

# THE GAY DISTRICT AS A PLACE OF RESIDENCE FOR GAY MEN AND LESBIANS IN JAPAN: THE CASE OF SHINJUKU NI-CHOME

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*Abstract* Unlike gay districts in the West and Australia, which are home to the gay and lesbian community, Shinjuku Ni-chome in Tokyo, the center of gay and lesbian businesses in Japan, is not a place where most gay men and lesbians choose to live. This paper examines the perceptions of gay men and lesbians about Shinjuku Ni-chome to explain why they do not prefer to live in Shinjuku Ni-chome. Fieldwork included snowball sampling semi-structured interviews with gay men and lesbians and participation in the activity of “*Ni-chome umisakura*,” which is responsible for garbage collection in Shinjuku Ni-chome. It revealed the following reasons for gay men and lesbians not choosing to reside in Shinjuku Ni-chome: First, gay men and lesbians consider the living environment of Shinjuku Ni-chome poor, noisy, and littered with trash. Second, the cost of housing in Shinjuku Ni-chome is high. Third, living in Shinjuku Ni-chome would mean that they have to come out and expose their sexual orientation. Fourth, since the number of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) support organizations in Shinjuku Ni-chome is few, and Shinjuku Ward does not have a “partnership vow program,” gay men and lesbians may not receive some supports from local government. Thus, Shinjuku Ni-chome is not a preferred place of residence for gay men and lesbians in Japan but a place they choose for entertainment. The gay district in Japan is different from the ones in the West as it is used only as a temporary refuge, a place for amusement and leisure, by gay men and lesbians.

**Keywords:** gay district, living environment, housing cost, sexuality

## 1. Introduction

Urban areas provide anonymity and safe places for people with different social attributes or socially oppressed groups. Such groups form enclaves within cities that offer them refuge and enable them to avoid social oppression. In the West, homosexuals (especially gay men) tend to concentrate in specific districts (Levine 1979; Castells 1983), and Castells (1983) notes that, in San Francisco, gay men live together forming their own cultural and political bases. Levine (1979) and Castells (1983) refer only to American cities, but such districts are also seen in cities in Europe and Australia (Collins 2004; Sibalis 2004; Ruting 2008).

In areas where the sexual minority is prominent, gay businesses play an important role in

constructing social networks for the minority community. Such an area is called a gay village or a gay district, which is defined as “a place characterized by a visible presence of non-heterosexualities” (Ruting 2008: 268). It declines through visibility, expansion, and the emergence of alternative suburban neighborhoods (Collins and Drinkwater 2017). Another factor contributing to the decline of gay districts is the price that the gay population and gay businesses have to pay due to gentrification and the influx of heterosexual residents into their neighborhoods (Ruting 2008). At the same time, however, middle-class homosexual couples without children are also major gentrifiers, and gay men as gentrifiers form the territorial and economic basis of the inner city through gentrification (Lauria and Knopp 1985).

While there is a decline in the number of gay districts owing to gentrification and dispersal to the suburbs in the West and in Australia, studies have shown that gay districts in Asia have different characteristics. Yue and Leung (2017) suggest that the gay cities of Hong Kong and Singapore follow a different trajectory from that of the districts in the West. These gay cities do not present a single-line evolutionary model of gay districts as proposed by Ruting (2008) but instead exhibit “disjunctive logics” (Yue and Leung 2017: 761). Similarly, Susaki (2019) points out that Shinjuku Ni-chome, Japan’s largest gay district in Tokyo, is partially different from Ruting (2008)’s model. These studies in Asia demonstrate the need to examine aspects of gay districts in the context of Asian cities. In Shinjuku Ni-chome district, gay and lesbian businesses are concentrated but it is not a preferred place of residence of the gay population. Therefore, Shinjuku Ni-chome is a place with a “night-only presence” (Sunagawa 2015: 91) of gays. The facts that gay men and lesbians do not live in Asian gay districts would highlight the differences between the Asian, and the Western and Australian urban contexts. This paper aims to examine the perceptions of gay men and lesbians about Shinjuku Ni-chome as a place of residence and explain why they do not prefer living in Shinjuku Ni-chome.

