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IN THE CIRCUIT COURT OF THE FIRST CIRCUIT
STATE OF HAWAI‘I

STATE OF HAWAI‘I *ex rel.* ANNE E.
LOPEZ, ATTORNEY GENERAL,

Plaintiff,

v.

BYTEDANCE INC.; TIKTOK INC.; TIKTOK
LTD.; and BYTEDANCE LTD.,

Defendants.

CIVIL NO. _____
(Other Civil Action)

COMPLAINT; SUMMONS

COMPLAINT

Plaintiff STATE OF HAWAI‘I *ex rel.* ANNE E. LOPEZ, ATTORNEY GENERAL (“State”), brings this action against Defendants BYTEDANCE INC., TIKTOK INC., TIKTOK LTD.; and BYTEDANCE LTD. (collectively, “Defendants” or “TikTok”), pursuant to the Hawai‘i Unfair or Deceptive Acts or Practices (“UDAP”), Hawai‘i Revised Statutes (“HRS”) §§ 480-1 through 480-24, for falsely marketing and promoting—to children and their families—an addictive and otherwise harmful social media platform, and alleges as follows:

I. INTRODUCTION

1. TikTok operates one of the largest social media platforms in the world, with over 1 billion users worldwide, and over 150 million users in the United States. These users, including children, are the key to TikTok’s multibillion dollar revenue stream, and TikTok exploits them for its economic gain.

2. TikTok’s business model is predicated upon compelling its users to spend as much time as possible on its platform. In TikTok’s own words, “[t]he advertising-based business model encourages optimization for time spent in the app” and “create[s] incentives for

companies to grow at the expense of their users.”¹ TikTok monitors the amount of time users spend on its platform down to the minute, and imposes strict limitations on any platform changes, including safety changes, that could decrease stay time because every minute spent on its platform increases the profitability and its bottom line.

3. TikTok employs a variety of features which its own employees have described as “coercive design tactics.”² These features foster psychological dependence and take advantage of some of the same dopamine-inducing strategies employed by the gambling industry—they are designed to make TikTok’s platform as addictive as possible so that its users keep coming back and spending as much time as possible on TikTok’s product.

4. This is particularly harmful for children. TikTok knows that it is “particularly popular with younger users,” who “have minimal ability to self-regulate effectively” and “do not have executive function to control their screen time[.]”³

5. TikTok is aware that its features can harm the mental health of its users, particularly its young users, but is unwilling to sacrifice its corporate profits for its users’ well-being.

6. TikTok fails to warn its users and the public about the risks and harms from its platform and misrepresents to users and the public the nature of its product and the risks associated with it.

7. This conduct is all the more alarming because of its impact on children. From TikTok’s inception, which involved emulating and ultimately acquiring the Musical.ly platform, there was a focus on child users and their value to the platform’s business. To this day, a

¹ TT-MS-AG-000226709 at 712, 718.

² TT-MS-AG-000229217 at p. 9.

³ TT-MS-AG-000226709 at 712; TT-MS-AG-000229158 at 158.

significant portion of TikTok’s user base is under 18, and many users are under 13. TikTok’s treatment of underage users has gotten it sued not once, but twice, by the federal government for violating the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (“COPPA”), 15 U.S.C. §§ 6501–6506.

8. Yet despite TikTok’s large youth user base, TikTok’s age assurance and age verification systems remain deficient, and TikTok’s efforts to protect these vulnerable users was and is inadequate. A 2022 *Forbes* article described TikTok LIVE as a “strip club filled with 15 year-olds.”⁴ Congressional offices, reporters, and non-profits had no trouble creating fake accounts that allowed them to pass as children and children had no problem creating fake accounts that allowed them to pass as adults. TikTok’s American Trust and Safety personnel were repeatedly sidelined and overruled by TikTok’s product managers, many of whom were based in Beijing and worked for the Chinese company ByteDance Ltd., TikTok’s parent company.

9. While TikTok’s user base and corporate revenue have soared, the impact on children, including children in Hawai‘i, has been devastating. Hawai‘i, and the United States as a whole, are experiencing what the United States Surgeon General called a “youth mental health crisis.”⁵

10. The State thus now brings this action to remedy and end TikTok’s unlawful behavior and the ensuing harm to the children of Hawai‘i.

⁴ Alexandra S. Levine, *How TikTok Live Became ‘A Strip Club Filled with Fifteen-Year-Olds’*, *Forbes* (Dec. 7, 2022, at 4:00 PM), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alexandralevine/2022/04/27/how-tiktok-live-became-a-strip-club-filled-with-15-year-olds/?sh=63b0efa762d7>.

⁵ *U.S. Surgeon General Issues Advisory on Youth Mental Health Crisis Further Exposed by COVID-19 Pandemic*, Se. ADA Ctr. (Dec. 14, 2021), <https://adasoutheast.org/u-s-surgeon-general-issues-advisory-on-youth-mental-health-crisis-further-exposed-by-covid-19-pandemic/>.

II. PARTIES

A. Plaintiff

11. The State, by and through its Department of the Attorney General (“Attorney General”), brings this action. The Attorney General is the chief law officer of Hawai‘i and has the authority to file civil actions to protect public rights and interests. HRS § 661-10. This lawsuit is brought pursuant to the Attorney General’s independent statutory authority, and common law authority, to represent the public interest.

12. The Attorney General has a duty to enforce the civil provisions of the UDAP, HRS § 480-20, and has standing to bring an action based upon unfair or deceptive acts or practices prohibited by the UDAP, HRS § 480-2(d).

13. The Attorney General is authorized by the UDAP to collect civil penalties of not less than \$500 nor more than \$10,000 for each violation of the UDAP, HRS § 480-3.1, and may recover threefold actual damages sustained by Hawai‘i by reason of anything forbidden by the chapter. Each day a violation occurs constitutes a separate violation under the statute.

14. The Attorney General is further authorized to obtain injunctive relief to halt violations of, and enforce compliance with, the UDAP, HRS § 480-15.

B. Defendants

15. Defendant ByteDance Inc. is a Delaware corporation with its principal place of business in San Jose, California. ByteDance designs, owns, and/or operates TikTok, and designs, develops, owns, operates, and/or markets the TikTok social media platform, an application that is widely marketed by TikTok and available to users throughout Hawai‘i.

16. Defendant TikTok Inc. is a for-profit entity incorporated in California. TikTok designs, owns, and operates a social media application and platform known as “TikTok” that is widely marketed by TikTok and available to minors in Hawai‘i. TikTok Inc. is headquartered in

Culver City, California. TikTok Inc. has a valuation of at least \$40–100 billion. TikTok Inc. reportedly generated approximately \$14 billion in revenue in 2024.

17. Defendant TikTok Ltd. wholly owns its subsidiary TikTok LLC which is, and at all relevant times was, a Delaware limited liability company.

18. Defendant ByteDance Ltd. is a multinational internet technology holding company and is the parent company of TikTok Inc., TikTok Ltd., and ByteDance Inc. ByteDance Ltd. is headquartered in Beijing, China and registered in the Cayman Islands. ByteDance Ltd. designs, owns, and/or operates TikTok, and designs, owns, and/or operates the TikTok social media platform, an application that is widely marketed by TikTok and available to minors throughout Hawai‘i.

