

## Sexual behavior of Japanese tourists visiting Thailand a key informant approach

Surasing Visrutaratna, Dr. PH.

Chiang Mai Public Health Office,  
Chiang Mai, Thailand

Siriporn Wongchai

Chiang Mai Public Health Office,  
Chiang Mai, Thailand

Manoon Jaikueankaew

Office of Disease Prevention and  
Control, Region 10, Chiang Mai,  
Thailand

Eiko Kobori

Department of Global Health and  
Socio-epidemiology, Kyoto  
University School of Public Health

Kihara masako

Department of Global Health and  
Socio-epidemiology, Kyoto  
University School of Public Health

Kihara Masahiro

Department of Global Health and  
Socio-epidemiology, Kyoto  
University School of Public Health

### Corresponding Author

Surasing Visrutaratna  
Chiang Mai Public Health Office,  
Chiang Mai, Thailand

E-mail : surasing@bkk2.loxinfo.co.th

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### ABSTRACT

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This study described the sexual behavior of Japanese tourists with local people during visiting Thailand, through qualitative and quantitative data collected from key-informants related to tourism (i.e. sex-workers, tour guides, and beach/boat boys) in 6 major tourist sites during the period from September 2006 to March 2007.

This study illustrated that some Japanese male and female tourists, may have sought sexual services from several sexual behaviors during their visit to Thailand. Some Japanese male tourists did not want to use condoms, and were only forced to do so by Thai sex workers. Equally important was the observation that certain female Japanese tourists engaged in sexual activities with Thai males, including tour guides, beach-boys/boat-boys, and male commercial sex workers. Although many of them used condoms during their first sexual act together, condom usage dramatically declined with every subsequent sexual act. This study illustrates that some female and male tourists, while visiting Thailand, engage in high risk sexual behavior. Surprisingly, it was found that some Japanese females, especially those under 30 years of age, exhibited sexual behavior that can facilitate the contraction and trans- mission of HIV as well as other sexually transmitted infections. The findings from this study show that educational initiatives should be undertaken in both Japan and Thailand focusing on consistently using condoms with vaginal , anal and oral sex.

**Keywords** sexual behavior, Japanese, tourist, Thailand

## พฤติกรรมการมีเพศสัมพันธ์ของนักท่องเที่ยวชาวญี่ปุ่นที่เดินทางมา ท่องเที่ยวในประเทศไทย-กรณีศึกษาจากผู้เกี่ยวข้อง

### บทคัดย่อ

สุรสิงห์ วิศรุตรัตน, ศิริพร วงศ์ชัย, มนูญ ใจเขื่อนแก้ว และคณะ. พฤติกรรมการมีเพศสัมพันธ์ของนักท่องเที่ยวชาวญี่ปุ่นที่เดินทางมาท่องเที่ยวในประเทศไทย-กรณีศึกษาจากผู้เกี่ยวข้อง. ว.สาธารณสุขและการพัฒนา, 2553; 8(1) : 33-44.

การศึกษานี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาพฤติกรรมเสี่ยงที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการมีเพศสัมพันธ์ของนักท่องเที่ยวชาวญี่ปุ่นที่เดินทางมาท่องเที่ยวในประเทศไทยด้วยวิธีการศึกษาเชิงคุณภาพและใช้ข้อมูลการศึกษาเชิงปริมาณในบางพื้นที่ เป็นการสนับสนุนโดยเก็บข้อมูลจากผู้ที่มีปฏิสัมพันธ์กับนักท่องเที่ยวโดยตรง เช่น หญิงบริการชายบริการ มัคคุเทศก์ เด็กวัยรุ่นชายที่ให้บริการแก่นักท่องเที่ยว ตามชายหาดและเรือท่องเที่ยว สำหรับพื้นที่ในการเก็บข้อมูลประกอบด้วย จังหวัดเชียงใหม่ ภูเก็ต สุราษฎร์ธานี กระบี่ ชลบุรีและกรุงเทพมหานครในช่วงเวลา ระหว่างเดือนกันยายน พ.ศ. 2549 ถึงเดือนมีนาคม พ.ศ. 2550

