Why aren't campus emergency alerts taken more seriously?

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Well-publicized tragedies on college campuses across the United States have prompted university officials to implement alert systems that broadcast real-time warnings via text message and e-mail to students, faculty, and staff. Such systems can be highly effective tools, but only if users take them seriously. New research to be presented at the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society 2014 Annual Meeting in Chicago illustrates some factors that can determine whether campus alert systems are attended to or disregarded.

In their paper, "Taking Emergency Warnings Seriously," University of Central Florida (UCF) researchers Daphne Kopel, Valerie Sims, and Matthew Chin explored a relatively unexamined aspect: user perception of warning systems and whether personality or feelings of control affected those perceptions. To do this, they surveyed 142 undergraduate students about the students' perceptions before and after an actual planned campus-wide attack in March 2013. Prior to the emergency, anecdotal accounts from students and faculty showed that the system was "overlooked and underappreciated."

"UCF's alert system was a popular topic of conversation prior to the planned attack due to the high volume of alerts students and faculty received," said Kopel, a graduate student in applied experimental human factors. "This caused many people to dismiss them regardless of there being a potentially dangerous situation."

The researchers found that following the averted 2013 incident, students

had a more favorable opinion overall of the alerting system and the safety benefits it offers. Although students said they did not personally mock the system, paradoxically, they reported that they mocked the system less than they had prior to the event; they also reported hearing less disparagement from others after the emergency. Perhaps not surprisingly, women showed more interest in campus security and safety, those who rated high on the neuroticism personality scale "tended to question safety protocol more often than those who scored low," and those who rated high on the agreeableness scale took the system more seriously than did other personality types.

"Maintaining a positive reception of an alert system is crucial," said Kopel. "If people dislike a system due to overreporting or misinformation, they are likely to ignore every message. We suggest differentiating between serious and nonserious threats. For instance, if there is a gas leak in a building, the alert should begin with 'WARNING,' and if there is an armed person on or near campus, the alert should begin with 'DANGER.'"

"Alert systems are a great tool for communicating emergency messages and protecting the public, but it's essential that the information is accurate, timely, and used sparingly enough to maintain safety and cultivate the public's trust."

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