



Transactional Intimacy and Structural Vulnerability: Compensated Dating among LGBTQA + Youth in Japan

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Received: 10 September 2025 / Accepted: 5 January 2026
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Abstract

Background Very little is known about the practice of compensated dating among LGBTQA+ youth in Japan. This is a critical gap in research, as compensated dating (*enjo kōsai*) is more commonly reported among young people experiencing economic hardship, social exclusion, or housing instability. LGBTQA+ youth in Japan are disproportionately affected by structural vulnerabilities, yet their experiences remain underexamined in national data. This study examines the prevalence and correlates of compensated dating among LGBTQA+ youth, and whether it is associated with indicators of social and mental health disparities.

Methods We conducted a national online survey of 5,323 LGBTQA+ youth aged 15–25 across Japan. Prevalence and patterns of compensated dating were assessed, and multivariable logistic regression was used to examine demographic and psychosocial correlates.

Results One in twenty participants (5.0%) reported engaging in compensated dating in the past 12 months. It was more common among those who had experienced homelessness, economic hardship, self-harm, and sexuality or gender identity-based marginalisation. Cisgender men were more likely to engage in compensated dating than cisgender women or trans and gender diverse youth, and gay youth more than asexual respondents.

Conclusions While compensated dating is often portrayed through moralistic or heteronormative narratives in East Asia, our findings suggest that it is shaped by intersecting forms of social and economic vulnerability. Associations between compensated dating and key risk factors including homelessness, discrimination, exclusion, and self-harm. These results call for rights-based, harm reduction approaches in public health responses, including LGBTQA+-inclusive mental health services and housing protections, grounded in care rather than criminalisation.

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Introduction

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender diverse, queer, questioning, asexual, and other sexually or gender diverse (LGBTQA+) youth experience significantly elevated risks of health disparities, including suicidal ideation and attempts, homelessness and engagement in health adverse behaviours such as alcohol and drug use, compared to their cisgender heterosexual peers (Fraser et al., 2019; Hill et al., 2025a, b; King et al., 2008; Marshal et al., 2011). While causes are multifaceted, minority stress theory offers an explanatory framework, positing that chronic exposure to stigma, discrimination, and social exclusion elevates stress and adversely impacts mental health and wellbeing (Meyer, 2003).

One area of increasing concern and under-researched practice within this population is compensated dating, defined as the exchange of romantic, sexual, or emotionally intimate interactions for financial compensation, gifts, or material goods (Lee et al., 2016). While compensated dating is not inherently problematic and may, in some cases, reflect autonomy or strategic decision-making (Angelides, 2019; Ueno, 2003; Wakabayashi, 2003), research suggests that youth who engage in such exchanges often face elevated risks of health and well-being disparity due to underlying social and economic vulnerabilities, including family rejection, discrimination, housing precarity, limited access to education or healthcare, and increased risk of suicidality (Dank et al., 2016; Laser, 2018; Lee & Shek, 2013). Despite the significance of these concerns, global research on compensated dating among LGBTQA+ youth remain sparse, with the majority of existing studies focusing on youth sex work in Western Cultural contexts (Dank et al., 2016).

In Japan, compensated dating, referred to as *enjo kōsai*, was labelled as such in the 1970s and has been the subject of strong public and media attention since the 1990s. The term is composed of two parts: ‘*enjo*’ meaning support (particularly financial) and ‘*kōsai*’ meaning ‘association or socialising’ (*Kōjien Dictionary*, 2018). Commonly portrayed as involving cisgender heterosexual school-aged girls and older men, *enjo kōsai* has long been framed through a moralistic and sensationalist lens, often emphasizing delinquency, materialism, or moral decline among young women in Japan, overlooking the broader structural conditions that shape this practice (Ueno, 2003). These narratives have shaped legal and policy responses, typically focusing on surveillance or policing of the young women engaged in compensated dating rather than the older men paying for these encounters or structural intervention (Mathieu, 2016; Ueno, 2003). While child prostitution is illegal under Japan’s Prostitution Prevention Act (1956), which prohibits intercourse in exchange for compensation, its narrow definition excludes

many forms of transactional sex (Ueno, 2003). Additionally, the Child Welfare Act prohibits adults from engaging in obscene acts with minors but does not clearly criminalize compensated dating unless sexual acts are involved, placing non-explicit interactions in a legal grey area. This ambiguity has led to inconsistent enforcement and limited protective oversight (Allen, 2025). Moreover, the public and academic discourse on *enjo kōsai* in Japan has largely ignored LGBTQA+ youth, who remain underrepresented in both research and institutional responses outside of adult men who have sex with men (MSM) (Hidaka, 2024).

Over time, terminology has shifted from *enjo kōsai* to *papakatsu* and *warikiri kōsai*, reflecting generational change, commercialisation, and adaptation to digital spaces. More recently, the rapid uptake of geosocial networking and matching applications, anonymous chat platforms, and *shien kōsai* (supportive dating) has transformed how compensated dating is initiated and sustained, expanding participation beyond heterosexual pairings and urban centres. International data suggest that such engagement is associated with poor health and well-being, outcomes, including depressive symptoms, self-harm, suicidality and experiences of harassment and abuse (Barker et al., 2019; Yasami et al., 2023), yet no empirical studies in Japan have examined this intersection.