ผลการศึกษาแสดงให้เห็นว่าบางส่วนของนักท่องเที่ยวชาวญี่ปุ่นทั้งชายและหญิงมีพฤติกรรมการมีเพศสัมพันธ์กับบุคคลหลายกลุ่มนักท่องเที่ยวชายบางส่วนไม่ต้องการใช้ถุงยางอนามัย แต่จำเป็นต้องใช้เพราะหญิงบริการบังคับให้ใช้ ในขณะเดียวกันพบว่านักท่องเที่ยวหญิงบางส่วนมีเพศสัมพันธ์กับมัคคุเทศก์ ชายขายบริการ เด็กวัยรุ่นชายที่ให้บริการแก่นักท่องเที่ยวตามชายหาดและเรือท่องเที่ยว ในกลุ่มนี้ยังพบว่าการใช้ถุงยางอนามัยในการมีเพศสัมพันธ์ในครั้งแรก แต่การมีเพศสัมพันธ์ในครั้งต่อๆมามากไม่ใช้ถุงยางอนามัย สรุปได้ว่านักท่องเที่ยว ทั้งหญิงและชายที่มีเพศสัมพันธ์มีโอกาสเสี่ยงสูงที่จะได้รับ เชื้อเอชไอวีหรือโรคติดต่อทางเพศสัมพันธ์อื่นๆ

**คำสำคัญ** พฤติกรรมการมีเพศสัมพันธ์ นักท่องเที่ยว ญี่ปุ่น ประเทศไทย

## INTRODUCTION

With the increase of global tourism, over the last several decades, people's sexual behavior during travel has become a topic of interest to many public health specialists and social scientists. There have been many publications, either presented in books or as research studies, focusing on the sexual behavior of tourists in various parts of the world. This includes Cabada and others who studied the sexual behavior of tour guides in Peru.<sup>1</sup> Taylor studied the sexual behavior of female tourists in the Dominican Republic and Jamaica.<sup>2</sup> Bellis reported on the sexual behavior of young people who visited popular tourist spots in Spain.<sup>3</sup> Orisatoki studied the role of tourism in contributing to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the Caribbean.<sup>4</sup> Thailand has, over the past two decades, emerged as one of Asia's premier tourist locations, and accordingly many millions of international tourists are constantly traveling across the country, from the pristine sandy beaches in the South to the rugged mountains in the North. The number of Japanese tourists visiting Thailand, over the past two decades, has increased every year. A Thai tourism authority report indicated that 1,248,700 Japanese tourists arrived in Thailand during 2007.<sup>5</sup> There are several studies that describe the sexual behavior of Japanese tourists in Thailand. Cash<sup>6</sup> studied Japanese male tourists and businessmen in 1994 through the use of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The author found that 71% of Japanese men engaged in sexual activities with commercial sex workers. The overwhelming majority (>95%) of these men, however, used condoms. Nemoto and others<sup>7</sup> studied high risk behavior of Japanese tourists in Khaosan Road Bangkok in 2002 through the use of self-administered questionnaires. They found that 91%

of tourists used condoms with sex workers when engaging in vaginal sex, while 47% used condoms when engaging in oral sex. With respect to Japanese female tourists Vorakit-phokatorn<sup>8</sup> studied the behavior of young Japanese women in 1994. She found that they were culturally and socially native and willing to take risks with respect to sexual contacts with local Thai men.

The present study was designed to explore the sexual risk behavior of Japanese tourists with local people from a different perspective, namely by collecting relevant information from the sexual partners of Japanese tourists (e.g. male or female sex workers, tour guides, beach/boat boys). The researchers felt that many sexually related issues could be very sensitive (e.g. the use of condoms, oral sex practices, etc.) and accordingly it would be difficult to approach foreign tourists. Even if this was possible the researchers were concerned that it would be very difficult to verify the reliability of any data that they could collect. Accordingly, they decided instead to directly interview and talk with the sexual partners of the Japanese tourists. It was hoped that the latter could provide a more objective, or unbiased, synopsis of what transpired during these sexual encounters. The study included a mixture of qualitative and quantitative approaches in order to obtain the pertinent information. The qualitative method provided details of behaviors and quantitative technique provided projection amount of actions.

## METHODS

This study was approved by the Chiang Mai Public Health Research Committee and was implemented during the period September 2006 - March 2007. The researchers collected

information from key informants who had sex with Japanese tourists or who had information about friends who had engaged in sex with Japanese tourists (i.e. sex-workers, beach/boat boys, and tour guides) working in 6 tourist spots in Thailand.

