

Comparative Depictions of Acne Vulgaris in Movies and in Animated Television Cartoons

Adrian P. Subrt¹, Richard F. Wagner, Jr.^{1,2}

¹The University of Texas Medical Branch Galveston, Texas 77555-0783 (USA).

²Edgar B. Smith Professor of Dermatology.

Correspondence: Richard F. Wagner. The University of Texas Medical Branch Galveston, Texas 77555 (USA).

e-mail: rfwagner@utmb.edu

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Summary

Acne vulgaris is a common chronic skin disease with the highest prevalence during the teenage years. The depiction of acne in animated television cartoons tends to follow a common plot, with a major character developing a single, large pimple. The comedone distresses the character and acquaintances may belittle the character, but the lesion resolves and the character learns a valuable life lesson. The portrayal of acne in films is much more varied than cartoons. Films typically use acne depictions to signal a negative aspect about characters. The five cartoons and five films detailed in this paper contain a variety of social and psychological responses to acne which demonstrate how such a common skin disorder can carry considerable social stigma. Cartoons and films may actually cause more harm than good by reinforcing negative cultural stereotypes about acne.

Keywords: Acne vulgaris. Movies. Cartoons. Stigmatization.

Resumen

El acné vulgar es una enfermedad crónica de la piel muy común. La prevalencia más alta se da en la adolescencia. La representación del acné en los dibujos animados de la televisión tiende a seguir un patrón común con un personaje principal al que le aparece un único y enorme grano. El comedón angustia al personaje y sus conocidos le menosprecian, pero la lesión se resuelve y el personaje aprende una valiosa lección de la vida. La descripción del acné en la películas es mucho más variada que en la televisión. Los filmes utilizan, normalmente, el recurso del acné para señalar un aspecto negativo de los personajes. Las cinco series de dibujos y las cinco películas abordadas en este trabajo contienen una gran variedad de respuestas sociales y psicológicas frente al acné que demuestran como un trastorno de la piel tan común puede conllevar estigmas sociales considerables. Los dibujos animados y las películas pueden, de hecho, causar más daño que beneficio al reforzar estereotipos culturales negativos sobre este problema.

Palabras clave: acné vulgar, películas, dibujos animados, estigmatización.

The authors state that this article is original and has not been previously published.

Introduction

Acne vulgaris is one of the most common skin diseases, especially among the adolescent population¹. One English study showed a prevalence of 50% in teenagers between the ages of 14 and 16². Despite the fact that it is so frequent, it remains highly stigmatizing to teenagers. Those with acne are often teased mercilessly by their peers and called many derogatory names³. Body image is important to adolescents, and compounded by lack of maturity and tact, hurtful remarks about acne vulgaris may be spoken.

Surprisingly, given its banality, acne is not depicted in film as commonly as one might think. However, television programming, especially animated cartoons, seems to feature acne more frequently. This is probably not a coincidence because these shows are generally directed towards the younger audience that acne usually affects. This study seeks to analyze examples of acne depictions in television cartoons and films, especially focusing on the social and psychological effects that this skin disease has on the character suffering from acne, as well as the impact of acne on other characters and on the plot outcome. While the accuracy of the skin disease depiction is not the primary focus (since cartoons are notoriously exaggerated and inaccurate), a few observations are included on this topic. Finally, possible influences on viewers and how these media portrayals can lead to the stigmatization of the disease will be examined.

Animated Television Cartoons with Acne Content (Table 1).

Most examples of acne in cartoons follow a common plot: the main character develops a single pimple overnight, while the rest of the face is totally clear, and the character becomes extremely distressed that he

will become laughingstock and a pariah. He frequently imagines the “zit” to be worse than it actually is, and is often made fun of by some of his peers. Even though a wise acquaintance tells him that acne is nothing to worry about, he still attempts various methods of hiding or destroying the lesion. In the end, the pimple usually resolves and the character realizes that acne is just a normal part of life. While there are many variations and not all of the elements are included every time, the first four examples in this paper follow this typical plot structure.

