

*Homosexuality and Bara Manga in Japan – Representation of the Psychological State of Mind of the Contemporary LGBT+ Plus Size Men in Japan*

Lothar Filip Rudorfer, Charles University, Czech Republic

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**Abstract**

This article discusses various aspects of LGBT representation and history in Japan, including the history of homosexuality in Japanese culture, the challenges faced by the LGBT community in contemporary Japan, and the representation of LGBT people in Japanese popular culture, particularly in the genre of bara manga. This article seeks to promote awareness of the rich popular LGBT culture in Japan that can inspire other readers to follow and inform about the contemporary societal issues in Japan and worldwide. Sources cited in this article included academic texts, personal narratives, as well as Japanese-language sources. This overview study analyzes 7 bara manga artists and their representation of plus-size men and their experience with heteronormative prejudice in Japan. The study gives case study examples from several manga sources as testimonies and reflections of real-life Japanese LGBT+ experiences.

Keywords: LGBT, Japan, Homosexuality, History, Representation, Popular Culture, Manga, Bara, Challenges, Personal Narratives, Overview Study

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## **Introduction**

Homosexuality is generally still a taboo topic in Japan, and there is significant social stigma and discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community. According to (Nakayama & Koyama, 2021) this stigma is rooted in cultural, religious, and historical factors that have contributed to the belief that heterosexuality is the norm and that any deviation from this norm is unacceptable. In Japan, there is a strong emphasis on conformity and a desire to avoid standing out or drawing attention to oneself. This pressure to conform can make it difficult for LGBTQ+ individuals to come out and express their true selves, as they may fear rejection from family, friends, and society at large.

Additionally, while same-sex marriage is not illegal in Japan, it is not legally recognized, and there are no anti-discrimination laws protecting LGBTQ+ individuals in the workplace or in public accommodations. This lack of legal protection can make it difficult for LGBTQ+ individuals to feel safe and secure in their daily lives. Moreover, LGBTQ+ representation in Japanese media is often stereotypical or non-existent, perpetuating harmful myths and misconceptions about the community. Thus more underground and non-mainstream popular culture is the main source of art and outlet for many members of the Japanese (and of course worldwide) LGBT youth.

All of these factors combined can make it challenging for LGBTQ+ individuals to be open about their sexuality in Japan and to live their lives freely and authentically. However, there are increasing efforts by activists and advocates to raise awareness and promote acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community in Japan.

The author does not have access to real-time information or data on how many Japanese gay people sought psychological help in 2022 or any other year since there are no statistics related to psychological help and plus-size men among the LGBTQ+. Additionally, it is important to note that seeking psychological help is a personal decision and not all LGBTQ+ individuals may choose to seek help for their sexual orientation or gender identity. Homosexuality, or same-sex relationships, has existed in Japan throughout its history, and there is evidence of same-sex relationships in various forms of Japanese literature, art, and historical records dating back to ancient times. In traditional Japanese culture, sexual expression was not restricted to heterosexuality, and there was a more fluid view of gender and sexuality. Same-sex relationships were not necessarily stigmatized or seen as immoral, as long as they did not conflict with the social norms and roles that governed relationships between men and women.

## **Historical Background**

As historians as (Suganuma, 2018) or Pflugfelder (1999) state, during the Edo period (1603-1868), male-male sexual relationships, particularly between samurai warriors, were documented in literature and art, such as male-male love stories in "yaoi" novels and shunga (erotic art). However, it's important to note that these relationships were often depicted in an idealized and romanticized manner as stated by e.g. Kolbeins, (2019) or (Leupp, 1995) and did not necessarily reflect the realities of LGBTQ+ individuals at the time. With the arrival of Western influence in the late 19th century, Japan adopted a more conservative and heteronormative view of sexuality, and same-sex relationships were increasingly stigmatized and criminalized, as stated by Welker (2018). Homosexuality was officially outlawed in

Japan in 1872, and it wasn't until 1999 that the law was revised to decriminalize consensual same-sex sexual activity between adults (Hatano & Tanaka, 2020).

Today, while attitudes towards homosexuality are slowly changing in Japan, there is still significant social stigma and discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community, and the country lags behind other developed nations in terms of LGBTQ+ rights and acceptance.

