COMUN. MÍDIA CONSUMO, SÃO PAULO, V. 17, N. 49, P. 294-319, MAI./AGO. 2020
DOI 10.18568/CMC.V17I49.2152

Mercado de afetos no Japão: um estudo sobre Gatebox e o convívio amoroso com personagens

Affective market in Japan: a study on Gatebox and loving relationships with characters

Beatriz Yumi Aoki[1]
Christine Greiner[2]

Resumo: *Este artigo tem como objetivo refletir sobre uma tendência recente de mercado cuja oferta de produtos busca estimular relações afetivas. O exemplo analisado é o Gatebox, que proporciona ao consumidor a experiência de morar com sua personagem favorita. Há novas formas de consumo e interação que emergem deste contexto, especialmente em países onde as companhias virtuais já são consideravelmente difundidas, como é o caso do Japão. A fundamentação teórica reúne autores como Takeyama (2005); Kurotani (2014); Illouz (2011); Giard (2016); Azuma (2009); Barral (2000); e a pesquisa do filósofo Brian Massumi (2015), sobretudo no âmbito da filosofia e da economia. A metodologia de pesquisa parte de uma ampla revisão bibliográfica reunindo autores japoneses e ocidentais, desdobrando-se em pesquisas de campo no Japão*[3]*, realizadas pelas autoras nos últimos cinco anos, incluindo visita a centros de pesquisa, laboratórios, sex shops e feiras. O resultado é um panorama preliminar do estado da arte do fenômeno Gatebox e da cultura otaku no Japão e um levantamento de questões que analisam as relações afetivas transdimensionais entre seres humanos e personagens, assim como o impacto crescente destas relações em redes específicas de consumo no Japão e em países ocidentais.*

Palavras-have: *consumo; mercado de afetos; Gatebox.*

Abstract: *This article aims to reflect on a recent market trend whose products seek to stimulate affective relationships. The analyzed example is Gatebox, which provides consumers with the experience of living with their favorite character. There are new forms of consumption and interaction that emerge from this context,*

especially in countries where virtual companies are considerably widespread, as it is in Japan. The theoretical basis brings together authors such as Takeyama (2005); Kurotani (2014); Illouz (2011); Giard (2016), Azuma (2009), Barral (2000); and the research of the philosopher Brian Massumi (2015), especially on the scope of philosophy and economics. The research methodology is based on a wide bibliographic review involving Japanese and Western authors, unfolding in a field research in Japan, carried out in the last five years, including visits to laboratories, sex shops and expositions. The result is a preliminary overview of the state of the art of the Gatebox phenomenon and otaku culture in Japan and on first reflections on the transdimensional affective relationships between human beings and characters, as well as the growing impact of these relationships on specific consumer networks in Japan and in Western countries.

Keywords: *consumption; affective market; Gatebox.*

Introduction

In the Japanese affective market, you can find everything. The wide array of products and services comprises host/hostess clubs, bars in which men or women are received by clients of the opposite gender, who accompany and entertain them, most of the time without sexual purposes, according to a study by Takeyama (2005). There are also establishments where it is possible to pick among a menu of services and acquire a romantic experience paid by the duration of time, being offered options such as running fingers through one's hair, hugs and sleeping with an escort. Alternatives that do not necessarily involve human contact, such as sex dolls, are among the most popular options among customers.

With technological development, an array of products and services are also potentialized, comprising videogames, apps and a growing market for company robots in different formats: humanoid, whose structure is close to a human body; animals, such as dogs, penguins or seals; or character holograms, as it is the case, precisely, of Gatebox. Beyond the functionality, already offered by virtual assistants with artificial intelligence, such as Google Assistant and Alexa, which make easier the realization of everyday tasks, Gatebox enables the experience of living with the hologram of a character, who interacts through a system of artificial intelligence, with a similar logic to the film *Her* (2013) by Spike Jonze, in which the main character Theodore develops a relationship with Samantha, a computer operational system.

Among the studies performed around this theme, the one who currently stands out is the project EMTECH (Emotional Machines: *The Technological Transformation of Intimacy in Japan)* from the Free University of Berlin, which proposes to analyze the relationship between humans and machines in Japan and understand how affective bonds are created between humans and machines, as well as the implications of these interactions in the Japanese society. As researcher for the program, the French author Agnès Giard, which had a wide research on

erotic culture and Japanese sexual dolls4, raises questions simulation games about love relationships. In what refers to the Japanese robotic scenario, authors such as Junji Hotta (2008), Shin Nakayama (2006), Yuji Sone (2017) and Jennifer Robertson (2018) have fed the state of the art of the discussion, presenting historic landscapes and developing important discussions, especially about robots built with the purpose of social interaction. There are, still, many studies about the otaku culture, as we present next, since it presents the context where this new market of affection arises in Japan. Authors such as Hiroki Azuma (2009), Étienne Barral (2000), Thomas LaMarre (2010) and Patrick Galbraith (2010) talk about the arrival of the otaku and their relationship with different products of fictional characters, from comic book characters to pop singers.

The objective of this article is, therefore, reflect on what it seems to be, in fact, a market tendency, whose offer is to stimulate affectionate relationships, not only from the subjective point of view, but also from the point of view of consumption. When analyzing the function of Gatebox in Japan and their communicational strategies, we seek to contribute with the state of art in this rising market.