III. JURISDICTION AND VENUE

19. This Court has jurisdiction pursuant to article VI, section 1, of the Hawai‘i Constitution and HRS § 603-21.5. The State seeks civil penalties in excess of \$40,000.

20. This Court has jurisdiction over Defendants because Defendants have intentionally availed themselves of the Hawai‘i market so as to render the exercise of jurisdiction by the Hawai‘i courts consistent with traditional notions of fair play and substantial justice.

21. The violations of law alleged in this Complaint occurred throughout Hawai‘i, including within the City and County of Honolulu.

22. Venue for this action properly lies in the Circuit Court of the First Circuit, pursuant to HRS §§ 480-21 and 603-36, because Defendants transact business in the City and County of Honolulu, or some of the transactions upon which this action is based occurred in the City and County of Honolulu.

IV. FACTUAL ALLEGATIONS

A. Background.

1. What is TikTok?

23. In 2012, Beijing-based technologist Zhang Yiming paired up with American venture capitalist Matt Huang to launch ByteDance and its first platform, Jinri Toutiao (“Today’s Headlines”), which utilized artificial intelligence (“AI”) to gather and present world news to users on a single feed.

24. Following the success of its first platform, in 2016, ByteDance created Douyin, a Chinese music-based app loosely modeled on the popular app Musical.ly. Musical.ly allowed users, including minor users, to create 15-second videos of themselves lip-synching, dancing, etc., to popular songs and movie scenes, and then post them to a scrollable feed for others to see. Musical.ly was a big success in the United States, drawing American teen users.

25. In 2017, ByteDance launched TikTok, a version of Douyin for the non-Chinese market, and acquired Musical.ly for \$1 billion. Nine months later, ByteDance merged Musical.ly into the existing TikTok, and a global version of TikTok was born.

26. From its inception, Musical.ly, the inspiration and predecessor of the modern day TikTok, was focused on youth. It quickly became extremely popular with teens and tweens. According to Alex Zhu, the founder of Muscial.ly and one of the first CEO’s of TikTok, the inspiration for Musical.ly came to him when he was watching the behavior of a large group of teens on a crowded San Francisco Bay Area train. “Teens are so passionate about social media,

photos, videos, and music, that it made me think, ‘Can we combine these three very powerful elements into one app and build a social network for music videos?’”⁶

27. A 2017 *Forbes* article described a meeting of “musers” at Musical.ly’s Santa Monica offices: “Teenage girls with faces perfectly painted per the latest Instagram makeup trends snap selfies with younger tweens. Hip-hop blares in the background as a trio of young multi-hyphenates jostle for space in front of an iPhone where they gesticulate, mouth along to lyrics and pose.”⁷

28. By 2017 Musical.ly had grown to over 200 million users, most between the ages of 13 and 21.⁸ Over 13 million videos are uploaded daily, and the number of registered users more than tripled between 2016 and 2017.⁹ When TikTok acquired Musical.ly in 2017, all of its teen and tween users instantly became TikTok users.¹⁰

29. Since its launch in 2018, TikTok’s user base and revenue have grown exponentially. In late 2021, ByteDance publicly stated that TikTok had 1 billion active global users, up from 55 million in early 2018 and 700 million in mid-2020.¹¹ In March 2023, TikTok CEO Shou Chew testified that TikTok has over 150 million monthly active users in the United States.¹² In 2025, *Reuters* reported that ByteDance was launching a new employee share buyback

⁶ Murray Newlands, *The Origin and Future of America’s Hottest New App: musical.ly*, *Forbes* (June 10, 2016, at 4:36 PM), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mnewlands/2016/06/10/the-origin-and-future-of-americas-hottest-new-app-musical-ly/>.

⁷ Natalie Robehmed, *From Musers to Money: Inside Video App Musical.ly’s Coming of Age*, *Forbes* (May 15, 2017, at 12:07 PM), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/natalierobehmed/2017/05/11/from-musers-to-money-inside-video-app-musical-lys-coming-of-age/>.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Press Release, *musical.ly and TikTok unite to debut new worldwide short-form video platform upgraded app, titled TikTok, now available globally*, TikTok (Aug. 2, 2018), <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/musical-ly-and?lang=en>.

¹¹ Jessica Bursztynsky, *TikTok says 1 billion people use the app each month*, CNBC (Sept. 27, 2021, at 11:49 AM), <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/09/27/tiktok-reaches-1-billion-monthly-users.html>.

¹² *TikTok: How Congress Can Safeguard American Data Privacy and Protect Children From Online Harms: Hearing Before the H. Comm. on Energy & Com.*, 118th Cong. 1 (2023),

which valued ByteDance at over \$330 billion.¹³ In the second quarter of 2025, ByteDance reported revenue of \$48 billion, surpassing Meta’s revenue of \$42.3 billion and making ByteDance the largest social media company in the world based on revenue.¹⁴ As 2024, ByteDance founder Zhang Yiming is the richest person in China.¹⁵

30. This astronomical growth and wealth have been powered by, and comes at the expense of, children, who continue to comprise a large portion of TikTok’s U.S. user base. In July 2020, TikTok reported that more than one-third of its 49 million daily users in the United States were 14 years old or younger. Internal documents reveal that TikTok has been incredibly successful at reaching U.S. users under the age of 18.¹⁶ A 2024 *Pew Research Center* survey reported that 63% of American teenagers (age 13–17) use TikTok, with most teenagers (57%) using the platform daily.¹⁷ Among teenage TikTok users, 16% say they use the platform almost constantly. In another report, more than 13% of young users stated that they “wouldn’t want to live without” TikTok.¹⁸

31. Internal documents reveal that U.S. children average nearly two hours a day on the TikTok platform, with many spending more than four hours a day on TikTok alone.¹⁹

<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/IF/IF00/20230323/115519/HHRG-118-IF00-Wstate-ChewS-20230323.pdf> (written testimony of Shou Chew, CEO, TikTok Inc.).

¹³ Krystal Hu *et al.*, *TikTok owner Bytedance eyes valuation of over \$330 billion as revenue surpasses Meta*, Reuters (Aug. 27, 2025), <https://www.reuters.com/business/finance/tiktok-owner-bytedance-sets-valuation-over-330-billion-revenue-grows-sources-say-2025-08-27/>.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ Sasha Rogelberg, *TikTok’s founder is now China’s richest person*, Fortune (Oct. 29, 2024, at 1:04 PM), <https://fortune.com/2024/10/29/tiktok-founder-china-richest-person-bytedance-zhang-yiming/>.

¹⁶ TT-MS-AG-000080170 at slide 6.

¹⁷ Michelle Faverio & Olivia Sidoti, *Teens, Social Media and Technology 2024*, Pew Rsch. Ctr. (Dec. 12, 2024), <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2024/12/12/teens-social-media-and-technology-2024>.

¹⁸ Victoria Rideout *et al.*, *The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens, 2021* at 31, Common Sense Media (2022), www.common Sense Media.org/sites/default/files/research/report/8-18-census-integrated-report-final-web_0.pdf.

¹⁹ Notice Filing Partially Unsealed Compl., Ex. A (“Utah AG Complaint”) ¶ 49, *Utah Div. Consumer Prot. v. TikTok Inc.*, No. 230907634 (3d Jud. Dist. Ct. Jan. 25, 2024).