International evidence increasingly highlights that LGBTQA+ youth across diverse settings engage in compensated dating not as a form of delinquency, but as a survival strategy in response to economic hardship, family rejection, and institutional discrimination (Dank et al., 2016; Patel, 2022; Philbin et al., 2023). These practices are shaped by systemic conditions, including stigma, social exclusion, and lack of access to safe, affirming environments (National Center for Youth Law, 2023). Harms that have been previously attributed to the impact of compensated dating are now largely understood as resulting from structural inequalities, with those who are more affected by economic insecurity or social marginalisation more likely to engage in compensated dating. (Ferguson et al., 2011; Walls & Bell, 2011).

In Japan, these concerns are particularly urgent. LGBTQA+ youth face significant health and social disparities and are often excluded from institutional support systems. Despite an ongoing national youth suicide crisis (Hill, Kaneko, Amos, Bourne, Yamashiro et al., 2025), which places Japan among the highest youth suicide rates in the world (The Nippon Foundation, 2021; World Health Organization, 2018), LGBTQA+ youth remain absent from being explicitly included in suicide prevention policy and programming (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, Japan, 2024). Sexuality and gender-identity based bullying and discrimination in educational settings (Hidaka,

2020; Hill, Kaneko, Amos, Bourne, Yamashiro et al., 2025; Knight, 2016), a lack of comprehensive anti-discrimination legal protections (Taniguchi, 2024), family rejection, a lack of shelters or protections for homeless LGBTQA+ youth (LGBT Shien House, 2024) and socioeconomic marginalisation (Hidaka, 2024) compound the structural vulnerabilities that may lead some LGBTQA+ youth to engage in compensated dating.

This study aims to address this critical research gap by exploring risk and protective factors associated with compensated dating among LGBTQA+ youth in Japan, specifically examining experiences from the past 12 months. Using data from an online survey of 5,323 LGBTQA+ youth across Japan, this study is the first to examine the associated demographic and psychosocial correlates, such as sexuality, gender identity, self-harm, sexuality and gender identity-based harassment and assault, and homelessness. Additionally, it investigates potential protective factors, including participation in LGBTQA+-inclusive activities, to assess their potential mitigating effects against adverse health outcomes. Findings from this research will offer valuable insights into the complex interplay between social marginalisation, transactional intimacy, and mental health among LGBTQA+ youth in Japan. The study contributes essential evidence to inform culturally sensitive policy, targeted public health responses, and inclusive education and social support strategies that can help reduce harm and promote well-being among this underserved population.

Methods

Data for this study were drawn from the *Writing Themselves In Japan (WTIJ)* survey, a national, anonymous, cross-sectional online survey conducted between May and July 2024. The survey examined the health and wellbeing of LGBTQA+ youth aged 15 to 25 years living in Japan. Participants were eligible if they self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, trans or gender diverse, queer, questioning, asexual, or held another non-heterosexual or non-cisgender identity. All respondents were residing in Japan at the time of survey completion. The majority identified as Japanese nationals, with a small proportion (2.4%) identifying as foreign-born residents of Japan. Participants confirmed their eligibility and consented to participate by checking two mandatory boxes after reading a detailed project explanation. In line with research conducted in international contexts, parental consent was waived for participants under 18 years of age, to reduce the risk of harm from potential forced outing or family rejection (Hill et al., 2021b; Patel, 2022). This study is guided by minority stress (Meyer, 2003) and structural vulnerability frameworks, drawing on

the social determinants of health and economic marginalisation literature, as well as theoretical work on transactional intimacy. These perspectives informed both the selection of variables and the interpretation of findings. Ethics approval for the WTIJ study was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of St Luke's International University.

Most participants were recruited through paid social media advertising campaigns on social media platforms such as Instagram. These campaigns featured animated video advertisements designed in collaboration with LGBTQA+ youth and static promotional materials. Additional recruitment occurred through partnerships with LGBTQA+ organisations and networks across Japan, which shared the survey through websites, email lists, and scannable QR codes distributed on printed materials. The survey was offered in both Japanese and English. The Japanese version was professionally translated from English and back-translated by native speakers and reviewed by bilingual researchers with expertise in LGBTQA+ health, including the lead author. A total of 5,323 participants completed the survey and met all inclusion criteria.

Measures

Sexuality and gender identity Participants selected the sexual identity that best described them from a list including: gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, queer, asexual, heterosexual, unsure/questioning, 'prefer not to have a label', and 'something else'. For analysis, participants who selected 'queer', 'can't choose only one term', 'prefer not to have a label', or 'something else' were grouped under 'something else'. This decision was guided by recent scholarship recognising the fluid, self-determined nature of sexual identities that do not conform to fixed or binary labels (Callis, 2013, 2014). Several of these individual categories included small sample sizes, such as 'queer' ($n=30$) and 'can't choose only one term' ($n=44$), necessitating analytic consolidation. The chosen grouping, created in consultation with LGBTQA+ youth, aimed to respect participants' own identity expressions while reducing the risk of marginalisation or misrepresentation through imposed categorisation. While a small number of cisgender participants identified as heterosexual, they were retained in the analysis given the specific cultural and historical context of Japan, where same-gender sexual behaviour and attraction may not always correspond to Western identity labels (Hill et al., 2021a; Kaneko et al., 2020; Kazama & Kawaguchi, 2010). Moreover, these participants confirmed their eligibility by self-identifying as part of the LGBTQA+ community at the beginning of the survey.