Otaku culture and consumption in Japan

The discussion related to the core of the Gatebox phenomenon – which refers precisely to the consumption of affection – have been object of study from authors outside Japan such as Illouz (2011). According to this author, our current context is characterized as the time of affection capitalism. "a culture where affectionate and economic discourses and practices shape one another" (p. 8), which produces a "large and broad movement in which affection becomes an essential aspect of an

4 Giard publishes extensively since 2004 books and academic articles about themes related to sex dolls, ghosts, bizarre sex, sexual objects and robots in Japan. Since 2015, she has participated in expositions such as *Persona, étrangement humain* (Strangely human Persona, Quai Branly Museum), *Miroirs du désir* (Mirrors of desire, Guimet Museum) and Les *Sciences de l'amour* (The sciences of love, Palais de la Découverte). From 2006 to 2012, she collaborated with different contemporary artists (Tadanori Yokoo, Makoto Aida, Toshio Saeki etc.).

economic behavior, and in which the affective life – especially in middle-class – follows the logic of economic and exchange relations" (p. 8).

Illouz (2011) has analyzed dating websites on the internet, thinking about how, by following the logic of consumer culture, technology ends up increasing the specification and refinement of the search for a sexual/romantic partner.

Even though this phenomenon takes place in many parts of the world, there seems to have a type of radicalization in the context of Japanese culture, in which a substantial part of relationships and dates happen between human beings and inanimate beings (characters, holograms, ghosts, robots, dolls, and so forth). To analyze specifically Gatebox (meetings with characters), it is important first and foremost to present the context in which these meetings are inserted, in other words, otaku culture.

Otaku (お宅) is a term in the Japanese language which literally means "*your home*", mainly used in treatment language, when you have the goal of showing respect or distance. The reading of the ideogram 宅 means house, residence. The first character (お) indicates a formal form of treatment.

This expression was adopted to designate the people adept of an emerging subculture[5] in the 1970's (AZUMA, 2009), precisely for comprising in its meaning their two main characteristics: (a) the desire for distancing oneself from other people; and (b) the search for seclusion in their own spaces (their homes, bedrooms, private spaces), "choosing to be with the most reliable group of characters in comic books, cartoons or inaccessible celebrities in the screen instead of the company of humans, that do not make any effort to understand them." (BARRAL, 2000, p. 22).

It is understood that otaku culture, despite being frequently associated to a culture of youth, understand as the main adepts the generation of Japanese people born in late 1950's, early 1960's, initial period of

5 In Japan, the word subculture acquires the sense of small segment of the market or a certain fan culture, unlike the understanding of the American cultural studies, which take the meaning of an underground culture. (STEINBERG, 2010).

reconstruction of post-war Japan, characterizing not young adults or teenagers in university or recently graduated, but adults in position of responsibility. In this sense, it is a subculture that is already rooted in Japanese society (AZUMA, 2009).

Historically, after the defeat in the Second World War, in 1945, Japan became a country expressively investing in the industry sector, seeking to rebuild their nation after the war and after North American attacks. Investments were located to heavy industry (metalworking and construction working).

With the economic growth between 1960's – with the beginning of the country's reconstruction – and 1980's – with the conquest of external markets –, Japan presented an improvement in the quality of life of their population and becomes one of the most consumer countries in the world. We see an evolution in big industries of appliances following the pace of change in the Japanese society as a whole. According to Barral (2000), the country went through, in one generation, from the statute of nation that fought for the first necessity to the super modernity, being recognized as a "consumption and entertainment society that reaches, thanks to a high-level technology, an opulence that gives each one of their members the illusion of governing the world by pressing one simple button (BARRAL, 2000, p. 33).

Therefore, the generation born around 1960's becomes the first one without the obsession for war memories and without the imaginary of restraint. In late 1970's, emerges the image of the *moratorium ningen* (モラトリアム人間) – expression that can be translated as moratorium people, popularized, at the time, by the psychiatrist Keigo Okonogi. These young people, supposedly without political awareness, start avoiding the arrival to the adult life, not showing any interest in entering the workforce. This youth can be characterized, yet, by their fragility facing a capitalist industrial society, where competitive relationships rule, as, for example, the SATs. It is understood that "many do not feel capable, or do not have the courage of integrating these social dynamics, and

prefer to maintain the part of their childhood that remains inside of them" (BARRAL, 2000, p. 35)

Another relevant point would be the power of mass media and consumption society. In the end of 1960's, the Japanese lifestyle begins to have a great influence from the United States and their American way of life. With the development of capitalism, it becomes necessary to distinguish a relatively autonomous and individualistic middle-class. Even so, the system of mass production and consumption still catered for collective needs: both workers and consumers should form a group, a family (KOGAWA, 1984).

In the 1970's, in addition to the technological advancement in the production system, the exploitation of more segmented markets become more interesting for the development of consumption, considering that, in a large part of the houses, there already were basic necessity goods for the family. The market segmentation begins to seek for differentiation and diversification of a society homogenized by the imperial system (KOGAWA, 1984), considering the concern of the middle-class geared towards the family sphere. The efforts are concentrated in the well-being and future of their children and no longer to companies and employers.

In 1985, arrives to the media a new term used to describe that same youth without worries and struggles faced soon after the war. It is *shinjinrui* (新人類), "a term that implied that the behavior of young people was so different from previous generations that they could even be considered as a 'new human race'" (KINSELLA, 1998, p. 292), characterized by their increasingly particular and restricted interests, and not only resistant to the entry in society as adults, but also unaware to any issue that is not related to their hobbies. Miyanaga (1991) understands *shinjinrui* as the first generation of the post war period to become visible, even though young people with individualistic values already existed for quite some time.