The first example is from an episode of *Doug* (Figure 1) entitled “Doug’s Huge Zit.” *Doug* was a cartoon from the early 1990’s that focused on the life of the title character, friends, and family. In this episode, Doug, a young teenager, wakes up the morning of a party given by one of his friends and finds a small pimple on his nose. Predictably, he panics and imagines the “humongous” pimple growing arms and talking to him, and even ordering pizza and playing poker with other imagined zits. He worries that his friends will call him “pizza face.” In fact, his elderly friend Mr. Dink actually asks him, “What’s that on your face, a doorknob?” Doug tries to eliminate the pimple using various creams, by popping it, and even through a bizarre incense-laden ceremony invented by his sister. His mother reassures him that the pimple is no big deal, but Doug seriously considers skipping the party. He decides to attend when he finds out that it is a costume party. He encounters his love interest at the party and removes his mask when he discovers she is also suffering from an image issue after a bad haircut. She does not even notice his pimple, and they happily dance together.

As *Doug* is probably the most realistic cartoon of the four that demonstrate examples of the single-pimple motif, it is fitting that it has the most accurate depiction of the situations surrounding teenage acne. The lesion itself is a fairly unassuming, solitary, flesh-colored

Table 1. Chronology of Animated Television Cartoons with Acne Content

Year of episode	Cartoon	Episode	Characters	Acne Depiction
1993	<i>Doug</i>	Doug’s Huge Zit	Doug	Single, small flesh-colored papule
2002	<i>Ed, Edd, N Eddy</i>	X Marks The Ed	Eddy	Single, large red papule
2004	<i>Teen Titans</i>	Transformation	Starfire	Single, extremely large nodule
2005	<i>Family Guy</i>	Brian The Bachelor	Chris	Single, large brown papule
2006	<i>South Park</i>	Make Love, Not Warcraft	Stan, Kyle, Eric, Kenny	Moderate inflammatory acne with associated obesity

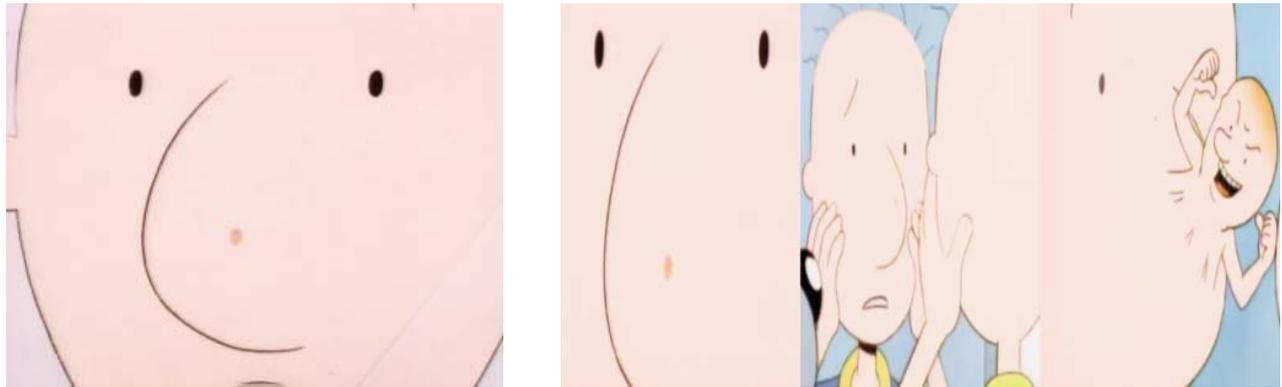


Figure 1. Doug (Single, small flesh-colored papule) in *Doug's Huge Zit (Doug)*.

papule on the nose that Doug discovers in the morning when he looks in the mirror, an event common in real life. He is very distressed about this and imagines it to be much worse than it actually is, a very common reaction for school-aged viewers when they first develop acne. In this cartoon, other characters do not tease him or call him names, apart from the comment made by the usually kind-hearted Mr. Dink. Doug's sister attempts to help him eliminate the pimple, while his mom reassures him that there is nothing to worry about, both very plausible supportive reactions from family members. His friends do not even notice his skin condition since they are busy dealing with image issues of their own, typical of many adolescents. One would hope that this type of experience with acne would be as bad as it gets for a teenager: some psychological self-esteem issues without any real social implications or criticism from peers. However, this is not always the case, as will be demonstrated in the following examples.

