

Ig Nobel prizes provide fun fodder online

Bananas, bacon, toast and Jesus proved to be irresistible topics on social media.

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In honour of the winners of this year's [Ig Nobel prizes](#), researchers on social media buzzed about holy images on toast, medical uses for bacon, the slipperiness of banana skins and other offbeat works of science.

The awards, presented by the [Annals of Improbable Research](#), recognize quirky research papers that might have otherwise slipped into obscurity. Not many people were talking about 'Frictional coefficient under banana skin'¹, for example, until it took home the physics prize. Shortly afterwards, [Michael Lerner](#), a physicist at Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana, tweeted that the paper "is clearly showing up on one of my exams".

Neil Cronin, a human-locomotion researcher at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland, tweeted:



H. Armstrong Roberts/Classicstock/Mary Evans Picture Library

Neil Cronin
@NeilJCronin84

Find funding for muscle research: difficult. Find funding for banana skin friction study: easy apparently- [jstage.jst.go.jp/article/trol/7 ...](http://jstage.jst.go.jp/article/trol/7)

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When reached for further comment, Lerner said that the banana-skin paper wasn't as trivial as it might seem. In the study, a brave volunteer stepped on 12 different banana skins as well as apple peels and tangerine skins, while the authors measured the frictional forces at play.

The result: a fresh banana peel on a linoleum floor offers up about as much friction as a sheet of ice. Lerner said that the paper included some discussion about the physics of friction that his undergraduate students might enjoy. "Somebody almost always jokingly mentions banana peels when we're talking about friction," he said. "The whole thing is accessible to introductory physics students."

He added that he appreciates the overall role of the Ig Nobel prizes. "Anything that drives more conversation about science, especially conversations where non-scientists don't feel intimidated, is

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good.”

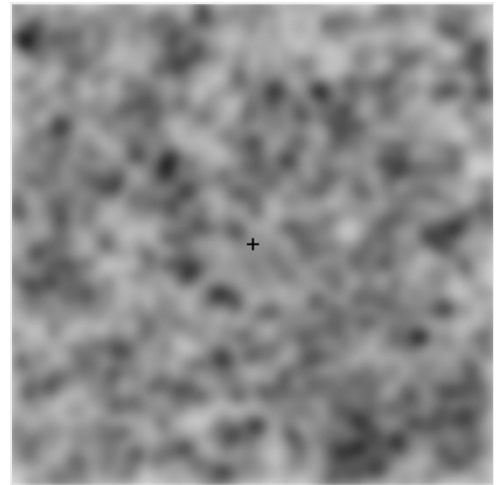
Face plant

Kang Lee, a psychologist at the University of Toronto, Canada, says he brags to his scientist friends about his latest achievement: the Ig Nobel Neuroscience Prize, for his paper, ‘[Seeing Jesus in toast: neural and behavioural correlates of face pareidolia](#)’².

Many people found humour in the paper’s title, but Lee said that the science is serious. He and his team took functional magnetic resonance imaging scans of the brains of people who reported seeing non-existent faces (face pareidolia) in ‘noisy’ pictures.

They found that the brain region responsible for face recognition, the right fusiform face area, is also activated when people ‘see’ imaginary faces. The authors write that the brain is so primed to spot human faces that “even the slightest suggestion of a face can result in the interpretation of a face.”

None of the volunteers in his study actually reported seeing Jesus or any other spiritual being, Lee said. The title of the paper refers more to the inspiration for the research rather than the study itself. “We had heard news of people seeing the face of Jesus on toast, and that’s where the idea started,” he said.



Source: Ref. 2

A 'noisy' image used in a study of people who see imaginary faces in such pictures.

Bacon bung

Social media also hailed some meaty winners, including the recipient of the Medicine Prize: a case study of a [cured pork ‘tampon’](#) that successfully stopped a major nosebleed. Darren Markland, an emergency physician at Royal Alexandra Hospital in Edmonton, Canada, remarked on Twitter:



The study ‘[Characterization of lactic acid bacteria isolated from infant faeces as potential probiotic starter culture for fermented sausages](#)’ won the Nutrition Prize. Steve Smith, a microbiologist at Trinity College Dublin, tweeted:



References

1. Mabuchi, K., Tanaka, K., Uchijima, D. & Sakai, R. *Tribol. Online* **7**, 147–151 (2012).
2. Liu, J. *et al. Cortex* **53**, 60–77 (2014).