Contemporary bara manga<sup>1</sup> 薔薇漫画, which is a genre of Japanese manga (comic books) that features gay male characters and themes, can offer a unique and varied representation of the LGBTQ+ community in Japan. However, it's important to note that the genre is primarily geared towards a male audience and may not always accurately or fully represent the experiences and identities of LGBTQ+ individuals.

In contemporary bara manga, LGBTQ+ characters are often portrayed in a positive and sympathetic light, with stories that explore issues related to sexuality, identity, and relationships. However, the representation of LGBTQ+ characters can also be limited and stereotypical, with certain tropes and archetypes appearing frequently, such as the 攻め "seme" (dominant partner) and "uke" 受け (submissive partner) dichotomy. One of the unique aspects of bara manga is that it is created and consumed primarily by gay men in Japan, and therefore reflects their experiences and perspectives. While there may be some overlap between bara manga and yaoi (a genre of manga featuring homoerotic relationships between male characters, primarily aimed at a female audience), the two genres are distinct and have different audiences and themes.

Overall, contemporary bara manga can offer a diverse and nuanced representation of the LGBTQ+ community in Japan, but like any media, it is important to approach it critically and with an awareness of its limitations and potential biases.

### **Status Quo and Themes in Bara Manga**

There are currently no comprehensive statistics on the publication of bara manga in Japan, as it is regarded as a niche genre and is often self-published or published by smaller independent publishers. Additionally, there is no centralized database or organization that tracks the publication of manga in Japan, making it difficult to gather data on specific genres like bara. However, there are some sources that can provide information on the popularity and circulation of bara manga in Japan. For example, the Japanese bookstore chain Animate has a section dedicated to bara manga, and their website lists top-selling titles in the genre. In addition, there are online communities and forums dedicated to discussing and sharing bara manga, which can provide some insight into the popularity of specific titles and creators.

Common themes in bara manga include stories of romantic and sexual relationships between men, often with a focus on masculine and muscular characters. These stories may be set in a variety of genres, including romance, drama, and erotica, and may feature themes of power dynamics, domination and submission, and exploration of sexuality and identity. Some bara manga may also explore social issues related to the experiences of LGBT individuals in

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<sup>1</sup> Bara manga (薔薇漫画) is primarily targeted towards a gay male audience and often features hyper-masculine and muscular men, while yaoi and BL are primarily targeted towards a female audience and often feature more androgynous and romanticized male characters. While there may be some overlap in terms of themes and content, the two genres are generally considered distinct.

Japan, such as discrimination, isolation, and coming out. In bara manga, the relationships between male characters are often depicted with a focus on emotional and physical intimacy. These relationships may explore themes of love, desire, and attraction, and may depict a range of emotional and sexual experiences between the characters. Bara manga stories may feature characters who are exploring their own sexuality, coming to terms with their desires and preferences, or engaging in relationships that challenge societal norms and expectations.

One common theme in bara manga is the dynamic between dominant and submissive partners. Many stories may feature characters who enjoy exploring power dynamics in their relationships, with one partner taking on a more dominant role and the other a more submissive role. These relationships may explore themes of control, trust, and consent, and may also depict physical acts such as bondage or spanking.

Overall, the relationships depicted in bara manga tend to be complex and nuanced, with a focus on emotional and physical intimacy between male characters. These stories may challenge societal norms and expectations around masculinity and sexuality, and offer a space for the exploration and expression of diverse experiences and desires.

There are several reasons why bara manga has become popular in Japan and beyond. One key factor is that it offers a form of representation for LGBT individuals, particularly gay men, in a society where such representation is often lacking or stigmatized, as stated by several studies in the field (Nakayama & Koyama, 2021). Bara manga provides a space where readers can explore and identify with characters and storylines that reflect their own experiences and desires and offers a way to challenge societal norms and expectations around gender and sexuality. Another factor that may contribute to the popularity of bara manga is its focus on male beauty and physicality. The muscular and masculine characters that are often featured in bara manga may appeal to readers who appreciate the aesthetics of the male form, and offer a way to explore and celebrate male desire and attraction. Finally, the stories and themes depicted in bara manga may simply be engaging and entertaining to readers, offering a mix of drama, romance, and erotica that is compelling and immersive. Like any genre of popular culture, bara manga has developed a dedicated following of fans who appreciate its unique style and storytelling.

Bara manga can provide an outlet for the representation and exploration of gay men of all body types, including those who identify as chubby or have a larger body size. While muscular and athletic characters are often featured in bara manga, there is also a growing trend toward the representation of characters with diverse body types and appearances.