A second example of acne in a cartoon hails from the episode of *Family Guy* (Figure 2) titled "Brian

the Bachelor." *Family Guy* is a cartoon that revolves around the lives of a family consisting of a mother, father, three children, and their talking dog. In one episode the teenage son Chris develops a large pimple on his cheek, which, in a possible homage to the previously discussed cartoon, he names Doug. This pimple talks to him and tells him to engage in criminal conduct such as graffiti, vandalism, and robbery. Chris does not seem to be very upset by this, and he sits in his room and talks to Doug all day. However, other characters do notice and make derogatory comments. His mother says, "Look at the size of that pimple, you're like a circus freak!" Even the dermatologist who he visits says to him, "I bet the kids call you zit face? Papa zit? Pus peak?" This physician attempts to treat the pimple by injecting it with a large vial of cortisone, but Doug manages to deter him by acquiring a gun and shooting at him. After a struggle, Chris grabs the needle and injects the medicine, causing the pimple to shrink and disappear immediately.

Family Guy is meant to be somewhat realistic, as it follows the lives of an ordinary family, but there are



Figure 2. Chris (Single, large brown papule) in *Brian The Bachelor (Family Guy)*.

certainly some absurd elements such as a talking dog and baby. The acne lesion depicted in this episode is a very large brown papule that resembles a nevus on Chris' right cheek; it also has a mouth and talks. In contrast to the portrayal of acne in *Doug*, Chris does not seem to be bothered by the pimple. However, other characters comment about it and insult Chris, including his mother and his dermatologist. While one certainly hopes that these particular characters would not disparage an adolescent due to skin disease, in real life peers and siblings frequently make remarks such as these. Fortunately, Chris is not offended by these comments, but many times when offensive comments are made about acne or another medical condition, teenagers develop lower self-esteem. Of interest in this episode are the treatments shown for Chris' acne. His mother tries to buy astringent at the pharmacy, and the dermatologist attempts to inject cortisone into the lesion. While both of these methods are sometimes used to treat acne, it is unlikely that either would be implemented for a solitary pimple.

Another cartoon that prominently features acne is *Ed, Edd, N Eddy* in the episode "X Marks the Ed" (Figure 3). *Ed, Edd, N Eddy* was a show about three adolescent boys who interact with their friends living on the same cul-de-sac. In this cartoon Ed discovers a large red pimple on Eddy's forehead. While Eddy is very worried about what people will think, Edd reassures him that pimples are a natural part of growing up. Other kids soon discover the zit and call Eddy a variety of nasty names including "lighthouse," "one-humped camel," "two-headed-ogre," and "ugly dorkling," and suggest that he join the circus. As the lesion grows larger and redder, Eddy tries to cover it with a wig and with foundation, but is unsuccessful. At this point, the kids are charging admis-

sion for people to see the pimple and taking pictures like paparazzi when Eddy leaves the house. Finally, a friend comes up with a convoluted remedy that involves squid and chickens, which is effective in removing the pimple, but also shrinks Eddy's head in the process.

