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UNOFFICIAL GUIDE TO EMOJI ETIQUETTE

The *Backbone Copy Unofficial Guide to Emoji Etiquette* is your ultimate cheat sheet for not looking like a clueless idiot with your emojis. For people managing social accounts, writing copy, or anyone just trying to keep your texts drama-free, this free download has you covered. These are the *most common* emoji missteps, but there are plenty more where they came from.

HAND AND GESTURE EMOJIS

Waving Hand

You think you're being friendly. In China, you're actually saying, "bye forever." Online, it's the emoji equivalent of blocking someone without actually blocking them. Passive-aggressive gold.

Thumbs Up

What could go wrong with a thumbs up? Oh, I don't know... *everything*. Boomers are out here using it to say, "Good job!" but Gen Z has declared it officially passive-aggressive. To them, it screams, "Sure, whatever," in the most dismissive way possible. And you just flipped off people in Greece, the Middle East, and South Asia.





Praying Hands

"Thank you" in the West, literal prayer in religious contexts globally, "respect" in parts of Asia, and occasionally totally misinterpreted as a high-five. It's a multitasking emoji with a lot going on, so tread lightly.

OK

"All good" in the U.S., but in Brazil it's basically calling someone an asshole. Like, literally—the circle your fingers make is a butthole. Just to make things worse, it was hijacked by far-right groups as a symbol for white supremacy, with the fingers forming a "W" and "P" for "white power." It started as a trolling campaign on 4chan but has since been adopted in some hate group contexts. Context is key—most people still use it innocently, but the association exists. What a time to be alive.

Clapping Hands

Applause? Sure. But repeat it between words: " Great  Job  Genius ", and you've either got sarcastic sass or aggressive emphasis.

Fist Bump

A friendly "bro" gesture in the U.S. But in some parts of the Middle East or Asia, a clenched fist feels more like, "I'm about to knock you out." Friendly? Maybe. Threatening? Also maybe. Good luck with that.

Sign of the Horns

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Rock on, unless you're in the Mediterranean. There, it's the "corna," and it means your partner is cheating on you. Nothing screams awkward like accidentally calling someone a cuckold at a metal concert.

Raised Hand



Is it a high-five? A signal to stop? Or a dismissive "no thanks"? Totally depends on context and interpretation.

Middle Finger

This one's universal. If you don't know what it means, I can't help you.

FACE EMOJIS

Face with Tears of Joy

Boomers think this means "I'm laughing so hard I'm crying!" Millennials love it and overuse it in group chats. Gen Z buried this one right alongside low-rise jeans. To them,  is cringe as hell, and they've replaced it with  to mean something is so funny it's tragic. Evolution, baby.

Grinning Face with Sweat

"Oh shit, that was close," or "Whew, I survived." For Millennials and Boomers, it's mild embarrassment or relief. In Asia, though, it leans way harder into, "I'm so mortified I want to melt into the floor."

Angry Face

Genuine rage? Maybe. But if you're in East Asia, this emoji has been downgraded to "mildly annoyed but not actually mad." Who knew anger could be so chill?

Winking Face with Tongue

Playful, cheeky, and sometimes just plain weird. Millennials use it when they're being silly. Gen Z prefers their sarcasm without tongue, thank you very much. Also, don't use it at work unless you're actively trying to get HR involved.

Face with Hand Over Mouth

Could be surprise, laughter, playing coy, or low-key shame. Spin the wheel.

Clown Face

This one's often used in online harassment campaigns. Trolls will spam it in comments or posts to ridicule or mock people, especially in political contexts.

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Thinking Face

Thoughtful? Or maybe you're just judging someone in the most passive-aggressive way possible. For Gen Z, it's giving big, "You're full of shit" energy.

Raised Eyebrow

Skepticism, sarcasm, or condescension—it depends on your tone. For Gen Z it's saying, "[BFFR](#)."

Grimacing Face

The unofficial emoji for awkward situations. Millennials use it to acknowledge cringeworthy moments, and it's Gen Z's go-to for when shit gets uncomfortable.

Smirking Face

Boomers and Millennials think it's flirty or cheeky. Gen Z, on the other hand, thinks it's creepy as hell. Use this one if you want to look like you belong in an unmarked van with candy.

Skull

Gen Z has completely transformed the skull emoji into their laughing face of choice. Where Millennials still cling to 😂 or 🤔, Gen Z's "I'm dead" moment always comes with 🤪.

Upside-Down Face

Confused? Silly? That's what Boomers and Gen X think. For Millennials, it's all about playful sarcasm. Gen Z has turned this into the emoji version of, "I'm saying something I don't mean, but I kinda do." But it has also been used sarcastically to dismiss or belittle people, particularly in trolling or mocking contexts aimed at marginalized groups.

