#HASHTAG TRIGGER WARNING: USING TUMBLR TO UNDERSTAND CURRENT CONFLICT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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#HASHTAG TRIGGER WARNING: USING TUMBLR TO UNDERSTAND CURRENT CONFLICT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The topic of Trigger Warnings [TWs] in higher education is often at the center of controversy. Because TWs are popularly and successfully implemented on Tumblr, this thesis compares the use of trigger warnings as discussed and practiced on Tumblr with the use of trigger warnings as discussed in higher education. Research material includes articles published by The Chronicle of Higher Education between 2006 and present, as well as blog posts published on Tumblr within the same period. The result of this research is the identification of four areas of conflict surrounding TWs in higher education, which are: value of content, potential for punishment, ability to handle ambiguity, and the presence of hierarchy or authority. The results of this comparison show that trigger warnings as practiced on the internet are culturally decided by bloggers, warn against recreational (devalued) content, hold no potential for consequences, and are not clearly defined (but cause no confusion). However, trigger warnings in the university warn against educational (valued) content, hold high potential for consequences, are subject to decision by multiple competing authorities, and are also unclearly defined (but cause confusion). Because TWs are a practice imported from Tumblr/the internet into higher education, these differences are found at the root cause of more ostensible issues surround TWs, such as concerns over whether TWs are moral or threaten students’ development. The conclusion to be drawn from these results are that trigger warnings need not necessarily be part of a debate over preserving or losing the values of a university; rather, it may more productively be at the center
of a discussion on how the characteristics of the practice as it is found on the internet must change before it can be successfully implemented in a university.
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INTRODUCTION

On August 26th, 2016, the University of Chicago released a letter to its incoming freshman class stating that the university “does not support so-called 'trigger warnings',” as they, in the university’s view, oppose “freedom of expression” and other university values.1 The letter spurred a flurry of newspaper articles exploring viewpoints for and against the use of trigger warnings. Although the letter is simply one piece in an ongoing argument over the practicality, morality, and value of trigger warnings in a classroom space, it is a clear marker that over the past 3 years, the trigger warning debate has become increasingly more heated but has not moved closer to a compromising solution.

Before the advent of trigger warnings, writers for The Chronicle of Higher Education generally conclude that mental health issues can best be approached as a joint effort between university resources, faculty, and students. For example, writer Gary Pavela seems to advocate a hybrid approach of the university inducing students to take ownership of their mental health when he writes that “setting limits for troubled students often induces [students] to seek the help they need.”2 Here, Pavela encourages implementation of a university policy that eventually causes students to take ownership of their mental wellness and seek help. Morton Silverman also advocates for establishing student ownership in combination with a university culture of caring, wherein “colleges need to develop creative approaches to respond to [students struggling with


mental illness] in ways that they will find helpful and nonthreatening.” These articles seem to suggest that, overall, universities should take the initiative in encouraging students to look after themselves and their friends. Thus, universities do not, outside of trigger warnings, seem opposed to supplying students with tools to overcome mental illness. If before the trigger warning debate writers in higher education believed in hybrid approach and responsibility towards students’ mental health, it is clear that trigger warnings themselves are the root cause of controversy, rather than any sort of prevailing attitude about mental wellness in higher education. What is it about trigger warnings that creates strong opposition and animosity?

Where before there was consensus on a hybrid approach to helping students overcome mental health, now there is concern that mental health tools are being used to encourage “hypersensitivity.” This concern creates a substantial amount of “crosstalk” in the trigger warning debate, wherein trigger warnings are supported as a means of medical help by some educators but opposed as a product of hypersensitivity by others. More specifically, the latter argument is that trigger warnings are part of the trend of hypersensitivity and are a way for coddled college students to avoid discomfort and fail to engage in civil debate, while the former argument is that trigger warnings are a tool for individuals with mental illness to overcome their disability through appropriate warning and preparation. These definitions differ significantly in that one focuses on individuals with medical conditions, while the other focuses on students without medical conditions; neither argument addresses this lack of agreement on what trigger

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warnings are for. This thesis seeks to reconcile this crosstalk by identifying the primary issues hidden underneath the “hypersensitivity” argument, in order to best enable supporters of trigger warnings to respond to those concerns.

Analysis of the ostensible “hypersensitivity” argument reveals a number of significant, latent concerns that trigger warnings pose for higher education. Upon close comparison to the practice as it proliferates on Tumblr, it becomes evident that many of the ostensible problems in opposition actually hold latent roots to the structure of trigger warnings. For example, concerns about academic freedoms, values, and freedom of speech seem to derive from the idea that students might use trigger warnings to avoid viewing content and material in the classroom. On Tumblr this is also a possibility, but it poses little to no problems for bloggers. Issues such as consequences and confusion were either not a problem or did not pose enough problem on Tumblr for the practice to be difficult, or contentious enough to cause a halt in usage. Therefore, in this thesis I argue that ongoing debates about the use of trigger warnings in university classrooms result from the difficulty of translating a social media practice into an academic structure. This viewpoint argues against the idea that trigger warnings can be considered as a simple debate about whether or not trigger warnings threaten values and freedoms. Essentially, we must look deeper than the initial debate to discover that the practice’s social media characteristics lead to conflict, rather than the practice itself. Establishing this is extremely important, as it may allow universities to adapt trigger warnings into a practice that does not cause an affront to values, confusion, or severe consequences in higher education.

The negative effects of introducing practices from other fields and spaces into higher education is not a new one. To identify another widely known example, universities also struggle with the introduction of business models and practices in higher education. Researcher Arthur
Taylor argues that business practices are implemented in universities more often, but that these actions are “based on the assumption that what works in the world of business should work in academia.” In reality, there are “several problems with the application of this theory to higher education,” due to complexities in higher education not present in a typical corporation. The effect of introducing business practices unto universities ultimately “impacts the educational value of the university, and impacts the community for which that education is provided,” a clear tension between the goals of higher education and the practice being introduced. Although not a business practice by any means, trigger warnings originate from a space that is markedly different from a university and, as a result of this difference, threatens universities’ goals. The goal of this research, therefore, is to identify the differences between the internet and higher education that create tension around trigger warnings.

Researcher Alexis Lothian suggests that trigger warnings can be modified to better fit a given community or discursive space. Lothian examines the use of trigger warnings in fan-based creative communities in the mid 1980s, where the initial introduction of a warning system was “met with angry resistance, leading to an intense and divisive dispute.” Although the space differs from higher education in its recreational nature, Lothian recounts that “arguments against warnings focused on artistic freedom and a fear of censorship,” a point which is also made in

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6 Arthur Taylor, “Perspectives on the University as a Business,” 117.

7 Arthur Taylor, “Perspectives on the University as a Business,” 118.

academia. However, Lothian writes that overtime trigger warnings evolved within the community in such a way that, with modifications, it ceased to cause conflict. For example, one modification included the ability not to warn viewers of any content at all; however, including the fact that the creator had chosen not to warn the audience was a necessity. Because of this slow modification and consequential acceptance of trigger warnings in a space that “is not less contentious than” current debates, Lothian suggests that the key to implementing trigger warnings in higher education may lie not in solving debates, but in modifying the practice so that it no longer causes debate. Ultimately, this thesis continues to suggest that trigger warnings can be successfully implemented in higher education through modification, using a close comparison with trigger warnings on Tumblr to identify in exactly which areas the practice causes conflict and therefore may need to change in higher education. It is my hope that this information can be used to benefit students with mental health concerns without threatening university values.

The Origins of Trigger Warnings

Trigger warnings originated on the internet, rather than in clinical psychology. As Buzzfeed writer Ali Vingiano notes, the earliest trigger warnings came from online feminist journals, where they were used to facilitate discussions about sexual assault without triggering PTSD flashbacks for survivors of assault. Trigger warnings became a way for sexual assault survivors suffering from PTSD to avoid disorienting panic episodes. Given this relationship to

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9 Alexis Lothian, “Choose Not To Warn,” 749.
10 Alexis Lothian, “Choose Not To Warn,” 748.
11 Alexis Lothian, “Choose Not To Warn,” 745.
PTSD and psychological conditions, I first directed my research towards the field of psychology, seeking information about trigger warnings as part of treatment for PTSD. This information would solve the problem of different definitions proliferating across the debate by establishing a psychologically backed definition of what a trigger warning should be. However, this is not possible. Although it is true that trigger warnings have their roots in psychology, these roots are quite tenuous to actual clinical psychology and psychological treatment. The strongest relationship is in the word “trigger,” which appears numerous times throughout the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual under the umbrella of “Trauma- and Stressor- Related Disorders” in entries such as PTSD, acute panic disorder, and other similar disorders. The word is used to describe the words, events, phrases, ideas, imagery, etcetera that, if interacted with, may produce a panic episode in a patient.

Trigger **warnings**, however, do not seem to have arisen out of clinical practice or suggestion. I looked for a relation between trigger warnings and the field of psychology by searching through psychology journal databases available through Georgetown’s Lauinger Library for articles pertaining to trigger warnings, both on my own and in conjunction with librarian Maura Seale. Results of this extensive search yielded only one article, which only explored whether professors teaching “abnormal psychology” used trigger warnings, rather than exploring what trigger warnings are or how useful they are in combatting mental illness. Although psychology-based news periodicals such as *Psychology Today* contain articles

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discussing trigger warnings, these articles were generally opinion pieces and not the results of trigger warning-based research. Without accompanying research, I decided that these opinion pieces would not provide an “authoritative,” mental healthcare-based definition of the practice. However, this research did illuminate the fact that trigger warnings are not a practice particularly driven or defined by clinical psychology.

Rather than being derived from clinical practice, trigger warnings primarily come from informal, creative spaces and are a product of community culture. As mentioned previously, Lothian traces the origin of trigger warnings to feminist creative spaces in the mid 1980s. In this context, “warnings contributed to practices of belonging in which ridicule and misunderstanding from the outside world brought participants in a dispersed network closer together,” an origin story that establishes the cultural genesis of trigger warnings in small communities. From there, warnings spread to feminist forum-based communities, where they were used to protect survivors of sexual assault, and eventually proliferated to other spaces. One such space, Tumblr, is now a particularly well-known platform in regards to its users’ dedication to using and advocating for trigger warnings, among other social justice initiatives. Tumblr is also particularly known as a refuge for people dealing with mental health conditions, which may be why trigger warnings have become widely accepted and used on the space. For these reasons, Tumblr can be defined as a platform on which trigger warnings enjoy some degree

16 Alexis Lothian, “Choose Not To Warn.”

17 Alexis Lothian, “Choose Not to Warn,” 746.


19 Alexis Lothian, “Choose Not To Warn,” 744.

of successful implementation and use, therefore is one of the originating points for the practice (as opposed to much newer spaces such as higher education).

Methodology

Researching Tumblr itself presents a number of difficulties due to the website’s design. Similar to my original goal in researching psychology journals, I hoped to establish an overarching definition of what a “trigger warning” is on Tumblr and how it may have evolved over time. This would have ideally been accomplished by searching out the few most popular posts on trigger warnings (determined by how many “notes” it had received) and considering them to be representative of a majority opinion. Unfortunately, it is actually extremely difficult to locate posts by “most popular” or “date” related criteria. A consultation with Professor Garrison LeMasters confirmed that the Tumblr search function is not designed to function in accordance with these parameters, and that there are few to no search alternatives. I attempted to remedy this issue by consulting with another student who frequently uses Tumblr. They sent me a few links to blogs that were related to mental wellness, and ran a few example searches for finding related content. Although these searches do not return the most popular posts, and tended to return a high volume of posts within the past month rather than over time, they did return a large amount of content related to trigger warnings with low numbers of notes (generally around 50-100). Rather than an analysis of the most popular posts on tumblr, the characteristics of trigger warnings on Tumblr can therefore be better identified by examining a large number of blogs relating to the topic. In order pursue the goal of characterizing the trigger warning conversation on Tumblr, a variety of search terms are necessary. For example, searching “trigger warning” returned a large number of results containing content that the author was warning about, from graphically violent images to erotic literature. Although I cited a number of these
results as examples of trigger warnings “in use”, I entered other search terms, such as “this is a trigger,” or “how to use trigger warning” to find posts that discussed trigger warnings, rather than used them.

