

Landmark trial accusing social media companies of addicting children to

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Young people use their phones to view social media in Sydney, Nov. 8, 2024. (AP Photo/Rick Rycroft, File)

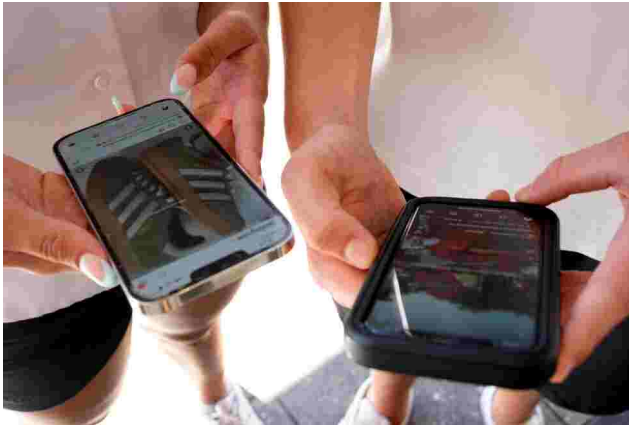
Instagram's parent company Meta and Google's YouTube will face claims that their platforms deliberately addict and harm children. TikTok and Snap, which were originally named in the lawsuit, [settled for undisclosed sums](#).

“This was only the first case — there are hundreds of parents and school districts in the social media addiction trials that start today, and sadly, new families every day who are speaking out and bringing Big Tech to court for its deliberately harmful products,” said Sacha Haworth, executive director of the nonprofit Tech Oversight Project.

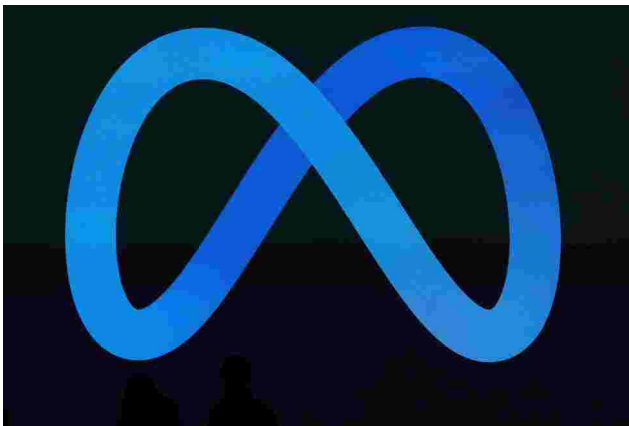
A separate [trial in New Mexico](#), meanwhile, was also set to kick off with opening arguments on Monday.

At the core of the Los Angeles case is a 19-year-old identified only by the initials “KGM,” whose case could determine how thousands of other, similar lawsuits against social media companies will play out. She and two other plaintiffs have been selected for bellwether trials — essentially test cases for both sides to see how their arguments play out before a jury and what damages, if any, may be awarded, said Clay Calvert, a nonresident senior fellow of technology policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute.

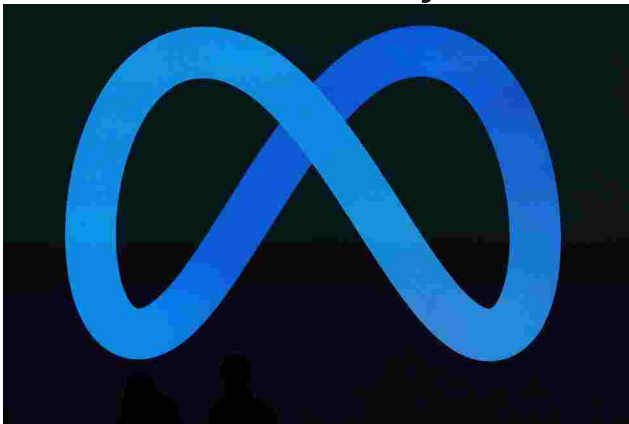
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It's the first time the companies will argue their case before a jury, and the outcome could have profound effects on their businesses and how they will handle children using their platforms.

KGM claims that her use of social media from an early age addicted her to the technology and exacerbated depression and suicidal thoughts. Importantly, the lawsuit claims that this was done through deliberate design choices made by companies that sought to make their platforms more addictive to children to boost profits. This argument, if successful, could sidestep the companies' First Amendment shield and [Section 230](#), which protects tech companies from liability for material posted on their platforms.

“Borrowing heavily from the behavioral and neurobiological techniques used by slot machines and exploited by the cigarette industry, Defendants deliberately embedded in their products an array of design features aimed at maximizing youth engagement to drive advertising revenue,” the lawsuit says.

Executives, including Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg, are expected to testify at the trial, which will last six to eight weeks. Experts have drawn similarities to the Big Tobacco trials that led to a 1998 settlement requiring cigarette companies to pay billions in health care costs and restrict marketing targeting minors.

“Plaintiffs are not merely the collateral damage of Defendants’ products,” the lawsuit says. “They are the direct victims of the intentional product design choices made by each Defendant. They are the intended targets of the harmful features that pushed them into self-destructive feedback loops.”

The tech companies dispute the claims that their products deliberately harm children, citing a bevy of safeguards they have added over the years and arguing that they are not liable for content posted on their sites by third parties.

