

More than fruits and vegetables: A survey on sexually-oriented graphicons by age and gender

There is no doubt that Computer-mediated Communication (CMC) is becoming increasingly visual (Herring, 2019). Graphical elements or graphicons, that is, emoticons, emojis, stickers, short videos, and GIFs (Herring & Dainas, 2017), have played an essential role in the visual transformation of digital communication. Consequently, an increasing number of publications have dealt with these elements in digital interactions (for CMC in Spanish, see, for example, Sampietro, 2016, 2020, 2021; Pérez-Sabater, 2019; Vela Delfa y Cantamutto, 2021). These publications have primarily addressed the discursive and pragmatic functions of interactions among adults, and little has been said about the communications of teenagers and young adults. However, their discourse practices are often ground-breaking and create a trend in digital communication. In the Spanish-speaking world, research on the interpretation and understanding of graphicons is still in its infancy (Sampietro, 2020), with few references to the sexual interpretation of certain graphicons.

To fill this research gap, an online semi-structured questionnaire was distributed to survey graphicons that might convey sexual interpretations in everyday written conversations. Respondents were classified according to age and gender: 416 people, 166 teenagers, 250 adults; 180 women, 236 men. The results show that more than 65% of teenagers do not give a sexual interpretation to aubergines and peaches, among others. In the case of young girls, the numbers are much more relevant since this is the case of 76% of the girls surveyed. By contrast, 60% of adults (18-35) give a sexual interpretation to these graphicons; the percentage between genders is not significant here. In English-speaking communities, sexually-oriented emojis have been addressed extensively (e.g., Thompson et al., 2018; Weissman, 2019), but this is the first time a survey has been carried out to know to what extent minors are aware of the sexual meaning of these emojis. Our study provides valuable information for the development of online child sexual grooming prevention by bringing some light on the level of emoji awareness of young Spanish social media active users.

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