

THE RISKS AND COUNTERMEASURES IN CRUISING SPOTS OF PUBLIC SPACES IN JAPAN FROM THE 1970S TO THE EARLY 2000S

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Abstract Cruising by gay men in urban areas is recognized as a form of resistance to heteronormativity. However, cruising in public spaces involves risky practices. The purpose of this study was to identify the evolution of risks and related countermeasures associated with cruising in public spaces in Japan. I created a database of cruising spots based on Japan’s gay magazine, *Barazoku* and coded the risks. “Victimization by professionals,” “police investigation,” and “gay bashing” were identified and shared as direct and immediate risks in cruising spots. These risks were categorized as risks from professional sex workers who are assumed to be gay or men who have sex with men, those who have public authority, and heterosexuals who are homophobic. The risks increased or decreased over time, with more risks from professionals and police investigations reported in the early years and more reports of gay bashing since the 1990s. *Barazoku* also shared measures to mitigate these risks. However, some of these measures were not feasible and gay bashing was always considered difficult to address. This study is significant because it clarifies not only the risks associated with cruising spots, where public space is at the same time a private space, but also the existence and usefulness of countermeasures against such risks.

Keywords: cruising spots, public spaces, sexualities, gay men, Japan

1. Introduction

A city is a heteronormative space where anyone outside that norm is perceived as “out of place” (Hubbard 2013). Gay men and lesbians strategically engage in public displays of affection in heteronormative spaces (Stasińska 2022). However, the visibility of sexual minorities in cities is recognized as resistance to heteronormativity (Valentine 1996; Mulligan 2008). Cities have also provided spaces for sexual minorities, especially gay men. Gay men have used heterosexual spaces to establish a gay lifestyle. Cruising by gay men transformed public spaces such as parks, movie theaters, and public restrooms into gay spaces. Cruising means that men engage in sexual acts with unspecified men, and the places where cruising takes place are called cruising spots. Cruising and the temporary occupation of public spaces where cruising took place played an important role in shaping gay cultural practices (Chauncey 1995).

Gay men’s lifestyles and practices, including cruising, have converted urban sociocultural norms (Houlbrook 2006). Cruising spots have subverted the homophobic and heteronormative rhetoric

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about the existence of homosexuality (Bleakley 2022). Since cruising takes place in spaces that are inherently heteronormative, cruising is recognized as resistance to heteronormativity. In this sense, cruising by gay men in public spaces can be seen as a queer practice. However, cruising spots are not entirely queer, and gay men's behavior there is dominated by the hegemony of heteronormativity (Qian 2014). A major topic of discussion regarding cruising spots in geography is whether the practices and spaces there resist heteronormativity.

However, cruising in public spaces is risky. Some gay men are considered a high-risk population for HIV due to condomless sex in cruising spots (Frank 2019). For gay men and MSM (men who have sex with men), cruising spots are spaces that activate their sexual desires, but they are also spaces where they encounter police patrols and violence from young men (Lorway *et al.* 2011). Ishida (2019) summarized the risks associated with the cruising spots in Japan that are covered in this study, but the risks of cruising spots have changed over time and the measures shared among gay men against the risks have not been fully examined. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify the evolution of risks and related countermeasures associated with cruising in public spaces in Japan.

2. Method

To examine the risks and countermeasures of cruising spots in Japan, this study analyzed articles in Japan's gay magazine *Barazoku*. *Barazoku* was first published in 1971 and was a bimonthly publication until July 1974; then the magazine was published monthly until September 2004. Since 2004 it has been published irregularly. *Barazoku* is the longest-running gay commercial magazine in Japan. The author browsed through the issues of *Barazoku* published from 1971 to 2004 at Japan's National Diet Library and created a database by collecting feature articles, readers' contributions, and editors' comments on cruising spots in Japan. Any articles on websites that discussed the contents of *Barazoku* were also included in the analysis because some issues were missing at the library. The parts of each article that mentioned the risks of cruising spots were extracted and coded. HIV/AIDS was treated as supplemental data because it was a different type of risk that poses a direct and immediate risk. From the database, "victimization by professionals," "police investigation," and "gay bashing" were coded.

