

ABSTRACT

This experiment investigated the influence of warnings, signal words, and a signal icon on perceived hazard of consumer products. Under the guise of a marketing research study, 135 people (high school students, college students, and participants from a shopping mall) rated product labels on six dimensions, including how hazardous they perceived the products to be. A total of 16 labels from actual household products were used: 9 carried the experimental conditions, and 7 were filler product labels that never carried a warning. Five conditions presented the signal words NOTE, CAUTION, WARNING, DANGER, and LETHAL together with a brief warning message. In another two conditions, a signal icon (exclamation point surrounded by a triangle) was presented together with the terms DANGER and LETHAL. In the final two conditions, one lacked a signal word but retained the warning message, and the other lacked both the warning message and the signal word. Results showed that the presence of a signal word increased perceived product hazard compared with its absence. Significant differences were noted between extreme terms (e.g., NOTE and DANGER) but not between terms usually recommended in warning design guidelines (e.g., CAUTION and WARNING). The signal icon showed no significant effect on hazard perception. Implications of the results and the value of the methodology for future warnings investigations are discussed.

Journal: Human Factors 36(3):547-556 (1994)