Participants also selected their gender identity from a list of 18 options. Those whose current gender identity matched

the sex they were assigned at birth and who selected only ‘man’ or ‘woman’ were classified as cisgender men or cisgender women, respectively. All others were grouped into a ‘trans and gender diverse’ category, consistent with common classification practices in population-based LGBTQA+health research (Hill et al., 2021).

Sociodemographics Participants reported their current age, which was grouped into three categories for analysis: 15–17, 18–20, and 21–25 years. Current educational setting was assessed through the question ‘Are you currently enrolled in any of the following types of education?’ with responses grouped into: ‘secondary school (high school)’, ‘2-year university or vocational school’, ‘university’, ‘other’, or ‘no schooling in the past 12 months’. Employment was measured with the question ‘Are you currently engaged in paid employment?’, coded as a binary yes/no variable.

Economic Hardship To assess economic hardship, participants were asked whether they or their parents had experienced difficulty paying their smartphone bill in the past 12 months. Responses included ‘yes’, ‘no’, or ‘don’t know’. Homelessness was assessed using a series of questions adapted from the *Writing Themselves In 4* survey (Hill et al., 2021) and international youth homelessness research (Morton et al., 2018). Participants were asked whether, in the past 12 months, they had run away from home, been forced to leave home, stayed temporarily with others (couch surfed), or had no safe place to stay. For the purposes of this study, homelessness was defined using international frameworks developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018) and the OECD (OECD, 2023), which include both visible and hidden forms of housing instability and insecurity. This broader definition contrasts with the Japanese legal definition of ‘homelessness’, which refers primarily to visible street homelessness (OECD, 2023). Adopting international standards enabled this study to better capture the lived realities of young people experiencing unstable or unsafe housing.

Disclosure of sexuality or gender identity Participants were asked separately whether they had disclosed their sexual or gender identity to family members and to friends. The question asked, ‘Have you ever come out to or talked with any: 1) family 2) friends about your sexual identity or gender identity?’ Response options were: ‘none of them’, ‘a few of them’, ‘some of them’, ‘most of them’, ‘all of them’, or ‘not applicable’. For analysis, these responses were grouped into four categories: ‘none’, ‘a few/some’, ‘most/all’, and ‘not applicable’.

Sexuality and Gender Identity Based harassment, Exclusion and self-harm To assess experiences of marginalisation,

participants were asked a series of questions about harassment or assault in the past 12 months that was specifically related to their sexuality or gender identity. These included.

Verbal Harassment ‘Have you ever experienced verbal harassment (e.g., being called names, threatened, or insulted) in the past 12 months because of your sexual identity or gender identity?’

Physical Harassment or Assault ‘Have you ever experienced physical harassment or assault (e.g., being shoved, hit, or otherwise physically attacked) in the past 12 months because of your sexual identity or gender identity?’

Sexual Harassment or Assault ‘Have you ever experienced unwanted touching, sexual comments or messages, or been forced to engage in sexual acts in the past 12 months because of your sexual identity or gender identity?’

All three questions had ‘yes’/‘no’ response options.

Exclusion was measured by asking, ‘In the past 12 months, have you felt deliberately left out or excluded because of your sexual identity or gender identity?’ (‘yes’/‘no’).

Self-harm was assessed by asking, ‘Have you injured or harmed yourself on purpose in the past 12 months?’ Responses were coded as yes or no.

Outcome Variable: Engagement in Compensated Dating

The primary outcome variable was engagement in compensated dating in the past 12 months. Participants were asked whether they had ever gone on a date or had a sexual encounter in exchange for money, gifts, or material support. Participants who responded that this occurred in the past year, whether as a date only, sexual encounter only, or both, were coded as having engaged in compensated dating in the past 12 months (‘yes’). All others were coded as ‘no’. This approach reflected both international behavioural surveillance standards and the sociocultural framing of *enjo kōsai* in Japan, which encompasses a broad spectrum of compensated relationships including sexual, emotional, and social intimacy. For this paper, the 12-month time frame was selected to align with standard recall periods for behavioural surveillance and to focus on current or recent engagement in compensated dating. Participants who reported either a date, a sexual encounter, or both were included in a single binary outcome variable (‘yes’ or ‘no’) to capture the broad range of compensated dating experiences while ensuring sufficient statistical power for multivariable analysis. This inclusive categorisation also reflects

the Japanese context of *enjo kōsai*, a term that commonly refers to compensated relationships involving money or gifts exchanged for companionship, intimacy, or sexual activity. While often associated with sexual transactions, *enjo kōsai* in Japan has long been understood to encompass a spectrum of compensated interactions, including dates or emotional intimacy without sexual contact (Lee & Shek, 2013; Ueno, 2003; Wakabayashi, 2003). This broader framing is especially relevant for young LGBTQA+ people, whose participation in such relationships may be shaped not only by economic marginalisation but also by complex social and relational dynamics (National Center for Youth Law, 2023). Recognising this, our operational definition was designed to capture both sexual and non-sexual forms of transactional engagement, consistent with how *enjo kōsai* is experienced and interpreted within the Japanese sociocultural context.

Statistical Analyses

All analyses were conducted using Stata SE Version 18 (StataCorp, College Station, TX, USA). Descriptive statistics were generated for all variables to summarise participant characteristics and the prevalence of compensated dating.