## 2. Research Methods and the Study Area

Fieldwork included snowball sampling semi-structured interviews with six gay men and four lesbians from May 2017 to February 2019 (see Table 1). I asked them about how they view Shinjuku Ni-chome as a place of residence. All informants’ names are pseudonyms to protect their privacy. Among the interviewees, Takashi and Manatsu run a gay bar and a lesbian bar, respectively, in Shinjuku Ni-chome; Manatsu used to live in Shinjuku Ni-chome formerly. All the other interviewees have visited Shinjuku Ni-chome as customers of gay bars or lesbian bars, but have never lived there, except for Manatsu. As part of fieldwork to understand the living environment in the district, I participated in the activity of “*Ni-chome umisakura*,” which is responsible for garbage collection in Shinjuku Ni-chome.

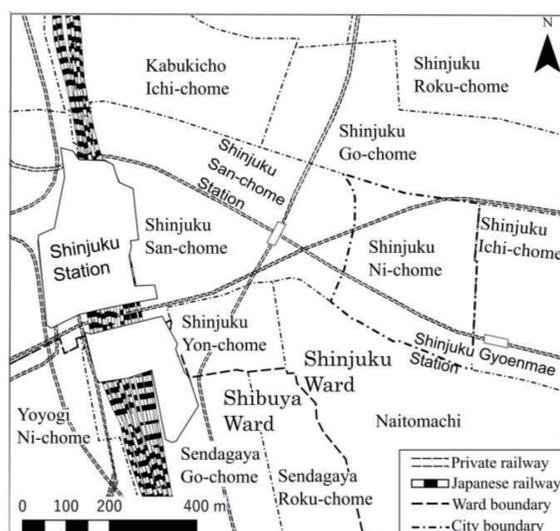
For data on housing cost, I referred to the web page of a real estate information service, LIFULL HOME’S (<https://www.homes.co.jp/chintai/tokyo/city/price/>, accessed on July 17, 2020) and analyzed rents in Tokyo for single’s housing in Shinjuku Ni-chome and municipalities. The web page of “*Nijipi*” (<https://Nijipi.lgbt/lgbtorganization/>, accessed on August 5, 2020) lists a number of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) support organizations, ranging from LGBTQ student circles to support organizations of LGBTQ. However, many LGBTQ-related organizations are small and often inactive or have become disbanded. Therefore, in this

article, only those organizations listed in “*Nijipi*” and are still active in 2020 as LGBTQ-related organizations are considered.

Shinjuku Ni-chome is about 750 m east of Shinjuku Station, and Shinjuku San-chome and Kabukicho, the largest downtown areas in Japan, are located around Shinjuku Station (see Fig. 1). Shinjuku Ni-chome was a red-light district in the aftermath of WWII, when the sex industry flourished, but the Anti-Prostitution Law enacted in 1958 led to the closure of the sex industry leading to its decline. In the 1960s, a number of gay bars that had been located in Shinjuku San-chome moved to Shinjuku Ni-chome and led to the creation of the gay district. During the “gay boom” in Japan since the 1990s, Shinjuku Ni-chome became a gay district commercialized to attract users, especially heterosexual women, who frequented these places and enjoyed the company of gay men. According to the basic resident register of Shinjuku Ward, as of July 2020, the population of Shinjuku Ni-chome is 1,223.

**Table 1** The profile of informants

Informant (fictitious name)	Age	Sexual orientation	Employment situation
Takashi	50s	Gay	Manager of gay bar
Yuji	40s	Gay	Office worker
Hikaru	20s	Lesbian	Student
Shinya	30s	Gay	Office worker
Masatoshi	40s	Gay	Office worker
Syutoku	40s	Gay	Office worker
Aya	30s	Lesbian	Office worker
Miyuki	20s	Lesbian	Office worker
Hajime	20s	Gay	Office worker
Manatsu	30s	Lesbian	Manager of lesbian bar



**Fig. 1** Study area.

### 3. Living Environment and Housing Cost

This section examines the characteristics of Shinjuku Ni-chome as a residential area, focusing on the living environment and housing cost. Gay districts in the West are primarily characterized by a concentration of gay population, and gay men prefer to live in neighborhoods with high amenities (Black *et al.* 2002). However, Shinjuku Ni-chome is characterized by the establishment of many gay and lesbian businesses. This difference between Shinjuku Ni-chome and the gay districts of the Western world may be due to the living environment of the districts. In addition, housing cost is an economic factor to consider in choosing one's residence.

