**HIV and AIDS in Contemporary Japan**

**Introduction**

Modern day Japan maintains a unique balance between tradition and modernity. The modern aspect of Japanese culture incorporates a booming tech world, advanced medical care, and elements of Western culture. In most industrialized, technologically advanced societies of the world, AIDS no longer poses a threat, even among HIV positive populations. However, Japan remains an outlier to these modern societies, not because it lacks the medical tools to prevent the transfer of HIV to AIDS, but because of societal norms, values, and practices that limit accessibility to needed resources.

The LGBTQ+ population in Japan continues to grow as the states moves towards a place of more acceptance. However, the LGBTQ+ population still faces many problems and prejudices in Japanese society despite the majority approval of things like gay marriage. I want to provide a quick overview of one of the prominent struggles faced by LGBTQ+ youth, as I believe it will provide some context for my research findings and question.

According to Human Rights Watch, “[LGBT students in Japanese](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/05/06/nail-sticks-out-gets-hammered-down/lgbt-bullying-and-exclusion-japanese-schools) schools face physical and verbal abuse, harassment, and frequent insults from both peers and staff. Hateful anti-LGBT rhetoric is nearly ubiquitous, driving LGBT students into silence, self-loathing, and in some cases, self-harm.” Bullying in the schools has been the most discussed and governmentally addressed problems facing the LGBTQ+ community. A law was passed earlier this year to prevent such actions from happening, though many complain the law will not do enough for the suffering students (HRW). While in Japan, Miki Mizuno, our guide for the three weeks, explained to me that bullying in Japanese schools is common due to the cultural push for sameness. If a student sticks out in the crowd or is viewed as different from their peers than it is likely that that child might endure bullying. Naturally, this extends to LGBTQ+ students, as their gender or sexuality makes them stand apart. This atmosphere of bullying and the encouragement of sameness facilitates a silence surrounding LGBTQ+ issues and people.

This silence flows into the political realm, as well as the realm of news and popular media. Unlike the United States, Japan does not have outspoken elected officials on either side of LGBTQ+ issues. The media largely does not report on LGBTQ+ issues or people. There is no great human rights movement like there continues to be in the United States and other industrialized nations.

One example of this reluctance to talk about or report on LGBTQ+ issues presented itself throughout my research. In 2015, a young man at Hitotsubashi University took his own life after being outed as gay by a peer (Shibun). The man’s parents later sued the school for acting incompetently during the critical period between the incident and the man taking his own life (Shibun). When looking for legal cases in Japan, news about any was scarce. I found this particular case from an outside reported and used that to find more information from small, local Japanese magazines, websites, and organizations. Large-scale Japanese newspapers or publications weren’t reporting on this case or other cases regarding LGBTQ+ issues. Information regarding this important incident could only be found on the small-scale. Incidents like this one are not uncommon in Japan and represent a greater problem of mental health related incidents in relation to the LGBTQ+ community.

“Silence” is the word I would use to describe Japan’s HIV and AIDS problem. It started because of silence and continues due to that continued silence. The government’s response to bullying in the schools shows progress, but remains a rare reaction when it comes to LGBTQ+ issues in Japan. My research focus primarily revolves around the question: why Japan? What makes Japan different from other industrialized nations to contribute to this growing problem? Where does this silence come from? Why does it continue? What cultural aspects encourage this silence? How do these cultural influences compare to the cultural influences we see in the United States surrounding this prejudice?

**Choosing My Topic**

I initially chose to research torture in Japan. Specifically, I wanted to compare Japan’s transition from a torture state to an almost “no-war” state to the United States’ transition from a no-torture to state to utilizing enhanced interrogation policies during the early 2000s. However, once in Japan I realized I wanted to focus on a topic that I could be more interactive with while actually in Japan. I decided to pursue an LGBTQ+ focus because I have never used the opportunity of a research project to look into these issues before. I identify with the LBGTQ+ community and wanted to explore that side of myself and that side of Japan.

