

Elena Giannoulis and Lukas R. A. Wilde (Eds.), **Emoticons, Kaomoji, and Emoji: The Transformation of Communication in the Digital Age**, New York, NY: Routledge, 2020, 263 pp., \$116.83 (hardcover).

Reviewed by

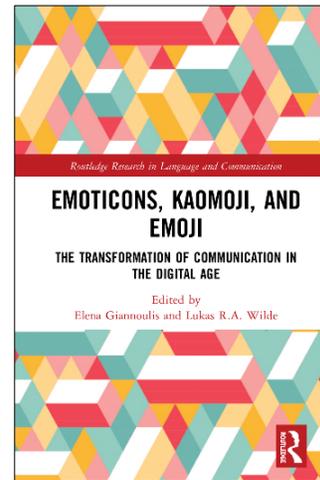
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Approximately 90% of people seem to use emoji, emoticons, and kaomoji in their online communication (Thompson, 2016). Although we use them frequently in social media, we barely think about how they change our daily life. Moreover, these small and colorful pictograms and ideograms are not only a part of digital communication but also have considerable impact on politics, economy, and even literature. Surprisingly, few academic studies have paid attention to them. Thus, **Emoticons, Kaomoji, and Emoji: The Transformation of Communication in the Digital Age**, edited by Elena Giannoulis and Lukas R. A. Wilde, is the first interdisciplinary and transcultural attempt to comprehend their increasing role in the digital age. Within the broad perspective of mediation theory, the book investigates the discourse on emoticon, kaomoji, and emoji from five aspects: intercultural mediation (Part I), social mediation (Part II), linguistic mediation (Part III), pictorial mediation (Part IV), and technological-material mediation (Part V).

This collection features a detailed introduction and 11 contributions. Chapter 1, by Elena Giannoulis and Lukas R. A. Wilde, differentiate among emoticons, kaomoji, and emoji and outline their history, development, and general functions. They then explain the mediation theory guiding the whole book.

Part I (chapters 2–4) explores to what extent digital pictograms and ideograms can overcome linguistic and cultural barriers. Chapter 2, by Jonathan E. Abel, questions the utopian ideal of emoji as a “universal” form of expression from a sociohistorical perspective. Relating contemporary emoji to the prehistory of photographic scripts and to their immediate technical history, he expresses criticism toward the universality of emoji because they are strongly embedded in cultural conditions. He then highlights that the revolution of emoji relies on their “pervasiveness across several platforms in a short period” (p. 38). Chapter 3, by Alisa Freedman, argues that using emoji with Japanese origin may require understanding of Japanese culture or may trigger secondary local meanings and even misunderstandings of Japanese culture. After applying the concept of “cultural literacy” to a rereading of *Empire of Signs*, she indicates that using emoji can either expand Japanese “cultural literacy” if emoji carry their original meanings, or erase Japanese influence if emoji are given new understanding in different nations. Chapter 4, by Marzena Karpinska and Paula Kurzawska, compliments the previous two chapters’ historical and theoretical perspectives with an empirical study on the different interpretation of kaomoji by the Japanese and Koreans, as they are known for extensive use of them. They find that many participants failed to recognize the meanings of kaomoji from another cultural source, thus concluding that pictograms and ideograms are universal to some extent but are virtually culture-specific products.



Part II (chapters 5–6) investigates how differences in age or gender are revealed in the use of pictograms and ideograms. Chapter 5, by Marta Fanasca, investigates how professional Japanese female-to-male crossdresser escorts perform their respective gender identity using (or avoiding) emoticons, emoji, and kaomoji in social platforms and private conversations online. Her semistructured interviews and observations show crossdressers use more emoticons, emoji, and kaomoji if they are more active on the Internet, if they occupy esteemed positions within the company, and in their private rather than public interactions. Chapter 6, by Michaela Oberwinkler, examines age and gender differences in the usage of kaomoji in Japanese Facebook conversations. While gender differences have been of interest in emoticon research, age, another important factor, is rarely considered. Her study reveals that women used more kaomoji than men and that some kaomoji are limited to certain age groups, thus concluding that generational differences are in some cases more explanatory than gender in their choice of kaomoji.