32. Dating back to its mimicry and acquisition of Musical.ly, TikTok’s capture of the youth market has been the result of a carefully executed campaign. According to Alex Zhu “[t]eenagers in the U.S. [were] a golden audience” for TikTok.²⁰ TikTok accordingly implemented a series of platform features designed to attract and addict young users. As Zhu explained in 2019: “Even if you have tens of millions of users, you have to keep them always engaged.”²¹ This engagement has come at the cost of the health of young users in the State and beyond.

2. The TikTok business model—user engagement over all else.

33. TikTok’s business model, like those of other social media companies, is based on the monetization of its users: sell access and information about its users to advertisers and companies so they can sell their products and services. Every user, and every minute that user spends on TikTok’s platform, helps generate revenue for TikTok. The result is a business model based on user engagement: the more users on a platform, and the more time a user spends on the platform, the more ads the platform can sell and the more information it can collect. While lucrative, this business model creates a strong incentive to encourage addictive behavior—there are only 24 hours in a day and TikTok’s goal is to capture as much of that time as possible. The result is a platform that is powerfully addictive and successful in capturing the time and attention of young users. Researchers studying the effect that social media has on the brain have shown

²⁰ Paul Mozur, *Chinese Tech Firms Forced to Choose Market: Home or Everywhere Else*, N.Y. Times (Aug. 9, 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/10/technology/china-homegrown-internet-companies-rest-of-the-world.html>.

²¹ Biz Carson, *How a failed education startup turned into Musical.ly, the most popular app you’ve probably never heard of*, Bus. Insider (May 28, 2016), <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/failed-education-startup-turned-musical-132120470.html>.

that social media exploits “the same neural circuitry” as “seen in those with gambling addiction and recreational drug users” to “keep consumers using their products as much as possible[.]”²²

34. The pressure to keep consumers (users) on its platform for as long as possible is only increasing with the launch of TikTok Shop. Launched in the U.S. only two years ago, TikTok’s online shopping service could sell an estimated \$15 billion in merchandise to Americans this year.²³ Globally, TikTok’s sales of \$19 billion rival that of Ebay (with \$20.1 billion in sales), even though Ebay was started three decades ago.²⁴ TikTok’s sales to U.S. consumers are critical to its rapid growth and profitability. According to analysts, TikTok sold \$4 billion to \$4.5 billion worth of products in the U.S. in its third quarter, the most of any country and a 125 percent quarter-over-quarter increase.

35. None of this is good for American kids, or more specifically, for Hawai‘i kids. Children are the more vulnerable users of TikTok’s platform and have more free time than their adult counterparts. Because children use TikTok’s platform more than adults, they see more ads, and as a result can generate more ad revenue for TikTok. Youth are also likely to continue using social media platforms as they age, meaning if TikTok can attract young users, it has a pipeline for long-term growth and success.

36. Users, including young users also generate a trove of personal data about their preferences, habits, and behaviors. Information about its users is TikTok’s most valuable commodity, and users provide this valuable personal information to TikTok in exchange for being able to download and use the TikTok app. TikTok mines and commodifies this data,

²² Jena Hilliard, *Social Media Addiction: What is Social Media Addiction?*, Addiction Ctr. (July 28, 2025), <https://www.addictioncenter.com/drugs/social-media-addiction/>.

²³ Jaclyn Peiser, *How TikTok came to rival eBay as a global online shopping destination*, Washington Post (November 16, 2025), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2025/11/16/tiktok-shop-growth-ebay/>.

²⁴ *Id.*

selling to third parties, including advertisers, the ability to reach incredibly narrow tranches of the population, including children. TikTok has placed its platforms into the stream of commerce and generated revenue through the distribution of its platforms, and its harvesting and use of vast amounts of valuable personal data. TikTok’s skyrocketing revenue comes at the expense of children, including children in Hawai‘i, and this exploitation has become central to TikTok’s immense profitability.

37. State and federal laws recognize the vulnerability of children under 13, particularly in the Internet Age. It is well established under state law that children lack the legal or mental capacity to make informed decisions about their own well-being. In addition, Congress enacted COPPA in 1999.²⁵ COPPA regulates the conditions under which Defendants can collect, use, or disclose the personal information of children under 13. Under COPPA, developers of platforms and websites that are directed to or known to be used by children under 13 cannot lawfully obtain the individually identifiable information of such children without first obtaining verifiable consent from their parents.²⁶

38. COPPA was enacted precisely because Congress recognized that children under age 13 are particularly vulnerable to being taken advantage of by unscrupulous website operators. As a June 1998 report by the FTC observed, “the immediacy and ease with which personal information can be collected from children online, combined with the limited capacity of children to understand fully the potentially serious safety and privacy implications of

²⁵ See 15 U.S.C. §§ 6501–6506.

²⁶ The Federal Trade Commission (“FTC”) clarified that acceptable methods for obtaining verifiable parental consent include: (a) providing a form for parents to sign and return; (b) requiring the use of a credit card, debit card, or other online payment system that provides notification of each transaction to the primary account holder; (c) connecting to trained personnel via video-conference; (d) calling a toll-free number staffed by trained personnel; (e) asking knowledge-based challenge questions; or (f) verifying a photo-ID from the parent compared to a second photo using facial recognition technology. *Complying with COPPA: Frequently Asked Questions*, F.T.C. (July 2020, edited Jan. 2025), <https://www.ftc.gov/business-guidance/resources/complying-coppa-frequently-asked-questions>.

providing that information, have created deep concerns about current information practices involving children online.”²⁷ The same report observed that children under the age of 13 “generally lack the developmental capacity and judgment to give meaningful consent to the release of personal information to a third party.”²⁸

39. Contemporaneous testimony by the Chairman of the FTC observed that the internet “make[s] it easy for children to disclose their personal information to the general public without their parents’ awareness or consent. Such public disclosures raise safety concerns.”²⁹ Further, “the practice of collecting personal identifying information directly from children without parental consent is clearly troubling, since its [sic] teaches children to reveal their personal information to strangers and circumvents parental control over their family’s information.”³⁰

40. As described below, TikTok does not conduct proper age verification or authentication. Instead, TikTok relies on users to self-report their age. This unenforceable and facially inadequate system allows children under 13 to easily create accounts on its platform. TikTok knows this, which is why it has not implemented necessary and robust age verification or authentication features.

²⁷ *Privacy Online: A Report to Congress* at 6, F.T.C. (1998), <https://www.ftc.gov/sites/default/files/documents/reports/privacy-online-report-congress/priv-23a.pdf>.

²⁸ *Id.* at 5.

²⁹ *S. 2326, Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998: Hearing Before the Subcomm. on Commc’ns of the Comm. on Com., Sci., & Transp. U.S. S. at 4*, 105th Cong. 2 (1998), https://www.ftc.gov/sites/default/files/documents/public_statements/prepared-statement-federal-trade-commission-protection-childrens-privacy-world-wide-web/priva998.pdf (prepared statement of Robert Pitofsky, Chairman, FTC).

³⁰ *Id.*

41. Despite these state and federal requirements, TikTok has turned a blind eye to collecting children's data. It has done this because children are financially lucrative, particularly when they are addicted to or compulsively using TikTok's platform.

