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The Effectiveness Of Using Extinction Techniques To Reduce Skin-Picking Behavior

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Abstract

Skin Picking Disorder (SPD) is a repetitive behavioral disorder characterized by compulsive scratching, pinching, or picking of the skin that results in tissue damage and lesions. This behavior is often associated with difficulties in emotional regulation and is maintained through negative reinforcement, where temporary relief from psychological distress reinforces the behavior. This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of extinction techniques in reducing skin-picking behavior. An experimental method with a Single Subject Research (SSR) design was employed. The participant was a female college student in early adulthood who had exhibited persistent skin-picking behavior since adolescence. The study was conducted in three phases: baseline, intervention, and follow-up, each lasting seven days. Behavioral measurements were obtained through self-monitoring under three primary triggering conditions: anxiety, boredom, and smartphone use. The intervention involved applying an extinction technique by eliminating the reinforcement that had previously maintained the behavior. The findings revealed that during the baseline phase, skin-picking behavior occurred at a high and stable frequency. Following the implementation of the extinction technique, the frequency of the behavior gradually declined across all triggering conditions. During the follow-up phase, the behavior remained at a very low level and did not return to its initial baseline frequency. These results indicate that extinction techniques are effective in reducing skin-picking behavior by disrupting the functional relationship between triggering stimuli, behavioral responses, and reinforcing consequences. The study provides empirical support for the application of operant conditioning principles in behavioral

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interventions and highlights the potential of extinction techniques as a focused and evidence-based approach for managing Skin Picking Disorder.

Keywords: Skin Picking Disorder, extinction technique, operant conditioning, behavior modification, Single Subject Research.

INTRODUCTION

Skin Picking Disorder (SPD), classified within the DSM-5 taxonomy as an excoriation disorder, is a complex psychopathological entity that manifests as self-destructive behavior directed at the epidermal tissue (Deschênes & Veillette, 2025). Phenomenologically, this disorder goes beyond a mere dermatological issue but also represents a failure of impulse regulation that is often rooted in persistent emotional distress. The clinical significance of this phenomenon is underscored by Grant & Chamberlain (2020), whose large-scale epidemiological study revealed that SPD has a very high rate of comorbidity with affective disorders, particularly Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), which reached a prevalence of 63.4% among patients. These findings indicate a reciprocal interaction between anxiety and the exacerbation of such repetitive motor behaviors. From this perspective, skin-picking behavior is understood as a mechanism for "emotional relief" from psychological tension, wherein individuals use this physical act to reduce anxiety (Snorrason & Lee, 2022). Therefore, the urgency of this study lies in a deep understanding of how anxiety acts as a precursor variable that sustains the persistence of this destructive behavior within an individual's personality structure.

Conceptually, skin-picking behavior is defined as a recurrent failure to regulate motor impulses, manifesting as destructive manipulation of skin tissue leading to significant lesions (Snorrason & Lee, 2022). Etiologically, this behavior is often triggered by an antecedent stimulus in the form of emotional distress, where the individual perceives the presence of internal tension or unbearable anxiety. Gallinat (2021) explains that this phenomenon operates as a maladaptive affective regulation strategy; that is, the behavior constitutes a subconscious effort to modulate negative emotional states into more manageable physical sensations. The psychological impact of this cycle is highly complex, as it involves a mechanism of negative reinforcement where the temporary reduction in anxiety following the act of picking actually reinforces the individual's dependence on the behavior. Consequently, sufferers are often trapped in severe emotional dissonance, characterized by feelings of shame, guilt, and a drastic decline in self-esteem due to the physical damage caused (Gallinat et al., 2021). This condition creates a psychopathological

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vicious cycle, in which the resulting skin damage becomes a new source of anxiety that triggers continued picking behavior.

