

German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ Tokyo)

DIJ Study Group



April 20, 2026, 6.30 pm (JST) / 11.30 am (CEST)

From Policy to Practice: The Daily Reality with Self-Checkout Machines in Japan

Mena Mesenhöller, Heinrich-Heine-University Düsseldorf/DIJ Tokyo

As Japan aims to address demographically induced labor shortages, automation and the implementation of everyday technologies, such as self-checkout cashiers, can be increasingly observed. This presents an opportunity to test if the self-image of Japan as a technological leader holds true, and to further examine how political ambitions impact individuals' daily lives. The study draws on Social Practice Theory, seeing automation as emerging from materials, competences, and meanings, to analyze how technology is embedded in everyday life.

The talk first explores the macro level by drawing on expert interviews with policymakers, researchers, and producers of self-checkout systems. It analyzes how these actors conceptualize the role of everyday automation and reveals significant institutional misalignments in their priorities: policymakers see the need for fast digital transformation; researchers fear social isolation; industry prioritizes efficiency. The talk then turns to the micro level and examines how self-checkout machines are experienced by individuals in daily life. Findings based on focus group interviews with customers and survey data from retail employees show how the machines impact social relations and lead to social isolation.

By linking institutional perspectives with lived experiences, the presentation highlights how continuing automation reconfigures everyday practices and social interaction. It ultimately demonstrates how sociotechnical transformations unfold across contexts, offering insights relevant for both Science and Technology Studies and policy debates in ageing societies.

Mena Mesenhöller is a PhD candidate in the Institute for Modern Japanese Studies at Heinrich-Heine-University Düsseldorf, specializing in Science and Technology Studies in Japan. She completed her Bachelor's degree in Sociology/Japanese Studies at Goethe-University Frankfurt a.M. and her Master's in Transcultural Studies at Heidelberg University. Mena's primary research interest lies in the implementation processes and social consequences of everyday technology in Japan. She previously studied at Meiji University, the University of Tokyo, and spent a research stay at Tokyo College (University of Tokyo). Since February 2026, Mena has been a PhD student at DIJ Tokyo.

About:

The DIJ Study Group is a forum for scholars from all disciplines conducting research on contemporary or modern Japan. The event is open to all.

This session is organized by Nicole M. Mueller.

This is a public event. Please be aware that audio-visual recordings may be made, stored, and published during and after the event.

Hybrid Event:

On-site participation: please register via email to mueller@dijtokyo.org until April 19, 2026.

Online participation: please register via our webpage.

Venue:

Online and DIJ Tokyo: <https://www.dijtokyo.org/access/>