3. Who runs TikTok?

42. The decision to exploit American children for economic gain is being made at the highest levels of the corporate organization. ByteDance Ltd. exclusively controls and operates the TikTok platform. In testimony before the United States House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce in 2023, TikTok CEO Shou Chew admitted that he was in regular communication to ByteDance Ltd. CEO Liang Rubo.³¹ ByteDance Ltd. admitted that its personnel outside the United States can access information from American TikTok users including public videos and comments. On information and belief, ByteDance Ltd. also has access to United States TikTok users' private information.

43. Despite efforts to portray TikTok as separate from Douyin (the version of TikTok distributed in China), the two companies share many overlapping personnel and technologies, as the 2023 report, *TikTok, ByteDance and Their Ties to the Chinese Communist Party* ("Australian Senate Report"), produced by the Australian Senate Select Committee on Foreign Interference through Social Media, makes clear.³² TikTok's engineering manager works on both TikTok and Douyin, and TikTok Inc.'s development processes are closely intertwined with Douyin's processes. TikTok Inc.'s employees and data systems are deeply interwoven into Byte Dance Ltd.'s ecosystem.

³¹ *TikTok: How Congress Can Safeguard American Data Privacy and Protect Children from Online Harms: Hearing Before the H. Comm. on Energy & Com. at 24, 118th Cong. 1 (2023)*, <https://www.congress.gov/118/chrg/CHRG-118hhrg53839/CHRG-118hhrg53839.pdf>.

³² Rachel Lee *et al.*, *TikTok, ByteDance and Their Ties to the Chinese Communist Party: Submission to the Senate Select Committee on Foreign Interference through Social Media* (Submission No. 34, Mar. 14, 2023), <https://t.co/ROPtMMud89>.

44. The source code that makes up TikTok’s recommendation algorithm, one of the key drivers behind TikTok’s success, was originally written by ByteDance employees in China and contains some of the same underlying basic technology as Douyin.^{33, 34}

45. For many years, TikTok’s algorithms have belonged to ByteDance Ltd.³⁵

46. ByteDance Ltd. also plays a role in hiring key personnel at TikTok.³⁶

47. For much of TikTok’s existence, high-level ByteDance Ltd. employees served in dual roles for both ByteDance Ltd. and TikTok Inc. These employees included: (1) Vanessa Pappas, the former Head of TikTok Inc. and interim head of the global TikTok business for ByteDance Ltd.; (2) Roland Cloutier, former Global Chief Security Officer, who provided cyber risk and data security support for both TikTok Inc. and ByteDance Ltd.; and (3) Shou Chew, TikTok’s CEO and CFO of ByteDance Ltd., who reports to the CEO of ByteDance Ltd.³⁷

48. The Australian Senate Report also alleges that ByteDance Ltd. is heavily influenced by the Chinese Communist Party.³⁸ The Australian Senate Report notes ByteDance Ltd.’s Editor in Chief, Zhang Fuping, is a Chinese Communist Party Secretary.³⁹ The report

³³ Utah AG Complaint ¶ 148, *Utah Div. Consumer Prot. v. TikTok Inc.*, No. 230907634 (3d Jud. Dist. Ct. Jan. 25, 2024).

³⁴ Letter from Shou Zi Chew, CEO, TikTok, to the Hon. Marsha Blackburn, Roger Wicker, John Thune, Roy Blunt, Ted Cruz, Jerry Moran, Shelley Moore Capito, Cynthia Lummis, and Steve Daines (“June 2022 Letter to U.S. Senators”) at 4, U.S. Senate (June 30, 2022), <https://bit.ly/3hqccLL>.

³⁵ Zhou Xin & Tracy Qu, *TikTok’s algorithm not for sale, ByteDance tells US*, S. China Morning Post (Oct. 15, 2020, at 4:10 PM), <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3101362/tiktoks-algorithm-not-sale-bytedance-tells-us-source>.

³⁶ June 2022 Letter to U.S. Senators at 5, U.S. Senate (June 30, 2022), <https://bit.ly/3hqccLL>.

³⁷ See *TikTok Names CEO and COO*, TikTok (Aug. 16, 2019), <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/tiktok-names-ceo-and-coo?lang=en>; see also Ryan Mac & Chang Che, *TikTok’s C.E.O. Navigates the Limits of His Power*, N.Y. Times (Jan. 27, 2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/16/technology/tiktok-ceo-shou-zi-chew.html>.

³⁸ Rachel Lee *et al.*, *TikTok, ByteDance and Their Ties to the Chinese Communist Party: Submission to the Senate Select Committee on Foreign Interference through Social Media* (Submission No. 34, Mar. 14, 2023), <https://t.co/ROPtMMud89>.

³⁹ *Id.* at 54.

concludes that ByteDance Ltd. is a “‘hybrid’ state-private entity” at least partially controlled by the Chinese government.⁴⁰

49. ByteDance Ltd. also designed and operates the Lark communication platform for use by all its subsidiaries, including ByteDance Inc. and TikTok Inc. All ByteDance Ltd., ByteDance Inc., and TikTok Inc. personnel have a Lark account and accompanying profile. All oral, video, and written communications between ByteDance Ltd., ByteDance Inc., and TikTok Inc. employees are either conducted face-to-face or through Lark. All written communications or documents exchanged through Lark are stored on Lark’s database. Lark also provides real-time translation subtitling for oral and video communications between English-speaking and Chinese-speaking personnel. Transcripts of these translated oral and video conversations are stored on Lark’s database.

50. Other public reports demonstrate that multiple former TikTok employees have reported that ByteDance Ltd. exercises significant control over TikTok’s decision making and operations. Twelve former TikTok and ByteDance Ltd. Employees and executives reported that CEO Shou Zi Chew has “limited” decision making power.⁴¹ Instead, major decisions related to TikTok are made by ByteDance Ltd. founder Zhang Yiming and other ByteDance Ltd. officials in China.⁴²

51. Senior TikTok employees hired to head departments have left the company after learning they would not be able to significantly influence decision making.⁴³

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 7.

⁴¹ Ryan Mac & Chang Che, *TikTok’s C.E.O. Navigates the Limits of His Power*, N.Y. Times (Jan. 27, 2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/16/technology/tiktok-ceo-shou-zi-chew.html>.

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ Emily Baker-White, *TikTok is Bleeding U.S. Execs Because China is Still Calling the Shots, Ex-Employees Say*, Forbes (Nov. 28, 2022, at 2:16 PM), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/emilybaker-white/2022/09/21/tiktok-bleeding-us-execs-china-control-bytedance/?sh=2542b5099707>.

52. ByteDance Ltd.’s own internal audit team prepared a risk assessment in late 2021 and found that numerous senior employees felt “that themselves and their teams are just ‘figureheads’ or ‘powerless ombudsmen’ who are ‘functionally subject to the control of [China]-based teams.’”⁴⁴

53. As recently as 2022, employees that work on product, engineering, and strategy at TikTok said “they reported directly into ByteDance leadership in China, bypassing TikTok’s executive suite.”⁴⁵ Similarly, former TikTok employees have stated that “nearly 100% of TikTok’s product development is led by Chinese ByteDance employees.”⁴⁶

54. Other employees have described ByteDance Ltd. as being “heavily involved” in decision making and operations at TikTok, with “blurry” boundaries between the two companies.⁴⁷ According to employees, these blurred lines included U.S.-based employees working during Chinese business hours to answer their ByteDance Ltd. counterparts’ questions.⁴⁸ Further, one TikTok employee stated ByteDance Ltd. employees could access U.S. user data.⁴⁹

55. Statements from other TikTok employees also suggest the lines between TikTok and ByteDance Ltd. are almost nonexistent, with ByteDance Ltd. being the “central hub for pretty much everything. . . . Beijing managers sign off on major decisions involving U.S.

