
Special issue
Visual motifs

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An analysis of feminist graphics published on Instagram by Spanish female professionals on the subject of International Women's Day (2019–2020)

Abstract

The present scene, defined as it is by the undisputed prominence of imagery and the power of social media acting as tools for political activism and public interaction, is strongly influenced by Instagram. This is a platform with a predominantly graphic format where imagery, as a means of visual communication, acquires a special significance. In the 21st century, the term cyberfeminism has become synonymous with that part of feminist philosophy focusing on new technologies, the internet and the digital world generally. The present study analyses images created by Spanish professional female illustrators for International Women's Day (March 8th), which were published on Instagram in 2019 and 2020. It will focus primarily on three kinds of imagery: plastic, linguistic and iconic. By mainly analyzing content and a sample of 124 artworks developed during this period, this study goes on to highlight the significance of the color violet. This is the plastic resource that stands out most from a very stylistically heterogeneous set of graphics. Complementing imagery is the important role of linguistics with frequent repetition of iconic references and a preference for representation of women. This last aspect is mainly with reference to their strength and security, in addition to an inclination for concepts linked to the need for vindication, sorority and empowerment.

Keywords

Feminism, social networks, Instagram, visual communication, illustration, activist graphics.

1. Introduction

Understood as the “graphic representation of an intentional message through a certain system of signs” (Montes-Vozmediano & Vizcaíno-Laorga, 2015, p. 17), visual communication comprises fields such as arts, graphic design, photography and illustration. The latter specialization, although it is a common ingredient of graphic design, can also be studied independently (Rom, 2015) or from its connection to the field of Art (Zeegen, 2013). This will depend on factors such as context or the purpose of the image. According to Chumillas (2020), it is a form of graphic expression intended to document or visualize the

word, and its aesthetic properties favor an understanding of a specific concept, regardless of the plastic resources used.

As part of visual communication, illustration contributes to describing the way in which society expresses itself by validating some meanings and repressing others (Martínez-Collado, 2011), and it reflects our moral values and part of our collective memory. In this sense, it is important to study the power of images in exerting a constructive effect on people (De Vet, 2010) or in giving an institutional voice to under-represented groups (Ledesma, 2003). Some ways that can explain the capacity of intentional images to support a particular cause (Yates & Price, 2016) are graphics that raise consciousness or generate emotions. They can portray behaviors that contribute to problem solving, show certain topics or give a “visual voice” to the social and political concerns of today’s society (Twemlow, 2007).

In the social context of visual communication there is a field called vindictive or activist graphics which, although it is currently a small sector, is attracting the interest of both professional and lay creators (Pelta, 2014). Linked to several fundamental areas (e.g., social justice, the environment and peace), activist graphics is defined as:

those images created from social commitment and political activism with the aim of claiming certain rights and showing or vindicating certain social problems or injustices. The sender of these messages could be a citizen who expresses him/herself individually or better or less organized groups, such as city platforms, neighbor associations or non-governmental organizations. The actions involved in activist graphics are very diverse: pacifist, ecological, labor-related or vindications for human rights, among many others (Clemente, 2012, par. 1).

Within activist graphics, and linked to social justice, feminist graphics developed as a visual representation of a social doctrine (feminism) “which grants women the capacity and rights that have been until now reserved to men [and stresses] the need to change the condition of subordination of women as a requirement for the development of their capacities” (Garone Gravier, 2005, p. 93). Strongly influenced by the works of authors that participated from the 1960s in antiracist and anti-war fights (Villaplana-Ruiz, 2008), feminist graphics contributed to renewing cultural tales and artistic discourses, and established illustration mainly as the ideal means of emphasizing the immediacy, ease of understanding and expressiveness of the message, above visual perfection or a specific style (Pelta, 2011b).

Since the late 20th century, the growing dominance of communication technologies explains the feminist effervescence in the public and communicative space (Larrondo, Morales i Gras & Orbegozo Terradillos, 2019). This has led to the emergence of cyberfeminism, a term that was coined to describe the particular philosophy that focuses on the new digital technologies and seeks to transform the Internet into a friendlier and more useful place for women (Guil-Bozal, 2011).

Thus, the use of ICT becomes a “fertile tool of political citizen activation” (Acosta, 2018, p. 6) and transforms the Internet into a powerful tool of solidarity and co-involvement (Sierra-Caballero, 2020). Similarly, the online dissolution of the production, reception and distribution spaces of art leads to the suppression of male control in galleries, museums (Gago Gelado, 2019) and exhibitions (Fernández-López, 2013). However, the digital environment can offer spaces of great interest for the visibility of marginalized identities and the discussion of topics that are usually avoided in dominant contexts (Crepax, 2020).