Univariable logistic regression models were used to examine associations between each independent variable and the binary outcome of compensated dating in the past 12 months. Independent variables included age, gender identity, sexual orientation, educational setting, employment, difficulty paying smartphone bills, disclosure of sexual or gender identity to family or friends, experiences of homelessness, sexuality or gender identity-based verbal, physical, and sexual harassment or assault or exclusion, and self-harm in the past 12 months.

All independent variables with p-values below 0.25 in the univariable analysis were included in the final multivariable logistic regression model to allow for the potential influence of confounding factors. This inclusive threshold was used to ensure that variables approaching significance were not prematurely excluded from the adjusted analysis (Mickey & Greenland, 1989). All multivariable models used complete case analysis, with participants excluded if they had missing data on any covariate. The final analytic sample was $n=4543$.

Results from both univariable and multivariable regression models are reported as odds ratios (ORs) or adjusted odds ratios (AORs), with corresponding 95% confidence intervals and p-values. Multicollinearity was assessed using variance inflation factors (VIFs), all of which were below 10 (mean VIF=2.02), indicating collinearity was within acceptable limits (O'Brien, 2007).

Results

Sample Characteristics

The final sample included 5,323 LGBTQA+ youth aged 15–25 years. Participants were most commonly aged 18–20 (45.3%), followed by 21–25 (42.6%) and 15–17 (12.1%). Regarding sexuality, 26.0% identified as gay, 21.2% as bisexual, 12.2% as lesbian, 11.4% as pansexual, 5.2% as heterosexual, 5.1% as asexual, 8.6% as unsure, and 10.2% were categorized as 'something else'. Gender identity was similarly diverse, with 35.7% cisgender women, 32.5% cisgender men, and 31.8% trans or gender diverse.

Educational engagement varied, with 40.9% currently enrolled at university, 33.3% reporting no schooling in the past 12 months, and 14.8% in secondary school. Most participants (75.8%) were engaged in employment. One twentieth (4.9%) reported difficulty paying their smartphone bill, and 5.1% had experienced homelessness in the past 12 months. While 44.4% had not disclosed their sexuality or gender identity to any family members, 24.2% were out to a few or some, 9.9% to most or all. A greater proportion were out to friends, with 59.6% out to a few or some, and 12.0% out to most or all.

Experiences of Harassment, Assault, Marginalisation and Self-Harm

In the past 12 months, 7.8% of participants reported feeling deliberately left out or excluded due to their sexuality or gender identity, while 18.0% had experienced verbal harassment, 1.6% physical harassment, and 3.9% sexual harassment based on their sexuality or gender identity. Self-harm in the past 12 months was reported by 20.9% of participants. Among the full sample, 18.5% reported any experience of verbal, physical or sexual harassment or assault in the past 12 months based on their sexuality or gender identity. Among those who had disclosed their LGBTQA+ identity to at least one person ($n=3540$), the prevalence was 22.8%.

Prevalence and Nature of Compensated Dating

Overall, as shown in Table 1 and 520 participants (9.8%) reported ever having engaged in compensated dating. Among these, 92 (1.7%) reported going on a date only, 227 (4.3%) reported a sexual encounter only, and 201 (3.8%) had engaged in both a date and sexual encounter. Of these 520, just over half (266, 5.0% of the total sample) had engaged in compensated dating in the past 12 months. When disaggregated, 47 participants (0.9%) reported a date only, 115 (2.2%) a sexual encounter only, and 104 (2.0%) both a date and sexual encounter in the past year.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics for all study variables ($N = 5,323$)

	Number (n)	%
Age group (years)		
15–17	644	12.1
18–20	2410	45.3
21–25	2269	42.6
Sexual orientation		
Lesbian	651	12.2
Gay	1381	26.0
Bisexual	1125	21.2
Pansexual	608	11.4
Heterosexual	275	5.2
Asexual	273	5.1
Unsure	459	8.6
Something else	544	10.2
Gender identity		
Cisgender man	1732	32.5
Cisgender woman	1898	35.7
Trans and gender diverse	1693	31.8
Current educational setting		
No schooling	1772	33.3
Secondary school (High school)	786	14.8
University	2179	40.9
2-year University/Vocational school	364	6.8
Other	222	4.2
Difficulty paying smartphone bill in past 12 months		
No	4795	90.0
Yes	261	4.9
Don't know	269	5.1
Parents completed four-year university		
No - neither	2284	46.0
Yes - both	1150	23.2
Yes - one	1529	30.8
Currently engaged in employment		
No	1286	24.2
yes	4032	75.8
Family or household religious		
No	4422	83.1
Yes	897	16.9
Disclosed sexuality or gender identity to family		
No	2361	44.4
a few/some	1289	24.2
most/all	528	9.9
Not applicable	1140	21.4
Disclosed sexuality or gender identity to friends		
No	956	18.0
a few/some	3164	59.6
most/all	638	12.0
Not applicable	548	10.3
Felt deliberately left out or excluded in past 12 months based on sexuality or gender identity		
no	4886	92.2
yes	412	7.8
Verbal harassment in past 12 months based on sexuality or gender identity		
no	4338	82.0
yes	950	18.0
Physical harassment in past 12 months based on sexuality or gender identity		
no	5205	98.4

Table 1 (continued)

