The Dangers of Warning Labels

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Imagine logging onto your favorite social media platform and being greeted with a warning: "Excessive use may harm your mental health." Would this change how you use the app? The idea of placing warning labels on social media is gaining popularity, especially as concerns grow about social media's impact on young adolescents' mental health. While these warning labels have been used in different industries before like tobacco and alcohol, their effectiveness remains questionable. In his guest essay, "Surgeon General: Why I'm calling for a warning label on social media platforms." from *The New York Times*, Vivek Murthy (2024) argues that social media poses significant risks to adolescent mental health. Citing research linking excessive use to anxiety, depression, and body image issues, Murthy advocates for mandatory warning labels on these platforms to raise awareness and encourage mindful usage. He contends that warning labels, much like those found on cigarette packages, will serve as a constant reminder of the dangers posed by excessive social media use. Murthy's argument is rooted in a desire to protect young users, but it raises important questions about the effectiveness of such measures. While Murthy's concerns are valid, implementing warning labels may not be the most effective solution. Warning labels oversimplify a complex issue and instead, focusing on teaching digital literacy among adolescents, redesigning platform features to promote healthier usage, and promoting open communication about online behavior could yield more significant benefits. This essay will argue that warning labels are ineffective, that platform design must change, and that digital literacy education provides a stronger, long-term solution.

Murthy (2024) argues that warning labels will help raise awareness, stating, "It is time to require a surgeon general's warning label on social media platforms." But studies suggest that people often ignore such warnings. Although warning labels are intended to inform and deter harmful behavior, studies show that users often disregard them. A study conducted by Bingbing

Zhang (2024) who is an assistant professor at the University of Iowa and education PhD found that, "The results revealed that the warning labels had no direct impact on diminishing perceived credibility and the intention to share the misinformation post." This raises concerns about the warning label's ability to address the root causes of excessive social media use. Either users do not notice warning labels or do not take them seriously. And from firsthand experience users do not take warning labels seriously. All the time on Instagram I will get blacked out images with a disclaimer or a warning asking me if I want to view the content first as it might be spreading misinformation. I notice these warning labels; I just don't pay much attention to them as I will watch the video or view the image anyways. If social media users (including myself) do not alter their engagement with misinformation despite clear warnings, it is unlikely that they will modify their overall usage patterns due to general mental health warnings.

Murthy is not entirely wrong about implementing warning labels though. While he acknowledges that a single warning label would not make social media safe for adolescents, he overestimates the effectiveness of multiple warnings. Warning labels can create a false sense of security, making it appear that the issue is being addressed while deeper systemic problems, such as the algorithms designed for maximum engagement, remain unchanged. Supporting this view, Bernoff (2024) argues that the core problem is not users' behavior but the underlying design of social media platforms. He states:

> Everything wrong about social media is rooted in the algorithm. Social media is optimized for addiction. It's optimized for anger and greed and jealousy. The more addictive it is, the more time people spend with it, and the more profitable it is. No amount of lip service, toothless advisory boards, and pro-social chest-beating from Meta, Google/YouTube, TikTok, or X can change that.

If warning labels give the impression that the risks of social media are being managed, platform developers may avoid taking more meaningful actions, such as limiting manipulative algorithms or enforcing stricter content moderation policies. Making warning labels the main solution puts the responsibility on users instead of fixing how platforms encourage unhealthy online habits. Social media addiction is not just a result of individual choices; it is a consequence of platforms being deliberately designed to encourage prolonged use.

Additionally, Murthy (2024) believes that implementing warning labels will make social media platforms safer as they, "[…] would regularly remind parents and adolescents that social media has not been proved safe." This might help, but a more effective approach would be to have social media companies take different steps to design platforms that promote healthier user engagement, rather than relying solely on warning labels. Many of the negative effects associated with social media such as addiction, anxiety, and depression, are linked to the way these platforms are designed to maximize user engagement. To address this, companies could improve their algorithms by prioritizing content that encourages positive interactions, meaningful connections, and time well spent, rather than focusing on maximizing screen time or exploiting users' psychological vulnerabilities. Peter Suciu's (2024) article states that media platforms take advantage of weaknesses in human psychology saying that, "social media platforms should remove addictive features, including infinite scroll, autoplay, and push notifications […]". Features such as push notifications, personalized content feeds, and infinite scrolling contribute to excessive engagement, making it difficult for users to log off. If these platforms removed these features, users, especially adolescents might naturally reduce their usage without needing warning labels. I know if I was scrolling on TikTok or Instagram and hit the end of the feed, it would probably make me hop off or at least make me think about how I've

spent my time that last half hour. But with an infinite scroll there is no spot to reflect on how you just spent your time as you already have another short video on your screen to watch. Social media companies should take proactive steps to design platforms that promote healthier user engagement, rather than relying solely on warning labels.

Moreover, improving adolescents' digital literacy would likely have a more lasting impact than merely placing warning labels on social media apps. Many young users lack the critical thinking skills needed to assess the content they consume, making them more vulnerable to misinformation, cyberbullying, and negative mental health effects. Murthy (2024) talks on how warning labels could, "shield young people from online harassment, abuse and exploitation and from exposure to extreme violence and sexual content that too often appears in algorithm-driven feeds." While warning labels might help some people stay safe, research indicates that adolescents with higher digital literacy skills are better equipped to critically assess online content and are less susceptible to negative influences. According to Taba (2022), "Fostering critical health literacy in adolescents will ensure they have the ability to analyze and act on health information to make important health decisions." Teaching digital literacy in schools would be a more effective way to help adolescents develop healthy social media habits and could empower them to navigate social media responsibly, reducing potential harm. Teaching adolescents how to recognize unhealthy online behaviors and develop coping strategies is likely to have a more lasting impact than simply placing a warning label on a social media app.

Ultimately, while the intention behind implementing warning labels on social media platforms is to protect users, especially adolescents, evidence suggests that such measures may not be effective. Focusing on digital literacy education, responsible platform design, and open communication may offer more significant solutions. Exploring this topic has highlighted the

complexity of mental health problems caused by social media use. Rather than just warning people about the risks of being online it's more effective to actively help them build safe and supportive digital spaces. That being said, some lingering doubts still remain. Although digital literacy education can help adolescents to navigate social media more responsibly, there is no guarantee that all adolescents will apply these skills consistently. Many teens including myself know excessive screen time is harmful but struggle to self-regulate. Similarly, while social media companies could implement healthier design choices, their financial incentives are tied to keeping users engaged for as long as possible. Can we trust these corporations to prioritize mental health over profit without strong regulations? Addressing the root causes of excessive social media use requires deeper measures beyond simply adding a label. Reflecting personally, if I had children, I would not rely on warning labels alone to keep them safe online. I would focus on teaching them how to think critically about what they see online, while also encouraging open conversations about their experiences and helping them set healthy boundaries with technology. In a world that's going to stay digital, helping young people build resilience and awareness is one of the most important things we can do. Tackling the real issues behind excessive social media use takes much more than just slapping on a label, and the next generation deserves real solutions, not surface-level fixes.

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