

Emilie Helén Vik

"Intolerance to diversity"

LGBTQIA+ narratives of navigating the Japanese educational system

Master's thesis in Equality and diversity

Supervisor: Guro Korsnes Kristensen

Co-supervisor: Jennifer Elise Branlat

January 2024

Emilie Helén Vik

"Intolerance to diversity"

LGBTQIA+ narratives of navigating the Japanese educational system

Master's thesis in Equality and diversity
Supervisor: Guro Korsnes Kristensen
Co-supervisor: Jennifer Elise Branlat
January 2024

Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Interdisciplinary Studies of Culture



Norwegian University of
Science and Technology

Likestilling og mangfold

Masterprogram, 2-årig

Læringsutbytte

En student som har fullført programmet, forventes å ha oppnådd følgende læringsutbytte, definert i kunnskap, ferdigheter og generell kompetanse:

Kunnskap

Kandidaten har

- avansert kunnskap om det tverrfaglige kjønnsforskningsfeltets sentrale teorier, debatter og kontroverser
- spesialisert innsikt i så vel historiske som samtidige endringsprosesser knyttet til likestilling og mangfold i det norske samfunnet, i lys av internasjonale og globale kontekster
- kunnskap på høyt nivå om hvordan kjønn som sosial og symbolsk kategori kan virke sammen med andre sosiale og symbolske kategorier og fenomener.

Ferdigheter

Kandidaten kan

- identifisere og arbeide selvstendig med praktiske og teoretiske problemer knyttet til likestilling og mangfold i konkrete samfunnmessige sammenhenger
- vurdere og benytte relevante metoder og teorier for analyse av kjønn og eventuelt andre sosiale kategorier i spesifikke empiriske problemstillinger
- analysere og forholde seg kritisk til problemstillinger knyttet til forståelser av kjønn, likestilling og mangfold på ulike samfunnsarenaer og derigjennom se og anvende flere tilnæringsmåter

Generell kompetanse

Kandidaten kan

- gjennomføre et selvstendig, avgrenset forsknings- og utredningsarbeid i tråd med gjeldende forskningsetiske normer
- anvende sine kunnskaper og ferdigheter på nye områder i tverrfaglig dialog og samarbeid med andre eksperter
- formidle resultater av eget faglig arbeid muntlig og skriftlig på en selvstendig måte både til eksperter og allmennhet

Abstract

In this master's thesis, I aim to investigate how Japanese LGBTQIA+ individuals and allies reflect upon and negotiate heteronormativity in Japanese society in general and in the Japanese educational system in particular. Additionally, I will explore how they try to make meaning of their experiences, and how they claim livable lives. Hence, in this project, I use the concepts of heteronormativity and livable/unlivable lives as my theoretical framework.

The research is based on qualitative digital interviews with ten Japanese individuals: seven from the LGBTQIA+ community and three allies. Through narrative analysis, the focus is on their stories of challenging gender and sexual norms, both within society in general and within the context of school life and education.

Their stories illustrate how "intolerance to diversity" as a phenomenon in Japanese society means that LGBTQIA+ individuals have to navigate their degree of participation in various societal arenas. In most settings, they describe a dilemma where they must either conform to heteronormative norms or risk marginalization. This phenomenon is also reflected in the educational system, as shown in their stories of heteronormative education and rigid school rules governing students' gender expression. Power relations are also apparent in their portrayals of who has the power to maintain the status quo and who has limited agency in challenging the heteronormative norms.

While there are stories of challenges, there are also stories of noticing positive changes within Japanese society and Japanese schools. An important perspective in this thesis is how individuals who share their stories and challenge heteronormativity can become legitimate subjects with livable lives.

This study contributes to a research field of current interest and high societal relevance by studying marginalized narratives within Japanese society.

Sammendrag

I denne masteroppgaven vil jeg undersøke hvordan japanske LHBT+ personer og allierte reflekterer over og navigerer heteronormative normer i det japanske skolesystemet, samt i det japanske samfunnet generelt. I tillegg vil jeg se på hvordan de finner mening i sine erfaringer, og hvordan de gjør krav på et levelig liv. Teorier om heteronormativitet og levelige/ulevelige liv utgjør derfor oppgavens teoretiske rammeverk.

Oppgaven er basert på kvalitative digitale intervjuer med ti personer fra Japan, hvor syv er LHBT+ personer og tre er allierte. Med bruk av narrativ analyse faller søkelyset på deres fortellinger om å bryte med normer for kjønn og seksualitet, både i samfunnet generelt og i sammenheng med skole og undervisning.

Deres fortellinger viser at 'intoleranse mot mangfold' som et fenomen i det japanske samfunnet fører til at LHBT+ personer må navigere sin deltakelse i ulike samfunnsarenaer. I de fleste settinger så beskriver de et dilemma om og enten måtte tilpasse seg heteronormen, eller å risikere andregjøring. Dette fenomenet gjenspeiles også i skolesystemet, som vises i deres fortellinger om heteronormativ undervisning, samt rigide skoleregler som regulerer elevenes kjønnsuttrykk. Makt og avmakt kommer også frem i deres fremstillinger om hvem som har makt til å opprettholde heteronormen, samt hvem som har lite handlingsrom i å utfordre skolesystemets status quo.

Samtidig som det var fortellinger om utfordringer, så kom det også til syne fortellinger om positive endringer innad i det japanske samfunnet og i skoler. Et viktig perspektiv i oppgaven er hvordan personer som deler sine fortellinger og utfordrer heteronormen kan gjøre seg om til forståelige subjekter med levelige liv.

Denne studien bidrar både på et veldig samfunnsaktuelt tema og på et forskningsfelt i utvikling ved å fremme marginaliserte fortellinger i det Japanske samfunnet.

Acknowledgements

It feels surreal to finish my masters' thesis. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and other challenges, I was at times uncertain whether I would ever be able to close this chapter in my life. However, I'm finally at a place where I'm able to do so thanks to many peoples' support and guidance.

First, I want to thank my dear family, Unni, Arne and Håkon, who has been there for me through everything. I wouldn't have been able to finish my thesis without your love and support. Thank you for proofreading and for encouraging me whenever I doubted myself. I'm so grateful to have you all in my life!

Next, I'd like to thank my supervisors, Guro Korsnes Kristensen and Jennifer Branlat. All your feedback, encouragements and advice has helped me move forward when I felt stuck or overwhelmed. Thank you for believing in me and my project!

In spring 2023, I was able to stay in Tokyo for three months thanks to the collaborative project *Teaching Gender Equality and Diversity in Norway and Japan* (UTFORSK) giving grants for student mobility. Thank you for funding my trip, I experienced and learned so much during my stay, both academically and culturally!

Thank you to the employees and students at Ochanomizu University and the LGBTQIA+ activists we met while in Tokyo. Everyone was so welcoming and interested in learning about our projects and in sharing their own research or activism with us.

To France Rose Hartline, Roger Andre Søråa and Joost Hegle, thank you for all your help during the research process!

Elisabeth Stang, thank you for all your advice, guidance, and continuous support. It has helped me be able to progress in my studies and be where I am today.

Thank you to all the Equality and Diversity M.A. students who made me feel less alone by sharing your own struggles with the writing process.

Nora Elise Stemland, thank you for listening to my worries, for motivating me and for coming up with fun activities and places to see in Japan. I'm so grateful to have you as a friend!

Lastly, I want to thank all my participants. Thank you so much for taking part in my project! This thesis wouldn't exist without your experiences and perspectives.

Emilie Helén Vik

Halden, December 2023

Preface

This master's thesis is the result of my academic interest in gender and sexual diversity education and my personal interest in Japanese culture. For my bachelor's thesis in Teacher Education, I explored various pedagogical approaches to norm-critical thinking related to topics about gender and sexuality in a Norwegian context. The focus was junior high school students' reception to such topics and teaching methods. I found that students responded positively but that there remained challenges due to misinformation and stereotypical or negative views towards LGBTQIA+ people. Since the completion of my Bachelor's thesis, I wanted to learn more about how social norms and a lack of education on gender and sexuality topics affects LGBTQIA+ people's lives. At the same time, I have had a lifetime interest in Japanese culture. As I became older, and especially after visiting the country as a tourist, I became even more interested in delving deeper into Japanese society and its complexities.

Thanks to the master's program in Equality and Diversity providing the opportunity to study abroad in Tokyo, my thesis came to fruition in late 2019. I applied for a student mobility grant under the project *Norway-Japan: Bridging Research and Education in Gender Equality and Diversity* (NJ_BREGED; 2019-2022) that is a part of the INTPART funding program offered by The Research Council of Norway. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the exchange program and the 2-month research stay planned for summer 2020 was cancelled, which was very disheartening. As was the case for many students, this was a difficult period for many reasons, and as a result, my thesis was postponed in 2021. Thankfully, when Japan reopened for visitors in October 2022, I was able to reapply. This time it was under the project *Teaching Gender Equality and Diversity in Norway and Japan* (UTFORSK; 2021-2025), funded by the Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills. UTFORSK, like NJ_BREGED, is a research collaboration between the Center for Gender Research (CGR) at the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies of Culture at NTNU (Trondheim, Norway) and the Institute for Gender Studies (IGS) at Ochanomizu University (Tokyo, Japan).

Thanks to UTFORSK, I stayed in Tokyo for 3 months during the spring of 2023. At Ochanomizu University, we got to meet other researchers and students working on LGBTQIA+ and gender equality issues. At their campus, I could discuss and work on my thesis with five other Equality and Diversity M.A. students and a Postdoctoral researcher affiliated with NTNU. By travelling to Japan, I also got to meet people with whom I'd been in contact with for my thesis, as well as activists working for nonprofit LGBTQIA+ organizations or support groups. In late March, I arranged a visit to Bunkyo Gender Equality Center to meet an activist and take part in their LGBTQIA+-friendly meeting "Bunkyo SOGI Nijiuro salon". There we listened to a presentation by a Japanese gay man and activist, and listened to the other participants' stories. We also visited Pride House Tokyo Legacy in Shinjuku, an LGBTQIA+ center established in anticipation of the Olympics and Paralympics Games in Tokyo. On one occasion, we took part in their "Transgender Day" and got to learn more about trans issues in Japan. In late April, PRIDE events took place in Tokyo. There were parades going through the city and various stands in Yoyogi Park in Shibuya. It was nice to see the Japanese LGBTQIA+ community both celebrate their identities and advocate for their rights. The numerous network-building opportunities in addition to the rich activist milieu in Tokyo have enriched my project in so many ways.

On April 24th, we took part in an UTFORSK seminar at Ochanomizu University's Hisao & Hiroko Taki Plaza building. We listened to IGS researchers' and students' presentations, and afterwards presented our own M.A. projects to them and the researchers from the Center for Gender Research at KULT (NTNU) who were visiting. The next day, IGS- and KULT-researchers and well as us M.A. students visited The Norwegian Embassy in Tokyo to meet the ambassador and other employees. The discussions were about differences between Norway and Japan in relation to gender equality and LGBTQIA+ issues, and about the collaborative projects NJ_BREGED and UTFORSK. In late May, we listened to a presentation about a PhD student's M.A. project on transgender issues in the Japanese healthcare system. In early June, I took part in a meet-up organized by France Rose Hartline, and spoke with other researchers and students working on gender and sexual diversity topics.

All the meetings and conversations I had with people during the trip contributed to my overall understanding of LGBTQIA+ and gender equality issues in Japan. It also meant a lot to me to be able to finish what I originally set out to achieve with my master's studies and thesis back in 2019. Living in Japan for 3 months and exploring Tokyo and other places have also given me memories for a lifetime.

Table of contents

Abstract	iii
Sammendrag	v
Acknowledgements	vii
Preface	ix
1. Introduction	1
1.1 Research theme and background	1
1.1.1 Gender and sexual diversity issues in the Japanese educational system.....	1
1.1.2 Heteronormativity in Japanese society	2
1.1.3 A period of change: LGBTQIA+ issues in Japan	4
1.2 Previous research	5
1.3 Research questions.....	6
1.4 Reading guide	7
2. Theoretical concepts and analytical approach	9
2.1 Heteronormativity	9
2.1.1 Hegemonic power relations	11
2.2 Livable and unlivable lives	12
2.3 Narratives and narrative analysis.....	13
3. Methods and methodology	15
3.1 Qualitative research: the qualitative interview	15
3.2 Recruitment of interviewees.....	15
3.2.1 Description of interviewees	16
3.3 Digital interviews: video, audio and email interviews	17
3.4 Semi-structured interviews and the interview process.....	18
3.4.1 Validity & reliability.....	19
3.4.2 Use of interpretation.....	20
3.5 Ethics and interviewer positionality	20
3.6 Analysis strategy: Using thematical analysis to categorize and identify themes and narrative	21
4. Conformity in Japanese society	23
4.1 Homogeneous identity vs. diverse realities: Challenging heteronormativity in Japanese society	23
4.1.1 Perspectives on Japanese society after experiences abroad.....	25
4.2 "Which part of society can I participate in, and which part can I not?"	27
4.2.1 LGBTQIA+ and ally spaces.....	29
4.3 A period of change: LGBTQIA+ representation in media	31
4.4 Summary	32

5. The Japanese educational system: Preserving and challenging the status quo	35
5.1 Experiences with heteronormative education	35
5.1.1 Self-education and sharing experiences	38
5.2 Experiences with heteronormative school rules and regulations	39
5.3 Power relations within the Japanese educational system.....	40
5.3.1 Principals	40
5.3.2 Teachers	42
5.3.3 Parents	44
5.3.4 Students	44
5.4 Perspectives on the Japanese educational system after experiences abroad	45
5.5 A period of change: Flexible school rules and inclusion of LGBTQIA+ topics.....	47
5.6 Summary	48
6. Conclusion	51
6.1 Findings	51
6.2 Limitations and directions for future research	52
 References	 55
 Appendices	 61
Interview guide	61
Information about participation.....	64

Tables

Table 1: Information about interviewees.....	16
--	----

1. Introduction

The big problem in Japanese education is "intolerance to diversity". Japanese education is a managed society, and those who are deviated from the group are excluded or regarded as annoying. The trend also affects LGBTQ, and because LGBTQ has a different feeling from the majority, teachers mistake it for "selfishness". I think these collective norms bother LGBTQ students. (Ren)

This quote by Ren, who is one of this thesis' research participants, illustrates a pressing issue in the Japanese educational system, that there exists an overall "intolerance to diversity". He presents this as an issue that especially affect students who "deviate from the group" and do not conform to societal norms. By not conforming one risks social sanctions and being perceived as "annoying" and "selfish". As will be explained in this introduction and the following chapter, heteronormativity remains the norm in Japanese schools, the centerpiece of a norm system which regulates the society's understandings of gender and sexuality. Japan is changing, albeit slowly, towards an increased awareness of the need to embrace diversity. The aim of this thesis is to contribute to the growing research on the current so-called "transitional phase" for gender and sexual diversity issues in Japan, by looking at Japanese LGBTQIA+¹ people's and allies'² narratives of school experiences and education.

1.1 Research theme and background

1.1.1 Gender and sexual diversity issues in the Japanese educational system

In Japanese schools, gender and sexual diversity education is very limited. In order to begin to understand this situation, it is useful to turn back to the early 2000s. Just as there seemed to be some improvements for sexual minorities in Japan, a "backlash" against the gender equality movement and "gender-neutral education" took place (Kazama, 2020, p. 45-46). During this period, various teaching programs dealing with sexuality were strongly criticized (Wakakuwa & Fujimura-Fanselow, 2011, pp. 340-341). A consequence of this backlash has been that "sexuality education in Japanese schools is poorly developed when it comes to presenting the facts about sex, reproduction and human diversity, including LGBT youth" (Hashimoto, et al., 2017, p. 387). Hence, sex education by itself is very limited, making information about gender and sexual diversity challenging to obtain within the walls of the mainstream school system.

Kasai and Toda (2023, p. 24) reference a survey (Hidaka, 2017) conducted among 1,025 Japanese LGB youth, which found that the participants started to realize they were LGB around the age of 13, that they "were not heterosexual" at around 15, and fully realized they were LGB at 17. Another study they reference (Nakatsuka, 2010) also stressed that "half of the children who experience gender dysphoria start their dysphoria before entering elementary school" (Kasai & Toda, 2023, p. 24). This calls attention to the importance of recognizing the period from elementary school to high school as a crucial

¹ LGBTQIA+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning, intersex, asexual/aromantic, and the plus sign "encompassing any preference not named" (Frühstück, 2022, p. 141). Other abbreviations include LGBT, LGBT+, LGBTI, LGBTQ and LGBTQ+. In this thesis, I will mainly use LGBTQIA+, but others will be present depending on what's used in references or by the research participants.

² In this context, allies refer to those who support and advocate for LGBTQIA+ people's rights, but who themselves do not identify as LGBTQIA+.

time for SOGI³ minorities and their peers to learn about gender and sexual diversity. Education plays a vital role in confronting “prejudiced views and behaviors, whether about sexual orientation or gender identity, or about ethnicity, faith, gender, or disability” (Smith, 2023, p. x). In order to pursue equality for all students, Japanese schools need to provide necessary education, and make sure all their students experience an inclusive and safe school environment.

In 2016, Human Rights Watch published a report called *The Nail That Sticks Out Gets Hammered Down: LGBT Bullying and Exclusion in Japanese Schools*. The report, based on over 50 interviews with LGBT students and former students, teachers, officials, and academic experts from throughout Japan, concludes that the following are LGBT students’ typical experiences: being bullied, serving as targets of anti-LGBT rhetoric from peers and teachers, experiencing gender norms and school rules as rigid, having limited access to education and information on LGBT issues, and receiving little to no support from adults or school officials (Human Rights Watch, 2016). Based on these findings, Human Rights Watch has urged the Japanese government to include sexuality and gender diversity in the national curriculum, which was to undergo a once-in-a-decade revision in 2017. The same year, there had been signs of progress, as the Ministry of Education (MEXT) encouraged teachers to consider the needs of LGBT students (Hashimoto, et al., 2017; Doi & Knight, 2017). In the end however, the government failed to include sexual and gender minorities in the curriculum (Doi & Knight, 2017).

One of the major obstacles to implementing the recommendations of the 2017 revision is that many teachers lack the knowledge and confidence when it comes to teaching gender and sexual diversity. Kasai and Toda (2023, p. 28) reference a 2016 survey by Hidaka conducted among 5,979 teachers, which found that more than half of the participants believed topics around gender and sexual diversity need to be incorporated in classes, yet the percentage who had done so was low – a mere 13.7%. Indeed, a reason mentioned for the discrepancy between the teachers’ beliefs and practice was due to gender and sexual diversity not being included in the national curriculum. It also further contributes to the issue of many teachers not even recognizing “the needs or existence of such students in their midst” (Dale, 2016, p. 223). Until the next revision, it continues to be difficult for students, parents, and willing teachers to hold schools accountable for lacking information or support for LGBTQIA+ students.

1.1.2 Heteronormativity in Japanese society

Russell and Horn (2017, In Kasai et al., 2023, p. 6) states that due to global culture being largely heteronormative, “schools are microcosms that represent and replicate these cultural norms”. Hence, it is relevant to also look at how conservatism toward gender and sexual diversity is also a more widespread phenomena within Japanese society. Interestingly, when looking at the country’s history, Japanese culture was rather “tolerant toward same-sex sexual conduct and relationships”, though mainly towards same-sex relations between men (Shoushi, 2008, In Kasai and Toda, 2023, p. 20). Furthermore, Frühstück (2022, p. 8) states that Japan also “has a rich history of ambivalence regarding transgenderism and other gender-related rights”. However, views

³ SOGI stands for sexual orientation and gender identity.

on same-sex relations and gender norms would change after the mid-19th century, as heteronormativity became a dominant social norm in Japanese society.

After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, newly imported ideas pathologizing such behavior and labeling them as “perverse desires” meant that same-sex sexuality could not be openly expressed (McLelland, 2000). Thoughts and structures that have been introduced, encouraged, and standardized through Westernization have made the male-female (heterosexual) model for families and relationships the norm in Japanese society (Shoushi, 2008). (Kasai & Toda, 2023, p. 20)

In today’s Japanese society, same-sex marriage is still not legally recognized. Although some prefects and municipalities have established a same-sex partnership system, it does not provide the same privileges or rights as marriage does. However, some citizens are trying to change this, as five nationwide lawsuits have been brought by Japanese same-sex couples. The first ruling was the Sapporo District Court in March 2021, which “declared that the government's failure to recognize same-sex marriage is unconstitutional” (Takahara, 2022). This historic verdict also had a positive impact on the partnership system, with “the figure nearly tripling after” (Takahara, 2022), and it was later to be followed with the Nagoya ruling in May 2023 (Amnesty International, 2023). Unfortunately, the Osaka ruling in June 2022, the Tokyo ruling in November 2022 and the Fukuoka ruling in June 2023 all “upheld the Japanese government ban on same-sex marriage” (Amnesty International, 2022a, 2022b, 2023). Amnesty International (2022a) called the decision in the Osaka case a “discriminatory ruling” and “a crushing blow to equality”.