Ed, Edd, N Eddy is not meant to be realistic. Therefore, its depiction of acne is highly caricatured and comical. Eddy's pimple starts out as a large yet believably-sized red bump on his forehead. As the episode continues, the bump grows to an enormous size and becomes bright red. Hiding acne with hair or makeup is something that happens frequently in real life, but the crazy remedy used at the end that results in head shrinking is of course ridiculous and fictional. The more important issue here, though, is the way Eddy and the other characters react to the pimple. Eddy is extremely worried that the other kids will mock him, and rightfully so: they shower him with ridicule and epithets, making him very upset and leading him to hide in his house. This is one of the more extreme examples of the stigmatization of acne, but unfortunately is not totally unrealistic. People will tease their peers with acne, and, as seen previously in *Doug*, such behavior can lead those with acne to socially and physically isolate themselves. While these writers included derisive names in this cartoon, none of them are beyond a fertile adolescent imagination. This is an excellent example of the types of names that those with acne may hear on a daily basis at school and other places, which understandably cause a great deal of embarrassment and shattered self-confidence.

An additional demonstration of cartoon acne occurs in the episode "Transformation" from the show *Teen Titans* (Figure 4). This program involves a group of



Figure 3. Eddy (Single, large red papule) in *X Marks The Ed* (*Ed, Edd, N Eddy*).



Figure 4. Starfire (Single, extremely large nodule) in *Transformation* (*Teen Titans*).

teenage superheroes who fight evil while dealing with the difficulties of being teens. One episode centers on Starfire, a human-appearing girl who is actually from a planet called Tamaran. She develops a very large nodule on her forehead that is exactly the same color as her skin. A friend assures her that “it’s only a zit. Everyone gets them. Deal with it.” Starfire wears a large hat to conceal the nodule from her friends. However, the hat falls off in front of many people and they laugh at her, causing her to leave Earth in shame. She wanders from planet to planet, searching for a place that is inhabited by ugly creatures where she believes she will fit in. Eventually she finds an alien who tells her there is nothing wrong with her, but she is simply undergoing Tamaranean puberty termed the “transformation.” She becomes a chrysalis and eventually emerges looking normal, without acne.

Teen Titans features superheroes, aliens, and monsters. It is clearly the least realistic of any of these cartoons. Thus it is not surprising that the portrayal of acne is the most inaccurate: Starfire develops a tennis-ball sized nodule on her forehead that is supposedly a “zit,” though it later turns into a unicorn-like horn. However, her reaction to the lesion is more realistic. She worries that her friends will think she is ugly and she attempts to conceal it with a hat. This is a common reaction, because appearance is an extremely important component of self-esteem. Also plausible is the reaction of her peers when the pimple is exposed: they laugh and make fun of her to the point where she is extremely embarrassed. This makes her feel even worse about herself and her appearance, so she runs away in order to avoid further scorn. A highly visible and stigmatized skin lesion such as a large pimple can often cause people to take drastic measures; leaving Earth is obviously fictionalized, but isolation and hiding from humiliation by peers is not an unusual response. Her search for unattractive monsters and aliens to be around parallels the common trend of bullying victims in schools or other settings to associate with one another. An interesting aspect about this particular cartoon that is different from the others being examined is that this character with acne is female. While Doug and Eddy are concerned about what others might think, Starfire seems to be the most saddened and distressed about her condition, and has the most drastic response of all. This may be an example of cultural gender stereotyping.

South Park (Figure 5) is a very popular television cartoon about four boys from Colorado and their interactions with friends and families. In the episode “Make Love, Not Warcraft,” the boys become obsessed with the computer game *World of Warcraft*, and start playing it for

hours on end. After a mystery character hacks the game, they begin spending every waking hour playing the game in order to defeat him. As the weeks go by, the boys grow fatter and develop worsening acne on their faces. Eventually, with help from the game’s programmers, the boys defeat their evil enemy. However, neither their acne nor their obesity is resolved at the end of the episode.

