

Viewpoints

Will warning labels mitigate the negative effects of social media?



The swelling discourse around the effects of social media on young brains is mounting on multiple fronts. We've seen an increase in litigation and a general call to action around protecting the mental health of children whose brain chemistry and development are in malleable states, highly susceptible to influence—good or bad. Those pushing for change are now entertaining the idea that warning labels might help people appreciate the potential risks of social media consumption, comparing it to warnings provided on substances such as cigarettes. Social media is a unique phenomenon, with unique benefits and unique problems—for that we will need to test unique solutions. Perhaps warning labels are the start.

The U.S. surgeon general, Dr. Vivek Murthy, announced on Monday that he would push for a warning label on social media platforms advising parents that using the platforms might damage adolescents' mental health.

Warning labels — like those that appear on tobacco and alcohol products — are one of the most powerful tools available to the nation's top health official, but Dr. Murthy cannot unilaterally require them; the action requires approval by Congress.

The proposal builds on several years of escalating warnings from the surgeon general. In a May 2023

advisory, he recommended that parents immediately set limits on phone use, and urged Congress to swiftly develop health and safety standards for technology platforms.

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Professionals



Treesineu McDaniel

Associate

Oakland

510.550.8229

tmcdaniel@f3law.com