The functional relationship between anxiety and skin picking is rooted in associative learning mechanisms, where this destructive behavior is adopted as a means of reducing pathological psychological tension. From a behavioral modification perspective, anxiety-induced skin picking is understood as a response reinforced through negative reinforcement, where escape from the aversive stimulus the feeling of anxiety is achieved through skin manipulation (Grant & Chamberlain, 2020). Based on this dynamic, extinction techniques become highly relevant because their primary goal is to break the contingency between maladaptive behavior and its functional reinforcer. Hollandt (2020) emphasizes that extinction learning is a central mechanism in exposure-based psychotherapy for anxiety disorders, where a subject is conditioned to face the triggering stimulus without engaging in the usual escape response. By applying the principles of extinction techniques, this study aims to eliminate the "reward" in the form of a sense of relief or reduced anxiety that has been obtained from picking activities. Through this process, it is expected that there will be a systematic degradation of the strength of the motor response, forcing the individual to habituate to their anxiety without engaging in destructive actions, which ultimately leads to the permanent elimination of the target behavior (Carpenter et al., 2019; Modecki et al., 2023).

The extinction technique itself is one of the core concepts in the behavioral approach, rooted in the Operant Conditioning theory developed by B. F. Skinner. In this theory, behavior is understood as the result of the relationship between a response and the consequences that follow it, particularly through the mechanism of reinforcement. Behavior that receives reinforcement tends to be maintained, while changes in the reinforcement pattern will influence whether or not that behavior occurs (Skinner, 1965). Based on this framework, extinction is defined as the procedure of ceasing the reinforcement that previously followed a behavior, so that the frequency of that behavior will gradually decrease until it disappears. This process does not occur instantly but unfolds through specific dynamics, such as the potential for a temporary increase in behavior (extinction burst) before it eventually decreases (Cooper et al., 2007; Lerman & Iwata, 1995). Thus, extinction emphasizes the severing of the functional link between behavior and its reinforcing consequences as the foundation for behavior modification.

A number of studies indicate that skin-picking behavior is closely linked to reinforcement mechanisms that sustain its occurrence, making interventions that target the relationship between response and consequence crucial. A study by Gallinat (2021) shows that skin-picking

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behavior is strongly associated with emotional regulation, in which individuals tend to engage in this behavior to reduce psychological tension or enhance certain feelings. This is reinforced by Gallinat's (2024) research, which found that skin-picking behavior occurs repeatedly in daily life and is triggered by various internal conditions such as stress, boredom, or sensory urges, which indirectly function as behavioral reinforcers. Additionally, Alfahaad (2024) emphasizes that skin picking is a multifactorial disorder involving psychological and behavioral aspects, including reinforcement patterns that maintain the behavior. Other studies also indicate that skin picking is associated with impulsive traits and difficulties in self-control, which reinforce the tendency toward repetitive behavior (Grant et al., 2024). Furthermore, LeBlanc (2024) in his case study revealed that without interventions targeting triggers and reinforcers, skin-picking behavior tends to persist and result in significant clinical impacts. These findings are supported by Asplund (2025), who demonstrated that behavior therapy-based interventions targeting the underlying mechanisms of the behavior—including reducing reinforcement for maladaptive behaviors—are effective in reducing skin-picking symptoms. Thus, the principle of Extinction (psychology) holds strong theoretical relevance in explaining how the removal of reinforcers can contribute to a reduction in skin-picking behavior.

Although various studies have examined Excoriation Disorder from the perspectives of clinical characteristics, psychological factors, and the effectiveness of behavioral interventions, there remain limitations in the literature regarding the testing of specific mechanisms underlying these behavioral changes. Studies indicate that existing research has primarily focused on describing behavioral patterns and triggers of skin-picking behavior in daily life, without deeply testing the mechanisms of behavioral change experimentally (Gallinat et al., 2024). Additionally, a systematic review indicates that while various non-pharmacological interventions have been developed, there remains uncertainty regarding which specific technical components most contribute to the effectiveness of these interventions (Loftus et al., 2025). Other research also confirms that the interventions used are generally combinatorial, making it difficult to isolate the contribution of specific behavioral principles, including Extinction (psychology) (Twohig & Capel, 2025). On the other hand, behavior analysis-based approaches highlight the importance of identifying reinforcers in maintaining behavior; however, they have not specifically tested the effectiveness of extinction as a standalone technique (Asplund et al., 2025; Kawahito et al., 2026).