South Park is roughly equivalent to *Family Guy* from a realism standpoint because it follows the lives of the boys and their families, but it does contain ludicrous and impossible elements at times. It is not totally unexpected that acne depicted in the show is somewhat life-like, at least compared to the previous cartoons analyzed. The animators do not follow the one-pimple motif seen in the previous examples of this genre. Kyle, Stan, Kenny, and Cartman have multiple, small papules and pustules scattered over their faces. There are several red, inflammatory-appearing pustules, along with comedones and flesh-colored papules. Another major difference between “Make Love, Not Warcraft” and the other acne cartoons is the boys’ reaction to their acne: they do not even appear to notice. They are so engrossed in their computer game that they do not make a single comment about their changing appearances. This is in stark contrast to the previous cartoon examples, where the character with acne or people around them (or both) had dramatic responses to a single pimple. While certainly an exaggeration, when *World of Warcraft* was released, some gamers did play it to the point where they became socially isolated and lost interest in other things, including their personal hygiene and appearance.

Movies with Acne Content (Table 2).



Figure 5. Stan, Kyle, Eric, Kenny (Moderate inflammatory acne with associated obesity) in *Make Love, Not Warcraft* (*South Park*).

Table 2. Chronology of Movies with Acne Content.

Year	Film	Character	Acne Depiction
1978	<i>Grease</i>	Leo "Craterface" Balmudo	Diffuse scarring
1994	<i>The Stoned Age</i>	Tack	Mild to moderate acne
2000	<i>Acne</i>	Zoey Franny Many other teenagers	Entire head becomes one large lesion with oozing pus and alopecia
2005	<i>Just Friends</i>	Dusty Lee Dinkleman	Severe inflammatory acne
2006	<i>Smokin' Aces</i>	Unnamed hotel employee	Severe inflammatory acne

While multiple cartoons depict acne, there are fewer examples of the disease in film. When acne does appear in movies, it is rarely an essential element of the plot. This may be simply due to differences between the two media – it is much more difficult to stretch a plot element across a feature length film than a briefer cartoon. Additionally, the intended audience of most cartoons is children and adolescents, while unanimated films are often aimed at more mature audiences. Furthermore, there is not a formulaic approach for acne in films as there appears to be with cartoons, so when acne is included in movies, there is typically more variation in its appearance and reactions by characters.

One film where acne is briefly featured is Roger Kumble's 2005 comedy *Just Friends* (Figure 6). In this movie, Chris Brander is an overweight teenager vying for the affection of his attractive best friend Jamie Palamino. He has many competing suitors, including Dusty, a stammering, nerdy musician who suffers from severe inflammatory acne. In an early scene, Dusty interrupts a conversation between Chris and Jamie to



Figure 6. Dusty Lee Dinkleman (Severe inflammatory acne) in *Just Friends*.

sing her a song with his guitar. His face is covered in inflammatory acne lesions including what appear to be papules and cysts. Predictably, his advances are rebuffed. The film shifts ahead ten years, and Dusty is again battling Chris for Jamie's heart. Both men are much more handsome: Chris has lost weight and Dusty no longer suffers from acne. Dusty explains his transformation, "I guess my skin cleared up and I lost my stammer." Unfortunately, Dusty also transforms into the antagonist, and uses dishonest means to woo Jamie. He is also secretly seeing other women. Interestingly, when Dusty was portrayed with acne, he was a relatively benign character, but after his acne disappeared he became much more dislikable to viewers.

Just Friends illustrates a major difference between the portrayal of acne in cartoons and films: film uses acne as a feature of antagonists, and cartoons portray it in protagonists. While not totally apparent when he is portrayed with teenage acne, Dusty is undeniably the villain in this movie. He is introduced as a stammering high school student, and the audience immediately notices his acne, as well as the fact that he is clearly disliked by the hero, Chris. Dusty acknowledges his prior acne, but becomes immoral. Also notable is the realism of the acne in this film. Movies generally contain more realistic portrayals of acne than cartoons, and this one is no exception. Dusty suffers from unmistakable inflammatory lesions, and even though he does not have much screen time in the scene, it is clear that the makeup artists worked with great accuracy when creating his acne.

