
Dermatology depictions in *Friends*

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Summary

Health-related topics are frequently referenced on screen in movies and television. *Friends* was on-air for 10 seasons and is one of the most watched television shows of all time. Dermatology was referenced more than any other health-related topic throughout the series. Beliefs about attractiveness and the stigma of skin conditions are further propagated in this program. Reviewing the depictions of dermatology in *Friends* will aid in understanding the public's ideas and stereotypes regarding skin and dermatologic diseases.

Keywords: Dermatology, Skin diseases, Television, Film, Situational comedy.

Descripciones dermatológicas en *Friends*

Resumen

Las películas y series de televisión hacen referencia frecuente a temas relacionados con la salud. La serie *Friends* estuvo en antena durante 10 temporadas, siendo uno de los programas televisivos más vistos de todos los tiempos. La dermatología aparecía en la serie más que cualquier otro asunto acerca de la salud. Las creencias sobre el atractivo físico y el estigma que suponen ciertas condiciones cutáneas son ampliamente discutidas en este programa. Una revisión de las descripciones dermatológicas en *Friends* ayudará a comprender las ideas y estereotipos existentes sobre la piel y las enfermedades dermatológicas.

Palabras clave: dermatología, enfermedades de la piel, televisión, película, serie de comedia.

The author's state that this article is original and has not been previously published.

Introduction

Visual broadcast media, including television and movies, plays a major role in the public's opinions and understanding of the health field. Reviews have been published analyzing the portrayal of different medical specialties and conditions. Psychiatry is one of the most studied medical topics within film. It has been demonstrated how the negative portrayal of psychiatry in film and television has led to negative stereotypes regarding mental health^{1,2}. Similarly, epilepsy is often depicted negatively in television and film, limiting the public's understanding of the condition³. Dermatology on the big and small screen has been reviewed less frequently. A previous study, reviewing the depictions of dermatology in the situational comedy *Seinfeld*, revealed that satire and caricature used in the show may contribute to misunderstanding and create negative stigma for skin diseases⁴. A review of dermatology in movies revealed how skin conditions are often used to highlight the villain or antagonist⁵. This study aims to further understand the depictions of dermatology in television by reviewing the series *Friends*.

Methods

All episodes of *Friends* were watched through the use of *Netflix*. A log was created to note each time a medical or health reference was made in the show. Transcripts of the episodes were also used to assist in

citing each medical reference⁶. Each reference was then further sorted according to the area of medicine it represented, including alternative medicine, cardiovascular, chiropractic, death, dental, dermatology, doctor references, endocrine, emergency, gastroenterology, genetics, genitourinary, hospital, infectious disease, immunology, insurance, lifestyle, metabolic, musculoskeletal, neurology, nurse, obstetrics and gynecology, oncology, ophthalmology, orthopedics, otolaryngology, pediatrics, pharmacy, plastic surgery, podiatry, poison, psychiatry, pulmonary, radiology, smoking, surgery, trauma, urology, and other. The frequencies were calculated and reported using raw numbers and percentages of the total number of medical references made throughout the series. The dermatology references were further categorized based on dermatologic topic and charted with raw numbers and percentages. Dermatology reference frequencies were also charted by season. No IRB approval was required for this media analysis study.

Results

There were 845 medical references throughout the series. References were represented by 39 medical categories. Dermatology was the most frequent category referenced with 199 (199/845, 23.6%, Figure 1).

Within the dermatology references, the three categories with highest frequencies were hair (91/199,

