Issue paper: Trigger Warnings and Personalization

Introduction

Triggers are types of content or situations that can provoke strong emotional or psychological reactions, particularly in individuals who have experienced related distress or trauma.

Trigger warnings are notices that are put ahead of content that might evoke strong emotional or psychological responses. For example, a news video with graphic violence may warn users ahead of the content that this video includes disturbing images. Trigger warnings give individuals the opportunity to avoid certain content if they believe it could negatively affect their mental health. For example, this may help people who have experienced trauma related to the content. To support mental health, trigger warnings have become widely prevalent on many sites online.

While trigger warnings can be helpful in some situations, they may not always be necessary or effective. In fact, overuse of trigger warnings may hinder the development of emotional resilience—one's ability to adapt to stressful situations. Other issues have also been identified.

Personalization and supportive semantics may provide the advantages of trigger warnings without the negative aspects.

Background to triggers

Common triggers

Common triggers often include:

- Violence: Graphic depictions or descriptions of physical harm, which may remind individuals of past traumatic events or induce fear and anxiety.
- Sexual Assault: References or detailed accounts, which can be particularly distressing for survivors, causing them to relive their trauma.
- Abuse: Depictions of emotional, physical, or psychological abuse, triggering painful memories and emotional turmoil.

- Discrimination: Content involving racism, sexism, homophobia, or other forms of bigotry; evoking intense responses, especially in those directly affected by such injustices.
- Mental Health Issues: Discussions of self-harm, suicide, or severe anxiety, which can be challenging for those who have personal experience with these struggles or know someone who has. Content may also exacerbate specific disorders such as eating disorders or addictions.
- Noises, and other stimulations that can make someone lose focus and become anxious. For example booms, other loud noises or flashing red lights.

Recognizing these common triggers underscores the importance of providing warnings to help individuals manage their emotional well-being.

For a more comprehensive list of triggers, refer to Appendix A,

For sample examples of trigger warnings refer to Appendix B.

Impact of common triggers

Common triggers can have a profound impact on individuals with mental health issues and, to some extent, cognitive disabilities. Trigger content may worsen their conditions and hinder their daily functioning. This can include:

- **Anxiety:** Triggering content can escalate anxiety and distress, especially in individuals who have experienced trauma or have underlying anxiety disorders. For individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), triggering content can induce anxiety, panic attacks, flashbacks, or other symptoms related to their trauma.
- **Other emotional responses:** Disturbing content can sometimes trigger strong emotional responses such as fear, anger, sadness, distress.
- **Physical Reactions:** Physical reactions might include, becoming non-vocal, increased heart rate, sweating, trembling, or nausea and others.
- **Loss of focus:** Encountering emotionally triggering or distressing content can make it difficult for individuals to focus on activities or responsibilities. This can make users unable to complete the task at hand.

The quantity of disturbing content can also be problematic. Excessive exposure can significantly impact mental health, leading to issues such as anxiety disorders, depression, or PTSD. This overwhelming exposure can create feelings of helplessness or hopelessness.

Trigger warnings and people with mental health issues and cognitive and learning disabilities

Trigger warnings help people avoid harmful content.Triggers are a particular concern for individuals with mental health issues and cognitive and learning disabilities and because these groups are often more vulnerable to intense emotional and psychological reactions.

For individuals with cognitive and learning disabilities, unexpected distressing content can disrupt their learning processes and cause significant confusion and anxiety. Similarly, those with mental health issues may experience heightened sensitivity to certain topics or stimuli, which can worsen symptoms of conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, or depression.

Exposure to triggering content without warning can lead to overwhelming emotional responses, difficulty concentrating, and even retraumatization. Consequently, many people believe that providing trigger warnings is essential to create a supportive environment that respects the mental health and well-being of all individuals, allowing them to navigate content more safely and manage their reactions effectively.

Potential drawbacks of trigger warnings

While trigger warnings aim to protect and support individuals with cognitive and learning disabilities and mental health conditions, research has suggested some significant concerns:

1. **Making the problem worse:** The trigger warnings reliably increase anxiety even before viewing the actual content thus adding extra negative/uncomfortable emotions in anticipation. In relation with academic content; at best, warnings have no effect on the comprehension of material. At worst, because trigger warnings seem to reliably increase anticipatory anxiety responses; trigger warnings have the potential to increase apprehension and anxiousness about attending class.
2. **Reinforcing the trauma as identity:** There is significant evidence that trigger warnings strengthen survivors' view of their trauma as a central aspect of their identity.This may be from making them select avoiding triggers on a continual basis is detrimental and reminds them of their challenges. This is counter therapeutic.
3. **Lack of Emotional Preparation Skills:**While it's accurate that having the ability to predict a reaction can empower individuals to actively manage stress, most people lack skills in emotional preparation. On the contrary, anticipating a particular response can also cause one to exaggerate the anticipated response.

