

Breaking Windows and Mirrors: The LGBTQ+/Disability Community's Representation in Japanese Media

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Abstract: This paper presents the media presence of a resulting community of people who identify with both the LGBTQ+ community and are Persons with Disabilities in Japan. Through traditional media, art production, and social media, this paper explores how Japanese LGBTQ+ people with disabilities voice their experiences and treatment in the local media. We compare six individual accounts of LGBTQ+/Disability experiences across various forms of media, highlighting the advantages and limitations for the LGBTQ+/Disability community to spread awareness in authentic ways. Our review suggests that the LGBTQ+/Disability community in Japanese media is under-represented compared to the LGBTQ+ and Disability communities individually, where the LGBTQ+/Disability group is more likely to share information about their sexuality and disability on the less-censored social media rather than others. Alongside theories of LGBTQ+/Disability representation, we discuss media portrayals in the context of “windows,” an outsider’s view looking in, and “mirrors,” a self-reflective view, and the influences of access on a member’s identity.

Keywords: *People with disabilities (PWDs), LGBTQ+, Japan, media*

1. Introduction

Scholars point out that people with disabilities are typically represented as asexualized and ungendered (Shakespeare et al. 1996; Tepper 2000; McRuer and Mollow 2012; Kattari 2015). Society similarly tells people with disabilities (PWDs) that sex is not an acceptable way for them to communicate or express love and other desires. Feminist researcher Yuriko Iino (2020) mentions that the worldwide Disability movements of the 1960s have been criticized for prioritizing access to the public sphere and its acquisition of rights while ignoring the problems faced in the private sphere. Since the 1990s, the feminist and LGBTQ+ movements have emphasized “sexual rights” and “politics of sexuality,” and sexual issues have since been recognized as human rights issues (Iino 2020, 53–54). Based on this understanding, the sexual rights of PWDs have been discussed in recent years in Japan (cf. Kuramoto 2005; Asaka 2009). The purpose of the present paper is to document and discuss the experiences of Japanese individuals who identify as members of sexual diversity

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Received on December 8, 2023, accepted after peer reviews on June 11, 2024; published online October 29, 2024.

and Disability communities (LGBTQ+/Disability¹), based on local media records.

Today, Japan has effective policy frameworks to protect the rights of PWDs, but legal debate on the issue of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) discrimination is still limited: the “Osaka City Residents Survey on Diversity and Conviviality in Work and Life” (Kamano et al. 2019) is considered the only survey of residents that includes SOGI issues. Other than this, “disability” data is lamentably lacking, exact figures for LGBTQ+ PWDs are still difficult to estimate, and specific data are unknown. The Annual Report on Government Measures for Persons with Disabilities from the Cabinet Office Japan (2021) does not officially include any data about their SOGI. Karen Nakamura (2008) provided a literature review on the sexual problems of PWDs, as well as businesses that cater to their sexual needs and sex volunteers in Japan, and concludes that “because able-bodied Japanese men are able to easily access sexual services, ... most of the discussion on sexual needs in Japan has been on men with physical disabilities rather than on those with intellectual or psychiatric disabilities” (Nakamura 2008, 17). Nakamura (2011) continued, “To my knowledge... there are no books written by gay or lesbian persons with disabilities discussing their life histories... in contrast to Japan, there has been considerable work published in the United States.”

Indeed, LGBTQ+PWDs in Japan are rarely visible, but this, of course, does not mean that they do not exist or are not known within their close circles. In terms of the variety and extent of advocacy for each of the LGBTQ+ and Disability communities individually, we lack data and knowledge about individuals who identify as both. Thus, understanding who the members of the LGBTQ+/Disability community are, what their lived experiences are like, how they are treated by the separate LGBTQ+ and Disability groups, and to what extent they are acknowledged and accepted by mainstream Japanese society is unknown and, as such, important to study.