Otaku arrives, then, as a new version of the old-fashioned and generalized concept of youth. Generally speaking, "it refers to those that

are involved in forms of subcultures strongly attached to animes6, videogames, computers, science fiction, movies with special effects, anime action figures, and so forth" (AZUMA, 2009, p. 3). Being strongly related to the fascination to mass culture (IVY, 2010), we understand that the stereotype of otaku is related to:

> An intense intimacy with fan objects massively mediated; a highly developed judgement about details of animation; a lonely form of being, even if followed by absorptions of in virtual sociability (with forms of call and movement that evidence new forms of communication). (IVY, 2010, p. 4)

The first one to employ this sense to the word *otaku* was the essayist Akio Nakamori which, in 1983, published the article Otaku no Kenyu (おたく』の研究) in the magazine *Manga Burikko*, catering for the adult audience. In the essay, there was a story about the author and his visit to *Comiket* – a fair for independent magazines organized since 1975 in Japan – in which verifies, initially through the analysis of the audience found in the event, the arrival of a group of young people obsessed by elements of the virtual and fiction, as it is the case of mangas, animes, celebrities or videogames.

However, the expression received a negative tone in 1989, with the news of the murder of four girls by Tsutomu Miyazaki, 27 years old, characterized by the media at the time as a "typical otaku" (BARRAL, 2000, p. 28) – in a search to Miyazaki's house, police found a vast collection of mangas and video tapes with animes. This representation and connection made from the incident with the image of the otaku started the process through which its image began to acquire a negative connotation and a derogative tone in society (BARRAL, 2000).

In the beginning of 1990's, in response to media attacks after the incident, the term begins to be used and appropriated by the otakus

6 "Anime means animation in Japanese. It is the contracted word through which Japanese write animation, deriving from the version in a nipponic accent animeeshon. Therefore, for Japanese people, each and every animation is an anime. Outside Japan, however, this word has another meaning. Abroad, it was conventioned to call anime specifically the animation produced in Japan or with a set of specific characteristics that the Japanese people had developed in that area". (SATO, 2007, p. 31)

themselves, seeking its association to positive aspects. However, in March 1995, another event puts in conflict the image of the otaku. An attack in the Tokyo subway, releasing the lethal gas Sarin, leaving 12 people dead and over 5 thousand injured, is performed by the religious cult and terrorist group Aum Shinrikyo, which, with an apocalyptic worldview based on science fiction and on references of Japanese animation, is associated to otaku culture, accentuating their negative perception (BARRAL, 2000; GALBRAITH, 2010).

Despite of that, six months after the event, the release of the anime *Neon Genesis Evangelion* makes otaku culture gain media attention and popularity, renewing their image. In 1996, the cultural critic Toshio Okada, in the publication *Otakugaku Ny□mon* (**オタク学** An introduction to Otaku studies), presents a new definition of the expression, treating the otaku as a new type of people "passible to cultural conditions of a highly consumerist society" (AZUMA, 2009, p. 5). In the same year, Okada offers, through this study, a course about Otaku in the University of Tokyo. At that time, many considered an insult this subject being studied in the most prestigious university in Japan (AOYAGI, 2005).

While in Japan great media outlets, such as the TV channel NHK and newspaper *Asahi Shimbun* banned the term, considering it derogatory, outside of the country it started to represent a new cultural movement. In the beginning of the 1990's, the word spread out throughout the United States in anime and sci-fi conventions, being a theme in magazines such as Wired and naming their own conventions, such as *Otakon*. In 1996, it begins to be even more known with the novel *Idoru* by William Gibson (GALBRAITH, 2010).

Thus, once the word began to be appropriated by the mass media – even with a negative connotation –, as well as by their adepts, it wasn't possible to replace it for any other term (with attempts of softening the term with the creation of the expression otakky or hobbyist, without success). As a strategy for valorization of the term, then, Japanese society and media started, later, associating it to every individual that has a quirk (it can be related to any theme, such as sports, music or health), seeking

their banalization and dissociating it from previous incidents (BARRAL, 2000). It is important to point out, in this sense, the importance of media in the representation and perception of the world otaku, considering that both positive and negative images were intrinsically linked to the media discourse (GALBRAITH, 2010).

Between the years 2001 and 2002, the artistic movement *Superflat* by Takashi Murakami inspired in the aesthetic of mangas and animes has their first exposition in the United States, spreading the term otaku among critics and the mass media. Thus, in the 2000's, with the growth in popularity of Japanese pop culture, the own impact of the otaku culture surpasses the country's borders and begins to have a global reach: otakus begin to be recognized both as ultra-consumers and as a creative force in the content industry, being incorporated to the cool brand Japan7. In 2005, the Nomura Research Institute estimated that 1.72 million otakus spent, per year, approximately 411 billion yen, (about 3.5 billion dollars) with their hobbies, being considered, therefore "enthusiast consumers" (GALBRAITH, 2010, p. 218).

Currently, we understand otaku as a multitude of subjects and practices (LUNNING, 2010) or a new form of social existence (LAMARRE, 2010), a meaning in constant change (GALBRAITH, 2010). According to Lamarre (2010), in his Otaku studies, it is important not to limit ourselves to interview people that declare or identify themselves as otaku or classifying them according to behavior stereotypes generated and shared on media. Despite recognizing the relevance of these information, it is necessary, still, to perceive the emergency of new social relations and understand how our comprehension can interact with them.

Azula (2009) analyzes otaku as "considerably social in its own interactional form) (p. 92) - in other words, engaged in "diverse forms

7 The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry from Japan had instituted the Secretary of Promotion of Creative Industry, officially named as Cool Japan, related to the term cool created by McGray (2002), which made reference to the rise of Japanese culture, "both regarding their forms of contemporary expression – fashion, j-pop, animes, games – exported to the whole world, and their more traditional facet, represented by kimonos, sumo wrestling and culinary traditions, among more antient cultural expressions". (ALBUQUERQUE; CORTEZ, 2015, p. 258)

of communication, such as online chats and forums, as well as in conventions and "offline meetings" in real life" (p. 92). To Condry (2004), otaku, in the Japanese scenario, points towards a new understanding of the relationship between consumer and society in general, representing an intersection between knowledge and passion, a commitment with their object of desire, evidencing a social life built from consumption goods.