Based on this, there is a research gap: no study has specifically tested extinction techniques as a single intervention variable in reducing skin-picking behavior. Therefore, this study was conducted to address this gap by directly testing the effectiveness of extinction techniques, with

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the aim of providing a more focused, measurable, and specific empirical contribution to the development of behavior-based interventions.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed an experimental method using a Single Subject Research (SSR) design, which involves observing a single subject repeatedly under different conditions through manipulation of independent variables and repeated measurements (Everitt & Howell, 2005). This design was chosen because it is suitable for testing the effectiveness of an intervention technique on individual and in-depth behavioral changes.

The subject in this study is a female college student in early adulthood who has consistently exhibited skin-picking behavior since early adolescence. The subject was selected using purposive sampling with the following inclusion criteria: having engaged in skin-picking behavior for an extended period, being willing to participate in the entire research procedure, and not currently undergoing any other interventions related to this behavior. Prior to the study's commencement, an initial verification was conducted via a structured interview to confirm the consistency and patterns of the behavior's occurrence, as well as to identify situations functionally associated with the emergence of skin-picking behavior. Based on the interview results, three conditions were consistently reported by the subject as trigger situations: when feeling anxious, when feeling bored, and when using a mobile phone. These three conditions were then established as the measurement context throughout all phases of the study. The subject received a comprehensive explanation regarding the purpose, procedures, and their rights during participation, and voluntarily expressed consent through an informed consent form prior to the study.

The independent variable (X) in this study is the extinction technique, which is a procedure to cease reinforcement that has been maintaining the skin-picking behavior. The dependent variable (Y) is skin-picking behavior, operationalized as the repeated act of scratching, picking, pinching, or squeezing the skin until it becomes irritated or injured. This behavior was measured based on its frequency of occurrence in the three identified trigger situations.

The study was conducted in three phases, each lasting seven days. The baseline phase (April 27–May 3, 2026) was conducted without any intervention to obtain a picture of the natural frequency of the behavior as a baseline. Entering the intervention phase (May 4–10, 2026), the researchers first provided psychoeducation to the subjects regarding the functional mechanism of their behavior, namely the relationship between the triggering stimulus, the urge to pick, and the consequence of a sensation of relief that functions as a negative reinforcer that maintains the

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behavior. Subjects were informed that the goal of the intervention was to allow the feeling of discomfort to arise naturally without responding through picking, so that the association between the stimulus and the response would gradually weaken.

During the intervention phase, subjects were given the following specific instructions: (1) whenever the urge to pick arose, subjects were instructed to refrain from acting on it and to let the uncomfortable sensation pass naturally; (2) subjects were not provided with alternative behaviors, so that the contingency between stimulus and response could be severed purely in accordance with the principle of extinction within the framework of operant conditioning; (3) family members served as observers who recorded the occurrence of the behavior but did not provide instructions or direct intervention to avoid creating a new source of external reinforcement. Additionally, the researcher conducted daily online checks via text messages to ensure consistency in procedure implementation, address participants' questions regarding instruction execution, and receive daily monitoring sheets without offering praise or responses that could function as positive reinforcement. This approach is grounded in the principle of extinction in Skinner's operant conditioning (1965), wherein the severing of the link between a response and its functional reinforcer leads to a gradual decline in the strength of that motor response (Hollandt et al., 2020). Subsequently, the follow-up phase (May 11–17, 2026) was conducted without any treatment to evaluate the durability of behavioral changes post-intervention and to identify the possibility of spontaneous recovery (Cooper et al., 2007).

Behavioral measurement was conducted using the self-monitoring method, a technique in which subjects actively and systematically record their own behavior during each phase of the study (King et al., 2025). The instrument used was a behavioral recording sheet designed to be simple and structured. Subjects recorded the occurrence of skin picking under the three trigger conditions immediately after the behavior occurred to minimize recall bias, with an identical recording format between the subject's sheet and the family observer's sheet as the significant other. Internal validity was ensured through repeated measurements in each phase, allowing for direct comparison of behavioral change patterns across conditions (Yuwono & Novitasari, 2024), while reliability was maintained through consistent procedures and identical operational definitions in every session. Data analysis used visual analysis, which is a standard approach in SSR, by examining changes in trends, levels, and data stability across the three phases to determine the effectiveness of the extinction technique (Bosch et al., 2026)

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RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Self-Monitoring Results for the Baseline Period