In a recently published academic book on young LGBTQ+/Disability, Martino reviewed different English language scholarly literature and cultural material about LGBTQ+ scholars/activists with disabilities (Martino 2020). He mentioned that representations of disability and queerness in film and television remain sparse and that increasing the representation of youth with disabilities in film and television would provide them with a greater variety of faces to relate to, thereby strengthening their personal identity. He also mentioned members of the LGBTQ+/Disability community “using a series of digital spaces to create spaces where disabled sexualities are discussed and celebrated” (Martino 2020, 19). Our article concurs with Martino that “visibility is extremely important” (Martino 2020, 23), and we try to contribute some Japanese-based examples to the archive of LGBTQ+/Disability activists’ stories. We aim to provide opportunities for the voices of LGBTQ+/Disability members to be heard by the international academic community in order to break through the limitations of conventional media and publication and to stimulate conversation about this issue among scholars.

2. Cases from Different Media

The following sections showcase six stories depicting the experiences and treatment of LGBTQ+/Disability members and discuss how they differ across diverse media types.

(1) Community Publications and Public TV Shows

We provide two stories from non-commercialized media: one is a community-published print,

¹ This paper uses “LGBTQ+/Disability” to refer to the community of people with disabilities who also identify with a sexual diversity, or the LGBTQ+ spectrum.

and the other is a public broadcast TV show on Nippon Hoso Kyokai (NHK: Japan Broadcasting Corporation). Both of them refer to media which originated prior to the Internet. Before the Internet was widespread, magazines or newsletters edited and published by the members themselves were an important communication tool for both the LGBTQ+ and Disability communities. These publications were meant for the community but were accessible to outsiders as well. However, their visibility was usually restricted unless one was already aware of their existence.

Minoru Hanada (1968–2002), a Japanese man with cerebral palsy (CP) who identified himself as gay, was among the first LGBTQ+/Disability persons to publicly write about his related challenges. His story appeared in magazines for queer² communities in the early 1990s, in the initial days of Japan's LGBT movement, and has made a memorable impression on readers since. Until that time, PWDs in Japan were considered to be asexual (cf. Asaka 2009; Iino 2020) and if they were sexually active, they were considered heterosexual. Hanada called himself a “double minority” and claimed that being “*shōgaisha*”³ is relative rather than absolute. Like PWDs, he also felt that being a gay man is a disadvantage in society. From his teens to his twenties, Hanada lived in denial of both his disability and his homosexuality. He stated: “To get out of this situation, you need to break down the image of masculinity that you have created in your mind and affirm your own body image. The other thing is to overcome homophobia” (Hanada 2000, 108). After he started attending a gay activity group in Osaka named G-FRONT Kansai, Hanada began to understand the correct information about homosexuality that relieved his anxiety. He still felt that there was no place for himself as a man with a disability in the gay community so he decided to create such a place himself. He started a project named “Gay and Disabled,” to encourage people to share their disability experiences within the gay group.

Hanada's main concern was: How do we provide actionable information to PWDs who are unable to go out and are also isolated as a sexual minority? He tried to achieve this in two ways. The first was publicizing it through the correspondence columns of gay magazines. However, since the readership was limited to the gay community, information could only reach gay readers who were interested in issues surrounding disability. The second was to distribute information about the project to organizations for PWDs. Unfortunately, only two or three organizations published the information in their member newsletters, but “most of them seemed to ignore it” (Hanada 2000, 60). Hanada expressed his own experiences of discrimination against PWDs, primarily within the gay community (Fushimi 2003). At the same time, some heterosexual PWDs hold negative attitudes towards homosexuality (Hanada 1996). Regretfully, Hanada suddenly died in 2002. Since his death, the issue of sexual minorities with disabilities has not been discussed as frequently in public magazines of a similar nature.

Another story is that of Hiroko, who was the first person to share her multiple disadvantaged experiences as an MTF (male-to-female transgender) person with CP on television talk shows. The program produced by NHK to support people with disabilities featured two LGBT-themed discussions, one in 2010 and the other in 2012. On the program, Hiroko said: “Living as a man

2 In the early 1990s, “queer” was popularly used to describe people who identified as a sexual minority or diverse gender identity. The terms “LGBT” or “LGBTQ+” appeared in Japanese mainstream media in the 2010s.