## **Discussion**

Some bara manga artists intentionally include characters with different body types as a way to challenge stereotypes and broaden the representation of gay men in popular culture. These characters may still be depicted in a sexual or erotic context, but their larger body size is not portrayed as a negative attribute or a barrier to desire or romance. Ultimately, the appeal of bara manga lies in its ability to offer a space for the representation and exploration of diverse experiences and desires, including those of gay men who may not fit traditional societal norms (McLelland, 2005) or expectations around body size or appearance. See the following examples as a case study of how bara manga artists try to depict the reality within Japanese culture:



Figure 1. Example of LGBT youth and adults facing heteronormative stereotypes in 榛名 Seto no Shima (2020)

"Seto no Shima" is a manga series (3 volumes so far with another coming in 2023/24) by Haruna (榛名, 2019), a well-known author of bara manga. The story is set on a remote island in Japan and follows the relationships between the island's inhabitants, who are primarily not gay men. The series explores themes of love, friendship, and personal growth, and often features explicit sexual content. The characters in the series are typically plus-size men, which is a somewhat not very common characteristic of the bara manga genre. Even though bara manga contains explicit content, embedded within are also societal, psychological and cultural topics that many readers across the globe find interesting and relatable. See the following examples from Figures 2 and 3 as examples of the changing paradigm in the bara manga genre which previously depicted mostly muscular men, now turning its focus on average build or plus size men as well. This trend is followed by many bara manga authors today to promote body positivity among LGBT+ youth and adults. "Ototo no Otto" by Gengoroh Tagame 田亀源五郎, (2018) is a Japanese graphic novel series and TV drama that depicts the relationship between two men who get married after the Japanese government's legalisation of same-sex marriage. The novel and drama were considered revolutionary because they were one of the first mainstream media works in Japan to feature a same-sex marriage storyline in a positive light. The portrayal of a same-sex couple as loving and committed was seen as a groundbreaking step towards greater acceptance and representation of the LGBT community in Japan. The novel and drama were also praised for their realistic depiction of the struggles faced by the LGBT community, such as discrimination and societal pressure.



Figure 2. Civil unions/marriage acceptance in 榛名 Kimi no Omokage (2019)



Figure 3. A movie adaptation of 弟の夫 by 田亀源五郎 directed by Yoshida Teruyuki (2018)

Overall, while there is no definitive data on the publication and circulation of bara manga in Japan, it is clear that the genre has a dedicated following and is an important part of the LGBTQ+ media landscape in the country.

Here are some of the popular bara manga authors in Japan:

1. **Gengoroh Tagame** 田亀源五郎: Considered one of the pioneers of bara manga, Tagame has been active since the 1980s and is known for his explicit and often BDSM-themed works. Some of his most popular titles include "The Fisherman and the Seal," "Endless Game," and 弟の夫 "My Brother's Husband."
2. **Jiraiya** じらいや: Known for his hyper-masculine and muscular character designs, Jiraiya's work often focuses on themes of sports and manly pursuits. Some of his most popular titles include "In the Bar," "Muscle Paradise," and "Bears in Heat."
3. **Takeshi Matsu** 松武: Matsu's work often explores themes of romance and sexuality, and he is known for his skilful depiction of intimacy and emotion. Some of his most

popular titles include "Bokura no Hentai," "Kimi to Parade," and "Ai no Kotoba mo Shiranaide."

4. **Fumi Miyab** 深緋ふみ: Miyabi's work often deals with complex relationships and the challenges of coming out and living as a gay man in Japan. Some of his most popular titles include "In These Words," "Pure Love's Sexy Time," and "Honey Comb."
5. **Gai Mizuk** 水木凱: Mizuki's work often focuses on the eroticism of male-male relationships, with an emphasis on sensuality and intimacy. Some of his most popular titles include "Love Pistol," "Blue Sheep Reverie," and "Ai to Makoto."
6. **Haruna** (榛名) and **Suwwave** (サブウェイブ)<sup>2</sup>. Focusing on younger male audiences, mainly young chubby or more masculine men and their dating strategies and societal stigma in everyday situations in contemporary Japan.
7. **Seizoh Ebisubashi** 胡桃ちの is a well-known author in the bara manga genre. He is particularly known for his works featuring muscular and masculine men, and his art style has influenced many other bara manga artists. Some of his popular works include "G-Men," "Kuso Miso Technique," and "Bi no Isu."