Similar to *Just Friends* is the 1994 comedy *The Stoned Age*, directed by James Melkonian (Figure 7). This film revolves around two friends, Joe and Hubbs, cruising around drinking, smoking, and trying to find girls to party

with. They learn from an acquaintance named Tack about two girls from a different town, Jill and Lanie, who they locate and attempt to woo. Tack suffers from moderate acne. According to Joe, Tack used to be a nice guy, but he is now very aggressive and only looks out for himself. In a rare moment of sentiment, Tack claims that no one likes a “crater face,” and that girls have no interest in him because of his acne. Joe says that Tack’s face will clear up eventually, but Tack is not pleased with the idea of waiting until he is thirty years old to date. Joe then suggests that Tack could date a girl with an acne problem, to which Tack angrily responds, “I don’t want no chick with zits, I want fine chicks.” After this exchange, Tack and his gang try to break into the house where the girls are staying, but are intercepted by Jill’s father.



Figure 7. Tack (Mild to moderate acne) in *The Stoned Age*.

The Stoned Age represents a second film example about acne depicted in an antagonist. Tack attempts to sabotage the main characters’ quest to find girls throughout the film. He is violent at times, kicking Joe and throwing beer cans at the house. Tack was a good person until he developed acne, a skin disease that causes him a great deal of anguish. The filmmaker places emphasis on the connection between his acne and his bad behavior, going so far as to blame acne. While people who develop acne usually do not have dramatic personality changes, they certainly can change their behaviors due to acne, especially if the condition is severe. Depression and psychoticism are among the psychiatric impairments reported in acne patients⁴, so Tack’s change in demeanor does have some basis in reality. However, his acne in the film is far from severe. He has a small cluster of papules on each cheek, and a smattering of similar lesions on his forehead. While noticeable, one would probably not make the connection between his bad behavior and his acne. Realistically, it is hard to believe that mild acne could transform a friendly teenager into such an angry young man.

Another film in which acne plays a role is the 1978 musical *Grease*, from director Randal Kleiser (Figure 8). The plot revolves around a romance between Danny, leader of a high school gang called the T-Birds, and his Australian sweetheart Sandy. The boss of the T-Birds’ rival gang, the Scorpions, is Leo Balmudo, who is also known as “Craterface.” This derogatory nickname is due to his facial scarring from acne. The scars consist primarily of the pitting, “ice pick” variety, especially prominent on his cheeks. His actual condition is not directly mentioned outside his nickname, but it is strongly hinted at in the form of a radio commercial for acne that immediately precedes his first appearance on screen. While two other characters are kissing in a parked car, a radio announcer asks, “Is acne ruining your life? Do you close your eyes when you look in the mirror? Fear no more. Face up to Face-Off, for deep penetration into infected pores. Help dry up the unsightly pimples and blemishes.” From this advertisement and Leo’s entrance shortly after, it is implied that he had severe acne in the past that has left its mark on his face and his life.

Grease is another example of creating a villain with acne. Craterface is the leader of the hostile gang in the film, and he repeatedly serves as a malevolent foil to Danny. His striking appearance plays a major part in this; the abundant scarring identifies him as an adversary. His moniker, Craterface, can be understood as an example of prejudice against people with acne. This name is almost exclusively used by members of the T-Birds, while the Scorpions tend to refer to him by his real name, Leo. Similar to some cartoons, film characters also may use derogatory sobriquets when referring to their peers with acne. While the depiction in this movie is different than prototypic single pimple plots, the idea of negatively



Figure 8. Leo “Craterface” Balmudo (Diffuse scarring) in *Grease*.

characterizing people by their skin condition remains the same. Another interesting aspect from this film is the text from the radio commercial. This commercial uses the assumption that people with acne also suffer from low self-esteem and dissatisfaction with their appearance as a marketing tool to promote a medicine. Similar advertising strategies continue today, with television commercials featuring celebrities who discuss how unattractive they felt before using the skin product being marketed and how beautiful they look after their skin cleared up. While the *Grease* commercial is overly dramatic, it addresses the cause and treatment of acne that the audience understands.