There were two limitations with regard to the data collected. First, because there were other gay magazines in addition to *Barazoku*, there may be a selection bias given all articles were from *Barazoku*. However, it is unlikely that the content of articles that addressed social issues related to gay men during the years 1971 to 2004 differed greatly from magazine to magazine. In addition, in order to examine the changes of risks in cruising spots, the use of the longest-running gay magazine as a source material served the purposes of the study. Second, the content of the articles concentrated on urban areas and few articles focused on rural areas. Moreover, there are no media that specialize in rural area cruising spots. Therefore, this study was limited to the risks associated with cruising spots in Japan's urban areas.

3. Temporal Changes in Risks in Cruising Spots

Three risks

Three risks were associated with cruising spots from the 1970s to the early 2000s. The first was

the risk of “victimization by professionals” at cruising spots. Professionals are those men who have sex with men at cruising spots to earn a living or pocket money. They first seduce men to get them to perform a sexual act. Then, after the sexual act, they demand money. Some will try extorting money by threatening to out the man to his family or colleagues at the workplace. *Barazoku* had postings from readers who had been threatened by professionals and paid them money, as well as warnings to readers.

A second risk was being caught and questioned by the police. Public movie theaters, parks, and restrooms are cruising spots that are subject to surveillance. Any behavior that offends public order and morals in such public spaces is discouraged. Police and security guards patrol cruising spots to discourage cruising by gay men. Gay men being questioned by the police were asked to provide personal information such as their name, family structure, and place of employment. For men who hide their same-sex sexual activities, there was a risk that the police would inform their family and workplace about their cruising behavior.

The third risk was gay bashing. Gay bashing is the assault or abuse to which gay men and lesbians are subjected by heterosexual men who often are homophobic. Gay bashing frequently involves physical violence against gay men; therefore, it is a more serious risk than the first and second risks. In Japan, a gay man was murdered by heterosexual men in a park on February 10, 2000. The perpetrators confessed during police questioning that they were targeting gay men (Kazama and Kawaguchi 2010).

These risks can be categorized into risks from those who are assumed to be gay or men who have sex with men, those who have public authority or security obligations for a particular space, and heterosexual men who are homophobic. Men risked financial harm from professional sex workers, disclosure of their secretive cruising or same-sex sexual behavior from the police and security guards, and physical violence from heterosexual men who most likely are homophobic.

Temporal changes

These three risks were not perceived as risks that occurred simultaneously or had always been present. In other words, new risks occurred at cruising spots over time. Gay men were aware that new phenomena were a risk to them from their experiences at the cruising spots, from word of mouth, or from reading articles in gay magazines.

Temporal changes in risks in cruising spots are shown in Fig. 1. In the period 1971–1974, an article on the risk of engaging with professional sex workers was featured in the January 1974 issue. According to Udagawa (2018), sociologist Hitoshi Ishida pointed out that in the January 1974 issue of *Barazoku*, there was an article that gay men are at risk of being outed by their sexual partners at cruising spots. No other articles on risks were published; however, it is unlikely that the three risks rarely or never occurred during that time period. The lack of descriptions of risk may be owing to the magazine being in its early stages of publication and published only bimonthly.

In the period 1975–1979, the number of articles on the risk of engaging with a professional increased to 6, and the risk of police investigation increased from 0 to 5. The September 1977 issue featured an article about a movie theater in Ikebukuro in which a gay man “said that he had been lured by a professional into taking money from him” (Dainishobo 1977: 38). In the February 1978 issue, the Editor-in-Chief made the following comments: “We frequently received phone calls from gay men who were frightened by professionals at movie theaters in Ginza and Ikebukuro. (...) Moviegoers should prepare themselves for this” (Dainishobo 1978: 256-257). In the January 1977 issue, a newspaper article about the police cracking down on gay cruising in the park was reprinted. Ishida (2019) noted in the same article that investigating police officer expressed negativity toward