In this scenario, the Internet has generated new literacy keys, with image as a protagonist (Danesi, 2017), which has favored the creation of a “society of visualization” (De la Flor, 2009) or “image civilization” (Fokou-Ngouo, 2020). In this, new social media has led to a democratization in graphic production. This, in turn, has replaced the previous vertical model with a new, more plural conception of “author” (Fajardo-Fajardo, 2010; Acosta, 2020), and a social interaction that promotes new social imaginaries (Sierra-Caballero, 2010). Among such media, Instagram –with a very young user profile– has become the most important social

network in terms of number of users, with the best growth perspectives, favoring, as it does, mobility, immediacy and authenticity of visual communication (Selva-Ruiz & Caro-Castaño, 2017). It differs from other media by virtue of its marked visual character, involving a unique discourse (Jurišová, 2020) and turning it into the social platform whose contents generate the most engagement from its users (Acosta, 2020). The efficacy of Instagram as a vehicle of visual communication is backed by its rapid growth, its influence on the behavior of its followers, its capacity to generate emotions and the ease of processing and remembering visual information (Sarmiento-Guede & Rodríguez-Terceño, 2020).

Likewise, regarding contemporary feminism, Zafra (2019) states that, through such new tools, the Internet allows for the most recent feminist art to make visible the intimate and private worlds of women. The body, the home, the cage, domestic life as a prison and female sexual anatomy are some of the recurrent topics.

The richness and complexity of the feminist universe is currently increasing, as “the feminist practices developed through the new media of the information society are showing the complex framework of positions and drastic identity, social and political changes regarding the topic of gender” (Martínez-Collado, 2011, p. 111). Thus, it is relevant to explore the extent to which this current greater diversity has banished some common aspects of the feminist praxis of the first years of the Internet: flowers, the great use of the Venus symbol and the omnipresence of the color violet are some of the traditional stereotypes (Kuni, 2019). More recently, Crepax (2020) argues that Instagram has contributed to this aestheticization through the representation of genuinely feminine traits, the use of motivational and empowering slogans and an emphasis on the value of the group.

Despite the publication of very interesting texts, such as the studies of Martínez-Collado (2014), Mahoney (2020) and Crepax (2020), Rovetto and Camusso (2014) warn about the scarcity of studies addressing the production of feminist iconography, particularly that circulating through virtual networks. According to Mayayo (2013), there is very little research on the space granted to female artists and feminist discourse in the literature on Spanish art in the last five decades. However, such studies are considered transcendental in overcoming traditional bias and in underlining the value of women in this field (López-Carmona, 2016); as López Varela suggests, they are the bearers of culture: “when women stop creating, culture will be unstable, empty and also dead” (2019, p. 13).

Even though the assumed scarcity of studies about the link between feminist graphics and social networks in scientific literature, other digital publications for the dissemination of fashion, style and culture have recently demonstrated this phenomenon in commemorating International Women's Day. In this regard, the articles of Megía (2019), Domínguez (2020) and Rustarazo (2020) are some of the examples that display the impact of social media (especially Instagram) on the production of the feminist symbolic universe, the construction of its identity, social cohesion, and the experience of community. Framed within this context, the present study is focused on women not only as the protagonists of the content of the message, but also as its authors and senders. Thus, this article delves into the conclusions of Cuesta-De-La-Cal (2020), according to whom the 21st century is witnessing the birth of a new feminist artistic movement. This has its own defining elements, and its projection is assisted by the impetus of social networks acting as a space for communication. These networks contribute to their improved visibility, recognizing their talent and shared experiences, ideas and creations. Along these lines, the aim of this study was to determine the existence of syntactic or semantic regularities in the universe of feminist graphics as disseminated through social media (in this case, Instagram) in the form of common graphic references (Zafra, 2019), consensual symbols that facilitate the understanding of the message (Clemente, 2012) and specific cyberfeminist aesthetics (Kuni, 2019; Crepax, 2020), among others.

2. Objectives and hypotheses

The main objective of this study was to analyze images produced by Spanish professional female illustrators commemorating International Women's Day (March 8th) published on Instagram in 2019 and 2020. The underlying goal was to investigate, through a systematic and quantifiable method, the existence of certain constants in these messages, in both expression and content, revealing the more significant meanings or topics and the formal resources used by female illustrators.