Baseline Period								
No	**Behavior**	**April 27, 2026**	**April 28, 2026**	**April 29, 2026**	**April 30, 2026**	**May 1, 2026**	**May 2, 2026**	**May 3, 2026**
	Picking at the skin around my nails when I feel anxious	✔	✔			✔	✔	
	Picking at the skin when not engaged in an activity (boredom)	✔		✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
	Picking at your skin while using your phone or scrolling	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	

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Table 2. Self-Monitoring Results During the Intervention Period

Intervention Period								
No	**Behavior**	**May 4, 2026**	**May 5, 2026**	**6 May 2026**	**May 7, 2026**	**8 May 2026**	**May 9, 2026**	**May 10, 2026**
	Picking at the skin around the nails when feeling anxious	✔	✔	✔				
	Engaging in skin picking when not doing any activities (bored)		✔				✔	
	Engaging in skin picking while using a phone / scrolling	✔	✔	✔	✔			✔

Table 3. Self-Monitoring Results for the *Follow-Up* Period

Follow-up Period (After Intervention)								
NO	**Behavior**	**May 11, 2026**	**May 12, 2026**	**May 13, 2026**	**May 14, 2026**	**May 15, 2026**	**May 16, 2026**	**May 17, 2026**
	Picking at the skin around the nails					✔		

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	when feeling anxious							
	Engaging in skin picking when not doing any activities (bored)				✔			
	Engaging in skin picking while using a phone / scrolling	✔			✔			✔

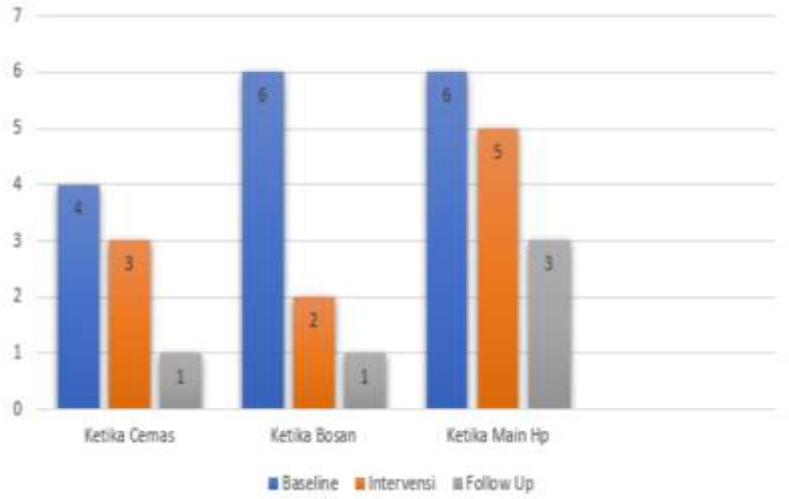


Figure 1. Graph of the Effectiveness of Reducing *Skin Picking*

The research results were obtained through a *self-monitoring* method conducted during three research phases: the *baseline* phase, the intervention phase, and the *follow-up* phase. Measurements were taken by recording the frequency of daily *skin-picking* behavior based on three specific triggering situations: when feeling anxious, when not engaged in an activity or feeling bored, and when using a smartphone or scrolling through social media. The overall dynamics of frequency changes across these three phases are comprehensively visualized in

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Figure 1.

Based on the results of *self-monitoring* during the *baseline* phase, which was conducted over seven days (April 27 to May 3, 2026), it was found that *skin-picking* behavior exhibited a relatively high and *persistent* daily frequency of occurrence. Referring to the data plot in Figure 1, all three trigger conditions were at the top of the graph's axis. Skin-picking behavior while idle (bored) and while using a smartphone had the highest daily frequency, followed by skin-picking behavior around the nails when feeling anxious. Qualitative data and visualizations in this phase indicate that prior to the intervention, skin-picking behavior consistently and frequently occurred in the subject's daily activities.

Entering the intervention phase conducted over the following seven days (May 4 to May 10, 2026), the recorded results showed a significant change in the frequency pattern of the behavior. Based on the graph trend in Figure 1 for the intervention period, a clear downward trend (descending trend) is evident in the daily occurrence of the behavior compared to the baseline phase. The frequency of skin-picking behavior—whether occurring when feeling anxious, bored, or while using a smartphone—began to gradually decrease. Although the behavior was still recorded on some days during the treatment period, the graph visually confirmed a consistent daily reduction in frequency.