“Recently, a number of lawsuits have attempted to place the blame for teen mental health struggles squarely on social media companies,” Meta said in a recent blog post. “But this oversimplifies a serious issue. Clinicians and researchers find that mental health is a deeply complex and multifaceted issue, and trends regarding teens’ well-being aren’t clear-cut or universal. Narrowing the challenges faced by teens to a single factor ignores the scientific research and the many stressors impacting young people today, like academic pressure, school safety, socio-economic challenges and substance abuse.”

A Meta spokesperson said in a recent statement that the company strongly disagrees with the allegations outlined in the lawsuit and

that it's "confident the evidence will show our longstanding commitment to supporting young people."

José Castañeda, a Google Spokesperson, said that the allegations against YouTube are "simply not true." In a statement, he said, "Providing young people with a safer, healthier experience has always been core to our work."

The case will be the first in a slew of cases beginning this year that seek to hold social media companies responsible for harming children's mental well-being.

In New Mexico, [opening statements begin Monday](#) for trial on allegations that Meta and its social media platforms have failed to protect young users from sexual exploitation, following an undercover online investigation. Attorney General Raúl Torrez in late 2023 sued Meta and Zuckerberg, who was later dropped from the suit.

Prosecutors have said that New Mexico is not seeking to hold Meta accountable for its content but rather its role in pushing out that content through complex algorithms that proliferate material that can be harmful, saying they uncovered internal documents in which

Meta employees estimate that about 100,000 children every day are subjected to sexual harassment on the company's platforms.

Meta denies the civil charges while accusing Torrez of cherry-picking select documents and making "sensationalist" arguments. The company says it has consulted with parents and law enforcement to introduce built-in protections to social media accounts, along with settings and tools for parents.

A federal bellwether trial beginning in June in Oakland, California, will be the first to represent school districts that have sued social media platforms over harms to children.

In addition, more than [40 state attorneys general have filed lawsuits](#) against Meta, claiming it is harming young people and contributing to the youth mental health crisis by deliberately designing features on Instagram and Facebook that addict children to its platforms. The majority of cases filed their lawsuits in federal court, but some sued in their respective states.

[TikTok](#) also faces similar lawsuits in more than a dozen states.

Other countries, meanwhile, are enacting new laws to limit social media for children. In January, [French lawmakers approved a bill](#) banning social media for children under 15, paving the way for the measure to enter into force at the start of the next school year in September, as the idea of setting a minimum age for use of the platforms [gains momentum across Europe](#).

In Australia, social media companies have revoked access to about 4.7 million accounts identified as belonging to children since [the country banned use of the platforms](#) by those under 16, officials said. The law [provoked fraught debates](#) in Australia about technology use, privacy, child safety and mental health and has prompted other countries to consider similar measures.

The [British government](#) also said last month it will consider [banning young teenagers from social media](#) as it tightens laws designed to protect children from harmful content and excessive screen time.

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Morgan Lee in Santa Fe, New Mexico, contributed to this story.

College Students Can't Put Their Phones Down—Not Even During Sex

According to a new study, more than one in three U.S. college students admit they've checked their phone during sex.

By Ashley Fike

College sex has always involved a little multitasking. Someone's roommate is asleep three feet away. Someone's thinking about a paper due tomorrow. Someone's hoping this doesn't turn into a whole relationship conversation. What's new is the phone. Not nearby buzzing on the dresser. We're talking actively in someone's hand.

According to a recent survey reported by the [New York Post](#), more than one in three U.S. college students admit they've checked their phone during sex. Not afterward. Not to change the music. During. The survey, conducted through the campus-focused apps [YikYak](#) and [Sidechat](#), polled roughly 100,000 American students aged 18 and over. About 35% said they pulled out their device mid-hookup to send a text or scroll through a video.

It's easy to read that stat as a joke about attention spans or to blame Gen Z for being terminally online. But phones aren't just distractions anymore. They're security blankets. They're anxiety regulators. They're muscle memory. For some students, reaching for a screen during sex isn't about boredom or disrespect. It's about habit, nerves, or staying tethered to a world that never turns off.

The same survey offers a more relatable snapshot of what college sex actually looks like right now. Nearly 23% of respondents said they've had sex while their roommate was still in the room. Meanwhile, 72% said they met their current or most recent partner in person, not through an app. That detail alone complicates the idea that young people have abandoned real-life intimacy.

IS THERE REALLY A SEX DROUGHT?

A lot of the panic about a so-called sex drought focuses on adults slightly older than current undergrads. The National Survey of Family Growth has found rising rates of sexlessness among people ages 22 to 34. About 10% of men and 7% of women in that group reported they're still virgins. An analysis by the [Institute for Family Studies](#) noted that sexlessness among young adult men has nearly doubled over the past decade, with a significant increase among women as well.

College students sit just outside that bracket. Many older Gen Z adults lost formative social years to pandemic lockdowns and remote life. Today's undergrads are back on campus, back in shared spaces, and back to navigating sex in close quarters. They're having it. They're just doing it with their phones within reach.

Scrolling during sex isn't aspirational. It's not romantic. It does, however, feel like an honest look into how intimacy works in a world where attention is constantly split. For better or worse, phones follow people everywhere now. Even into bed.

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