#### Noise and garbage problems

Shinjuku Ni-chome's restaurants, including gay and lesbian businesses, are often located in the same building. The noise generated from the activities in these places affects the living environment. The interviewees who have visited gay bars or lesbian bars in Shinjuku Ni-chome vociferously deny its suitability as a place of residence:

No. Not at all. It's not a place to live in ... it's a place to go for drinks ... I can't live in a place full of bars serving alcohol. It's noisy. (Shinya, gay, 30s. Translated by the author)

If you are asking me whether I want to live there, no, I don't, and if you are asking me why, I'd say it's too loud ... I wouldn't mind living there if it was a quiet place. (Aya, lesbian, 30s. Translated by the author)

Shinya visits gay bars about four times a month, and Aya visits lesbian bars about once or twice a month. Gay bars and lesbian bars mostly serve alcoholic beverages, and some bars have karaoke in them. Loud conversations and music go on throughout the night, sometimes even into the early hours of the morning. Shinya and Aya do not consider Shinjuku Ni-chome as a place of residence, based on their experience of visiting the gay bars or lesbian bars there.

However, the noise is not limited to gay bars and lesbian bars. In Shinjuku Ni-chome, some do not go into gay bars or lesbian bars, but drink openly in the streets and create a lot of noise. Manatsu, who runs a lesbian bar in Shinjuku Ni-chome and used to live there, talks about the ruckus on the street as follows:

It's like when people from abroad come in, they feel freer to drink outside ... so, I remember foreigners making a lot of noise and Japanese non-gay people making fun of them. (Manatsu, lesbian, 30s. Translated by the author)

In 2015, the renovated Shinjuku Park was closed at night after residents complained about the noise. Loud noise was not only from the gay and lesbian bars but also from the streets, which made Shinjuku Ni-chome unlivable. The heterosexual residents living near Shinjuku Park find that the night-time closure of the park has reduced the noise levels, but it has not fundamentally resolved the problem because of the high concentration of restaurants in the area.

Drinking on the streets also leads to the streets becoming littered. Managers of restaurants, including gay bars and lesbian bars, are also responsible for the garbage problem in Shinjuku Ni-

chome. Many buildings do not have a garbage collection mechanism, and the trash is simply dumped on the streets. Figure 2 shows that a large amount of garbage is seen along the main street in Shinjuku Ni-chome, especially on weekends. People even vomit on the street side and on the building walls. Manatsu who lived in Shinjuku Ni-chome earlier found it a “dirty and stinky” place, saying, “I would never recommend living there.”

Measures to resolve the garbage issue have been undertaken since 2017, and “*Ni-chome umisakura*” is now responsible for garbage collection in Shinjuku Ni-chome. Anyone can participate in this activity besides residents or managers of restaurants. When I participated in the activity on August 19, 2020, there were about 40 participants. Participants collected litter for half an hour around an area with a high concentration of restaurants in Fig. 3. However, “*Ni-chome umisakura*” happens only once a month, whereas littering occurs daily in Shinjuku Ni-chome.

The noise and the garbage problems in Shinjuku Ni-chome make it unsuitable as a place of residence. The high concentration of restaurants in Shinjuku Ni-chome is the cause of both problems. Although measures have been taken to address each of these problems, fundamental solutions have not been found, and the living environment has not improved significantly.



**Fig. 2** Garbage on a main street in Shinjuku Ni-chome. (Photo by the author, April 2019)



**Fig. 3** Collected litter. (Photo by the author, August 2020)

## Housing cost

West side of Shinjuku Station was designated as a sub-center of the Tokyo city in 1958, and the area around Shinjuku Station, the largest terminal station in Japan, has undergone redevelopment since then. A regional characteristic of Tokyo is that housing costs decrease concentrically mainly in the hard core area (Chiyoda Ward, Chuo Ward, and Minato Ward) of central Tokyo (See Fig. 4). Housing cost for singles in Shinjuku Ward (104.1 thousand JPY) is the seventh highest in Tokyo. Wards in which cost is higher are Minato Ward (133.5 thousand JPY), Chiyoda Ward (123.2 thousand JPY), Shibuya Ward (121.4 thousand JPY), Chuo Ward (118.4 thousand JPY), Meguro Ward (108.8 thousand JPY), and Taito Ward (104.8 thousand JPY).

