

Good Intentions, Bad Impressions: When Content Warnings Impair Experience of Visual Art

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Abstract

Museums and galleries increasingly use content warnings to alert visitors to sensitive content. We examine how warnings about moral issues (e.g., abuse, slavery, injustice) influence viewers' experiences of visual art. In three experiments ($N = 1,048$), we found strong evidence that warnings reduce enjoyment of visual art, but weaker evidence that they diminish perceived artistic value. This effect on enjoyment is more pronounced when warnings are presented before (vs. after) the painting and when there is a high (vs. low) semantic correspondence between the warning and the artwork. Our findings reveal an unintended negative consequence of content warnings and identify boundary conditions of this effect. These insights underscore the importance of carefully considering how and when to contextualize morally sensitive artworks without compromising viewers' experiences.

Keywords: Content warnings; Enjoyment; Visual art

Track: Consumer behavior