The extra negative emotions induced by trigger warnings serve no productive purpose.
Overuse of trigger warnings may hinder the development of emotional resilience—one's ability to adapt to stressful situations. Antifragility, the ability to grow stronger through challenges, is also essential for long-term emotional and mental health. Relying too much on trigger warnings can prevent the development of both emotional resilience and antifragility (as coping mechanisms) in the long term.

4. **Ineffective in reducing distress :** Studies have suggested that trigger warnings do not lessen/reduce distress. The study found that trigger warnings have no effect on emotional response about warned content. Another study suggests that Trigger warnings were not helpful for individuals who self-reported a diagnosis of PTSD (Post-traumatic stress disorder). Trigger warnings were not helpful even when the warned-of content closely matched survivors' traumas[3].
There is a growing body of literature demonstrating that trigger warnings seem trivially effective in achieving their purported goals[6].

5. **Ineffective in reducing avoidance:** They do not appear to increase the avoidance of warned content. ??
6. **Boost attraction:**Trigger warnings contribute to a "forbidden fruit effect," where the warnings actually boost attraction to potentially negative material instead of reducing it.

Findings likely reflect the "Pandora effect," which suggests that people have a general tendency to approach rather than avoid stimuli that has been marked as aversive and uncertain[1].

Evaluating both sides of effectiveness of Trigger warnings:

Trigger warnings can reduce negative emotions but can also increase avoidance. Thus, trigger warnings introduce difficult-to-weigh tradeoffs: the avoidance of warned-of content might have short-term emotion-regulation benefits, but also could hypothetically result in decreased memory for important material or prevent people from learning to cope with distressing content. On the other hand, by reducing negative emotional experiences or signaling supportive environments, trigger warnings might promote engagement with otherwise distressing material in the long run [7].

This concludes, trigger warnings can be helpful in some situations, they may not be necessary or effective in other situations.

Proposed Solutions

ED note: this section may need more work

<mark>A proposed solution</mark> may be to allow for a global setting so that the user can control the exposure without trigger warning,each time problematic content is available.
Consumers should be provided with user preference in settings so that they can remove or hide trigger warnings.

With informed choices users will be well equipped in handling their emotional needs. Such as solution may included

- **Global setting -** Provide options in settings to remove or hide trigger warnings.
- **Syntax for trigger warning in the relevant code. An example may be having an attribute in the section or embedded content such as :**

  Adapt-trigger = @setting@

  Settings could relate to values in Appendix A as a registry.

- **User control:**
- **Flexible:** Users can change the setting or make them time sensitive to increase the exposure, such as allowing for more disturbing content on the weekend or after work.
- **Frequency of reminder:** The user can be prompted to review preference if the trigger warning can be turned on or off with personalization option.It will be especially helpful for people having memory challenges.However its important that
    - Users do not need to be reminded of their challenges on a regular basis, and issues can be ignored by the user.
    - The user is not reminded or asked while viewing content.
    - The prompt should be non intrusive in nature to avoid distraction.

References

1. A Meta-Analysis of the Effects of Trigger Warnings, Content Warnings, and Content Notes
2. (Are Trigger Warnings Actually Helpful?)
3. Helping or Harming? The Effect of Trigger Warnings on Individuals With Trauma Histories
4. What if Trigger Warnings Don't Work?
5. How The "Trigger Warning" Took Over The Internet

6. [Something Distressing This Way Comes: The Effects of Trigger Warnings on Avoidance Behaviors in an Analogue Trauma Task](#)
7. [Trigger warnings as an interpersonal emotion-regulation tool: Avoidance,attention, and affect depend on beliefs](#)

Appendix A: Common triggers

- The following list outlines common triggers that may evoke strong emotional or psychological responses in individuals, particularly those with related trauma experiences (source: https://www.sistersincrime.org/page/contentwarnings): Sexual assault
- Abuse
- Child abuse/pedophilia/incest
- Animal cruelty or animal death
- Self-harm and suicide
- Eating disorders, body hatred, and fat phobia
- Violence
- Loud noise
- Pornographic content
- Kidnapping and abduction
- Death or dying
- Pregnancy/childbirth
- Miscarriages/abortion
- Blood
- Mental illness
- Ableism
- Racism and racial slurs
- Sexism and misogyny
- Classism
- Hateful language direct at religious groups (e.g., Islamophobia, anti-Semitism)
- Transphobia and trans misogyny
- Homophobia and heterosexism
- News
- Swears or curses
- Nudity
- Murder
- Torture

Types of content
- Sudden Loud noises (booms, firework, gun shots)
- Content with supportive information

Appendix B: Trigger warning examples

Example 1:

Image 1: Content Warning: The Following video contains material that may be harmful or traumatizing to some audiences.