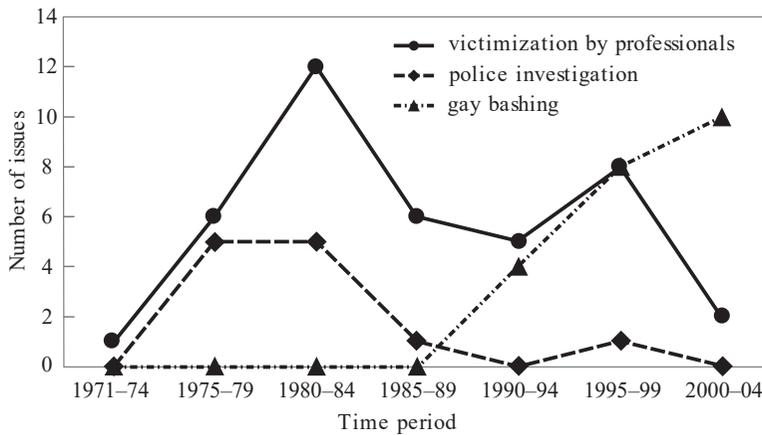


Fig. 1 Changes in the number of articles on risks in cruising spots.
(Created by the author)

gay cruising, suggesting that gay men may be treated in a discriminatory manner.

In the period 1980–1984, articles on the risk of engaging with a professional increased from 6 to 12, of which 2 were feature articles. These articles described how to recognize professionals. One of the articles was titled “There are always professionals in movie theaters and restrooms!!” The title suggests the high number of professionals in cruising spots at the time. The tactics used by professionals had become more sophisticated. A person posted in reader contribution’s section described having to pay off professionals in a theater in Ueno. He reported “they were in on it. It was a set-up. (...) one professional gropes me, then the other finds out and accuses, taking me to an out-of-the-way place, and raking in the money” (Dainishobo 1981a: 109). Because of this rampant victimization, *Barazoku*’s Editor-in-Chief commented, “it seems that the time has come for gay men to think about it. (...) They should think about the fact that movie theaters are places where people go to see movies” (Dainishobo 1980: 139).

During this period, there were another five articles on the risk of police investigation. Police conducted undercover investigations at movie theaters to crack down on cruising. For example, the February 1982 issue of *Barazoku* reported on a police undercover operation at a certain movie theater in Tokyo. According to an article in that issue, a gay man touched the body of another man next to him at a movie theater. The man was a detective who then took the gay man outside and began questioning him. The detective cursed the gay man, saying “we are hiding in the movie theater to catch a dirty faggot like you” and “do you always do this? What company do you work for? Tell me your name” (Dainishobo 1982: 112). In addition, gay men who were supposedly cruising were sometimes assaulted by security guards. According to *Barazoku*’s chief editor’s comments in the October 1981 issue, a gay man was “taken to the security guard’s room and beaten and taunted. He must have been doing something in the restroom, which was seen by the security guard” (Dainishobo 1981b: 280–281).

In the period 1985–1989, the number of articles on the risk of engaging with a professional decreased by half to 6. However, in the February 1985 issue, there was a feature article on professionals again. *Barazoku* editors continued to identify professionals as a risk in cruising spots. Articles on the risk of police investigation decreased from 5 to 1, and articles on gay bashing remained at 0. The HIV/AIDS epidemic may have been a cause of the decrease in articles on these

risks. Articles on HIV/AIDS have been published in *Barazoku* since 1983. The HIV/AIDS epidemic led to concerns regarding the use of cruising spots. For example, an article in the December 1985 issue reported that “considering that anal sex seems to be spreading steadily among the gay community in Japan, and that hotels and saunas are thriving as before without any measures in place, it seems that the possibility of the rapid spread of AIDS in Japan is not completely out of the question” (Dainishobo 1985: 43). Although not an article on public cruising spots, the May 1987 issue of *Barazoku* reported on the reality of a significant decline in the number of gay hotel and sauna patrons because of an increase in the number of gays fearing HIV/AIDS.

