

# Explaining the popularity of pimple-popper videos

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There are several factors that contribute to the sensations felt while watching pimple popping videos. Credit: University of Queensland

Why is the internet going crazy for videos of pimples popping, cysts exploding and stomach-churning ingrown hairs?

University of Queensland School of Psychology PhD candidate James Sherlock says humans have always had an appetite for the gruesome – and there are several factors that contribute to the fascination.

"Every culture has scary bedtime stories, ghost tales, and in modern

times, blockbusters featuring all manner of violent ghouls, monsters, and murderers," he says.

"What [horror movies](#) and pimple popping videos allow us to do is expose ourselves to stimuli that are highly arousing: eliciting specific physiological responses in preparation for a response to something that we have evolved to strongly dislike.

"In the case of horror movies, our brains tell us the bogeyman on screen is a threat and our body prepares to leap out of the seat and flee by flushing blood into our muscles and increasing respiration.

"In similar fashion, when we watch a surgeon expertly extract a big goopy blackhead from the nose of a patient, our disgust responses is engaged – albeit in a diluted format; we're not actually in any danger, but our brain still rewards us with a little thrill."

Digging a bit deeper – excuse the pun – Mr Sherlock says intrigue with pimple popping, blackhead extraction, and cyst draining can be linked to the disorder dermatillomania.

A component of [obsessive compulsive disorder](#), dermatillomania involves excessive skin picking, often to the point of injury, which is typically anchored in a belief that picking skin will remove an imperfection or extra-bodily invader.

"While maladaptive in its extreme form, this behaviour is evolutionarily conserved from our ancestors and, in fact, many animals demonstrate dermatillomania," he says.

"Quite often the greatest threats to health have been parasites, often those that could be transferred by insects or other disease vectors.

"In dermatillomania, skin picking is reinforced by dopamine releases from the brain – because the brain thinks the patient is responding appropriately to a potential threat.

"By watching experts excavate skin imperfections via our computer, we can stimulate a thrilling situation, even though in reality we might still be in our pyjamas in bed."

If you're becoming worried about your mental health after reading this article, Mr Sherlock reassures that the popularity of such videos is not due to enjoying seeing others in pain.

Indeed he says the mild disgust response elicited from most videos – somewhere in between making viewers ill or bored – guarantees and explains their large audiences.

But what does it mean if you're one of those people who can't stand to watch it all?

"Pimple popping videos, while enormously popular, are highly divisive," Mr Sherlock says.

"They are reflective of an individual's disgust sensitivity – the degree to which your behavioural immune system is activated by exposure to cues of disease.

"Recent studies using family data have shown disgust sensitivity is highly similar in identical twin pairs and much less so in non-identical twins indicating a genetic component.

"In fact, more than half of the difference from individual to individual is due to genetic variation, with the remaining variation due primarily to individual experience."

One interesting aspect of this topic is how our [disgust sensitivity](#) has changed through generations, and across cultures.

Contrary to what you may believe, Mr Sherlock says we are less macabre than our forebears.

"How we satisfied this curiosity has changed from the extreme – for instance public executions – to more benign forms such as television shows in which contestants eat bugs for the chance of a cash prize," he says.

"What thrills, excites, and disgusts us as human beings tends to be a mixed bag.

"For instance, most Westerners look on the practice of eating satay crickets with a good degree of repulsion, but the practice is quite common in many East Asian countries.

"On the other hand, there will likely always be certain behaviours or actions humans find disgusting because not finding them disgusting would be counter-productive to survival.

"In the case of pimple popping, by tapping into [disgust](#) these videos have triggered one of the most ancient and widespread of human emotions."

Provided by University of Queensland

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