3 The English translation as referenced in Okuyama's work: “The contemporary Japanese parlance for disability is *shōgai*. As ‘disability’ has multiple meanings in English, so does *shōgai*, which consists of two characters, *shō* (interfering) and *gai* (damage/harm). The literal translation of the word *shōgai* tends to emphasize the physical impairment aspect and places the meaning of disability in the medical-model context. Within the context of the social model of disability, *shōgai* also means a limitation created by the social environment that negatively affects the person with a disability” (Okuyama 2020, 9). The word “*sha*” means person/people in Japanese.

for over 50 years, I could not stop suicidal thoughts. When male care helpers supported me with bathing, I did not want to show my naked body to them.” Hiroko finally decided to change her assigned sex in her 50s by seeking medical assistance. She also conveyed a message to the audience that she wishes young people with disabilities could live their lives in their own way.

In 2019, Hiroko also told her life story to *Shinto no Tomo* in Japan in the article “LGBT with Disabilities: Even Double Minorities Should Not Give Up” (Taguchi 2019), which was published by The Board of Publications of the United Church of Christ in Japan. The magazine itself addresses the diversity of a Christian’s life. There are still no mainstream magazines in Japan that mention LGBTQ+/Disability experiences at all. Because of her disability, Hiroko stated that when she came out as transgender: “My psychiatrist didn’t believe that, and I did not gain the understanding of people around me. My family rejected me, telling me not to dress like a woman” (Taguchi 2019, 66). She could not get any support or approval from them but then moved to a different city where she found a Church that welcomed her. After Hiroko’s physician diagnosed her with “gender identity disorder,” she was allowed to receive gender reassignment surgery. Although the surgery was highly risky for her because of her disabilities, she decided to undergo it so she could be baptized as a woman:

The church should be the last shelter where no one has rejected me. I believe that it is a sin against God to exclude those who are different. I also hope that the church is open to anyone who can feel free to come, even with disabilities or identified as LGBT, just like me...I felt liberated after I was baptized as a woman. The grace of God who accepted me as I am, is given to everyone. (Taguchi 2019, 67)

In the community magazine, Hiroko notes the links between disability, gender identity, and the importance of religion in her life. However, she made no mention of her faith when she appeared on public television.

The stories of Hanada and Hiroko depict the real-life experiences and the difficulties of PWDs who identify with a sexual minority through media engagement between community members and the public. In Hanada’s case, readership can be limited to the audience of an outlet, where the success of an individual’s story in magazines depends on whether readers from the community want to engage with it. Hiroko’s case suggests that in mainstream media, national platforms are more likely to show minorities with differences in their public life, such as disabilities, but less likely to show their private life, such as religious beliefs, as Japanese communication normally prefers “regulated” topics with a “lower degree of personal involvement” (Kitao and Kitao 1989, 60).

It is not possible to share all the cases here, but compared with non-commercial media, LGBTQ+PWDs remain invisible in commercial magazines, radio, and television in Japan. Meanwhile, since the widespread adoption of the internet, blogs have become a popular way to document lives. Nonetheless, as time marches on, many of these online pages vanish into obscurity. For instance, Hanada’s blog which became inaccessible after his death. Such occurrences serve as archives playing an important role in preserving digital history.

(2) Comics (Manga) and Movies

In this section, we will present one manga and one film. Manga, the common name for Japanese comics, is an influential illustrated medium of popular culture that originated in Japan, and is marketed globally (Okuyama 2020, xii). Okuyama’s research (2020) points out that modern-day narratives rarely represent the viewpoints of PWDs, arguing that manga could be an agent

of social change by increasing disability awareness and promoting diversity and inclusiveness. Based on Okuyama's manga research, we would like to highlight the effects of manga featuring LGBTQ+PWDs.

Hidamari ga Kikoeru (2017) was originally a Boys' Love (BL) manga published in 2013 and drawn by Fumino Yuki which was then turned into a film by Kamijo Daisuke in 2017. This manga features the romantic relationship of Kohei, an introverted boy with sensorineural hearing loss, and Taichi, a rambunctious and loud boy, and was highly praised for its authentic portrayal of the challenges associated with hearing loss, drawing from in-depth interviews conducted by the original author, and delving into societal issues that are not typically addressed in other BL manga (Onishi 2016; Igarashi 2021). This series breaks away from the impression of traditional BL characters and focuses on discrimination and exclusion issues more than on boys' romantic relationships. It also shows the unavoidable difficulties of people with hearing loss living in a society designed for individuals who have normal hearing. For example, since Kohei became hard-of-hearing, some of his high school classmates do not want to talk to him, while others see him as disabled and want to help him with everything. When Kohei goes to college, students from a sign language club always communicate with Kohei through sign language. However, Kohei lip-reads and does not sign. Kohei invites Taichi to help him with notetaking for his class. Due to growing up with his elderly grandfather, Taichi always speaks loudly. Since Japanese society considers loud speaking embarrassing, Taichi is viewed as weird and loses his part-time job. However, Kohei can hear Taichi's voice more clearly than others, and Taichi always patiently repeats when necessary. Taichi says to Kohei, "If you can't hear what I am saying, just say it out loud just ask a few more times. Why do you keep on avoiding it? The inability to hear is not even your fault!" This manga and accompanying film reveal that under the pressure of the "silent" culture of Japanese society, those who disturb the quiet are denied and excluded from their surroundings. In such situations, people who are different from the majority are subjected to peer pressure, leading to self-denial. This manga illustrates the process of building a culture of tolerance among people.