From the abovementioned objective, and after a brief exploratory analysis of the sample, the following working hypotheses were proposed:

- H1. Although there are some common plastic axes (among which the color violet stands out), the expressive code of the images linked to 8M (March 8th) is very heterogeneous and follows the characteristic style of each illustrator.
- H2. The illustrations are frequently based on linguistic signs to specify or contextualize the meaning of the graphic message (fundamentally using a specific typography included in the image) or to provide additional information (through external description).
- H3. In the desire to communicate recognizable concepts and facilitate the understanding of the message, the highest levels of iconicity (figurative or realistic) predominate over abstract motifs, as well as the representational role of the image over symbolism.
- H4. Regarding the previous hypothesis, there is a clear preference for the representation of women, especially in a collective manner (to emphasize the strength of union) and, to a lesser extent, for other graphic motifs such as the Venus symbol and the fist (to evoke feminist resistance).
- H5. Despite the variety of meanings, there is clear consensus on the concepts that the illustrations aim to convey, with the right to protest and the relevance of vindication, sorority, and equality as the semantic axes of feminist graphics.

3. Methodology

This study is based on content analysis, which is a method that allows all types of messages to be described from a set of data and facilitates the formulation of inferences based on four fundamental principles: objectivity, systematicity, manifest content and the capacity to generalize (Puebla-Martínez, 2013). This technique allows for the analysis of any type of communication through the quantification of messages or contents in categories and subcategories and their statistical analysis (Hernández-Sampieri, Fernández-Collado & Baptista-Lucio, 2010). Moreover, "content analysis is not limited to the verbal aspects, as it reaches other semiotic modes" (Cares-Mardones, 2017, p. 182); thus, as an ideal methodology to be applied in non-linguistic modes of communication (Flores-Huelves & Montes-Vozmediano, 2017), it has been widely used in scientific studies on visual communication in several of its disciplines, such as graphic marketing (Montes-Vozmediano & Torregrosa-Carmona, 2018), graphic design (Suárez-Carballo, 2019), visual identity (Salvador-Rivero & Vizcaíno-Laorga, 2018), and visual journalism (López-del-Ramo & Montes-Vozmediano, 2018).

Furthermore, this technique is useful in the field of social design, since "in the scope of communication sciences, content analysis has contributed substantially to the advancement of research on media and marketing images and stereotypes of minority and vulnerable groups" (Eiroa & Barranquero, 2017, p. 108). The formula used in this article presents a quantitative approach and is focused on the manifest variables (Igartua, 2006), in both the content and expression of the images.

3.1. Variables

This study proposes an original list of variables from previous investigations on the theory of image –Groupe μ (1993); Villafañe and Mínguez (2000); Polidoro (2016)– and from several scientific papers on visual communication that apply content analysis as the main method, among which the publications of Benito-Martín (2018), López-del-Ramo and Humanes (2016), Sánchez-de-Lucas (2018), Vargas-Ortiz (2020) and Miret-Burbano (2018) are noteworthy. Thus, along with a small card that gathers the biographic and identity data of the work (basically, the name of the author and the year of production), the variables are structured into three blocks, which correspond to the division of signs established by Joly (2012) and Montes-Vozmediano and Vizcaíno-Laorga (2015) (Table 1):

- Plastic sign: this analyses the materiality of the visual signifier through the elements that bring the plane of expression together and allow for the recognition of the content from shapes, textures and colors, among other factors (Carrere & Saborit, 2000; Groupe μ , 1993). This block gathers: the illustrative technique used by each author, following some of the formulas cited by Wigam (2007); the chromatic traits of the piece, with special emphasis on the predominating hue and color palette, from the combinations proposed by Sutton and Whelan (2008); a small selection of four kinds of techniques using visual communication of Dondis (1998), which were considered to be more suitable for the composite analysis of the study object; and a study of the proportion or framing of those images where women are the protagonists.
- Linguistic sign: this analyses the presence of the textual statement and its relevance when it accompanies the iconic elements; in this case, we studied the predominating typographic category, according to the four main blocks of Thibadeau; the role of the text (Barthes, 2000) to ensure the meaning of the image (anchorage) or to provide additional information in order to understand the meaning of the work (relay); and, finally, the role of description in Instagram (external to the graphics) to specify, explain or complete the meaning of the image.
- Iconic sign: this is the sign establishing a relationship between the signifier, the pattern and the referent (Zunzunegui, 1998). This section assesses the level of iconicity from a simplified classification of three values (Contreras & San-Nicolás, 2001); the roles of the image, stressing the representational and symbolic levels; an analysis of the denotative meaning of the image from the elements represented in each piece, i.e., the main or secondary inclusion of material, symbolic and human motifs (women, men and children), the relationship between them and the expression in their faces; and, lastly, a list of the most relevant concepts underlying the work to determine the intention of each author.

