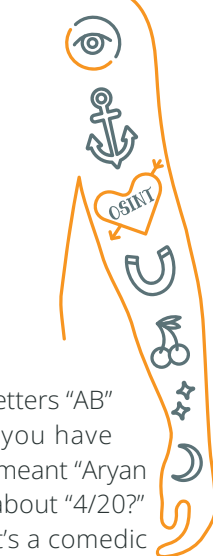


OSINT

IN PLAIN SIGHT

by Logan Baumunk



Have you noticed anything that doesn't fit in within the world around you? Try and find the reference to Nazism on a graphic t-shirt. Would you understand the nod to sex trafficking in a Facebook comment? What about a tattoo that refers to a criminal act or someone being branded? Subtle details like these are hiding in the matrix of everyday life. Through the use of OSINT skills and techniques, investigators are able to uncover these hidden details in order to paint a bigger picture of what's hiding all around us.

In 2023, 32% of all Americans had at least one tattoo.¹ Whether it was an infinity symbol on someone's forearm or an "I heart mom" on a bodybuilder's bicep, they have been present for generations. The teardrop tattoo may be the most widely recognized tattoo with a hidden meaning. What could be considered the topic's worst kept secret, the meaning varies geographically and by style. An outline of a tear could refer to attempted murder while a colored tear could mean that they committed murder. While the teardrop tattoo may symbolize a criminal act, extremist ideologies are often hidden amongst other symbols or numbers to avoid persecution.

Some nations have even gone as far as enacting legislation against publicly sharing infamous symbols and extremist propaganda. In Germany, "penal code prohibits publicly denying the Holocaust and disseminating Nazi propaganda, both off- and online. This includes sharing images such as swastikas, wearing an SS uniform and making statements in support of Hitler."² This and other similar legislation have caused followers of these ideologies to hide in plain sight. If you were to see a tattoo

of someone with the letters "AB" on their arm, would you have immediately known it meant "Aryan Brotherhood?" What about "4/20?" Someone may think it's a comedic reference to marijuana, but it's also a common reference to Hitler's birthday.³

Within the last twenty years, tattoos of various images, text and symbols have been publicly linked to ideologies and organizations. In 2008, the Canada Border Services Agency published an array of examples of Russian prison tattoos and the underlying meanings of common symbols. A spider web can represent how inescapable the gang lifestyle is, and a cross could extend beyond someone's faith. For some, "a cross can indicate bondage, subordination, or slavery. Some tattoos are given involuntarily as warnings or punishment for transgressions."² The act of branding is widely used across other criminal networks outside of prison and could even sneak its way inside your local high school's classrooms.

While most teenagers may escape the life of prison gangs and teardrops, they could still be hiding tattoos or sinister references out in the open. According to the Arizona State University School of Social Work, at least 100,000 U.S. children are sexually exploited every year.⁴ Within the human trafficking industry, a common practice among pimps is to brand their victims. Symbols of this oppressive ownership could include images of barcodes or even the names of a particular pimp or trafficker.⁵ It's estimated that around half sex trafficking victims have branding tattoos.⁶ Telltale signs of sex trafficking could also be camouflaged within normal communication. Have you ever noticed

a seemingly random capitalized word in a social media comment? Maybe a word that just doesn't make sense in context? There are signals to sex trafficking that lurk within everyday language, so the practices are able to continue unnoticed.

Picture the Facebook profile for a young woman living in an urban area like New York City. She is active on the site daily, posting pictures and status updates of her life. She uploads a photo of herself with the caption, "trying to square up." Under that photo, someone comments, "Heard you got Head Cut." In the profile caption, she has "Renegade" followed by a series of heart and nail emojis. Nothing out of place and could describe the activity on thousands of social media profiles, but for OSINT investigators, there are several keywords that paint a different picture.

Within the realm of sex trafficking, various keywords listed on the profile- (i.e., "trying to square up") can mean that someone is trying to escape prostitution while "head cut" often refers to the act of a victim being beaten down by their pimp. With "renegade," it could be a colorful self-description or even a reference to a person involved in prostitution without a pimp.⁷ While these terms are often innocent without any insidious ulterior motive, the idea of contextual examination is all around us both on and off screen.

Various symbols are understood regardless of your language or culture. Take the peace sign. Holding your middle and index fingers up together is globally understood from the streets of San Francisco to Tokyo. Some infamous symbols, like the swastika, have entirely different meanings based on the culture in which they appear. For most, the swastika may immediately be associated with the Holocaust and Nazism. Meanwhile, the swastika is actually derived from the Sanskrit word "svastika" and means "good fortune."⁸ Whether cultures are similar with the interpretation of symbols or not, they are most often prominently featured. Have you ever considered which are not prominently displayed?

After asking someone if they're okay, they might respond with a thumb up or perhaps a gesture where their hand mimics the abbreviated "OK." Bellingcat, a Netherlands-based investigative journalism group specializing in fact-checking and open-source intelligence,

published an article highlighting the hidden symbols of the far-right ideologies, including the meaning behind the 'OK sign' hand gesture. Michael Colborne, a journalist with Bellingcat, wrote, "In 2017, far-right extremists on the website 4chan started a hoax claiming that the 'OK' hand gesture, an everyday gesture in the US and English-speaking world, was actually a hate symbol. They did so in order to provoke an overreaction from the media and opponents of the far right. Far-right extremists began using the symbol, posting photos of themselves making the gesture in order to troll and "trigger" their perceived opponents. The hope was to make them look ridiculous and mockable for claiming something so common was a far-right extremist symbol." What began as a hoax and an act of trolling has taken off to a point where extremists are clinging to their success of darkening an everyday gesture.

Because criminal industries and extremist ideologies are forced into covert practices, it's imperative that OSINT investigators think critically regarding what is being presented within basic human interactions. Open-source investigations are a constant test to think deeper into what's presented in front of you. Context is key with these interpretations and uncovering whether or not a tattoo is just a tattoo is the ever-present task at hand. A continued practice to ask questions and question what's normal. I spy, with my little eye, a world of secrets hidden in plain sight.

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- 1 <https://www.thehill.com/changing-america/enrichment/arts-culture/4160905-one-third-of-americans-are-tattooed-study-finds/#:~:text=They%20found%20that%2032%25%20of,actually%20had%20more%20than%20one.>
 - 2 Agency, C. B. (2008). *Tattoos and Their Meanings*.
 - 3 Glaun, D. (2021, JULY 1). *Germany's Laws on Hate Speech, Nazi Propaganda & Holocaust Denial: An Explainer*. Retrieved from FRONTLINE: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/germanys-laws-antisemitic-hate-speech-nazi-propaganda-holocaust-denial/>
 - 4 <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.phoenix.gov/district2site/Documents/Teen%20SEX%20Trafficking%20Brochure.pdf>
 - 5 <https://www.napnappartners.org/tattoos-human-trafficking-victims>
 - 6 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36251250/>
 - 7 <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DCF/HumanTrafficking/Schools/Language-in-the-life.pdf>
 - 8 <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/history-of-the-swastika#:~:text=The%20word%20swastika%20comes%20from,the%20sun%20through%20the%20sky.>