

EMOJI CODES AND SOCIAL MEDIA'S ILLEGAL DRUG TRADE

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Millions of people throughout the world use social media platforms (or “apps”) providing an easy avenue to reach a large number of people. Companies spend billions of dollars to advertise on these platforms because they are ideal venues for marketing and selling their products. Legitimate businesses are not the only ones to use social media apps as a marketing tool. In recent years, drug dealers have turned to such apps to solicit buyers and arrange sales. Using social media, suppliers can surreptitiously advertise to a wide audience, and when someone shows interest, they send private messages to arrange individual transactions. Apps that offer encrypted or disappearing messages, such as Snapchat or Signal, are particularly suited for such use. Today, drug dealers operate on virtually all social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Pinterest, and Discord. Even more specialized apps can be used for drug sales. For example, a 2021 law enforcement investigation in one Florida county resulted in over 60 arrests of individuals selling drugs via LGBTQ dating apps. The scale of this problem is enormous. During the second half of 2021, Snapchat shut down approximately 144,000 drug-related accounts in the United States. In just the last quarter of 2021, Facebook removed over four million drug-related message exchanges around the world, while Instagram removed another 1.2 million.

The major social media platforms are aware of the problem. Many have content filtering algorithms that block objectionable material, which typically includes explicit discussion of drug sales. When these filters work correctly, the offending posts are flagged for further scrutiny or deleted outright before users get a chance to see them. Snapchat estimates that it captures 88 percent of drug-related content through its monitoring software. Faced with content filtering, drug dealers work to circumvent it. Emojis—smiley faces and other small images used alongside text—are now the building blocks of an improvised code to thwart content moderation in social media. Combinations of emojis can convey that drug dealers have a product to sell as well as details about its quantity or strength. This method has proven effective for two main reasons. First, emoji messages look harmless to the casual observer. To the uninitiated, a string of colored hearts, lightning bolts, and rockets looks innocuous; no one would inevitably assume it contains a message about drugs of a particular variety or potency. Second, it requires a targeted and complex algorithm for an app to detect and filter out only coded emojis. Setting up a content filter to block specific emojis would sweep up a large amount of innocent communication. Although snowflake emojis can refer to cocaine, and an electric plug can be code for a dealer, platforms do not want to block all uses of snowflake or plug emojis.

In April 2022, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) released a chart of commonly used emoji codes (see Figure 1 below). The chart depicts the symbols associated with specific drugs, signs that a dealer is advertising, and details of the specific drugs offered. Although the chart is helpful now, there is no guarantee it will reflect the shorthand of tomorrow. Emoji codes are highly adaptable. Even if an algorithmic filter can detect a specific combination of emojis, switching to a new combination may be enough to fool it. Moreover, detecting the combinations assumes that the individuals crafting these filters are aware of the new codes in the first place. On some platforms, just the conspicuous use of a capital “T” within text can indicate interest in buying or selling methamphetamine (which derives from meth’s street name, “Tina”).



EMOJI DRUG CODE | DECODED

COMMON EMOJI CODES

FAKE PRESCRIPTION DRUGS

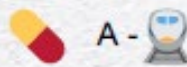
PERCOCET & OXYCODONE



XANAX



ADDERALL



DEALER SIGNALS

DEALER ADVERTISING



HIGH POTENCY



UNIVERSAL FOR DRUGS



LARGE BATCH



OTHER DRUGS

METH



HEROIN



COCAINE



MDMA & MOLLIES



MUSHROOMS



COUGH SYRUP



MARIJUANA



This reference guide is intended to give parents, caregivers, educators, and other influencers a better sense of how emojis are being used in conjunction with illegal drugs. Fake prescription pills, commonly laced with deadly fentanyl and methamphetamine, are often sold on social media and e-commerce platforms - making them available to anyone with a smartphone.

#ONEPILLKILL

dea.gov/onepill

Disclaimer: These emojis reflect common examples found in DEA investigations. This list is not all-inclusive, and the images above are a representative sample.



A digital cat-and-mouse game occurs. Dealers learn what codes are being detected, they invent new codes, the social media platforms and law enforcement discover and monitor the new codes, and the cycle repeats. This phenomenon is not limited to the online drug market. “Algospeak”—the use of coded language to avoid getting blocked or down-ranked by algorithms—is increasingly common across social media platforms. Many users already carefully monitor their vocabulary, worried that using certain terms will result in their posts being hidden or demonetized. Emoji drug codes are just an extension of this familiar social media dynamic.

The illegal drug trade driven by social media is concerning, particularly when it targets young adults and teens. For Americans aged 18 to 45, drug overdose is the leading cause of preventable death. Young Americans are also more likely to use new social media platforms, and between 34 and 43 percent of minors have conversations with strangers online. This does not mean that social media inevitably leads young people to drugs—studies indicate that teenagers’ experimental drug use is declining—but if buyers and sellers of drugs can easily communicate through public platforms, some people will be at higher risk. Teens’ deaths from fentanyl overdoses increased in the last several years, and counterfeit drugs tainted with lethal levels of fentanyl are a particular danger. One prominent example is that of TV host and relationship therapist Dr. Laura Berman. In 2021, her 16-year-old son died from an accidental fentanyl overdose after a dealer on Snapchat offered him alleged prescription drugs (Xanax and Percocet) that turned out to be counterfeit substances containing lethal doses of fentanyl. In 2021, the DEA seized a total of 20.4 million counterfeit pills, about 40 percent of which contained lethal amounts of fentanyl. One California prosecutor asserted that in 2022, 90 percent of drugs purchased through social media contain fentanyl.

Policymakers are responding to drug sales on social media. In July 2022, Colorado’s legislature directed the state’s attorney general to study, and issue a report by March 2023 on, the use of the internet, including social media platforms, for trafficking fentanyl. Starting in January 2023, California law will require social media apps to post their policies on the use of social media platforms for drug trafficking, link to resources from health authorities, and delineate procedures for reporting information to law enforcement. In Illinois, legislators introduced a bill in November 2022 that would make the use of an “electronic communication device” in drug trafficking a Class I felony. At the federal level, a bi-partisan group of seven Representatives introduced the “Combating Harmful Actions with Transparency on Social Act of 2022,” or CHATS Act, in the U.S. House of Representatives. This bill expands law enforcement’s data collection and reporting on how individuals use social media platforms to commit crimes and directs the U.S. Attorney General to publish annual reports on the platforms used in connection with specific criminal offenses, particularly as to crimes by or against juveniles. In the U.S. Senate, the Cooper Davis Act was introduced on September 15, 2022. The bill would establish a standardized reporting system for social media companies to alert authorities to the sale of fentanyl, methamphetamine, and counterfeit drugs on their platforms, with penalties for companies that fail to report.

Social media companies are starting to take steps to combat drug trafficking on their platforms. In the summer of 2022, parent companies of some social media platforms (*e.g.*, Snap, Meta, and Google) funded a campaign through the Ad Council to inform young adults and teens about the dangers posed by fentanyl. On Snapchat, some drug-related searches that get blocked automatically redirect users to informational videos on fentanyl and related substances. The major social media platforms’ content filters show increasing sophistication: an entire sub-industry now develops machine-learning software to detect prohibited content.

The use of social media apps to market and sell drugs is an ever-evolving challenge. As social media’s efforts to detect drug sales become more elaborate, so too will dealers’ efforts to avoid them.

RESOURCES

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