Another issue posed by researching Tumblr is the sensitive, personal, private nature of its content. Researching Tumblr is an essential part of understanding trigger warnings in higher education because trigger warnings have originated and proliferated on the website, where they experience significantly less controversy. The website therefore holds authoritative information on the successful implementation of the practice, which can illuminate the difficulties and possible solutions for trigger warnings in higher education. The ultimate goal of this analysis is to aid individuals with mental illness in successfully navigating academia, just as they have successfully navigated online spaces through trigger warnings. However, Professor LeMasters noted that the website’s search function is difficult to navigate because the website seeks, to some extent, to project its content only to connected users rather than to the general public. Professor Amanda Phillips also noted that there is difficulty in researching Tumblr because there is some resistance to personal blogs being used for non-personal research, as some users find this to be upsetting and a violation of personal privacy. Indeed, Tumblr users often use the blog as platform to share about difficult life experiences with the expectation that friends and family will not have access to such content. One user writes that they “worked through a lot of issues here-growing up in a brainwashing cult, childhood beatings and rape, and plenty of therapy,” and that Tumblr was their “safe place to let everything out” to their “tumblr support system”, who “[were] wonderful.”

had discovered their Tumblr blog, expressing that they felt Tumblr to be a private space away from public eye and public discovery to express difficult thoughts and feelings. Tumblr users have further deleted some of the blog posts I initially researched and cited; because Tumblr is not regularly cached by any public domain websites, many of these deletions are effective and cannot be readily traced, if at all. These deletions also point to the private, sensitive nature of sources included in this research, as users who deleted posts are seeking to erase the content from public domain. Because posts are often suddenly and arbitrarily deleted, all blog posts cited can be found in the form of screenshots in the appendix. However, blog posts detailing personal struggles and other sensitive topics have had all identifying information censored. Redacting identifying information from records of private, sensitive posts that may be deleted in the future can aid in protecting the privacy of Tumblr users without the complete loss of research material.

Choosing a higher education periodical was an essential part of this research, as it includes many voices that identify many different concerns about trigger warnings beyond the ostensible “students don’t need to be protected” argument. Because this thesis is about concerns that educators have in regards to trigger warnings, the editorials were particularly helpful. To understand the core issues at the center of the debate, I have primarily singled out and examined the viewpoints of opposition to trigger warnings in higher education. In doing so, I established that the main concerns of opposing voices in higher education were loss of academic freedom, intellectual freedom, freedom of speech, cultural values. Other issues within opposing stances were confusion over trigger warnings and their implementation, and fear of severe consequences in relation to their implementation.

Trigger warnings are often conflated to and identified as part of a larger ongoing trend around hypersensitivity in the university. Hypersensitivity in the higher education space
specifically is the notion that students are coddled and unable to withstand opposition to their viewpoints, becoming easily insulted and unable to handle discomfort. It is important to establish that many opponents of trigger warnings treat the practice as similar to one of these other practices and part of an ongoing hypersensitivity trend. As such, arguments against trigger warnings are often found within arguments against hypersensitivity, and a number of articles that will be referenced in the coming chapters exemplify this. In some cases, an argument against hypersensitivity will be cited as an argument against trigger warnings; all such articles mention trigger warnings only briefly, but remain important evidence and insight into the argument against trigger warnings.

Overview

This thesis will explore, in four separate chapters, the four unique areas that trigger warnings cause contention. It will begin by establishing that there is difference in content value between higher education and Tumblr due to educational versus recreational nature, and that this content value creates a trigger warning practice on Tumblr that allows for avoidance of content that is impermissible in higher education. Chapter two explores the potential severe consequences faced by educators in higher education when interacting with or implementing trigger warnings, and proves that this threat is absent on Tumblr. The threat is absent on Tumblr due to a lack of any strong governing authority on Tumblr, while higher education holds numerous possible levels of authority on trigger warnings that conflict with each other and create confusing ambiguity with regard to trigger warnings; this concept will be explored in chapter three. Exploration of the ambiguity of trigger warnings will continue in chapter four, where the

many variations of trigger warnings on Tumblr will be shown to result in ambiguity that also appears in higher education and creates conflict. Ultimately, the conclusion of this research will be that the four ways trigger warnings create conflict in higher education can be identified, and that this identification creates the possibility for modification and implementation of a trigger warning practice that no longer conflicts with American higher education values.
CHAPTER I: The Principles Argument and Content Value Differences

Many opponents of trigger warnings argue that employing warnings in the classroom threatens the presence of constructive adversity in the classroom, freedom of speech, and intellectual freedom. More succinctly, trigger warnings are presented as a threat to university values and principles. However, the principles argument is notably absent or diminished on Tumblr. Trigger warnings are contentious in Higher Education but not on Tumblr because of a key difference between the two spaces: content in higher education “matters”, while content on Tumblr “doesn’t matter”. There is no higher value associated with avoiding content on Tumblr due to the website’s primarily recreational nature, whereas educators use content for educational reasons. This difference in value of content between Tumblr and the higher education classroom seems to be the root cause of the avoidance and principles issue. Essentially, trigger warnings cause controversy in higher education because they create the potential for avoidance of recreational, “devalued” content on Tumblr, but conversely create potential for avoidance of educational, “valued” content in higher education.

Higher Education

To summarize the primary concerns of some educators, the practice of using trigger warnings opposes and endangers core values of higher education. For example, one concern is that trigger warnings will allow students to avoid engaging with opposing viewpoints or debating contentious issues. This poses a significant problem for educators because engaging in contention and debate is a valued aspect of university education. Thus, professors and students who use trigger warnings that allow students to avoid debate void major goals and values of higher education. However, this is just one aspect of the principles argument. Altogether, opponents of the TW practice express concerns about the loss of intellectual freedom, freedom of
speech, and the value of adversity in the classroom (the principles argument). Essentially, writers for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* value adversity, intellectual freedom, the freedom of speech in higher education, and feel that students oppose and threaten these values when they propose the use of trigger warnings in the university classroom.

Overcoming adversity is arguably a major feature of the human experience, according to writers for *The Chronicle*. Working through difficulty enriches the human experience, and is an ever-present feature of life both in college and beyond. To identify this concept more clearly in the context of higher education, adversity in the classroom specifically is a situation in which a student may feel uncomfortable interacting with certain material. Educators see this sort of discomfort as a necessary feature of engaging in debate and expanding one’s worldview. Altogether, writers for *The Chronicle* value adversity in the classroom due to its significance in humanities material, its preparation of students for future careers, and its reflection of the world at large.

*Chronicle* writers believe that adversity in the classroom reflects the adversity present in the world at large, and therefore is important because it facilitates education better appropriate to the world we live in. Writer Todd Gitlin advocates for adversity and discomfort in the classroom by writing that “the unwritten contract of university education [is]: *I am here to be disturbed.*”\(^\text{23}\) Students are “here” to be disturbed because, as Gitlin writes, human history is “a slaughter house . . . [a] record of murder, rape, and sundry other brutalities,” and the “discomfort [associated with reading this material] is the crucible of learning.”\(^\text{24}\) By asserting that discomfort in the classroom is a result and reflection of the realities of the larger world outside of university, Gitlin places a

\(^{23}\) Todd Gitlin, “You Are Here to be Disturbed.”

\(^{24}\) Todd Gitlin, “You Are Here to be Disturbed.”
value on learning about both the positive and negative realities of the world that students live in. He defends the classroom against students that prefer to institute trigger warnings by writing that “discomfort drives education,” a clear assertion that without adversity present in the classroom that reflects adversity and difficulty in the world at large, education could not properly occur. Todd Gitlin therefore makes the case that students must interact with the difficult aspects of the human experience in order to become properly educated.

Adversity in the classroom also prepares students for future lives and career paths, throughout which they will continue to encounter adversity. Writer Eric Hoover asks whether “the future caretakers of civilization [are] made of marshmallows,” implying that facing and overcoming adversity in the classroom is valuable for its development of skills needed after graduation.25 Writer Irina Popescu addresses career preparation more specifically, arguing that uncomfortable content in higher education “will serve students well as they encounter their first jobs and careers.”26 These articles make it clear that one of the values of adversity in the classroom is preparing students for confronting discomfort in the professional world.

Aside from being an intrinsic part of living in the world at large, and perhaps because of that intrinsic nature, adversity is also seen as an essential part of the creation and study of humanities. Writer Rob Goodman notes that “the humanities are the product of trauma,” and therefore trauma cannot be removed from the classroom in which they are taught.27

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viewpoint is further expanded in a much older article by Eric Hoover, who wrote in 2006 that students suffering from mental illnesses such as depression should not be removed from classrooms, because it is well known that such students can be more creative and have much to contribute to a humanities classroom. 28 Asserting the value of depression in the human experience is an assertion that the “darker” aspects of life are a valuable part of the humanities. Understanding that difficult experiences are valuable in the humanities explains why professors are hesitant to remove difficulty-related content from the humanities curriculum.

Adversity is also valued for its contributions to creating persons of “character,” or students who look closely at their beliefs and develop them through challenge and logical discourse. Writer Susan Neiman cites Todd Gitlin when writing “universities are very much in the business of trying to get you to rethink why you believe what you believe and whether you have grounds for believing it.” 29 This process of challenging students’ beliefs builds students’ character, which Gitlin expresses is an important value of university education. Nieman follows this argument by writing that educational institutions “don’t do enough to help students overcome the obstacles growing up.” 30 The implication here is that the purpose of a university is to help students work through adversity, rather than to help them avoid it. In another article, Scott A. Bass and Mary L. Clark write that “students increasingly come to college with little appreciation for civilized, engaged, and thoughtfully probing discourse,” discourse being a

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30 Susan Neiman, “Infantilized by Academe.”
dialogue between various viewpoints on an issue.\(^3\) By lamenting students’ lack of respect for open discourse, rather than the lack of open discourse itself, Bass and Clark assert that engaging with adversity through discourse is an important feature of collegiate character building. Together, these three authors imply that adversity, in the form of discomfort, debate, and discourse, is valuable because it teaches certain values to students and therefore contributes to their overall character.

A second, entirely different value threatened by trigger warnings is freedom of speech in universities. Academic instructors oppose trigger warnings because the practice prevents freedom of speech, which professors feel is a dangerous situation. In “The Comfortable Kid,” writer Eric Hoover asserts directly that censoring students, academics, and speakers on the grounds of possible threats to other students’ wellbeing can be used to “threaten free speech.”\(^3\) Amy Werbal writes that “those who believe that campus culture today can be improved through the suppression of speech” should heed the “cautionary tale” of “Comstockery” from the early 20\(^{th}\) century, in which attempts at censorship strengthened the opposition.\(^3\) The fear present in Werbal and Hoover’s arguments against trigger warnings on the grounds of freedom of speech is that censoring speech that is uncomfortable to interact with will only cause such speech to proliferate, achieving the opposite intended affect by “erod[ing] the credibility of the censor and strengthen[ing] the opposition.”\(^3\) Although the authors of these articles are not writing


\(^3\) Eric Hoover, “The Comfortable Kid.”


\(^3\) Amy Werbal, “For Our Free Speech, We Have Censors to Thank.”
specifically about trigger warnings, they directly mention trigger warnings when linking them to the larger series of trends that accomplish this threat to freedom of speech. Thus, trigger warnings are viewed as a component of a series of requests that threaten to violate freedom of speech on college campuses.

Similar to the freedom of speech argument, professors also oppose trigger warnings from the standpoint of intellectual freedom, writing that trigger warnings threaten to revoke a professor’s right to decide what is valuable educational material, or to remove that valuable education material from the college classroom altogether. Writer Todd Gitlin discusses at length the issues with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, lamenting that “advocates of trigger warnings counted ‘roughly 90 instances of assault’ in the piece. Although not addressed, the implication in this article is that trigger warnings may prevent professors from teaching great works of literature. These works of literature have intrinsic value that triumphs over “the demand for comfort” and a need for “the truth [to be] prettily wrapped.” Allowing students to avoid such material is considered a loss of intrinsically valuable content in the classroom, and denial of such valuable content’s intrinsic right to be in a curriculum.