In this sense, according to Lamarre (2010), the otaku phenomenon can be related to "the transformations of capitalism, to changes in the way we interact with and through merchandise, and to technological transformations, especially in communication and information technologies" (p. 364). For the author, there is, at least, three implications in the understanding of otaku: new types of images and image flows, related to the arrival of new technologies, new forms of relationship with these images, and the change of consumption relation.

It is precisely in this context of new forms of relationship that emerges the desire or affection directed to characters, represented by the expression *moe*. This begins to be used in the 1980's, referring, originally, to the "fictional desire for comic book, animation and game characters, or pop idols" (AZUMA, 2009, p. 47). According to Condry (2013), *moe* is, generally, an expression used for the affection directed towards characters, or, more specifically, "a reference to an internalized emotional response to something, generally without any hope of emotional reciprocity" (p. 187).

Despite having questions about the origin and the reason of using the term, in Condry (2013)'s interpretation, *moe* is the noun form of the word *moeru* (萌える), which means to blossom, to grow. The reference to the verb is given by the specific attraction to girls that are about to grow up and become young women (as it is the case of a big part of the characters in question), and for the desire to take care of them. There is, still, a wordplay with another verb *moeru* (燃える – with completely different ideograms and meanings), regarding the action to boil or burn, and can be related to an intense sexual desire.

In this sense, the otaku gets closer to the image of *bish□jo* (美少女), pretty girls represented in different media, such as animations and games, which not only symbolize the transformation of the female body into a technological artifact, but also refer to relationships based on ownership and control, visible in the attraction of otaku to computers (BLACK, 2012).

In the relationship of otaku with technological artifacts, we can observe that, since early 1980's – "a moment where online communities were the only form of computerized correspondence available" (AZUMA, 2009, p. 4) – until the present day, the basis of internet culture in Japan were built through them. According to Ito (2012), many of the main characteristics present in the digital age and in the network we currently live in – such as the decentralization of forms of production and participant media – were already clear in the beginning of otaku culture.

Barral (2000) considers the otaku the first generation of what he calls *Homo virtuens*, a virtual man fascinated "by the image of himself that is sent through a television or computer screen", and "doesn't know what to do with this redundant and distressing reality" (p. 21). Still according to the author, there would be a disgust to the idea of suffering. The otaku refuses to suffer and risk himself in a relationship with someone else, feeling more comfortable in the virtual universe created by him.

Even though Japan has a long history of relationships known as trans dimensional, that bring back ghost narratives present in literary works; in the recent context, an example that stands out is Gatebox, especially regarding its consumption potential, as analyzed in the following section.

Gatebox and new forms of relationship

Bearing in mind the presented context, we verify in Japan the existence of a wide market of affective products, services and experiences that contemplate not only interaction with other people, as the hosts/hostess clubs, bars in which the waiters/waitresses offer a couple hours of company and talk – the best and most popular escorts being ranked

and awarded – for different purposes that range from company to events and dates to the replacement of family members. There are also options of non-human companies, such as sex dolls, videogame characters and virtual reality, in addition to robots with artificial intelligence created for domestic use.

In Japan, since 2008, there are registers of people interested in taking their relationship with characters to other levels. An example is Taichi Takashita, who, with the goal of officializing matrimony with the anime character Mikuru Asahina, organized an online petition seeking legal recognition of the wedding with a 2D character, gathering, in two months, about 3 thousand signatures (CONDRY, 2013).

In the next year, the first informal (non-legalized) wedding ceremony between a character and a human being took place. The user Sal9000 fell in love with Nene Anegasaki, a virtual girl from the game *Love Plus*, which simulates romance between the main character and the love interests, and made a ceremony between some friends, with live transmission on the internet. The game Love Plus was developed by Konami for Nintendo DS in 2009. In its narrative, the lead character (the gamer) meets three girls and can choose one of them to be in a relationship (WICOFF, 2013).

In 2017, the game development company Hibiki Works offered the Japanese audience the possibility of having a wedding ceremony in virtual reality with one of the characters of the game *Niizuma Lovely x Cation*. Those interested in the event could get enrolled during a period, and in June 30th, 2017, the grooms could gather in their virtual reality devices in a chapel and consolidated their marriages with their chosen ones. The ceremony was held by the company as a form of promotion of the game's release, which had as main point the relationship of the player with the characters.

Image 1 - Wedding ceremony in virtual reality promoted by the company Hibiki Works.

Source: Vocativ

As previously mentioned, it is important to point out in this scenario the *moe* aspect, about the affection related to characters. The company Vinclu, having in mind the Japanese market, releases in 2016 Gatebox's promotional campaign, announcing the robot that, equipped with artificial intelligence, presents functionalities for daily choirs, but has as the main goal to offer a lifestyle followed by the character designed for its interior. Composed by a glass cylinder connected to the user's internet and smartphone, the device projects the hologram of the tridimensional character Azuma Hikari internally.

Image 2 - Gatebox's structure.