First, I decided to check Human Rights Watch to see if there were any pressing issues they had been highlighting in Japan. Human Rights Watch was very concerned with the bullying of LGBTQ+ students in schools, so I considered this topic until I realized I would face a similar problem with it as I did with torture in Japan. After more research and conversations with Julie, I intended to pursue legal cases in order to focus my topic a bit more. However, I was met with many challenges due to the lack of media attention given to these issues. Major newspapers or publications in Japan were not reporting on LGBTQ+ items. I was able to find some information on smaller websites and magazines, but using Google translate made it hard to fully understand the meaning behind some sections of information. I contacted the lawyer on the Hitotsubashi case I mentioned above, and he was receptive to my inquiry, but could not speak English, making my second biggest challenge the language barrier.

I continued to research and came across some articles expressing concern over AIDS and HIV in Japan. Then Julie sent me a link to a blog highlighting an AIDS activist group in Shinjuku. The combination of these two things set me on my path to finally choosing AIDS and HIV as my topic. This topic is important because it is something that could easily be solved through communication, education, and more acceptance. No one in a nation like Japan should be suffering from AIDS and knowledge regarding preventing the spread of HIV should be accessible to all.

**Assumptions and Research Methods**

After deciding on my research topic, I began searching for more information online. I found news articles, opinion blogs, and organization websites to act as my base for gathering data and information. I also was able to visit the Shinjuku Ni-chome district multiple times throughout my visit, which allowed me to partake in observational research and one-on-one talks with activist leaders in the community.

Before visiting Shinjuku Ni-chome, I imagined it to be this subdued version of the Capitol Hill district in Seattle or the Castro in San Francisco. I figured it would be a less flamboyant atmosphere. Public expression of uniqueness or emotions seemed unlikely to be found in Tokyo outside of Harajuku or Akihabara. I also envisioned this neighborhood or area as a small district with very few LGBTQ+ specific stores, theaters, or bars.

However, Shinjuku Ni-chome was very different than what I imagines. First, it was much larger and vibrant than I previously assumed. There were hundreds of shops, bars, theaters, and meeting places in the area specifically for LGBTQ+ people. This is one of the few areas of Japan that I witnessed people talking louder than a hushed voice. There were queens and kings in full drag and it was not a subdued, watered-down version of Americanized drag. Rainbow flags lined the street with no shame and the bars were loud and crowded with LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ people in them. The area was basically exactly like Capitol Hill or the Castro.

I figured that AIDS activism would be scarce, though I anticipated one or two organizations putting forth the effort in this realm. I was met with a multitude of organizations that were working on preventing the spread of HIV, educating people about HIV, and helping prevent the transition from HIV to AIDS from occurring. These organizations were small and garner very little media attention or government support, but they exist and they’re passionate. This showed me that there are leaders in the community that are aware of the problem and are fighting against it.

**The Research**

According to Benedict Anderson, the idea of nationalism has created imagined communities that hold an immense amount of power. Japanese nationalism runs deep and runs strong within society. Great value is placed on being Japanese and fitting into the primarily homogeneous society that is Japan. The emphasis placed on fitting that Japanese mold can be powerful and good, but can also harm groups of people in Japan that do not fit with that idealized version of what it means to be Japanese. The documentary “Hafu” follows the lives of half-Japanese people who identify as Japanese, but are somewhat rejected by their Japanese society because of the aspects of their lives or their looks that are not entirely Japanese. The struggles faced by the people in “Hafu” mirror the struggles faced by many in the LGBTQ+ community.

The desire to fit in or to match the mold set by Japanese nationalism and society facilitates the silence surrounding HIV and AIDS. When talking with a member of the organization called AKTA, which is a small group advocating for protection against HIV and AIDS, they said that one of the biggest problems in the LGBTQ+ community is the reluctance to “come out of the closet.” They do not want to be known as different or are scared to stand out from the crowd because of what it could mean for their careers, personal lives, or even simply their identity as a Japanese person. Japanese society promotes a sort of “don’t-ask-don’t-tell” mindset. There is an encouragement to keep ones personal life at home and just simply withhold any information regarding your sexuality or gender. Hiding the fact that one is LGBTQ+ is dangerous because it prevents one from knowing about and taking the proper measures to protect against HIV or AIDS.