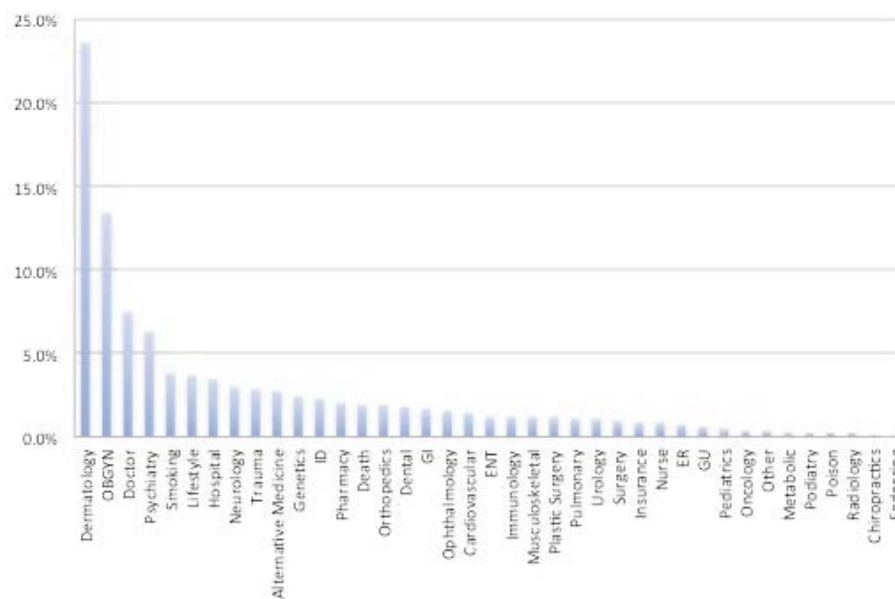


Figure 1. Health-Related Topics in *Friends*.

45.7%), skin growths/pigmented lesions (19/199, 9.6%), and cosmetic products (15/199, 7.5%). These findings are presented in Table 1. Dermatology was referenced in 109 episodes (109/236, 46.2%), with the most appearing in season two (Figure 2).

Discussion

Friends is one of the most watched programs in television history. According to Nielsen Ratings, *Friends* was the most watched series from 2001-2003, and its series finale was the 4th most watched finale in history,

Table 1. Frequency of Dermatology Topics in *Friends*.

Dermatology Topic	Raw number	Percentage
Hair	91	45.7%
Skin growths/ pigmented lesions	19	9.6%
Cosmetic Products	15	7.5%
Nails	12	6.0%
Skin injury	11	5.5%
Sunburn/tan	11	5.5%
Hair loss	7	3.5%
Sweating/ oil production	5	2.5%
Skin infection	4	2.0%
Skin piercing	4	2.0%
Tattoo	4	2.0%
Albinism	3	1.5%
Acne	3	1.5%
Skin aging	2	1.0%
Edema	2	1.0%
Arthropod assault	1	0.5%
Bullous disorders	1	0.5%
Cosmetic procedures	1	0.5%
Dermatology office	1	0.5%
Skin color	1	0.5%
Skin cancer	1	0.5%

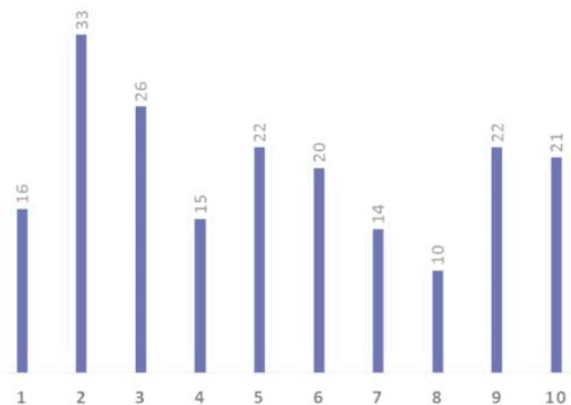


Figure 2. Dermatology References in *Friends*, by Season.

with 65.9 million viewers⁷. The show was on the air from 1994-2004, and the 236 episodes are still aired today. The episodes are also available for viewing by DVDs. Since January 2015, the series has been available through Netflix with a subscription to the streaming service website. This makes the series available for binge watching for new viewers. Binge watching has been defined as watching 2 or more episodes in one sitting⁸. According to a survey by TiVo, published in *Fortune*, 9 out of 10 people participate in binge watching, so television content is making a big impact and reaching more viewers⁹. Although medicine is not the main plot of the show, it is a recurring theme. Health conditions and situations were referenced 845 times. Examining the medical references, specifically dermatology topics, more closely reveals cultural attitudes toward skin diseases.

Previous studies have shown television and film can encourage negative opinions and stigma regarding psychiatry and mental illness^{1,2}. In *Friends*, dermatology is referenced 199 times compared to the 53 times psychiatry was referenced. The authors believe the impact broadcast media has on public opinion regarding dermatology and skin diseases is similar. It is important to be aware of the ideas that television and film are reinforcing. Upon going through each dermatologic issue that is depicted in this series, there are major themes. The topic of hair is repeated over 91 times throughout the series. It uses hair to address attractiveness, like when Barry gets a hair transplant in, "The One with the Sonogram at the End," in season one, and when Ross breaks up with his girl friend for shaving her head bald in, "The One with the Jellyfish," in season four¹⁰. Also, the amount of hair is important in a person's appearance. A neighbor is feared and called a yeti for having long hair and then is attractive once he cuts it short¹⁰. Hair reinforces what is visually attractive and plays into cultural stereotypes.