The lack of LGBTQIA+ rights does not only garner criticism domestically, but also internationally. Four years ago, Japan received a lot of attention due to the Tokyo 2020 Olympics and Paralympics. Although the Games had to be postponed to 2021, several LGBTQIA+ activists and athletes were still trying to take advantage of the attention to push for an “LGBT Equality Law” (Yamaguchi, 2020). The campaign was called #EqualityActJapan online and was an effort to pressure the Japanese government to finally pass a law that would provide LGBTQIA+ people with protection against discrimination. This was also necessary if Japan wanted to meet the requirements of *the Olympic Charter* and *Olympic Agenda 2020* (Human Rights Watch, n.d.). However, despite promises from politicians (Human Rights Watch, 2021) and the statements in the two Olympic documents, no inclusive anti-discrimination laws were passed before or during the Games. Ironically, the Tokyo 2020 Olympics would be labeled the “Rainbow Olympics” due to the record high number of openly LGBTQIA+ Olympic and Paralympic athletes (Topping, 2021), despite there being none from the host country itself (Outsports, 2021a, 2021b). While this was a great victory for increased visibility of gender and sexual diversity in international sports, it was a stark contrast to the domestic situation of Japanese activists and athletes fighting for basic human rights.

Another high-profile international event taking place in Japan was the G7 meeting in May 2023, with Hiroshima as the host city. Amongst the seven members, Japan was the only country which does not allow same-sex marriage or provide its LGBTQIA+ citizens with protection against discrimination (McCurry, 2023). Using the international attention as an opportunity, Japanese and international LGBTQIA+ activist organizations came together and formed the LGBTQIA+ forum “Pride7”, in short P7, and held the “Pride 7 Summit 2023” on March 30th. P7 is an effort to advocate for LGBTQIA+ rights and to put pressure on the G7 countries and their leaders. Besides the fight for marriage equality

and an inclusive anti-discrimination law, they also point out issues that affect transgender people in Japan, such as the need for “rights-respecting bodily autonomy” and “gender self-determination” (Pride7 Communiqué, 2023). After the G7 meeting, a watered-down bill was passed to promote understanding, yet it “stops short of protecting any specific rights or providing a blanket barring of discrimination”, leaving LGBTQIA+ people and activists disappointed (Reynolds, 2023).

Japan does not only fall behind when it comes to LGBTQIA+ rights, but also when it comes to overall gender equality. In the 2020 report *Over the Rainbow? The Road to LGBTI Inclusion* (OECD, 2020, ch. 3.2.3, figure 3.8), Japan, South-Korea and Turkey are shown to be the three lowest performing OECD-countries when it comes to both issues. Indeed, the report highlights the significant relationship between a country’s legal LGBTQIA+ inclusivity and gender equality, as both “exclusion of LGBTQIA+ people and the endorsement of traditional gender norms” are underpinned by heteronormative views on biological sex, gender identity, gender roles and sexual attraction (OECD, 2020, ch. 3.2.3, figure 3.8). In Japanese society, one problem in relation to gender equality and gender roles is the societal pressure on women to leave the workforce after childbirth. While women traditionally have been positioned to be mothers and the main caretakers, Japanese men have been expected to be the breadwinners. Women do not get the same career opportunities as men, while men ironically are often pressured into overworking themselves to an extreme degree. Although these roles have been challenged in recent years (Ishii-Kuntz, 2022, p. 45), gender equality continues to be a problem in Japan, especially with the COVID-19 pandemic “accelerating the domestic demands and decreased employment opportunities for women” (Ishii-Kuntz et al., 2022, p. 1). Furthermore, these issues indicate the degree of which societal pressure and traditional gender norms can negatively effect and in more extreme cases be experienced as oppressive.

1.1.3 A period of change: LGBTQIA+ issues in Japan

Despite the continuous challenges and often slow progress regarding LGBTQIA+ rights and gender equality in Japan, there are also signs of positive change. Dale (2016, p. 221) describes this current period as being a seemingly “transitional phase for LGBT rights in Japan”, both as a consequence of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics and with the “increasing international pressure from abroad and the work of local activists”. This can be seen in the 2020 OECD report (ch. 3.2.2, figure 3.4), which states that all OECD countries are generally improving when it comes to legal LGBTI+ inclusivity. For instance, in the second half of 2023, there have been two important Supreme Court rulings regarding transgender people in Japan. The first was a decision which affirmed a transgender woman’s right “to use workplace bathrooms aligned with her gender identity” (Doi & Reid, 2023), and another case ruled that compulsory sterilization for transgender people as “a requirement for legal gender recognition” is unconstitutional (Doi & Knight, 2023). Furthermore, in terms of statistics, various polls show that a majority of the Japanese population are in favor of same-sex marriage, and the percentage is even higher amongst younger people. Frühstück (2022, p. 153) references a 2019 large-scale internet survey by Dentsū, which showed that “close to 80 percent expressed their support or acceptance”. Hence, she writes that “extensive evidence suggests the normalization of LGBT+ existence advances forward” (Frühstück, 2022, p. 163).

The statistics and cases mentioned show that many Japanese people's lived experiences or beliefs are not reflected in the country's legal and educational systems. Despite growing support for LGBTQIA+ rights, those who have the power to make changes continue to be hesitant, opting to preserve the heteronormative status quo. Although legal changes alone are not enough, the OECD report (2020, ch. 3.2.3) states that they are important due to how they consequently lead to "changes in attitudes" and what is seen as "socially acceptable". The same goes for including gender and sexual diversity perspectives in the curriculum, as education is a key to further knowledge and understanding, going beyond simply teaching tolerance and acceptance of a perceived "difference".

1.2 Previous research

The book *SOGI Minority and School Life in Asian Contexts: Beyond Bullying and Conflict Toward Inter-Minority Empathy* edited by Kasai, Toda, and Russell is a recent and unique study in the way it brings together "scholarship on SOGI issues across Asian countries and contexts" (Kasai et al., 2023, p. 8). This book looks at eight Asian regions, including Japan and the situation in Japanese schools. Kasai et al. (2023, p. 8) state that there now is a "growing number of studies on SOGI minorities in Asian contexts". This study shows that this research field is of current interest and high societal relevance. This is also the case when it comes to Japan and the topic of education specifically, as Kasai and Toda (2023, p. 26) highlight that there "have been few studies on SOGI and school life in Japan". This thesis contributes to the much needed research on school issues for Japanese LGBTQIA+ people and the important role of education in promoting inclusion.

Furthermore, Kasai and Toda (2023, p. 27) mention that Japanese research has mainly been conducted on adults, though they say that "some studies on the general student population have examined student perspectives". Two studies they mention looked at differences in attitudes amongst students of various ages. Tanaka et al. (2018) found that junior high school students have more negative attitudes towards LGB people than university students, due to anxiety of "being viewed as different from others" (Kasai et al., 2023, pp. 27-28). Kasai et al. (2019) similarly found that for younger students, "direct interaction with the LGBTQ+ community was found to be related to receptive attitudes, and a high tendency toward conformity was related to rejective attitudes" (Kasai et al., 2023, p. 28). This aspect of conformity and a fear of being perceived as different is relevant in my interviewees' stories. Lastly, in this study, the concept of "inter-minority conflict" is introduced and used in a Japanese context to examine conflicts between various marginalized groups, such as women, SOGI minorities and people with disabilities.

In addition to there being few studies on LGBTQIA+ students' experiences with Japanese schools, Ueno (2023, p. 3) also states that "very few studies have been conducted to examine LGBQ students' experiences in Japanese higher education institutions". Hence, Ueno's study from 2023 aimed to contribute to the emerging literature and highlight the importance of national contexts when doing such research. By analyzing in-depth interviews, Ueno (2023, p. 2) found that "a large majority of Japanese LGBQ students describe their higher education institutions as heteronormative", and that campus heteronormativity in Japan manifests in "straight peers' gossip about LGBQ students, outing attempts, and use of LGBQ *kyaras* (or characters) in their group interactions". Ueno (2023, p. 2) states that "these patterns of peer relations indicate influences of a

social discourse in Japan that defines same-sex sexuality as a private matter”, and further relates it to the interaction rule that distinguishes between private feelings (*honne*) and public performances (*tatemae*). By referencing Wagatsuma and Rosett (1983), Ueno emphasizes that “Japanese people tend to *expect* each other to maintain the distinction” because of their strong emphasis on maintaining smooth social interactions and interpersonal harmony (Ueno, 2023, p. 10). However, this interaction rule often makes it difficult for LGBTQIA+ people to know Japanese people’s true feelings about gender and sexual diversity, as some might seem accepting in public while being not-accepting in private. Hence, when navigating heteronormative spaces such as higher education institutions, LGBTQIA+ people often have to “manage their visibility” (Ueno, 2023, p. 8).

When it comes to research more specifically on Japanese people’s experiences with educational content during elementary to high school, there are four studies of note. The first one is a study from 2005 on LGBT+ issues in education in six countries, in which Komiya (2005, p. 34) reflected on stories from six Japanese high school students and found that “only heterosexuality and heterosexual marriage are taught”. The second one is a case study by Moore (2016) on queer language learners, specifically of an English conversation class organized by Japanese LGBTQIA+ people. One conclusion was that “the heteronormative assumptions that routinely pervade ESL textbooks and classes can have a profoundly debilitating effect on many LGBT students in the classes, either silencing them or forcing them to feel the need to lie” (Moore, 2016, p. 99). Next is a qualitative study by Hashimoto et al. (2017), in which they conducted interviews with over 50 individuals, across five generations, from Japan. The questions they received were related to education on sexuality and gender. Although there were no explicit question related to LGBTQIA+ issues, one of their findings was that “heterosexism continues to underpin existing courses of study in such subjects as moral education, and health and physical education (PE)” (Hashimoto et al., 2017, p. 387). Last is a 2021 report by Cortez et al. on 16 countries and how laws and regulations affect LGBTI people’s lives. One of their research topics were “access to inclusive education”. They found that Japan is amongst the countries that do not include sexual and gender minorities in sex education courses (Cortez et al., 2021, p. 45, figure 2.5). All these studies found that LGBTQIA+ people’s lived experiences and perspectives continues to be excluded from relevant subjects at Japanese schools, due to the prevailing heteronormative curriculum on gender and sexuality.

1.3 Research questions

In this project, I will use qualitative interview as my research method, narrative analysis as my analytical approach, and the concepts of heteronormativity and livable/unlivable life as my theoretical framework. When analyzing the interviewees’ narratives on school experience and education, I will look at the following overarching research question:

How do Japanese LGBTQIA+ individuals and allies reflect upon and negotiate heteronormativity in Japanese society in general and in the Japanese educational system in particular? How do they try to make meaning of their experiences and claim a livable life?

To answer this question, I conducted interviews with ten Japanese individuals: seven members of the LGBTQIA+ community and three allies. I analyze the interviewees’ narratives about the time when they were students in elementary school, junior high

school and/or high school. Since there is not a clear dividing line between school and life outside school, their stories necessarily take up gender and sexual diversity issues within the broader scope of life outside school as well. In this way, my interviewees throughout the interviews also reflect on Japanese society in general. To operationalize the overarching question, I will also be looking at the following sub-questions:

1. *How do the interviewees describe their experiences with conformity in Japanese society? Which societal arenas do they experience as open to their participation? Which are experienced as difficult?*
2. *What do the interviewees describe as the reasons for, and consequences of, a limited education on gender and sexual diversity in Japanese schools?*
3. *How do the interviewees describe their experiences within the Japanese educational system? How are power relations presented in their stories?*

1.4 Reading guide

This thesis consists of six chapters, with this introduction being the *first chapter*. In the *second chapter*, I will present the theoretical concepts that form the thesis' framework, that being heteronormativity and livable and unlivable lives, and the main analytical approach which is narrative analysis. In the *third chapter*, I present the project's methods and methodology. As mentioned, my data is based on ten qualitative interviews, specifically semi-structured digital interviews. I will discuss the challenges and ethical considerations during the research process, and the use of thematical analysis as a strategy when organizing the data material.

Next come the two analytical chapters, where I use the established theoretical perspectives to analyze the data material. In the *fourth chapter*, I will analyze the interviewees' stories on conformity in Japanese society, especially looking at how they question and challenge heteronormative norms. I will also look at which societal arenas they experience as more open to their participation, and which they experience as more difficult. This chapter and the next chapter also include sub-chapters on some of the interviewees' experiences with other cultural contexts and how this affected their perspectives on Japanese society and educational system. In *chapter five*, I will look more specifically at the Japanese educational system. Here I examine the interviewees' stories of "a big void" in Japanese education, referring to the lack of LGBTQIA+ perspectives in sex education and subjects in general. Then I explore their experiences with rigid school rules based on traditional gender norms, and who they present as having the power to preserve these norms. The two analytical chapters end with subsections which cast a more nuanced look towards some positive changes that are underway. *Chapter six* is the thesis' conclusion, where I discuss my findings in the preceding analysis chapters.

2. Theoretical concepts and analytical approach

As has been established in the introduction chapter, heteronormativity is one of the primary structuring principles in Japanese society. In this thesis, my aim is to look at how the interviewees reflect upon and negotiate heteronormativity in society in general and in the educational system in particular, as well as examining how they try to make meaning of their experiences and claim a livable life. To do so, I will use the theoretical concepts of heteronormativity and livable and unlivable lives as the framework, and narrative analysis as my analytical approach. These theories are useful to analyze how the interviewees describe the societal pressure to conform to heteronormative norms, and how those who do not conform are positioned as having unlivable lives. Narrative analysis is useful to look at *how* the interviewees tell their stories and make meaning of their experiences.

The previously mentioned study by Ueno (2023) shows the relevance of using the concept of heteronormativity to study Japanese LGBTQIA+ people's experiences with education and school life, though the focus of this study is elementary to high school and not higher education. Furthermore, Ueno highlights the importance of the national context, as many sexuality scholars argue that "heteronormativity operates differently across different national contexts because there are national variations in social discourses about same-sex sexuality and institutional and interactional practices that regulate behaviors of the citizens" (Piekut & Valentine, 2016; Ryan-Flood, 2005, In Ueno, 2023, p. 2). Indeed, Phoenix (2007, p. 181) points out that it is "important to recognize that norms are socially constructed and so historically and geographically specific as well as selective in focus". Hence, they are continuously interpreted and given meaning, and these meanings are cultural, not fixed or natural (Røthing & Svendsen, 2009, p. 34). Bolsø et al. (2007, p. 13) stresses that the continuous repetition creates the illusion of heteronormative norms being "natural" and unchangeable, despite the social and cultural aspects. These aspects are important to be aware of when doing research on a different cultural context than one's own and using western concepts and theorists.

2.1 Heteronormativity

Ueno (2023, p. 1) explains that "the concept of heteronormativity has emerged from queer theory (Butler, 1990; Warner, 1991) and feminist theory (Rich, 1980; Rubin, 1984)". Judith Butler is especially known for contributing to studies on the concept and critiques of heteronormative norms (Bolsø et al., 2007, p. 13). In this section, I will first give an overview of how heteronormativity regulates sexual norms, romantic norms, and gender norms. In the subsection, the aspect of hegemonic power relations is presented, to further unpack the concept of heteronormativity.

Bolsø et al. (2007, p. 11) states that norms are given meaning through the process of creating, defining, and validating what is considered normal and what is seen as abnormal. This means that heteronormativity refers to how heterosexuality is seen as normal and natural, and thus also most wanted, which consequently causes other sexual relations and identities to be seen as unnormal, strange and unwanted (Røthing & Svendsen, 2009, p. 40). The assumption that people are only interested in the opposite sex ignores the lived experiences of homosexual people, those who fall under the bisexual "umbrella", people who are on the asexual spectrum and other sexual identities and experiences. Frühstück (2022, p. 143) highlights that being queer "defies heteronormativity" and instead reimagines sexual identities as "fluid, performative, and

flexible in the spectrum". Indeed, queer theory has a critical approach to binary categories and shifts our understanding to the fluidity of sexuality, which is relevant when examining some of the interviewees' experiences with navigating society when having a sexual identity that's on a spectrum.

In addition, Bolsø et al. (2007, p. 11) says that due to heteronormativity, stories of love should be about a romantic attraction between a man and a woman. Hence, the heteronormative assumption that people are both sexually and romantically attracted to the opposite sex makes other romantic relations or experiences abnormal, such as same-sex relations, romantic attraction to more than one gender and people on the aromantic spectrum. Tessler (2023, introduction) says that "sexual attraction and romantic attraction often get conflated", and this misconception makes it difficult to realize that "romantic orientation is separate from sexual orientation". The reason this distinction is important to highlight in this thesis is due to one of the interviewee's romantic orientation and sexual orientation. Furthermore, Chen (2010, In Brandley and Dehnert, 2023, p. 2) states that "since most global societies assume and expect people to be allosexual/alloromantic, aces and aros can face discrimination, erasure, and violence through social systems of control structures known as allonormativity". Allonormativity can be seen in relation to heteronormativity. While the latter norm enforces compulsory heterosexuality, the former enforces compulsory sexual attraction and romantic attraction.

Furthermore, heteronormativity is also built on a distinction that is necessary for its existence, that being the distinction between men and women (Ambjörnsson, 2006, In Lundin, 2012, p. 61). Hence, heteronormativity is instrumentalized through the concept of the gender binary. Bolsø et al. (2007, p. 13) references the philosopher Jacques Derrida and his criticism towards the West's tendency to think in binary oppositions and the hierarchical view of one side being superior. On one hand, identifying as either a man or a woman is seen as a universal and shared experience. On the other hand, gender fluidity, genderqueer people, non-binary people and agender people are often seen as inferior or in some cases non-existent. Also, the assumption that there are only two biological sexes and that all people are cisgender, means that intersex people and transgender people are also excluded in the cisheteronormative narrative.

Cisheteronormativity is a term which combines the concepts of cisnormativity and heteronormativity. Ueno (2023, p. 15) references Schilt and Westbrook (2009) and explains that "examining cisnormativity is important in its own right, but it will also increase understanding of heteronormativity, which is intertwined with cisnormativity". Questioning the gender binary and cisnormativity is relevant to this thesis due to four of my interviewees being transgender, two of which experience their gender identity as being fluid. Lastly, fulfilling gender roles and having a gender expression that aligns with ones assigned or assumed gender is expected. Hence, gender nonconformity and challenging gender roles are frowned upon in a cisheteronormative society.

The main strengths of this theoretical concept lie within 1) questioning what the majority sees as universal and natural norms regarding sexuality, romantic attraction, and gender (Bolsø et al. 2007, p. 11), 2) criticizing "tolerance thinking" which has only acceptance of marginalized groups as a premise (Bolsø et al., 2007, p. 15), 3) critically examine social institutions and "everyday practices that endorse heterosexual ideals" (DePalma & Atkinson, 2010, In Ueno, 2023, p. 1), and 4) challenging hegemonic heteronormativity, which shed light on power relations and social hierarchies. The latter point will be explored further in the following subsection.

2.1.1 Hegemonic power relations

When discussing social norms there's also the aspect of power relations, as in either having the power to define and preserve the norms or being powerless when unable or unwilling to conform to the norms (Bolsø et al., 2007, p. 14). Here the concept of hegemony is relevant, because as Phoenix (2007, p. 178) writes, the concepts of hegemony and normativity both entail power relations and are thus "often used interchangeably, because, to some extent, they are interdependent". Heteronormativity is a hegemonic norm in the way a dominant group has the power to define and uphold ideal values regarding sexuality, romantic attraction and gender, and make subordinate groups believe that their views and interests are universally shared (Gramsci, 1971, In Phoenix, 2007, p. 178). With hegemonic heteronormativity, the subordinate group are those whose sexuality, romantic attraction and/or gender does not fit into a cisheteronormative narrative. The dominant group are then those who do fit in, that usually being heterosexual/heteroromantic, allosexual/alloromantic and cisgender people.

However, it is important to emphasize that heteronormativity is a term meant to criticize hegemonic heterosexuality and the expectations and restrictions it puts on *everyone*. Indeed, as Bolsø et al. (2007, pp. 11-12) point out, this norm also affects heterosexual people, as it dictates how life ought to be lived in society. For instance, they explain how not conforming to the nuclear family ideal means that single parents or other family structures are stigmatized and seen as inferior. Indeed, Wada and Søråa (2022, p. 144) highlight that due to the powerful trope in Japan of the husband/father being the primary breadwinner and the wife/mother being the one expected to take care of the home, heteronormativity "overshadows actual diversity in society, such as an increasing existence of single and LGBTQ+ households". Since heteronormativity shapes our understandings of reality, any person who challenges or are unable to meet heteronormative expectations will likely experience people around them perceiving and treating them as different (Bolsø et al., 2007, pp. 11-12).