The commercial and business activities of Shinjuku Ward are centered around Shinjuku Station, which includes the downtown areas of Kabukicho and Shinjuku San-chome (Fig. 1). Since Shinjuku Ni-chome is adjacent to these areas, housing cost here is higher than the average in Shinjuku Ward. According to the web page of LIFULL HOME'S, the average housing cost for single-person households around Shinjuku-gyoenmae Station is 118.1 thousand JPY, and that around Shinjuku San-chome Station is 112.8 thousand JPY. These are about 10 thousand JPY higher than the average in Shinjuku Ward. The average in the area around Shinjuku-gyoenmae Station is the same as the average in Chuo Ward.

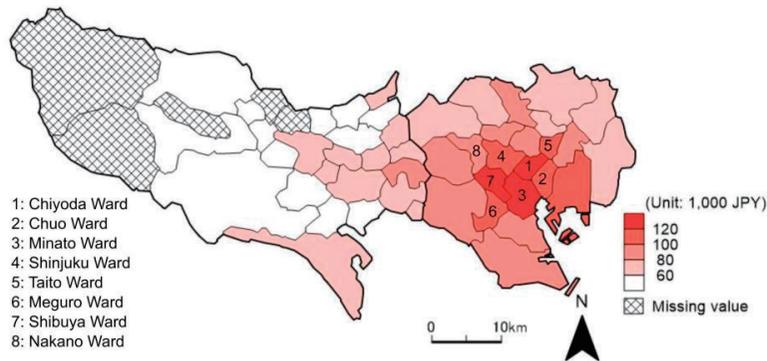
The high housing cost for singles in Shinjuku Ni-chome is therefore another reason for the place being shunned as a residential area by gay men, who are considered to have higher incomes than lesbians. Syutoku, who lives in Saitama Prefecture with his partner, had earlier considered Shinjuku Ni-chome as a place to live before the partnership was established. However, the high cost of housing dissuaded him from living there and he moved to the suburbs of the Shinjuku Ward. Yuji, who lives in Kanagawa Prefecture with his partner, earlier in his twenties lived in the same suburbs where Syutoku currently resides. The reason for this is again related to the high housing cost in Shinjuku Ni-chome. Yuji is from a suburb of Tokyo and had not come out to his parents. Therefore, he felt that if he lived in his parents' home in the suburbs, he would not be able to live as a gay man:

Twenty years ago, or maybe twenty-five years ago, because we didn't have the internet as we do now, if you wanted to hang out with gay friends or be active as a gay man, the only place to do it was around Shinjuku. I went to high school on the Seibu line, but I also had a part-time job in urban areas such as Harajuku. I used to hang out in Shinjuku. If I continued to live in my parents' house and work in an area close to it, I wouldn't have been able to live as a gay man. So, I thought about moving toward Shinjuku Ni-chome. (Yuji, gay, 40s. Translated by the author)

When Yuji was in his twenties, living in Shinjuku Ni-chome appealed to him. His partner, who was present at the interview, asked him "If Shinjuku Ni-chome were as affordable as Nakano, you would live there, wouldn't you?" He answered, "I would not now, but at that time, I would have considered it." He used to visit gay bars in Shinjuku Ni-chome five days a week in his twenties, and therefore wanted to live there. He could express his sexuality only in Shinjuku Ni-chome because he was (and still is) in the closet. Although Shinjuku Ni-chome was the only place for him to express his sexuality openly, his answer to his partner meant that he did not live in

Shinjuku Ni-chome because of the high housing costs. Thus, cost of housing is a barrier to living in Shinjuku Ni-chome.

In this section, the characteristics of Shinjuku Ni-chome as a residential area, the living environment, and housing cost have been examined to understand why gay men and lesbians consider it an unsuitable place to live. Other interviewees also claimed that they moved to other areas for economic reasons.



**Fig. 4** Average rent for one-person households in Tokyo in July 2020.  
 (<https://www.homes.co.jp/chintai/tokyo/city/price/>; July 7th, 2020)

#### 4. Factors Related to Sexualities

This section examines the characteristics of Shinjuku Ni-chome as a residential area in view of sexual orientations. In Japan, gay men and lesbians are difficult to come out and declare their sexuality in society. In such a social context, what does Shinjuku Ni-chome represent to them? Japan has several organizations supporting the LGBTQ community by offering them safe community spaces and creating a network of LGBTQ, as is done in the gay districts of the West. I now focus on the status of LGBTQ-related organizations in Shinjuku Ni-chome.