Trigger warnings also threaten academic freedom itself. Although this academic freedom originated as the freedom for professors to research without (religious) consequences in the name of academics, professors view their ability to teach material they choose in the classroom as an extension of this freedom. In “The Gravest Threat to Colleges Comes From Within,” Bass and Clark write that “many of the things we take for granted were once controversial”, such as the

35 Todd Gitlin, “You Are Here to be Disturbed.”
36 Todd Gitlin, “You Are Here to be Disturbed.”
climate of fear professors faced in the 1950s. These authors assert that despite challenges, “a key tenet of college has been the freedom to pursue novel questions” and that “academic freedom,” or the ability to “pursue inquiry without risk of persecution” is a 900 year tradition that “is something to cherish and protect.” The defense given here is that the ability for students to avoid material is a form of censoring professors, who have held for 900 years the right to research and therefore teach material that students may find uncomfortable. Thus, trigger warnings as a form of censorship violates the principal of academic freedom.

Adversity, freedom of speech, and intellectual freedom are valued components of a university education. The fact that there are numerous reasons why trigger warnings present a threat to university values and principles perhaps illuminates why trigger warnings are so hotly debated; they appear to offend university values in not just multiple ways, but in multi-faceted ways as well. Understanding the depth to which even just one value is threatened by trigger warnings is perhaps important to keep in mind when approaching the issue.

**Tumblr**

Unlike in Academia, where the content of a classroom is considered valuable and classroom censorship threatens deeply held values, content on Tumblr is recreational. Because Tumblr content is recreational, the potential for avoidance threatens no values of free speech, intellectual freedom, and the value of the university. Essentially, trigger warnings on Tumblr do not pose controversy as significantly as they do in higher education because the website’s content does not hold as much social value as content in the classroom. The recreational nature

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[37] Scott A. Bass and Mary L. Clark, “The Gravest Threat to Colleges Comes From Within.”

[38] Scott A. Bass and Mary L. Clark, “The Gravest Threat to Colleges Comes From Within.”
of Tumblr content can be identified by identifying the intended audience for blog posts and by the lack of concern Tumblr bloggers display about avoidance of content.

Examples of Tumblr posts that use trigger warnings are “meanspo” blogs, which quote “mean” statements to inspire (“spo”) people to change some aspect of themselves. For instance, a blogger might write statements calling the reader fat or ugly to inspire the reader to lose weight. However, mean comments about a person’s weight can trigger an adverse reaction from some viewers; for example, a meanspo blog may trigger the relapse of an eating disorder. Therefore, the meanspo writer chooses to place a trigger warning on her post. If a user viewing that blog chooses not to read the post because of the trigger warning, there is no value lost; the content is only intended for individuals who find it useful.

Another example of recreational content on Tumblr are pornographic blogs, which often make use of trigger warnings. Trigger warnings on pornography caution against non-consensual rape and other sexually triggering scenarios. For example, one blogger working prefaces an erotic story describing a violent rape in graphic detail with the following message: [TRIGGER WARNING: If you’re the kind of person who needs trigger warnings, stop reading now. In fact, unfollow me and never look back. You’ll be happier.]

This is an extreme example of usage in pornography, because this blog is specifically written to be particularly egregious. Because the writer is not profiting from his work or presenting it as educational material, the work is entirely


recreational and does not hold the same social value as content in a university classroom would have.

To include a situation that is perhaps less extreme and more common, another instance of trigger warnings on sexual content warns against imaginative material that is not written pornographically but nevertheless deals with sexual misconduct. For example, a creative writer establishing the backstory of her original character warns her readers that a character she introduces has a backstory that includes rape.41 By taking the TW precaution, the writer is able to write about distressing topics intended for audiences who are willing to consume it without upsetting the accidental “passerby.” This version of a trigger warning particularly close to the initial form of a trigger warning, which originated to protect survivors of rape and sexual assault who may have PTSD or feel uncomfortable reliving their past experiences through the form of a blogged story, image, or video. Because reading unpublished fiction or viewing pornography are rarely related to deep societal values, the content is clearly recreational.

Recreational content on Tumblr is not limited to user-created material, but also expands to include popular entertainment. A number of blogs writers devote themselves to protecting audiences from triggering material in popular culture and media consumption. For example, one blog provides “a resource for people to search out a TV show or a movie (or a game, a song, whatever really) in case it contains a potential trigger. This could include: eating disorders, suicide, mental illness in general, death (including specific deaths like death of a pet, parent, etc),

sexual assault, homophobia, pretty much anything you can imagine.”42 Such a blog creates a warning guide for popular entertainment that may cause a viewer to feel uncomfortable or have an adverse psychological reaction due to a pre-existing condition. A similar blog specifically provides a place for fans of the popular television show *Supernatural* to create imaginative scenarios in which *Supernatural* characters interact with issues such as depression and other psychological disorders.43 These posts contain trigger warnings to allow readers to navigate through archives to find posts that are helpful and avoid posts that are unhelpful or triggering. The association of these blogs with popular culture, which is a medium of entertainment and recreation, further displays the recreational value of content on Tumblr that is being tagged with trigger warnings.

Blog writers who deal with and write heavily about psychological distress and illness also use trigger warnings, creating content that is not entertainment but still recreational. These writers use Tumblr as a place to document their personal struggles. Many posts include distressing images such as graphic self-harm, quotes glorifying or struggling with suicide and suicidal ideation, quotes glorifying or struggling with depression and mental illness, and creative writing espousing the deep struggles, distress, and despair of individuals dealing with difficulty.44 Tumblr users will tag these posts with trigger warnings so as not to affect individuals

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44 “It takes self control to not kill yourself when,” redacted (blog), entry posted December 5, 2016, (accessed December 5, 2016). [See Appendix VII].

“I’ve stopped wondering when it will end,” redacted (blog), entry posted November 8, 2016, (accessed November 16, 2016). [See Appendix VIII].
who may seek to avoid such content or are at risk of relapse into a condition given appropriate triggers. This sort of personal content is not intended to educate others, be read for entertainment, or even be widely consumed by an audience outside of Tumblr.

Tumblr users acknowledge and show disregard for the fact that trigger warnings may allow users to avoid content, and at times even encourage this avoidance. For example, the erotic fiction writer previously mentioned actively acknowledges that his blog is sexually violent and warns readers “If you don't like it, don't read it.” This statement shows that the author feels no value is lost if readers who are uncomfortable with sexual violence choose not to read his blog. The creative writer including non-consensual rape in her character’s history also includes a message that reads “TRIGGER WARNING! THIS POST CONTAINS… Nonconsensual Rape, Abuse,” including all capital letters in order to grab attention and ensure readers take note of the warning. This grab for attention supports the idea that writers are not afraid of their readers discovering that content is triggering and avoiding it as a result; rather, writers prefer that readers notice the trigger warning and are able to decide whether or not to continue. A third blogger apologizes that her previous post caused some individuals to become upset and requests that “if you get freaked out by gore, horror, frightening imagery, or just get spooked easily, do not open links I’ve tagged as gore, horror, or creepypasta.” This quote illustrates that bloggers expect readers to avoid content tagged by trigger warnings, and associate no loss of value with it. The same blogger later writes that followers should “PLEASE consider unfollowing if [her] talking

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45 “Trigger warning: If you’re the kind of person who,” Bed time Stories for Broken Girls (blog).

about aspergers [sic] affecting behavior and decision making triggers [them].”

She acknowledges that she knew her previous content would cause her to “lose a few followers,” but is glad that “it makes their dashboards safer for them.” These statements show that the blogger is unconcerned with any lost value when losing followers due to their feelings of discomfort or disturbance.

Whether Tumblr bloggers are creating their own entertainment, interacting with popular entertainment, or simply creating a private creative space, the website is clearly filled with recreational content. Because of this recreational nature of the platform, Tumblr users show disregard for any potential avoidance of content and, in some cases, actively encourage avoidance. Understanding why this avoidance is poses no problems on Tumblr is essential to understanding why it does pose problems in higher education.

From the set of data presented in this chapter, it is clear that Tumblr bloggers create and interact with recreational content, and that avoidance of such content does not produce significantly negative consequences. It is also clear that writers in higher education are concerned that avoiding material in the classroom will lead to loss of values in the higher education, from adversity and intellectual freedoms to the value of the content itself. The implicit circumstance in both arguments is that trigger warnings can be a means of avoidance. Multiple Chronicle authors assert this assumption; for example, Todd Gitlin compares trigger warnings to the cinematic rating system of G, PG, PG-13, etc. Because the cinematic system is used to

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48 Lucy, “Yeah I figured id lose a few followers for that.”

49 Todd Gitlin, “You Are Here to be Disturbed.”
decide whether certain populations should avoid attending a movie screening, this comparison shows that writers arguing against trigger warnings view it as a tool of avoidance. Writer Rob Goodman continues to assume that trigger warnings are a means of avoidance when he explains the importance of traumatic events in great works of literature, seeming to imply that the institution of trigger warnings in classes containing these works of literature would remove the traumatic events and their value from that classroom.\(^{50}\) Bass and Clark corroborate this interpretation when they write that controversial work such as “provocative art, revealing films, graphic literary portrayals, and controversial speech” have “enlightened the world”, implying that they are a valuable commodity that would be lost with the institution of trigger warnings.\(^{51}\) Each of these authors mention trigger warnings as a means of purposefully avoiding certain types of content in the classroom.

Because trigger warnings originated on the internet, it can be said that this avoidance style of interpretation began on the internet and consequently made its way into higher education. However, trigger warnings are not necessarily a means of avoidance, and can instead function as a warning of content ahead. Such a warning might better enable a student to prepare his or herself to interact with difficult content by, for example, preparing an extra therapy session or setting aside time to work through adverse reactions after class. This solution highlights the true issue beneath the principles debate, which is that the difference in content value between Tumblr and higher education causes the practice to threaten higher education values, and that this difference must be addressed by modifying the practice. Thus, before importing trigger warnings from the internet into higher education, educators may need to examine the difference

\(^{50}\) Rob Goodman. “Ovid Had No Trigger Warning.”

\(^{51}\) Scott A. Bass and Mary L. Clark, “The Gravest Threat to Colleges Comes From Within.”
between the two spaces and begin a conversation about how to modify the practice so that it can be used in higher education without threatening values and principles, rather than arguing about the morality of implementing trigger warnings as they are on the internet into higher education.
CHAPTER II: Consequences and Lack Thereof

To be sure, the principles argument is one of the most popular opposing stances to trigger warnings. At the very least, it is the argument that appears on publications outside of higher education journals, popular across standard news publications and media.\(^{52}\) However, morality is not the only domain under which trigger warnings can cause issues when implemented in the higher education sphere. A closer look at higher education articles specifically reveals that trigger warnings pose concrete threats to academics and educators in the form of negative consequences and punishment. Such consequences can take the shape of law, career risk, and financial threat. On Tumblr, aside from the minor consequence of lost popularity, users face no significant risk or punishment. Therefore, another reason there is difficulty translating trigger warnings from Tumblr into the higher education space is because there are few or no major consequences for blog writers if they fail to use the warnings on Tumblr, whereas in a university, creating regulations and rules for trigger warnings creates potential for punishment of professors and administration if they fail to use warnings or use them properly.

Higher Education

University educators fall under the purview of Title IX, the law that protects students from gender-based inequality and protects female students from sexual assault. Given their foundation in sexual assault, trigger warnings are seen as related to Title IX, and become a legal threat to professor’s careers. Being a student-driven request, trigger warnings also pose risk to

professor’s careers and higher education institution’s financial income. These three topics present various scenarios in which the implementation of trigger warnings may draw unwanted consequences into academics. Therefore, if instituted, failure to properly use trigger warnings in the classroom could hold severe consequences for professors and universities and therefore leads to opposition of trigger warnings.