Furthermore, during the *follow-up* phase conducted over seven days post-intervention (May 11 to May 17, 2026), *skin-picking* behavior remained at a very limited level of occurrence. A visual analysis of Figure 1 shows that the downward trend from the previous phase has now leveled off (stabilized) at a significantly lower baseline level. The daily frequency for all three behavioral categories (during anxiety, boredom, and smartphone use) recorded very minimal numbers per day and showed no resurgence in frequency back to the initial baseline level. Overall, the recorded data and graphs demonstrate a sustained reduction in the frequency of skin-picking behavior by the end of the study.

DISCUSSION

The results of the *baseline* phase indicate that *skin-picking* behavior in the subjects occurred with relatively high and sustained frequency throughout the seven-day observation period. Skin-picking behavior consistently emerged in three primary trigger situations: when the subject felt anxious, when the subject was not engaged in an activity or felt bored, and when the subject was using a mobile phone or scrolling through social media. This study aligns with Gallinat (2021), who explains that *skin-picking* behavior functions as a maladaptive affective regulation

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strategy, whereby an individual may utilize this physical act to mitigate unbearable negative emotional states. Meanwhile, Snorrason and Lee (2022) explain that *skin-picking* behavior is generally triggered by antecedent stimuli in the form of emotional distress; in this case, it manifests as anxiety and boredom. The recurring pattern of skin-picking behavior across these three situations indicates the strong role of *negative reinforcement* mechanisms: *skin-picking* provides momentary relief, which subsequently reinforces the individual's dependence on the behavior (Grant & Chamberlain, 2020). Thus, this baseline phase demonstrates that *skin-picking* behavior in a subject is not random but rather a conditioned response functionally maintained by the reinforcing effect of reduced anxiety.

Upon entering the intervention phase, the application of this *extinction* technique demonstrated significant changes in behavioral patterns. Based on the data in Figure 1, *a* downward trend in the daily frequency of skin-picking behavior is evident compared to the baseline phase. The mechanism underlying the extinction technique in this study is based on the fundamental principles of Skinner's (1965) Operant Conditioning, specifically the functional severing of the link between the behavior and the reinforcing consequences that the subject had previously maintained. When the subject no longer consistently receives the reinforcing sensation of relief through the act of picking, the strength of that motor response gradually diminishes over time. At the beginning of the intervention phase, it was observed that the behavior still occurred quite frequently before gradually decreasing; this can be interpreted as the "extinction brush" phenomenon—a temporary spike in behavior frequency commonly occurring after reinforcement is discontinued (Cooper et al., 2007; Lerman & Iwata, 1995). This phenomenon is a normal part of the *extinction* process and does not indicate intervention failure. This study on the reduction in *skin-picking* behavior frequency provides initial empirical evidence that this *extinction* technique can function as an effective standalone intervention, filling a research gap that has previously focused more on testing extinction within the context of combined interventions (Asplund et al., 2025; Twohig & Capel, 2025).

The reduction in behavior was further reinforced by data from *the follow-up* phase, which lasted seven days or one week following the intervention phase. A visual analysis of Figure 1 shows that the frequency of skin-picking behavior did not rebound to baseline levels but remained at very low levels across all three categories of triggering situations. This may indicate that the *extinction* technique does not merely suppress *skin-picking* behavior temporarily but has produced a more stable or consistent change in response patterns. This study aligns with the principle of *extinction learning* proposed by Hollandt (2020), which states that habituation to the

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trigger stimulus without the involvement of an escape response can lead to more adaptive learning. In line with this study, (Carpenter et al., 2019) emphasize that the successful consolidation of the *extinction* process of anxiety prevents individuals from reverting to their original maladaptive responses. Nevertheless, the continued occurrence of the behavior on certain days during the *follow-up* phase warrants attention. This phenomenon can be interpreted as *spontaneous recovery*—the partial reappearance of behavior that has undergone *extinction* after a predetermined interval—indicating that the *extinction* process is not absolutely permanent and still requires ongoing monitoring (Cooper et al., 2007).

