

Call for Papers

# Emotional Attachment to Machines: New Ways of Relationship-Building in Japan

International Conference, Freie Universität Berlin, Oct. 25–26 2019

**Event Date:** 25/10/2019 to 26/10/2019

**Abstract Submission Date:** 14/6/2019

**Location:** Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany

**Disciplines:** Japanese studies, affective sciences, anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, psychology etc.

The conference is organized by the ERC-funded research project ‘Emotional Machines: The Technological Transformation of Intimacy in Japan’ (EMTECH) at Freie Universität Berlin.

## Description

So-called ‘emotional technologies’ play an increasing role in our everyday life. Machines have come to be perceived not just as technical artifacts or lifeless objects that assist workflows in industry or act as service robots. Instead, they are viewed as ‘interaction partners’ to which affective bonds or even relationships of varying shape or intensity may be formed. An early example of this was the Tamagotchi of the 1990s, an electronic toy whose owner had the task of raising a virtual chick and caring for its well-being.

Recently, Japanese society has been witnessing a rise in intimate attachment to information and communication systems such as emotional robots (e.g. Pepper, Lovot), holographic spouses, downloadable boyfriends and augmented reality (AR) partners. Some users are now tackling the social stigma associated with artificial worlds, up to the point where they openly ‘marry’ their favorite ‘2D character’ by exchanging rings, organizing pretend weddings or filling out legally-invalid marriage licenses. Also, the game industry has started to address the demand for ‘delusional love’ (*mōsō ren'ai*) and – although it is still a niche market – they are increasingly targeting a more mainstream audience. With the proliferation of sophisticated electronic devices, this rising phenomenon of emotional attachment to artificial entities is likely to further expand in Japan and globally. How could such ways of bonding be understood and explained?

During the course of an international and interdisciplinary conference, the discussion will involve the ways in which humans form intimate relationships with ‘emotionally-intelligent entities’ (robots, holograms, etc.) and what purposes these relationships to machines serve for them; is it for comfort, as a substitute for interpersonal relationships with humans, or does it constitute something else entirely? In this context, a goal of the conference is to invite alternative perspectives regarding the nature of attachment to artificial entities. Currently, technologies that foster emotional connections between humans and digital beings are perceived as a threat by many. Because emotional devices are considered to be make-believe systems based on ‘simulation’ (which is often confused with lying, deceit or fraud), emotional technologies could potentially be suspected of affecting human sexual identity or disrupting social bonds. The

impact of these human-machine relationships on traditional family and society structures will therefore be explored as well. Do intimate relationships to machines lead to negligence of social contacts and, therefore, ultimately to social isolation, or might interactions with machines improve one's ability to open up to fellow humans?

Some further questions to be addressed include: What is the profile of people who invest time and energy in romantic relationships with artificial entities and how do they perceive themselves, represent themselves and interact with each other? How do the makers of emotional devices and the game/software industry try to appeal to customers, and how do they succeed in creating successful (i.e. loveable) characters?

Lastly, human-human relationships that are merely facilitated by modern technology (such as virtual interactions using virtual reality (VR), avatars etc.) will also be covered.

While the conference mainly aims to focus on Japan, researchers working on similar trends in other countries are invited to contribute as well.

### **Submission guidelines**

Abstracts must be submitted in English and sent by email to [elena.giannoulis@fu-berlin.de](mailto:elena.giannoulis@fu-berlin.de) in PDF format. The submissions (between two and three pages) must include a title, an abstract and a short biography of the author (including name and affiliation).

### **Key dates**

Abstract Submission Deadline:	June 14, 2019
Notifications:	July 14, 2019
Conference:	October 25–26, 2019

### **Scientific Program Planning Committee members:**

Prof. Dr. Elena Giannoulis, Dr. Agnès Giard, Berthold Frommann

### **Contact**

All questions about submissions should be emailed to [elena.giannoulis@fu-berlin.de](mailto:elena.giannoulis@fu-berlin.de)