Table 1: Variables, categories and observable criteria.

VARIABLE	CATEGORY	OBSERVABLE CRITERION
PLASTIC SIGN		
Illustrative technique	Means and materials (Wigam, 2007)	Analogical /vectorial / typographic / collage / other
Color	Hue	Clearly predominating hue in the
	Selection of chromatic harmonies (Sutton & Whelan, 2008)	Achromatic / monochromatic / analogous / complementary / other
Composition	Selection of visual communication techniques (Dondis, 1998)	Economy / profusion Flatness / depth

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		Symmetry / asymmetry / instability Juxtaposition / singularity
Proportion	Framing (López-Del-Ramo & Humanes, 2016)	Wide / full / medium / close-up / detail / several
LINGUISTIC SIGN		
Typography	Use of typographic elements	Yes / no
	Predominating typographic category, according to the four main blocks of Thibadeau (Salvador-Rivero & Montes Vozmediano, 2016)	Sans serif / serif / script / fantasy
Textual message	Roles (Barthes, 2000)	Anchorage / relay
	Relevance of the text present in the description of Instagram for the understanding of the message	Yes / no
ICONIC SIGN		
Iconicity	Iconicity level (Contreras & San Nicolás, 2001)	Realistic / figurative / abstract
	Role of the image (Montes-Vozmediano & Vizcaíno-Laorga, 2015)	Representational / symbolic
Represented figures	Presence of women	Yes / no
	The role of women in the image	Main / secondary
	Attitude/s of the women	Vindication, love, optimism, aggressiveness, safety, sadness, seriousness, calmness, neutral, other
	Presence of men	Yes / no
	Presence of children	Yes / no
	Relationships between individuals	Individual / collective / family /
	Presence of the feminine symbol	Yes / no
	Inclusion of elements	Identification of other main or secondary elements
Intentionality and conceptualization	Main concept/s in the image	Vindication, sorority, action, equality, empowerment, change, oppression, violence, freedom, inclusivity, love, feminism, body, homage, other

Source: Own elaboration.

3.2. Sample

The sample consisted of 124 illustrations created by Spanish professional women who had published their work on Instagram within the last two years (97 pieces in 2019 and 27 pieces in 2020) and labelled it with the hashtag #ilustralahuelgafeminista (illustrate the feminist strike). Thus, the aim was to specifically analyze the perception of these professional illustrators with regard to this strike through the analysis of the messages related to 8M in Spain. Considering 124 images a sufficiently significant number, this selection of pieces allows a stable criterion to be established and a considerable volume of pieces with content strongly related to the object of study to be incorporated (illustrations created to commemorate the feminist strike). The integral repertoire of images is included in the Annex.

Moreover, unlike other studies that lay stress on the characteristics of spontaneous and amateur activist graphics –e.g., Pelta (2011a)–, the present study is focused on qualified illustration. With this requirement, the aim is to guarantee the analysis of images with a certain graphic quality, which is a criterion that, in the field of visual communication, has always been questionable (Suárez-Carballo, Martín-Sanromán and Galindo-Rubio, 2020). Therefore, this study excluded the work of amateur designers, those who do not meet the professional and academic requirements of the discipline; creators “who are not within the academic, normative, technical and scholarly background of graphic design, but who currently use tools and procedures typical of the practice of expert graphic design” (Vega-Pindado, 2018, p. 53). To ensure such quality in the creations making up the sample, the Instagram profile of the authors was checked, observing that their artistic activity was not limited to the selected illustration and that they had a verified presence in this discipline.

Likewise, although the sample that resulted from the search using the hashtag includes illustrations of male and foreign authors, these were excluded, due to their small number. Thus, the sample is limited to the previously mentioned sex and geographic criteria (Spanish women). Furthermore, the study excluded images created by organizations and collections of works of the same author, in order to prevent the excessive weight of a particular perspective or style in the results. In the latter case, we selected the first piece of a carousel or the most recent illustration, if that author published in two different years. Figure 1 shows a random selection of four illustrations from the study sample.

Figure 1: Random selection of four pieces from the sample.



Source: @ilustracionesmaryf, @_depeapa, @marialugili and @chari_nogales.