Perhaps most significantly concerning for educators is the possibility that a failure to comply with trigger warnings might trigger a legal Title IX offense. The strongest example of this perceived connection is the Title IX case of Laura Kipnis. Title IX is a law that protects and promotes gender equality in education, now one of the primary laws governing sexual assault investigations on college campuses. Laura Kipnis, a professor at Northwestern University, came under investigation in relation to Title IX when she submitted an article to The Chronicle of Higher Education asserting that students are incorrectly taught that they are fragile and at the mercy of professors, specifically in the context of dating and sexual relationships. Because the law has expanded to cover sexual assault, a student triggered a Title IX investigation in response to Kipnis’ published remarks on sexual fragility, asserting that Kipnis’ speech created an “uncomfortable and hostile campus” that discouraged victims of sexual assault from coming forward.53 Kipnis describes her Title IX investigation as a harrowing ordeal, during which she was allowed little to no transparency or appropriate representation in her “trial.”54

The Kipnis investigation highlights a number of problems in relation to Title IX and trigger warnings. First, the investigation implies that Title IX can be used to retaliate against

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54 Laura Kipnis, “My Title IX Inquisition.”
certain kinds of speech made by professors of a university, regardless of the platform that the professor uses to do so. In the future, this might extend to using or failing to use trigger warnings. Kipnis also writes that at the time of her writing the remarks being investigated, she had no reason to suspect she was in violation of any campus policies or would be facing the possibility of Title IX investigation and enforcement.\footnote{Laura Kipnis, “My Title IX Inquisition.”} This lack of predictability creates a second problem, which is inability to avoid triggering a Title IX case, were it to extend to trigger warnings, which might perpetuate severe consequences for what professors feel are innocent or small mistakes. Finally, Title IX creates an environment on campus where faculty members may not “feel safe to speak freely,” and thus feel threatened in their profession.\footnote{Peter Schmidt, “A Faculty’s Stand on Trigger Warnings Stirs Fears Among Students,” \textit{The Chronicle of Higher Education} (October 06, 2015), \url{http://www.chronicle.com/article/A-Faculty-s-Stand-on-Trigger/233656} (accessed November 9, 2016).} Although one might suggest that trigger warnings need not interact with Title IX, trigger warnings did originate in sexual trauma and Kipnis herself cites trigger warnings as part of a trend that led to her Title IX investigation.\footnote{Laura Kipnis, “My Title IX Inquisition.”} Therefore, Title IX does contribute to professors’ concerns. The Laura Kipnis case therefore demonstrates the severe consequences that can result from a Title IX investigation, and also demonstrates the apparent flaws in this law that threaten large consequences without strong opportunity for defense.

Aside from Title IX and other legal difficulties, trigger warnings pose risks for professors’ careers through evaluation. If implemented, trigger warnings might give rise to protests against professors who misuse or refuse to use the practice in their classroom. One professor notes that he is forced to eliminate lectures from his sociology class that he believes are

\footnotetext[55]{Laura Kipnis, “My Title IX Inquisition.”}

\footnotetext[56]{Peter Schmidt, “A Faculty’s Stand on Trigger Warnings Stirs Fears Among Students,” \textit{The Chronicle of Higher Education} (October 06, 2015), \url{http://www.chronicle.com/article/A-Faculty-s-Stand-on-Trigger/233656} (accessed November 9, 2016).}

\footnotetext[57]{Laura Kipnis, “My Title IX Inquisition.”}
essential to the course, such as abortion and child sexual abuse. If he fails to drop the lectures, the professor notes that he would “get seen as insensitive” by his students.\(^\text{58}\) A spokeswoman at Berkely notes that “academic freedom is a value principle at UC Berkely, and it is compatible with providing a constructive and respectful classroom environment in which sensitive topics can be explored and debated.”\(^\text{59}\) The spokeswoman goes on to note, in relation to this statement, that professors are subject to a peer review process by a senate of faculty.\(^\text{60}\) This association of faculty review in association to trigger warnings and sensitive topics reveals the possibility of consequences for professors who are unable to adequately walk the line between acceptable and unacceptable handling of difficult material and trigger warnings. In this way, trigger warnings hold potentially negative consequences for professors’ teaching careers. Although this criterion is perhaps already part of many schools’ review process, the ambiguously defined nature of trigger warnings (discussed shortly in chapter 3) may make it particularly difficult for professors to meet requirements on this topic. Further, professors who disagree with trigger warnings on the basis of academic or other principles may be forced to choose between student/institution requirements and professional values.

Aside from threats to professor’s careers, trigger warnings in the higher education sphere also present financial threat to universities. One author cites the AAUP Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure Chairman’s thought that when colleges “[acquiesce] to student demands to limit free speech,” they are looking “at students as customers . . . [who] is always right and needs

\(^{58}\) Robin Wilson, “Students’ Requests for Trigger Warnings Grow More Varied.”

\(^{59}\) Robin Wilson, “Students’ Requests for Trigger Warnings Grow More Varied.”

\(^{60}\) Robin Wilson, “Students’ Requests for Trigger Warnings Grow More Varied.”
to be satisfied.”\textsuperscript{61} This quote points to consequences in store for Universities that are forced to navigate the trigger warning issue; if trigger warnings are not implemented or implemented “incorrectly,” universities could face the loss of revenue and, therefore, ability to continue educating students. As a result, universities are forced to choose between catering to students in order to gain revenue, or holding onto their traditional values as an institution of higher education (as discussed in chapter one). Although not discussed in my primary sources, one might imagine that institutions might also face lawsuits for failure to comply with trigger warnings, if such a failure led to severe complications for a student.

Important to note here is that some of the consequences in this section are not a result of implementing trigger warnings, but a result of a possibility for uneven or incorrect implementation of trigger warnings between higher education institutions. For example, legal consequences for professors may remain ambiguous and hard to predict because Title IX cases are largely based on students’ emotional reaction to an issue, which is difficult to concretely codify. Universities only experience financial risk if some universities adopt trigger warnings but others reject them, giving student consumers the choice to avoid universities that fail to use them. The argument here, then, is that trigger warnings have no place in higher education as an entire field or entity, rather than that trigger warnings have no place in a particular university. Significantly, trigger warnings are implemented highly unevenly on Tumblr but pose no similar problems; this difference will be explored in depth in chapter three.

In comparison to legal difficulties and professional impact, using Tumblr subjects an individual to relatively few or no significant consequences. Aside from cases of illegal activity, the highest consequence Tumblr can distribute to a user is dismantling their blog and banning their IP address from using the website. Although it is possible to face consequences on Tumblr, there appears to be little or no correlation between the website’s rules and the use of trigger warnings. Unlike the higher education sphere, negative consequences on Tumblr as a result of failing to use trigger warnings appear to be less common and therefore do not cause opposition on grounds of punishment.

Perhaps most parallel to interference of the law in higher education would be Tumblr’s terms and conditions contract, which governs who can use Tumblr and what its members can create/post/write about while using the website. The entirety of the terms and conditions contract does not address or mention trigger warnings. Therefore, Tumblr’s terms and conditions (with accompanying community guidelines) do not stipulate that users must use trigger warnings, nor do they outline any consequences for failing to use them. This lack of mention in the legal document governing Tumblr establishes that users of Tumblr are not required to use trigger warnings, and face no administration-driven punishment for failing to do so.

The closest thing mentioned to any sort of warning or tagging system on the site is the section on “Unflagged NSFW [Not Safe for Work] Blogs.” These are blogs containing “sexual or adult-oriented content” that should be tagged in order to create an ideal environment for

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63 “Community Guidelines,” Tumblr.
“millions of readers and creators from a variety of locations, cultures, and backgrounds who hold different points of view concerning adult-oriented content.” Although from this definition it might seem as though any content inappropriate for the workplace (which may include triggering topics like rape or gore) should be tagged, NSFW is a term generally associated on the internet with pictures of an explicit nature, such as pornography. The solution to the NSFW issue presented in the terms and conditions is not to implement trigger warnings, but rather to require that users self-flag one’s blog as NSFW on the user account’s settings page. This is a website-mechanics based feature that differs from trigger warnings because no warning must be written on a particular blog post or blog; rather, the website will simply refrain from showing the blog to anyone who has opted out of viewing NSFW content through their own settings page.

It may seem as though some sections of the terms and conditions ban a large amount of content that would otherwise be covered under trigger warnings, and therefore constitutes “lawful” or administration-driven consequences for users who fail to comply. For example, under the “Gore, Mutilation, Bestiality, or Necrophilia” section of terms and conditions, Tumblr administrators write that users should not “post gore just to be shocking,” nor should anyone “showcase the mutilation or torture of human beings, animals, or their remains.” However, the key language in this section is that one should not post gore “just to be shocking,” or content that is generally considered inappropriate to any audience for the sake of selfish entertainment (bestiality, mutilation, etc). In contrast, trigger warnings are not necessarily implemented to

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64 “Community Guidelines,” Tumblr.
66 “Community Guidelines,” Tumblr.
warn against content that any given individual may find disturbing, but rather to warn against any content that may trigger someone with a mental health condition specifically. The latter criteria covers a broader set of material than the former would. Another key feature of this section is that the implication of “just to be shocking” means that users may be able to post things such as gore or torture as part of a creative endeavor or conversation around a popular media piece, so long as the intention is not solely to disturb viewers. Therefore, this sort of content is not entirely banned by the Tumblr terms and conditions, and user-driven trigger warnings are still needed on the website to navigate around its presence.

In another example of content that is seemingly blocked but actually still allowed, under the “Promotion or Glorification of Self-Harm” section, Tumblr requests that users not “post content that actively promotes or glorifies self-harm” and “urges or encourages others to: cut or injure themselves; embrace anorexia, bulimia, or other eating disorders; or commit suicide rather than” seeking counseling or appropriate help.68 However, a quick cursory glance through searches related to self-harm or eating disorders display quite a number blogs with exactly such graphic images. The key here is that the language Tumblr uses in regards to these disorders is the prevention of glorification of the disorder. The terms and conditions go on to establish that “Dialogue about these behaviors is incredibly important and online communities can be extraordinarily helpful to people struggling with these difficult conditions. We aim for Tumblr to be a place that facilitates awareness, support and recovery, and we will remove only those posts or

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blogs that cross the line into active promotion or glorification of self-harm.”

Essentially, Tumblr’s policy on graphic images relating to self-harming disorders is that so long as the content does not encourage or glorify the disorder, Tumblr allows or encourages the use of its platform to facilitate helpful connections or dialogues. This means that the terms and conditions in no way ban the use of content that may, for example, trigger a user to return to harming themselves. Therefore, although some sections of Tumblr’s user agreement may appear to ban content that is otherwise labelled with a trigger warning, it does not in the end ban or require any sort of warning for potentially disruptive material.

To complement the lack of trigger warnings in the terms and conditions, there are numerous examples of Tumblr bloggers who choose not to use trigger warnings and seem to encounter no consequences. For example, one user writes on her “meanspo” blog that the reader is “sitting on [their] lazy ass instead of working out” and that the “lard covering the entirety of [the reader’s] body won’t go away by itself.” The user tagged the post containing these words with things such as “ana” (anorexia) and “pro ana,” but failed anywhere to tag it with “TW,” “Trigger Warning,” or to write any trigger warning at the top of or within the post. Because this blog discusses (and to some extent encourages) a psychological disorder, it is an example of a blog that would need to have a trigger warning if trigger warnings were required on Tumblr.

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69 “Community Guidelines,” Tumblr.
71 “Meanspo,” Teeny, Tiny, Thinning Ana (blog).
72 This blogger writes at the top of her blog that she doesn’t promote eating disorders, in order to abide by Tumblr terms and conditions while posting questionable content. This is an excellent example of Tumblr’s terms and conditions having no bearing on whether individuals warn other users against triggering material. “Meanspo,” Teeny, Tiny, Thinning Ana (blog).
Another example is a blogger who writes “there is no pretty way to tell you that I want to die.”\textsuperscript{73} Although the author of this blog writes about suicidal ideation, a topic which is generally considered to require trigger warnings, the author is nevertheless free to choose not to label his content with any warnings. These two blog examples that deal with mental disorders and ideations but fail to implement trigger warnings are proof that trigger warnings are ultimately optional on Tumblr.