Source: PCMag.com

Defined by the brand as "the first virtual domestic home which enables you to live with your favorite character", the device has the

technology of projection and sensors as camera and microphone, detecting the face and movements of the user, in addition to connection via Bluetooth and infrared, through which it is possible to have interactions with other appliances and electronic devices, and an input for television or computer – which enables the transmission of the character to other screens. Released to pre-order between 2016 and 2017 with the initial price of 298 thousand yen, with official release in 2018, it is currently sold for 165 thousand yen, without additional taxes, being available for purchase in their official website and in online stores such as Amazon and Yahoo Shopping. Despite not having a physical store, it is possible to book a test drive, and, since October 2019, the product is found exposed in an electronic store. Up until the present moment, the units produced were only commercialized to Japan and the United States, having Japanese as the only language available.

The first character available by the brand, Azuma Hikari, is described as a "comforting bride", who can help her partner relax after a difficult day. On Gatebox's website, there is a section with their profile, composed by physical and personality traits. The character refers to the user as master, and the interaction can be through voice, as in a conversation, and through an app, which controls the device and enables the interaction with the character through a chat when you are out of the house. In addition to responding to the interactions, Hikari begins conversations and her system is developed and updated according to the exchange of content and experience with the user. According to each user's habits, Hikari knows her time to wake up and to go back home, also performing activities common to virtual assistants, such as event reminders, weather forecast, appliance control and speakers for music.

In 2018, Vinclu offered, in a determined time period, two new possibilities of company: the virtual singer Hatsune Miku and the character Ayase Aragaki, from the Japanese animation *Ore no Imouto ga Konna ni Kawaii Wake ga Nai*, whose devices had to be discontinued due to a system update. Despite Hikari being the only character available for purchase at the moment, it is possible for characters to design and view

other characters in the internal part of the device, making their own creations, which can be shared with all the network of people that own a Gatebox, also allowing the inclusion of different genders – considering that, until now, only female characters were available.

The relationship with the characters were explored in its communication both through the official website and through video campaigns available on YouTube. The brand's official channel has over 6 million views and 20 thousand subscriptions, having 34 videos available, whose content varies from concept and promotional videos, recordings of events held in person, explanatory films, new releases and updates, and interviews with characters discussing issues related to the Gatebox universe. Generally, concept and promotional films bring the narrative of men which, living by themselves, have Hikari's company, which, if digitally synced with other devices, can perform simple tasks such as turning the light on, turning the vacuum cleaner on or turning the TV on and off. Until now, there is a series of three conceptual videos, all released in 2016, and two promotional ones, the first released in 2016 and the second released in 2018 – period in which the product had already been delivered to its first clients.

In the first conceptual video titled Care, a young man returns from his work to his house and interacts with Hikari, which in a certain moment of the video leaves the device and gets face to face with her user. The next morning, she wakes him up and gives him information about the weather, asking him to come home early. In the second video, Beside the narrative brings a man that, while working on a computer, counts with Hikari's support, motivating him to carry on, and making simple activities, such as turning on the lights when he is working and turning it off when he is sleeping. The last one of the series, Wait, has the goal to present Gatebox Chat, app developed so that the user can communicate with the character when he is out of the ouse. In this context, it is presented a young man interacting with Hikari through text messages while he is going to work and, later, in his office. Before coming back

home, he asks her to clean the house, turning on the vacuum integrated to her system.

In the first promotional video, Okaeri (welcome back, in Japanese), it is presented a young man's routine that, since the morning, counts with the character to wake him up, talk about the weather and chat during the day through text messages in the app while he is out of the house. When she receives the warning that her companion is coming home, she turns on the apartment lights and receives him when he arrives. At the end of the day, he points out how good it is to come home knowing someone is there waiting for him. In a second video, named *Kanpai* (cheers, in Japanese) a man interacts with Hikari in the end of his workday through text messages. While he comes home, Hikari turns on the lights and prepares the mood. When he arrives, the character says they are completing their three-month anniversary of living together, and they celebrate the date with a dinner.

Despite presenting different functions and uses within the household environment, the main attribute promoted by the brand in its communication platforms is the possibility to live with the company of this character. In the product official website, the company highlights the desire of getting people closer to their favorite characters, describing as the reason for Gatebox development "not only the search for entertainment or convenience. We want the characters to be naturally inserted into our daily lives and accompanying us in our moments of relaxation".

The company's website brings, in addition to descriptive sections of the product, the company and the character Hikari, the possibilities to use in the work environment and information about pre-purchase experimentation. They also share explanatory content about the relationship of Japanese society with characters, which do not restrict to current days, having a wide history of relationship and interaction with beings of other dimensions. Through data collected by Character Databank, Japanese company of marketing and consultancy specialized in characters and licensing, Gatebox tells that, In Japan, 82.2% of the people have some

type of product related to characters, and that these transmit feelings of vitality, calm and peace of mind.

Considering not only the relationship between Gatebox and their characters as also the Japanese history of relationship with characters, Vinclu performed, in 2017, an action through Gatebox's official website, to supply their characters the recognition of marrying a character, in addition to the benefits to the married couple, "as an additional value for the maintenance of the couple's life and a day off in the woman's birthday. The invitation was also extended to non-employees: if there was any interest, they could send, along with the wedding documents, the resumé to apply for an opening. The registration would also recognize same-sex and interspecies marriage, in the case of people married with characters with the same gender or non-human characters.

Image 3 - Gatebox official website with information for the officialization of marriage with characters.

Source: Gatebox

In the website, they released to all audience, forms for wedding registration in four different models, for printing and filling, as well as instructions for sending these documents. These forms, in addition to fields with personal information, there are questions related to the

proposal, how the couple met and if the last name will be adopted by the virtual partner. Until now, there were over 3.7 thousand documents sent.