4. Results

4.1. Plastic sign

The choice of illustrative technique defines some of the syntactic attributes of the piece. Among the methods used, the analogical option stands out (96 illustrations, 77%) with respect to the vectorial alternative (11%) and collage (8%). The rest of the creations belonged to typographic messages –or lettering designs– and embroidery illustrations (2 in each case). However, it is important to highlight the difficulty of classifying the pieces into these

categories, due to the frequently hybrid nature of their production and the problems of evaluating the extent to which the piece was made from pre-existing elements (collages, for instance). To tackle some of these uncertainties and complete the formal analysis, we subsequently evaluated the geometric or spontaneous nature of the pieces, linked to the previous aspect; in this analysis, the second (i.e., spontaneous) alternative clearly prevailed (94%) over the geometric design and mixed creations (5 and 2 cases, respectively).

Regarding the chromatic characteristics of the analyzed images, we observed a marked repercussion of combinations of analogue colors (24%), with close hues in the chromatic circle (predominantly warm), and monochromatic harmonies (22%), which, together, constitute almost half of the selection. In contrast to the diversity of these combinations (whose categorization is insufficient for the multiplicity of the observed strategies), there are more obvious regularities with respect to the dominant hue in the illustrations, in which the color violet –associated with the feminist struggle (Arbat, 2018)– stands out with 28%. This percentage increased when also considering some colors close to violet –such as magenta and pink, with an additional 38%– or their mere presence in the piece (not only as the main color but also as the secondary color), which was observed in 73 cases (59%). In the rest of the illustrations, except for the color red (9%), the main hues have little significance in the entire sample, or no clear dominance is shown by any color.

Secondly, after an initial exploratory analysis, we resorted to a small selection of visual communication techniques of Dondis (1998), which are more relevant for the plastic description of the visual language of the feminist graphic messages from the perspective, composition, number of elements and protagonism (exclusive or shared) of the represented motifs. The prototypic style of the illustrations is fundamentally based on depth simulation (71%) over flatness and on the combination of two or more relevant elements (juxtaposition) in the image (61%). Similarly, there is an equivalence between the economy and profusion of elements, and, regarding the distribution of weights, asymmetric balance (which is more spontaneous) clearly stands out (73%) with respect to symmetry (13%) and compositional instability (14%), which is more provocative.

Lastly, we analyzed the framing of those images that represented human motifs (a total of 101 cases) using the classification of López-Del-Ramo and Humanes (2016), which was previously revised and simplified. These pieces, all of which include at least one woman, show a preference for wide framings (34% of the illustrations have a greater profusion of figures, fundamentally groups of female individuals in a protest context) and medium or close-up framings (30% and 22% of the cases, respectively, linked to images that represent a smaller number of women) over other alternatives, such as detail framings, which show a poor global presence.

4.2. Linguistic sign

Firstly, 39 images show an absolute lack of textual components, compared to 85 pieces (69%) that include some message of this sort. In the communicative strategy of the illustrations that resort to the linguistic sign, this provides additional information in 31 images (25%), which is fundamental for the correct interpretation of the meaning (relay role), whereas in 54 cases (44%) the linguistic sign is used as anchorage (strengthening or contextualization of the image). In the latter cases, the explicit reference to the struggle or the acronym 8M appear in 47 illustrations, of which 9 show it in an exclusive manner. Moreover, it is worth highlighting the role of the Instagram description (external to the image): in 19 cases (15% of the evaluated pieces), the information seems to contribute decisively to the correct decoding of the message or provides complementary information, as is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Example of the relay function of the linguistic sign in the Instagram description.



Source: @miss_moratalaz.

In the aforementioned 85 images that incorporate some typographic element, following the synthesized classification of Thibadeau, the handwritten types stand out (69 cases, 78%); among these, 56 (two thirds of the typographic designs) were created *ad hoc* by their authors, compared to 13 pieces that had previously-designed script fonts. Moreover, there is little presence of sans serif styles (14 cases) and an almost residual representation of serif (4) and fantasy fonts (2).

Beyond the pieces that mention 8M explicitly as the topic of the illustration, the slogans or textual messages are very heterogeneous, are formalized in different languages (English, Galician, Basque and Catalan, apart from the clearly predominant Spanish language) and are related to some of the concepts described in the next section.

4.3. Iconic sign

This section analyses the reality that the images aim to convey through an assessment of their content. Firstly, regarding the area of iconicity (how faithful the signifier is to the referent), the figurative or abstract images (42% and 39%, respectively) stand out with respect to the realistic images (16%), the hybrid motifs (2 pieces that use *collage*) and another 2 creations made exclusively with the typographic component. Regarding the role of images, there is a clear predominance of representational motifs (72% of images that reflect a high semantic analogy between the signifier and the referent) over symbolic illustrations (28%), in which the concept that underlies the piece transcends the representation of the signifier.

