

Reading a Literary Passage: Anticipation, Emotion, and Comprehension

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INTRODUCTION

- Trigger warnings (TWs) are statements that provide students a caution that upcoming educational content may be emotionally disturbing. The idea is that TWs allow students to psychologically prepare themselves. However, recent studies suggest TWs may function as threat cues, rather than preparatory cues, eliciting anticipatory anxiety and avoidance. The present study examines the difference between presenting antecedent information to students in the form of a TW versus an alternative, a coping cue, introduced as a Content Notice.

Purpose/Background

- Trigger Warnings (TWs) serve as statements which serve to warn/caution individuals about content they may find emotionally disturbing.
- It has been found in studies (Bridgland, et al., 2019) that these Trigger Warnings can function as threat cues (stimuli alerting of perceived dangers/threats), and evoke feelings of anxiety or distress, in addition to escape and avoidance behaviors

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- In an effort to avoid these potentially negative consequences an alternate coping cue has been established for this experiment. Such a cue is developed to contrast the feelings of vulnerability and risk emphasized by TW notices. Simultaneously, this cue encourages an ability to cope and modulate these negative feelings and encourage participation. This is further thought to be able to help with anxiety (Kaczurkin & Foa, 2015).
 - This study proposed to collect data anonymously from undergraduate students at WMU. The students were asked to read a passage from Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* that could, possibly, be modestly distressing.

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- The sampled students were randomly split into two groups, with each of them receiving two distinct packets. One of these packets had TW language embodying the threat cue interpretation. The students from the other half of the sample obtained a packet with Content Notification (CN) language that embodied the aforementioned coping cue.

METHOD

- Participants sampled were offered extra credit for the courses they were sampled in.
- Participants only went to courses where there were alternative options for extra credit, other than research participation.
- The researcher read the participation script, asked if there were any questions, and then dispersed the participant surveys.

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- Each participant received an envelope with a consent form attached to it. Participants who did not opt to participate could hand back the sealed packet. Participants who did opt to participate did so by opening the sealed packet, after reading the consent form attached to the outside of said packet.
 - After participation was completed or ceased, the participants put the survey materials back into the envelope, to be collected by the researcher.

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- The packet included the following material forms in order:
 - 1. Brief demographic form (this contained no information with personal identifiers)
 - 2. Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II (AAQ)
 - 3. Antecedent cue: Trigger Warning or Content Notice (determined randomly)
 - 4. Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS-1)
 - 5. Decision sheet (one item option to continue with the passage or cease participation)
 - 6. Literary Passage
 - 7. Comprehension items
 - 8. PANAS-2
 - 9. Coin flip gamble choice (one-item measurement for risk aversion)

RESULTS

- Tests were employed to discover the effects of antecedent cue conditions on post- and pre-passage PANAS scores.
- PANAS scores were analyzed using independent samples t tests.
- Chi-Squared Tests were used for the categorical variables
- Results pertained to the 5 following Hypotheses conducted:

Hypothesis 1

- Anticipatory negative affect will be higher in the TW than CN group.

- Independent samples t test
 - IV – Condition: TW or CN
 - DV – PANAS-1 Negative

PANAS negative			
	N	M	SD
CN	59	15.59	5.96
TW	54	17.44	7.46
$t(111) = -1.46, p = .15, d = -.28$			

- The mean score was numerically higher in TW compared to CN. This small-moderate effect size ($d = -.28$) did not reach formal significance ($p = .15$)
- ANCOVA, with gender entered as the covariate, also failed to reveal a statistically significant difference on the PANAS-1 negative score between the TW and CN groups, $F(1, 110) = 1.54, p = .22$.

Hypothesis 2

- Discontinuation rates will be higher in the TW than CN group.
 - 3.5% (4/113) of the total sample were unwilling to read the passage

 - CN = 1.7% (1/59)
 - TW = 5.6% (3/54)
- Overall discontinuation rate was very low
- 3xs higher in TW than CN, but overall low rate precludes statistical analysis

Hypothesis 3

- Those in the TW group will be more risk averse (choose “no” on the coin toss gamble) than those in the CN group.
 - Chi square analysis
 - IV – Group: TW or CN
 - DV – Choice: No or YES
 - 76% of those in TW declined the coin toss gamble compared to 68% in CW. This difference was not statistically significant, $\chi^2 = .76, p = .38$

Hypothesis 3

		Gamble (No)	Gamble (Yes)	
		No	Yes	Total
CN	Count	39	18	57
	% within	68.4%	31.6%	100%
TW	Count	38	12	50
	% within	76%	24%	100%
Total	Count	77	30	107
	% within	72%	28%	100%

Hypothesis 4

- Negative affect after reading the negative story (PANAS-2 scores) will not differ between groups.
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- $M = 17.20, SD = 7.63$) compared to CN ($M = 16.40, SD = 7.40$);
 - An independent samples t-test did not show a significant difference between groups.
 - $t(106) = -0.54, p = .59, d = .11$.