Not only can users refrain from using trigger warnings without consequences, but some users even go so far as to advocate against the use of trigger warnings, or make fun of other users who do request or choose to use trigger warnings. One user titles a post “You’re not a Special Snowflake . . . and “Trigger Warnings” are Stupid.”\textsuperscript{74} This user touches on the popular notion that trigger warnings are a form of avoidance for individuals who pretend they are especially bothered by certain topics in order to feel “special,” “unique,” or be treated in a special manner. Because trigger warnings are entirely voluntarily used on Tumblr, there are no consequences for a blogger who mocks the practice. However, if trigger warnings were to became commonplace and expected in the university, there may be less room for such sentiment due to the possibility for consequences such as Title IX or career impact.

Further building on anti-trigger warning sentiment are the “triggered” memes that proliferate across the internet, including on Tumblr. These memes are used to make fun of individuals who attempt to feel like the “special snowflake” described above. For example, one


user captions an image of a shocked SpongeBob by writing “when you’re in biology class and realize there are only two genders.” This anti-gender-queer post belittles gender queer individuals who experience societal rejection of their identity and may deal with mental health issues as a result. This meme makes a joke out of the “triggering” effect that such individuals may experience. Not only does this post not appear to carry consequences, it actually has 74,000 notes that show significant popularity. Other users joke about trigger warnings in a less aggressive fashion, using it as a slang term to, for example, express strong emotions about a surprising or coincidental event on an entertainment series. Altogether, the scathing intended humor in these posts ultimately proves that users can not only reject trigger warnings, but actively flaunt their rejection and belittle users who use them or face adverse reactions from posts not containing warnings. Although professors can oppose trigger warnings, belittling and mocking students with disabilities would like result in serious consequences. Although this likely poses no significant problem for professors, it highlights the large differences between Tumblr and higher education about consequences when discussing trigger warnings.

While its true that the website takes no action for or against trigger warnings, one might argue that one consequence users face on Tumblr for failure to use trigger warnings is a loss of followers or decline in popularity. The “triggered” meme that carries 74,000 notes is one way to disprove this theory; although a user may experience a loss of followers who only follow blogs that employ trigger warnings, there are many users who do not use trigger warnings and can


follow the blog. A second contradiction to this theory is that some users who choose not to use trigger warnings simply do not care about any loss of followers. The writer of the “bedtime stories for broken girls” blog writes that “if you’re the kind of person who needs trigger warnings,” then “unfollow [the blog] and never look back,” displaying a flagrant disregard for loss of followers. In a less extreme example, another blog user apologizes for messing up a trigger warning on one of her posts but asks readers to “PLEASE consider unfollowing [her] if [her] talking about aspergers [sic] affecting behavior and decision making triggers you” because the writer “will do [her] best to tag it but [she] might slip up.” Here, the blog writer freely chooses to lose followers rather than deal with backlash over trigger warning mistakes, proving that loss of popularity is not a significant consequence in regards to trigger warnings.

Trigger warnings are not stipulated as a required practice in the Tumblr terms and conditions, many users choose not to use trigger warnings, and other users choose to actively fight against or make fun out of trigger warnings. These three trends together show that trigger warnings on Tumblr are entirely optional, and hold no consequences. To take the practice as it is on Tumblr and insert it into higher education consequently poses a significant problem: if there are no consequences on Tumblr but high consequences in higher education, how could the practice jump from one space to another without any serious modifications? The structural difference between the two realms creates a practice that causes no harm in one area but creates fear in another. Therefore, it is important to address the difference between the internet and higher education when discussing how trigger warnings may be implemented in higher education. For example, perhaps trigger warnings may need to be designated as a courtesy rather

77 “Trigger warning: If you’re the kind of person who,” Bed time Stories for Broken Girls (blog).

78 Lucy, “Yeah I figured id lose a few followers for that.”
than a right in order for professors to be able to use them without concern or fear. Although this solution may pose other problems, it is an example of how one might examine one the “consequences” structural differences between the internet and higher education and seek to resolve some of professors’ concerns regarding trigger warnings.
CHAPTER III: Conflicting Authorities and Lack Thereof

Complementary to issues with consequences are issues with authority regarding trigger warnings. A university holds many levels of authority: the law, administrators, professors, and even students are able to claim some amount of power over various aspects of higher education. Confusingly, each of these groups lay a possible claim to authority over trigger warnings. As a result, it is unclear who, in the university setting, should be responsible for dictating whether, when, and how to use trigger warnings, resulting in a tug-of-war between all four. This tug of war is notably absent on Tumblr, whose only authority aside from individual users is the silent website administration. Therefore, another reason there is difficulty is because the usage, definition, and practice of trigger warnings on Tumblr is the result of a cultural norm created in the absence of any central authorities running Tumblr, whereas in the university bureaucratic structure, an authority is needed to decide on official policy in regards to what trigger warnings are and how to use them.

Higher Education

Failure to clearly fall under the jurisdiction of one or two levels of authority in higher education is a structural issue with the trigger warning practice. Having come from a space that has no levels of bureaucracy, trigger warnings lack any context that could help sort it into the appropriate level of authority in a university. This lack of context contributes to opposition of trigger warnings due to resultant confusion and, in some cases, outright problems. Because it is unclear whether the authority on trigger warnings in higher education should be the federal government, administration, faculty, or students, the structure of the practice (or lack thereof) poses difficulty in higher education.
The Title IX implications of trigger warnings discussed in chapter two make it clear that the federal government is one potential source of authority on trigger warnings. Laura Kipnis’ investigation highlights that United States laws, primarily through Title IX, may be responsible or in the future responsible for dictating whether trigger warnings should be employed in the classroom. As previously noted, although the law does not yet specifically cover trigger warnings, it is associated with trends including trigger warnings and may expand to cover them in the future. Writer Katherine Mangan further mentions federal involvement when she notes that Kipnis’ case “points to the need for better guidance from the U.S. Department of Education on how colleges and universities should handle controversial statements by professors in news and social media.” A request for US Department of Education guidance on statements that are controversial to students can easily be interpreted to include trigger warnings, which are designed to prevent hostile classroom environments caused by controversial material. Further complicating matters of federal involvement on subjects such as trigger warnings is the fact that “it’s very obvious that the First Amendment is butting heads with Title IX enforcement,” an issue previously exposed as common to trigger warnings as well. All of these written statements imply a connection between trigger warnings and federal jurisdiction.

Another potential source of authority on trigger warnings is a university’s administration. Laura Kipnis writes that the “Title IX bureaucracy [within a university’s administration] is


80 Although controversial can often mean politically sensitive, I use it here to include content such as rape or other difficult material whose inclusion in class curriculums can be seen as controversial. Laura Kipnis’ statements were politically controversial, but ultimately caused a Title IX investigation due to its “chilling effect” on her university’s campus. Laura Kipnis, “My Title IX Inquisition.”

81 Katherine Mangan, “Kipnis Case Highlights Perilous Clash of Title IX and Academic Freedom.”
expanding by the minute,” in response to an email from her university announcing that they had
adopted new “policies, programs, hires, surveys, procedures, websites, and educational initiatives
devoted to sexual misconduct.” Kipnis also notes that in response to requests for clarity on
Title IX-related issues, her university’s president “announced that he’d consider the petition,”
pointing towards his authority as an administrator of the university to decide whether and how to
cover topics concerning emotional well-being on campus. A university’s administration might
similarly choose whether to enforce or discourage the use of trigger warnings. For example,
American University’s Faculty Senate “[adopted] a resolution that treated students’ request for
trigger warnings not as an instructional matter to be handled by faculty members but as a mental-
health issue best handled by student-support services.” This “approach got instructors off the
hook for judging students’ requests to be shielded from content,” meaning the administration had
chosen to adopt the burden of making decisions in regards to trigger warnings. The
administration-driven responses to trigger warnings outlined above prove that trigger warnings
can fall under the authority of university administration, which can cause conflict with the claims
of authority from other sources of authority on campus.

One such conflicting source of authority are professors, some of whom prefer to retain
power over whether and how to implement trigger warnings. Katherine Mangan quotes
University of Arizona professor Mary P. Koss as saying “trigger warnings are difficult in an
intellectual environment because emotional learning is an important part of learning.”

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82 Laura Kipnis, “My Title IX Inquisition.”
83 Laura Kipnis, “My Title IX Inquisition.”
84 Peter Schmidt, “Speaker Beware: Student demands make campus speech a minefield.”
85 Peter Schmidt, “Speaker Beware: Student demands make campus speech a minefield.”
86 Katherine Mangan, “Kipnis Case Highlights Perilous Clash of Title IX and Academic Freedom.”
than warning students about upsetting material, Koss has them sign a consent form agreeing to experience “explicit imagery and materials that provoke emotions” and encourages students that find it offensive to talk about it with her. In this situation, Koss retains the ability to choose how and when to warn her students, offering them the chance to speak with her directly about their feelings on whether her classes or material should deserve trigger warnings. Koss appreciates when a student comes to her with a problem about class and sensitive materials, noting that she can “benefit from what students are thinking” and actively change her own behavior, which she doesn’t see as “self-censorship.” The author notes that this approach “puts decisions in the hands of faculty members,” rather than administrative officials or the law.

Another professor supports the decision to place the authority on trigger warnings in the hands of the professor by stating that “never, ever would [she] advise telling students to avoid thorny material,” but explaining that “as the teacher, [she is] always there with students: supporting them, alert to their bodies, aware of any discomfort or resistance, regularly checking in to see if they are OK with what they are doing,” and “[encouraging] them to take responsibility for themselves and to set parameters, stopping if they feel in any way unsafe or ill at ease.” In this situation, the professor retains the authority to decide not to implement trigger warnings, but also to ensure in her own preferred way that students are comfortable and allowed to take care of

87 Katherine Mangan, “Kipnis Case Highlights Perilous Clash of Title IX and Academic Freedom.”
88 Katherine Mangan, “Kipnis Case Highlights Perilous Clash of Title IX and Academic Freedom.”
89 Katherine Mangan, “Kipnis Case Highlights Perilous Clash of Title IX and Academic Freedom.”
themselves if needed. These two cases show that professors are a potential source of authority on trigger warnings, and may conflict with administrative control over the subject.

The last possible source of authority in the university are the students, who may oppose decisions by both professors and administration. In the case of Laura Kipnis, students held a large amount of authority over the case proceedings. Laura writes that despite having been asked herself to keep the case confidential, the student bringing the case before her retained the authority to “[publish] an article on a well-trafficked site excoriating [Kipnis]. . . [and] announcing that two students had filed Title IX complaints against [her].” ⁹¹ The student also “excoriated [their] university’s president for his op-ed essay on academic freedom,” and “didn’t seem particularly concerned that [the student] herself was subverting the process by charging that the process had been subverted.” ⁹² In this investigation, the student held the authority to decide what to share and how to share it, whereas the professor herself held no ability to do so. Writer Robin Wilson records that during Duke University professor Owen L. Astrachan’s computer science class, Astrachan “mentioned that the subject of a movie he’d asked students to watch had committed suicide.” ⁹³ As a result, “after class a student came up and told [Astrachan] that he needed to use a trigger warning if he was going to mention suicide.” ⁹⁴ The ability for a student to tell a professor that he “needed” to use a trigger warning proves that students request and retain the authority to decide whether trigger warnings should be used, and can conflict with professors when doing so. The title of the article recounting this anecdote is “Students requests

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⁹¹ Laura Kipnis, “My Title IX Inquisition.”

⁹² Laura Kipnis, “My Title IX Inquisition.”

⁹³ Robin Wilson, “Students’ Requests for Trigger Warnings Grow More Varied.”

⁹⁴ Robin Wilson, “Students’ Requests for Trigger Warnings Grow More Varied.”
for trigger warnings grow more varied,” which in itself points to the idea that students are responsible for requesting and directing whether, when, and how to implement trigger warnings.95

Federal law poses significant consequences. Administrations seek to better their universities to attract more students. Professors hope to educate students to the best of their ability. Finally, students seek to create the best possible environment to learn in. As each of these groups take a stand on trigger warnings, they come into conflict with each other. It is therefore unsurprising that the inability identify a single level of authority to govern trigger warnings has caused controversy in higher education.