As mentioned in the introduction, there's a significant relationship between gender inequality and the marginalization of LGBTQIA+ people, due to both stemming from heteronormative understandings of biological sex, gender identity, gender roles, sexual attraction and romantic attraction. Hence, another layer to hegemonic cisheteronormativity is hegemonic masculinity. According to Miyazaki (2023, p. 126), hegemonic masculinity upholds and draws from the power of hegemonic heteronormativity in the way it "defines and subordinates marginalized masculinities and femininities". She references Connell's (1995) work on hegemonic masculinity, in which it is explained that "multiple masculinities reside in any given society", meaning the idea that there's only one or limited types of masculinity, the type typically exhibited by elite men, is wrong (Miyazaki, 2023, p. 126). Hence, with this hegemonic norm, only a limited masculinity is given legitimacy, and it does not account for how "femininity and masculinity do not belong to differently sexed bodies" (Butler, 2004, In Miyazaki, p. 147). Hence, the mentioned dominant group also consist of people adhering to hegemonic masculinity. In this thesis, the concepts of hegemonic heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity are useful when examining the interviewees' stories of power relations and social hierarchies within the Japanese educational system, and how the dominant group has the power to define and uphold heteronormative ideals, such as by enforcing rigid school rules based on traditional gender norms.

Another aspect of unequal power relations is the conflicts that can occur between or within marginalized groups. Here the concepts of inter-minority conflict and inter-minority empathy are also helpful. The former term recognizes “the intersectionality of majorities and minorities within individuals”, and hence the conflicts and complex discrimination that can occur among marginalized groups (Shiraishi & Toda, 2023, p. 195). This means that people with marginalized queer identities can experience stigmatization by other SOGI minorities. Some of my interviewees described how it can be difficult to navigate both heteronormative spaces and queer spaces in Japanese society due to having a gender identity or sexual orientation that is fluid, which will be explored in a subsection in chapter four. The term inter-minority empathy is then helpful to make people recognize the benefits and privileges of one’s majority aspects, which can then lead to “greater awareness of other minorities, and thereby to inter-minority empathy” (Kasai, 2023, p. 206).

2.2 Livable and unlivable lives

Judith Butler’s concepts of livable and unlivable lives, especially known from their book *Undoing Gender* (2004), are helpful when studying how normative restrictions can “undo one’s personhood” and undermine “the capacity to preserve a livable life” (Butler, 2004, p. 1). More specifically, the concepts show “the ways in which discourses of the normative construct what are considered to be “livable” or “unbearable lives” by giving recognition to some ways of living and everyday practices rather than others” (Phoenix, 2007, p. 178). In this process, Butler’s term “cultural intelligibility” is also important. The term explains how the normative framework of a culture or context decides who is, and who is not, recognized as a “legitimate subject” (Kristensen, 2011, p. 68). Hence, in contexts where heteronormativity is given legitimacy, those who conform to heterosexual ideals are seen as “legitimate subjects” with livable lives, whereas those who do not conform or are unable to risk becoming “illegitimate subjects” with unlivable lives (Butler, 2004, In Kristensen, 2011, p. 69). In Phoenix’s study of adult narratives of people who experienced serial migration as children, she states that “those who have childhoods constructed as “non-normative” are unlikely to be able to recognize themselves in their culture’s canonical narratives of what it is to be a person”, due to how people’s “autonomy and subjectivity are constrained by normalizing processes” (Phoenix, 2007, p. 179). Hence, her study shows how the concepts of livable and unlivable lives are useful when examining my interviewees’ experiences with conformity to heteronormative norms when they were younger, and how this affected their self-image and their outlook on their future.

Furthermore, Browne et al. (2021, p. 33) state that focusing on Butler’s theorization of livability makes one able to go beyond and challenge the binary of inclusion/exclusion, as the concept’s “potential lies in its ability to focus on the lived experiences of those who are otherwise judicially unintelligible and abject, as well as those who are supposedly recognized”. Indeed, as mentioned in the introduction when referencing the 2020 OECD report, legal LGBTQIA+ inclusivity is important, but legal changes alone do not guarantee or secure the conditions necessary for a livable life. Browne et al. (2021, p. 44) illustrate this by examining how LGBTQIA+ people who live in countries with more legal LGBTQIA+ inclusivity might still often experience “everyday realities of being ‘other’ and ‘not normal’”, due to there still being a societal pressure to conform to heteronormative ideals. On the other hand, they also explain that in countries where there’s no or little legal LGBTQIA+ inclusivity, LGBTQIA+ people might still find ways to make life livable

and/or “bearable”. In the context of education, these aspects are helpful when examining interviewees’ accounts of rigid school rules based on traditional gender norms, and how they navigate between what is allowed and what is not. Indeed, Butler highlights the importance of “social and institutional provision for a livable life”, stating that “when the structures that we depend upon fail, we also fail and fall” (Butler & Worms, 2023, p. 58).

When there is limited social recognition and a lack of institutional support, those who are “constructed as having “unbearable lives” have to assert their claim to a livable (or bearable) life” (Butler, 2004, In Phoenix, 2007, p. 179). In their study, Browne et al. (2021, p. 45) state that LGBTQIA+ people try to become viable subjects and make their lives more livable by finding recognition and acceptance from support systems and by challenging heteronormative norms in “small ways”:

In breaking the heteronormative imaginations in small ways, to be able to poke holes in dominant orders, opens up spaces that can not only disrupt hegemonic and repressive normativities, but also make lives more liveable. Indeed engaging in the process of disruption can make lives more liveable through creating meaning. (Browne et al., 2021, p. 45)

The last point of creating meaning, or finding a meaningful life, relates to this thesis’ aim of examining how the interviewees try to make meaning of their experiences, even if those experiences were negative and difficult. Lastly, Phoenix (2007, p. 185) emphasize that people can claim a livable life by telling their stories: “it is partly through the practice of telling their stories that people’s particular lives become visible and have the potential to become culturally intelligible and challenge the norm”. She further highlights that the “need to assert a claim to a livable life fit with the theoretical framework for narrative analysis” (Phoenix, 2007, p. 179).

2.3 Narratives and narrative analysis

In this thesis, narrative analysis is applied to examine how the interviewees describe and reflect upon their experiences with heteronormativity in Japanese society and in the Japanese educational system, and how they try to make meaning of their experiences and claim a livable life. When studying people’s narratives, it is important to keep in mind that narratives are not objective descriptions of events, but rather *stories* of experience (Squire, 2008, In Phoenix, 2007, p. 182). Hence, the same “story” can be told differently by others or by the same person in a different context. This is due to all knowledge being “situated”, which also means one needs to consider the position of the parties involved (Haraway, 1991; Stanley, 1992, In Cederberg, 2014, p. 135). Indeed, the relationship and interaction between interviewees and interviewer determine what knowledge is produced and how the narratives are co-constructed. Narratives being co-constructions, a concept which “is widely accepted amongst narrative researchers”, shows that they are shaped by interactions and its context (Riessman, 2008, p. 31, In Cederberg, 2014, p. 135). In this interview-based study, I have access to the interviewees’ stories of experience produced in the interview context. This makes narrative analysis a fitting choice, because as Kristensen (2011, p. 80) emphasize, with narrative analysis the focus is on the stories and how they are told. Hence, it is interesting to examine the interviewees’ language, such as their word choices, phrasing, or use of figurative language, like metaphors or similes. It is also relevant to study how, when producing narratives, people will try to connect correlating events to make sense of them (Johannessen et al., 2018).

Furthermore, Bruner (1990; 2002, In Phoenix, 2007, p. 181) makes a distinction between personal narratives and canonical narratives, with the latter being “narratives of how life ought to be lived in the culture, i.e. normative cultural expectations”. In Phoenix’s (2007) text, an example of a non-canonical narrative is the stories from families of serial migration. In contexts where heteronormativity exerts more pressure, LGBTQIA+ stories and experiences do not fit the canon. Furthermore, Phoenix (2007, p. 181) points out that “narrators are much more likely to produce narratives about disruptive life events that alter their expected biographies or expectations of how life ought to be lived in the culture”. Disruptions leads to “disrupted expectations of continuity”, and hence people who experience this has to account for them being outside the norm and failing to “fit the canon” (Riessman, 1993; 2002, In Phoenix, 2007, p. 179).

Johannessen et al. (2018, p. 97) highlight the aspect of power when it comes to narratives, as in how they have the power to shape how we perceive and understand the world. They explain this by using “the American Dream” as an example, and how it legitimizes an individualistic society in which one’s success and quality of life are primarily the responsibility of the individual (Johannessen et al., 2018, p. 109). These points are useful when examining dominant narratives about Japanese society that the interviewees present and challenge in their stories. Lastly, they also point out that people’s positions of power and status affect whether one’s narratives are heard or seen, and it is therefore meaningful to explore marginalized narratives that are often overlooked (Johannessen et al., 2018, pp. 110-111), which this study does by examining the narratives of Japanese SOGI minorities and allies.

3. Methods and methodology

As mentioned in the introduction, this thesis' methodology consists of using a qualitative approach and conducting digital semi-structured interviews. Collectively, my data material consists of interviews with ten individuals that are all Japanese and are either members or allies of the LGBTQIA+ community. In this chapter, I will account for the project's reliability and validity by explaining the choices made during the research process.

3.1 Qualitative research: the qualitative interview

Thagaard (2018, pp. 11-12) states that qualitative methods are suitable for researchers aiming to investigate and conduct thorough analyses of social phenomena. One such method is qualitative interviews, which can give insight into the interviewees' experiences, perspectives and self-reflection (Thagaard, 2018, p. 12). Specifically, it gives the researcher insight into *how* they understand, describe, and retell their experiences. Thagaard (2018, pp. 41-42) references Miller's and Glassner's (2016) work on qualitative interviews, in which they state that an interviewee's accounts can be understood as narratives of their experiences. These aspects of qualitative research and qualitative interviews fit with this project's research questions, theoretical framework, and analytical approach.

Furthermore, Thagaard (2018, p. 46) emphasize that the terms one use to refer to the research participants should be related to the project's research method. Hence, I will use the term "interviewees" in this thesis. This also fits with what she describes as an "interactionist perspective" on research, meaning that the knowledge is developed in the interaction between the researcher and the research participants (Thagaard, 2018, p. 46).

3.2 Recruitment of interviewees

The interviewees were recruited by using snowball sampling and by using two mediators with connections to LGBTQIA+ people or allies from Japan. Hence, when I got in contact with someone, they could help me get in contact with another potential interviewee. A benefit of using two mediators in snowball sampling is avoiding the issue of all the interviewees coming from the same connection (Thagaard, 2018, p. 56). When recruiting, all potential participants were sent a document with information about the project and what participation entails. The requirements for taking part in my project were the following: 1) You self-identify as LGBTQIA+ or serve as an ally to LGBTQIA+ people, and 2) you have attended junior high school and/or high school in the Japanese school system or have a close family member who has. I wanted to recruit between eight and ten people from Japan over the age of 18. Between April and June of 2020, I recruited eight of the interviewees and I conducted these interviews in June and July. After the thesis' postponement, I recruited two additional interviewees by using one of the same mediators. These interviews were conducted during May and July of 2023. All the interviewees are Japanese and have been students at Japanese schools. Since the mediators knew I was doing research on gender and sexual diversity education, I was able to recruit six interviewees who has experiences with teaching LGBTQIA+ topics, mainly by doing visiting lectures at schools, universities and/or parents' meetings. This

fits with what Thagaard (2018, p. 54) refers to as “strategic selection”, meaning the researcher selects participants who have experiences or qualifications that are relevant to the research questions. Since interviewees who had finished school not too long ago were likely to remember their personal school experience with the most clarity, recruiting people who sometimes or regularly teach LGBTQIA+ topics was helpful with getting both recent and relevant experiences.

3.2.1 Description of interviewees

In the table below, the interviewees are listed by their pseudonyms, their approximate ages at the time of the interviews, their gender identity, their relation to the LGBTQIA+ community, and if they have any experiences abroad. The table also shows which interviews were conducted by video, audio or email, and that an interpreter was used in a pair-interview. I use pseudonyms and approximate ages to protect the interviewees’ identities. The pseudonyms are a variation of Japanese names. They are either more masculine, feminine or gender-neutral names based on the interviewees’ gender identity. At the beginning, I used number codes when doing my initial analysis, but I planned on using pseudonyms in the text to make their stories more personal, as well as to make it easier to differentiate and identify each person for the reader.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender identity	LGBTQIA+ relation	Abroad experience	Interview method
Haruto	20s	Man	Transman		Video (with an interpreter)
Fumiko	50s	Woman	Ally		
Nina	40s	Woman	Ally	Yes	Video
Mei	20s	Woman	Pan/prefer women	Yes	Video
Kenji	40s	Man	Gay	Yes	Audio
Yugo	30s	Man	Gay	Yes	Video
Takashi	30s	Man/X-gender	Transman/X-gender		Email
Ren	30s	Man	Transman		Email
Makoto	60s	X-gender	X-gender, demisexual, romantic attraction for women	Yes	Video
Eriko	50s	Woman	Ally	Yes	Email

Table 1: Information about interviewees

As the table shows, the ten interviewees consist of three transmen, one of which sometimes also identify as X-gender⁴, one X-gender person who’s “maybe demisexual⁵” and is romantically interested in women, one pansexual⁶ woman with a preference for women, two gay men and three women that are allies. They ranged in age between early twenties to mid-sixties. They come from different places in Japan, but most currently live in bigger cities. Many of the interviewees are also activists, either doing activism work in their personal life, or they worked for one or several non-profit LGBTQIA+ organizations or support groups in Japan. Due some interviewees’ public activism work, they were naturally more open about their identity. Some were a bit more selective about who they

⁴ X-gender is a Japanese term meaning non-binary, pronounced x-jendā.
⁵ Demisexual refers to people who only feels sexual attraction after forming a strong emotional connection with a person. Demisexuality is a part of the asexual spectrum.
⁶ The interviewee said the following about her identity: “I actually don’t really know, but I identify as pansexual, but I’m more attracted to girls”. Pansexual refers to sexual attraction toward people regardless of their sex or gender identity. The term is considered to fall under the bi umbrella.

shared their identity, allyship or activism with, and two interviewees were not “out” to family members or colleagues. They also had diverse educational and professional backgrounds.

Two of the interviewees are family members: Haruto (transman) and his mother Fumiko (ally). This interview was then conducted as a pair-interview. Eriko (ally) is also a mother to a child that identifies as transgender. Nina (ally) feels close to the LGBTQIA+ community due to identifying with the feeling of being perceived as “different” in Japanese society. She also has several friends from the community. Hence, LGBTQIA+ and diversity issues are important for Fumiko, Eriko, and Nina, because a lack of education and discrimination directly affects their family or close friends. Hence, they are allies to the LGBTQIA+ community, and actively support and advocate for issues that affect them.

Amongst the ten interviewees, six have experiences of studying and/or working outside of Japan, either for a shorter or longer period. Specific countries will not be mentioned to protect the interviewees’ identities. Yugo, Kenji, Nina, Eriko and Makoto have experiences from Western countries. The latter three also have experiences from Asian countries, which Mei does as well. Makoto (they/them) has experiences from four different countries: 1) They first went to school abroad for four years when they were young, 2) they then studied abroad for one year during High school, and 3) they took higher education and 4) worked abroad for about eight years. Yugo also had a one-year exchange during High School, while Nina and Kenji have both lived abroad for ten years before returning to Japan. Eriko has studied and worked in five different countries, having been abroad for about fourteen years in total. At the time of the interviews, they all lived in Japan again. When returning though, they had some new perspectives on their home country, especially regarding LGBTQIA+ issues, based on their experiences with other countries. Indeed, Zhang (2021, p. 384) states that “overseas experiences involve exposure to diverse cultures and new thoughts and ideas, which may influence individuals’ attitudes and way of thinking”. Hence, their stories will be included in the analysis as two sub-chapters.

3.3 Digital interviews: video, audio and email interviews

A characteristic of qualitative methods is flexibility in the research process (Thagaard, 2018). This aspect was especially relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic, as I had to adapt when challenges and limitations arose during the research process. With the pandemic making the plan of travel and face-to-face interactions not possible in 2020, applications with the option of video and audio communication provided a great alternative in this situation. The advantage of digital interviews is being able to avoid the typical challenges of physical meetings, such as “time and financial constraints, geographical dispersion, and physical mobility boundaries of research populations” (Cater, 2011, In Janghorban et al., 2014, p. 1). Hence, I was able to continue using qualitative interviews for my project instead of changing methodology completely, which was a concern early in the pandemic. Hence, all interviews were conducted online, the first eight due to the pandemic, and the last two due to conflicting schedules.

All the interviewees had the options of doing a video interview, an audio interview, or an email interview. I included these options for three reasons; 1) for some, this is a sensitive topic, meaning it might be easier not having to show their face, 2) due to the different time zones and people’s various schedules, an email interview might be more

convenient, 3) potentially increase the number of people who are able to participate by including more options. The video and audio interviews would be conducted through the application *Zoom*. Six requested video interviews, one requested only using their audio, and three requested using email. As suspected, including more options made it easier for potential interviewees to be able to participate.

As Cater (2011, In Janghorban et al., 2014) points out, a disadvantage with digital interviews is that the interviewer will normally have a harder time reading the interviewees' body language. In the video interviews, I could see their facial expressions and maybe see some arm gestures. However, depending on the camera quality and framing, it could be difficult taking in all the cues through the screen. Hence, connecting with an interviewee can be more challenging compared to a physical meeting, and especially when one is only using audio. In the audio-interview, I could try to pay attention to their tone or emotion as they talked, but there were naturally no visible cues to see or use to connect better. When using *Zoom* there is also the mediating factor of the internet to consider. Connection issues can break up or disrupt the flow of the conversation. In my project, one interviewee's connection stopped briefly, and another's internet issues caused the interview to stop for about two minutes. Luckily it only happened once in these interviews, and we were able to pick up where we left off rather quickly. In the email interviews, not having to worry about this issue is an advantage, but this method was also the least personal format, as you are limited to written information, with no facial or tonal cues, and limited emotional cues. I also noticed the interviewees' replies were shorter and less descriptive. However, as mentioned, the pros of including the options of audio-only and email interviews outweighed the cons in my project.

3.4 Semi-structured interviews and the interview process

In my project, I conducted semi-structured interviews. Thagaard (2018, p. 91) state that this type of qualitative interview is most common. With this method, the interviewer has the main topics and questions prepared in advance, but the interview itself has a flexible structure. This means that the order of questions can vary, as one rather lets the conversation flow more naturally. If the interviewee brings up topics that were not prepared, then the interviewer can ask them to further elaborate and decide whether to include it in their research. For my project, the flexible structure was beneficial in being able to adjust the interview guide before, during and after each interview. The adjustments were based on what I learned from each interview, such as asking about and including perspectives from experiences abroad. I also adapted the questions based on whether the interviewee identifies as LGBTQIA+ or as an ally, and if they are an activist and/or a parent. Hence, based on my main interview guide, I ended up having four different versions with a few differences. In the attachments I have combined these versions into one interview guide. More specifically, the interview guide had sixteen main questions in total. Some questions also had examples or follow-up questions, either to help the interviewees or myself as the interviewer if necessary. The questions were mainly about the interviewees' experiences with the Japanese educational system, and some on their experiences with gender and sexual diversity issues in Japanese society. In the interviews, I first asked more general questions, before asking about more specific instances or events they recalled.

The seven video/audio interviews were the most spontaneous and flexible in nature, as I did not follow the guide too strictly and let my interviewees decide the direction of the interview topics. I mainly used the guide to make sure most questions had been touched upon or to get back on track if the conversation got too off topic. I also asked follow-up questions that I had not written down specifically, but that I asked along the way based on what the interviewees brought up.

The three email interviews were more structured in comparison, as I followed the guide more closely due to it being more difficult to be flexible or spontaneous in a written conversation. However, using email provided the interviewees with more flexibility in the sense that they could reply when it best fit their schedule. Having more time can also help with any potential language barrier or uncertainties. For me as the interviewer, it also gave me time to read and study their replies, and hence I could better prepare follow-up questions. I also split the interview guide into 2-4 email rounds, depending on the situation. This was to not overwhelm the interviewees with too many questions at once, and to make the interview less structured or formal. Hence, based on the interviewees' answers, I could begin the next email round with new follow-up questions, before going back to the main questions again.

3.4.1 Validity & reliability

Thagaard (2018, p. 188) states that when it comes to a study's reliability, the researcher must account for the development of their data material during the research process by being specific, give detailed descriptions and be transparent of one's methods and strategies. This is what I have tried to do in the previous subsections and will continue with in this section and the ones following.

My data consists of interviews with people of a various backgrounds and identities, but they do not represent the entire LGBTQIA+ community and all allies in Japan. They can only contribute with their own narratives and experiences about the topics. The variety of interviewees have both positive and negative aspects. The positives are that my data provide different perspectives; from men, women and non-binary people, from trans and cis people, from queer and straight people, from young, middle-age and older people, from parents, activist and educators, and from people who have only lived in Japan and people who have studied and/or worked in different countries. A possible disadvantage is that the selection of interviewees can become too broad and that there's too many varying factors. However, as mentioned in the chapter two, heteronormative understandings and expectations is something that affects everyone. In addition, experiences with schools are something most have in Japan. Hence, my approach is looking at their common stories on conformity to social norms, instead of focusing on a specific identity or age group. Also, the context of when the research process took place is of relevance. The COVID-19 situation disrupted the project and made many things uncertain. Hence, my focus was being able to find people that could participate, do so by communicating in English, and be willing to talk about a culturally sensitive topic, all within the time frame of the planned recruitment and data development. Hence, choosing to have a variety of interviewees were beneficial both in terms of the research questions and theoretical framework, and to adapt to the situation.

