Trypophobia, skin, and media

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Abstract

Trypophobia is the fear of patterns of clustered holes, bumps, or nodules. Trypophobia has a special relationship with dermatology because of its effects on individuals with skin disease, its relationship with disease avoiding behavior, and its utilization in many online skin disease hoaxes. Trypophobic patterns on skin and characters can be found in movies, TV shows, and videogames. Several popular horror villains take advantage of trypophobic patterns like Freddy Kreuger, Jason Vorhees, and Pinhead. Most recently, another blockbuster villain has joined their ranks - Killmonger. Public health messaging about these biases and the often noncontagious nature of skin disease is warranted to attenuate public stigma of skin disease perpetuated by media.

Keywords: trypophobia, cinema, film

Trypophobia is defined as the disgust or fear of patterns of grouped or clustered holes, papules, or nodules. This phenomenon has drawn ever increasing attention from international psychologists, psychiatrists, and dermatologists. Multiple investigations into trypophobia have been published in peer-reviewed journals. This is a topic of interest to dermatologists because trypophobia has been implicated in human evolutionary theory; innate avoidance of trypophobic images appearing on skin may enhance survival by recognition of potentially contagious and fatal diseases [1]. Although many healthy individuals will find trypophobic images disturbing, individuals with skin disease will be particularly affected. This phenomenon has been observed to lead to exacerbation of skin diseases in patients seeing such images [2]. Unfortunately, trypophobic images comprise the largest number of images used in skin disease hoaxes on the internet and are easily encountered by patients seeking internet-sourced information about skin concerns. A very popular pattern that is exploited for its trypophobic properties is the lotus plant seed pod [3].

Media producers and artists have been quick to take advantage of trypophobic patterns in their productions and have utilized them on villains in comics, videogames, and several film genres. Notable examples include Jason Vorhees, the evil character in *Friday the 13th* who wears an ice hockey goalie's mask that is designed with closely grouped holes. Likewise, Freddy Krueger from the series *A Nightmare on Elm Street* has hypertrophic facial burn scars to give his skin the appearance grouped gaps and raised plaques. Another character that takes advantage of the pattern is Pinhead from the *Hellraiser* franchise. Most recently, another commercially successful antagonist has joined the collection of these unique villains. Killmonger is the major antagonist in the film *Black Panther* (2018) and he is portrayed with numerous small and narrowly separated keloid scars on his torso and upper extremities, each one representing a life taken(https://pixel.nymag.com/imgs/daily/vulture/2018/02/15/15-killmonger-michael-b-jordan-2.w330.h330.jpg). A popular television series, *American Horror Story: Cult* (FX, Season 7, 2017), employs numerous disturbing images employing trypophobia on the tongue, brain, eyes, and face of characters. Furthermore, trypophobic honeycomb patterns of characters are featured in promotional posters and other advertising materials (https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/thumb/

4/4d/American_Horror_Story_Season_7.jpg/220px-American_Horror_Story_Season_7.jpg).

In dermatology, cribriform scarring that is associated with healed pyoderma gangrenosum and burn scars may also create natural patterns of concave and convex surfaces. This may help explain the social isolation and avoidance some of these patients experience. Although these two examples are not contagious skin diseases, the non-medically trained public may generalize about skin diseases and respond to all skin diseases with an identical behavioral response-avoidance. Additional media public health messaging about the noncontagious nature of most skin diseases is warranted to educate the public and avoid further stigmatization of those affected by them, especially owing to bias reinforced by exposure to fictional images seen on television, film, and online media.

References

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