In November 2018, the Japanese Akihiko Kondo took part in a wedding ceremony with the virtual idol Hatsune Miku – one of the characters offered for company by Vinclu. Living since March of the same year in the company of Miku's holo-robot in Gatebox, Kondo officialized his union in a 40 people ceremony, costing around two million yen. Despite not having a legal basis, the wedding had a document expedited by Gatebox. In an interview, Kondo tells he had negative experiences with women in the past, and that he doesn't have any desire to get into a relationship with a person, pointing out that the character with whom she married cannot cheat on him, get older or die.

When we consider the presented context, it is important to observe the power relationships that emerge from these interactions, considering the choice of the user of living with character that, by definition, would not have the autonomy or conscience to generate confrontations, fall outs or separations. Such asymmetries are also analyzed in studies about products with similar purposes, as it is the case of sex dolls and robots. There is even a movement against the development of these technologies – such as the Campaign against sex robots, led by Kathleen Richardson, professor at the Montfort University, in England – saying that these initiatives promote women's objectification, once the female gender correspond to most representation in sex dolls and robots, as well as reinforces relationships of gender inequality and violence.

When analyzing the development of sex robots and the discourses published on the media and by the companies responsible for these articles in comparison to fictional narratives in films and TV series that explore the relationship between women robots and male humans, Hawkes and Lacey (2019) verified that there is an expectation in relation to robots as something "human enough so that their desire and affection are meaningful, but not aware enough to decide to leave their

partner" (p. 7), "having the need for a company that say the right things to make them feel loved" (p. 11).

In order to understand this type of power relationship, Giard (2016) has been reflecting about the reason why love dolls are, in its majority, representations of women. When talking with some creators of dolls, the author points out the speech from the president of Orient Industry, one of the main manufacturers of Japanese *love dolls*, in which they would be an instrument to perfect a simulation, and they would be exclusively reserved to the male audience, because they cannot move. This affirmation would come from the conviction that, in a relationship, the man would be the active part, and, therefore, the woman would be the one to "suffer, offer themselves, open themselves, submit themselves and wait" (p. 238). As much prejudiced and fictional this businessman argument is, there is no doubt it is based in a "pattern of man-woman relationship that still seems to be common in the country where spouses are called *oku-san*, term used in an allusion to the place reserved to them: inside [the home]" (p. 238).

Giard's research (2016) widely discusses not only the current market, but also all the history of relationship. When he brings up voices of producers and users, he presents important perspectives for the understanding of these forms of relation. When we think about the Japanese context, an aspect that also stands out is the animist conception, the understanding that the spirits would be embodied in nature and that every entity, human and non-human, would be a spiritual essence, coming from religious and philosophical doctrines of Buddhism and Taoism.

When bringing the speech of a few of the creators of love dolls, the author compares dolls to a type of vehicle. Just like a car, the doll would be a means of transportation, enabling their users the movement, the change to another location. This relation would be "reinforced by the idea that the doll has in its center an empty space, in form of a cabin, in which is possible to shelter a fragment of the anatomy that is designed to accommodate a cavernous body" (GIARD, 2016 p. 218). In this same sense, the doll would transmit "an imaginary linked to the transmission

of life, imaginary rooted in the otaku culture, born out of the ruins of the post-war era" (GIARD, 2016 p. 218).

Thinking about these forms of relationship, Takeyama (2005) suggests that, although these alternative forms of relationship based in a bond of consumption are frequently seen as a form of entertainment or escapism, this type of perspective ignores the fact that this activity is not reduced to acquiring goods. The consumption practice – and this is, without a doubt, a well stablished consumption practice – boosts the creation of new markets and leads to the cultural production of new meanings and the transformation of social values (MIYADAI, 1994 *in* TAKEYAMA, 2005).

Final considerations

More than a conclusion or an objective diagnostic about the growing impact of consumption of affection, this article seeks to raise some questions that can collaborate with the contemporary debate. Throughout the research we observed that in the current scenario – marked by the economy of affection – love relationships follow, often, the logic of commercial relationships and cost-benefit patterns (ILLOUZ, 2011). Therefore, a market arises, having as goal the commercialization of affection, which, in the specific context of Japan, reflects, and at the same time, feeds, a demographic situation marked by the increasingly smaller number of marriages and relationships and the consequent lower birth rate, which in 2016 presented their lowest index since 1899 – year that the statistics began to be collected.

However, the theme of affection also can be approached under other perspectives. The philosopher Brian Massumi (2015), for example, has proposed a philosophy of affection which, in turn, would have an increasingly more significant impact in the economic sector and in the lifestyles. According to this author, it isn't about merely satisfaction, in other words, consuming to fill an individual desire. Beside this tendency already widely debated, there would be a network of affection and intensities that can be conceived as something he calls dividualism coin,

not individualism, pointing towards a possible opening to the other no longer restricted to a Narcissistic conduct, as it strengths the aesthetic dimension of relations.

We would like to suggest that it can also be an important clue to think about the emerging market of affections in Japan. In this case, it isn't necessarily about only filling the needs of lonely people, as it has been highlighted to some authors, such as Illouz (2011). But it can also be about a process of collective rehabilitation or a dividualist micropolitics, as proposed by Massumi (2015), which even being introduced in one of the biggest centers of consumption in the world, would shelter a logic of anti-narcissistic and anti-western approximation8, with the ability to generate new forms of life.

At the same time in which the logic of capitalism of affection rules, it is possible to raise questions that complexify the debate, as for example: in what way in this dystopian scenario, in which apparently everything that matters is the commercialization and pricing of all instances of life, can emerge a network of affections that makes us rethink the notions of value through the micropolitics of dividualism? Would this be a starting point to question the sovereignty of the economy in all spheres of life and analyze consumption beyond the relationships between consumer and what is consumed, opening paths to new transindividual networks of affections?

References

AOYAGI, H. *Islands of Eight Million Smiles*: Idol Performance and Symbolic Production in Contemporary Japan. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005.