**Tumblr**

There are no significant governing bodies associated with Tumblr, aside from the relatively hands-off website administration (and standard United States law). In the absence of a governing body, users of Tumblr appear to be the only authority on deciding whether, how, and when to use trigger warnings on Tumblr. Further, this process seems to be culturally normative in that no single user has more authority than another; rather, agreeable decisions on the topic are chosen by a collective community when many users pass around certain posts on the topic and label it as acceptable. The process of establishing trigger warnings is further normatively enacted by the users of Tumblr when bloggers write trigger warnings in the same fashion as one another, popularly cementing the practice as enacted in certain ways. Because users do not hold power over one another, there appear to be no significant issues of authority in regards to trigger warnings. Therefore, on Tumblr, trigger warnings are decided and implemented in normative fashion and do not cause any related confusion or conflicts of authority.

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95 Robin Wilson, “Students’ Requests for Trigger Warnings Grow More Varied.”
The structure of Tumblr is such that the only governing management that could dictate the use of trigger warnings is federal or state law, Tumblr management, or the users themselves. Federal law does not appear to govern the use of trigger warnings in an online space; at the very least, I have been unable to locate any sources that would imply any sort of regulations on the subject. Although one might suggest that freedom of speech is associated with trigger warnings, there do not appear to be any cases against Tumblr or its users for this, particularly as trigger warnings are a voluntary practice. Even if trigger warnings were not voluntary, it seems unlikely that the federal government would intervene on a private website. Tumblr management also does not dictate whether Tumblr users should include trigger warnings on their posts. As mentioned previously, the terms and conditions, including the community guidelines section, do not once mention trigger warnings or imply that they must be used. Although some parts of the guidelines may suggest consequences for failure to censor certain materials, chapter two resolves that this censorship is not the same as employment of trigger warnings.

In the absence of governing law or regulation, Tumblr users normatively implement, expand, and define trigger warnings. The first way that users make decisions on trigger warnings is by concretely defining what they are, how they are used, and why they should be used. One blog, titled “A Tumblr for Trigger Warnings,” defines trigger warnings as a way to “warn people for content that may trigger them.” The blog goes on to assert that “triggering, in this context, means to trigger a panic/anxiety attack, or to cause extreme distress.” The blog also establishes

96 “Terms and Conditions,” Tumblr.


that “trigger warnings are important because they help people avoid material that triggers them, or at the very least helps them to be prepared for it.”

By setting out this definition, the user is defining trigger warnings or passing on a definition that he or she has gained over time through browsing other, similar posts on the topic. A second blogger links their own definition of a trigger warning to an external feminist website that defines the term, and briefly summarizes that trigger warnings are “those bracketed phrases (or sometimes pictures) that tell you when something you’re about to read/see/hear might be triggering.” The blogger establishes that their “blog exists to spread information about how (and where!) trigger warnings should be used,” meaning the intent of this blog is to contribute to the definition and usage and trigger warnings. These two posts are examples of disseminating and reaffirming existing definitions of trigger warnings.

Alternatively, users also contribute new ideas to the practice of using trigger warnings by attempting to shape the practice, expand it, or make it more useful. For example, the second author above also wrote a different post titled “an effective way to add trigger warnings on calls for help.” A call for help in this instance is a blog post through which a user admits that he or she is struggling with something, perhaps such as suicidal thoughts or self-harm, and is reaching out for help to their online community. Such a user might include “TW” in their post to avoid

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100 “An Introduction,” Fuck Yeah, Trigger Warning (blog),


102 “An effective way to add trigger warnings on calls for help,” Fuck Yeah, Trigger Warnings (blog),
triggering other people; however, the blogger suggests that this may cause the call for help to go unnoticed or be ignored by individuals who would otherwise be able to help.\textsuperscript{103} Instead, the blogger suggests that users should not put “TW in the title” of a call for help, but rather title it with “ATTENTION: PEOPLE IN [AREA]” or “call for help in [place]” as a title, then put a trigger warning on the first line of text.”\textsuperscript{104} This modification constitutes a suggested change in the practice of using trigger warnings.

Aside from using trigger warnings or suggesting modifications to the practice, users also collectively decide to use trigger warnings by affirming their value in the community. More specifically, users will sometimes reaffirm that other users can and should use trigger warnings to navigate their psychological difficulties. For example, one user establishes that

There is no such thing as a ridiculous or silly trigger. You are not ridiculous or silly for avoiding things that distress you. Your triggers are valid and you deserve to be able to protect yourself without being bullied and harassed. You deserve safety.\textsuperscript{105}

The article “you” in this quote addresses any reader that may benefit from trigger warnings but feels ashamed for using them due to backlash or discouragement from others. This statement contributes to the proliferation of trigger warnings by fighting backlash and encouraging its use; popular support normalizes the TW practice and allows users to continue using it without feeling ashamed. A second blogger echoes this sentiment when writing “it is considered common

\textsuperscript{103} “An effective way to add trigger warnings on calls for help,” Fuck Yeah, Trigger Warnings (blog).

\textsuperscript{104} “An effective way to add trigger warnings on calls for help,” Fuck Yeah, Trigger Warnings (blog).

\textsuperscript{105} “There is no such thing as a ridiculous or silly trigger,” Realistic Suggestions (blog), entry posted June 6, 2016, \url{http://realsuggestions.tumblr.com/post/145491916042/there-is-no-such-thing-as-a-ridiculous-or-silly} (accessed November 25, 2016). [See Appendix XVIII].
courtesy to put a simple “Trigger Warning: [Subject]” before a post.” By labelling it as a “common courtesy,” the user suggests that the usage of trigger warnings has become a normal facet of Tumblr culture and reaffirms that other users should contribute to the practice. By individually affirming the usage of trigger warnings, users collectively decide that trigger warnings are a valued practice in the community.

Beyond simply affirming that trigger warnings are a valid practice, tumblr users also fight for the right to use them without backlash by actively making fun of users who feel disturbed by the fact that some bloggers are using them. One blogger makes a joke out of such people by posting a video of crying babies, on which is written “if you are a HUGE baby who hates trigger warnings and the entire concept of being considerate of other people is offensive to you,” then the individual should “take your own advice and “grow thicker skin.” The latter half of this quote is a pointed statement about the irony of individuals feeling disturbed and uncomfortable with the notion that other individuals are requesting trigger warnings to avoid disturbance and discomfort. By making a joke out of the occasionally aggressive opposition to trigger warnings, this user contributes to the normalization of trigger warnings and to creating an environment in which other users feel comfortable using trigger warnings.

Users continue to contribute to the definition of a trigger warning by creating lists of possible triggers that other users should be mindful of. One blog dedicated to creating a meme for sufferers of mental illness to enjoy, dubbed “mental illness mouse,” dedicates a link on their

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sidebar to a page labelled “Frequently Used Tags.” On this page, the writers seeks to help “followers and mods . . . keep track of the tags we use,” which “will help mods be consistent and followers be able to find posts and block ones they find triggering.” Through this list, the creators of the blog contribute to defining exactly what words should be included in a trigger warning, and what topics deserve warnings. Some examples from this list in particular include: addiction, rape, BPD/Personality Disorders, Tourette’s, perfectionism, anger, and sleep. Altogether, the list totals 35 categories and is “continually being updated to reflect the most current tags we use,” a statement that reflects the contributory nature of users on Tumblr to defining trigger warnings. The blog further encourages viewers to “please let [the writers] know if anything is missing,” showing the collaborative nature in which other users may have a say in the practices of popular blogs, which themselves shape and contribute to how their viewers interact with a practice.

By defining, using, and reaffirming trigger warnings as part of culture, Tumblr’s users collaboratively and “normatively” define the practice in the absence of an ultimate authority’s decision. Because the website administration makes no rules about trigger warnings and one user does not hold any particular authority over another, there is no major clash of authority on the topic. This lack of conflict allows trigger warnings to organically proliferate across the website. However, this organic proliferation has not translated well into the university structure. Students


109 “Frequently Used Tags,” Mental Illness Mouse (blog).

110 “Frequently Used Tags,” Mental Illness Mouse (blog).

111 “Frequently Used Tags,” Mental Illness Mouse (blog).

112 “Frequently Used Tags,” Mental Illness Mouse (blog).
who attempt to request trigger warnings run into conflict with professors and administration, who conflict with each other and potentially with the law as well. Therefore, it is clear that the process of importing trigger warnings from the internet (where there is no authority structure) into the university (where there is an authority structure) is yet another a source of conflict in higher education. In order to implement trigger warnings without controversy, officials would likely need to identify this difference between the two spaces and attempt to modify that practice to overcome that difficulty.
CHAPTER IV: Results of Ambiguity

One of the most striking things present in the trigger warning debate is the strange “cross talk” that occurs. Some students and faculty advocate for trigger warnings on the basis that they would help students with diagnosed mental health conditions. However, opponents would argue at length about fragile students who used trigger warnings to avoid any uncomfortable topics. These are two very different definitions of a trigger warning, which few authors seemed to notice or acknowledge when engaging with the other side. This crosstalk is a result of widespread ambiguity about trigger warnings, what they are, and how to use them. Therefore, another reason trigger warnings are controversial in higher education is because the practice and definition of trigger warnings changes quickly and contains a large amount of ambiguity on Tumblr, whereas in the university there is much less room for ambiguity and constantly fluctuating definitions or practices.

Higher Education

Trigger warnings in higher education breed an impressive amount of “cross talk” by causing writers basing their arguments in very different ideas of what a trigger warning ultimately is. *Chronicle* contributors label trigger warnings as anything from a simple warning about material that may trigger PTSD to a method for lazy students to avoid doing work. Inability to converse about a single, concretely defined topic is destined to create controversy. Therefore, the ambiguity over what a trigger warning is, what its used for, what triggers are, and how to implement the warnings in a classroom poses confusion and difficulty for instructors in the higher education classroom.

One of the biggest ambiguities in the trigger warning practice in higher education is the debate over whether they are for all students who wish to use them, or only for students with
medical conditions. Writer Eric Hoover highlights this issue when he summarizes two distinctly different definitions of trigger warnings; the first is that the warnings are for “individuals with disabilities, such as PTSD or severe anxiety disorder, which can disrupt daily life.” This definition, which is close to the trigger warning’s original intent of protecting sexual assault survivors with PTSD from triggering episodes, asserts that trigger warnings are for students with medically diagnosed needs. The second view on the definition of trigger warnings is that they allow any students who are uncomfortable with material to choose not to interact with it, regardless of mental health status. Hoover summarizes this argument by quoting a student’s comment that other students “refuse to read texts that challenge their own personal comfort.”

Writer Robin Wilson recounts that Professor Philip N. Cohen, a professor at University of Maryland at College Park, was “in the middle of a lecture on abortion last year in his course on contemporary family issues when a student got up and left.” The student further “told him she wouldn’t be able to participate in class discussions concerning abortion.” This is an example of a student using or requesting trigger warnings in order to avoid discussing a topic about which they feel strongly, or a topic that they feel uncomfortable discussing due to their personal beliefs on the subject. While it is possible that this student had a mental health condition triggered by things associated with the topic of abortion, such a condition appears not to have been made part of the conversation with the professor. These two different definitions of trigger warnings, based within or outside of medical concerns, create the ambiguity that causes “crosstalk” and, therefore, increased conflict.