Part III (chapters 7–8) focuses on the structural role and function of digital pictograms and ideograms within digital communication. Chapter 7, by Christina Margrit Siever, proposes a systematic semiotic-semantic model for linguistic functions that emoji can assume. Her model differentiates between referential function and modal function. The first function means emoji are employed to replace not solely nouns but also verbs, adjectives, and even propositions; the second function means emoji are employed to extend the proposition through providing new information, showing writers' attitude, or just as decoration, and repeat parts of propositions, causing semantic redundancy. Chapter 8, by Barry Kavanagh, starting from the observation that previous scholarship studied emoji mainly in the context of dialogues, investigates the function of emoji in Japanese autobiographical online storytelling, a type of monologue. He finds that these emoji, apart from use as lexical replacements and emotional emphasizees, can create and reflect writers' online self-personas, their "public image," showing their desire to appear charming and also Japan's current ideology of cuteness.

Part IV (chapters 9–10) discusses to what extent communication with digital pictograms and ideograms can be regarded as picture-mediated. Chapter 9, by Lukas R. A. Wilde, approaches the questions of to what extent emoticons, kaomoji, and emoji are pictures, and when cultural knowledge must be considered to comprehend them. To study these questions, he outlines a picture-theoretical model of prelinguistic misunderstandings, intending to open the black box of emoji's "intrinsic semantic structure" (p. 172) that needs to be considered before language and cultural differences. Chapter 10, by Risa Matsuda, focuses on structures and functions of wide kaomoji—representations of not only faces but body parts and various items, such as (*^o^)/\(^*) meaning high-five (in contrast to simple kaomoji representing only facial expression, such as (^o^)). These wide kaomoji may use supplemental letters to emit "voices" and visualize movements or invisible phenomenon. They can also evoke the whole communicational situation as if the writer and receiver are present in the same place.

Part V (chapters 11 and 12) examines how transformation of communication influences material forms of pictograms and ideograms. Chapter 11, by Alexander Christian, explores whether or not the addition of facial expressions helps to simplify the interpretation of pictograms and thus increase efficiency. His case study on Mr. Yuk, an iconic character with a facial expression of disgust used to educate American children in the prevention of poisoning, indicates that Mr. Yuk isn't highly effective in its work. He concludes that our perception and interpretation of facial expressions have strong contextual dependence and may change rapidly. Chapter 12, by Dale K. Andrews, concludes this volume with his fieldwork on the significance

of kaomoji in non-online context, through analysis of how fans of popular Japanese anime illustrate traditional prayer tablets with injected kaomoji in their "anime pilgrimages." After categorizing these prayer tablets with kaomoji, he concludes that kaomoji can amplify fans' moods, stir their excitement, and thus promote deeper engagement.

This volume can be recommended for two reasons. First, it is a timely and systematic study on emoticons, emoji, and kaomoji through the communicative, sociopolitical, aesthetic, and cross-cultural perspectives. It answers essential questions like whether or not emoji are a universal language or to what extent they are pictures, how people's gender and age influence their use, what their structures and functions are, and what their material forms can be. Second, this book is both theoretically and empirically solid and abundant. It is guided by the mediation theory on the macro level, and nearly each part consists of theoretical discussion and complementary empirical research.

There still exists room for improvement or further study. The empirical researches in this collection are almost always situated in the context of Japan as an important birthplace of emoji. Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that among the 90% of people using emoticons, kaomoji, and emoji in their daily communication, Japanese are a minority. Other cultural context matters. An investigation and comparison of the use of emoticons, kaomoji, and emoji in various cultural backgrounds can make this book more comprehensive. Nonetheless, with multiple perspectives and ample methodologies, this book is key reading for students and scholars in sociolinguistics, media studies, Japanese studies, and language and communication.

Reference

- Thompson, C. (2016, April 19). The emoji is the birth of a new type of language (no joke). *Wired*. Retrieved from. www.wired.com/2016/04/the-science-of-emoji/