	Number (n)	%
yes	83	1.6
Sexual harassment in past 12 months based on sexuality or gender identity		
no	5082	96.1
yes	206	3.9
Experienced any homelessness in the past 12 months		
no	5018	94.9
yes	269	5.1
Experienced any self-harm in the past 12 months		
no	3691	79.1%
yes	975	20.9%
Engaged in compensated dating in past 12 months		
No	5059	95.0
Yes	266	5.0

Factors Associated with Compensated Dating

In the multivariable regression analysis (Table 2), several sociodemographic and psychosocial variables were significantly associated with engaging in compensated dating in the past 12 months:

Several indicators of economic vulnerability were significantly associated. Participants who reported difficulty paying their smartphone bill had more than three times the odds of engaging in compensated dating compared to those who did not report such difficulty (AOR=3.42, 95% CI: 2.22–5.26, $p<.001$). Those who had experienced homelessness in the past 12 months also had significantly higher odds (AOR=3.01, 95% CI: 1.94–4.66, $p<.001$). In addition, participants who were currently engaged in employment had higher odds compared to those not working (AOR=1.79, 95% CI: 1.18–2.72, $p=.006$).

Cisgender men had significantly higher odds of engaging in compensated dating than cisgender women (AOR=0.38, 95% CI: 0.22–0.66, $p=.001$) and trans and gender diverse participants (AOR=0.41, 95% CI: 0.24–0.70, $p=.001$) in the past 12 months.

In terms of sexuality, asexual participants had markedly lower odds of engaging in compensated dating in the past 12 months compared to gay participants (AOR=0.09, 95% CI: 0.01–0.69, $p=.021$). Both participants who were ‘unsure’ of their sexuality or gender identity, or those whose sexuality was categorized as ‘something else’ also had lower odds, though these findings only approached statistical significance ($p=.054$ and 0.053 , respectively).

Experiences of sexual harassment based on sexuality or gender identity in the past 12 months were significantly associated with engaging in compensated dating (AOR=2.51, 95% CI: 1.38–4.55, $p=.002$), as was feeling deliberately left out or excluded due to one’s sexuality or gender identity (AOR=1.80, 95% CI: 1.17–2.76, $p=.007$). Participants who had self-harmed in the past 12 months were also

significantly more likely to report engaging in compensated dating (AOR=1.98, 95% CI: 1.39–2.83, $p<.001$).

Discussion

This study is the first large-scale examination of compensated dating among LGBTQA+youth in Japan, shedding light on the social and structural factors that shape transactional intimacy in these populations. In total, one-tenth (9.8%) reported ever engaging in compensated dating, and one-twentieth (5.0%) had done so in the past 12 months. Within this group, experiences ranged from sexual encounters to non-sexual dates, reflecting the broad sociocultural framing of *enjo kōsai* in Japan. Several sociodemographic and psychosocial factors were significantly associated with compensated dating, including economic vulnerability, gender identity, sexual orientation, marginalisation, and self-harm. As detailed in this discussion, these findings provide important insight into the context and risks associated with compensated dating and challenge prevailing assumptions that such practices are limited to heterosexual or cisgender populations, or that they are best understood through a lens of delinquency or personal pathology.

A key finding from this study is the strong association between economic vulnerability and compensated dating. LGBTQA+youth who reported difficulty paying their smartphone bill (either themselves or their parents) in the past year had more than three times the odds of engaging in compensated dating, while those who had experienced homelessness had odds three times higher than those with stable housing. These findings are consistent with international literature identifying transactional sex as a survival strategy among socioeconomically marginalised LGBTQA+youth (Australian Aid, 2022; Dank et al., 2016; Lee & Shek, 2013). In particular, they align with research from the United States and Hong Kong observing that both

Table 2 Multiple regression results: engaging in compensating dating in past 12 months ($N = 4,543$)