##### The dangers of coming out

In Japan, one's residence or address is an important piece of private information required in a variety of situations, from conversations with friends to official documents. One's place of living is related to one's personal identity; thus, segregation occurs not only by sexuality but also by ethnicity and race. Although the LGBTQ began to be recognized increasingly in the 2010s in Japan, social prejudice and discrimination against LGBTQ persists. Under such circumstances, what does it mean to live in Shinjuku Ni-chome, which is recognized by the public as a place with a high concentration of gay bars?

Takashi has been running a gay bar in Shinjuku Ni-chome for many years. Based on conversations with his customers, he explains why gay men and lesbians do not live in Shinjuku Ni-chome:

You don't have to bother to live in Ni-chome. If the address is 3-14 Shinjuku Ni-chome,

everyone would say, “What? Ni-chome?” This district is a place to play. So, in a way, you need to switch. When you get off work and step into the Ni-chome, you flip a switch and enjoy being gay. And on the way back from here, you pretend to be heterosexual. I think that’s still necessary. (Takashi, gay, 50s. Translated by the author)

Takashi considers that living in Shinjuku Ni-chome would reveal one’s sexuality. Therefore, Shinjuku Ni-chome is not a place to live but “a place to play” for gay men and lesbians; also they need to “pretend to be heterosexual” when they return home from Shinjuku Ni-chome. Living in a gay district would mean coming out, especially for those who hide their sexuality, whereas they can temporarily express their sexuality by visiting Shinjuku Ni-chome.

Hajime, who hides his sexuality in his daily life considers Shinjuku Ni-chome as a place where he can express it.

I guess it is rare to have a space with many allies who have the same sexuality, a sense of belonging, or something like that. In this sense, Shinjuku Ni-chome for me is a space where I can realize who I am and what kind of person I am. This is not possible in Roppongi, Ebisu, or any other Shinjuku area. (Hajime, gay, 20s. Translated by the author)

Roppongi is a business area located in Minato Ward and has many nightlife facilities. And Ebisu is popular area for its sophisticated atmosphere with fashionable restaurants and cafes. For Hajime, Shinjuku Ni-chome plays an important role in the construction of his own gay identity; he says he is able to realize “who I am” in Shinjuku Ni-chome and not in Roppongi, Ebisu, or other Shinjuku areas. However, Hajime has his own reasons for not living in Shinjuku Ni-chome. He says:

I hate the fact that people ask, “You live in Ni-chome, do you?” I don’t like it. 100% right. When I say, “I live in Shinjuku Ni-chome,” the response is, “Oh, so you are gay?” That’s not really my kind of thing. (Hajime, gay, 20s. Translated by the author)

As mentioned by Takashi, Hajime also recognizes that living in Shinjuku Ni-chome would mean revealing his sexuality as Shinjuku Ni-chome is closely tied to his gay identity. However, despite the discrimination and prejudice against LGBTQ in Japan, gay men and lesbians are at risk of coming out even in Shinjuku Ni-chome. Therefore, Shinjuku Ni-chome is a place where gay men and lesbians do not live, but stay temporarily to express their sexuality.

### **Inadequate support for LGBTQ**

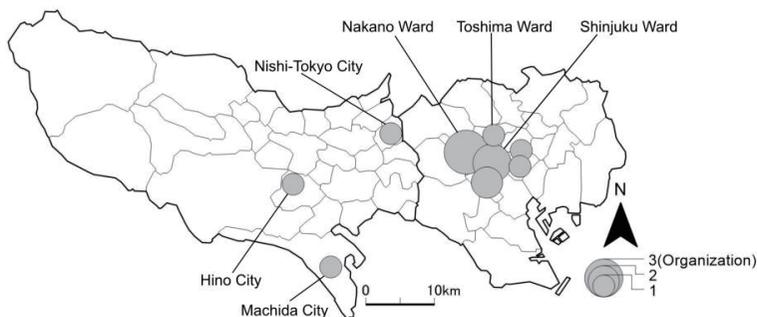
Japan has various LGBTQ-related organizations. According to the web page of “*Nijipi*”, 55 organizations were active as of 2016. There are regional differences in their distribution, with 25 organizations located in Tokyo alone in 2016. 19 of 25 organizations in Tokyo are still active in August 2020, and I mapped 15 of them whose office or main location of activities were known. Figure 5 show that three are in the Shinjuku Ward and the support organizations are distributed in Nakano Ward, Shibuya Ward, Toshima Ward, Chiyoda Ward, and Bunkyo Ward around Shinjuku Ward. Nakano Ward has four organizations, the largest number in Tokyo. The organizations in suburban areas are not geographically dense, but there is one organization in