Another potential issue is the reliability of the interviewees' recollections of their time as students. As stated previously, I had a "strategic selection" in the sense that I recruited several people that are active and aware of the current situation regarding education,

due to being activists and/or parents of LGBTQIA+ children. Lastly, the aspect of having interviews in English or English translations influences the data I have access to. Although all the English-speaking interviewees were able to communicate without any issues, there might still be limitations in what they are able to express about their thoughts and feelings.

3.4.2 Use of interpretation

Amongst the video interviews, one was a pair-interview with Haruto and his mother Fumiko. This was also the only interview where an interpreter was used, as all the individual interviews were conducted in English. When using an interpreter, it is important to find someone who is culturally acceptable and linguistically proficient (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, p. 173). Luckily, the interpreter I got in contact with through my mediator were themselves a member of two LGBTQIA+ organizations and works as an interpreter professionally. These factors were important in making sure the translations were more accurate and in needing to show consideration for the interviewees when including another person in the conversation, especially when dealing with a sensitive topic. Hence, it was also reassuring that the interpreter and interviewees knew each other. It is also important to note that when using an interpreter, the interviewees' accounts are told through their translations and retellings. This means I only have access to the stories and experiences through the interpreter. The opposite is also the case, as the interviewees received my questions or comments through the interpreter. I would then also like to emphasize that quotes from Haruto and Fumiko that I use in my later analysis is the interpreter's translations.

3.5 Ethics and interviewer positionality

Thagaard (2018, p. 24) emphasizes the importance of the ethical and moral responsibilities of the researcher throughout the entire research process. In this subsection, I will explain the ethical concerns considered throughout the project, as well as my responsibilities and positionality as the researcher.

The first thing I did after outlining my project was to send it to NSD, *The Norwegian Centre for Research Data*, for assessment and approval. When the thesis was postponed, I contacted NSD again to extend the research project's official time of completion. This process is important in qualitative methods that entail close contact with the research participants, and where the researchers receive information that can be connected to the participants (Thagaard, 2018, pp. 21-22). After receiving approval, I started the recruitment process. All potential interviewees were sent a document which contained information about the project and what participation entails, information about consent, how the data would be used and stored, and what kind of topics would be included in the interview. Due to the sensitive nature of some topics, as well as the potential language barrier, I decided to give the interviewees four of the main questions in advance. As mentioned, they were given the option to use video, audio and email, one reason being that it can be a sensitive topic, hence they might prefer not having to show their face.

As the interviewer, it is important that I create trust and make the interviewees feel comfortable. Hence, at the start of each interview, I made sure to tell the interviewees to only share what they feel comfortable with, meaning they could skip or be brief about certain questions. I also told them a bit about myself to better connect with them, and

then I re-informed them about the project and about consent, to make sure the interviewee agreed before formally starting the interview. The audio from each video and audio interview was recorded with permission for later transcription. To protect the interviewees' identities, I use pseudonyms and approximate ages, and I have omitted or anonymized other identifiable information.

Another aspect of my project is that I conducted cross-cultural interviews, and that I have the position as one from the "outside" doing research on a culture that's different from my own. There are both benefits and challenges related to this that one needs to be aware of. In terms of benefits, being on the "outside" means the researcher can question what the "insiders" take for granted, while the main challenge is understanding what's new or different from our own experiences (Thagaard, 2018, p. 79). As mentioned in this thesis' preface, I have had an interest in Japanese culture for a long time, which makes me familiar to some extent with certain cultural contexts, but I am also aware of where my knowledge is limited. I am a Norwegian woman in her 20s, and my experiences and position influence the research process, from the very beginning of the project till the final analyses and conclusions. Indeed, reflexivity of one's role and influences are important when doing cross-cultural research (Ishii-Kuntz et al., 2022, p. 3).

3.6 Analysis strategy: Using thematic analysis to categorize and identify themes and narratives

While narrative analysis is my main analytical approach, my analysis strategy when organizing and categorizing the interview transcripts was to use thematic analysis to find common themes and narratives. According to Johannessen et al. (2018, p. 279), a thematic analysis is when the researcher looks for "groups of data with common features", also known as "themes" or "categories". Hence, I started with organizing quotes from the interview transcripts that were similar in content. After collecting and organizing all the interviews into one document, I began a more detailed analysis by color coding and in the process finding main themes and subcategories. After having done several rounds of organizing and coding the interviews, I found two overarching themes, which makes up the two analytical chapters: 1) Conformity in Japanese society, and 2) The Japanese educational system: Preserving and challenging the status quo.

Within these main themes, I looked at similar descriptions and phrases, and began to identify common stories between the interviews. These will be further explored in the analysis. Some examples include the narrative of an overall "intolerance to diversity" in Japanese society and the educational system, and consequently stories of self-education and sharing experiences to try to claim a livable life.

4. Conformity in Japanese society

The framework for the interviews was structured around LGBTQIA+ topics in relation to Japanese schools, but due to education being a societal institution, this naturally led the interviewees to also discuss broader societal phenomena. In this chapter, I will then examine how the interviewees describe their experiences with conformity in Japanese society, specifically how they talk about the societal pressure to conform to heteronormative norms. Several interviewees presented the widely accepted narrative of Japan being a homogeneous and equal society “for everyone”. My interviewees provide counter-narratives based on their own experiences that challenge these views. In particular, the individuals I interviewed challenge the dominant majority group’s presentation of the “equal society narrative” as referring to a set of universally shared experiences. As mentioned in chapter three, some of the interviewees have studied and/or worked abroad. Such experiences give them insight into other cultural contexts where gender and sexual diversity are more normalized, defamiliarizing their view of Japanese society upon their return.

With Japanese society’s homogeneous identity and the extreme pressure to conform to heteronormative norms, the interviewees describe how culturally accepted social groups become limited. Their stories reveal the ways in which they navigate both heteronormative and queer spaces, considering which they can participate in, and to what degree they can fully participate. To this end, I will examine which societal arenas they experience as open to their participation, and which they experience as difficult. Lastly, I will look at what the interviewees describe is changing regarding gender and sexual diversity becoming more normalized in Japanese society.

4.1 Homogeneous identity vs. diverse realities: Challenging heteronormativity in Japanese society

Kenji (40s) identifies as a gay man and works in the mental health field. He has also lived abroad for ten years, which he says has shaped his current views on Japanese society, especially in relation to LGBTQIA+ issues. Kenji says that “people don’t want to stand out” in Japan, whether that be in school, at work, or even amongst friends and family. Several interviewees pointed out that one of the reasons for why it is difficult to be perceived as different is due to Japan being a more “homogeneous” and collective-minded society, or as Kenji pointed out: “Still, people *think* that this is a homogeneous country and the racial ethnic group is only Japanese”. His phrasing indicates that this is not necessarily a given fact about the country, but rather a widely accepted narrative, or as Kasai and Toda (2023, p. 18) phrase it, a “homogeneous *identity*”. Hence, this means there’s an expectation and a belief that one ought to be “the same” or “similar” in nature. Kenji follows his statement with describing how it relates to heteronormativity in Japanese society, illustrated by him saying that the dominant group and the “right” sexual identity in Japan is heterosexual people.

Men never realize their privilege, they think Japanese society is a very equal, fair society for everyone, and they don’t realize how women, you know... with their position and... the same, very same thing for LGBT people, they don’t talk about it and heterosexual is that “right way”. [...] I guess they know it, that exist, LGBT exist, but at the same time, still majority is... heterosexual world. (Kenji)

Here, a widely accepted narrative about Japanese society is presented by Kenji. As before, he uses the phrasing of “they *think* Japanese society is like a very equal, fair

society for everyone”, meaning this again is a perception rather than a given fact. Indeed, Kasai and Toda (2023, p. 26) point out that many Japanese people have ignored the differences and diversity of the country, due to the common belief that Japan is a primarily homogeneous society, while reality shows otherwise. Kenji then questions the hegemonic heteronormativity, stating that the term “everyone” does not include or take into consideration the lived experiences of Japanese women or LGBTQIA+ people, and probably also other minorities and marginalized groups. The patriarchal and cisheteronormative culture only validates the lived experiences of privileged Japanese men and heterosexual cisgender people. As mentioned in chapter two, those who have the power to define and perverse heteronormative norms, will try to make the subordinate groups believe their views are universally shared. Hence, Kenji emphasizes that “they” are the ones who experience Japanese society as equal, not realizing or acknowledging their majority aspects and privileged position in society. He thinks that the dominant group is most likely aware that gender and sexual diversity exists, but they ignore the existence of others they perceive as being abnormal. Indeed, those who have a non-normative gender identity, gender expression, sexuality or romantic attraction present alternative narratives to the one of a homogeneous and heteronormative Japanese society. When the status quo is then questioned or challenged by LGBTQIA+ people, they are positioned as being illegitimate subjects and of having unlivable lives. Furthermore, regulating norms, such as heteronormativity, can affect anyone who does not conform to them. This is something all the interviewees discussed and is illustrated particularly well in this quote by Nina.

It’s not only towards LGBTQ people, but then as a whole, it’s the nature of the Japanese culture. It’s really hard for Japanese people to accept... who’s different from you. (Nina)

Nina (40s) is an ally and advocate for LGBTQIA+ people and has a background in education and communication. She has lived abroad for ten years and has experience working for student exchange programs with topics such as diversity and inclusion. In her quote, she presents the issue of an overall intolerance to difference in Japan, and that this phenomenon is ingrained in the very culture. With heteronormativity being such a dominant social norm, it not only affects SOGI minorities, but dictates many aspects of people’s lives, like expectations of family structure, relationship dynamics and self-expression. When it comes to the latter aspect, Nina points out that by “being the same” in the way you for instance dress, speak, and behave, “you feel safe, to be in a group”. She often experiences the consequences of not conforming to such expectations: “I say things and have opinions too strongly. So, they think I am some kind of an *alien*, in some ways”. Her presenting her experience by using the word “alien” illustrates a feeling of otherness and of literally being alienated. When Nina expresses herself as an outspoken person, instead of being understood and accepted, she often experiences going against the grain. One instance she mentioned of this happening, was during her time working for an exchange program in Japan. During the application process, a student who identifies as LGBTQIA+ became a topic in the workplace. Nina said she started hearing negative statements from co-workers about this student, such as: “Uh oh, they are really obviously “out””. Especially one co-worker was being very difficult and expressed her homophobic views.

She said: “Well, if I have to host this student, I would never host an LGBTQ student in my house”. [...] Then she said: “It’s bad for my kids”. [...] I was really furious, and I was really upset and I got angry. Then some people said: “Yeah, some people are not ready for it”. But then, we are [an exchange] program, and we’re accepting all kinds of students from all over the world and any kind, regardless of sexual orientation, regardless of nationality,

regardless of color. Like, it actually says in the statement, in the mission, in our program. So, I pretty much pointed out: "What you're saying is not in the statement" [laughs]. And then she said: "Well, some people are not ready". But isn't that our goal? To get closer and to find inclusiveness and equality? (Nina)

The first two statements of the co-worker show how "Japanese mothers are socioculturally configured as the solo overseers of heteronormative norms at home" (Tamagawa, 2018, p. 515). Hence, this person would not allow an LGBTQIA+ exchange student into her home, due to the misconception of them having a bad influence on her children. In a study on same-sex marriage in Japan, Tamagawa (2016, p. 182) identified the Japanese traditional family as "the "hotbed" of heterosexism in Japan". For Nina's co-worker, the traditional family was not to be disrupted or challenged, which is why when Nina called her out on her prejudices and violations of the organizations' mission of equality and inclusivity, the co-worker filed a complaint about Nina to HR. She was then asked to speak with the director. Nina reemphasized her point about the co-worker's statements being discriminatory and against their program statements. Nina then says the following happened: "Later somehow, the policy and the company rules had been revised. That regardless of sexual orientation we should not be saying anything biased towards them. So, it was my win". The clearer policies on employees' behavior and prejudices were an important moment for Nina. She saw that although she might be viewed as "an alien" and different by some for the way she is, like her co-workers, she could have a positive impact and make a difference: "Yeah, that was kind of a trigger – that I decided to become an advocate, strongly, firmly, while I'm in Japan". As Johannessen et al. (2018) points out, when producing narratives, narrators will try to connect correlating events to make sense of them. Here, Nina seems to reframe her negatives experience to a meaningful experience in her life, as well as connecting it to being a "trigger" of wanting to be an ally and to use such moments as an opportunity to educate Japanese people about gender and sexual diversity.

4.1.1 Perspectives on Japanese society after experiences abroad

The incident at Nina's workplace happened not long after she had returned to Japan from living abroad for ten years. There she had experienced a culture where LGBTQIA+ people were very accepted. When confronted with the heteronormativity within Japanese society, she describes experiencing a reverse culture shock, because for Nina, gender and sexual diversity being visible and simply a part of everyday life had become "really normal". Therefore, the non-normative behavior in Nina's perspective, was to have prejudices towards gender and sexual diversity. Indeed, as mentioned in chapter three, having experiences from other countries than your own "involve exposure to diverse cultures and new thoughts and ideas, which may influence individuals' attitudes and way of thinking" (Zhang, 2021, p. 384). This is something Kenji says he experienced, who like Nina also lived abroad for ten years.

I have seen a totally different world, or a different society, community in [city abroad], and I lived there for 10 years. So... then coming back to Japan – yeah, that's definitely shaped my viewpoint or... some ideas about LGBT. (Kenji)

The biggest area of difference between Japanese society and other cultures that the interviewees' presented in their stories, was the level of acceptance towards gender and sexuality diversity. Nina and Kenji, as well as Yugo and Mei who I will introduce later in this chapter, describe how LGBTQIA+ identities were very normalized, both in schools and in universities, at workplaces and in society in general, as all four say they met or

saw several LGBTQIA+ students and/or colleagues who were open about their identities. Hence, like Kenji phrased it in his quote, it was like seeing “a totally different world”. In the areas they lived in, these interviewees’ felt they were accepted for who they are, both in general and in relation to being LGBTQIA+. Having their identities validated and their lives becoming visible, meant they became culturally intelligible, as they were accepted within the normative cultural expectations (Phoenix, 2007). In their stories of life in Japan, this was not their experience. Hence, it was difficult for some interviewees, like Kenji, when returning to their home country.

When I was in [city abroad], I really kinda felt – I can be gay, you know, I can marry someone in the future and I can have a kid... and I can be – really happy ever after kinda... in [country abroad]. And that’s why I really felt sad that I had to go back to Japan. Really, really wanted to go back to [country abroad], but it didn’t work out. (Kenji)

Kenji, as well as Makoto who will be introduced in the next section, most likely would have stayed abroad, at least for longer, but temporary working visas were an issue. In Kenji’s account, he describes the anxiety of going back to Japan. He then uses the fairytale phrasing of a “happily ever after” scenario to describe his imagined future abroad, while describing a not so happy ending when talking about having to return to life in Japan. Although he emphasizes that the country abroad also has places that are more conservative and less accepting, Kenji says that LGBTQIA+ issues are nevertheless visible and talked about: “You can see someone who really, really has a same feeling, same attitude, same opinions and – share the difficulties together”. This story then presents the possibility of finding a place of belonging and being able to claim a livable life. In contrast, he says that in Japan, “LGBT issues are not visible, totally denied, people don’t talk about it and it’s kinda embarrassing, and people want to hide”. Hence, this presents the opposite situation, now risking becoming an illegitimate subject and of being seen as having an unlivable life, having to go back to hiding a part of yourself and conforming to the heteronormative society. Kenji is not the only one who presented contrasting narratives of the culture in Japan versus some cultures outside of Japan, as shown in the following quote.

I think my experience from [country abroad] gave me the idea of seeing Japan as such a homogeneous society, cause in [country abroad] everybody is different, “everybody is different and it’s okay” kind of culture, right? [...] In Japan... we think - “majority is always right” kind of culture. (Yugo)

Yugo (30s), who identifies as a gay man and works for a Japanese agency, had a one-year exchange period during high school. In his story, similarly to Kenji and Nina, he returned from abroad with a much more comprehensive understanding of the homogeneity of Japanese society, because as he puts it, is not only about “the physical appearances”, but also about what’s “in our heads, our ideas”. He then compares the two cultures and describes Japan as having a “majority is always right” culture and the other as having a “everybody is different and it’s okay” culture. Nina also described the culture she experienced as people appreciating the differences and the diversity, while in Japanese society, the subordinate group are often excluded when they fail to fit into the patriarchal and heteronormative society. In summary, a number of the interviewees of this study are faced with the dilemma of either conforming and hiding parts of themselves or challenging the norms. With the latter option, the question then becomes: in which areas of society they can participate, and to what degree are they able to fully be themselves in these various spaces?

4.2 “Which part of society can I participate in, and which part can I not?”

Here, I will examine which societal arenas the interviewees experience as difficult to participate in, as well as which they experience are more open to their participation. I begin this section with a quote from Makoto (60s), who identifies as X-gender and use they/them pronouns in English. Makoto experiences their gender identity as being “quite fluid”. They are romantically attracted to women, and they mentioned that they are “maybe demisexual”, which is on the asexual spectrum. Makoto has been an activist since the mid-80s in Japan, first with the women’s rights movement and then with the LGBTQIA+ rights movement, and they are a member of Japanese LGBTQIA+ organizations. Hence, they have a lot of experience and knowledge about gender and sexual diversity issues in Japan, due to their own life experiences and with helping young LGBTQIA+ people. When growing up, Makoto saw older women in their life only being in relationships with and eventually marrying men. Hence, the heteronormative and allonormative expectation of having to marry someone of the opposite gender has affected them ever since they were very young.

So, I thought: “Which part of society can I participate in, and which part can I not?” [laugh]. [...] I didn’t know how I could live through this society, you know, this life that I was expected to lead, yeah? And – So, uh... I didn’t think I would fit in. So, I couldn’t imagine myself becoming an adult. (Makoto)

As mentioned in chapter two, Phoenix (2007, p. 179) explains that those who have childhoods that they experience as non-normative are unlikely to be able to recognize themselves fully in their “culture’s canonical narratives of what it is to be a person”, because they are positioned as being illegitimate subjects and as having unlivable lives. Hence, Makoto were unable to imagine themselves “becoming an adult”, because there were no adult role models that matched their lived experiences of neither being romantically attracted to men, neither allosexual nor cisgender. Makoto therefore describes a process of having to almost separate life into participable and non-participable areas, to try to find a place where they might be able to fit in. However, when it comes to the school context, Makoto and several interviewees explain that the extreme societal pressure to conform consequently leads to there being little space for diverse social groups. In the introduction, a 2019 study was mentioned, which showed how younger students with “a high tendency toward conformity was related to rejective attitudes” towards LGBTQIA+ students (Kasai et al., 2023, p. 28). In the following quote, Makoto describes the extent to which conformity is “important for everyone” in Japanese schools.

Having to fit in, I mean, for survival, is really necessary when you are young and going to school in Japan. It’s very important for everyone. So, I guess – because everyone tries to fit in, the groups become limited. [...] So, they hide a part of themselves, and they try to – uhm, try to conform. [...] Conform to certain ways if you want to survive. (Makoto)

According to Makoto, schools are rarely a place that is open for LGBTQIA+ students’ participation, due to the pressure to conform and there consequently being limited numbers of accepted social groups to fit into. This is supported by Kenji, in which he who describes that LGBTQIA+ students may be hesitant to seek support or resources at their schools, because as he puts it: “it’s inside of school, *part of school*”.

Furthermore, the word choices and phrasing of the interviewees matter, as they show how extreme the societal pressure to conform can be for Japanese people, as well as the

consequences of not doing so. In Makoto's case, they phrase it by saying "having to fit in for *survival*" and "conform to certain ways if you want to *survive*". Nina also compares it to a life-or-death scenario, a social death, for Japanese LGBTQIA+ people: "Some are really "out out", but it's really rare. It's like they're taking a bullet, *risking their lives*". Here, these interviewees present what they view as the two main options of life in Japanese society for LGBTQIA+ people. On the one hand, Makoto's example of "conform to survive" illustrates how you have to fit the normative cultural expectations in order to be seen as having a livable life. On the other hand, Nina's example of "risking their lives" describe how not conforming to cisheteronormativity is a way to be seen as having an unlivable life. This dilemma makes it difficult for SOGI minorities to navigate spaces within Japanese society, as neither option provide the conditions of a truly livable life.