⁴⁴ Emily Baker-White, *A China-Based ByteDance Team Investigated TikTok’s Global Security Chief, Who Oversaw U.S. Data Concerns*, Forbes (Nov. 28, 2022, at 2:17 PM), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/emilybaker-white/2022/10/25/bytedance-tiktok-investigation-global-chief-security-officer-roland-cloutier>.

⁴⁵ Emily Baker-White, *TikTok is Bleeding U.S. Execs Because China is Still Calling the Shots*, Forbes (Nov. 28, 2022, at 2:16 PM), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/emilybaker-white/2022/09/21/tiktok-bleeding-us-execs-china-control-bytedance/?sh=2542b5099707>.

⁴⁶ Salvador Rodriguez, *TikTok insiders say social media company is tightly controlled by Chinese parent ByteDance*, CNBC (June 25, 2021, at 8:09 PM), <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/06/25/tiktok-insiders-say-chinese-parent-bytedance-in-control.html>.

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ *Id.*

operations, including from the teams responsible for protecting Americans’ data and deciding which videos should be removed.”⁵⁰ Further, TikTok employees stated ByteDance Ltd. officials “lead TikTok’s design and engineering teams and oversee the software that U.S. employees use to chat with colleagues and manage their work. They’re even the final decision-makers on human resources matters, such as whether an American employee can work remotely.”⁵¹ ByteDance has been making decisions “both large and small” about all aspects of TikTok. It directed TikTok’s budget, operated TikTok’s internal document storage platform, handled media criticism directed at TikTok, and entered into contracts on behalf of TikTok to provide key services for the TikTok platform.⁵²

56. In fact, one former TikTok employee reported to *Forbes* that their paycheck listed ByteDance as the check’s drawer, not TikTok.⁵³ And another employee reported that their contract listed TikTok as their employer, but their tax returns listed ByteDance.⁵⁴

B. TikTok’s lack of age verification and features facilitate the sexual exploitation of children.

1. TikTok allows millions of children and teenagers to use its platform.

57. TikTok’s growth among youth in the U.S. has been enabled by its ineffective age verification and parental control procedures, which allow children under 13 unfettered access to the platform, without regard to parental consent, despite the fact that TikTok’s terms of service require consent of parents or guardians for minors.

⁵⁰ Drew Harwell & Elizabeth Dwoskin, *As Washington Wavers on TikTok, Beijing Exerts Control*, Wash. Post (Oct. 30, 2022, at 1:33 PM), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/interactive/2022/bytedance-tiktok-privacy-china>.

⁵¹ *Id.*

⁵² Utah AG Complaint ¶¶ 145–47, *UT Div. Consumer Prot. v. TikTok Inc.*, No. 230907634 (3d Jud. Dist. Ct. Jan. 25, 2024).

⁵³ Emily Baker-White, *TikTok is Bleeding U.S. Execs Because China is Still Calling the Shots*, *Forbes* (Nov. 28, 2022, at 2:16 PM), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/emilybaker-white/2022/09/21/tiktok-bleeding-us-execs-china-control-bytedance/?sh=2542b5099707>.

⁵⁴ *Id.*

58. When a user first opens TikTok, they are prompted to “Log in to TikTok” or “Sign up” for an account using a phone number or email address. TikTok then asks, “When’s your birthday?”

59. TikTok does not verify the age that its users report. Nor does it use any method to verify that users who acknowledge that they are minors have the consent of their parents or legal guardians to use the platform.

60. TikTok knows that many of its U.S. users under the age of 13 fail to report their birthdates accurately.⁵⁵ In July 2020, TikTok classified more than a third of its 49 million daily users in the United States as 14 years old or younger.⁵⁶ While some of those users were 13 or 14, at least one former employee reported that TikTok had actual knowledge of children even younger based on videos posted on the TikTok platform—yet failed to promptly take down those videos or close those accounts.⁵⁷

61. According to TikTok’s Trust and Safety team, one of the biggest challenges it faces is “determining who is a minor (defined as users 13-17 years old).”⁵⁸

62. Moreover, TikTok users under 13 can easily delete their age-restricted accounts and sign up for an over-13 account on the same mobile device—without any restriction or verification—by simply inputting a fake birthdate.

⁵⁵ Jon Russell, *Musical.ly Defends its Handling of Young Users, As it Races Past 40M MAUs*, TechCrunch (Dec. 6, 2016, at 8:12 AM), <https://techcrunch.com/2016/12/06/musically-techcrunch-disrupt-london/>.

⁵⁶ Raymond Zhong & Sheera Frenkel, *A Third of TikTok’s U.S. Users May Be 14 or Under, Raising Safety Questions*, N.Y. Times (Sept. 17, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/14/technology/TikTok-underage-users-ftc.html>.

⁵⁷ *Id.*

⁵⁸ TT-MS-AG-000199632 at 637.

63. This is not a new problem for TikTok. In 2019, the FTC alleged that despite the company’s knowledge of a significant number of users who were under 13, the company, then-Musical.ly, failed to comply with COPPA.⁵⁹

64. TikTok settled those claims by agreeing to pay what was then the largest ever civil penalty under COPPA as well as to a consent decree setting forth several forms of injunctive relief.⁶⁰

65. Then, TikTok made available to users under 13 what it describes as a “limited, separate app experience.”⁶¹ The child version of TikTok restricts users from posting videos through the app. Children can still, however, record and watch videos on TikTok.⁶² For that reason, experts fear the app is “designed to fuel [kids’] interest in the grown-up version,” a business growth strategy disguised as a compliance tool.⁶³

66. Having been sued by the FTC once over child users, one would expect TikTok to take its legal obligations with respect to children seriously. Instead, TikTok continued to flout the law, and in August 2024, the FTC filed a second action against TikTok over the same issues.

According to the FTC’s press release:

[TikTok was] aware of the need to comply with the COPPA Rule and the 2019 consent order and knew about TikTok’s compliance failures that put children’s data and privacy at risk. Instead of complying, ByteDance and TikTok spent years

⁵⁹ Compl. Civil Penalties, Permanent Inj., & Other Equitable Relief (“Musical.ly Complaint”) ¶¶ 26–27, *United States v. Musical.ly*, No. 2:19-cv-01439 (C.D. Cal. Feb. 27, 2019), ECF No. 1.

⁶⁰ Lesley Fair, *Largest FTC COPPA settlement requires Musical.ly to change its tune*, F.T.C. (Feb. 27, 2019), <https://www.ftc.gov/business-guidance/blog/2019/02/largest-ftc-coppa-settlement-requires-musically-change-its-tune>.

⁶¹ Dami Lee, *TikTok stops young users from uploading videos after FTC settlement*, Verge (Feb. 27, 2019, at 1:04 PM), <https://www.theverge.com/2019/2/27/18243510/tiktok-age-young-user-videos-ftc-settlement-13-childrens-privacy-law>.