Variable	Compensated dating		Univariable regression		Multivariable regression	
	(n)	(%)	OR (95% CI)	P-value	AOR (95% CI)	P-value
Age group (years)						
15–17	34	5.3	REF			
18–20	123	5.1	0.97 (0.65 - 1.43)	0.861		
21–25	109	4.8	0.91 (0.61 - 1.35)	0.629		
Sexual orientation						
Gay	129	9.3	REF		REF	
Lesbian	24	3.7	0.37 (0.24 - 0.58)	0.000	0.68 (0.34 - 1.37)	0.280
Bisexual	60	5.3	0.55 (0.40 - 0.75)	0.000	0.95 (0.59 - 1.53)	0.829
Pansexual	19	3.1	0.31 (0.19 - 0.51)	0.000	0.66 (0.34 - 1.28)	0.218
Heterosexual	10	3.6	0.37 (0.19 - 0.71)	0.003	0.68 (0.29 - 1.60)	0.379
Asexual	1	0.4	0.04 (0.00 - 0.26)	0.001	0.09 (0.01 - 0.69)	0.021
Unsure	8	1.8	0.17 (0.08 - 0.36)	0.000	0.41 (0.16 - 1.01)	0.054
Something else	15	2.8	0.27 (0.16 - 0.47)	0.000	0.46 (0.21 - 1.01)	0.053
Gender identity						
Cisgender man	153	8.8	REF		REF	
Cisgender woman	51	2.7	0.28 (0.21 - 0.39)	0.000	0.38 (0.22 - 0.66)	0.001
Trans and gender diverse	60	3.5	0.38 (0.28 - 0.51)	0.000	0.41 (0.24 - 0.70)	0.001
Current educational setting						
Secondary school (High school)	39	5.0	REF			
No schooling	100	5.6	1.14 (0.78 - 1.67)	0.486		
University	93	4.3	0.85 (0.58 - 1.25)	0.420		
2-year University/Vocational school	22	6.0	1.23 (0.72 - 2.11)	0.450		
Other	12	5.4	1.10 (0.56 - 2.14)	0.782		
Difficulty paying smartphone bill in past 12 months						
No	200	4.2	REF		REF	
Yes	47	18.0	5.04 (3.57 - 7.13)	0.000	3.42 (2.22 - 5.26)	0.000
Don't know	19	7.1	1.75 (1.08 - 2.85)	0.024	1.49 (0.83 - 2.67)	0.185
Currently engaged in employment						
No	38	3.0	REF		REF	
yes	227	5.6	1.96 (1.38 - 2.78)	0.000	1.79 (1.18 - 2.72)	0.006
Disclosed sexuality or gender identity to family						
None	110	4.7	REF		REF	
a few/some	72	5.6	1.21 (0.89 - 1.64)	0.221	0.97 (0.67 - 1.41)	0.873
most/all	34	6.4	1.41 (0.95 - 2.09)	0.092	1.06 (0.63 - 1.78)	0.829
Not applicable	50	4.4	0.94 (0.67 - 1.32)	0.715	0.78 (0.47 - 1.30)	0.339
Disclosed sexuality or gender identity to friends						
None	31	3.2	REF		REF	
a few/some	162	5.1	1.61 (1.09 - 2.38)	0.017	1.56 (0.98 - 2.49)	0.059
most/all	49	7.7	2.48 (1.56 - 3.94)	0.000	1.76 (0.94 - 3.30)	0.078
Not applicable	24	4.4	1.37 (0.80 - 2.36)	0.257	1.36 (0.60 - 3.09)	0.458
Any verbal harassment in past 12 months based on sexuality or gender identity						
No	177	4.1	REF		REF	
yes	85	8.9	2.31 (1.76 - 3.02)	0.000	1.05 (0.72 - 1.54)	0.783
Any physical harassment in past 12 months based on sexuality or gender identity						
No	246	4.7	REF		REF	
yes	16	19.3	4.81 (2.75 - 8.42)	0.000	0.77 (0.32 - 1.86)	0.567
Any sexual harassment in past 12 months based on sexuality or gender identity						
No	228	4.5	REF		REF	
yes	34	16.5	4.20 (2.84 - 6.22)	0.000	2.51 (1.38 - 4.55)	0.002
Felt deliberately left out or excluded in past 12 months based on sexuality or gender identity						
No	219	4.5	REF		REF	
yes	47	11.5	2.76 (1.98 - 3.85)	0.000	1.80 (1.17 - 2.76)	0.007
Experienced any homelessness in past 12 months						

Table 2 (continued)

Variable	Compensated dating		Univariable regression		Multivariable regression	
	(n)	(%)	OR (95% CI)	P-value	AOR (95% CI)	P-value
No	220	4.4	REF		REF	
Yes	44	16.4	4.26 (3.00 - 6.05)	0.000	3.01 (1.94 - 4.66)	0.000
Self-harmed in past 12 months						
No	331	9.0	REF		REF	
Yes	115	11.8	1.76 (1.31 - 2.36)	0.000	1.98 (1.39 - 2.83)	0.000

cisgender heterosexual and LGBTQA+youth are more likely to engage in compensated dating or survival sex when faced with unmet basic needs, such as housing instability or financial insecurity (Dank et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2016; Lee & Shek, 2013). Our findings extend this literature to Japan and underscore the urgent need for structural interventions that address economic precarity among LGBTQA+youth. It is possible that some participants considered compensated dating as a form of employment, particularly given the long history in Japan of young people engaging in *mizushobai* ('water trade'). This term encompasses a wide range of nightlife and entertainment industries, such as hostess and host clubs, bars, and venues involving emotional or sexual services. While compensated dating is largely distinct from traditional forms of *mizushobai*, there is some overlap, as both can involve compensated companionship and, at times, sexual services. Moreover, these findings should also be interpreted in the context of Japan's current economic situation, with rising inflation, increased living costs, and a weakening yen (OECD, 2025).

The present study also found significant associations between gender identity and compensated dating. Compared to cisgender men, both cisgender women and trans or gender diverse participants had lower odds of engaging in compensated dating. This contrasts with earlier Japanese literature that primarily portrayed *enjo kōsai* as involving young cisgender women and older men (Laser, 2018; Wakabayashi, 2003). Our findings suggest that the gendered narratives surrounding *enjo kōsai* may obscure the experiences of LGBTQA+youth, who may engage in transactional intimacy outside of heteronormative frames. These findings underscore the need for service providers to recognise the diverse identities and experiences of youth engaged in compensated dating, and to tailor support services to address the specific vulnerabilities of LGBTQA+youth.

While global research often highlights the overrepresentation of trans and gender diverse youth in transactional sex (Stenersen et al., 2024), our finding of lower engagement among this group in Japan may reflect context-specific barriers. Trans and gender diverse youth in Japan may face unique structural exclusions from compensated dating, such as heightened stigma (White Hughto et al., 2015), reduced access to partner-seeking platforms (whereas cisgender

gay and bisexual young men can use popular geo-social networking apps such as 9Monsters (9Monsters, 2018), or fears related to safety and gender dysphoria. Additionally, the dominant cultural framing of *enjo kōsai* as involving young cisgender women and older cisgender men (Lee & Shek, 2013; Wakabayashi, 2003) may limit opportunities for trans and gender diverse youth to be included in such exchanges. Rather than indicating reduced marginalisation, these findings may point to limited access or the presence of unmeasured deterrents.