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113 Eric Hoover, “The Comfortable Kid.”
114 Robin Wilson, “Students’ Requests for Trigger Warnings Grow More Varied.”
115 Robin Wilson, “Students’ Requests for Trigger Warnings Grow More Varied.”
These two definitions are not the only source of ambiguity, however. Within the definition of trigger warnings as a medical accommodation, two conflicting schools of thought about what exactly trigger warnings allow students with mental health conditions to do about triggering topics create further ambiguity and conflict. The first school of thought is that trigger warnings are ultimately intended to simply be a warning that allows students adequate preparation to tackle an assignment; the second is that they offer the ability to avoid the assignment altogether and do something else instead. For example, Peter Schmidt writes that a professor at Southeast Community College, Elizabeth Iseman, allowed a “young man who didn’t stay for any of the video clips” of war scenes to instead “research written content on the same subject and [write] a paper” to complete his classwork assignment.116 Schmidt also cites a student who uses trigger warnings for two separate purposes, writing that she “nine times out of 10 . . . [is] not going to have to opt out” of a lecture or assignment, instead using trigger warnings to “steel herself against” potential harm and difficulty that she can handle if not taken by surprise.117 These two students use trigger warnings to engage with a topic in a way that will not cause extreme duress. However, the latter student also “sometimes asks to skip a classroom session she cannot emotionally handle.”118 By modifying her approach to trigger warnings to also include avoidance, this student displays the ambiguity of trigger warnings by using them for two separate purposes: to prepare for trouble in some cases, and to avoid trouble completely in others. Because trigger warnings can be used in multiple ways by students with preexisting

116 Peter Schmidt, “A Faculty’s Stand on Trigger Warnings Stirs Fears Among Students.”
117 Peter Schmidt, “A Faculty’s Stand on Trigger Warnings Stirs Fears Among Students.”
118 Peter Schmidt, “A Faculty’s Stand on Trigger Warnings Stirs Fears Among Students.”
The medical diagnosis-based definition further conflicts with the idea that trigger warnings may also be defined as a tool used to avoid anything a student finds uncomfortable, as opposed to avoiding triggering a medically diagnosed condition. Topics a student may find uncomfortable include engaging with ideas that challenge personal beliefs in ways that the student finds offensive. Schmidt writes that Mr. Engel, an associate professor of film and media arts, chooses to use trigger warnings but “wants to be sure any accommodation of students’ triggers is for “a medical reason,” and not in response to their views on matters such as race, religion, or gender relations.” The assertion that trigger warnings must not be used to avoid discussions of socially contentious issues shows that there are faculty who believe the definition of a trigger warning may, for some people, include the ability to use trigger warnings to avoid thorny subjects. Wilson further highlights this issue when writing “if it is difficult to know what might trigger students’ memories of trauma, it is perhaps even harder to know what students might consider immoral.” In this quote, Wilson expresses belief that trigger warnings may not be used to only cover medically traumatic topics, but also may expand to cover topics of discomfort and personal belief related challenges. Expressing a desire to ensure trigger warnings remain a tool for mental health only shows that some educators oppose discomfort-based trigger warnings, contributing to conflict based on one variation on the definition of the warnings.

A student expands on the viewpoint that trigger warnings can be used for non-medical reasons when he calls trigger warnings an “easy way to cop out of work,” with another student

119 Peter Schmidt, “A Faculty’s Stand on Trigger Warnings Stirs Fears Among Students.”

120 Robin Wilson, “Students’ Requests for Trigger Warnings Grow More Varied.”
corroborating by stating that a “university should not be a super-sheltered environment,” opposing universities that allow students to avoid topics they dislike through the use of trigger warnings.\textsuperscript{121} This viewpoint is expanded more concretely in one university’s resolution that “says that faculty members can continue to issue "trigger warnings," but only to prepare students to process material, not to suggest they can opt out of exposure to it,” and that “if students complain that instructional content will cause them personal difficulty, the solution is to direct them to support-services offices.”\textsuperscript{122} This quote concretely solidifies the viewpoint that trigger warnings can be used for both mental health condition-related reasons and for avoiding non-mental illness related discomforts, and that some universities strongly oppose the latter usage.

Ambiguity is not limited to definitions, however, as ambiguities in the implementation of trigger warnings are also responsible for conflict. Educators are unclear on exactly how to implement trigger warnings in a way that is helpful to students, and consequently may oppose trigger warnings due to inability to properly implement them. For example, when some professors consider implementing trigger warnings, they find that the material needing advanced notice simply isn’t worth the effort or trouble. One author writes that “some professors remove controversial or sensitive course content altogether, before students even ask for warnings” because “those faculty members say it simply isn’t worth the risk of alienating students.”\textsuperscript{123} A second professor follows a similar framework when he notes that “upon reflection . . . he realized he didn’t have to announce that Aaron Schwartz had killed himself” when discussing a movie

\textsuperscript{121} Peter Schmidt, “A Faculty’s Stand on Trigger Warnings Stirs Fears Among Students.”

\textsuperscript{122} Peter Schmidt, “A Faculty’s Stand on Trigger Warnings Stirs Fears Among Students.”

\textsuperscript{123} Peter Schmidt, “A Faculty’s Stand on Trigger Warnings Stirs Fears Among Students.”
based on the activist’s life. These professors express difficulty with the ambiguous usage of trigger warnings, opting to cut material that would otherwise require such warnings in lieu of figuring out how to implement them without alienating students.

Aside from inability to confidently employ trigger warnings without further difficulty, professors also express concern over difficulty implementing trigger warnings in different classroom styles, constituting ambiguity in methods of using trigger warnings. Professor Elizabeth Iseman tells Wilson that managing classroom discussion within the framework of avoiding thorny material without warning is difficult because she “[has] to work to navigate conversations away from subjects that might be uncomfortable.” This points to difficulty figuring out how to use trigger warnings in a discussion space, as opposed to a more straightforward lecture space. Another professor writes, in regards to the implementation of trigger warnings, that he “plans to ask students this year to list their specific triggers in an anonymous questionnaire” but that “he still isn’t sure what he’ll do with the information.” The reason he isn’t sure is because he cannot “track 92 students’ personal concerns,” despite caring for his students and wanting to help alleviate psychological burden. Inability to figure out how to use trigger warnings in an open discussion or to accommodate 92 students’ triggers in a classroom illustrate practicality issues from trigger warnings that stem from ambiguity in methodology. This is an issue of ambiguity because there are many various concerns about practicality and methods of dealing with triggering topics, but there do not appear to be any

124 Peter Schmidt, “A Faculty’s Stand on Trigger Warnings Stirs Fears Among Students.”
125 Robin Wilson, “Students’ Requests for Trigger Warnings Grow More Varied.”
126 Robin Wilson, “Students’ Requests for Trigger Warnings Grow More Varied.”
127 Robin Wilson, “Students’ Requests for Trigger Warnings Grow More Varied.”
strong solutions or agreement on what should be done. The result of this ambiguity is confusion and contention.

The “92 students” concern touches upon another issue, which is the ambiguity in what is actually a trigger. The implication behind having difficulty tracking “92 students’ personal concerns” is that these students may require warnings about a wide variety of issues, rather than a few core areas (for example, common “core” areas might be rape, suicide, violence, etc). Wilson notes, in the article tellingly titled “Students’ Requests for Trigger Warnings Grow more Varied,” that while trigger warnings “first appeared mostly on blogs or other online forums, often to alert people to content related to sexual assault,” they now cover a “range of issues – sexual violence, suicide, abortion, racism.” These two examples show the expansion of potential triggers from topics that are traditionally considered delicate (sexual assault and suicide) to topics that are traditionally handled with care but are often open to discussion in a classroom (abortion, racism). Wilson further addresses this issue when she writes “Stephen Nowicki, dean and vice provost for undergraduate education at Duke, says that if it is difficult to know what might trigger students’ memories of trauma, it is perhaps even harder to know what students might consider immoral.” This quote highlights the difficulty in figuring out what it is that constitutes a trigger, and also highlights the ever-expanding nature of what a trigger might be if a broad definition of trigger warnings is considered.

Trigger warnings may be for students with medical concerns, for students who feel particularly uncomfortable discussing certain topics, or for students who simply dislike certain topics and refuse to engage with them. Trigger warnings can allow students to prepare for

\[128\] Robin Wilson, “Students’ Requests for Trigger Warnings Grow More Varied.”
\[129\] Robin Wilson, “Students’ Requests for Trigger Warnings Grow More Varied.”
dealing with certain material, or to avoid it altogether. To compound these issues, professors are unsure how to implement trigger warnings without creating further issues, such as alienating students or becoming unable to track the full number of triggers in a large class. What constitutes a trigger is not even concretely defined, expanding anywhere from general categories of violence or sexual assault to highly personal keywords that relate to a specific event. All of these differences constitute ambiguities as to what trigger warnings are and what they are used for, which causes confusion and contention in higher education.

**Tumblr**

Ambiguity is not absent from Tumblr. Rather, Tumblr is the driving force behind and the breeding ground for ambiguity in trigger warnings. Because of the culturally and collaboratively decided nature of trigger warnings explored in the previous chapter, trigger warnings on Tumblr suffer from any sort of established authority to decide their form, purpose, and intent. This ambiguous nature is identified by users each time they modify and use warnings, even going so far as to overtly address and attempt to change some of the practice’s features. Because of the lack of organized authority on Tumblr, no party is particularly responsible for navigating this ambiguity. Therefore, much of this ambiguity in regards to trigger warnings originates on Tumblr, which displays similar ambiguity but less difficulty navigating around it.

By creating lists of triggers that vary significantly in number and type of triggers, Tumblr users create a high level of ambiguity in the practice. For example, one blog creates a list of over 75 trigger tags.\(^\text{130}\) The list is highly specific in nature, distinguishing things such as “drinking (heavy), drinking (recreational), drug use (intravenous), drug use (mentioned), drug use

onscreen), drug use (off screen), drug use (prescription))” into separate, explicitly labelled categories.” The blogger also includes tags not explicitly related to PTSD and panic disorders, such as slavery, classism, and childbirth. A second blog, founded for the purpose of spreading support for dealing with various mental illnesses, refrains from listing the latter class of tags and only lists tags that may trigger an acute episode of mental illness, such as depressive thoughts or particularly strong panic. This list includes tags such as “asking for help, sleep, school, grief/loss, OCD/Intrusive thoughts, ADD/ADHD, Rape” and “Dissociation,” which may trigger memories or thoughts that lead to adverse reactions in coordination with mental illness. It further covers 35 tags, only half of the first example. In a combination approach, a third list of just 30 tags consolidates both directly mental illness related tags and other tags into non-specific categories. Some examples of tags in the third post include “rape, abuse, swearing, talk of drug use, descriptions/pictures of medical procedures, corpses, skulls or skeletons, needles, spiders, snakes, insects, slimy things, nazi paraphernalia” and “discussions of -isms, shaming, or hatred of any kind (racism, classism, hatred of cultures/ethnicities that differ from your own, sexism, hatred of sexualities or genders that differ from your own, anti-multiple, non-vanilla shaming, sex positive shaming, fat shaming/body image shaming, neuroatypical shaming).” Created on a page dedicated to explaining issues of privilege, this third list encompasses issues

131 “Tags (TW, list of triggers below),” A Tumblr for Trigger Warnings (blog).
132 “Tags (TW, list of triggers below),” A Tumblr for Trigger Warnings (blog).
133 “Frequently Used Tags,” Mental Illness Mouse (blog).
134 “Frequently Used Tags,” Mental Illness Mouse (blog).
of societal discomfort (such as -isms) as well as and mental illnesses (OCD, phobias). These three differing tags lists serve to demonstrate the variability and ambiguity concerning what triggers are on Tumblr.

The third blogger mentioned previously also touches upon the next ambiguity, which is variation in the actual mechanics of using a trigger warning. Tumblr users create ambiguity in trigger warnings by using them in different formats. In one style, the creator of “kyriarchy and privilege” writes that when “discussing one of these [topics], it is considered common courtesy to put a simple “Trigger Warning: [Subject]” before a post.” The “Trigger Warning: [Subject]” format, however, is highly subject to change between bloggers. For example, in the previously mentioned “meanspo” blog post, the writer did not use tags at all but rather wrote “TRIGGER WARNING!!!!!” at the top of the post but did not follow up with any specific triggers.

However, some users conflict with this first implementation style and create ambiguity by employing trigger warnings is within the tags of a post, rather than in the body of text. For example, one user writes nothing in the body of her post that discusses difficulties with but tags her post with the phrase “trigger warning”, then separately tags “blood, cutters, mental illness, [and] death mention.” She does so among tags that are more descriptive and less “warning” oriented, such as “actually borderline,” establishing that she is not a self-diagnosed BPD sufferer, and “I have been clean but now I’m starting to get bad again.” Another writer employs a

137 “Common Trigger Warnings,” Kyriarchy & Privilege 101 (blog).
139 “Meanspo,” Teeny, Tiny, Thinning Ana (blog).
140 “Started again after being clean for so long,” Pussy Likes Pussy (blog). http://pussy-likes-pussy.tumblr.com/post/156952715556/started-again-after-being-clean-for-so-long-nope (accessed February 8, 2017). [This post can no longer be located and has been omitted from the Appendix].
141 “Started again after being clean for so long,” Pussy Likes Pussy (blog).
similar style to this, in that she tags her post with “trigger warning” and then separately tags the potentially triggering topics in the post (such as depression). However, this user also tags the abbreviation “TW” whereas the first user did not. These variations in the mechanics of trigger warnings are clear demonstration of the ambiguity present in their usage on Tumblr.