In the period 1990–1994, articles on the risks of professionals and police investigations decreased. The *Barazoku*’s Editor-in-Chief recognized victimization by professionals was declining and reported that “these days, I rarely hear such stories. I think it’s because people are waking up, there are fewer of these bad people around, and it’s harder to work because no one cries themselves to sleep” (Dainishobo 1990a: 350). However, articles on the risk of gay bashing had suddenly increased. *Barazoku*’s Editor-in-Chief noted that after publishing an article about a park in Tokyo being a cruising spot, “I received a call from someone, and he said that he was having trouble with people being assaulted who congregate there” (Dainishobo 1990b: 99). Subsequently, readers began contributing information about gay men being assaulted in parks and public restrooms that were cruising spots. Readers reported that “it was a terrible shock. One man was surrounded by a group of people and kicked as hard as he could in the stomach. I had heard rumors. But I never thought I would actually witness it. I don’t often go to cruising spots, but the fact that I witnessed it makes me wonder if this kind of behavior is common” (Dainishobo 1991: 390). The reader added that the culprits were students who could have been from anywhere. Another reader mentioned that “bashing started in May of 1989, and I think it was in the spring of 1990 that bashing began to be mentioned frequently” (Dainishobo 2000a: 93). As the reader noted, gay bashing had increased by the early 1990s.

In the period 1995–1999, articles on the risks of professionals and police investigations increased again. One reason for this was a feature article on the troubles that gay men should be aware of. There were also reports of being victimized by professionals using a new technology called message dialing, which was a telecommunications service that allowed users to record, replay, or add messages from a subscriber or public telephone. Some gay men were extorted by professionals they met through this service. The risk of gay bashing had further increased to eight articles. Message dialing may have been used for gay bashing as well. According to Dainishobo (1999: 212), one reader stated that gay bashing always occurs after messages are recorded on the message dial about gay men gathering in a particular park. In the early days of online tools, technologies changed the manner by which gay men met. The existing risks continued but with the assistance of new technologies.

In the period 2000–2004, articles on the risk of professionals decreased from 8 to 2, and no articles were published on the risk of police investigations. The articles on the risk of professionals were feature articles on troubles that gay men should be aware of. Although police investigations in cruising spots may have occurred, the lack of articles suggests that *Barazoku* was not aware of such occurrences. Articles on gay bashing increased from 8 to 10. Not only did more issues mention gay bashing, but there was a tragic incident symbolic of gay bashing that occurred in Japan in 2000. This incident was called the “Yumenoshima Park murder case,” in which a gay man was murdered by heterosexual young men. This case was covered extensively not only in *Barazoku*, but also in the mass media. The trial of the young man who committed the crime was also reported in detail in *Barazoku*. Subsequently, feature articles on questioning the pros and cons of cruising in parks or the

problems encountered by gay men appeared in *Barazoku*. In one of the feature articles, the following statement was made: “Please be aware that gay bashing, any troubles, and crimes are likely to occur in parks and other outdoor areas. In February 2000, there was a robbery and murder of a gay man in the Shinkiba area. The problem of outdoor danger has not been solved at all. Please be very careful” (Dainishobo 2002: 50).

4. Risk Prevention for Gay Men in Cruising Spots

What preventive measures could gay men have taken in response to the risks at the cruising spots, and what actions did gay magazines of the time recommend to protect the readers? In this section, I analyze articles on risks prevention in *Barazoku* and readers' reactions to them, focusing on the risks of gay bashing and victimization by professional sex workers.

The most contentious issue in *Barazoku* between the 1970s and 1990s was how to avoid victimization by professionals, and the most articles on the risk of professionals were published during 1980–1984. A feature article on the risk of professionals in the June 1983 issue discussed how to detect professionals at cruising spots. The article highlighted nine characteristics of professionals: (1) professionals dress seriously, (2) the meeting place is almost always fixed, (3) they often operate in groups of several people, (4) they would never make a motion on their own, (5) they are very good at playing the innocent and acting as if they have little experience, (6) they approach you by using skillful tactics, (7) they avoid caressing but are aggressive, (8) they try to look much younger than their age, and (9) their eyes are always unsettled. This preventative measure may have been somewhat effective; nonetheless, readers continued to report instances of victimization by a professional.