Since 2006, Queer Film Festivals are held every year for the LGBTQ+ community in various locations. In 2018, deaf and lesbian filmmaker Mika Imai garnered attention at the Kansai Queer Film Festival at the debut of her movie on lesbians who are deaf. *Nijjiro no Asa ga Kurumade* (2018)⁴ tells the story of Hana (played by Eri Nagai) and Ayumi (played by Haruka Kobayashi), two young deaf women who meet in a sign language group and form a romantic relationship as they navigate their places in society. The film is entirely in Japanese sign language and shows disparities that exist between the city and countryside life for deaf LGBTQ+ people. As director and scriptwriter, Imai has expressed that this film is based on her and her friend's experiences and offers some semblance of the realities they faced through the film to convey the same messages about treatment for the community as a whole (Imai 2019). Hana is worried about being forced out of the closet because the gossip of her private life could spread rapidly in the small deaf community in the countryside. Although there are no explicit sexual scenes, *Until Rainbow Dawn* does feature suggestive scenes, such as Hana and Ayumi in a bathtub together, though the water and bubbles cover their naked bodies, and another scene where they are depicted partially clothed, lying together in bed. Hana and Ayumi also share a kiss and hold hands. At the discovery that her daughter is a lesbian and in a relationship with Ayumi, Hana's mother signs, "Disgusting, I won't accept this." Despite Hana's father trying to make amends, they cannot understand Hana's sexuality and are afraid of what others will say about her, leading them to throw Hana out of the house. Ayumi takes her to Tokyo to meet other deaf members of the Queer community. It appears that only large cities such as Tokyo or

4 Imai, M. (Director): *Nijjiro no Asa ga Kurumade (Until Rainbow Dawn)*. [Film]. JSLTime, Japan (2018)

Osaka have queer deaf communities. There, they join a support group of individuals who are either lesbian, gay or transgendered, and deaf. They share their own stories, which are shown through flashback scenes. These stories help Hana and Ayumi gain hope that they could eventually live together and be accepted.

The Japanese government's Agency for Cultural Affairs increasingly encourages art projects and exhibitions related to PWDs, but there are few works that express and discuss LGBTQ+/Disability members. The background of the two art mediums described here connects deaf culture with people who are hard of hearing and reveals an attempt to explore diversity within the deaf community. Furthermore, it appears that art media such as films are more likely to contain suggestive material and focus on the relationships that LGBTQ+/Disability members form or break with others, as well as their status within their community. These relationships can be with other members of the Japanese LGBTQ+/Disability community or not and may help or hinder the LGBTQ+/Disability member's ability to have their differences accepted. We look forward to seeing more Japanese films (and even documentaries) that tell the stories of the LGBTQ+/Disability members in the future because these communities are extremely diverse. A film about deaf lesbians may provide a very different story than a movie about gay men who have intellectual disabilities.

(3) Social Media — The Building Block of the Community

We will address how the community is built through social media, which refers to digital platforms and communities such as Facebook, autobiographical blogs, or community chat rooms that permit LGBTQ+/Disability members to express themselves freely without formal publication processes.