One of the few movies in which acne plays a major role in the plot is Rusty Nails' 2000 sci-fi/horror film *Acne* (Figure 9). This film centers on two siblings, Zooney and Franny. Zooney regains consciousness after fainting in the bathroom to discover that the top of his head has turned into a giant acne pustule. While Zooney expresses the comedone, draining fluid drips on Franny and soon she develops acne as well. The two main characters discover that other teenagers have been affected, and try to determine how to cure their mysterious condition while being ridiculed by adults and children. Later it is revealed that they have been infected with a virus that only affects teenagers due to their bodily oils. This viral infection causes their scalps to turn into giant pimples. The only way to survive is to rub oily foods, like chocolate, into the pustule. Eventually, the military uses helicopters to spray an antidote on the victims, and they are cured, though they lament that nothing will happen to those responsible for their skin disease.

Acne is a rare example of a feature length film that revolves around its eponymous condition. The acne

lesions in the film are far from realistic, although this is by design. Starting with Franny and Zooney, the teenagers' scalps are transformed into large pustules with associated alopecia. While the lesions look somewhat like a giant version of normal pustular acne, a real lesion could obviously never grow to this enormous size. Additionally, there is no evidence of any other acneiform lesions on any of their faces or bodies. In this way, *Acne* is similar to the cartoons that showcase one pimple. However, in this work, teen distress is justified, because the pimple encases the entire head. Of further interest is the filmmaker's association between acne and foods such as chocolate, popcorn, and butter. According to the plot, acne is maintained by characters rubbing oily foods into the pustule. A gross inaccuracy in the film is the suggestion that acne is caused by a virus. The pathophysiology of acne is well understood, and it is clear that the contributing pathologic agent is a type of bacteria, *Propionibacterium acnes*. The filmmaker may have decided that it would be more dramatic to create a comedogenic virus. Regardless of the factual errors, this is a very important example of acne in film.

A final example of acne in film is the 2006 action film *Smokin' Aces*, which was directed by Joe Carnahan (Figure 10). The plot revolves around a soon-to-be mafia informant, Buddy "Aces" Israel, hiding out in a Lake Tahoe casino hotel waiting to be picked up by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Several different assassins attempt to find him in order to claim a large bounty that has been put on his head. A teenage employee of the hotel, who is clearly incompetent, is shown as having severe acne. He has at least a dozen large pustules and acne cysts on his forehead, cheeks, chin, and nose, which are exaggerated. In this film acne is never mentioned in any dialogue, but simply depicted briefly on a stock character. He is easily



Figure 9. Zooney, Franny, ... (Entire head becomes one large lesion with oozing pus and alopecia) in *Acne*.

tricked by one of the assassins into allowing access to Aces' floor that was designed to be highly secure. Later, when the authorities question the teen about how he could be so inept, he stammers a poor excuse and appears very nervous. His mistake is partially responsible for a tremendous amount of violence and bloodshed that ensues.

Smokin' Aces brilliantly illustrates another way in which filmmakers utilize acne: as a background element to one of the characters that stresses one of their negative traits. Most commonly these are youth and inexperience, poor hygiene, or unattractive physical appearance. The unnamed hotel employee is both young and inexperienced, and his acne adds to the notion that he may be a student working a part time job who clearly does not know what he is doing. The filmmaker is able to convey a backstory for this transitional character without devoting dialogue by simply portraying him with severe acne and making him appear both flustered and blundering in his appearance. A similar strategy that is sometimes used in film is a flashback to a character's youth in which he or she is depicted with acne, signifying that the character was once much less mature and experienced. While there are no real psychological effects of the acne in this instance, the young man's actions clearly drive the plot.



Figure 10. Unnamed hotel employee (Severe inflammatory acne) in *Smokin' Aces*.