The effectiveness of *extinction* techniques in this study cannot be separated from a deep understanding of the *negative reinforcement* mechanisms that may underlie skin-picking behavior. As explained by Grant & Chamberlain (2020), individuals with *Skin Picking Disorder* exhibit a very high rate of comorbidity with anxiety disorders, where anxiety serves as an antecedent variable that consistently precedes the onset of picking behavior. Within the framework of *operant conditioning*, this behavior is reinforced through the mechanism *of negative reinforcement*, wherein the temporary relief of anxiety immediately following the *picking* act functions as a reinforcer that strengthens the association between the stimulus and the response (Skinner, 1965). By applying *extinction* techniques, this study systematically breaks the cycle. This process encourages individuals to adapt directly to the aversive stimulus, which over time weakens the strength of the association between anxiety and the picking response (Hollandt et al., 2020; Modecki et al., 2023). Thus, the reduction in behavioral frequency observed in this study is not merely a superficial change but reflects the weakening of the long-established functional relationship between the phase of emotional distress and the maladaptive motor response in a subject.

Although the results of this study provide positive indications regarding the effectiveness of extinction techniques, there are several limitations that must be critically acknowledged. First, the use of a Single Subject Research (SSR) design means these findings cannot be broadly generalized, as the measured behavioral changes reflect only the condition of a specific subject within their unique life context. Second, the *self-monitoring* method used as the primary measurement instrument has the potential to introduce reactivity bias, where the subject's awareness of being observed may indirectly influence the frequency of the behavior's occurrence (King et al., 2025). Third, the absence of a comparison control group complicates efforts to strictly attribute causality to the observed changes. Fourth, the duration of each phase, which lasted only seven days, is relatively short to draw robust conclusions regarding the stability of long-term

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behavioral changes. Fifth, the *extinction* intervention in this study was conducted naturalistically in daily life, making it difficult to fully control external reinforcing variables that may have influenced the subjects' behavioral patterns during the study (Yuwono & Novitasari, 2024).

Despite these limitations, this study has significant implications both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, the results of this study reinforce the relevance of Skinner's operant conditioning principles in explaining and addressing focused body-focused behavioral disorders such as Skin Picking Disorder. This study demonstrates that breaking the contingency between stimulus, response, and reinforcement through extinction techniques is a valid and empirically measurable mechanism of behavioral change, consistent with the applied behavior analysis framework (Cooper et al., 2007). Practically, the results of this study open up opportunities for the development of extinction-based intervention protocols as a more specific and well-defined component in the management of Skin Picking Disorder, whether as a standalone technique or as an integrated part of a more comprehensive approach such as Habit Reversal Training or Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Loftus et al., 2025; Twohig & Capel, 2025). Additionally, the use of self-monitoring in this study also demonstrates that behavior-awareness-based interventions can be implemented online and independently, which implies greater accessibility of interventions for individuals with direct access to professional psychological services. For future research, it is recommended that testing be conducted using a multiple baseline design across subjects or situations, involving a larger number of participants, and integrating additional objective measures such as periodic documentation of skin condition to strengthen the validity and generalizability of the study (Bosch et al., 2026).

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the application of extinction techniques has been empirically proven to be highly effective in reducing the frequency of skin-picking behavior in subjects. This effectiveness is reflected in shifts in behavior levels, beginning with highly persistent occurrence during the baseline phase, followed by measurable reduction during the intervention phase, and finally stabilizing at a very minimal level during the follow-up phase. This success was consistently observed across the three primary trigger conditions: when the subject experienced anxiety, when bored, and when using a mobile device.

The results of this study provide evidence that breaking the functional chain between the triggering stimulus and reinforcement can create lasting behavioral modification. These findings also specifically underscore that operant extinction techniques possess clinical efficacy to function

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as a single intervention variable. The removal of reinforcement in the form of a sense of relief proved sufficient to dismantle the subject's dependence on this destructive behavior.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Given the limitations of this study, particularly regarding the use of a single subject and the relatively short observation duration, several recommendations are proposed for future development. For future research, it is recommended to replicate this procedure using a multiple baseline design with a broader sample of subjects to strengthen external validation and the generalizability of the findings. For psychology practitioners, the results of this study can serve as a foundation for developing a more structured treatment protocol for Skin Picking Disorder that focuses on breaking the behavioral reinforcement chain.

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