AZUMA, H. *Otaku*: Japan's database animals. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

BARRAL, E. *Otaku - Os filhos do virtual*. São Paulo: Editora SENAC, 2000.

8 The notion of collective in Japan, as in other non-western cultures, is fundamental for the cultural constitution. The notion of self is, first of all, collective, either in contexts of work or family. The well being of the group comes before individual needs. The seminar proposed by the professor Emmanuel Lozerand in Paris, called *Drôles d'Individus, de la singularité individuelle dans le Reste-du-monde*, took this discussion further and in 2014 was published by the publishing house Klincksiek.

BLACK, D. The Virtual Idol: Producing and Consuming Digital Femininity. In: GALBRAITH, P; KARLIN, J. (Eds.). *Idols and celebrity in japanese media culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 209-228.
CONDRY, I. B-Boys and B-Girls: Rap Fandom and Consumer Culture in Japan. In: KELLY, W. (Ed.). *Fanning the Flames*: Fans and Consumer Culture in Contemporary Japan. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004, p. 17-40.
CONDRY, I. *The Soul of Anime:* Collaborative Creativity and Japan's Media Success Story. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.
FONTENELLE, I. *Cultura do consumo*: fundamentos e formas contemporâneas. São Paulo: Editora FGV, 2017.
GALBRAITH, P. Akihabara: Conditioning a Public 'Otaku' Image. In: LUNNING, F. (Ed.). *Mechademia V.* 5: Fanthropologies. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010, p. 210-231.
GALBRAITH, P.; LAMARRE, T. Otakuology: A Dialogue. In: LUNNING, F. (Ed.). *Mechademia V.* 5: Fanthropologies. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010, p. 360-374.
GIARD, A. *Un désir d'humain*: les love doll au Japon. Paris: Société d'édition Les Belles Lettres, 2016.
HAWKES, R; LACEY, C. The future of sex: intermedial desire between fembot fantasies and sexbot technologies. *Journal of Popular Culture*, v. 52, n. 1, 2019, p. 98-116.
HOTTA, J. 人とロボットの秘密. Tokyo: Kodansha, 2008.
ILLOUZ, E. *O amor nos tempos de capitalismo.* Rio de Janeiro: Editora Zahar, 2011.
ITO, M. Introduction. In: ITO, M; OKABE, D; TSUJI, I. *Fandom Unbound*: Otaku Culture in a Connected World. London: Yale University Press, 2012, p. xi-xxxi.
IVY, M. The Art of Cute Little Things: Nara Yoshimoto's Parapolitics. In: LUNNING, F. (Ed.). *Mechademia V.* 5: Fanthropologies. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010, p. 3-30.
KINSELLA, S. Japanese Subculture in the 1990s: Otaku and the Amateur Manga Movement. *Journal of Japanese Studies*, v. 24, n. 2, p. 289-319, 1998.
KOGAWA, T. Beyond Eletronic Individualism. *Canadian Journal of Politic and Social Critic*, v. 8, n. 3, p. 15-20, 1984.
KUROTANI, S. Working women of the bubble generation. In: KAWANO, S; ROBERTS, G.; LONG, S. *Capturing contemporary Japan: differentiation and uncertainty.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014.
LAMARRE, T. Cool, Creepy, Moé: Otaku Fictions, Discourses, and Policies. *Diversité urbaine*, v. 13, n. 1, p. 131-152, 2013.
LOZERAND, E. *Drôles d'Individus, de la singularité individuelle dans le Reste-du-monde*. Paris: Klincksiek, 2014.
LUNNING, F. (Ed.). *Mechademia V.* 5: Fanthropologies. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
MASSUMI, B. *The Power at the end of Economy*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.

MIYANAGA, K. *The Creative Edge*: individualism in Japan. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1991.
NAKAYAMA, S. **ロボットが日本を救う—開発から40年のパイオニアが語るロボットの近未来**. Tokyo: Toyo Keizai, 2006.
ROBERTSON, J. *Robo sapiens japanicus*: robots, gender, family, and the Japanese nation. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018.
SONE, Y. *Japanese Robot Culture*: performance, imagination and modernity. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017.
TAKEYAMA, A. Commodified romance in a host club. In: MCLELLAND, M.; DASGUPTA, R. *Genders, Transgenders and Sexualities in Japan*. Nova York: Routledge, 2005.
WICOFF, C. Hatsune Miku: The reality of a Fake Pop Star. *Colorado Journal of Asian Studies*, v.2, p. 1-11, 2013.

