# Study reveals psychological and hidden meanings behind emoji use



A study published in the journal Current Psychology by researchers at Oklahoma State University has shed light on the potential psychological underpinnings of emoji use in digital communication. The research involved surveying 285 undergraduate students, mostly around 20 years of age, to examine how often they used 40 commonly recognised emojis in text messages and social media posts, with the objective of linking emoji usage patterns to personality traits.

The study found distinct correlations between emoji use and aspects of personality. For male participants, frequent use of emojis was associated with manipulative tendencies and emotional instability. Female participants, on the other hand, displayed a pattern where their intentional and thoughtful selection of emojis was connected to their self-image and efforts to shape how others perceive them. The researchers noted: “Emoji use may be related to strategies to manipulate the perceptions of others and to present a positive impression of oneself,” suggesting that women may use emojis to appear agreeable and open in their online interactions.

This research offers insights into how digital communication tools like emojis can play a role beyond simple expression — potentially serving as extensions of individual personality traits and social strategies.

Adding another dimension to the conversation about emojis, Amit Kalley, founder of the organisation For Working Parents, recently issued a warning concerning the hidden meanings some emojis might carry, particularly within younger demographics. Writing on Instagram, Kalley highlighted dangers that arise from the unregulated use of the internet and how some seemingly innocuous emojis can convey coded or “sinister” messages among teenagers.

Kalley’s “periodic table of emojis” categorises various emojis as symbols for drug use and extremist ideologies. For example, he explained that cocaine can be represented by emojis such as the snowflake, 8-ball, or snowman; marijuana by tree-related emojis; MDMA by the money bill emoji; ketamine by a horse; and psychedelic mushrooms by the red mushroom emoji. More direct symbols include the gun or knife emoji for weapons, and a smiley face with X’s for eyes to indicate death.

The glossary also identifies certain emojis as representing specific subcultures or extremist groups—for instance, “incel” can be symbolised by the apple, bean, bill, or “100” emoji, while “Neo-Nazi” representations include the hedgehog, lightning bolt, or the number sequence 1488. Emojis such as the ghost, goblin, or monster were listed to signify anti-woman sentiments.

Kalley acknowledged that his list is not exhaustive but reflects common emoji use that may signify meanings far different from their surface appearance. He emphasised that these interpretations are widely used among younger users to send covert messages.

Together, these developments underscore a complex landscape around emoji use in digital communications—where personal expression, social signalling, and covert messaging can intertwine in varied ways. The research and expert observations provide an expanded understanding of how emojis function within contemporary digital culture.

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

## Bibliography

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2. <https://ecommons.luc.edu/cs_facpubs/387/> - This publication provides access to the full text of the study 'Emoji Use in Social Media Posts: Relationships with Personality Traits and Word Usage' by Shelia Kennison and colleagues.
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5. <https://ecommons.luc.edu/cs_facpubs/304/> - This publication presents research on predicting personality from language and emoji use on Twitter, authored by Maxwell Meckling and colleagues.
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