Aside from variance in actual usage of trigger warnings, users also create ambiguity within the practice by actively suggesting changes to it. For example, one user suggests a modification to trigger warnings on calls for help, which are blogs posted in an attempt to receive some sort of supporting outreach from another community member (be it emotional support, suggestions on resources to handle a certain issue, or perhaps even calling for emergency services in extreme cases). The user suggests that when writing a call for help, one should not “put the TW in the title” because “usually this is a fine thing to do, but when your primary goal is to get the attention of everyone (or nearly everyone) who might be able to help, having a title that only says “trigger warning: [fill in the blank]” is counterproductive.” Instead, the user suggests modifying the format of a trigger warning to “[move] the original title into the text, [add] a TW just above it, and [put] in a title that targets the people who will be able to help.” This modification shows the fluctuating nature of the practice and its ability to change based on circumstances and over time, and contributes to the practice’s ambiguous nature.

142 “I’ve stopped wondering how it will end,” redacted (blog).
143 “I’ve stopped wondering how it will end,” redacted (blog).
144 “An effective way to add trigger warnings on calls for help,” Fuck Yeah, Trigger Warnings (blog).
145 “An effective way to add trigger warnings on calls for help,” Fuck Yeah, Trigger Warnings (blog).
146 “An effective way to add trigger warnings on calls for help,” Fuck Yeah, Trigger Warnings (blog).
Finally, Tumblr users create ambiguity within the definition of a trigger warning. As previously alluded to in the tags list, there is a difference in opinion on whether trigger warning are used to aid sufferers of mental illness through traumatic episodes, or to aid everyone in avoiding discomfort. One blogger quotes a WordPress author who writes “to dismiss trigger warnings as the latest trend in hypersensitive college students is profoundly disrespectful to survivors” and “my survival tactics are not trends. My activism is not outrage. And my trauma is not fodder for your web traffic.” In asserting that trigger warnings are for survivors and not for the greater populous, the blogger is establishing trigger warnings as primarily a tool for individuals dealing with mental health concerns. Another blogger takes a more liberal view on the topic when quoting a source that writes trigger warnings “came out of the recognition that we are not unaffected by the political and intellectual work that we do” and “healing can only truly happen when we take collective responsibility for creating structures and practices that enable healing.” This quote implies a more liberal usage of trigger warnings, in which they are used to recognize that everyone regardless of mental health status can become affected by certain topics. Interestingly, the blogger notes below the quote that “this is not how all people use trigger warnings ([the author] gives examples of white students saying they are “triggered” to avoid having to hear about racism), and trigger warnings are not beyond co-optation.” Just as professors are concerned that trigger warnings will prevent students from engaging with opposing viewpoints, so too are some Tumblr bloggers concerned that trigger warnings could


149 “Thus trigger warnings cannot be viewed in” Disability History Blog (blog).
allow students to disengage with challenging topics. A third blogger asserts that “there is no such thing as a ridiculous or silly trigger” and that “you are not ridiculous or silly for avoiding things that distress you. Your triggers are valid and you deserve to be able to protect yourself without being bullied and harassed. You deserve safety.” This blogger suggests that no one should feel shame for having triggers, and implies that having triggers is not dependent on an individual’s mental health status.

By creating varying lists of trigger warnings, using the warnings in different styles, and using them to cover a large array of different topics, Tumblr users create ambiguity in the trigger warning practice. Because there is no higher authority on Tumblr, having this ambiguity poses no particular problem; the warnings are simply a courtesy and part of Tumblr’s “culture,” therefore requiring no concrete form or definition. In higher education, however, the ambiguity of trigger warnings produces conflict over whether the warnings should be reserved for medically diagnosed conditions, and whether individuals are able to use the warnings to avoid work, prepare for it, or something else. Therefore, in order to discuss if trigger warnings can be used or how they should be used in higher education, it seems necessary to first establish that there are a number of interpretations of the practice and that some of these interpretations cause conflict while others may not.

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150 “There is no such thing as a ridiculous or silly trigger,” Realistic Suggestions (blog).
CONCLUSION

I began this research entirely reluctant to contribute to “pro” or “anti” trigger warning stances. I felt that trigger warnings could be highly beneficial to individuals with mental health concerns, and passionately supported advocacy and help for these often-stigmatized illnesses. On the other hand, however, I was also a passionate student, dedicated to the value of debate and discussion in academics, and deeply concerned over the potential loss of this kind of engagement. Through this research, I hope to have reconciled these two issues by opening the door for a discussion on how to modify trigger warnings in such a way that they can benefit individuals with mental illness without endangering higher education.

Beginning this research on Tumblr exposes the very real difficulties faced by individuals with mental health concerns who are exposed to the intense and sometimes disturbing content found there. To the average individual, reading thoughts of suicidal ideation or witnessing the struggle of an individual against anorexia or bulimia is difficult. To an individual recovering from anorexia or struggling with thoughts of suicide, reading those thoughts can be not only difficult, but dangerous. Shedding light on the exact nature of some of Tumblr’s content in the context of impact on individuals with diagnosed medical conditions dispels the belief that trigger warnings are entirely about hypersensitivity on Tumblr.

Trigger warnings are not entirely about hypersensitivity in the university, either. Students in English classes may read Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, in which a child is raped by her father. Students in sociology classes may watch Mary Harron’s *American Psycho*, in which the protagonist commits acts of bloody murder. Recently, I watched waterboarding in Kathryn Bigelow’s *Zero Dark Thirty* for a course on post 9/11 American culture. A victim of sexual assault at the hands of a family member or a veteran returning from abroad and seeking
education may find that, without appropriate warning, these scenes can be difficult or impossible to work through. Navigating the origins of trigger warnings and their resultant issues in higher education can illuminate solutions to the problems they pose, and enable educators to use them without conflict. This discussion can ultimately aid students with mental health conditions to better thrive in university classrooms.

Using trigger warnings to support students with mental health conditions on college campuses is both timely and necessary. Recent statistics reveal that sexual assault on college campuses is prevalent; on average, one in five college women, and one in sixteen college men, will experience sexual assault while attending college. Sexual assault and rape can result in PTSD and other mental health conditions; trigger warnings originated as a means of helping such survivors to navigate difficult spaces without triggering a panic attack or other adverse reaction. Trigger warnings can continue to do so in higher education, where their value will only increase as they enable impacted students to pursue higher education, an invaluable experience. Beyond survivors of sexual assault, trigger warnings also benefit veterans returning from overseas who may deal with PTSD, and further aid students grappling with a variety of mental illnesses (another well-known and prevalent issue on college campuses today). These minority groups on college campuses stand to benefit from the successful implementation of trigger warnings.

The true issues behind the implementation of trigger warnings were obscured by ostensible arguments about an assault on American values in higher education. Authors tended to present the practice as part of a larger trend of hypersensitivity, relating it to students’ reluctance to engage with opposing viewpoints but neglecting to mention its aid to students with mental

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health conditions. This passionate defense of American values and ideals in higher education illuminates the importance American culture attaches to those values and ideals, and the bitter contention that results from attempting to dismantle them. However, this research has also illuminated a possible flaw in this passion for protecting higher values: defending values can occlude finding solutions. If the debate around trigger warnings focused not only on defense of values, but rather on defense of values in conjunction with proposed solutions for sufferers of mental illness, perhaps trigger warnings would cease to be a polarizing debate and become instead a constructive one.

The role of the internet in this debate is also notable for its invisibility. None of The Chronicle writers mentioned the origins of trigger warnings on the internet in their arguments, nor factored the role of the internet into the practice. In this way, the role of the internet became invisible in this debate, rarely mentioned or acknowledged and perhaps even forgotten or unknown. This research suggests that identifying and examining the internet-based origins of new social phenomena and cultural norms is productive in understanding them. Social media is further commonly regarded as popular with newer generations, while the voices arguing against trigger warnings were generally professors of an older generation. The role of the internet in creating this generational difference is significant, as young students may have access to more context than professors responding to their requests.

It is clear that American culture values open debate, freedom of speech, academic freedom, and other principles of academic discourse and learning. However, it is also clear that American culture values education and the educational material taught within university classrooms; for this reason, practices like trigger warnings are created in order to open the classroom to individuals who may otherwise struggle and ultimately facilitate learning. The
debate over trigger warnings is ultimately the result of a clash between these values, as the desire
to protect educational values conflicted with the desire to share the value of education with all
who wish to access it. This thesis ultimately suggests that by identifying key issues with trigger
warnings in the university classroom and changing the practice to best fit the higher education
space, the value of academics and the value of education can continue to coexist, remain strongly
upheld, and benefit college students in the United States.
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APPENDIX


About This Blog

(If you could signal boost this, I’d really appreciate it)
Hello, Tumblr! This is an idea I had to help out the people of the internet, so we can feel like we can enjoy media safely.

The point of this blog is to provide a resource for people to search out a TV show or a movie (or a game, a song, whatever really) in case it contains a potential trigger. This could include eating disorders, suicide, mental illness in general, death (including specific deaths like death of a pet, parent, etc), sexual assault, homophobia, pretty much anything you can imagine.

This is obviously a pretty ambitious project, so any help you could provide would be appreciated. Submissions are open, and the more descriptive you are the better. I will tag everything, and if you need me to tag anything I've left out, just message me. Also, if you'd like to help out as a mod, just drop me a message.

An example of how this blog will work:

Say your friend has suggested you watch Buffy The Vampire Slayer. It’s a great show, but certain episodes contain triggers such as: sexual assault, domestic abuse, suicide, death, etc. So you could search the tags of this blog for “buffy-the-vampire-slayer,” and you’d get posts that would list the trigger at the top (along with what episode it’s contained in), and then a read more listing specifically what happens (such as who dies or who is assaulted) - that way you’re protected, but you can also avoid spoilers or if you’d prefer not to know for whatever reason.

If you have any questions or suggestions for this blog, feel free to let me know!

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I’ve stopped wondering how it will end, now I just ask when.
– B.M.
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VIII


“Your’re not a Special Snowflake, Self Diagnosis is a Joke, and “Trigger Warnings” are Stupid

A short video by Rob Dyrk that touches on self diagnosis, fake (not psychiatric) phobias, and trigger warnings; give it a watch.

FEB 7 2017

An introduction

Hey there!

This is a blog about trigger warnings, those bracketed phrases (or sometimes pictures) that tell you when something you’re about to read/see/hear might be triggering.

This blog exists to spread information about how (and where!) trigger warnings should be used.

If you’re interested in becoming a member, please ask me at my main blog. I’m looking especially for people who are triggered by things that I’m not: eating disorders, fat-hate, images of violence, or self-harm. Even if none of those are your triggers, though, you’re still welcome to join the team!

One-time contributions and questions are also encouraged.


Thus, trigger warnings cannot be viewed in isolation. Rather, they are part of a larger complex of practices designed to de-privatize and collective healing. They came out of the recognition that we are not unaffected by the political and intellectual work that we do. These practices also recognized that the labor of healing has to be shared by all. Trigger warnings are one of many practices that insist that one does not have to be silent about one's healing journey – that one's healing can occupy public and collective spaces. And healing can only truly happen when we take collective responsibility for creating structures and practices that enable healing.

—
Andrea Smith, “Beyond the Pros and Cons of Trigger Warnings: Collectivizing Healing”

note that this is not how all people use trigger warnings (she gives examples of white students saying they are “triggered” to avoid having to hear about racism), and trigger warnings are not beyond co-optation. but she's trying to shed light on how and why they arose.

#trigger warnings  #collective healing  #andrea smith  #indigenous feminism  #trauma

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