Skin growths/pigmented lesions are the second most frequent dermatologic topic referenced throughout *Friends*. This group includes references to supernumerary nipples, freckles, moles, and an unknown skin growth. In each of these cases, skin growths are portrayed as negative and strange. In, "The One with Phoebe's Ex-Partner," in season three, Chandler loses a date due to his supernumerary nipple, which, interestingly, is portrayed as less attractive than the woman's prosthetic leg¹⁰. In, "The One with Ross's Thing," in season three, dermatology is a major theme in the plot since Ross has an unknown skin growth, which is never given a true diagnosis. The lesion is not seen on the screen, but the characters utilize language to describe what is "fancier than a mole"³. This is one of the most important episodes related to dermatology because Ross goes to see a dermatologist. Ross is embarrassed and the other characters reinforce his shame in having a skin condition. The dermatologist is unsure of the growth and calls for his colleagues to come into the room and view Ross's lesion, making it even more embarrassing¹⁰. Unfortunately, the theme of skin growths being strange and reason to be ashamed is reinforced repeated throughout the series. The fear is that this theme will be apparent to viewers and become incorporated into the culture.

The topic of sunburn and tanning is of particular importance to the future of dermatology and population health, and is presented throughout the series. Sunburn/tanning is tied for the 5th most referenced dermatology topic with 11 references. There is one true reference to sunburns in, "The One with the Jellyfish," in season four, but the other 10 references made are about tanning¹⁰. Each reference portrays tanning as positive and attractive. Shockingly, in, "The One in Barbados," in season nine, Rachel is jealous of a woman sunbathing who is, "tan, leathery, and wrinkly"¹⁰. This is reinforcing to the audience that tan skin is beautiful skin, even if it is leading to skin damage. There is a negative portrayal, in season ten, episode, "The One with Ross's Tan," where Ross gets an artificial spray tan, but unfortunately is turns out poorly and is the subject of mocking all episode¹⁰. The series references skin changes due to sunlight multiple times, however it only references skin cancer once in season two, "The One Where Eddie Moves In"¹⁰. The emphasis on tanning represented in the series has the potential to influence its audience to pursue this behavior and avoid proper sun protection strategies. The fear is this could result in a higher incidence of skin cancer as a result of poor sun protection habits.

The difficulty in analyzing dermatology in this series due to the lack of visual evidence of skin changes

is important to note. There are large amounts of dermatology references in *Friends*, but the majority are verbal statements or descriptions. The only skin changes that are visible to the viewers, other than hair, are when Phoebe gets the chickenpox (Figure 3), Rachel is scratched by a cat, Rachel gets a tattoo, Bonnie gets a sunburn, and Ross gets an artificial tan (Figure 4)¹⁰⁻¹². The authors hypothesize the reason for this is it would require more production time and resources to portray a skin change visually. It would also require more accurate knowledge of the condition to be able to recreate it. A person's skin and hair is easily mentally pictured, negating need for visual aids.

Friends won six Primetime Emmy Awards, after being nominated for 62, and won the Emmy Award for Outstanding Comedy Series in 2002, being nominated in



Figure 3. Phoebe, Lisa Kudrow, and her date, guest star Charlie Sheen, appear with papules covered by calamine lotion over their face and hands to represent infection of varicella zoster virus.



Figure 4. Ross, David Schwimmer, showing the drastic difference between his natural skin tone and his artificial tan from a salon.

five of the ten years it was on the air¹³. It has made its place in television history as one of the most successful and popular situational comedy shows in American television history. Due to its relevance and popularity, its cultural impact cannot be underestimated and its high frequency of dermatology references should not be overlooked.

Conclusions

Health related topics are frequently portrayed throughout television and film. The study of dermatology in cinema is limited⁵. The depictions of dermatology have been reviewed in two television situational comedies, *Seinfeld* and *Friends*. Both reviews determined dermatology was the most commonly referenced health topic throughout each series. It is important to understand how dermatology is portrayed to understand its impact on patient education, thoughts, attitudes and fears regarding skin. Future studies are needed to further explore how film and television directly impact opinions about dermatology and skin diseases.

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