### Study Design

Qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, were the main data collection methodologies employed in this study. A quantitative method (self-administered questionnaires) was also used as a supportive data collection instrument for a group of male sex-workers in a northern province and for a group of beach/boat boys in a southern province of Thailand. The sample sizes for the quantitative study were calculated from the Yamane formula<sup>9</sup>. Minimum sample size for male sex workers and beach/boat boys were respectively 101 and 76 respondents.

### Methodological explanation

Because of the difficulties inherent in approaching the study population, the study team used various approaches to collect data from each key informants group.

*Tour guides(TGs)* - Local public health staff from each province contacted Japan tour companies, in their own geography area, to participate in focus group discussions. In those tourist spots where there were few Japanese tour guides, the research team performed in-depth interviews with each respondent. We performed 2 focus group discussions and 11 in-depth interviews.

*Female sex workers(FSs)* - Local public health staff identified and mapped the establishments that provided sexual services for Japanese clients (e.g. Japanese bars). They contacted and obtained permission to conduct the study with the managers

of these establishments. The researchers conducted 4 focus group discussions with sex workers in one province. In the other provinces, researchers generally conducted only 2 focus group discussions if there were not any new issues to discuss that arose from the earlier discussions. In those tourist spots where there were a small number of sex workers engaging in sexual activities with Japanese clients the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with the respondents. In brief the researchers were able to have access to most of the popular places frequented by Japanese tourists in each of the 6 provinces. They subsequently were able to randomly approach members of the different “target groups”, who were not engaged with Japanese clients, at the time of these visits. We performed 13 focus group discussions and 5 in-depth interviews.

*Male sex workers(MSs)* – Local public health staff identified and mapped the gay bars that provided sexual services for Japanese clients. The researchers had earlier conducted a pilot study focusing on male sex workers. One of the main findings was that there was a great deal of peer pressure for male sex workers to exaggerate their “sexual exploits” when in a group setting. As such it was felt that it would be better to conduct in-depth interviews rather than focus group discussions to ensure that the data was reliable and accurate. We performed 40 in-depth interviews.

*Beach/boat boys* - local public health staff identified and mapped the beaches where there were beach/boat boys. From another earlier pilot study, among this group, researchers also observed that there was a great deal of peer pressure to exaggerate one’s “sexual exploits” when in a group setting. Therefore the research team similarly decided to conduct in-depth interviews with this target group. The local public health coordinator initially contacted members

of this target population and randomly asked individuals if they would be interested in participating in the study. We performed 50 in-depth interviews.

### **Interview Process**

In-depth interviews were performed in an appropriate environment. Consenting respondents allowed research staff to use a tape-recorder while interviewing male sex workers, beach boys, and boat boys. In those provinces in which there were very few female sex workers or tour guides, the research team conducted in-depth interviews instead of focus group discussions. Each interview took 45-60 minutes by using interview guide for each category informants. Focus group discussions were generally conducted with tour guides and female sex workers.

### **Data analysis**

The taped sessions for the in-depth interviews were transcribed verbatim in Thai. However all names were deleted from the transcripts. All

transcripts were subsequently independently read by at least 2 members of the research team. Interview data were analyzed and interpreted using content analysis in which the main ideas, comments, and words were grouped according to variables of interest. The researchers conducted content analysis of the focus group discussion data. Field notes served as contextual supplements to the transcripts for each target group. The investigators and facilitators independently classified the information and arrived at similar conclusions which provided consistency and credibility.

### **RESULTS**

The results of this study are based on data collected from 106 in-depth interviews and 15 focus group discussions amongst various target populations located in 6 tourist sites. Additional self-administered questionnaires were distributed to male sex workers in a northern province and beach/boat boys in a southern province. The details of qualitative data collection components are highlighted in Table 1.