Discussion

Cartoons generally depict acne similarly with the one-pimple plot, but run the gamut when it comes to reactions about the condition. They include total apathy (*South Park*), extreme angst (*Doug*), ridicule by others (*Family Guy*), and a combination of the latter two (*Ed, Edd, N Eddy* and *Teen Titans*). This mirrors real-life circumstance: some people do not mind their acne (especially if it is mild), others overreact to their condition, and often-times people poke fun. Although one wishes that skin diseases were not stigmatized, the reality is that people with facial disfigurement suffer from psychological and social

trauma, and they often share similar reactions.

There are some key differences between the depiction of acne in cartoons and in film. The first is the importance of acne to the plot. In cartoons, acne is often the focal point of an entire episode, while in films, it is usually only briefly mentioned or simply visible on a minor character and not even referred to at all. Some possible explanations for these differences between cartoons and movies are the length of the production and the target audience. Second, cartoons almost always depict acne in protagonists, while films often portray the condition in antagonists. This occurs because cartoons are trying to teach a relatable lesson to younger viewers, while films rarely use acne to send a thematic message. In film, acne usually serves as a visual reminder of a villain's negative qualities. A third major difference is the realism of the acne portrayed. Cartoons are usually less realistic visual depictions of acne due to the animation involved, and they often focus on acne as one giant lesion, while films are generally more lifelike in their depiction. Despite these differences, there are also several similarities between the two forms of media in their depictions of acne. The most important is that in almost every example of acne in cartoons and films, it is depicted in a negative light. Whether it is a cartoon character getting extremely upset about the discovery of a single pimple and avoiding peers or a movie villain's evil behavior being associated with acne, there is usually a negative association.

A final issue that merits consideration is the potential audience impact of movies and cartoons that depict acne. While *Family Guy* and especially *South Park* are intended for more mature audiences, the vast majority of cartoons are directed toward children and adolescents as their main audience. These age groups can be easily influenced by media due to their immaturity and relative paucity of life experiences. If a cartoon shows acne in a negative light, viewers may begin to treat those with acne in a disparaging fashion. No negative consequences occur to characters who belittle acne sufferers in any of the cartoons presented, so teens may conclude that it is acceptable social behavior. Additionally, viewers may adopt some of the acne-related epithets that they learn from these cartoons (e.g. "zit face" or "two-headed ogre") and employ them when teasing their peers. By the same token, those with acne may identify with acne cartoon characters and begin to feel even more embarrassed about it. While several of the episodes end with positive messages that reassure viewers that acne is an expected occurrence in life that is usually temporary, this information is only presented briefly near the end of the

show when everything is resolved. The vast majority of these cartoons depict the angst and ignominy of the acne characters, and although the writers may want their final message to be a positive one, the audience may still focus on the negative portrayals that dominate the plots. Thus, it is easy to imagine how these depictions can add to the stigmatization of such a common skin disease.

Films are less likely than cartoons to degrade characters with acne because acne is usually used as a minor aspect of a film as opposed to a major plot element, and it is rarely as overdramatized as it is in cartoons. However, none of the films discussed paint acne in a positive light, and it is certainly conceivable that after seeing villains with acne (*Just Friends*, *The Stoned Age*, and *Grease*), viewers may develop negative outlooks towards real life acne sufferers. *Smokin' Aces* also does not help improve the public image of those with acne. Additionally, while *Acne* is clearly unrealistic, it could induce a fear of the condition in audiences and lead to further stigmatization of those with acne.

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Adrian Paul Subrt is a 2006 graduate from the University of Texas at Austin where he majored in biology. He is currently a fourth-year medical student at The University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB) in Galveston, Texas. He will graduate from medical school in 2014 and plans on pursuing a career in dermatology. His essay on acne vulgaris in cartoons for the "Skin Diseases Depicted in Cinema" course taught by Dr. Wagner was the inspiration for this original research article.



Richard F. Wagner, Jr., MD is currently the Edgar B. Smith Professor of Dermatology at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston, Texas, USA. In addition to serving as the Program Director for the Dermatology Residency Program, he also teaches several didactic courses in the medical humanities to upper level medical students. These classes focus on analysis of literary and cinematic skin disease depictions and their impact.