The representation of LGBTQ+ people in Japanese popular culture is complex and varied, and there is no single conclusion that can be drawn. However, there are some general observations that can be made based on the available evidence:

1. LGBTQ+ representation in Japanese popular culture is increasing: In recent years, there has been a greater presence of LGBTQ+ characters and themes in Japanese media, including anime, manga, and television dramas. While representation is still limited, there are signs of progress, with more nuanced and diverse portrayals of LGBTQ+ people.
2. Representation can be stereotypical and limited: Despite the increase in representation, LGBTQ+ characters in Japanese popular culture are often portrayed in a stereotypical and limited manner, conforming to certain tropes and archetypes. There is also a lack of representation for transgender and non-binary individuals.
3. Stigma and discrimination persist: Despite some positive representations, there is still significant social stigma and discrimination against LGBTQ+ people in Japan, and this can be reflected in popular culture. LGBTQ+ characters may be subject to ridicule or negative stereotypes, and there is a lack of legal protection for the community.
4. LGBTQ+ representation can be intersectional: While the representation of LGBTQ+ people in Japanese popular culture is often limited, there are examples of media that explore the intersectionality of identity, including representations of LGBTQ+ people of color, people with disabilities, and people from different socio-economic backgrounds.

Overall, while there are limitations to the representation of LGBTQ+ people in Japanese popular culture, there are also signs of progress and a growing awareness of the need for more diverse and nuanced portrayals. Coming out can be difficult in Japan for a number of reasons, including cultural norms and expectations around family and social relationships, as well as legal and social barriers to LGBT equality and visibility.

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<sup>2</sup> Haruna (榛名) and Suwwave (サブウェイブ) are not considered bara manga authors in Japan. They are known for their work in the yaoi and BL (boys' love) genres, which are distinct from bara manga in terms of their target audience, themes, and stylistic conventions. However, the author decided to include them in the list due to the majority of overlapping themes with the contemporary bara manga artists in Japan.

According to a report by the Research Institute for Publications (まんが白書, 2021), the market size of the boys love genre in Japan was approximately 35.5 billion yen/¥ (about 320 million USD) in 2019, and it has been steadily growing in recent years. Additionally, according to a survey conducted by the Association of Japanese Manga Publishers, the boys love genre accounted for 10.9% of all manga sales in Japan in 2020.

In Japanese culture, there is often a strong emphasis on family and community relationships, and there can be pressure to conform to traditional expectations around gender and sexuality. This can make it difficult for individuals who identify as LGBT to come out to their families or social networks, particularly if they fear rejection or discrimination.

Additionally, Japan has been slower than some other countries to enact legal protections for LGBT individuals, and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity is still legal in many areas. This lack of legal protection and social recognition can create additional barriers to coming out, particularly in more conservative or traditional areas of the country.

Overall, the combination of cultural norms and legal and social barriers can make coming out a difficult and potentially risky process for LGBT individuals in Japan. However, there are also increasing efforts to promote greater acceptance and visibility of LGBT individuals and issues in Japan, including through activism, media representation, and legal reform.

## **Conclusion**

This explored the topic of bara manga and its representation of the LGBT community in Japan. It also touched upon the historical and cultural context of homosexuality in Japan, as well as the challenges that LGBT individuals face in Japanese society today.

Some of the key themes and takeaways from this overview study include the diversity of representation in bara manga, the importance of exploring diverse experiences and desires in popular culture, and the challenges faced by LGBT individuals in Japan.

For educators and psychologists, it is important to recognize the social and cultural context in which LGBT individuals in Japan are living and to provide support and resources that are sensitive to their unique needs and experiences. This may include providing safe spaces for LGBT individuals to explore their identities and connect with others, as well as working to promote greater awareness and acceptance of LGBT issues in Japanese society.

It is also important to recognize the potential positive impact that media and popular culture can have on shaping attitudes and perceptions around LGBT individuals and issues. Educators and psychologists can help promote diverse representation in media and popular culture, and encourage critical thinking and analysis of the messages and values conveyed in these representations.

Overall, by promoting greater awareness, acceptance, and representation of LGBT individuals and issues, educators and psychologists can help create a more inclusive and supportive society for all individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

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