**Table 1** Number of respondents included in study's qualitative data collection components (i.e. in-depth interviews and focus groups discussions)

Province-Region	Study Respondents			
	Tour guides	Male Sex workers	Female Sex workers	Beach/Boat Boys
B-Central	-	10**	2*/10	-
C-Northern	5**	10**	4*/40	-
Ch-Eastern	-	10**	2*/10	-
K-South	2**		5**	10**
P-South	2*/16	10**	3*/15	30**
S-South	4**	-	2*/10	10**
Total	27	40	13*/90	50

**Note :** \*/=\* Number of focus group discussions conducted/number of individuals participating in focus group discussions

\*\* = Number of in-depth interviews conducted

### Information Gathered From Sex-Workers

#### Male sex-workers

Some male sex workers stated that they had both had male and female Japanese clients, and that oral sex was one of the most prominent sexual services provided. Some examples of their experiences, with respect to the number and characteristics of the Japanese clients, are as follows:

"...In this bar we like male clients. About 80% of our clients are males. Women are difficult, but we will provide sexual services to them as well ..." (*P - province*)

"...I have been working here for 5 years, and during this period I have provided sexual services to about 50 male Japanese customers..." (*Ch - province*)

"...The Japanese customers are under 40 years of age..." (*B - province*)

"...I have more than 30 Japanese clients per month..." (*B - province*)

"... 80% of my clients are male while the remaining 20% are female..." (*B - province*)

Some gay bars provided services to female clients. Male sex workers mentioned that most of their clients were over 30 years of age. The latter enjoyed performing oral sex, but without using condoms to protect against the HIV or other STIs. Some examples of the sex workers' experiences are as follows:

"...Japanese female clients, most of whom are over 30 years of age, come here to watch our show. Afterwards they take boys out for a price ranging between 1,000 - 4,000 Baht..." (*B&C&P - province*)

"...Most of the Japanese women like to perform oral sex without using any condoms for protection..." (*Ch&P&C&B - province*)

"...these women are not at all interested if we use condoms, but for the most part we use condoms because we are afraid of contracting a STI and wish to protect ourselves..." (*P - province*)

About 40 % of my clients do not care whether condoms are used or not...” (*Ch - province*)

From quantitative study in a northern province, we surveyed all of gay bars in the province. A key finding was that 44.3% of the male sex workers in this province, answering a self-administered questionnaire, indicated that they had engaged in sexual activities with Japanese

male customers. At the same time 20.2% of these male sex workers also claimed to have had sexual contacts with Japanese female clients. Some of these respondents even claimed to have engaged in sexual activities with more than 50 Japanese female tourists. The data from this quantitative instrument confirms the observations and findings from the qualitative components of this study. Details are highlighted in Table 2.

**Table 2** The experience of male commercial sex workers with Japanese male and female clients, according to the number of sexual contacts, in a northern province during the previous year.

Number of Japanese clients engaging in sexual activities with individual male sex workers	# of male sex workers having sexual contacts with male clients		# of male sex workers having sexual contacts with female clients	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
0 clients	58	55.7	83	79.8
1-10 clients	40	38.5	15	14.4
11-29 clients	3	2.9	3	2.9
> 30 clients	3	2.9	*3	2.9
Total	104	100.0	104	100.0

\* **Note:** 1 male sex worker claimed to have had sex with 50 female Japanese clients.  
1 male sex worker claimed to have had sex with 52 female Japanese clients.  
1 male sex worker claimed to have had sex with 100 female Japanese clients.

### Female Sex Workers

Female sex workers are employed at various venues such as karaoke bars and massage parlors. They mentioned that some of their clients did not want to use condoms. The following are some of the comments that they made with the respect to the number and characteristics of their Japanese clients:

“...90% of the customers are Japanese. There are not many customers under 40 years of age...” (*C&Ch&B&S&P - province, several FSs*)

“...The customers like to come here to drink. Afterwards they invite us to have sex at the place where they are staying. We travel by Tuk-Tuk...” (*C - province, several FSs*)

“...The customers like to have us perform oral sex, but without using condoms” (*B&C&P&Ch&S - province, several FSs*)

“...Japanese clients who do not want to use condoms. They always say that since they have only one sexual partner there is no need to use condoms...” (*B - province, several FSs*)

“...All my customers have to use a condom. Otherwise I will force them to use it. If they do not agree to do so, I will cancel the sexual engagement without returning their money...” (*Ch&C&P&S - province, several FSs*)

“...About 2 out of every 10 customers ask me not to use a condom, but I refuse to do it. In the end they have to use it anyway...” (*Ch&C - province*)

### Information from Beach Boys/Boat Boys

The beach boys/boat boys tend to be young males who work at a beach (or on a boat). They provide various services to tourists, such as renting Jet skis, steering banana boats, and diving. Some of the beach/boat boys mentioned that they had engaged in sexual activities with Japanese female tourists. The following are some comments made by the beach/boats boys, with respect to their Japanese clients:

“...If a group contains 2-3 tourists, and they are all women, there is a chance to engage in sexual activities...” (*K&P - province*)

“...Most of them want to have sex in the water, or roll the boat over to have sex on the island...” (*K - province*)

“When we teach them to ride Jet skis, there is a good chance to come into close contact with these tourists...” (*P&K - province*) “If she persuades me to go out at night for a tour or to have dinner, there is a good chance of us engaging in sexual activities” (*P&S - province*)

“...It is very common for Japanese female tourists to have sex here. I have a lot experience with them. I also used to have a Japanese wife...” (*S - province*)

“I engaged in sexual activities with 6 Japanese female tourists.” (*P - province*)

“...I use Condoms, but it depends on my judgment with respect to which partners I can trust. I might wear 2 condoms on an occasion, or wear only one condom, or not wear any at all. I may wear a condom for the first sexual encounter with an individual, and then not put one on the next time...” (*S&P - province*)

“.....Condoms are used sometimes.....” (*K - province, BBs*)

The results from the self-administered questionnaire that we performed with beach boy working all of tourist beaches in a southern province indicated that a significant percentage of beach boys/boat boys (39%), working at various beaches, had engaged in sexual activities with female Japanese tourists. If one focuses on the more popular beaches, then more than half of the beach boys/boat boys claimed to have had sexual contacts with Japanese female tourists. We also found that 66.6% of them always use condoms, 70% of them performed oral sex and 83.3% of them received oral sex from their partners. This quantitative data confirmed the data collected in the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Details are highlighted in Table 3.

**Table 3** Number of Beach Boys/Boat Boys who had sexual contacts with female Japanese clients during the past year in a southern province

Sexual behaviors	Number	Percent
<b>Engaged in sex</b>		
Ever	30	39.0
Never	47	61.0
Total	77	100.0
<b>Condom use</b>		
Always	20	66.7
Sometimes	8	26.7
Never	2	6.6
Total	30	100.0
<b>Performed Oral Sex</b>		
Never	9	30.0
Ever	21	70.0
Total	30	100.0
<b>Received Oral Sex</b>		
Never	5	16.7
Ever	25	83.3
Total	30	100.0
<b>Anal sex experiences</b>		
Never	21	70.0
Ever	9	30.0
Total	30	100.0
<b>Number female Japanese clients of beach/boat boys</b>		
1-2 persons	22	75.9
3-4 persons	6	20.6
≥ 5 persons	1	3.5
Total (* Missing: 1 respondent)	29*	100.0

### Information from tour guides

The study team conducted focus group discussions or in-depth interviews with tour guides in several tourist locations in Thailand. The data from tour guides illustrated that some of the male and young Japanese female tourists had engaged in high risk sexual behavior during their sojourn in Thailand. Tour guides provided the following comments with respect to their Japanese male and female clients:

“...Most of the women are around 20-30 years old or more than 30 years of age. Some Japanese teenagers come here with their parents, but at night they go off on their own...” (*P - province*)

“...Approximately 80% of the young Japanese female tourists conduct themselves in this manner... We [tour guides] are also women and feel uncomfortable answering these questions, but this is the truth. The numbers of female Japanese tourists exhibiting this type of behavior may even be higher than our estimates...” (*P - province, several TGs*)

“...if you ask the male tourists what they would like to see and do in this province, all will answer “enjoy” the sea, sand, and sun. They will not talk about being interested in engaging in “sexual activities”. (*P - province, several TGs*)

“...Most of the males take a night tour, especially those tourists who are over 40 years of age...”

“...Most of my customers, over 40 years of age, like to have Thai women go to their hotel rooms to engage in sexual activities. They will pay “joiner-fees” of about 400-600 baht to the hotel. When he needs a girl the tourist makes a signal by beckoning his guide with his little finger...” (*C&Ch&P - province, several TGs*)

“...when a group of 3-5 male tourists stay in separate rooms it is obvious that they intend to engage in sexual activities...” (*S - province*)

“....In general Japanese female tourists request that condoms be used during their first sexual encounter. However once they have had sex with a particular individual it is no longer necessary to use condoms for subsequent sexual acts together. Consistent condom usage drops to only 50%...” (*P - province*)

“....Most Japanese female tourists enjoy engaging in oral sex. They do not use any condoms when performing oral sex. They perform oral sex for up to an hour at a time...” (*P - province, several TGs*)