Websites

AMAZON. Alexa User Guide: Learn what Alexa can do. Disponível em: https://www.amazon.com/b?ie=UTF8&node=17934671011. Acesso em: abr. 2020.
AMAZON. Gatebox **キャラクター召喚装置** Gatebox**量産モデル** GT-BX-100JP. Disponível em: https://www.amazon.co.jp/dp/B0841YZMZJ?__hssc=250833881.1.1588130043071&__hstc=250833881.ab9ec06d5459ee2d5441eda1088a5302.1587588637695.1588024822709.1588130043071.13&__hsfp=3149358639&hsCtaTracking=ede2802e-fb63-4a2a-ab6e-868d6bc2fcb8%7C2edddcbb-c4bc-4987-8599-6f1f37fb97c7. Acesso em: abr. 2020.
CAMPAIGN AGAINST SEX ROBOTS. Disponível em: https://campaignagainstsexrobots.org/about/. Acesso em: abr. 2020.
CNN. Tokyo man marries videogame character. Disponível em: http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/asiapcf/12/16/japan.virtual.wedding/. Acesso em: ago. 2019.
EL PAÍS. Virgens, ameaça à natalidade no Japão. Disponível em: https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2017/03/20/internacional/1490008541_339286.html. Acesso em: ago. 2019.
EMTECH. Emotional Machines: The technological transformation of intimacy in Japan. Disponível em: https://www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/en/e/emtech/project/index.html. Acesso em: abr. 2020.
FAMILY ROMANCE. Disponível em: http://family-romance.com/. Acesso em: abr. 2020.
G1. O homem japonês que 'casou' com uma cantora de realidade virtual. Disponível em: https://g1.globo.com/economia/tecnologia/noticia/2018/11/12/o-homem-japones-que-casou-com-cantora-de-realidade-virtual.ghtml?fbclid=IwAR1Wokt4-JEZRjtZgsZZFP2aRED7HPWwPJqaMNZQXWK81xNS4CLwhUNNwNo. Acesso em: ago. 2019.
GATEBOX. Disponível em: ttp://gatebox.ai/. Acesso em: ago. 2019.
GATEBOX LAB. Tokoukyoku Marriage. Disponível em: https://gateboxlab.com/tokoukyoku_marriage/#. Acesso em: ago. 2019.

GATEBOX STORE. Disponível em: https://store.gatebox.ai/item-detail/56343?hsCtaTracking=493483fc-64df-4d79-9b82-0022e587f134%7C7566b558-58eb-4d60-abee-32ea1799a0af. Acesso em: abr. 2020.
GOOGLE ASSISTENTE. Disponível em: https://assistant.google.com/intl/pt_br/. Acesso em: abr. 2020.
INVISIBLE BOYFRIEND. Disponível em: https://invisibleboyfriend.com/. Acesso em: ago. 2019.
ISTOÉ. Japão registra menos de um milhão de nascimentos pela primeira vez. Disponível em: https://istoe.com.br/japao-registra-menos-de-1-milhao-de-nascimentos-pela-1a-vez/. Acesso em: ago. 2019.
NEXTSHARK. Japanese company now offers benefits to workers married to anime characters. Disponível em: https://nextshark.com/japanese-company-now-offers-benefits-workers-married-anime-characters/. Acesso em: ago. 2019.
PCMAG.COM. Gatebox Virtual Home Robot Wants You to Be Her Master. Disponível em: http://www.pcmag.com/news/350314/gatebox-virtual-home-robot-wants-you-to-be-her-master. Acesso em: ago. 2019.
VOCATIV. Tokyo men married videogame characters in VR. Disponível em: http://www.vocativ.com/439438/tokyo-japan-vr-wedding-hibiki-works/index.html. Acesso em: ago. 2019.
YAHOO SHOPPING. キャラクター召喚装置 「Gatebox」量産モデル（GTBX-100JP）.Disponívelem:https://store.shopping.yahoo.co.jp/gatebox/gatebox-gtbx-100.html?__hssc=250833881.1.1588130043071&__hstc=250833881.ab9ec06d5459ee2d5441eda1088a5302.1587588637695.1588024822709.1588130043071.13&__hsfp=3149358639&hsCtaTracking=93b72407-07f3-4dad-8e93-6a43f6199561%7C04299ff8-374d-485b-9a61-3a46cfb8aa06. Acesso em: abr. 2020.
YOUTUBE. A indústria japonesa do amor. Disponível em: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qpZbu7J7UL4&t=374s. Acesso em: ago. 2019.
YOUTUBE. Ela – Trailer legendado. Disponível em: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q68rKU1Padk. Acesso em: ago. 2019.
YOUTUBE. Gatebox – Concept Movie 1st “CARE”_english. Disponível em: https://youtu.be/_hxzyRiJcYs. Acesso em: abr. 2020.
YOUTUBE. Gatebox – Concept Movie 2nd “BESIDE”. Disponível em: https://youtu.be/JZnb0fwBirk. Acesso em; abr. 2020.
YOUTUBE. Gatebox – Concept Movie 3rd “WAIT”_english. Disponível em: https://youtu.be/5k7-PA9oXXA. Acesso em: abr. 2020.
YOUTUBE. Gatebox Inc. Disponível em: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCdUDXEinxFZJ2NnKfhf3wTw/featured. Acesso em: abr. 2020.
YOUTUBE. Gatebox – Promotion Movie “KANPAI”_English ver. Disponível em: https://youtu.be/bBOXQz7OHqQ. Acesso em: abr. 2020.
YOUTUBE. Gatebox – Promotion Movie “OKAERI”_english. Disponível em: https://youtu.be/nkcKaNqfykg. Acesso em: abr. 2020.

YOUTUBE. How Lonely Japanese are finding virtual love. Disponível em: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LGfSZemKquU. Acesso em: ago. 2019.

About the authors

Beatriz Yumi Aoki – PhD student and Master's in Communication and Semiotics at PUC-SP, CAPES PROSUP scholar and PSDE (PhD Exchange Program) at University of Tsukuba, Japan. Bachelor of Arts in Social Communication (Advertisement) at ESPM-SP. In the present article, the author developed the field research and specific analyses, since the article is part of the discussions she has been developing in her PhD thesis in the Graduate Studies Program in Communication and Semiotics at PUC-SP.

Christine Greiner – Full professor at PUC-SP, where she teaches in the course of Arts of the Body and in the Graduate Program in Communication and Semiotics. She's an author of different books and articles on body, Japanese culture, political philosophy and art. She is currently a productivity scholar in research 2 (PQ2) at CNPq. In the present article, the author participated in the theoretic discussion, especially regarding the concept of body in Japan and lifestyles, creating a few insertions in the text.

Date of submission: 06/10/2019
Date of acceptance: 31/05/2020