In Nina's interview, she brings up an interesting example that illustrates contradictions in society and the ways LGBTQIA+ people are able to participate in certain cultural spaces. She brings up the all-male *Kabuki* and all-female *Takarazuka* theaters. In the *Kabuki* theater, men also play women's roles, while in the *Takarazuka* theater women play men's roles. Frühstück (2022, p. 8) highlights that "historically, gender-bending and cross-dressing have been century-old practices on and off the various stages of Japanese theater". Nina says that these theaters are seen as "one of our cultures that represent our history", and that many tourists are recommended by Japanese people to go see a play while visiting. Furthermore, she points out that "there are lots of people in that society that are actually gay", and that "they like to be in the theater community, and it's been going on for many, many years, going back to the Edo era". Here, Nina presents what she experiences as a contradiction. On the one hand, she says that the theaters are "really accepted" in Japanese society and that they are "viewed *as part of our culture*". On the other hand, she states that "nobody says anything about the phenomenon being *part of* and LGBTQ related", and that the gender and sexual diversity is accepted "as long as it's in that community". As Kenji pointed out earlier in a quote, many Japanese people are aware that LGBTQIA+ people exist, but their identities are ignored and not talked about. Indeed, as mentioned in the introduction chapter when referencing Ueno's study (2023), unlike heterosexuality, same-sex sexuality is seen as a private matter in Japan. This is also shown in Nina's example, and she further describes how in relation to these theaters, LGBTQIA+ people are allowed to perform and highlight Japanese culture, while simultaneously being perceived as a group *separate* from and *not a part of* Japanese culture. In other words, Nina experiences that their participation is accepted in the theater plays, as it is contained and remains in a fictional setting. This also relates to the interaction rule that Ueno (2023) mentions, which distinguishes between private feelings (*honne*) and public performances (*tatemae*), showing how Japanese people might seem more accepting in certain public settings, yet be less accepting in private. Hence, Nina's example illustrates how Japanese LGBTQIA+ people often have to manage their visibility and their degree of participation.

Furthermore, the interviewees did present some societal arenas that are open to their participation, though those were spaces specifically created for gender and sexual minorities. Most of them mentioned visiting or becoming members of LGBTQIA+ organizations and/or LGBTQIA+ centers at universities or in various districts. Other queer spaces mentioned included LGBTQIA+ bars, clubs and restaurants, which one can mainly find in the bigger cities. Hence, Nina and Kenji brought up how it can be more difficult to live in rural areas or in the suburbs, as there are fewer places to find a community. Kenji himself grew up in a rural area and mentions having to travel to a different town to find resources, as well as wanting to move away from his family and neighbors to study in

another city: "I thought being far away from them is safer and healthier, because they won't find out, and I can feel more free". Both Kenji and Nina point out the difference in resources and community available to those in big cities compared to those in rural areas. Hence, Kenji describes how he himself and many LGBTQIA+ want to move to a big city, as such places can better provide conditions necessary for a more livable life. However, Nina then brings up the following point:

Compared to [living in rural areas], the people who are living in bigger cities have better deals, because they have a community there. But! Again, if you start working and if you try to have a normal life, if you go to school, if you go to college or if you go to a company, people stay quiet about it. Yeah, they don't – they can never ever share their sexual orientation. [...] Even parents would ask you: "Just behave normal, or you will get bullied". Yeah, yeah... It's a lot of pressure, you know? Being someone else that you're not. (Nina)

In this quote, Nina's phrasing of having to live a "*normal* life" and having to "behave *normal*" shows how heteronormativity within the traditional family, workplaces, schools, and higher education institutions still makes life difficult for SOGI minorities even in the bigger cities in Japan. Hence, as Nina puts it, they have to conform by "never ever" sharing their LGBTQIA+ identities and by "being someone else" to avoid bullying and stigmatization. Makoto also described how LGBTQIA+ people cannot fully be themselves if they want to be able to participate in Japanese society. However, it was mentioned that the interviewees found a safe space within LGBTQIA+ places or groups, but how open are some of these spaces to people with more marginalized identities? This will be explored in the next subsection.

4.2.1 LGBTQIA+ and ally spaces

Fumiko (ally, 50s) is the mother of Haruto (transman, 20s). She belongs to an LGBTQIA+ parents' and friends' group, and in her experience, parents' reactions to their children differ by what gender and sexual minority their children belong to. One example she gave is from one of their group meetings, in which a woman said she could accept having a lesbian daughter, but that she could not accept having a transgender child.

"Well, my daughter... I wouldn't be able to accept transgender". Other mothers would say, "maybe lesbian is better", I mean, in terms of acceptance, you know? "I could accept if my daughter [goes] out with a woman, but then changing gender is not acceptable". So, some mothers feel that way. So, the acceptance really depends on what kind of... changes that they have to go through. (Fumiko)

Fumiko points out that for many parents, having a trans child who wants to transition is seen as a bigger barrier compared to having a child who is attracted to the same gender. More specifically, the further you stray away from the cisheteronormative norms, the bigger the threshold for acceptance or understanding becomes. Fumiko's example shows how this can even be the case within spaces created for LGBTQIA+ people and allies. Another interviewee also has experiences of this happening, as shown in the following quote.

I feel many people have difficulties with understanding "non-binary" and "gender fluidity", even in the LGBTQ community sometimes I feel the difficulty. (Takashi)

Takashi (30s) identifies as a transman, but also experiences their gender as being fluid and therefore they sometimes identify as X-gender as well. Their sexual and romantic orientation is for women. Takashi uses both he/they pronouns in English, but they/them

pronouns is the preferred choice when using either. Hence, I will use they/them when referring to Takashi. Takashi is an activist, and their work is related to doing counseling and enlightenment on LGBTQIA+ issues. Takashi says that in Japan, "heterosexism and the gender binary system are really strong", to the point where they had heterosexism towards themselves when they were young. With internalized homophobia, a person will experience an "aversion to homosexuality" and be made to believe that "heterosexuality is normal at its root" (Miyakoshi, 2012, In Kasai & Toda, 2023, p. 27). Takashi describes then the consequence of suppressing your sexual and romantic orientation and internalizing cisheteronormative beliefs. Indeed, these norms made Takashi feel they had to hide their attraction towards girls, and that they had to either identify as a man or a woman. Takashi says they struggled for a long time while hiding parts of themselves and trying to fit in. Luckily, they now have accepted their gender fluidity and sexuality. However, Takashi says they still feel that it is sometimes "very difficult to talk about non-binary or gender fluidity".

In Takashi's story, it is shown that when your gender identity has fluidity, and therefore not fitting into a binary categorization of gender, it can be difficult to navigate both within cisheteronormative spaces and queer spaces. Indeed, as shown in Fumiko's story of a mother representing a SOGI minority, and with Takashi's experiences, cisnormativity can be prevalent even within LGBTQIA+ spaces. The concept of inter-minority conflict shows how more marginalized SOGI minorities can experience "discrimination and mistreatment not only by the majority, but also by other minority group members" (Kasai, 2023, p. 200). Since people whose identities fall under the transgender umbrella are a more marginalized group, it explains why Takashi and Fumiko has stories of prejudices even within queer spaces.

The same can be the case for those who have no clear sexual or romantic label, an issue that Mei brings up in her interview. Mei (20s) is a student and belongs to the LGBTQIA+ community. She says she does not use or identify herself with any specific label, but she mentioned "pansexual" as being the closest and specified that she has a preference for women. Despite being attracted to women and belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community, Mei tells a story of not feeling welcome in a women-only bar in an LGBTQIA+ area in Japan.

I have been to that area before, but I personally didn't really like it, because – I don't know if it's just me or if it was just at the time, but people I met was... even though they are really... open... but they also have a really... kind of... they have the stereotypes, because I went to the women-only bars, and the first question I got was: "Are you lesbian?", and I answered that: "Oh, I'm not sure, but I am also attracted to girls", and they didn't really like it, because... they prefer lesbians, and who... looks like – feminine and stuff. (Mei)

Mei emphasizes that this was her experience, and it might have been different in another circumstance or with other people she encountered. Regardless, based on her story, she agreed that it can be difficult to not have a clear label, both in society in general and in LGBTQIA+ areas in Japan. Mei also points out the contradiction of the people she encountered being "really open", but at the same time having certain "stereotypes" about gender expression and not fully accepting people with a fluid and un-labeled sexuality. Mei neither fit the expectation of identifying as a lesbian or of being very feminine presenting. Indeed, Nina says that in Japan, "the gender roles are very, very strong, and masculinity and femininity is also strong as well. So, everything has to be clear cut". Hence, the heteronormative expectation of having a gender expression that

corresponds to your gender identity leaves little room for gender nonconformity, even sometimes within LGBTQIA+ places.

4.3 A period of change: LGBTQIA+ representation in media

Today, Japanese society is facing a critical moment in which its homogeneous identity is transforming into a diverse one. Sexual and gender minorities, or lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, have emerged as a group that is now understood as a minority group that often experiences stigma and exclusion. (Kasai & Toda, 2023, p. 18)

As this quote highlights, the homogeneity of Japanese society is being challenged by marginalized groups becoming more visible and acknowledged. The interviewees bring up better gender and sexual diversity representation in media as a clear example of this change. Previously, LGBTQIA+ characters in TV series, entertainment shows and movies have been portrayed by using harmful stereotypes, with especially gay men and transgender women being used as comedic relief. The way SOGI minorities were portrayed in media “not only created stereotypes, but also reduced the public’s awareness of LGBQ people who do not fit these stereotypes” (McLelland, 2000, In Ueno, 2023, p. 3). Kenji mentions that there are still issues and a need for better representation both in front of the camera and behind the scenes. However, Kenji, Mei and Yugo notice how the situation is improving.

Especially lately there are very good role models in Japan as well, not only for LGBTQ, but also body image and... what else... people who have disabilities... and everything, there are very good role models in social medias or TV-shows. (Mei)

Here, Mei brings up the topic of role models. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Makoto, as well as other interviewees, had no role models when growing up, which made it difficult for them to imagine “becoming an adult” due to experiencing having a non-normative childhood. Now, the increasing number of role models for marginalized groups in Japan means that people can feel seen and heard, and hence become visible and viable subjects. Even Nina, who herself does not identify as a SOGI minority, found a place to belong within the community after seeing Japanese LGBTQIA+ people on TV talking about their experiences of not fitting in. She says she related to their stories and felt “I am more like *a part of them*”. For Nina, media showcasing diverse identities and experiences was important, as she at the time struggled with fitting into Japanese society again.

As explained in chapter two, one way for people to claim a livable life is by telling their stories. LGBTQIA+ people are not only doing so more often in traditional media, but also on social media platforms such as YouTube. By using social media, LGBTQIA+ people find a digital space to connect with each other and fill the gaps where traditional media may still be lacking. Mei notices how LGBTQIA+ people simply sharing their daily lives helps normalizing LGBTQIA+ identities, relationships, and families for those who do not identify as LGBTQIA+. Indeed, Mei says the comments she reads are mainly positive, showing how social awareness of gender and sexual diversity is increasing amongst the Japanese population. According to Mei and Yugo, this is especially the case amongst the younger generation. Mei shares a story of when she once encountered a few junior high school students, and while casually chatting, she heard them bring up the term and meaning of being X-gender, and that it was simply a normal part of the conversation. Yugo also says he notices “the situation becoming kinda better”, with younger people becoming more

aware and understanding. However, Yugo and the other interviewees emphasize that it is a slow process, and that more awareness and social recognition is needed.

4.4 Summary

In this chapter, I have explored how the interviewees describe their experiences with conformity in Japanese society. My material showed that the common belief that Japan is a homogeneous society legitimizes the societal pressure to conform a dominant social norm such as cisheteronormativity. Specifically, Kenji presents the “equal society narrative” in his interview and describes how this heteronormative narrative invalidates the lived experiences of Japanese women and LGBTQIA+ people. He explains that it is usually Japanese men and heterosexual people who pushes this narrative, illustrating how they as the dominant majority group have the power to frame Japan as an equal society “for everyone”. However, the interviewees provided counter-narratives based on how their experiences challenge these views. Indeed, Makoto and Nina’s descriptions present what they view as the two main options of life in Japanese society for LGBTQIA+ people: “conform to survive” or “risk your life” by not doing so. Their descriptions show that neither option provide the conditions for a truly livable life, as the former entails not being able to fully be yourself, and the latter means you risk stigmatization from others.

The stories from the interviewees who had studied and/or worked abroad, showed how it could be challenging to return to Japan after experiencing other cultural contexts where gender and sexual diversity is normalized. Indeed, their stories presented the possibility of having a livable life abroad, with Kenji phrasing it as a “happily ever after” scenario, which contrasted their descriptions of life and their imagined futures in Japan. However, as explained in chapter two, even in countries where gender and sexual diversity are less accepted, people can still find ways to make life livable and/or bearable and try to make meaning of their experiences. Nina’s story of an incident at her workplace, in which she challenged co-workers’ discriminatory remarks, shows how she reframed a negative experience into a meaningful one. She describes how this moment was a “trigger” for her, and that she from then on decided to be an active advocate for LGBTQIA+ people in Japan, and hence contribute to making a difference. Indeed, the interviewees notice how Japanese LGBTQIA+ people sharing their stories on social media, and being represented in traditional media, is changing Japanese people’s mindset and awareness of gender and sexual diversity.

Furthermore, in this chapter I also explored which societal arenas the interviewees experience as more open to their participation, and which they experience as more difficult. I found that the interviewees experienced digital spaces on social media and LGBTQIA+ organizations and/or centers as being places where one could find a community and a place to belong. However, Takashi and Mei experience that having a fluid gender identity or an un-labeled sexuality can sometimes make it difficult to be accepted or understood, even within LGBTQIA+ spaces. Fumiko also described how some parents in ally spaces can show prejudices towards more marginalized LGBTQIA+ people. Indeed, the concept of inter-minority conflict shows how one not only can experience prejudices and discrimination by a majority, but also by minority groups. Furthermore, in Nina’s example of *Kabuki* and *Takarazuka* theaters, she experiences that LGBTQIA+ people’s participation is accepted in these settings, but that their LGBTQIA+ identities have to remain a private matter. Moreover, Kenji and Nina point out how it is easier to find a community and better resources in bigger cities compared to more rural areas in Japan. However, Nina says that if LGBTQIA+ people want to have a “normal life”, they

still have to conform to heteronormativity within workplaces, higher education institutions and schools. The interviewees' stories then illustrate how Japanese LGBTQIA+ people have to manage their visibility and their degree of participation, both when navigating heteronormative spaces and LGBTQIA+ spaces.

5. The Japanese educational system: Preserving and challenging the status quo

In chapter four, I have looked at the interviewees' experiences with the societal pressure to conform to heteronormative norms in Japanese society in general, which can further help with understanding how "schools are microcosms that represent and replicate these cultural norms" (Russell & Horn, 2017, In Kasai et al., 2023, p. 6). Indeed, as will be explored in this chapter, the Japanese educational system reflects the broader societal phenomena of an overall "intolerance to diversity". Specifically, I will examine the interviewees' experiences with heteronormativity in the Japanese educational system.

The first section explores their stories related to education, where I examine what they describe as the reasons for, and consequences of, a limited education on gender and sexual diversity in Japanese schools. Here their experiences with heteronormative sex education are discussed, specifically how they were taught and what they learned during such classes. Then the interviewees' stories of having to rely on self-education is examined, as well as how they find meaning in sharing their experiences.

The second section explores the interviewees' experiences with rigid school rules and regulations based on traditional gender norms, especially focusing on their stories of struggling with gendered school uniforms. Next, I will look at who they present as having the power and/or self-interest in enforcing heteronormative rules and education, and who they describe as being more powerless when challenging the status quo. In this regard, I will look at different parties within or involved with Japanese schools, that being principals, teachers, parents and students, and the interviewees' stories that specifically center around each of them.

Similarly to chapter four, I will also look at how interviewees' experiences with other cultural contexts give them insight into other school systems where differences and diversity are more accepted, and how this seems to have affected their perspectives on the Japanese educational system when returning. Lastly, the interviewees' stories of some positive changes in relation to education are discussed.

5.1 Experiences with heteronormative education

The big problem in Japanese education is "intolerance to diversity". Japanese education is a managed society, and those who are deviated from the group are excluded or regarded as annoying. The trend also affects LGBTQ, and because LGBTQ has a different feeling from the majority, teachers mistake it for "selfishness". I think these collective norms bother LGBTQ students. (Ren)

Ren (30s) is a transman and an activist. He has a background in educational psychology and has experience studying gender and sexual diversity education in Japan. He is a volunteer in several Japanese LGBTQIA+ groups and he also give lectures on gender and sexual diversity education at all levels of the school system, from primary to post-secondary. In his quote, Ren explains how the overall "intolerance to diversity" within the Japanese educational system affect LGBTQIA+ students, as they are often excluded by the majority group and are labelled as being selfish. This is something the 2016 Human Rights Watch report also point out several places. The reason LGBTQIA+ students are perceived as selfish is due to teachers believing they are putting their own needs before the group's interests and wellbeing. Hence, as the report puts it, nonconforming students are continuously accused of ruining the school harmony. The report further stresses that "The Japanese government compounds and even fuels this problem by promoting social

conformity and a climate of “harmony” in schools” (Human Rights Watch, 2016, p. 87). As mentioned in chapter four, an interaction rule in Japan distinguishes between private feelings and public performance, so that people can maintain interpersonal harmony (Ueno, 2023, p. 10). With non-heterosexuality being seen as a private matter in Japan, it is then not surprising that the interviewees’ stories show how LGBTQIA+ perspectives were not included in sex education. Mei shares how her teacher only read a few sentences from the textbook: “That was it, so I don’t think I had a good education, regarding sex education”. Like with Mei, all the interviewees describe how their sex education was unhelpful due to being very limited and heteronormative. Specifically, Fumiko and Haruto say despite there being a thirty-year difference between them, both *how* they are taught and *what* they are taught has not changed much.

When it comes to *how* sex education is taught, Fumiko and Haruto explain that sex education in Japan operates on a binary division of students. Hence, at the time Haruto was in elementary school, he had to go into the girls’ room. This was naturally difficult for him as he “felt a distance” to the girls in class. Takashi says they also remember their discomfort when learning about menstruation around 5th and 6th grade, for the same reason as Haruto. Hence, dividing the class into girls and boys makes it especially difficult for transgender students. For Haruto, he felt he were put in an uncomfortable position due to feeling a “distance” to his assigned gender. For Takashi, it was difficult due to not identifying with a binary division of gender in the first place. Hence, sex education being cisheteronormative is apparent in *how* the interviewees described being taught.

In terms of what they were taught, the consensus was that the information they received was very limited. The topics they mentioned were male and female anatomy, puberty, menstruation, pregnancy and STIs. However, it varied amongst the interviewees how many of these they were taught, and most only remember learning about one. For instance, Nina says she only had a few hours of sex education about male and female anatomy and how “that was it”. The teaching of biological sex being binary invalidates the existence of intersex people, which further teaches that those not conforming to the gender binary are “abnormal”. Furthermore, as sex education by itself is very limited to begin with, LGBTQIA+ perspectives in sex education are even more so, or non-existent as Nina puts it. For Takashi, this was apparent in how a teacher very vaguely explained reproduction: “father and mother love and hug each other, and a baby comes to this world”. As explained in the theory chapter, heteronormativity invalidates other sexual or romantic orientations and other family dynamics in general. In Takashi’s experience, the norm of a man and a woman being together and having a child was the main message in their limited sex education. Hence, as illustrated, sex education being very cisheteronormative is also apparent in *what* the interviewees say they learned.

Furthermore, Kenji shares a story from when he was a high school student. A doctor, who was an old man, was invited to talk about topics such as sex education. All the students were gathered in the school’s auditorium to listen to the lecture. Kenji says that this was the only time in his whole education where anything related to sexuality was taught: “It was only that moment. One day”. However, the brief information they received about homosexuality was rather peculiar.

I very clearly remember this, he said: “Being a gay guy is actually natural, but the percentage is one person per one hundred people”. He also said: “Lesbians, that doesn’t exist”. Yes [laughs]. He said: “Lesbians, that is just people faking it, but gay – men to men, that does exist, but percentage is really low”. (Kenji)

Although the doctor said that it is “natural” for a certain percentage to be gay men, Kenji says he did not take this message positively: “I felt more lonely, that I don’t want to be that one per one hundred”. According to Kenji, this feeling was worsened when right after the lecture, one of his classmates came up to him as said “it must be you!”. The classmate was referring to Kenji being that “one person per one hundred people”. Hence, despite homosexual men being mentioned and referenced as “natural”, it was nevertheless portrayed as being abnormal and unusual, even more so with homosexual women being described as “people faking it”. Indeed, Kenji felt the doctor’s statement singled him out, as classmates immediately began looking for that “one person”. When asked about how the students reacted to the lecture afterwards, Kenji says that everyone was laughing about it. Hence, he tried to laugh about it too and pretend it did not affect him. Specifically, Kenji says he was “trying to *blend in with them*”, showing how he had to fit in with the majority group to avoid becoming an illegitimate subject at his school.