⁶² *Id.*

⁶³ Leonard Sax, *Is TikTok Dangerous for Teens?*, Inst. Fam. Stud. (Mar. 29, 2022), <https://ifstudies.org/blog/is-tiktok-dangerous-for-teens->.

knowingly allowing millions of children under 13 on their platform designated for users 13 years and older in violation of COPPA[.]⁶⁴

67. The FTC’s second complaint alleges that as of 2020, TikTok had a policy of maintaining accounts of children that it knew were under 13 unless the child made an explicit admission of age and other rigid conditions were met. TikTok human reviewers spent an average of only *5 to 7 seconds* reviewing each account to determine whether the account belong to a child, and TikTok continued to collect personal data from these underage users, including data that would enable TikTok to target advertising to them—without notifying their parents and obtaining consent as required by COPPA.⁶⁵

2. TikTok aggressively markets its platform to children and teenagers.

68. TikTok has designed and aggressively marketed TikTok to attract and profit from young users in the U.S.

69. TikTok sells itself as a social media company, but its actual source of revenue is ad sales, which have boomed. In 2023, TikTok reported record earnings of \$16 billion in the U.S.⁶⁶ Researchers also estimate that 35% of TikTok’s 2022 U.S. ad revenue was derived from users under age 18.⁶⁷

70. Central to these revenues is TikTok’s ability to attract young users, a demographic that ByteDance has aggressively pursued since the product’s launch.

⁶⁴ Press Release, *FTC Investigation Leads to Lawsuit Against TikTok and ByteDance for Flagrantly Violating Children’s Privacy Law*, F.T.C. (Aug. 2, 2024), <https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/news/press-releases/2024/08/ftc-investigation-leads-lawsuit-against-tiktok-bytedance-flagrantly-violating-childrens-privacy-law>.

⁶⁵ *Id.*

⁶⁶ *TikTok’s US revenue hits \$16bln as Washington threatens ban*, Fin. Times (Mar. 15, 2024), <https://www.ft.com/content/275bd036-8bc2-4308-a5c9-d288325b91a9>.

⁶⁷ Maya Brownstein, *Social media platforms generate billions in annual ad revenue from U.S. youth*, Harv. T.H. Chan Sch. Pub. Health (Dec. 27, 2023), <https://hsph.harvard.edu/news/social-media-platforms-generate-billions-in-annual-ad-revenue-from-u-s-youth>.

71. The initial iteration of TikTok allowed users to lip sync pop music by celebrities who appealed primarily to teens and tweens (e.g., Selena Gomez and Ariana Grande). It labeled folders with names attractive to youth (e.g., “Disney” and “school”); and included in those folders songs such as “Can You Feel the Love Tonight” from the movie “The Lion King,” “You’ve Got a Friend in Me” from the movie “Toy Story,” and other renditions covering school-related subjects or school-themed television shows and movies.⁶⁸

72. Even TikTok’s sign-up process demonstrates that young users are what it values most. In 2016, the birthdate for those signing up for the Musical.ly app defaulted to the year 2000 (i.e., 16 years old).⁶⁹ In December 2016, one of Musical.ly’s founders, Alex Zhu, confirmed the company had actual knowledge that “a lot of the top users they’re under 13.”⁷⁰

3. TikTok’s live streaming feature (TikTok LIVE) facilitates the sexual exploitation of children.

73. Having deliberately and successfully attracted large number of children, including children in Hawai‘i, to its platform, one would expect TikTok to take steps to keep its young users safe.

74. But this is not the case as demonstrated by TikTok’s live streaming feature, “TikTok LIVE” or “LIVE”. Contrary to representations that TikTok does “not allow content that may put young people at risk of psychological, physical, or developmental harm”⁷¹—the

⁶⁸ See Musical.ly Complaint ¶¶ 26–27, *United States v. Musical.ly*, No. 2:19-cv-01439 (C.D. Cal. Feb. 27, 2019), ECF No. 1.

⁶⁹ Melia Robinson, *How to Use Musical.ly, the app with 150 million users that teens are obsessed with*, Bus. Insider (Dec. 7, 2016, at 8:28 AM), <https://www.businessinsider.com/how-to-use-musically-app-2016-12>.

⁷⁰ TechCrunch, *From Brush to Canvas with Alex Zhu of Musical.ly* at 10:02–10:11, YouTube (Dec. 6, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ey15v81pwII>.

⁷¹ *Youth Safety and Well-Being*, TikTok (May 17, 2024), <https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/en/youth-safety> [<https://web.archive.org/web/20250715224021/https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/en/youth-safety>].

company knows LIVE operates in part like a virtual strip club, providing streamers with a performance stage, and allowing users to hand over virtual money.

75. Due to known flaws in its age-gating, TikTok has allowed children and teenagers to access TikTok LIVE, and be exploited, despite not reaching the age requirement.

76. Until mid-2022, TikTok allowed users who said they were over the age of 16 to access TikTok LIVE. After receiving negative press coverage, TikTok raised the age to 18.

77. However, both before and after that change, TikTok was aware that underage users, particularly young girls, were able to access and stream on TikTok LIVE. If a user signed up for TikTok via another social media platform, they were granted an 18+ experience on TikTok, even if they were underage.⁷²

78. This was not a hypothetical concern. TikTok’s internal research revealed that more than 100,000 TikTok LIVEs were hosted by users under the age of 15 in just one month and underage users could “Easily Access Livestream Feed.”⁷³ At the same time, underage hosts were receiving a “significant #” of messages sent by older users.⁷⁴ TikTok knew that “Live Interaction Enables Exploitation of Live Hosts.”⁷⁵

79. This put users, particularly girls under the age of 15, at “risk of grooming.”⁷⁶ This risk was exacerbated by TikTok’s design choices. In TikTok’s own words, “Transactional sexual content hits most business’ metrics of success & is pushed to TopLives because Algo prioritizes engagement.”⁷⁷

⁷² TT-MS-AG-000205212.

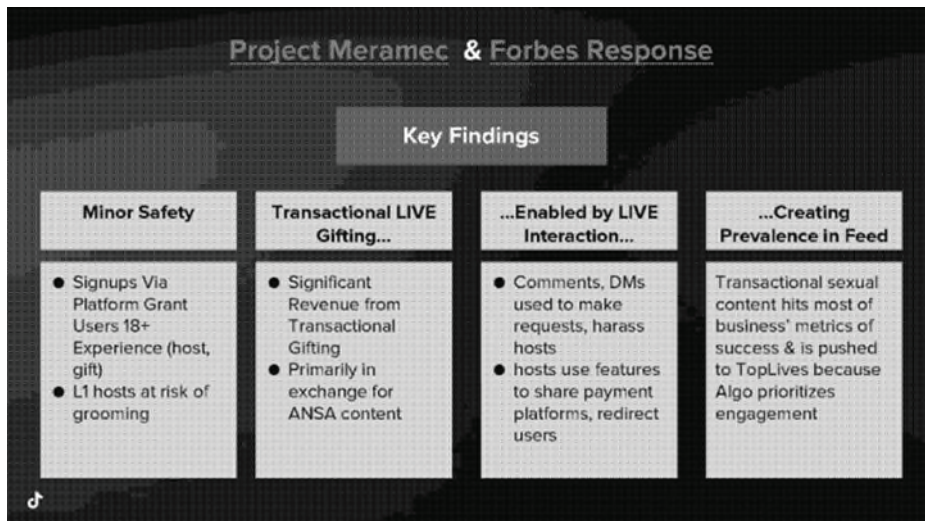
⁷³ *Id.* at TT-MS-AG-000205274.