Differences by sexuality were also notable. Asexual participants had markedly lower odds of engaging in compensated dating compared to gay participants, and those who identified as 'unsure' had lower odds that approached statistical significance. These differences may reflect varying motivations, levels of sexual activity, or degrees of access to partner-seeking networks. Prior research suggests that sexuality shapes not only patterns of intimacy but also exposure to risk environments and coping mechanisms in response to marginalisation (Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2020). While the current data do not allow for detailed exploration of motivation, these findings suggest that future qualitative work may be warranted to unpack how identity, desire, and structural constraint interact to shape transactional intimacy among LGBTQA+youth in Japan.

Experiences of sexual harassment or assault and social exclusion based on sexuality or gender identity within the past 12 months were significantly associated with compensated dating during the same period. Participants who reported such harassment were more than twice as likely to have engaged in compensated dating, as were those who reported being deliberately excluded. These findings highlight the relationship between recent marginalisation and transactional intimacy, where exclusion from safe, affirming environments may lead some youth to seek validation, connection, or material support through compensated means, even when such exchanges carry emotional, physical, or social risks (Dank et al., 2016; Laser, 2018). This interpretation aligns with minority stress theory, which posits that chronic exposure to stigma, discrimination, and social rejection contributes to elevated risk-taking behaviours (Meyer, 2003). While Meyer does not explicitly reference transactional sex, later studies have extended this

framework to survival sex and compensated intimacy among LGBTQA+youth, positioning these practices as responses to exclusion and structural neglect (Antebi-Gruszka, 2022; Dank et al., 2016). It is important to note that while experiences of harassment and assault may increase the likelihood of engaging in compensated dating, it is also possible that involvement in compensated dating creates additional risk environments for exposure to harassment or violence. The potential bidirectionality of this finding should be explored in future qualitative and longitudinal research.

For LGBTQA+youth in particular, these risks are intensified by the combined effects of legal, social, and institutional marginalisation. In the Japanese context, law enforcement has historically focused on policing the young people involved in *enjo kōsai*, especially school-aged girls, rather than the adult men who pay for these encounters (Mathieu, 2016; Ueno, 2003). This approach fosters mistrust and discourages young people from disclosing exploitation or accessing help. LGBTQA+youth, whose identities may already be hidden or stigmatised, often face additional risks when seeking support. Studies have documented that LGBTQA+youth involved in transactional intimacy may avoid formal services due to fears of being criminalised, misgendered, outed to unsupportive family members, or further stigmatised by authorities and providers (Dank et al., 2016; Mathieu, 2016). These overlapping vulnerabilities, rooted in legal precarity, social stigma, and a lack of culturally competent care, limits access to support and may increase the likelihood that young people navigate these exchanges in isolation. Moreover, The low rate of disclosure among LGBTQA+youth observed in this study may reflect persistent stigma and fears of discrimination (Kazama & Kawaguchi, 2010). This lack of disclosure is likely to further restrict access to social support and care, and may reinforce isolation, particularly for those navigating transactional or stigmatised forms of intimacy. Addressing these challenges requires a shift away from punitive or surveillance-based responses toward approaches that prioritise safety, inclusion, and competent care. This includes the development of services led by professionals and peers with specific training in LGBTQA+youth care. Culturally competent counseling, inclusive health services, and peer support programs that recognise the realities of compensated dating without judgement are essential (Stott, 2013). Such services not only reduce harm, but also restore agency and dignity to young people whose needs are often overlooked in conventional support systems (Bass & Nagy, 2025). Importantly, these findings suggest that existing legal and regulatory frameworks in Japan do not adequately address the realities faced by LGBTQA+youth involved in compensated dating. Policymakers should consider reforms that are

grounded in harm reduction, youth empowerment, and international human rights standards, and are inclusive of the needs and voices of LGBTQA+ communities.

Similar to prior research from Hong Kong and Sweden documenting elevated risks of suicidal ideation, mental distress, and self-harm among youth engaged in compensated dating or selling sex (Li et al., 2015; Svensson et al., 2012), self-harm was significantly associated with compensated dating in this study. Youth who had self-harmed in the past year had nearly twice the odds of engaging in compensated dating, highlighting the possible intersection of mental health vulnerability and transactional intimacy. While causality cannot be inferred, this co-occurrence underscores the need to better understand the structural and emotional drivers of transactional intimacy among marginalised youth. The mental health of this population warrants urgent attention from mental health services, school-based well-being programs, and community support providers.

Importantly, this study also offers a culturally grounded framework for understanding compensated dating in Japan. While the majority of international literature focuses on survival sex or prostitution (Dank et al., 2016; Svensson et al., 2012), *enjo kōsai* encompasses a broader set of practices that include emotional, social, and relational dimensions. By adopting an inclusive definition that reflects this sociocultural context, this study expands the analytical scope of transactional intimacy to better account for how LGBTQA+youth in Japan experience, navigate, and interpret these exchanges. Rather than pathologising youth for engaging in *enjo kōsai*, our findings highlight the structural and social conditions under which such practices occur, and the urgent need for culturally competent, LGBTQA+-inclusive responses.

