

Warning screens fail to deter Instagram users from seeing graphic content, study finds

February 2 2023



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

The introduction of sensitive-content warning screens by Instagram is not effectively protecting vulnerable Internet users from the negative

impact of graphic online imagery, according to new research from Flinders University.

The results of a study conducted by Flinders University Psychology researchers show that sensitive-content screens—with [graphic images](#) being obfuscated by a blur and accompanied by a warning—don't deter vulnerable users, especially those with mental-health concerns, from approaching potentially graphic content.

"Trigger warnings may not be an effective way to limit people's exposure to negative material," says Professor Melanie Takarangi, College of Education, Psychology and Social Work at Flinders University.

"Our data suggests that alternative, empirically grounded methods for flagging potentially negative content on social media may be necessary."

The research, "Curiosity Disturbed the Cat: Instagram's Sensitive-Content Screens Do Not Deter Vulnerable Users From Viewing Distressing Content," by Victoria Bridgland, Benjamin Bellet and Melanie Takarangi—has been published by *Clinical Psychological Science*.

By focusing two studies on approach or avoidance behaviors, the results showed that people using Instagram submit to their curiosity, even when there are possible harmful consequences.

In Study 1, participants were asked how likely they would be to uncover a blurred image if they came across it on Instagram. The researchers also measured psychopathology and psychological-vulnerability variables (such as depression, anxiety and stress, PTSD symptoms, general well-being, that could relate to the likelihood that people would uncover these images.

In Study 2, participants had the option to click to uncover a single blurred image or select "next photo" to skip uncovering the image.

Participants in the two studies were Instagram users aged 20 to 71 years old, with 54% being female, and the vast majority of participants (80%–85%) indicated a desire (Study 1) or made a choice (Study 2) to uncover a screened image.

"This result aligns with research on the 'forbidden-fruit effect': When something is forbidden or restricted, it becomes more attractive, and curiosity toward it increases," explains lead author Dr. Victoria Bridgland.

"Our results also fit with the 'Pandora effect,' which shows that people are especially willing to engage with stimuli if an outcome is uncertain and negative."

In Study 1, the researchers found that the desire to uncover the blurred image was associated with a number of vulnerability factors, including depression, well-being, and PTSD symptoms. They did not find that [vulnerable people](#) were any more likely to use the screens as a tool for avoidance.

"Furthermore, we found no evidence that vulnerable users were any more likely to use the screens to avoid sensitive content," says Dr. Bridgland. "Therefore, warning screens appear to be an ineffective way to deter vulnerable users from viewing negative content."

Although this study focuses on Instagram, many other platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and BuzzFeed, use similar sensitive-content screens—and Professor Takarangi says it is therefore surprising that no research has investigated the wider use of sensitive-content screens or the use of trigger warnings in a [social-media](#) context.

More information: Victoria M. E. Bridgland et al, Curiosity Disturbed the Cat: Instagram's Sensitive-Content Screens Do Not Deter Vulnerable Users From Viewing Distressing Content, *Clinical Psychological Science* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/21677026221097618](https://doi.org/10.1177/21677026221097618)

Provided by Flinders University

Citation: Warning screens fail to deter Instagram users from seeing graphic content, study finds (2023, February 2) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-02-screens-deter-instagram-users-graphic.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.