### DISCUSSION

The results of the present study indicate that male Japanese tourists over 40 years of age, when traveling with a group, were very likely to engage in sexual activities with commercial sex workers. Studies from Japanese researchers<sup>(10,7)</sup> also made similar observations. This finding was especially true if these male Japanese tourists visited the major tourist cities in the country. Although the rate of consistent condom usage was high, this finding was partially the result of Thai sex workers forcing their Japanese clients to use condoms. According to the Thai sex workers, participating in this study, approximately 20% of their Japanese clients initially did not want to use condoms. The study also illustrated that male Japanese clients liked to perform oral sex without using any protection against STIs and/or HIV/AIDS. Although the chance of transmitting/contracting STIs or HIV/AIDS is lower from oral sex than from vaginal or anal sex, this is not a safe sex practice.

Some of the younger female Japanese tourists had sexual contacts with tour guides, beach boys, boat boys, and male sex workers. The prevalence of this type of behavior was substantially higher than the research team had expected to find (see Table and 2&3).

Moreover, as shown by others Vorakitphokatorn and Belliveau<sup>8,11</sup>, although some of the female Japanese tourists used condoms during their first sexual contact with a particular individual they frequently stopped using condoms during subsequent sexual acts with the same person. The rate of condom usage during the so-called “first sexual contact” was quite high, but it dropped to less than 50% for later sexual contacts.

According to information from all of key informants in this study, both qualitative and quantitative approaches, reflected risk behaviors in the same direction. It showed that our results might display practical manners of these groups of tourists. In this study the researchers did not explore the determinants of these sexual behaviors. These included a sense of freedom and anonymity during traveling in a foreign country, a sense of loneliness or feeling in need of companionship, and peer influence.<sup>10</sup>

The findings from this study demonstrate that at least two types of educational initiatives should be undertaken in both Japan and Thailand. In Japan the program should focus on STI & HIV/AIDS prevention, by increasing public awareness about the importance of consistently using condoms to reduce high-risk sexual behavior; especially emphasizing the need to use condoms when performing oral sex.

In Thailand the program should similarly focus on consistent condom use to reduce high-risk sexual behavior; also emphasizing the need to use condoms for active and passive oral sex. A special initiative should be undertaken for male sex workers in some major tourist cities and beach/boat boys. There clearly needs to be additional interventions undertaken to make those individuals potentially entering vocations that can put them at a high risk to contract/transmit STIs & HIV/AIDS. This study has clearly demonstrated that informal and formal commercial sex workers [i.e. female

sex worker, male sex worker, tour guides, beach boys/boat boys, etc.] do not consistently use condoms, nor do some of these individuals/groups have adequate knowledge and awareness concerning various high-risk behaviors associated with the transmission of STIs & HIV/AIDS.

Accordingly the researchers would like to recommend that provincial and district health authorities design and disseminate appropriate and more relevant information concerning the prevention of STIs and HIV/AIDS for the general population, as well as any groups who serve as a source of workers who eventually become part of the informal/ formal commercial sex networks located at tourist destinations in Thailand. Although the latter frequently includes the rural and urban poor, our study has nevertheless identified certain sections of the country as well as specific categories of people who comprise a significant segment of the informal/formal commercial sex network. Thus there appears to be a higher number of women and men from the north, northeast, and south, as well as specific ethnic groups such as Shan migrants from northeastern Myanmar who serve as sex workers working at karaoke bars, male sex workers working at gay bars, and those working as beach boys/boat boys. In general provincial and district health offices throughout the country, but especially in those geographic areas that serve as major tourist destinations, need to design and implement more relevant STI & HIV/AIDS prevention programs in secondary schools, universities, vocational institutes, as well through mainstream mass media. These efforts can take the form of online counseling, appropriate printed materials for literate and semi-literate populations, as well as special educational dissemination approaches for men and women working at karaoke bars, gay bars, and other venues that cater to the entertainment needs of international

tourists. This study is not without limitations. The research team realized that it would not be able to cover all groups of people engaging in sexual relations with Japanese tourists. The team nevertheless was able to interview the major target groups having sexual relations with Japanese tourists. The research team used the information collected from tour guides (both male and female), and reviewed other relevant data prior to the commencement of the study. This information

was helpful in identifying those individuals/groups of people to be interviewed in an in-depth manner.

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