This Is Why You Can't Stop Watching Those Zit-Popping Videos

Pause that blackhead removal video for two seconds and read this.

By Lane Moore

182 Shares

It's pretty hard to ignore the boom of gross-out videos. Videos where someone pops a million-year-old pimple, the pus splashing on the camera lens, or removes a mile-long ingrown hair from their face have probably been littering your feed for weeks now. But you click on them. And you watch them. And you share them. Or, if you're like me, you watch everyone around you click them and watch them and share them, understanding only that I guess people like this?

So why do they like them so much? Why are people obsessed with watching things that disgust and revolt them?

"It's the same kind of thrill people get from, say, riding a roller coaster or bungee jumping — it activates the experience typically comes with a real kind of danger while actually being protected from the harmful effects typically associated with those situations," Daniel Kelly, an assistant professor of philosophy at Purdue University, and author of Yuck!: The Nature and Moral Significance of Disgust, explains. "One of the main functions of disgust, the heart of this particular emotion's primary job or core mission, is to protect us from infectious diseases."

But why do some people love watching these videos, and others can't even look at the screengrabs without needing to move to another country? "Disgusting things tend to capture the attention pretty easily, and (surprisingly) it's been found that people are more likely to pass along and tell their friends about something that's disgusting versus something that isn't," Kelly says. "Some [people] are just more 'disgustable' or squeamish across the board than others."

So maybe we're just too weak to resist our own curiosity about gross stuff, but why do the videos even exist in the first place? Why would you, for one thing, have a 10-year-old blackhead that you finally decided you needed to remove and, you know what, may as well videotape it and send it to my friends?

I tried to track down some of the creators of the most popular popping (or in some cases, tweezing) videos and, perhaps not surprisingly, found it incredibly hard to do. In most cases, the people who upload these have very common names or they're fake names to begin with, so tracking them down is basically impossible. It's not like these are actual filmmakers hoping to have someone from the press hunt them down and make them celebrities. No, they're just people with weird stuff growing out of their bodies who understand supply and demand. That ingrown hair video has over 16 million views. Sixteen million! That's some serious proof that people cannot stop watching these weird-ass gross-out videos, even if many of them don't know why they're watching them in the first place.

Nina Strohminger, author of The Hedonics of Disgust (2013, University of Michigan),
thinks our need to watch things that make us feel disgusted has less to do with our actually wanting to feel awful and more to do with our want to have an experience. "I don't think there's anything straightforwardly masochistic about it," Strohminger said. "Rather, negative sensations are interesting, particularly when you're in a context where they can't hurt you. You're probably not going to step in dog shit just for the experience, but maybe you'd click on a link to watch someone else doing it."

After hearing Strohminger say that, all I could think was, Well, that actually makes a lot of sense. I don't ever want to witness a bunch of teenagers getting brutally murdered in real life, but I'll watch Scream over and over again and love every minute of it. I don't ever, ever, ever want to see women getting abused and assaulted in real life, but no one is a bigger fan of watching Law & Order: SVU than I am. I love watching video of terrible things happening because I know that's not happening in real life, but it still feels really intense to witness it, to watch it happen. Because I know everyone's going to be OK at the end.

Well, except for the part where everyone's spending parts of their lives watching blackhead removal videos and high-fiving each other because it's so gross that it's great. Still not sure how I feel about that one long-term.

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