Example 2:

Image 2 : Trigger Warning :Please note:The blog may contain discussion of suicide self-injurious behaviour, depression and or reference of mental health disorders that may act as a trigger. Continue on your own discretion.
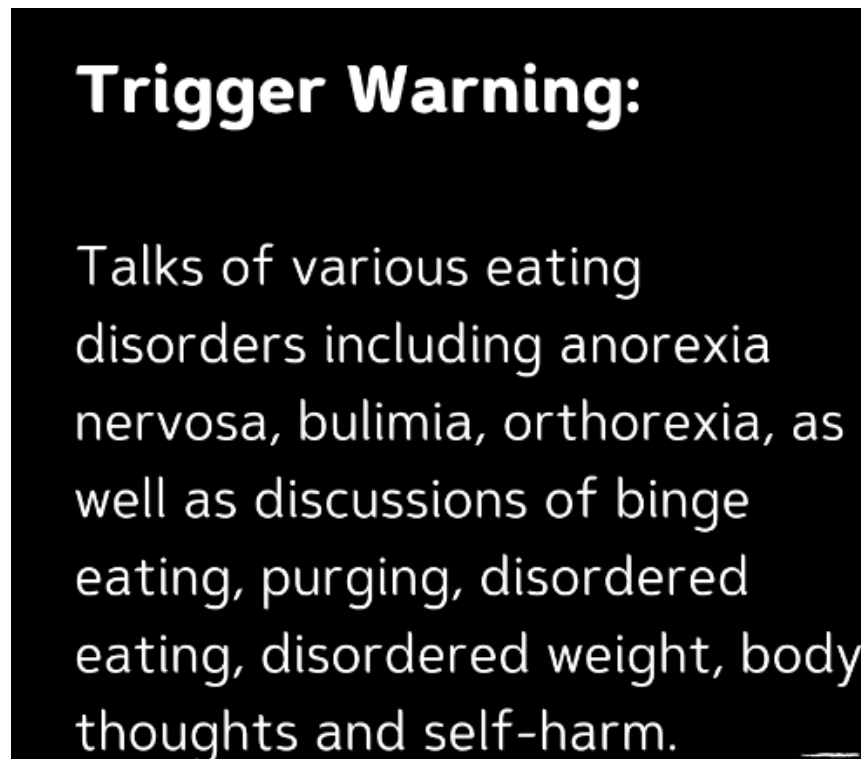
Example 3:

Image 3: Trigger Warning: Talks of various eating disorders including anorexia nervosa,bulimia,orthorexia, as well as discussions of binge eating, purging, disordered eating, disordered weight, body thoughts and self-harm.
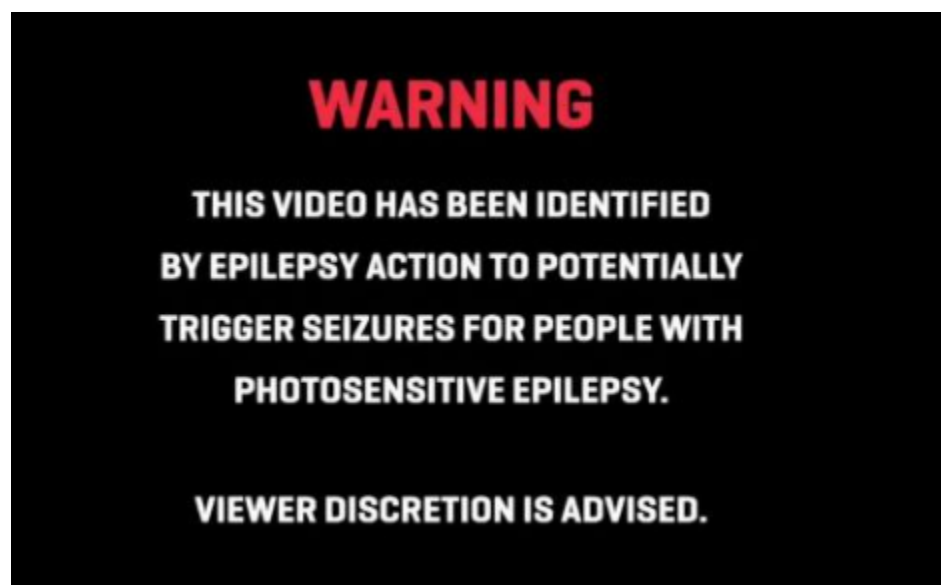
Example 4:

Image 4: Warning: This video has been identified by epilepsy action to potentially trigger seizures for people with photosensitive epilepsy. Viewer discretion is advised