

# Emojis, a criminal's best friend

Doves, snowmen, and cherries. Terrorists and mafia members encrypt their messages with emoticons.

For most people, an emoji is a smiling face or a big red heart to brighten up a text. For criminals, these innocent symbols have a much deadlier meaning. Did you know, for example, that a shower emoji involves shooting and killing a target with a "shower of bullets" while a person next to a bowling ball is an order to hurt somebody?

These examples are taken from a report published by three US intelligence agencies. The objective of the report is to provide federal agents with some keys for interpreting and allowing them to understand the emojis used by criminals.

According to this document, the use of emojis has become commonplace in communication between members of terrorist or criminal organizations. *"Criminals have rushed to adopt these technologies which make their work easier while complicating that of the police officers who investigate their actions"* confirms Marilyn McMahon, a professor of criminal law at Deakin University, Australia. *"The use of emojis in the criminal context is extremely varied, but there is still a common thread: the signs work like a code that is understandable only to the members of the criminal organization,"* adds the expert.

These emojis are nothing more than a modern version of "pizzinis," the paper notes used by Bernardo Provenzano, the famous former godfather of the Sicilian Mafia. Messages riddled with grammatical errors, embellished with numbers and coded expressions, decipherable only by the sender.

From dark net dealers to Islamic State followers, all criminal groups now use emojis in their communications. However, each gang has its own code. Among the terrorists of IS, a heart accompanied by a dove represents a martyr.

If a gang or criminal organization takes hostages or deals in human trafficking, the crown emoji is used to confirm that the gang has a victim. The number of roses sent in a message represents the price to be paid.

For gangs, the emoji of a running man next to a knife or scissors is an order to stab someone, while that of a policeman with a pistol is an invitation to murder a police officer with a gun.

Among white supremacists, emojis are used to camouflage Nazi references. The door means “Heil Hitler” because it is interpreted as two H’s while two lightning bolts represent the SS.

Without a doubt, the most creative use of emojis goes to drug dealers. Broccoli and trees are used to order marijuana, the snowman for methamphetamine, and the blowfish is used for cocaine. Emojis such as the black billiard ball with the number eight or a backpack are used to indicate the weight of whichever drug for sale.

However, emojis can sometimes be difficult to interpret. The image of a pill, for instance, has multiple meanings. It could be used by drug dealers for selling drugs, by terrorists to discuss poisons, or by white supremacists to identify an enemy of their ideology or to recruit others into the fold.

Emojis are finding their way more and more often into criminal cases. This may create a whole new line of work for people as emoji interpreters.

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