NEWSFEED SCIENCE

It's "Perfectly Normal" to See Jesus in Toast, Study Says

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Human brains are "uniquely wired" to see faces, according to researchers at the University of Toronto

Every now and then, there's a viral news article about someone claiming to see religious imagery on a Goldfish cracker, a power meter, a turtle shell, or–more commonly–a piece of toast.

Iam Macalpine—AP

Fred Whan, of Kingston, Ont., shows off a fish stick he cooked that he claims shows the likeness of Jesus Christ.

According to a new study published in the journal *Cortex*, that's "perfectly normal" because of a phenomenon called "face pareidolia, the illusory perception of non-existent faces" caused by the interaction between the frontal cortex, the part of the brain that helps produce "expectations" of what an object should look like, and the posterior visual cortex, the part that processes the image.

Researchers at the University of Toronto — in partnership with Chinese universities — performed brain scans on 20 participants and showed them computer-generated pictures made up of indiscernible shapes. Some were told in advance that they were going to see images of a face, while others were told they would see a letter of the English alphabet. In both instances, about 35% saw an illusory image where there wasn't one.

"Our findings suggest that it's common for people to see non-existent features because human brains are uniquely wired to recognize faces, so that even when there's only a slight suggestion of facial features the brain automatically interprets it as a face," the study's lead researcher Kang Lee of the University of Toronto's Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study said in a statement.

The CBC reports that Lee also said people who see Jesus or the Virgin Mary in food or other objects may see them because religious beliefs can dramatically impact how they

want to see the way life works.

New York University researchers Ana Gantman and Jay Van Bavel recently discussed similar findings (available online) in an April New York *Times* editorial. In a few experiments, they "flashed strings of letters" across a computer screen and asked participants whether they could see a word. Some of the words shown contained "moral content (*virtue*,*steal*, *God*) and others did not (*virtual*, *steel*, *pet*)."

They "found that participants correctly identified strings of letters as words more often when they formed moral words (69 percent accuracy) than when they formed nonmoral words (65 percent accuracy)," and have dubbed this phenomenon the "moral pop-out effect" — comparing it to the experience of food seeming especially pronounced to people who are hungry.

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