

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection.

Meta and YouTube Found Negligent in Landmark Social Media Addiction Case

A jury found the companies harmed a young user with design features that were addictive and led to her mental health distress.

Source: Cecilia Kang, *New York Times*, March 25, 2026

The social media company Meta and the video streaming service YouTube harmed a young user with design features that were addictive and led to her mental health distress, a jury found on Wednesday, a landmark decision that could open social media companies to more lawsuits over users' well-being.

Meta must pay \$4.2 million in combined compensatory and punitive damages, and YouTube must pay \$1.8 million.

The bellwether case, which was brought by a now 20-year-old woman identified as K.G.M., had accused social media companies of creating products as addictive as cigarettes or digital casinos. Citing features like infinite scroll and algorithmic recommendations, K.G.M. sued Meta, which owns Instagram and Facebook, and Google's YouTube, claiming they led to anxiety and depression.

The verdict in K.G.M.'s case — one of thousands of lawsuits filed by teenagers, school districts and state attorneys general against Meta, YouTube, TikTok and Snap, which owns Snapchat — was a major win for the plaintiffs. The finding validates a novel legal theory that social media sites or apps can cause personal injury. It is likely to factor into similar cases expected to go to trial this year, which could expose the internet giants to further financial damages and force changes to their products.

The personal liability argument draws inspiration from a legal playbook used against Big Tobacco last century, in which lawyers argued that the companies created addictive products that harmed users. The companies have largely dodged legal threats by citing a federal shield, called Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996, which protects them from liability for what their users post.

TikTok and Snap both settled with the plaintiff for undisclosed terms before the trial started.

Wednesday's verdict follows a ruling this week by a New Mexico jury in another case brought by the state attorney general there, which found Meta liable for violating state law by failing to safeguard users of its apps from child predators. That jury decided on Tuesday that Meta should pay \$375 million in that case.

The trial in the California Superior Court in Los Angeles County began last month, with the jury of seven women and five men taking more than a week of deliberation to reach its verdict. The \$6 million in financial damages are a drop in the bucket for Meta and YouTube's parent company, Google, which bring in billions in revenue every quarter.

But the lawyers, parents and consumer interest groups supporting plaintiffs in other suits hailed the jury's decision as a major step to rein in social media giants.

"This is the first time in history a jury has heard testimony by executives and seen internal documents that we believe prove these companies chose profits over children," said Joseph VanZandt, one of K.G.M.'s lawyers.

"We respectfully disagree with the verdict and are evaluating our legal options," a Meta spokeswoman said.

Google also said it disagreed with the verdict and plans to appeal. "This case misunderstands YouTube, which is a responsibly built streaming platform, not a social media site," said José Castañeda, a Google spokesman.

The cases have been compared to those against Big Tobacco last century, when Philip Morris and R.J. Reynolds were accused of hiding information about the harms of cigarettes. The companies reached a \$206 billion master settlement with more than 40 states in 1998 that led to an agreement to stop marketing to minors. Strict tobacco regulations and a decline in smoking followed.

Though the California Superior Court of Los Angeles County verdict is an initial victory against tech giants, legal experts said it was unclear if the decision would represent a similar turning point. Eight other cases brought by individual plaintiffs are slated to go to trial there. A set of federal cases brought by states and school districts in Oakland, Calif., at the U.S. District Court of Northern California, are scheduled for jury trials this summer.

"There is a long road ahead, but this decision is quite significant," said Clay Calvert, a nonresident senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, a center-right think tank, and expert on media law. "If there are a series of verdicts for plaintiffs, it will force the defendants to reconsider how they design social media platforms and how they deliver content to minors."

Concern about social media use has mounted globally. In 2024, the U.S. surgeon general called for adding warning labels to social media explaining that the platforms were associated with mental health harms for adolescents. In December, Australia barred children under 16 from using social media. Malaysia, Spain and Denmark are considering similar rules.

But most efforts to regulate social media in the United States have failed. K.G.M., whose first name is Kaley, filed her lawsuit in 2023 against Meta, Snap, YouTube and TikTok. Kaley, who lives in Chico, Calif., said she had begun using social media at age 6 and claimed the sites caused personal injury, including body dysmorphia and thoughts of self harm.

Her case, which was presided over by Judge Carolyn B. Kuhl, represented one of the strongest personal injury cases among the thousands of suits filed.

Ahead of the trial, lawyers for the companies argued to the judge that the cases should be dropped, invoking speech protections. Lawyers for the plaintiff countered that the case was about product design, not speech.

While Snap and TikTok settled, lawyers for Meta and YouTube proceeded, saying they had a strong legal defense. It was too hard to prove social media was addictive and caused personal harms, the companies said.

During opening arguments, one of K.G.M.'s lawyers, Mark Lanier, presented the jury internal company documents from Meta and YouTube that showed tech executives knew of and discussed the negative effects of their products on children. Mr. Lanier argued that features like infinite scroll, algorithmic recommendations and autoplay videos were designed to entice and hook young users to compulsively engage with the platforms.

Meta countered that K.G.M.'s mental health issues were caused by familial abuse and turmoil. YouTube argued that it was not a social media company and that its features were not designed to be addictive.

During the five-week trial, K.G.M.'s lawyers grilled Meta's chief executive, Mark Zuckerberg, and the head of Instagram, Adam Mosseri. The executives rejected claims that Instagram, which K.G.M. began to use at age 9, could be described as "clinically" addictive.

K.G.M. testified about her childhood and using social media as both a creative outlet and an escape from bullying at school. She spent hours a day on Instagram and posted hundreds of photos using beauty filters to mask her insecurities, which she said led to her body dysmorphia.

On Wednesday, all but two of the jurors found both companies liable, determining that Meta and YouTube were negligent in designing their platforms, and that their products harmed K.G.M. The plaintiff, dressed in a tan sweater and long pink dress, sat in the first row of the public benches and listened intently to the verdict, but showed little emotion.

During arguments on punitive damages, Mr. Lanier held a jar of M&M's, saying each piece of candy represented a billion dollars of the companies' value.

"You can take out a handful and not make a difference," he said, scooping out a few with his hand. "You can take out two handfuls and not make a difference."

Meta's lawyer, Paul Schmidt, suggested that the jury could avoid punitive damages completely. Meta is already on the path toward making changes toward protecting young users, he added.

Luis Li, YouTube's lawyer, apologized to K.G.M.

"We are sorry for the things you have suffered," he said. "We at YouTube truly hope there have been things at YouTube that have enriched your life and allowed you to express yourself."

Mr. Lanier responded by saying, "A lawyer apology is not the same as accountability." He used his teeth to crack off the shell of a single blue M&M.

"This is like \$200 million," he said. "They do not want to feel the pain for what they did."

The jury ultimately decided on \$3 million in punitive damages after deliberating less than an hour, doubling the amount of compensatory damages already owed by the companies.

Outside the courtroom, jurors who gave their first names as Matthew and Victoria said they had shied away from giving K.G.M. a huge sum.

"We wanted to focus on the future and what teens and children would be subjected to in the future," Victoria said, speaking of the precedent set for the companies by their decision.

Possible Response Questions

- What are your thoughts about the verdict against Meta and YouTube? Explain.
- Did something in the article surprise you? Discuss.
- Pick a word/line/passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a "move" made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.