PANAS-NEGATIVE			
	N	M	SD
CN	59	16.4	7.4
TW	54	17.2	6.3

Hypothesis 5

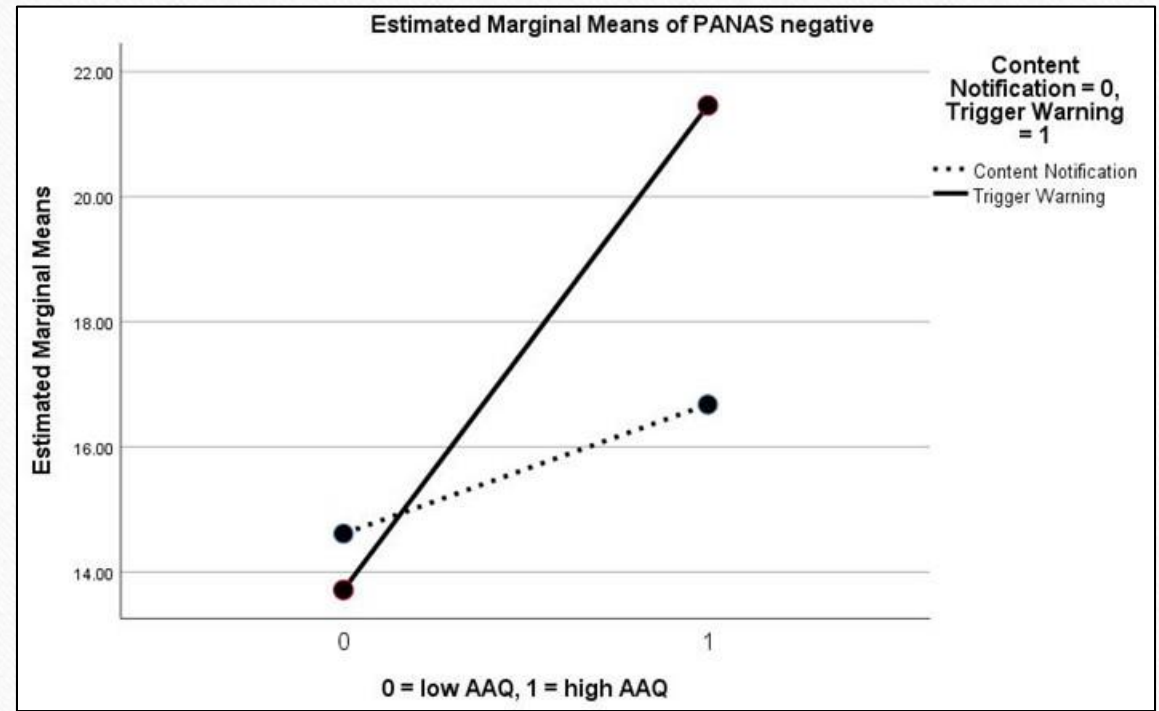
- Experiential avoidance (AAQ) will moderate the PANAS-1 results. That is, those who are higher in experiential avoidance and receive the TW will report this highest anticipatory negative affect.

- Univariate ANOVA

- Fixed factors –
 - Condition (TW or CN)
 - AAQ (High or Low)
- DV – PANAS-1

- There was a significant Condition x AAQ

- TW + High AAQ: $M = 21.46$, $SD = 8.64$
- TW + Low AAQ: $M = 13.71$, $SD = 3.20$
 - Large effect size, $d = 1.21$



DISCUSSION

- The TW condition did yield higher negative anticipatory affect scores, than the CN condition. However, an independent samples t-test showed that this difference was not significant. As prior research (Brigland et. al., 2019 & Bellet et. al., 2018) had 260 and 300 participants split between conditions, respectively, it is expected that these numbers would be required to yield statistically significant results.
- Undergraduate students did demonstrate three times the opt-out rates for the TW condition, in comparison to the CW. However, the small percentage of the sample, combined with the small percentage of those who opted out at all, limits the reliability of these findings. Though few were affected by the TW the TW does show that it limits people's willingness to go forward with aversive conditions and increases the rate of escape behavior.

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- As there were 76% of TW participants who engaged in the coin-flip gamble, as compared to the 68% of NC participants who engaged in the coin-flip demonstrates, that TW participants were more likely to be risk-averse than that of CW participants. This result was not statistically significant
 - The lack of a significant difference between the NC and TW groups in terms of negative affect shows that the story was not as aversive as the conditions may have implied, or that students were resilient enough to read through it without experiencing any change in Negative Affect.
 - There was a statistically significant difference in PANAS scores, for those who participated in the TW condition, when they were shown to have already high AAQ levels.

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- This study proved useful at assessing the effects of Trigger Warnings, as classroom settings are a common area in which they are utilized. The classroom setting should be noted as having made the aversiveness of the overall study different than what would normally be found in a laboratory setting.
 - Data collection was halted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, there were significant findings, and even when they weren't found, the hypotheses were supported. This supports the assertion that further replication or extended studies should occur in the future.



- To my family, and Thesis Committee. Through your encouragement and support, I obtained the confidence and skills which I needed to get here. Even in these trying times, I know it is good and that I am lucky to have you all in my corner. Thank you, you are all the best.

THANK YOU

LOVE YOU GUYS!!!