⁷⁴ *Id.*

⁷⁵ *Id.*

⁷⁶ *Id.*

⁷⁷ *Id.*



80. TikTok’s own Trust and Safety Team also acknowledged that “perform[ing] sexualized behavior in exchange for virtual items”⁷⁸ is:

A. “Exposing minors to a misleading environment that encourages addiction and impulsive purchasing of virtual items”;⁷⁹ and

B. “Exposing minors to repeated sexualized content puts them at development risk.”⁸⁰

81. At the same time, TikTok knew users were reporting that TikTok LIVE was “[REDACTED]”⁸¹

82. Despite this knowledge, TikTok did not act until unfavorable press coverage forced their hand.

83. An April 2022 *Forbes* article detailed how in hundreds of recent TikTok livestreams, “viewers regularly use the comments to urge young girls to perform acts that appear

⁷⁸ TT-MS-AG-004070156 at p. 2.

⁷⁹ TT-MS-AG-004072825 at 829.

⁸⁰ *Id.*

⁸¹ TT-MS-AG-000205212 at 233.

to toe the line of child pornography—rewarding those who oblige with TikTok gifts, which can be redeemed for money, or off-platform payments.”⁸²

84. In one example, a 14-year-old girl was asked to expose various parts of her body to TikTok users, including a 68-year-old man, in exchange for gifts created and sold by TikTok. The article detailed how TikTok users tell underage girls to perform sexually suggestive and even explicit act on camera. “In return, the girls are showered with virtual gifts, like flowers, hearts, ice cream cones and lollipops, that can be converted to cash.”⁸³

85. These gifts are a creation of TikTok. TikTok has created a system where users can purchase a virtual currency called “TikTok Coins” (“Coins”). Users purchase Coins directly through TikTok’s website or mobile app or through the Apple or Google app store, and cash out these Coins for real money. TikTok achieves massive profits as it only “shares with creators 50% of its net revenue from virtual items.”⁸⁴

86. Once users purchase Coins, they can buy and send Gifts to streamers. These Gifts appear as animated emojis in a LIVE session’s chat, but carry real cash value for the hosts. Each Gift costs a different number of Coins—for example, an “Ice Cream Cone” costs one Coin, while the “Lion” emoji costs 29,999 Coins (\$299.99).⁸⁵

⁸² Alexandra S. Levine, *How TikTok Live Became ‘A Strip Club Filled with Fifteen-Year-Olds’*, Forbes (Dec. 7, 2022, at 4:00 PM), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alexandravine/2022/04/27/how-tiktok-live-became-a-strip-club-filled-with-15-year-olds/?sh=63b0efa762d7>.

⁸³ *Id.*

⁸⁴ *Turning Passion to Profit: WAYS TO MAKE MONEY ON TIKTOK LIVE*, TikTok (Dec. 15, 2022), https://www.tiktok.com/live/creators/en-US/article/turning-passion-to-profit-ways-to-make-money-on-tiktok-live_en-US.

⁸⁵ *LIVE Gifts on TikTok*, TikTok, <https://support.tiktok.com/en/live-gifts-wallet/tiktok-live/live-gifts-on-tiktok> (last visited Oct. 21, 2025).

87. TikTok creates flashy, eye-catching incentives to coax users into spending more time and money on the app. For example, by increasing their Gift-giving activity, users “level” up and unlock “exclusive” Gifts and badges, which become more enticing at each level.

88. TikTok also incentivizes streamers to use LIVE by offering compensation if their content gains popularity. LIVE streamers earn “Diamonds,” an in-app token, for each Gift they receive.⁸⁶ This creates a virtual economy centered on popularity, all under TikTok’s control.

89. TikTok makes these animated Gifts even more tempting by designing them like cute, colorful emojis reminiscent of cartoons and Disney characters—clearly aimed at children.

90. TikTok frequently introduces new Gifts like baby animals, plush toys, astronauts, and school buses, through animated short videos featuring playful tunes and themes like childhood dreams and back-to-school. These images and themes, designed to appeal to children, suggest a significant number of TikTok LIVE users are under 18 years old.

91. The monetization and presence of children on live streams pose insidious risks. As detailed in the *Forbes* article, Austin Berrier, a special agent with Homeland Security Investigations who specializes in livestreamed cybercrimes and child sexual abuse reported that “parents he speaks to are generally not aware of what’s happening on livestreams and that when the money exchanged takes the form of fun pictures, as is the case on TikTok, it makes what’s really going on even easier to miss or dismiss.” He stated that for platforms “where the monetization is through tokens or flowers or stupid little emojis . . . it doesn't click in a kid's head, I think, that they're actually being paid” and “the parents don't really stop and think, ‘Okay,

⁸⁶ *Diamonds*, TikTok, <https://support.tiktok.com/en/business-and-creator/video-gifts-on-tiktok/diamonds> (last visited Oct. 21, 2025).

someone’s paying my kid to dance. No, they’re just getting little flowers and little hearts.’ It allows people to separate that.”⁸⁷

92. Publicly, the company responded to the *Forbes* article with this public statement, “TikTok has robust policies and measures to help protect the safety and well-being of teens . . . we immediately revoke access to features if we find accounts that do not meet our age requirements.”⁸⁸

93. But in reality, while this information was shocking to the world, it came as no surprise to TikTok. Internally, employees were unsurprised by the revelations. They and the company had long known about this issue. After TikTok was alerted to the coming *Forbes* article, one employee remarked: “I think it’s the story we’ve been waiting for[,]” and “I’m expecting the worst[.]”⁸⁹

94. In February 2022, two TikTok leaders discussed issues with minors being sexually solicited through LIVE.⁹⁰

95. Even more appalling, these leaders knew about agencies that recruited minors to create Child Sexual Abuse Material (“CSAM”) and commercialized it using LIVE.

96. In another example from a March 2022 LIVE safety survey, users reported that “streamer-led sexual engagements (often transactional) [were] commonly associated with TikTok LIVE.”⁹¹ Users also reported “often seeing cam-girls or prostitutes asking viewers for

⁸⁷ Alexandra S. Levine, *How TikTok Live Became ‘A Strip Club Filled with Fifteen-Year-Olds’*, *Forbes* (Dec. 7, 2022, at 4:00 PM), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alexandralevine/2022/04/27/how-tiktok-live-became-a-strip-club-filled-with-15-year-olds/?sh=63b0efa762d7>.

⁸⁸ *Id.*

⁸⁹ TT-MS-AG-000203882.

⁹⁰ Notice of Filing of Less Redacted, Public Compl., Ex A. (“Utah AG Public Complaint”) ¶ 111, *Utah Div. Consumer Prot. v. TikTok Inc.*, No. 240904292 (3d Jud. Dist. Ct. Jan. 3, 2025).