As has been established, the interviewees experience sex education in Japan as being heteronormative and very limited, making education specifically about gender and sexual diversity often non-existent. Indeed, all the interviewees say they never received any education about gender and sexual diversity in their whole education, all the way from elementary school to high school. This means they have never had any dedicated classes about it, and they never saw it included in their textbooks. Instead, Haruto (transman, 20s) emphasizes how the textbooks only referred to heterosexual people, portraying that “it is natural for young people to become interested in the other sex”. Hence, in Haruto’s experience, the teaching materials reinforced the heteronormative narrative of it being natural and normal for people to be sexually and romantically interested in the opposite gender. Yugo thinks that other sexualities and identities not being acknowledged is “pretty common in Japanese schools”. Hence, the phrasing of there being “*a big void*” was used by Haruto, which referred both to the limited sex education and non-existent LGBTQIA+ perspectives in Japanese education.

Mei, Yugo, and Takashi learned about or briefly heard about LGBTQIA+ topics in a university setting, but this was either by choosing a subject that dealt with gender studies or similar fields, or if other peers were doing their own research on it. However, this is outside the period of elementary school to high school, hence not a part of the standard education everyone receives, which is the focus in this thesis. However, Takashi empathizes how learning about diverse sexualities in higher education was a significant moment in their life.

At that time, I still couldn’t face my emotion, but it was a big experience that I was taught about gender and sexuality, including homosexuality, although there were still no topics about transgender. That affected the basis of my life and existence. (Takashi)

Takashi stresses how the power of knowledge is important in people’s views and understanding of gender and sexual diversity. For Takashi, getting this knowledge finally made them realize what they had been feeling and struggling with since they were young. Indeed, as mentioned in the introduction chapter, studies on Japanese LGBT+ people show that most LGB people start realizing they are not heterosexual around the age of 13, and transgender people often start experiencing dysphoria before elementary school. This was also the case for Takashi: “I felt *different* from my friends from my childhood, but I couldn’t recognize my gender identity and sexual orientation”. Due to not receiving any education about gender and sexual diversity in school, and little awareness in society in general, Takashi and others have to live with the feeling of being “different” or fearing they will be perceived as “different”. Like with Takashi, it is often

after graduating high school that they might first learn and realize *why*. Hence, in the next subsection, I will look at the interviewees' stories of having to find information and resources *outside* of the school system.

5.1.1 Self-education and sharing experiences

Both Makoto and Haruto's stories show how students are curious about topics related to sex, sexuality and gender. With the very limited and gender separated sex education, they instead rely on sharing information between each other. In Makoto's story, they explain how the girls in their class would read novels and pass them around, saying to each other: "Oh, read this! And read that! There are some sexual stories". Makoto says the boys also had "their own tools to pass around". However, because the limited information the classmates found was either for boys or girls, as well as the focus being on the sexual stories, this was "very bothering" for Makoto. Due to struggling with conforming to cisheteronormative and allonormative norms, Makoto says they "couldn't really identify with any of the stories". Haruto also shares a story of students having to rely on sharing information between each other. After receiving information from the girls' part of sex education, Haruto explains how he joined his friends to share what they had just learned.

I went back to my friends, who are other boys, and we shared information, what the girls talked about and what the boys talked about. And we were laughing and talking about that, but the teacher got really angry. The teachers said: "Why did you share information? Why did you do that? You shouldn't do that". (Haruto)

In Haruto's story, the teachers are presented as having the power to maintain the gender divide of the information given during sex education, since they tried to shut down students sharing information with each other. Both Haruto and Makoto's stories show that students are often interested in learning about gender and sexuality topics, but that this is hindered by teachers' interest in upholding their rigid and heteronormative views.

Other interviewees also presented self-education as being their main option if wanting to learn about sexual and gender diversity. In Fumiko's case, the cisheteronormative school context made it difficult for her to receive any information or resources for parents. Hence, she explains that she mostly self-educated herself through the internet and by reading books. When Haruto was about to graduate, Fumiko says that she then also began looking *outside* of the school system. It was only then that she was able to find accurate and helpful information. In Haruto's case, he describes how he got no information on transgender people at school, and on TV he says there were mainly stereotypical depictions of transwomen. Hence, his biggest tool was social media, which was also the case for Mei, Yugo and Takashi. After searching for groups or gatherings online, Haruto was then able to meet transmen who had transitioned, and hence people he could identify with. For him, meeting other transmen and listening to their stories made his own life and experiences valid. Indeed, his story shows how people can claim a livable life and become culturally intelligible by telling their stories. In Fumiko's case, she tries to make meaning of her experiences by sharing them with others, in hopes that they can avoid making the same mistakes she made.

I go to schools and talk about the mistakes I made in trying to raise a transgender son without knowing, and then a lot of misunderstandings between parents and family. So, taking up the big ones, the big mistakes and trying to talk about it. Even if it's my mistakes it's very important to look back and tell other people about it. (Fumiko)

Now Fumiko, Haruto, Makoto, Takashi, and Ren all regularly visit schools and attend parents' meetings to share their own stories and educate about LGBTQIA+ issues. By doing so, they can challenge the norm, spread awareness, and have their lives become visible in Japanese society.

5.2 Experiences with heteronormative school rules and regulations

In addition to the interviewees' experiences with a heteronormative education, their stories also showed how the Japanese educational system reinforces and encourages social conformity through school rules and regulations that are based on rigid gender norms. Ren says that many trans and gender nonconforming students struggle a lot with such regulations due to dysphoria and being put in uncomfortable situations. The most common issues mentioned by the interviewees were related to school uniforms, rules governing hairstyles, restrooms, swimming classes, where to sit in the classroom, lodging on school trips and which name is used in the school register. In this section, interviewees' stories with such regulations will be explored.

Since it is common with gendered uniforms in Japan, meaning girls wear skirts and ribbons and boys wear pants and ties, this is especially difficult to manage from a gender diversity perspective. Ren says he himself struggled with having to wear one when he was a student, to the point of saying: "I totally gave up on school uniforms". Luckily, because Ren was a member of a sports club, his solution to the problem was that he continued wearing his sport uniform after P.E. classes. However, this shows that the only way for Ren to feel comfortable during his school years was by finding a loophole in the system. Ren was not the only interviewee who mentioned school uniforms as an issue:

I didn't want to wear skirts, but I thought: "Well, no one likes skirts, right?". So, I thought: "Well, all the other girls don't like skirts either, but they have to wear it, because that's the rule". So, I didn't realize I were different from the others. (Haruto)

Haruto had a lot of stories in the pair-interview about his experiences with school uniforms and other school policies. Already during elementary school, Haruto describes feeling uncomfortable with having to wear skirts, as shown in his quote. Since Haruto thought he was like "all the other girls", at this point, his views fit in with those of other girls and the consensus that "no one likes skirts". However, in junior high school, he began to realize he was "sort of *different*" and that his discomfort was related to his gender identity. For Haruto, this seems to have been a disruptive event, due to a discontinuity of his expectations of being like the other girls. When talking about this period, Haruto says he acted quite "tough", perhaps even "a little threatening", as he often got into fights with other boys: "Maybe that was a character that I had: "Okay, you can't say anything, you can't comment anything or make fun of Haruto, because you will get trouble". Haruto follows this by saying that "it's embarrassing", perhaps expressing a distance to his past self and behavior. At the time however, this seems to be how he protected himself from being teased, and perhaps a way to be perceived more as a "normal" boy rather than an "unnatural" girl. As discussed, many Japanese students worry about being perceived as "different" from their peers and consequently be teased, bullied, or excluded, which seems to have been the case for Haruto as well.

Before Haruto started high school, he started thinking more seriously about the issue of school uniforms. At the time, some Japanese schools had begun allowing gender-neutral uniforms, but since there were still just a few places doing so yet, this directly affected Haruto's number of choices. Even though his academic performance was at a higher level

than his options, having autonomy of deciding what to wear was more important to him. As mentioned in chapter two, people's "autonomy and subjectivity are constrained by normalizing processes" (Phoenix, 2007, p. 179). Hence, it makes sense that reclaiming some autonomy over his gender expression was important for him. After finding a high school that allowed gender neutral uniforms, Haruto decided to visit the place beforehand, to make sure this truly was the case. While visiting, he saw for himself that there were students "who were not boys" wearing pants. Hence, during high school, Haruto was finally able to wear his choice of uniform.

I grew quite tall and dressed in pants and boy shirt. So, I looked like a boy, and other students in other grades would think that I'm a boy. Only very close people knew that I was actually female by documents. So, in that way I "passed", so I wasn't made fun of for having a girlfriend, cause everyone thought I was like all the others. (Haruto)

As described in this quote, Haruto was able to "pass", meaning other students perceived him as a cisgender boy who was in a relationship with someone of the opposite gender. Hence, he fit with the heteronormative narrative, as shown in his phrasing of "everyone thought I was like all others". In this way, Haruto avoided being labeled as "different", and fended off any potential teasing or bullying.

Unfortunately, even though Haruto was able to wear pants at this school, there were still other issues which made things difficult for him. For example, Haruto says he would use his name when signing a test, which caused misunderstandings about his gender due to the school register. He says teachers would make him use his registered name, and that if he did not do so he was told that he "wouldn't get his test back". Haruto's story shows that despite using a masculine name and wearing his preferred uniform, his gender identity and gender expression were still not acknowledged. Hence, based on Haruto's stories, schools allowing gender-neutral uniforms are not a prerequisite of LGBTQIA+ students' needs being accounted for. Another example of this were the issue of restrooms: "A lot of times he couldn't use the toilet, because he couldn't go into the boys' toilet, because he was treated as a female, but then he couldn't go into girls' toilet because he looked male". On the one hand, in the more public context, Haruto was able to "pass" as a boy and mainly be treated as such. On the other hand, in official documents and in areas such as the restroom, he was not recognized by his gender. This conflict and disruptiveness in his life made Haruto withdraw himself from social interactions: "Many things were difficult for me, and I was quite depressed about it and I became very quiet, not communicative, and I didn't interact very much with other students". Due to Haruto having to navigate the various barriers in the school system, he did not feel the support he hoped to receive at this high school, hence affecting his mental health and his interaction with peers. His story then illustrates how schools having flexible rules regarding school uniforms, and hence seeming more LGBTQIA+ inclusive, is by itself not enough to ensure a safe school environment for LGBTQIA+ students. Indeed, the interviewees tell stories of school authorities and teachers are hesitant in making changes in school practices, and how they instead seem more interested in maintaining the status quo, which will be explored in the next section.

5.3 Power relations within the Japanese educational system

5.3.1 Principals

Fumiko, as mentioned, is the mother of Haruto and belongs to an LGBTQIA+ parents and friends' group. She attends parents' meeting and visits schools or universities to educate

others about LGBTQIA+ issues, especially from the perspective of a parent. Fumiko observed early on that Haruto did not like to wear skirts, but at the time she did not realize this was a huge struggle for him. It was not until Haruto went into junior high school that she began to see "the signs". At first, her focus was on the bigger issue of having a transgender child and what this entailed, not on the issue of school uniforms. Before Haruto was to go to high school, she became more co-operative by helping him look for a suitable school. Fumiko then shares a story of when Haruto was supposed to give a speech at a school ceremony, due to him being a top student. For the ceremony, Fumiko placed an order for a pair of pants, as well as a skirt "just in case something happened". She asked the school many times to confirm this order, but it did not arrive in time for Haruto's speech. As it turned out, the principal had stopped her order. The principal claimed there was an agreement between the school and the company making the uniforms. It was only after confronting them that Fumiko finally received the order.

Even if the other teachers understood, then if the headteachers says "no" then everything stops. [...] So, it's really difficult to go through the system and get what you want, because there are many little - little gates... and if one gate closes then you can't do this, you can't do that. (Fumiko)

In Fumiko's story, the principal is presented as having the power to maintain the rigid gender norms. Hence, regardless of there being any accepting and cooperative teachers or not, the principal can singlehandedly stop changes from happening. This is illustrated with her describing the system as having many "little gates", and one "gate" closing is enough to stop the whole process. Makoto points out a main factor in why principals often push back against progressive changes: "The people who try hard and to make things more liberal, they don't become principals usually, and those who are more obedient, more conforming become principals". Hence, principals tend to be more conservative, and therefore being dismissive and pushing back against those who challenge the status quo.

So, this kind of school rule, limited gender expression, is part of this kind of school power system that tries to make sure you have to obey people who are - controlling you, you know? [laughs]. It's just to really to teach how to obey. Teach obedience. So, that's the more difficult part of it. [...] Their priority is obedience and then it's grades [laughs]. First, it's obedience, it's the prime... value. [...] And those who have obeyed, teach other people to obey. (Makoto)

As Makoto explains, rigid school rules and practices that are rooted in gender stereotypes is a way to teach obedience, which they believe is the school authorities' true priority, not education. This "prime value" then legitimizes a culture of conformity in many Japanese schools, which Makoto describes is passed on by "those who have obeyed" to others. They point out that even though there now are an increasing number of women who are becoming principals, they also fall into the pattern of obedience and conformity: "Still, that doesn't mean that they can exert their power to broaden the gender notion, the notion of gender and sexuality. It's really difficult for them to start doing that once they become principal". Furthermore, Makoto presents an interesting observation they have made, where they state that the principals who do try to "reform the school", are usually the ones who are just about to retire. Makoto uses the metaphor about a train ride, which symbolizes a principal's career. They explain that if other "passengers" start any trouble just before you are about to get off, or retire, you can just leave the situation without any major consequences for yourself.

It's just before their retirement. Yeah, it's like, let's say if you are in a train and at your next station you're gonna get off. And then there's someone doing something bad in the

train, then you can just yell at them and then sort of get out of the train at the next station, right? So, you don't risk yourself. It's like that, you know? It's before retirement, they really start trying hard, 1 or 2 years. [...] So, that's sort of the pattern. (Makoto)

Makoto suggests that principals nearing retiring age may serve as agents of change, albeit of short duration. They explain that implementing changes in this period means there is less "risk" involved. Hence, if there is any backlash, the principal can simply "get out of the train at the next station". Makoto has noticed that this is a pattern in Japanese schools, showing the limitations within the system, and the need for more flexibility and openness towards other ideas. Instead, as Makoto experiences, most principals are worried about their own position and career, and hence they are interested in and benefit from maintaining the status quo.

5.3.2 Teachers

Makoto further explains that it is not just principals who do not want to risk their careers by trying to make changes, but also teachers, especially those who are young and new to the job or those who identify as LGBTQIA+ :

So, usually young teachers risk their career, you know? If they start something. Like, the teachers I know that are now coming out, as gay for example, they usually step down from full-time to part-time, because they don't want to risk losing their entire job, but if they become part-time, they are less committed or there are less expectations for them, and so they can come out more easily and keep their job. So, that's a problem too. Teachers cannot become role models to their full extent. (Makoto)

According to Makoto, many LGBTQIA+ teachers step down from a full-time position to working part-time due to there being "less expectations" in a part-time position. They explain that this makes it easier for teachers to be open about their LGBTQIA+ identity, as they don't "risk" their entire job. In chapter four, it was shown how many Japanese LGBTQIA+ people have to manage their visibility and navigate their degree of participation in many societal arenas. In the school context, Makoto similarly presents a situation in which full-time teachers experiences more pressure to adhere to a heteronormative lifestyle and gender norms, which means teachers who are open about their LGBTQIA+ identity feel they cannot fully participate in the school system. Makoto further points out that LGBTQIA+ teachers have to decide whether they either want to truly be themselves and work part-time, and hence have less power and ability to make changes, or if they want to conform and be in a position of power within the system. Makoto stresses this dilemma by saying: "You have to choose. You can't have both". Indeed, as shown in chapter four, the interviewees experience that LGBTQIA+ people have to choose between two main options of life in Japanese society, that being conformity or taking a significant risk. Again, neither option provide the conditions necessary for a livable life.

Another interesting point is Makoto talking about role models. When it comes to LGBTQIA+ teachers, Makoto says they cannot become role models to their full potential, due to the mentioned dilemma. As illustrated in chapter four, having no adult role models was an issue for Makoto when they were young, and hence they were unable to imagine themselves becoming an adult. This shows the importance of adult role models, both in schools and elsewhere in society. Unfortunately, Makoto says that due to most teachers conforming to heteronormative norms, many instead become "role models of rigid malehood". They say this can be seen by the gender expression of teachers in Japanese

schools. Whereas teachers who are women can have a more “broad” expression, Makoto says that the teachers who are men “really look like men”: “They don’t act feminine, they don’t use feminine language, they wear suits, they don’t wear color. They really adhere to the gender code at school. So, that sort of shows how boys *should* be”. Makoto’s description illustrates how only a limited masculinity is accepted amongst male teachers in Japanese schools. They further explain how teachers also reinforce and push the idea of there only being a limited masculinity onto students:

I think that is a reflection of the teachers’ mind [laughs]. Yeah, because they say: “Okay, girls can be active and it’s okay if girls are not feminine, they can play sports and do what they like, wear pants and it’s okay”. That’s what they say, but boys should be boys and nothing else, you know? The notion of malehood for them is very strict, rigid. (Makoto)

This quote shows the role teachers play in enforcing hegemonic masculinity. Makoto explains that teachers often accept all students being “masculine”, but boys specifically should only be masculine and reject femininity, as shown in Makoto’s phrasing of “boys *should* be boys and *nothing else*”. Makoto then brings up the aspect of power and illustrate how schools reflect the culture and replicate dominant norms in Japanese society: “You must adhere to this gender code if you want power, so they try to keep the male dominance in that way, and schools are totally a reflection of that”. Their description shows how hegemonic masculinity upholds and draws from the power of hegemonic heteronormativity, by teachers only accepting a limited masculinity and enforcing rigid gender norms within schools.

Both Makoto and Fumiko’s stories illustrate how it can be difficult for LGBTQIA+ students’ needs to be acknowledged, due to the many barriers within the school system. Fumiko says they are often reliant on having a teacher with “enough power within the system” and who is passionate about inclusion. However, she says that even then it can be difficult, as most principals and teachers become worried about “risking their job”. Based on the stories told by other LGBTQIA+ students in the Human Rights Watch (2016, p. 2) report, this is a shared experience: “The strong cultural desire to “maintain harmony” means that even teachers who do try to support LGBT students can be left, as one former teacher put it, “alienated in their own compassion””.

Furthermore, Makoto presents another reason as to why LGBTQIA+ perspectives are rarely present in school subjects, which is related to the issue of teachers in Japan normally being overworked. Makoto explains that teachers including topics that are not in the national curriculum means they have to do extra work, as they need to self-educate themselves and find their own resources and teaching materials. This work then comes in addition to being overworked to begin with, as this is a common issue amongst Japanese teachers according to Makoto.

So, it’s like leaving it up to the individual teachers, the work, and extra work. [...] It’s just all what we call shadow work, you know? It can’t be seen, it is not acknowledged, it is not supported, it is not paid, and it is not systematic, and the quality depends on... how much work you put in [laughs]. Yeah. So, that’s not good. I mean, if it’s just once, it’s okay, but it’s all of the time. (Makoto)

As mentioned in earlier, students are often reliant on having a teacher with “enough power within the system” and who’s passionate about LGBTQIA+ topics. However, as this quote illustrate, there’s little motivation for teachers be passionate about non-curricular topics, as this requires doing unpaid “shadow work”. Furthermore, as Makoto highlights, these teachers are oftentimes “isolated in the school as well, because they are the only

one who's concerned about this issue". In addition, Makoto says the "good teachers" are most likely to be the ones to quit and get another job, which they say is a huge loss. Due to this systematic issue, Makoto says that when they and other activists do visiting lectures at schools, they have to take "utmost care" to not put too much pressure on the teachers. Instead, they try to give the support and information they need, to avoid further stress and feelings of isolation.

5.3.3 Parents

Fumiko's story of the canceled order on Haruto's uniform showed it can be a struggle for parents or guardians to go through the many "gates" in the school system and be heard. She also mentioned trying to get advice from the school nurse, but she did not receive any good information and was just told Haruto did not have gender dysphoria, which was untrue. Hence, she started talking to people in "higher positions" at Haruto's school, in hopes they would understand her.

I acted as a parents' committee member. So, I became close to teachers, parent-teacher association, and then I used to go and talk about my son, to the school administration, but then the classroom-teachers were not fully understanding. They didn't know what I was talking about. So, there was a gap in information among different people. (Fumiko)

Despite Fumiko trying to get a closer relationship with the teachers at Haruto's school, she says there were still difficulties. In Fumiko's case, she spent a lot of time fighting the school system by herself, showing how it can be difficult for parents individually to challenge the rigid rules and gender norms within Japanese schools. However, when it comes to parents' collective power over school matters, Makoto says the following:

Parents have quite power actually, in saying things to schools, because the school says: "Well, because the parents say this, and the parents say that" [laughs]. So, they use the power of parents to maintain the status quo. (Makoto)

Makoto brings up an aspect of parents' influence that they find interesting, which is that schools will use the parents to "maintain the status quo". This connects to the next subsections, which shows that when students try to challenge the heteronormative norms and rules, school authorities will often turn to other social institutions. As mentioned in chapter four, the Japanese traditional family functions as "the hotbed" of heteronormativity in Japanese society. Hence, as Makoto's quote shows, it makes sense that schools would turn to parents to uphold rigid rules and heteronormative ideals. Interestingly, Makoto reflects on how they can try to turn the situation around and use the relationship between schools and parents as an advantage. Since a lot of their activism work involves visiting schools and working with LGBTQIA+ parents' groups, Makoto suggests that parents of LGBTQIA+ students can use their collective power to challenge schools' rigid gender norms.