Taken together, these findings provide a foundation for future research, policy, and practice. Given the absence of explicit identification of LGBTQA+youth from Japan's suicide prevention frameworks and national youth policies (Matsumoto et al., 2024; Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, Japan, 2023, 2024), there is a pressing need for targeted interventions that reach those most vulnerable to harm. These include affirming and accessible mental health services, economic supports that mitigate youth poverty, and public health messaging that acknowledges the complexities of transactional intimacy without moral panic. Policies grounded in structural reform, rather than punitive responses, are most likely to safeguard the wellbeing of marginalised youth. LGBTQA+ young people engaged in compensated dating who seek help should be met with care, not barriers, and protected from institutional discrimination and violence based on their perceived sexuality or gender identity.

Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations. First, this data was collected using an online survey, which may limit the generalisability for young LGBTQA+ people with limited access to the internet. Second, the study also used a convenience sampling methodology that is commonly used globally for recruiting hidden populations such as sexual and gender minorities, drug users and sex workers (Armstrong et al., 2015; Balakrishnan et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2016). It was, therefore, not possible to extrapolate accurate prevalence rates among this sample regarding engagement in compensated dating. However, the figures are comparable, if slightly higher, than other studies in Japan and Hong Kong among heterosexual youth (Laser, 2018; Lee & Shek, 2013). Furthermore, this is the largest sample of LGBTQA+ youth in Japan regarding compensated dating until now, providing important data and insights into this population. Importantly, these sampling limitations reflect broader structural exclusions. Until LGBTQA+ people are formally recognised in Japan's Census and national surveys, it remains impossible to conduct representative sampling. As such, convenience sampling will remain a necessary tool to illuminate the experiences of communities systematically omitted from official data. Third, the data were self-reported, which may introduce recall bias or social desirability bias (Kelly et al., 2013), particularly regarding sensitive behaviours such as self-harm or engagement in compensated dating. However, the survey used was online and anonymous, likely reduced this reporting bias. Finally, broad operationalisation of *enjo kōsai* as including both sexual and non-sexual compensated interactions was essential to reflect the Japanese context but may limit comparability with international studies that use narrower definitions of transactional sex.

Conclusion

This study provides the first empirical evidence of compensated dating among LGBTQA+ youth in Japan, situating *enjo kōsai* within a broader framework of structural vulnerability, social exclusion, and survival. These findings challenge heteronormative and moralistic understandings of *enjo kōsai* and highlight the need for culturally grounded, intersectional approaches to harm reduction, youth wellbeing, and policy reform. In contrast to public narratives that frame compensated dating as delinquent or deviant behaviour, compensated dating among LGBTQA+ youth was not driven by delinquency, but by intersecting forms of economic hardship, discrimination, and mental distress. That youth who self-harm, face exclusion, or lack stable housing are significantly more likely to engage in such exchanges

underscores the urgent need for inclusive services and protective policies. These should centre safety, affirmation, and access to support, rather than surveillance and criminal punishment. As Japan continues to grapple with rising youth suicide and entrenched inequality, LGBTQA+ youth must not be left behind. Targeted, rights-based, and structurally informed interventions are essential to ensure that all young people, regardless of their identity, experience, or means of survival, are treated with dignity and care.

Acknowledgements This research was supported by funding from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) Fellowship and a KAKEN grant provided by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (Grant Number: 22KF0339.) It was further supported by Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (KAKENHI) (B) (Grant Number: 23H03233) and the Health, Labour and Welfare Sciences Research Grants, Research on HIV/AIDS, Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, Japan (Grant Number: 25HB1001). The funders had no role in the study design, data collection, analysis, interpretation of results, or the writing of this manuscript. The authors are grateful for this support, which facilitated the design, implementation, and analysis of the data.

Author Contributions Adam O. Hill: Conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, data curation, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing, supervision, project administration. Dr Hill led the study design, analysis, and manuscript development. Nadia Bahja: Investigation, resources, writing – review & editing. Ms Bahja contributed contextual insights on sex work and marginalisation in policy and practice, and supported the interpretation of findings related to structural exclusion. Lily Miyata: Writing – review & editing, validation. Dr Miyata supported the interpretation of culturally sensitive content, and contributed to reviewing the manuscript with a focus on human rights implications. Stuart Gilmour: Methodology, formal analysis, writing – review & editing. Dr Gilmour provided guidance on statistical design and critically reviewed the manuscript, especially regarding public health and policy framing. Jennifer Power: Supervision, conceptualisation, writing – review & editing. Dr Power contributed to study framing and interpretation, particularly around LGBTQ+ youth and social theory. Gene Lim: Writing – review & editing, validation. Dr Lim reviewed the manuscript for clarity and coherence, contributing especially to sections on mental health and policy implications. Natalie Amos: Data curation, formal analysis, writing – review & editing. Dr Amos supported data interpretation and provided substantive feedback on manuscript drafts. Adam Bourne: Conceptualisation, methodology, writing – review & editing. Dr Bourne contributed to study design, especially around LGBTQ+ health research, and helped refine the manuscript's international relevance. Noriyo Kaneko: Resources, investigation, writing – review & editing. Dr Kaneko facilitated data collection in Japan and supported interpretation in the context of Japanese public health.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions

Data Availability The data that support the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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