Loudly Crying

Boomers see this as actual crying, Millennials use it for exaggerated reactions, and for Gen Z, it's a reaction to comedy gold. For them, it means, "This is so funny I can't even breathe."

HEART EMOJIS

Purple Heart

Luxury, friendship, or "I'm just fancy like that."

Yellow Heart

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Friendship in some places. In Germany? It's giving jealousy.

♥ Black Heart

Dramatic, goth, or mourning—take your pick. Gen Z loves this one for its “too cool to care” energy.

ANIMAL EMOJIS

🐍 Snake

Calling someone shady might transcend generations, but Gen Z has taken snake-emoji culture to another level. Whether it's for drama or betrayal, this is shorthand for “I see you being fake.”

🦄 Unicorn

This one's shorthand for rare or unattainable things. In the tech world, it's used to describe billion-dollar startups (aka *unicorn companies*). In dating culture, it's referring to a mythical third partner for couples looking to spice things up. Gen Z uses it with a heavy dose of irony, like, “Oh wow, you're so unique 🦄.”

🐸 Frog

The frog emoji started as innocent fun but has been poisoned by its association with Pepe the Frog, a meme appropriated by alt-right movements. While not inherently offensive, it's a subtle dog whistle in certain circles. So unless you're talking about *actual* frogs, maybe tread carefully.

FOOD EMOJIS

🍑 Peach

I mean, *sometimes* it's a fruit. But let's be real, it's usually a butt. Everyone knows it, and if you don't, now you do.

🍆 Eggplant

This emoji isn't here for subtlety—it's bringing BDE, and I don't mean Big Dinner Energy. Don't be a dick and use this one without being very clear about what's on the menu.

🍕 Pizza

Want a slice? Careful—it's been misused in far-right conspiracy theories, particularly in the “Pizzagate” nonsense, where it became shorthand for absurd, debunked ideas about child trafficking.

SYMBOLS AND OBJECTS

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Rainbow / Rainbow Flag

It's heartbreaking, but even the pride flag emoji isn't safe. Some trolls and bigots use it sarcastically to mock inclusion efforts or LGBTQ+ issues. Once again: context matters.

Fire

Millennials use it to say, "That's hot" or "awesome!" Gen Z still thinks it's cool but will judge you if you use it too much. Overuse = cringe.

Glass of Milk

The glass of milk emoji has been used in some circles to represent so-called "white purity," tied to supremacist ideologies so maybe when you're asked, "Got Milk?", just say no.

Sparkles

Boomers see this as literal sparkles. Millennials use it to add flair, like "🌟 Amazing 🌟." Gen Z uses it for pure sarcasm, like "🌟 Totally 🌟 having the best time." If you see it, the eye roll is implied.

Top Hat

Fancy or just annoyingly snobby, depending on your audience.

Stop Sign

Gen Z loves using this in place of 🙅 to signal "Nope" or "Stop right there." It's more about shutting something down in a conversation, often with sarcastic intent.

Bouquet

"Congrats!" in the West, but in parts of Asia, it's giving "Sorry for your loss."

BODY PARTS

Foot

Harmless in most places but can be offensive in parts of the Middle East and Asia, where feet are considered dirty.

Leg

If you're using this one, just know that it's started popping up in spicy, suggestive contexts; it's less innocent than it looks.

Palm

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“Stop” or “Say no more” in North America but in Greece, it’s a “moutza”—basically the middle finger.

Tongue

Flirty, playful, or wildly inappropriate. Pick your poison.




Eyes

Curious, suspicious, or downright judgy. This one’s doing a lot of work.

Nail Polish

Serving sass since day one. Millennials love using it to show they’re unbothered. Gen Z wields it like a weapon of sarcasm. Pair it with a comeback, and you’ve got, “I’m too fabulous to care about your drama.”

Before you go, here are a couple last tips to carry with you:

Cultural appropriation via emojis is a big no. Using emojis like  and  or regional food emojis like  to make jokes about cultures you don’t belong to isn’t clever, it’s disgustingly offensive. And digital blackface is absolutely not it. Choosing darker skin-tone emojis when that’s not your identity isn’t “fun,” it’s harmful. Skin-tone modifiers exist so people can authentically represent themselves, not so others can treat identity like a costume.

At the end of the day, emojis aren’t just tiny pictures. They carry meaning, nuance, and sometimes a lotta baggage. Use them wisely, stay respectful, and maybe, just maybe, your next Thread won’t accidentally spark an international incident.

Good luck out there. 