# Social media's impact on youth: Insights from the Netflix series Adolescence



The discourse surrounding the impact of social media on youth is gaining momentum in the UK, particularly in light of the Netflix drama series *Adolescence*, which provocatively addresses the dangers faced by teenagers in online spaces. The show has catalysed discussions regarding the influence of incel culture and the nuanced meanings behind emojis often used by children and adolescents.

Jack Thorne, the series' co-writer, has made headlines by advocating for stringent measures against the use of smartphones by individuals under the age of 16, likening their potential dangers to those of cigarettes. "If it was my decision, I would be talking of smartphones like cigarettes and issuing an outright ban on all use by under-16s," Thorne stated, emphasising a need for decisive action against technology companies and calling for the UK government to adopt measures similar to those in France, Norway, and Australia regarding social media restrictions for teenagers.

The poignant storyline of *Adolescence* follows 13-year-old Jamie Miller, portrayed by Owen Cooper, who becomes embroiled in a murder case after being influenced by misogynistic content online. The show delves into the complexities of teenage communication, particularly through the use of emojis that can serve as coded language within the “manosphere” — a term that refers to various online spaces promoting misogyny. The second episode highlights the influence of controversial figures such as Andrew Tate, whose messaging is superficially cloaked in allegory yet carries profound implications for young audiences.

The narrative captures a glimpse into how emojis convey deeper meanings within this cultural context. A teenage character breaks down interpretations tied to the “manosphere,” explaining, for example, that the red pill emoji signifies awakening to misogynistic beliefs, while the dynamite emoji conveys radical incel ideologies. Another significant symbol discussed is the 100 emoji, connected to the "80 to 20 rule" — a belief applying to the attraction dynamics between men and women.

Concerns regarding the language used in these online communities have led academics to warn of a potential "moral panic." Dr Robert Lawson, a sociolinguistics expert from Birmingham City University, indicated that while many emojis might be used innocuously, there is also a subset of language that fosters a sense of belonging within toxic communities. He pointed out that terms unique to the incel culture serve a purpose, offering a form of identification and expression within these circles.

Research conducted by Dublin City University’s anti-bullying centre revealed alarming trends, indicating that platforms like TikTok and YouTube Shorts quickly direct anti-feminist content to young users, particularly targeting those aged 16 to 18. Discussions led by Prof Dr Lisa Sugiura of the University of Portsmouth highlight how emojis are utilised to navigate content moderation systems effectively, indicating a calculated approach to sustain harmful messaging within social media.

In response to rising concerns, the Online Safety Act came into effect recently, aimed at limiting children's exposure to harmful content online. However, Ofcom, the UK regulator overseeing the Act, clarified that incel-related emojis would only be deemed harmful if used in a context that incites hatred against women.

The series has spurred wider conversations about the need for legislative changes to enhance child safety in digital environments. Daisy Greenwell, a co-founder of Smartphone Free Childhood, noted that the public debate elicited by *Adolescence* should prompt government action to regulate the algorithms of smartphones used by underage children, arguing that parents alone cannot be expected to navigate these complexities.

As the dialogue surrounding youth, technology, and misogyny progresses, the implications of the issues raised in *Adolescence* continue to resonate within academic and social spheres, underscoring a demand for comprehensive strategies to safeguard younger generations against the risks of online radicalisation and harmful cultural narratives.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://news.sky.com/story/stephen-graham-on-how-the-rise-of-incel-culture-influenced-new-netflix-show-adolescence-13327207> - This article supports the claim that the Netflix series Adolescence explores the impact of social media and incel culture on youth, highlighting the need for societal accountability in addressing these issues.
* <https://time.com/7267884/adolescence-netflix-explained/> - This article explains the plot of Adolescence, focusing on how the show delves into themes of social media, incel culture, and the use of emojis as coded language within misogynistic online communities.
* <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/> - Ofcom's website provides information on the UK's regulatory efforts regarding online safety, including how they address harmful content and the context in which incel-related emojis are considered harmful.
* <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/online-safety-bill> - This collection of documents from the UK government discusses the Online Safety Act, which aims to limit children's exposure to harmful content online, aligning with concerns raised by Adolescence.
* <https://www.dcu.ie/anti-bullyingcentre/> - Dublin City University's anti-bullying centre conducts research on trends related to online content, including how platforms like TikTok and YouTube Shorts direct anti-feminist content to young users.
* <https://www.port.ac.uk/department-of-sociology> - The University of Portsmouth's sociology department, where Prof Dr Lisa Sugiura is based, explores topics related to social media and content moderation, highlighting how emojis are used to navigate these systems.