Barazoku advised readers to consult the police if they were victimized by a professional. The Editor-in-Chief noted, “If you are unfortunate enough to be frightened by a professional, please have the courage to report it to the police. Please report the incident to the police so that your identity will never be revealed, and your family will never find out about it” (Dainishobo 1979: 209). However, gay men were reluctant to consult the police. One reader pointed out that “in order to file a victim report, I must inform the police of my shameful behavior. That is the aim of the professionals” (Dainishobo 1981a: 109). Likewise, another reader stated “Why do the police let people like this hang around? Well, the victims, including myself, have the guilt and weakness of having been in and out of cruising spots, so they probably cry themselves to sleep and don't report it to the police, so maybe the police don't know the reality” (Dainishobo 1994: 195).

For gay men, the police have two sides. Indeed, as the Editor-in-Chief pointed out, the police are in a position to protect victims; however, some police have a negative attitude toward gay men and their cruising. They were even conducting undercover operations against gay men. Therefore, it is not difficult to imagine that gay men who have been victims of professionals are hesitant to consult the police. Although the police are in a position to protect gay men as victims, gay men have also been victimized by the police.

It is difficult to determine whether effective countermeasures against gay bashing were introduced. The September 1999 issue of *Barazoku* introduced OCCUR, which is a non-profit organization that provides consultation and support for gay men and lesbians. OCCUR gave advice on how to respond when an individual is victimized or when a victim asks for help. However, in the July 2000 issue after the Yumenoshima Park murder case, a gay man noted the following: “Some people have suggested that we should show defenses on Internet bulletin boards, but it is almost

impossible to defend against the tactics used in the Yumenoshima Park murder case, or any of the earlier bashing cases. I heard that some people have approached them pretending to be a gay man. If they suddenly hit us with a slap, there's nothing we can do" (Dainishobo 2000b: 202).

There certainly were ways to prevent an outbreak of gay bashing in cruising spots where one meets an unspecified partner. However, *Barazoku* had encouraged visits to cruising spots despite the gay bashing that was occurring. Cruising spots were featured five times from 2000, when the Yumenoshima Park murder case occurred, to 2004, when the monthly publication ended. However, in the December 1990 issue, when gay bashing was first reported in the magazine, the Editor-in-Chief noted that "it would be a contradiction to publish an article about cruising spots and then tell people not to go there, but if possible, it would be better not to go to parks at night" (Dainishobo 1990b: 99). Apparently, *Barazoku* had contradictory views regarding visiting cruising spots.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the chronological changes in risks in cruising spots and the measures taken to address these risks by analyzing articles published in the Japanese gay magazine *Barazoku*. The analysis of the articles showed that "victimization by professionals," "police investigation," and "gay bashing" were identified and shared as direct and immediate risks in cruising spots. These risks can be categorized as risks from those who are assumed to be gay or men who have sex with men, those who have public authority, and heterosexual men who are homophobic. The risks increased or decreased over time, with more professional and police investigations reported in the early years and more reports of gay bashing beginning in the 1990s. *Barazoku* also shared measures against these risks. However, some of these measures were not feasible for some gay men, and gay bashing was considered difficult to address in the first place. *Barazoku* seemed to have contradictory views regarding visiting cruising spots; while publishing about gay bashing in cruising spots they could not very well tell gay men to not go there.

This study is significant in that it clarified not only the risks of cruising spots, where public space is at the same time private space, but also the existence and usefulness of countermeasures against such risks from the 1970s to the early 2000s. However, it did not examine the current risks for sexual minorities. Risks may have changed from physical and direct risks in geographical spaces to non-physical and indirect risks in online spaces, such as slander on social networking services. This issue should be addressed in future studies.

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(*: In Japanese)