each city.

The main activities of each of the three organizations in the Shinjuku Ward include dissemination of information on HIV/AIDS to businesses, government, and educational institutions and to offer support for HIV-infected people. “*Akta*,” which is the only organization in Shinjuku Ni-chome, has six programs: information collection on HIV/AIDS and dissemination, outreach, HIV testing dissemination programs, preventive behavior promotion programs, transmission reality of HIV, and a program for facilitating tutoring. *Akta*’s office is an open space for anyone to serve as a member of the LGBTQ network facility. In this space, there are books related to sexuality, and users can read them freely.

However, *Akta* is the only support organization in Shinjuku Ni-chome and it is limited in its ability to meet the needs of gay men and lesbians. In Japan, same-sex marriage is not allowed; while heterosexual couples can be legally married, same-sex couples remain in a “voluntary” relationship. Various rights, including the right to property, are not guaranteed. Especially for gay men and lesbians with partners, life in their old age is a pressing issue. Since 2015, an increasing number of local governments in Japan have introduced a “partnership vow program,” which is to become available to 30% of the population by March 2021. It is a system that can partially resolve the problems of same-sex couples, although it is not legally binding. In Tokyo, eight municipalities have introduced it, and a total of 277 couples are using it. However, the Shinjuku Ward has not introduced this program so far. In February 2015, Sumiyoshi Kenichi, Mayor of the Shinjuku Ward, said “to guarantee same-sex partnerships as equal to marriage, the government must reach a conclusion based on sufficient discussions on the nature of the marriage system.” He has not changed his position in 2020.

In this section, I examined the characteristics of Shinjuku Ni-chome as a residential area related to sexuality and society, focusing on the dangers of coming out and the LGBTQ-related organizations on the ground. For gay men and lesbians, living in Shinjuku Ni-chome would mean coming out of the closet. This would make it difficult for those who hide their sexuality to live in Shinjuku Ni-chome. Further, there is only one LGBTQ-related organization in Shinjuku Ni-chome, which is unable to meet the diverse needs of gay men and lesbians. The partnership vow program is one way to address the problems in the lives of same-sex couples. It offers a form of support that LGBTQ-related organizations cannot. However, Shinjuku Ward has not introduced it, and gay men and lesbians cannot avail this support, even if they live in Shinjuku Ni-chome.



**Fig. 5** Distribution of LGBTQ-related organizations in August 2020. (<https://Nijipi.lgbt/lgbtorganization>; August 5th, 2020)

## 5. Conclusion

This paper aimed to examine gay men and lesbians' perceptions about Shinjuku Ni-chome as a place of residence and to explain why they do not prefer to live in Shinjuku Ni-chome. According to them, the poor living environment, the high cost of housing, the risk of coming out and the lack of LGBTQ-related organizations to offer them support were the main reasons for them to avoid living in Shinjuku Ni-chome.

As a residential area, Shinjuku Ni-chome is not an attractive proposition for gay men and lesbians. It is a place for them to visit for entertainment and leisure and, thus, is different from gay districts in the West and Australia. This shows that Shinjuku Ni-chome is a temporary refuge for gay men and lesbians to express their sexuality.

Research focusing on neighborhoods where gay men or lesbians live will soon become increasingly important in Japan, where LGBTQ rights are now gaining recognition. However, the many possible forms of household are not limited to living with a partner. In particular, the life problems of gay men and lesbians living alone, without a partner, are not related to the rights associated with same-sex marriages. Geographical studies on the lives of gay men and lesbians can reveal the diverse aspects of this problem, which can be a subject for future work.

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(\*: in Japanese, \*\*: in Japanese with English abstract)