We have observed that in recent years, the use of platforms such as YouTube by the LGBTQ+/Disability community is catching on, as it provides a stronger representation of the community. YouTube is an important tool for sharing individual voices in an accessible manner. On YouTube, a transgender person with CP named "Uekichi" created the channel "Sekumai Shōgaisya Uekichi" (Uekichi, A Sexual Minority Person with Disabilities) to share experiences at their different life stages as asexual. On YouTube Live, Uekichi's audience can also comment and communicate with them in real-time. Although Uekichi's YouTube channel receives little attention, it shows the possibility for individuals to build a space for sharing their authentic voices, expanding networks, and promoting understanding of LGBTQ+PWDs. Uekichi's channel reminds us that we should be careful when classifying members of the LGBTQ+/Disability community as only sexual since there are still individuals of this community who identify as asexual.

Social media can also be used to build a community. In 2011, Yutaka Masumi created the Japanese online group Nijinokokoro as a place for sexual minorities with developmental disabilities, drug addicts, and people who are HIV positive to communicate. The associated website features blogs on related news or partnerships that involve people with disabilities and other minorities. Masumi described that when he tried to join the self-help group about mental health issues after he was depressed due to his partner's death, he noticed that it was difficult to find a welcoming community to share the problems he encountered as a homosexual. Masumi then started sharing information by using social networking services such as Facebook and Twitter and received requests from some readers to set up a "talking place" where they could meet face-to-face. It was in response to these requests that Masumi started a real chat room for sexual minorities and mental health issues, calling it "Nijinokokoro Café" in Tokyo. The format of group activities has become more diversified as members can now use the group's chat room to communicate and exchange ideas online, and receive group information via an email newsletter, Facebook and X (formerly Twitter).

They can also get personal service through LINE, and Instagram. Based on the trust relationship that is built through communication on Social Networking Services (SNS) face-to-face meetings are held. The Nijinokokoro Café takes the intimacy of connection between community members a step further, as individuals can meet with one another directly and at their own discretion. The Japanese term “*ibasyo zukuri*,” meaning “the way to build whereabouts,” describes this as like “networking” in English. Nijinokokoro allows marginalized individuals to create networks and spaces to support others and themselves through its SNS use online, which carries over into the offline world.

Japanese social media caters to multiple minority groups, including the LGBTQ+/Disability community, and offers self-help and networking with other members of minority groups. Nijinokokoro shows that empathetic support, building self-confidence, and learning about the LGBTQ+/Disability community through resources and talking to others play a crucial part in social media. The case of the “Uekichi” channel shows that YouTube uniquely blends the creative freedoms of artistic media with the expressive freedoms of social media, where users may choose how much or how long they discuss their experiences so long as it is within implicit community guidelines or with appropriate viewership restrictions such as age limits. Today in Japan, most members of the LGBTQ+/Disability community are using X to share their real life and get information from the community, typically displaying their ID name adorned with a rainbow flag and a disabled person's mark to signify their identity.

3. Discussion

These stories represent how the experiences of LGBTQ+/Disability members are portrayed through different media types and how this informs members of their community and others outside the community about their experiences. The three media types intersect in manners of depiction which align with Casey Allyn's (2021) description of the “window” and “mirror” effect in media. This description supports the congruency between authentic representation in the media and a person's likelihood of affiliating proudly with the LGBTQ+/Disability community. Allyn (2021) explains: “A piece of media that is a “window” shows viewers points of view they may be unfamiliar with... A “mirror” shows viewers characters or perspectives that they themselves identify with...” (Allyn 2021, 29). Moreover, the stories we selected show the varying degrees of authenticity in representation, which correlate with their accessibility in online searches and their “window (for outsiders to “look in” and learn about the community)” or “mirror (providing further opportunity for community self-reflection)” tendency.

Generally, it appears that “traditional” media, those forms that are not dependent on the Internet such as printing or broadcasting, act as a “window” for LGBTQ+/Disability representation. This is conditional on the range of topics the outlet covers, who publishes the outlet (e.g., the government or an organization affiliated with the LGBTQ+/Disability community), and who can or wants to access the outlet's content. As seen in the Hanada's case, readership can be limited to the audience of an outlet, where the success of an LGBTQ+/Disability story in an LGBTQ+ magazine depends on whether LGBTQ+ readers want to engage with it. In Japan, LGBTQ+/Disability stories are normally told by the members themselves, who are given a national platform, though it is still very rare. However, some minorities may be emphasized more than others in Japanese traditional media due to historical or religious biases that affect Japanese views on these groups. In fact, this includes an attempt to reprimand the Disability community over their disregard for the LGBTQ+ community (McLelland 2011).

