





















The harmful hidden meanings behind emojis

People of all ages use emojis in their digital communications. In addition to adding humour or emphasis to messages, for some communities and peer groups, these symbols can form a language of their own. This is particularly true of young people and teenagers, who sometimes use emojis as a code to disguise their true intentions from adults.

While hidden meanings behind emojis used by young people can be harmless, some may indicate risks including extremism, drugs, sexual interactions and bullying. This was recently brought to life on the Netflix limited series, [Adolescence](#), which depicted the devastating consequences of harmful online interactions, and the warning signs (in the form of emojis) that are easily missed by adults.

To help schools and parents decode potentially harmful messages, we've compiled a list of emojis commonly used in dangerous contexts. This includes specific emojis used on the show, and others highlighted by the work of Olivia Brown, Associate Professor in Digital Futures at the University of Bath.

Emoji(s)	Potential Meaning
	The red pill emoji is linked to incel, or “involuntarily celibate”, culture, where misogynistic and extremist views are prevalent. The meaning originates from The Matrix films, but has been adopted by the manosphere to represent those who see the “real truth” in the world.
	The blue pill emoji is used in incel culture to represent the opposite of the red pill - those who are blind to the real truth and adhere to more mainstream views about gender dynamics.
	The 100 emoji is used in relation to incel culture. It represents the idea promoted by those in the manosphere that 80% of women are attracted to 20% of men.
	The dynamite emoji is used in incel culture to represent the exploding red pill, in other words, breaking out of societal norms and myths.
	The kidney beans emoji is tied to incel culture. It is thought to represent coffee beans, which link back to a series of memes mocking women.
	The plug emoji can be used to mean drug dealer, also known as a person's “plug”.
	The snowflake, nose and petrol pump emojis are all used to represent the drug cocaine.
	The horse emojis can be used to represent the drug ketamine.
	Skull, alien and devil emojis may represent the drug ecstasy.
	The balloon emoji may be used to represent the drug nitrous oxide.
	Camera emojis can represent a request for nude/explicit images or videos.
	Peach, aubergine and cherry emojis can all be used to represent body parts in a sexual context.

	The sweat emoji may also be used in a sexual context.
	The face with no mouth emoji can convey the message “Do not tell anybody”. It may be used in a bullying context or when sharing inappropriate, illegal or sensitive information.
	The frog emoji can mean “You’re ugly”. It is used in bullying or harassment contexts.
	Heart emojis can mean different things depending on the colour used. The red heart usually means love.
	The purple heart can be used to convey attraction or sexual desire.
	The yellow heart may mean "I'm interested, are you interested?"
	The pink heart can mean "I'm interested but not in sex."
	An orange heart is more likely to be platonic, and means "You're going to be fine."

When monitoring digital interactions for these emojis, it's important to remember that context matters. Their use does not automatically indicate a harmful conversation - the specific circumstances in which a symbol is used will reveal whether it's something that should spark concern. Understanding the hidden meanings behind emojis can be most helpful when they are considered alongside other markers of risk.

Of course, the language used by teenagers is constantly evolving. The meanings of emojis can change from one month to the next, so it's useful to try to stay abreast of the latest slang, as it may offer signs of safeguarding risks.

Regular, judgement-free discussions with young people on their understanding and experience of online interactions encourages openness and can establish a strong foundation for digital safety lessons.

[The Hidden Meanings Behind Emojis: A Lesson From Netflix's Adolescence](#)