5.3.4 Students

As has been discussed, it can be difficult for LGBTQIA+ students to navigate the various rigid and heteronormative school rules and policies. This was also the case in a recent news story that Makoto mentioned, in which an X-gender high school student was forced cut their hair shorter. At this point in the interview, Makoto held up a newspaper article that included pictures of a "before and after" hair length comparison. The difference between the two pictures was very minimal, because as Makoto points out, the student's

hair was pretty short to begin with. Hence, Makoto could not understand how the student was perceived as having long hair.

What was very interesting in this case, was that the X-gender student had mentioned the issue at a students' meeting beforehand. Makoto points out that there had been "a movement to try to change these school rules of gender expression". In this case, it was related to many schools' policies of hair length or hairstyles, which Makoto says are specified by how many centimeters it can be for boys, or how girls have to put their hair in a ponytail during P.E. classes. In the students' meeting, Makoto emphasizes that *everyone* agreed that the rules had to change. However, since the students were soon to take a university exam, the school authorities used this as an excuse to diminish the students' proposal: "If we change the rules, then when you go to take the university exam you will be scrutinized by university professors, and you won't pass the test". Once again Makoto points out that "if they can't use their power, they use the power of someone else to oppress", whether that be with the power of parents or with the power of higher education institutions. Makoto explained how this "threat" and enforcement of the haircut rule was "just to show power", because in their opinion, such rigid policies are "unreasonable", "absurd" and "arbitrary".

5.4 Perspectives on the Japanese educational system after experiences abroad

Makoto experienced school abroad when they were very young, and at that time they were not aware of their own gender identity yet. The thing Makoto mentions that they took note of, was that the school they went to abroad was mixed, meaning boys and girls were in the same classes. Makoto says it was also "like an international school", as it was very diverse with students being of many different nationalities. Makoto experienced the teachers at this school as "very fair" due to treating the students equally regardless of gender, which seems then to not have been Makoto's experience in Japan. Another thing about this school system that Makoto liked, was how each individual student's needs and level in different subjects were better accommodated for. Makoto is unsure whether this was normal for the whole country, but regardless, they felt it was "a good system" and that the teachers were "really thoughtful". Even though Makoto did not know the foreign language and could not communicate very well during the first two months, they still felt "very comfortable there". Hence, when Makoto returned to Japan, the Japanese school system felt like a stark contrast for them.

Maybe because I had experienced a school system that was different. I knew that there could be something different. Of course, I didn't know how to find anything different. If I found something different, maybe I went there, you know? But I couldn't find it in Japan. So, I just stopped [going to school]. [...] I think... in a very broad sense, Japan was not prepared to accept diversity. Diverse environment, diverse personal history, things like that. (Makoto)

As mentioned earlier, Ren feels a problem in Japanese society, and in the Japanese educational system, is an overall "intolerance to diversity". In Makoto's quote, we see how "diversity" is not just relates to being LGBTQIA+, but that it is also about "diverse environments" and "diverse personal histories". When Makoto returned to Japan, they wanted to study more Japanese as a subject, because they had fallen behind while living abroad. However, the school did not accommodate for Makoto, as they were not flexible in terms of individual student's needs, which Makoto was used to abroad. Indeed, Makoto says they felt the teachers were more interested in them obeying the rules, rather than being interested in Makoto's education. Also, due to the more rigid gender roles in Japanese schools and Makoto becoming aware of their gender identity, they stated to

struggle at school due to dysphoria. Hence, Makoto stopped going to school in Japan at around the age of fourteen, and instead having to rely on self-education. Later on, they wanted to experience something different than the Japanese educational system again, so they went to different countries for high school and university. Like the stories of Kenji, Nina and Yugo showed in chapter four, Makoto's experience show how it can be challenging to go from having a more livable life and then back to being seen as not having one.

In contrast to the other interviewees' experiences abroad, which were mainly described as being positive, Eriko (50s) mentions a challenging period from her time in another country. Eriko is the mother of a person that identifies as transgender, which she says made her realize the importance of being an ally to the LGBTQIA+ community. She has a background in psychology, and she has studied and worked in five different countries, having been abroad for about fourteen years in total. In relation to her experiences with gender and sexual diversity issues abroad. She mentions how her experiences from one country was especially difficult due to her transgender child's experiences at school.

The most significant experience, in a negative way, was my transgender son's unbearable experience in [country abroad]. Not only did the school not protect his basic human rights, but they did serious harm to his dignity as well. [...] From this personal experience, I decided to raise awareness in a Japanese school setting. (Eriko)

Eriko did not want to go into detail about this experience, but she shares how it made her realize the importance of having a supportive school system. Her story shows how she turned a challenging and painful experience in her life into something meaningful in her life afterwards, by becoming an advocate to raise awareness in Japan. Like with other interviewees, Eriko now often does lectures to university students about gender and sexual diversity. She says she has only received positive feedback from students, and that they understand the importance of such topics. When asked how she feels whenever she receives such feedback, Eriko says the following: "I feel encouraged and rewarded to have played my role". This sentiment was shared with other interviewees who does activism work and visiting lectures, that playing a role in bringing awareness in Japan gives them meaning and fulfillment in life. For instance, Mei shares a story of when she got the opportunity to organize a seminar about LGBTQIA+ topics when taking part in an exchange program for youth.

That exchange means a lot to me, because that was the first time that I came out in public. And I also organized one of the seminar events about LGBTQ community. [...] I found out that there are a lot of participant youths who identify themselves as gay or lesbians and they secretly told me after I organized that event. So, that was the first time that I could make a small change to others. (Mei)

Mei's experience illustrates the importance of having a learning environment that supports including gender and sexual diversity topics. Indeed, Mei describes how being able to talk about the LGBTQIA+ community, made her feel comfortable and safe to be open about her own identity to other students during the exchange, hence becoming visible. Furthermore, Mei being able to share her story created a safe space for others to open up about their LGBTQIA+ identities with her as well. Hence, Mei reflects on how making a "small change" can have a ripple effect and therefore possibly contribute to a larger movement towards inclusivity and acceptance.

5.5 A period of change: Flexible school rules and inclusion of LGBTQIA+ topics

Fumiko says that it would be difficult for her, or her generation, to change the whole educational system in Japan. This is something she hopes the younger generation will be able to do. Instead, she says she tries to make small changes when she can, such at her workplace which is a nursing home:

There's elderly people there and even there everything is gendered. Like, using colors, it's always pink for a woman, even if you're 100 or 105, it doesn't matter [laughs]. [...] I tried, I said: "Oh, let's quit this and we can just maybe use one color, or we can use many different colors?". (Fumiko)

For Fumiko, trying to implement these changes was important, because as she phrases it, these gendered norms are a part of people's "everyday life". The story then builds on how LGBTQIA+ people and allies can use self-education and their experiences to fill "the big void" in the country's educational system. Luckily, the interviewees' stories show some schools in Japan are slowly changing, especially regarding loosening up the strict gender norms. For instance, Fumiko shares a story of how Haruto's school for the first time held a mixed-sports event:

Towards the end, when he [Haruto] was about to graduate, there was a sports day event. Usually, in sports day events, a lot of events are separate, male and females separate, girls' event and boys' event – but then, for the first time it was mixed. [...] We noticed that it was mixed. And of course, we didn't confirm: "Ah! Is it because of us, Haruto?". So, it's not confirmed, but probably, because it changed in the third year. (Fumiko)

When Fumiko tells this story, she seemingly tries to make sense of Haruto's challenges, as well as his influence on the school. Indeed, when telling a story, people will try to connect correlating events to make sense of them (Johannessen et al., 2018). Hence, they understand this change as being a consequence of a correlation of events relating to Haruto, though they emphasize it not being confirmed. Still, in their experience, Haruto and Fumiko have taken part in changing the school's rigid gender norms. Hence, becoming legitimate subjects and claiming culturally intelligible lives.

Furthermore, an increasing number of Japanese high schools are now also "relaxing or scrapping gender codes for uniforms" (Kyodo News, 2020). As seen in Haruto's stories, schools allowing gender-neutral uniforms is by itself not enough to ensure an inclusive school environment, as there can be many other issues or rigid school rules. However, it is a step in the right direction, and a sign that an increasing number of schools are becoming aware of LGBTQIA+ students and the needs of *all* students. Indeed, as Mei points out, allowing gender-neutral uniforms is in the best interest of all students, because although transgender and gender nonconforming students are often more affected by gendered uniforms, Mei experiences that they are restrictive for *everyone*.

For me, regardless if they are LGBTQ or not, it's really good to give the students a choice, to wear what they feel are comfortable and... if there's a rule, students need to ask teachers individually and explain why they have to choose this one, but if they work those rules, they can just casually choose what they want to wear and... it's very nice regardless if they are LGBTQ or not. (Mei)

In Mei's quote, she illustrates how heteronormative norms are restrictive for all the students, specifically in the way their autonomy over their gender expression is constrained by traditional gender norms. Also, as previously discussed in this chapter with Haruto and Fumiko, it can be very challenging to individually ask schools about issues with school uniforms. Hence, Mei emphasizes that having a flexible rule which

allows students to choose their school uniforms based on their preferences makes it easier for everyone. Indeed, Kasai and Toda (2023, p. 18) also state that schools that support gender and sexual diversity improves the experiences for not only LGBTQIA+ students, but for *all* students. Having a flexible rule means the new normal becomes students “casually choosing” their uniform, as Mei phrases it, instead of LGBTQIA+ students being singled out and being perceived as abnormal.

In terms of education about gender and sexual diversity, Eriko says that she notices how things are changing due to her younger child’s school. She says that the school allow students to wear their preferred uniform, that they have invited a guest lecturer who “promotes awareness in sexuality issues”, and that this lecturer had LGBTQIA+ perspectives as one of their topics. Although Makoto points out that many schools still do not prioritize such visiting lectures, due to “other issues that comes first”, but at the same time they see how the situation is slowly changing. This observation is also pointed out by Kasai and Toda (2023, p. 28): “Some schools have tried incorporating SOGI issues into the classroom and have shifted their value system from heterosexualism and cisgenderism to being inclusive of SOGI”. Indeed, both Eriko and Mei’s stories highlight the role education can play in increasing awareness about the diversity within Japanese society.

5.6 Summary

In this chapter, I have examined what the interviewees describe as the reasons for, and consequences of, the limited education on gender and sexual diversity in Japanese schools. The interviewees’ common story of “a big void” in Japanese education shows how a narrow and cisheteronormative-based sex education leaves little room for the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ perspectives. Indeed, their descriptions of how sex education is taught revealed how knowledge about sex and sexuality is gender segregated. What they encountered during their schooling was also described as being very cisheteronormative heavy, and the interviewees say the teaching only covered a very narrow range of topics. The interviewees’ stories then illustrate how these limitations on sex education consequently leads to LGBTQIA+ perspectives being non-existent or non-issues. Furthermore, Makoto explains how teachers’ efforts to include LGBTQIA+ topics in subjects go unacknowledged, due to it being unpaid “shadow work”. Further, they explain that teachers who are supportive of LGBTQIA+ issues often become “isolated in the school”. This is illustrated through Makoto’s experience of full-time LGBTQIA+ teachers rarely being open about their identity, as they fear they might lose their job. Other interviewees’ accounts also reveal how these various “risks” limit the teacher’s ability and motivation to include such topics in their lessons. By also exploring the interviewees’ experiences abroad, specifically with other school systems and teaching methods, Makoto, Eriko, and Mei’s reflect back on the importance of an inclusive and safe school environment for LGBTQIA+ students. Directly experiencing a different situation in another cultural context made salient for them certain features of the Japanese system.

Due to the interviewees’ experiences of a heteronormative education, many describe how they *felt* they were “different”, and that they also worried about being *perceived* as different. For instance, Haruto and Takashi share about the ways in which the gender divide of sex education was challenging, due to not identifying with their assigned gender. Kenji’s story of a visiting lecturer illustrates how misinformation can be harmful for LGBTQIA+ students, as he felt he was consequently almost outed by his classmates.

These accounts revealed how the Japanese educational system hindered and delayed the interviewees in having important realizations about themselves, and prevented them from being able to claim a livable life. The common story of a journey characterized by “self-education” then revealed how they had to look *outside* of school system to look for information and resources. In doing so, they were able to have their identities recognized and share their experiences with others.

Furthermore, in this chapter I also explored the interviewees experiences with rigid school rules and regulations, as well as the power relations that underpin who has the capacity to drive change or maintain the status quo. Haruto and Ren’s common experiences of struggling with gendered school uniforms show how they either had to find loopholes in the system, or find schools with flexible uniform rules in order to be able to regain some of their autonomy over their gender expression. Haruto’s story of struggling with other sorts of rigid school regulations despite attending a seemingly LGBTQIA+ inclusive high school, points to how additional reform is needed to ensure a safe school environment for LGBTQIA+ students. If many of the narratives reveal the extent of the need for change, some stories did show how an increasing number of schools are loosening up on certain regulations. There are also isolated attempts to include LGBTQIA+ topics in classes.

In the interviewees’ stories, they presented principals and teachers who do not want to “risk” their careers as the ones with the power and/or self-interest in enforcing the heteronormative norms. Makoto explained how hegemonic masculinity amongst teachers plays a role in this, especially in how male teachers only legitimize the expression of a particular masculinity amongst male students. The ones who were presented as being more powerless when challenging the status quo were individual teachers, parents, and students, and even students collectively. The interviewees experience that school authorities will use the power of others, such as parents or higher education institutions, to shut down those who challenge the norms. Makoto related this to their experiences of schools often valuing “obedience” at the expense of education. Interestingly, the ones presented as being able to challenge the status quo were the following: principals nearing retiring age, teachers with enough “power within the system”, and parents collectively. Similarly to chapter four, the dilemma of *conforming* or *risking* one’s position in society was seen in the interviewees’ accounts of power relations within the Japanese educational system.

6. Conclusion

In this project, I have analyzed the stories of ten Japanese individuals: seven from the LGBTQIA+ community and three allies. My aim has been to examine how they reflect upon and negotiate heteronormativity in Japanese society in general and in the Japanese educational system in particular. In addition, I have looked at how they try to make meaning of their experiences and claim a livable life. In this concluding chapter, I will present my main findings and relate them to previous research, before looking at some of the thesis' limitations and suggestions for further research.

6.1 Findings

As the title of this thesis suggests, there was a common narrative amongst the interviewees of an overall *intolerance to diversity*, shown to be a phenomenon in Japanese society and reflected within the Japanese educational system. Indeed, the myth of a "*homogeneous society*" ignores the diverse realities in Japan, something both Kasai and Toda (2023) and Fujimura-Fanselow (2011) have pointed out in their works. This myth then legitimizes a culture in which there is an extreme societal pressure to conform to a dominant social norm such as heteronormativity, as there is an expectation and assumption that all have "the same" sexual and romantic attraction, gender identity and gender expression. Hence, both in society overall and within schools, the interviewees describe how LGBTQIA+ people have to manage their visibility.

In both contexts, their stories present the dilemma of choosing between *conformity* or *risk*. They reflect on how neither option provides the conditions of a truly livable life, hence making it difficult for SOGI minorities to navigate the various spaces in Japanese society. Since being open about one's LGBTQIA+ identity is seen as a private matter in Japan (Ueno, 2023), the interviewees reflect on how many Japanese LGBTQIA+ people feel that they cannot truly be themselves if they want to fully take part in society, and having to *conform* to do so. By being open about one's LGBTQIA+ identity, one then *risks* partial at best and non-existent participation in various societal arenas. In this thesis, the interviewees' stories showed how workplaces, higher education institutions and schools were difficult to participate in, due to the ways in which heteronormativity is ingrained in the very culture. Some even experienced that marginalized LGBTQIA+ identities can also face prejudices *within* ally and queer spaces in Japan. Shiraishi and Toda (2023) have also looked at inter-minority conflict in a Japanese context, though their study focused on the conflicts *between* different marginalized groups.

In relation to education, Ueno's (2023, p. 2) study also found that Japanese LGBTQ students experience higher education institutions as predominantly heteronormative. In this study, the focus has been on experiences from elementary to high school. My analysis points to the common experience of not receiving any education on gender and sexual diversity education, neither in sex education nor in subjects in general. Hashimoto et al. (2017) similarly looked at previous experiences with education, and although they did not specifically examine LGBTQIA+ topics, they found that subjects in Japanese school are heteronormative. In addition, challenges with rigid school rules and regulations based on traditional gender norms were present in the interviewees' accounts.

Trying to implement changes was described as difficult due how power relations within Japanese schools create barriers. Again, their stories presented the dilemma of *conformity* or *risk*. Principals and teachers were said to refrain from challenging the

status quo in fear of risking their careers and/or compromising their position of power. Their stories further demonstrated how school authorities will use their own power, and even the power of higher education intuitions and parents, to uphold social norms. Another aspect to this was how hegemonic masculinity, especially amongst male teachers, played a role in upholding the heteronormative status quo within schools. The interviewees' stories illustrate how heteronormative norms puts undo restrictions on everyone.

With stories of negotiating heteronormative spaces and education, interviewees presented "self-education" and inclusive LGBTQIA+ spaces as their way to gain cultural intelligibility. This way, they could find helpful resources and listen to other LGBTQIA+ people's stories, and hence have their own experiences and identities validated. Indeed, an important perspective in this thesis is how people can claim a livable life by telling their stories, and in this process become visible and challenge the norms (Phoenix, 2007, p. 185). Sharing their stories with others was how the interviewees made sense of their various challenges and experiences, and by simply doing so, claiming livable lives.

With some interviewees having experiences with other cultural contexts, they also reflected on and compared their life abroad versus Japan in relation to gender and sexuality diversity issues. I found that they described experiencing a reverse culture shock when returning, as their "normal" now were gender and sexual diversity being normalized. However, as explained, even in contexts of it being less accepted, people can still find ways to make life livable and/or bearable and try to make meaning of their experiences. For some, challenging Japan's homogeneous identity and presenting counter-narratives to the dominant majority group's "equal society narrative" was another way to claim cultural intelligibility. Several also describe finding meaning in implementing small changes in people's "everyday life", some doing so by engaging in activism work and doing visiting lectures at schools and universities. Their stories can be seen as examples of how LGBTQIA+ individuals and allies make themselves visible in various contexts, and in the process raising awareness on LGBTQIA+ issues in Japan.

Lastly, their stories also presented more optimistic views on the future, as they describe noticing how society overall and the educational system is changing, slowly but surely. The analysis presented the common story of how better representation and role models in both traditional media and social media makes it so LGBTQIA+ people can share their stories and becoming more visible. In the school context, the interviewees emphasize that *all* students benefit from the increasing number of schools including LGBTQIA+ topics in lessons and introducing flexible school rules.

6.2 Limitations and directions for future research

The limitations of this thesis mentioned in chapter three in relation to my data and my position as researcher, means other methods and perspectives could be explored. For instance, conducting interviews only in Japanese might help with reaching more research participants. With my interviewees having various LGBTQIA+ identities, a more focused selection of participants might be beneficial in highlighting more unique experiences for specific groups. Also, the various methods used, that being video, audio and email interviews, means some interviews were longer and more detailed than others. Using one specific method consistently could make the comparisons and analysis of the data material more reliable. Lastly, being a Norwegian ciswoman in her 20s also affects my analysis of the data, meaning other interpretations could be made.

One interesting aspect in my analysis was how people with more marginalized LGBTQIA+ identities could experience prejudices and conflict within their community. Exploring this issue further in research could be beneficial in making more people realize their own majority and minority aspects, which could lead to more inter-minority empathy (Kasai, 2023). Also, in my thesis, experiences of different cultural contexts were included to examine the interviewees' stories of defamiliarization of Japanese society and educational system. However, doing a comparative study between specific countries, like with Ishii-Kuntz et al. (2022) doing so with Norway and Japan, helps with having more focused comparisons.

Furthermore, more research is needed on not just the various challenges LGBTQIA+ people face within Japanese society, but also on the ways they can find meaning and claim a livable life *despite* of such challenges. In this thesis, including such stories was important to also highlight meaningful experiences and feelings of joy, pride, and hope. However, focusing specifically on how Japanese LGBTQIA+ people can thrive despite a lack of social and legal recognition can further contribute to such research. This perspective is also helpful in avoiding the narrative of countries either being "progressive" or "backward" when doing research on different cultural contexts (Browne et al., 2021, p. 31).