With respect to the represented motifs, 101 pieces (81%) represent women, always with a leading role; in 58 of these illustrations, they appear individually (57%), whereas in 43 of them they appear as a group (43%). A much smaller number of illustrations show men (5 cases) and children (10). There is a predominance of images that reflect a social or community link among women, with no additional relationship, almost always motivated by the feminist protest (32 cases); 8 pieces represent family or generational motifs and 3 of them show an affective bond (as a couple). Lastly, 2 of these images represent, simultaneously, several of these relationships.

The analysis of the expression in the faces of the women present in the illustrations delves into the tone or meaning of the message, which can be a multiple attitude, especially in the case of the collective representations. Since there are numerous nuances, we attempted to group the different expressive variants into a smaller number of stable categories in order to provide a clearer picture. The results show a clear predominance of attitudes linked to

safety, trust, pride or assertiveness (31 cases), happiness or optimism (26) and, less frequently, calmness (10) and aggressiveness or challenge (9). To an even lesser extent, there are expressions related to love (4), seriousness (4) and sadness, pain or insecurity (2). In a total of 29 images, either there is an attitude of neutrality or the attitude is unspecific or difficult to interpret.

Along with human motifs, there are other recurrent symbolic elements or material objects in the pieces. Among these, the representation of the Venus symbol stands out, appearing in 30 images (24% of the sample), with a clearly leading and secondary role in 9 and 21 of them, respectively. In addition to this symbol, there is a clear representation of flowers (19 cases) or plants (8), attributed by Kuni (2019) to the feminine imaginary; the fist (13), to symbolize feminist resistance; an abstract formalization of the heart (5), to represent love or union; fire (6), to describe bravery or leadership; or representations of the world, planet Earth or the universe (4) as a metaphor of empowerment or worth. Likewise, the authors of the illustrations resorted frequently to anatomical motifs or artifacts related to women's nature (the uterus, painted nails, the womb or the menstrual cup) to vindicate the female body. There is also a vast amount of graphic elements that are strongly related to the concepts transmitted by the illustrations: butterflies (3) and sewed wings as a metaphor of freedom and change; the cage, the apron and the chains to denounce oppression or deprivation of freedom; and symbolic resources such as infinity to highlight the unlimited possibilities of women.

The aim of the last analysis was to reveal the concepts that derived from the study of the iconic sign –in combination with the textual component– and which, somehow, contribute to explaining the feelings of the illustrators and the reasons for their participation in this digital mobilization. As in the analysis of the facial expression or gestures, the important diversity of concepts (which usually coexist in the same illustration) motivated their grouping into a smaller number of categories to ensure a better understanding of the ideas around which feminist graphics revolve. In this regard, there are two main messages. The first main message is the need for vindication or the right to strike to commemorate the feminist struggle (present in 43 illustrations); this idea is strengthened with a meaning of denunciation, struggle, insurgency or need for action in 22 images that show different symbolic motifs (such as the speaker) or roles (women as warriors, for instance). The second main message refers to sorority (linked to unity or cohesion), which is represented in 42 cases. At a lower frequency –although clearly relevant– is the concept of empowerment (31 images), which, in some pieces, is associated with the idea of the woman as the center of life, her relevance in the future of society, her strength (sometimes infinite: the need to stand again) and her leadership through her capacity to hold the world. Sixteen images refer to her freedom as a conceptual axis –in some cases with nuances of independence– and another 14 images reflect a claim for equality and women's rights; in turn, the latter two topics are very close to the ideas that underline the need for a social change (8 cases), sometimes through the emphasis on a future view. Other messages are used to denounce violence (10 illustrations), often through concepts close to safety or the right to live, as a rejection of male oppression or the patriarchy (5), as a vindication of inclusivity or diversity (racial or of sexual orientation, in 8 illustrations), or as a manifestation of love as the essence of the message (3). Moreover, 7 pieces pay homage to specific references to the feminist struggle, such as Frida Kahlo (2), Naomi Parker (2), Jane Godall, Malala Yousafzai, Teresa Wilms Montt and even the famous propaganda poster of J. Howard Miller (2) or, in a more light-hearted tone, to the childish symbol of Pippi Langstrum as a representation of rebellion (“I want you unruly”). In one case, the dedication addresses the previous generations that initiated the feminist struggle. Lastly, 8 illustrations emphasize the female anatomy, which translates into life or flowering (5) or asserts the right of women to make decisions about their own bodies (3).

