

Popular science project summary

Our main goal in the proposed research project is to investigate how people perceive artificial entities - synthetic (i.e., computer-based) human characters and robots - in the context of moral interactions. Moral interactions are structured in such a way that one of the parties involved is the agent who carries out a given action, e.g., harming, and the other party is the target of this action and thus becomes the patient (victim). We will aim to check how the appearance of artificial entities and their behavior in the interaction shape the process of attributing them human qualities, e.g., the capacity to feel pain or to understand right from wrong. We will also check whether the attribution of human qualities is associated with granting moral worth. Previous research has shown that people readily reason about non-human and non-living entities in terms of human qualities – this phenomenon was termed anthropomorphism. However, it is still unknown to what extent anthropomorphism concerns the realm of morality. An important element of our work will be to examine what impact the properties of the observers (research participants) have on the process of assigning human qualities and moral worth to artificial entities. We predict that empathy towards the entities in the role of moral patients will increase people's tendency to view artificial entities as human-like. If instead of empathy people feel discomfort, it will decrease this tendency. Rapid development of the fields of computer science, design, animation, and engineering brings about the creation of increasingly complex artificial entities we already interact with quite often, and will likely interact with more and in more circumstances in the future (for example in education, entertainment, medicine, services). Hence a need emerges to better understand our nuanced perceptions of these entities and learn how they influence us and our emotions.