Manga comics and movies as a kind of art media could be either a “window” or a “mirror” for the LGBTQ+/Disability community, depending solely on the viewer's subjectivity and the

authenticity of the cast and crew representing the community. The nature of mass media such as TV show outlets often restricts the content or capacity of an LGBTQ+/Disability experience being showcased in Japan. In contrast, the more personal and detailed the stories of LGBTQ+/Disability members are—as often expressed on social media—the harder it is for members of the general public to engage with the art production, unless they are searching specifically for it. It is certainly possible, however, for “new members” of the LGBTQ+/Disability community or members of either individual community to connect with other members through social media. To ensure authenticity in the representation of LGBTQ+/Disability stories, it is imperative to be mindful of the influence of commercialization, as creative choices and industry restrictions such as budget and casting may pose hindrances. The more authentic the portrayal of LGBTQ+/Disability stories is, the further society moves away from the stereotypes about minorities such as the Disability community, as Stibbe (2004) outlines.

Social media serves as both a “mirror” and a “window” for LGBTQ+/Disability members to use when navigating through their own experiences while also directly learning about the experiences of other LGBTQ+/Disability members. Social media is self-published and the least restrictive regarding what LGBTQ+/Disability members choose to share and how they choose to share their experiences. For this reason, social media can offer a highly subjective, sometimes warped perspective since it forfeits the revision and validity of traditional and art media. Nonetheless, social media offers LGBTQ+/Disability members the chance to be their most authentic selves when it is used in favor of self-expression. It caters to multiple minority groups, including the LGBTQ+/Disability community, and offers self-help and networking with other members of their minority groups around the world.

Despite being a liberating platform for marginalized members, social media may also invite problems for community members, including online bullying and the inability to ensure the security of personal privacy, which must be carefully reviewed. The intention for viewership is also not controlled, as privacy settings can only offer limited protection. Users are still susceptible to their posts being shared elsewhere and taken out of context. Irrespective of media type, all the stories presented in this paper show that PWDs are no different from the broader public both in having a range of sexual desires and conveying this through different media outlets.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, we sampled six Japanese cases from our ongoing international data collection. Based on these stories, we conclude that the LGBTQ+/Disability community in Japan is comparatively small and under-represented in the media compared to the Japanese LGBTQ+ community or the Disability community separately, due to their failure to engage with or raise awareness of their presence in society. Existing platforms in different media reveal that their experiences reflect their low status as a double minority, facing challenges both amongst the two individual minority communities and the broader public.

In the context of their shared experiences, LGBTQ+PWDs are more likely to share information about their sexuality and disability on social media, since their freedom of expression is less restricted by publisher censorship or choice. Social media sharing of LGBTQ+/Disability stories is largely self-authored and targets other LGBTQ+/Disability members. As per Allyn’s theory (2021), social media is a validating “mirror” for LGBTQ+/Disability members to allow community members to reflect on their own experiences, while also directly articulating their experiences to the outside through this “window.” However, while social media is often widely shared, it can also be restricted and not shared at all. While members of the LGBTQ+/Disability community might

intend their social media posts to be a “window” into their community, private or deleted posts and accounts with no followers can serve as a “mirror” for themselves. Social media is a technological medium that can serve different purposes depending on who created the information, its quality, and what their dissemination strategy is. It allows all individuals and groups, including LGBTQ+/Disability members to express their stories in a more accessible way with varied publicity and readership. As such, it is a less restrictive and more flexible media platform. The consequence is, of course, that its effectiveness as a “window” or a “mirror” for the LGBTQ+/Disability community can vary greatly. While it can provide outsiders with valuable information about the lived experiences of community members, the information can be anecdotal or not even true. It also exposes itself to feedback from the broader society which can be hateful and hurtful at times. Internally, like a diary, it may enable individuals and community members to write and chronicle such reflections that may then be shared broadly and change their function from a “mirror” to a “window” for the broader community.

It is incumbent upon the academic community to provide opportunities for the voices of LGBTQ+/Disability members to be heard in order to both validate their experiences and develop a greater understanding of this doubly marginalized community by scholars. We anticipate a thorough and insightful analysis of the intersection between disability and sexual diversity in media studies in the future.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP 20J21415 to the first author.

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