5. Discussion and conclusions

This study objectively considers contemporary feminist graphics through a plastic, linguistic and iconic analysis of images created by Spanish professional female illustrators to commemorate the feminist strike of 2019 and 2020, published on Instagram under the hashtag #ilustralahuelgafeminista (“illustrate the feminist strike”). With a total sample of 124 pieces (a number that was considered sufficiently representative to draw reliable conclusions), the obtained results allow for the verification, to a great extent, of the working hypotheses.

Firstly, regarding the plastic component, the analogical method stood out as the foremost technique over other alternatives (especially vectorial illustration, which showed a limited presence in the selection). However, based on this assertion, we should also consider the hybridization of formulas, the combination of analogue and digital methods (e.g., in the computerized chromatic finish) and the difficulty of specifying the procedures or materials used by each author. This majority use of analogue illustration (more spontaneous and organic) coincides, in turn, with the preference for depth and more defined compositions (especially asymmetric), whereas the slight superiority of the juxtaposition of elements and the very subtle preference for profusion (with respect to singularity and economy, respectively) are associated, as is discussed further in this article, with the importance of the group (Crepax, 2020) and the event reflected by the hashtag (the 8M strike). On the same lines, although the analysis of the proportion of the figures (the framing of those images in which women are the protagonists) reveals a marked heterogeneity, it also shows a parallelism with the aforementioned techniques: the wide framings coincide with the profusion and juxtaposition of elements usually showing situations of collective protest, whereas the closest ones coincide with singularity and economy.

There was a reiterated use of the color violet –applied in the sample with certain flexibility, as is shown by the frequency of magenta and pink tones– to evoke the hue that American suffragettes used in their uniform in the march that claimed Equal Rights in the year 1978 (Arbat, 2018). At the plastic level, as was stated by Kuni (2019), it continues to be the most important identity element, also in the current digital scope. The relevance of this hue contrasts with the small interest of the study in chromatic combinations, a diversity of formulas that transcends the employed classification and either seems to derive from the stylistic preferences of the illustrators or lacks an explicit meaning. However, beyond the manifest weight reflected by the chromatic hue in the conformation of the meaning, it is worth looking at the semantic relevance of the other plastic dimensions with greater presence in the sample (i.e., asymmetric balance, analogical technique and spontaneity). In this sense, it would be interesting to determine the relevance of these attributes in the definition of feminist illustration with respect to other types of vindictive messages or other scopes of visual communication, such as certain mainstream trends of more commercial graphics.

Moreover, the important presence of the linguistic sign (included in more than two thirds of the sample) reveals the relevance of the textual component in the semantic construction of the piece, either in contextualizing the meaning (anchorage) or in providing additional information to the image (relay). These functions also intervene in the Instagram description (an element external to the image), where the relay function becomes very useful, in some cases, for completing the meaning of the illustration when: 1) the iconic sign is not sufficient, 2) the linguistic sign does not take part in the piece, or 3) the meaning is questionable. When it is present in the visual text, the typographic features show a vast majority of handwritten forms created *ad hoc* by the illustrators, often as a reflection of their personal calligraphy. Beyond this customized morphology (which underlines the preference for analogue illustration) and the script fonts (previously designed and digitized), which showed great presence, the rest of the categories are practically testimonial.

The iconic sign is probably the aspect that provides the most solid and interesting results for the definition of feminist graphics in the online environment. At this point, it is safe to assert that there is an unquestionable preference for the representation of the adult woman, both individually and collectively, with expressions that predominantly reflect safety or calmness, and which show, in most of them, a vindictive but optimistic attitude. Along with the human representation, there is an outstanding preference for references like the high fist (as a metaphor of union or strength) or the Venus symbol (as the universal female symbol) and, less frequently, anatomical motifs (such as a vindication of the female body), flowers and plant elements. Along these lines, although the catalogue of concepts underlying the sample is very varied –and, moreover, many of them are strongly related to each other or the nuance is extremely diffuse–, there is an outstanding number of explicit references to the transcendence of the call or right to strike –very close to the concepts of feminist struggle and sorority– and the ideas of empowerment, equality and freedom. Furthermore, in many cases, the same piece does not display protagonism of a single concept but of several messages that coexist simultaneously and are essential for the configuration of the meaning. To sum up, it seems that, despite the diversity of styles, the repetition of different motifs –some of them not very different from the ones described by Kuni (2019)– suggests a certain generalized consensus regarding content.