Lastly, Kasai et al. (2023, p. 6) state that "further inquiry is needed to understand the experiences of LGBTQ youth in schools worldwide". My study focused on adult narratives of school experience, and it varied as to when they finished high school. Though some had experiences working with LGBTQIA+ youth due to their activism work and/or doing visiting lectures at schools, examining the experiences of Japanese LGBTQIA+ youth specifically might reveal different experiences, especially as the situation in Japan is currently changing regarding gender and sexual diversity becoming more normalized.

References

- Amnesty International. (2022a, June 20). *Japan: 'Discriminatory' ruling on same-sex marriage a crushing blow to equality*. Amnesty International. Retrieved 29.08.2022, from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/06/japan-discriminatory-ruling-on-same-sex-marriage-a-crushing-blow-to-equality/>
- Amesty International. (2022b, November 30). *Japan: Tokyo ruling on same-sex marriage a sign of hope*. Amnesty International. Retrieved 17.10.2023, from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/11/japan-tokyo-ruling-on-same-sex-marriage-a-sign-of-hope/>
- Amnesty International. (2023, June 8). *Japan: Fukuoka ruling on same-sex couples shows progress on LGBTI rights*. Amnesty International. Retrieved 17.10.2023, from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/06/japan-fukuoka-ruling-on-same-sex-couples-shows-progress-on-lqbti-rights/>
- Bolsø, A., Annfelt, T., & Andersen, B. (Eds.). (2007). *Når heteroseksualiteten må forklare seg*. Tapir akademisk forlag.
- Brandley, ben, & Dehnert, M. (2023). "I am not a Robot, I am Asexual": A Qualitative Critique of Allonormative Discourses of Ace and Aro Folks as Robots, Aliens, Monsters. *Journal of Homosexuality, ahead-of-print*(ahead-of-print), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2023.2185092>
- Browne, K., Banerjea, N., McGlynn, N., Bakshi, L., Beethi, S., & Biswas, R. (2021). The limits of legislative change: Moving beyond inclusion/exclusion to create 'a life worth living'. *Environment and Planning. C, Politics and Space*, 39(1), 30–52. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2399654419845910>
- Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing Gender* (1st ed.). Taylor and Francis. Retrieved 03.01.2023, from <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203499627>
- Butler, J. & Worms, F. (2023). *The Livable and the Unlivable* (Hanafi, Z. Trans) (1st ed.). Fordham University Press.
- Cederberg, M. (2014). Public Discourses and Migrant Stories of Integration and Inequality: Language and Power in Biographical Narratives. In *Sociology*, 48(1): 133-149. Retrieved 24.11.2020, from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0038038512470041>
- Cortez, C., Arzinos, J., & De la Medina Soto, C. (2021). *Equality of opportunity for sexual and gender minorities*. (1st ed.). World Bank Publications. <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-1774-8>
- Dale, S.P.F. (2016). Teaching LGBT Rights in Japan: Learning from Classroom Experiences. In *Human Rights Education in Asia-Pacific*, 7: 219-232. Osaka: Asia-Pacific Human Rights Information Center. Retrieved 24.02.2020, from https://www.hurights.or.jp/archives/asia-pacific/section1/seven_3-4.pdf
- Doi, K. & Knight, K. (2017). *Japan's Missed Opportunity to Support LGBT Children*.

- Retrieved 05.02.2020, from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/04/27/japans-missed-opportunity-support-lgbt-children>
- Doi, K. & Knight, K. (2023, October 25). *Victory for Transgender Rights in Japan: Supreme Court Rules Compulsory Sterilization Unconstitutional*. Human Rights Watch. Retrieved 14.12.2023, from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/10/25/victory-transgender-rights-japan>
- Doi, K. & Reid, G. (2023, July 8). *Japan Supreme Court Ruling a Victory for Transgender Employees: Employers Should End Workplace Bathroom Restrictions*. Human Rights Watch. Retrieved 14.12.2023, from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/18/japan-supreme-court-ruling-victory-transgender-employees>
- Frühstück, S. (2022). *Gender and sexuality in modern Japan* (1st ed.) Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108354967>
- Fujimura-Fanselow, K. (Ed.). (2011). *Transforming Japan: how feminism and diversity are making a difference*. New York: The Feminist Press.
- Hashimoto, N., Ushitora, K., Morioka, M., Motegi, T., Tanaka, K., Tashiro, M., Inoue, E., Ikeya, H., Sekiguchi, H., Marui, Y. & Sawamura, F. (2017). School education and development of gender perspectives and sexuality in Japan. In *Sex Education*, 17(4): 386-398. Retrieved 17.04.2020, from <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2017.1292459>
- Human Rights Watch. (n.d.). #EqualityActJapan. Retrieved 23.11.2020, from <https://www.hrw.org/EqualityActJapan>
- Human Rights Watch. (2016). "The Nail That Sticks Out Gets Hammered Down": *LGBT Bullying and Exclusion in Japanese Schools*. Retrieved 25.02.2020, from https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/japan0516web_0.pdf
- Human Rights Watch. (2021, July 19). *Japan: Prime Minister Should Back LGBT Equality Act*. Retrieved 01.09.2022, from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/07/19/japan-prime-minister-should-back-lgbt-equality-act>
- Ishii-Kuntz, M., Kristensen, G.K., & Ringrose, P. (Eds.). (2022). *Comparative Perspectives on Gender Equality in Japan and Norway: Same but Different?* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003185222>
- Ishii-Kuntz, M. (2022). Caring masculinity: Fathers' childcare in Japan and Norway. In Ishii-Kuntz, M., Kristensen, G.K., & Ringrose, P. (Eds.). *Comparative Perspectives on Gender Equality in Japan and Norway: Same but Different?* (1st ed., pp. 36-52). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003185222>
- Janghorban, R., Roudsari, R.L., & Taghipour, A. (2014). Skype interviewing: The new generation of online synchronous interview in qualitative research. In *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being*, 9(1). Retrieved 04.05.2020, from <https://doi.org/10.3402/qhw.v9.24152>
- Johannessen, L.E.F., Rafoss, T.W & Rasmussen, E.B. (2018). *Hvordan bruke teori?*

Nyttige verktøy i kvalitativ analyse. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

- Kasai, M. (2023). Inter-minority Empathy. In Kasai, M., Toda, Y., & Russell, S. (Eds.), *SOGI Minority and School Life in Asian Contexts* (1st ed., Vol. 1, pp. 198-208). Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003430414>
- Kasai, M., & Toda, Y. (2023). Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and School Life in Japan. In Kasai, M., Toda, Y., & Russell, S. (Eds.), *SOGI Minority and School Life in Asian Contexts* (1st ed., Vol. 1, pp. 18-35). Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003430414>
- Kasai, M., Toda, Y., & Russell, S. (Eds.) (2023). *SOGI Minority and School Life in Asian Contexts* (1st ed., Vol. 1). Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003430414>
- Kazama, T. (2020). Conditional Inclusion: Sexual Minorities, Tolerance, and Nationalism. In *International Journal of Japanese Sociology*, 29(1): 39-51. Retrieved, 13.10.2020, from <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijjs.12110>
- Komiya, A. (2005). Difficulties Japanese Gay Youth Encounter (Ofuji, K, Trans.). In Sears, J. T. *Gay, lesbian, and transgender issues in education* (1st ed., pp. 31-36). Harrington Park Press. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203462591>
- Kristensen, G.K. (2011). *Familieplanlegging – bak tallene: Fortellinger om reproduksjon i det flerkulturelle Norge* (Doctoral thesis, Norwegian University of Science and Technology). Retrieved 13.10.2020, from <https://ntnuopen.ntnu.no/ntnu-xmlui/handle/11250/244159?show=full>
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2015). *Det kvalitative forskningsintervju* (T. M. Anderssen & J. Rygge, Trans.) (3rd ed.). Gyldendal akademisk.
- Kyodo News. (2020, December 11). *Genderless uniforms spread in Japan as LGBT students gain notice*. Kyodo News. Retrieved 07.12.2023, from <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2020/12/b4f968dbbaff-focus-genderless-uniforms-spread-in-japan-as-lgbt-students-gain-notice.html>
- Lundin, M. (2012). Heteronormativitet – vad är det? In Elmeroth, E. (Ed.), *Normkritiska perspektiv: I skolans likabehandlingsarbete* (pp. 59-72). Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- McCurry, J. (2023, April 2). 'It's like we don't exist': Japan faces pressure to allow same-sex marriage. *The Guardian*. Retrieved 13.12.2023, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/02/its-like-we-dont-exist-japan-faces-pressure-to-allow-same-sex-marriage>
- Miyazaki, A. (2023). Hybrid Masculinities? Reflexive Accounts of Japanese Youth at University Josō Contests. In Salenius, S. (Ed.). *Gender in Japanese Popular Culture: Rethinking Masculinities and Femininities* (1st ed., pp. 123-149). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-12942-1_5
- Moore, A.R. (2016). Inclusion and Exclusion: A Case Study of an English Class for LGBT Learners. In *TESOL Quarterly*, 50(1): 86-108. Retrieved 16.04.2020, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43893804>

- OECD. (2020). *Over the Rainbow? The Road to LGBTI Inclusion*. OECD Publishing, Paris. Retrieved 24.02.2023, from <https://doi.org/10.1787/8d2fd1a8-en>
- Outsports. (2021a, September 22). *At least 186 out LGBTQ athletes at the Tokyo Summer Olympics, by far a record*. Outsports. Retrieved 13.12.2023, from <https://www.outsports.com/olympics/2021/7/12/22565574/tokyo-summer-olympics-lgbtq-gay-athletes-list>
- Outsports. (2021b, September 4). *At least 36 out LGBTQ Paralympians are competing in Tokyo, by far a record*. Outsports. Retrieved 13.12.2023, from <https://www.outsports.com/2021/8/16/22623849/lgbtq-paralympics-out-athletes-tokyo>
- Phoenix, A. (2007). Claiming Livable Lives: Adult Subjectification and Narratives of 'Non-Normative' Childhood Experiences. In Kofoed, J. & Staunæs, D. (Eds.). *Magtballader – 14 fortællinger om magt, modstand og menneskers tilblivelse* (pp. 178–196). Aarhus: Danmarks Pædagogiske Universitetsforlag.
- Pride7 Communiqué. (2023). *Pride7 Communiqué*. Marriage For All Japan. Retrieved 17.10.2023, from <https://www.marriageforall.jp/wp-content/themes/mfaj/pride7/pdf/Pride7-Communique.pdf>
- Reynolds, I. (2023, June 16). Japan Passes Watered-Down LGBTQ Bill Opposed by Rights Groups and Conservatives. *TIME*. Retrieved 13.12.2023, from <https://time.com/6287777/japan-lgbt-bill/>
- Røthing, Å. & Svendsen, S.H.B. (2009). *Seksualitet i skolen: Perspektiver på undervisning*. Oslo: Cappelen Damm
- Shiraishi, M. & Toda, Y. (2023). Inter-minority Conflict in Japanese Context. In Kasai, M., Toda, Y., & Russell, S. (Eds.), *SOGI Minority and School Life in Asian Contexts* (1st ed., Vol. 1, pp. 186-197). Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003430414>
- Smith, P. K. (2023). Foreword. In Kasai, M., Toda, Y., & Russell, S. (Eds.). *SOGI Minority and School Life in Asian Contexts* (1st ed., Vol. 1, pp. x-xi). Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003430414>
- Takahara, K. (2022, June 29). Unpacking Japan's latest ruling on same-sex marriage. *The Japan Times*. Retrieved 01.09.2022, from <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/06/29/national/social-issues/explainer-ruling-same-sex-marriage/>
- Tamagawa, M. (2016). Same-Sex Marriage in Japan. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 12(2), 160–187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1550428X.2015.1016252>
- Tamagawa, M. (2018). Coming Out to Parents in Japan: A Sociocultural Analysis of Lived Experiences. *Sexuality & Culture*, 22(2), 497–520. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-017-9481-3>
- Tessler, H. (2023). Aromanticism, asexuality, and relationship (non-)formation: How a-spec singles challenge romantic norms and reimagine family life. *Sexualities*.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607231197061>

- Thagaard, T. (2018). *Systematikk og innlevelse: en innføring i kvalitative metoder* (5th ed.). Fagbokforlaget.
- Topping, A. (2021, July 30). Rainbow Olympics in Tokyo hailed as turning point for LGBTQ+ athletes. *The Guardian*. Retrieved 13.12.2023, from <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2021/jul/30/rainbow-olympics-tokyo-hailed-turning-point-lgbtq-athletes>
- Ueno, K. (2023). LGBTQ students' experiences of heteronormativity in higher education institutions: focusing on Japan as the national context. *Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-023-01125-6>
- Wada, C. & Søråa, R. A. (2022). Work-life balance and equality observed through advertising during the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan and Norway. In Ishii-Kuntz, M., Kristensen, G.K., & Ringrose, P. (Eds.). *Comparative Perspectives on Gender Equality in Japan and Norway: Same but Different?* (1st ed., pp. 139-153). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003185222>
- Wakakuwa, M. & Fujimura-Fanselow, K. (2011). Backlash Against Gender Equality after 2000. In Fujimura-Fanselow, K. (Ed.). *Transforming Japan: how feminism and diversity are making a difference* (p. 337-359). New York: The Feminist Press.
- Yamaguchi, M. (2020, October 15). LGBT groups in Japan launch petition seeking equality law. *The Associated Press*. Retrieved 21.11.2020, from <https://apnews.com/article/japan-olympic-games-marriage-tokyo-73e71291ab2d89c243d08e5bdd895045>
- Zhang, T. (2021). Male homosexuality in Japan from the perspective of the younger generation: a case study of students at a National University. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 18(4), 360–393. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2019.1684415>

Appendices

Interview guide

Introduction

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself?
 - Age, gender identity, sexuality, education, work, LGBT+ activism, etc.?
 - A. For an activist: What kind of work do you do in relation to LGBT+ activism?
(Anything relating to education?)

School (information)

2. Can you tell me what kind of schools you have attended so far (in Japan or abroad)?
3. At these schools, were topics relating to LGBT+ ever present/discussed in some way?
 - A. For a parent: When you yourself attended school, were topics relating to LGBT+ ever present/discussed in some way?
 - If yes, how? (Did students or teachers talk or know about it?)
 - Were topics relating to sexuality and gender in general present/discussed?
4. Did the schools ever offer information about LGBT+ topics outside of class?
 - A. For a parent: Did the schools offer you information/guidance about LGBT+ topics?
 - If yes, what kind? (E.g., school visits, school nurse, after school program, clubs/groups, posters/signs/guidelines)
 - If no, was it ever discussed? What was the arguments for or against it?
 - Did they offer any information about sexuality and gender in general?
5. To what extent were LGBT+ people visible in school?

Classroom experiences

6. Do you remember an instance in which LGBT+ topics were taught/brought up in class?
 - In which subject? (PE, Home Economics, others?)
 - What topic(s) were brought up? How was the topic(s) approached?
 - Was it in sex education? If no, were LGBT+ perspectives ever included?
 - How did the teacher(s) act/respond?
 - How did the students act/respond?
7. Do you remember any other instances?
8. In general, were topics relating to sexuality and gender ever taught/brought up in class?
9. Were LGBT+ perspectives included in the textbooks/teaching materials?
 - If yes, how? (Do you remember a picture or a certain sentence/title?)
 - If no, why do you think that is? In your opinion, what was missing?
 - Were topics relating to sexuality and gender portrayed in the teaching materials?
10. What do you think about the current curriculum in relation to LGBT+ perspectives?

School experiences

11. How would you describe your experience in school as an LGBT+ person (or ally)?
 - Safe environment? (Awareness/information, preventive measures against bullying, supportive peer group) → School uniforms?
 - Feel excluded? (Strict gender roles, no information, derogatory language/bullying)
 - A mix of the two?
- A. For a parent: How would you describe your experience with the schools as a parent?
 - Good school/teacher and parent relationship? Any support/information?
 - Feel excluded?
 - A mix of the two?
- B. For a parent: Do you remember a certain instance from your child's time in school?

Media (and other resources)

12. Where else did you seek more information about LGBT+ topics during the time you went to school (if at all)?

A. For a parent: Where else did you seek more information about LGBT+ topics during your child's time in school (if at all)?

- Social media? LGBT-organizations, pride-event(s)?
- Movies, documentaries, TV-series? News/articles? Books, comics? (Stereotypes?)

13. What information did you find helpful (and/or misleading), and why?

Experiences from a different country/culture *(Relevant if the informant has lived abroad)*

A. How would you describe your experience with living in a different country and Japan regarding LGBT+ education/topics? (Differences, similarities?)

B. Do you remember a specific instance, where you perhaps noticed or were shocked by the differences and/or similarities?

C. Have you met many Japanese LGBT+ people outside of Japan? (Do you think being LGBT+ might be part of their reason for wanting to study abroad?)

D. How would you say your experience from another country has shaped your view on LGBT+ education/topics in Japan?

Closing comments

14. Have you noticed any changes since the time you went to school when it comes to LGBT+ topics (in school and/or in general) in Japan?

15. In your opinion, what do you think needs to change in relation to LGBT+ education (or society in general) in Japan?

16. Is there anything else you'd like to say/add?

Thank you so much!

Information about participation

The research project and its purpose

I'm a Master's student from the study programme Equality and Diversity at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). For my thesis, I'm interested in looking at LGBT+ people and allies in Japan and their experiences with LGBT+ topics in school.

In this document I will provide further information about my research project and what participating in it will entail.

Who is responsible for the research project?

My Master's thesis is a result of the two following projects:

1. *Norway-Japan: Bridging Research and Education in Gender Equality and Diversity* (NJ_BREGED; 2019-2022), funded by INTPART, The Research Council of Norway.
2. *Teaching Gender Equality and Diversity in Norway and Japan* (UTFORSK; 2021-2025), funded by the Norwegian Agency for International Cooperation and Quality Enhancement in Higher Education (DIKU).

NJ_BREGED and UTFORSK are research and teaching collaborations between the following institutions:

- Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU); the Center for Gender Research (CGR) at the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies of Culture, (Norway)
- Ochanomizu University; the Institute for Gender Studies (IGS), (Tokyo, Japan)

Why are you asked to participate?

You self-identify as LGBT+ and have attended junior high school and/or high school in the Japanese school system or have a close family member who has. You may also be part of an LGBT+ activist group or serve as an ally to LGBT+ people.

What participation entails

For my project I will conduct interviews with LGBT+ people and allies in Japan. Questions I'd like to ask include one's previous experiences with LGBT+ topics/sexuality education in junior high school and in high school, and one's general perspectives on education in Japan regarding gender and sexual diversity.

The interview will be in English and will last for approximately 45-90 minutes.

The interview will be conducted through an application which provides the option of video or audio chatting (most likely Zoom) or through email. The interview (only the audio) will be recorded and later transcribed so that the information can be used in my master thesis.

Your privacy – how the data/information will be stored and used

The information provided in the interview will only be used in the research project described in this document. Personal/identifiable information will be anonymized, and the audio file will be securely stored and later deleted when the research project is completed (latest estimated time of completion; 31.12.2024).

Participation is voluntary

Participating in this project is completely voluntary. If you do choose to participate, be assured that you can withdraw your consent at any time without giving any specific reason. All your personal information will then be deleted. There will not be any negative consequences for you if you do not want to participate or if you later choose to withdraw your consent.

What gives me the right to process personal information about you?

I will process information about you based on your consent.

On behalf of the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies of Culture at NTNU, Norwegian Centre For Research Data (NSD) has considered that the processing of personal data in this research project complies with privacy regulations.

Where can I find out more?

If you have questions about the research project, or wish to use your rights, please contact:

- Emilie Helén Vik ([email], [phone number])
- Guro Korsnes Kristensen ([email], [phone number]). Department of Interdisciplinary Studies of Culture at NTNU
- Jennifer Branlat ([email]), Department of Interdisciplinary Studies of Culture at NTNU
- Thomas Helgesen ([email]), Data Protection Officer at NTNU

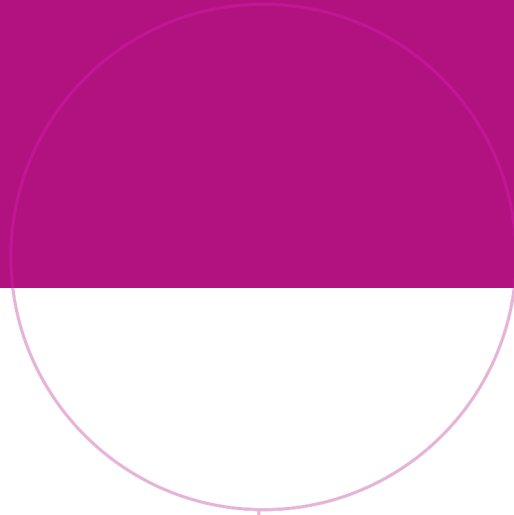
If you have further questions related to NSD's assessment of the research project, you can contact:

- NSD – Norwegian Centre For Research Data by email ([email]) or by calling: [phone number]

With best regards,

Guro Korsnes Kristensen
(Supervisor)

Emilie Helén Vik



Norwegian University of
Science and Technology