

William Pesek on Bloomberg Pooh Poohs Lack of Libido Assessment of the Japanese.

The root of Japan's supposed sex drought isn't culture, but economics. This distinction is important because it feeds into Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's efforts to end Japan's 20-year bout with deflation.

I, too, have been swayed at times by such data sets. As far back as December 2001, I explored waning sex drives in Japan, citing findings that Japanese are the world's least prolific lovers. Such conclusions are quite paradoxical. How else to explain a country whose cities are teeming with red-light districts; a porn industry that's burgeoning; hard-core manga -- a type of comic book -- that's read openly on the subways; and love hotels that can't turn over rooms fast enough.

But I've come to doubt sensationalist surveys suggesting young Japanese don't have sex. The real issue is that many avoid traditional, committed relationships out of doubts about the future that based on economics rather than culture. If low libido were strictly societal, why do the Czech Republic, Poland, Singapore, South Korea, Spain and Taiwan have fertility rates as low as Japan's? I don't see the global media characterizing those countries as sexless freak shows spiraling toward extinction.

"This is the typical weird and wacky Japan story that overseas editors seem to gobble up and encourage," says Jeff Kingston, head of Asian studies at the Tokyo campus of Temple University.

"Of course Japanese have sex and if the number of love hotels is any barometer it seems like many are getting plenty of it. How do all those places stay in business if nobody is doing it?"

To Kingston, the basic premise is flawed. "Japan has a low birthrate

and thus it must be a lack of sex," he says. "That's not exactly compelling logic that overlooks all the main factors behind couples' decisions not to have more children."

Part of the problem is cherry-picked data. Take the 2011 survey by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research on which sex-drought stories are often based. Its finding that 61 percent of unmarried men and 49 percent of single women between 18 and 24 of age weren't in any kind of romantic relationship is mentioned up high. Rarely cited is this fact on Page 2 of the report: almost 90 percent of respondents intend to marry someday. And what about international comparisons? A recent Pew study found that 71 percent of unmarried Americans aren't in committed relationships. Also, there can be big cultural and generational differences in the meaning of "single," "dating" and "having sex."

Japan's low birthrate (are you listening Mr. Prime Minister?) is a result of exorbitant living costs, elevated stress and diminished confidence. Even after two decades of deflation, prices in Japan for everything from rent to food to entertainment remain among the highest in the world. Economic stagnation and changes in labor laws have restrained wage growth and enabled companies to swap employees into low-paying part-time jobs with few benefits.

This means the exclusion of more and more Japanese from the lifetime employment system that's long been the cornerstone of Japan Inc., forcing many to work additional jobs. If you leave for work at 6 a.m. and get home close to midnight, including weekends, where is there time for dating?

Young Japanese, especially men, don't feel financially secure enough to enter into long-term relationships, never mind getting married or starting families. At the same time, little has been done to blunt the institutionalized sexism that exacerbates Japan's low birthrate. Hardships women face in balancing careers and family encourages many to delay marriage and motherhood. If Japanese felt better about the future, they wouldn't be so reluctant to start building their own.

Japan's demographics are worthy of study. How it balances a fast-aging population, a gigantic debt burden and a negligible birthrate -- if that's even possible -- will offer insights to officials in China, Germany and the U.S. in the years ahead. But portraying Japanese as libido-less oddballs and looking for clues in their culture only dehumanizes a nation. It misses Japan's pioneering role in one of the biggest economic challenges of this century as developed nations mature.