In this same block, while diversity in the area of iconicity seems to again be explained by each author's own style, it is interesting to note the great preference for representational –rather than symbolic– images. This, as well as explicit messages and the frequent inclusion of the linguistic sign (through the abovementioned handwritten elements or the description given by the platform), the similarity of motifs and the preference for certain stereotypes, again suggest the sacrifice of surprise –at least from the iconic perspective– in favor of an easily understandable content. Therefore, it seems that the responsibility for facilitating the understanding of the meaning lies in the preference for the representational role rather than in the area of iconicity, and that creativity is mainly manifested in the plastic aspect.

Thus, the results at least partially allow the predictions of this investigation to be validated: the feminist graphics published on Instagram by Spanish professional female illustrators in 2019 and 2020 employ dynamic balance, analogue methods, organic strokes and, especially, the color violet (or similar hues) as the most important common elements of plastic creations that generally conform to the style of each illustrator (H1). The message is frequently based on linguistic signs, either with handwritten typographic elements in the piece (with the anchorage role standing out among such elements) or through the external description, which allows the meaning of less explicit illustrations to be reinforced (H2). With a hegemony of the figurative or abstract levels, there is a prevalence of the representational role to, presumably, convey unequivocal meanings to the receiver (H3). In the universe of feminist graphics, there is a clear preference for women as the protagonists of the message, both individually and collectively, together with other resources, such as the Venus Symbol, the high fist or flower motifs (H4). Lastly, an analysis of the linguistic and iconic signs revealed the predominance of concepts linked to the need for protest, sorority and empowerment, frequently with a tone of strength, confidence and optimism about the future (H5).

Next, along with the previous conclusions, we describe some of the limitations or possible challenges that derive from this study, which will be addressed in future projects in this research line. Firstly, it would be interesting to delve into the analysis of some variables (the iconicity level, the roles of images or the meaning of the iconic sign), whose categories are insufficient, vague or imprecise in the present study. Secondly, it would be ideal to improve the reliability of the analysis of the iconic sign with a qualitative study (e.g., through interviews with the authors). Thirdly, future studies should increase the sample size with new criteria (e.g., evaluating the possible differences of international feminist graphics with the iconic sign). Lastly, as has been proposed by Marín-Dueñas (2020), it is necessary to expand

this research with an evaluation of the repercussion, impact or efficacy of the images through their interactions (comments or likes).

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Annex: list of authors and analyzed images

2019 (97 artworks)			
estoesjauja	estudiomow	maria.novoa.ilustracion	parodriguez.23
personology	evitikis	mariahesse	periwhat illustration
anabelmart	fraesq	marialeon ilustracion	pinkpanter1985
anaferrer illustration	guisante	marialugili	produtriz.agency
anayala	hippieher	marianto.ilustra	rebeca zarzaestudio
annaflorsdefum	holasoykaaa	marrabila	remorada
arramazka	ilustracionesmaryf	mavicasanovadesign	rocio_montoya
axoueres e chisqueiros	imma mestre	mentxuplorca	ruthnaser
bysilvianieto	inkterface	merakithings	sdraswi
candela_pineiro	io.obradoirotextil	minibloggers	siempregotica
canhippiehome	iratink	miss_moratalaz	sopadenez
carolaribas	iriacidre	missarorua	studiovariopinto
catabaeme.enpapel	jotakaillustration	morisukis	tatiayala
celesteciafarone	judit.maldonado	myriam sizigia	tenikeguanfetama
claraneon	kris_lata	nauena_	tres.voltes.rebel
coco_glez	laciudaddeladama	nereagomez_studio	tukiandco
cothesanchez_illustration	ladydesidia	nolavola	umaniza
cristinareinadesign	laotrarous	nosolocreativa	vandis
depeapa	lauilustra	nuria_diaz	varelalaf
doceleguas_	laura_missaoki	oihanartea	vientodelnorte
dudelsea	laurysp	olga_trabajos	vireta
elenahormiga	lijudraws	p8ladas	xianacobo
emmagasco	loberucita_roja	pachsmile	
escarolota	lydiacecilia.art	paloma.iglesias	
estudiolimon	mai_ilustrada	paloma.plaza.designs	
2020 (27 artworks)			
marcelopez	chari_nogales	laia_lions	norestina
_martestudio	crisramosilustracion	lavcreations	palomaperezreyes
26ymotion	cristinacoboart	lidiacantos	sdraswi
aidartist	elenagarnu	mariasimavilla	tiniki_studio
albaricoque_acg	evacortesilustra	miabuelalila	watermarycolors illustration
anegaryl	gatamostaza	nai_robby	wearemicodi
annaflorsdefum	ilustralba	negroennegrecido	