

Intimate Intersections: Exploring ‘Racework’ in Interracial Gay Male Relationships in Japan

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Extant research on intimate relationships in Japan has predominantly separately studied ‘interracial marriage/couples’ and ‘same-sex partnership/couples.’ Typically, studies on interracial relationships have focused on heterosexual couples, while research on same-sex relationships has examined local Japanese couples. Consequently, despite the existence of intimate unions that are both interracial and same-sex, the intersection between these two categories has been overlooked. Only in the last decade have a few scholars started to address the relationship between race, ethnicity, and queer sexuality. Given the increasing number of foreign residents (including sexual minorities) and various changes brought about by globalization in Japanese society, local queer studies should broaden its focus and encompass the experiences of interracial sex, dating, and partnership.

This research draws on in-depth interview data collected between 2019 and 2022 from 23 local Japanese and international migrant gay men residing in urban areas of Japan, such as Tokyo and Osaka, who have been involved in interracial relationships lasting at least one year or longer. Most interviewees can be categorized as the middle class who have attended university and have stable incomes. In addition, it must be noted that this research specifically investigates two interracial patterns: Japanese-white and Japanese-Asian relationships. In this study, ‘white’ migrants primarily refer to individuals perceived as ‘Western’ with English-speaking backgrounds, while ‘Asian’ migrants include individuals from Japan’s neighboring countries. These two groups were chosen to be consistent with the trends observed in heterosexual interracial marriages.

In examining interracial relationships among gay men in Japan, the concept of ‘racework’ proposed by American sociologist Amy Steinbugler, referring to the everyday actions and strategies individuals employ to sustain intimate relationships within a society characterized by entrenched racial inequalities, has been modified and used. Her study identifies three main realms where racework operates: (1) public spaces, (2) internal relationship dynamics, and (3) the construction of identities. This presentation focuses on the first realm, ‘visibility management in public spaces.’ Racism in Japan largely stems from the persistent and hierarchical boundary between Japanese and foreigners. Race, ethnicity, and nationality are often conflated to define Japanese people and Japaneseness as opposed to foreigners and foreignness. In other words, interracial relationships, whether with white or Asian migrants, share many similar experiences. However, the experiences of middle class white and Asian migrant gay men in Japan differ significantly, resulting in distinct interracial experiences for each group.

The interview data suggest that interracial gay male couples commonly experience hyper-invisibility in public spaces where the norms of heterosexuality and monoethnicity prevail. However, they do not necessarily perceive their invisible status negatively but actively reinterpret it as convenient due to their awareness of the potential stereotypes and prejudices that can accompany queer visibility. They enjoy a higher degree of freedom in controlling the visibility of their relationship, depending on the specific circumstances. Moreover, despite the potential risk for double marginalization, their interracial status often assists in mitigating the stigma associated with their same-sex status. Overall, this research argues that through racework adopted by gay male couples, the Japanese-foreign boundary is potentially reinforced rather than challenged.

Key words: Racework, Gay male couples, Japan