This silence goes beyond an individual’s desire to come out of the closet. Japanese schools generally ignore LGBTQ+ students when it comes to sex education. Similar to the United States, LGBTQ+ sex is a non-existent topic in Japanese schools. However, sex education is more extensive and informative in Japan than in the United States. Having productive heterosexual sex education can benefit LGBTQ+ students because some safe-sex practices are similar, but it is not enough to prevent LGBTQ+ students from having an inadequate understanding of their own sexual activity. It is essential that sex education and information regarding this disease be a part of the conversation in Japan. For instance, 30 percent of people who contracted AIDS in Japan did not even know they had been infected by HIV prior to their transition to AIDS (UNAIDS).

Additionally, AIDS and HIV “is considered a ‘foreign’ disease by many, which can only be caught by intercourse with ‘foreigners,’” (Japan Today). This attitude makes Japanese people feel safe to participate in unprotected sex with other Japanese people, which can easily lead to the spread of HIV within the LGBTQ+ community. However, 93 percent of HIV/AIDS carriers in Japan are Japanese nationals and 85 percent of all cases were infected in Japan (Japan Today). HIV and AIDS may have started as a problem outside of Japan, but there is no denying that it is now a Japanese problem. Even when engaging in sexual activity with other Japanese nationals, the LGBTQ+ community needs to recognize and understand the possibility of contracting AIDS and HIV.

Lastly, Japanese hospitals are technologically and medically advanced enough to prevent HIV from turning into AIDS. However, they are much less likely to test for HIV than the United States (Scott). HIV and AIDS is far from patients and medical professionals minds when testing some illness. This is partially due to patients’ reluctance to disclose the fact they are sexually active within the LGBTQ+ community, but also doctors in Japan are not asking the questions necessary to prevent HIV from transitioning to AIDS.

The combination of these things has led to a doubling in the number of people infected with HIV and AIDS since 2000 (UNAIDS). Every year, about 1500 cases of HIV or AIDS are reported, and 60 percent of those cases originate from homosexual sexual activity (UNAIDS). Additionally, 70 percent of these cases are among the youthful population (20s and 30s), indicating this problem will continue to worsen due to the lack of education given to Japanese youth (UNAIDS). AIDS and HIV is a serious, growing problem in Japan. The numbers seem low, but Japan is the only industrialized nation with a growing AIDS and HIV population, meaning there is a serious problem.

One of the more shocking aspects of my research is the extremely low number of needle-to-arm incidents ending in HIV. Heroin and other needle drugs is not prominent in Japan, meaning it accounts for very little of all HIV cases. This is a stark contrast to the AIDS crisis in the United States because heroin was one of the top contributors in the spread of HIV and AIDS throughout the US. My theory is this difference accounts for the slow take off and limited numbers of cases in Japan. Heroin facilitated a quick spread to various groups of people, but in Japan it is nearly isolated to homosexual sexual activity, limiting its reach and rapidness in spreading.

One of the biggest challenges for me in my research was definitely the language barrier. Initially, researching online was difficult because many large-scale publications were not reporting on these issues, with the exception of a few articles on the Japan Times. When I was able to locate articles stemming from smaller publications or sources, the language barrier posed a real problem. Google translation is helpful, but the words lose some of their meaning when directly translated word for word. Outside of the internet, in person conversation were hard to come by because of my inability to speak Japanese. There were many people at the Campy Bar! I went to that could have provided me more information had I been able to speak the language.

The moment in all of my research that stood out to me the most was when I visited Campy Bar! Before going I had researched the group AKTA and learned about their Delivery Boys program. Delivery Boys is an assembly of gay men who go to all the LGBTQ+ friendly bars in Shinjuku Ni-chome and deliver aesthetically pleasing condoms to the bars in order to promote safe-sex and spread information on the dangers of HIV and AIDS. I went to Campy Bar! on a Tuesday and did not expect any AKTA promotion to actually be there. However, when I was leaving I noticed a box on the corner of the bar that held the AKTA condoms. This was really interesting to me because this was a community solution that did not rely on government intervention or better sex education. The community itself stood up and is constantly taking action against this disease. Community activism is one of the most important aspects of political or social activism and it was really cool to see that alive in Japan.

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