⁹¹ TT-MS-AG-000265480 at 496.

tips/donations to take off their clothes or write their names on their body[.]”⁹² That same month, TikTok employees admitted “cam girls” (or women who do sex work online by streaming videos for money) were on LIVE and that these videos had a “good amount of minors engaging in it.”⁹³

97. TikTok has long known that virtual gifting is used as a predatory grooming tactic on LIVE. TikTok has internally acknowledged that “[p]erpetrators tend to use tactics such as gift giving, flattery, and gifting money to win the trust of minors.”⁹⁴

98. Given how lucrative LIVE is for TikTok, the company slow-rolled implementing safety measures, and once it did, these measures proved largely ineffective at keeping pace with the growing popularity of LIVE. This was by design—LIVE was “such a huge part of the strategy for the [TikTok app]” that TikTok employees recognized they “d[id not] know” if they could “reasonably expect to increase limitations for L[LIVE]” even in February 2022, and even after recognizing that “it is irresponsible [of TikTok] to expect that users will use LIVE wisely[.]”⁹⁵

99. In May 2022, after the *Forbes* article came out, TikTok took steps to evaluate how “valuable” its underage LIVE hosts were before it would decide to make safety changes to the feature, like increasing the minimum age requirement from 16 to 18.⁹⁶ It found 384,833 hosts were 16 to 17—as far as TikTok was aware—and they spent over seven million minutes streaming themselves on LIVE.⁹⁷

⁹² *Id.*

⁹³ TT-MS-AG-004081812 at 894.

⁹⁴ TT-MS-AG-000000161 at 421.

⁹⁵ TT-MS-AG-004071323 at 839.

⁹⁶ Utah AG Public Complaint ¶ 121, *Utah Div. Consumer Prot. v. TikTok Inc.*, No. 240904292 (3d Jud. Dist. Ct. Jan. 3, 2025).

⁹⁷ *Id.*

100. Despite learning that there were a “high” number of underage hosts on the platform and that these minors were receiving problematic messages from adult users, TikTok waited six months before raising the minimum age for a user to host a LIVE session from 16 to 18.

101. But raising the minimum age from 16 to 18 did nothing to solve the problem. TikTok’s age-gating is ineffective (discussed above), and many kids still join LIVE events daily. TikTok also chose to forgo reasonable safety measures, prioritizing profits over safety, allowing unrestrained transactional sexual content and other illicit activities to thrive.

102. As a result, these activities have not just continued—they have exploded as LIVE has become even more popular.

103. In September 2022—five months after the *Forbes* story—an investigator found that “within minutes of browsing the [LIVE] feed”⁹⁸ they were shown underage girls providing sexually suggestive content in exchange for money and young boys using filters to pose as girls to receive Gifts.⁹⁹

104. The investigator also found a “never-ending stream” of hosts who openly admitted that they were 14 and 15 years old while also “holding signs” or “standing in front of the camera” with a sign saying “Rose = say daddy,” “ice cream = 360 spin,” or “universe = cut shirt.”¹⁰⁰ These symbols alluded to the Gifts that corresponded to each sexually suggestive act—payments the investigator deemed to be “built for obfuscation.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Upper Echelon, *TikTok Is Poisoning Society* at 8:49–8:54, YouTube (Sept. 13, 2022), <https://youtu.be/qbv-VteX5H8>.

⁹⁹ *See generally id.*

¹⁰⁰ *Id.* at 6:58–9:36.

¹⁰¹ *Id.* at 9:20–10:11.

105. As the investigator continued viewing, he describes being “bombarded” by a stream of underage hosts who “did spins, bent over on camera, lifted their shirts, or engaged in other clearly suggestive content directly for money” with a chatroom of users trying to view them in compromising positions.¹⁰²

106. The investigator also documented the coded language which viewers used to have underage girls perform for them, including “fit check” which means lift your shirt to show your stomach; “you forgot something” or “get something from the back” which means walk away and show your rear; “outfit check” where girls would back up to show their entire bodies; and “feet check” or “toe ring check” to show their feet.¹⁰³ In his words, these LIVE streams were “overrun” with paying viewers.¹⁰⁴

107. Even when the investigator created a new test account, it quickly fell into a similar pattern and recommended exploitative content. This rapid escalation to sexually exploitative content on LIVE has been confirmed elsewhere. In April 2023, *CNN* created a test account for a 14-year-old.¹⁰⁵ After just 17 minutes of use on the first day, the account was flooded with sexually suggestive LIVE recommendations in the For You feed on the user’s account.¹⁰⁶ These included LIVE videos of a girl in short shorts with the reporter stating, “all we’re really seeing is this girl’s bottom in the frame, it looks like that’s the point of this video.”¹⁰⁷

108. Also in 2023, a TikTok senior director was alerted by advocates who had noticed an increase in “teens in overtly sexualized situations on live streams controlled by someone older

¹⁰² *Id.* at 10:04–10:33.

¹⁰³ *Id.* at 14:13–14:51.

¹⁰⁴ *Id.*

¹⁰⁵ *CNN Takes Over a 14-Year-Old’s TikTok Account. 17 Minutes In, This Is What We Saw*, CNN (Apr. 18, 2023), <https://www.cnn.com/videos/business/2023/04/18/teen-tiktok-experiment-clare-duffy-zw-orig.cnn-business>.

¹⁰⁶ *Id.* at 1:01–1:13.

¹⁰⁷ *Id.*

than 18 who is collecting money from viewers while the teen performs sexually suggestive acts.”¹⁰⁸ The advocates said they reported the streams through TikTok’s internal reporting tools, but TikTok found they did not violate its policies.

109. As late as December 2023, internal TikTok documents reflect that TikTok admits “the cruelty”¹⁰⁹ of maintaining LIVE with its current risks for minors on the app. The study showed its LIVE feature had the following characteristics:

- A. “Higher proportion[s] of minor users”;¹¹⁰
- B. “Minor users are more likely to access high severity risk LIVE content than adult users”;¹¹¹
- C. For violating content like “[a]dult nudity and sexual activities (ANSA) . . . and minor-hosted LIVE rooms, minor audiences are usually 2 times more than an average LIVE room”;¹¹² and
- D. “Minor users lack self-protection awareness and interact more with risky LIVE content.”¹¹³

4. TikTok is designed to keep underage users on LIVE.

110. TikTok has refused to implement reasonable safety measures to protect underage users or warn them of the dangers of LIVE. Instead, it has put in place manipulative design features meant to provide a façade of safety while making sure underage users can have unfettered access to LIVE.

¹⁰⁸ TT-MS-AG-000332476 at 478.

¹⁰⁹ TT-MS-AG-000226169 at 171.

¹¹⁰ TT-MS-AG-000227997 at 998.

¹¹¹ TT-MS-AG-000226169 at 171.

¹¹² *Id.* at TT-MS-AG-000226172.

¹¹³ TT-MS-AG-000227997 at 998.

111. In part, this is because TikTok recognizes internally that its age-gating is ineffective and that TikTok’s own moderation efforts on LIVE are ineffective and inconsistently applied, and TikTok hides this information from users and the public. TikTok knows this is particularly true for children, admitting internally: (1) “Minors are more curious and prone to ignore warnings[;]” and (2) “Without meaningful age verification methods, minors would typically just lie about their age[.]”¹¹⁴

112. TikTok markets an array of tools to consumers meant to “Keep Your LIVE Safe” that TikTok knows do not work—in part because of users’ low adoption rates.¹¹⁵ But the low adoption rates are by design. TikTok is aware users do not use these features but will not adequately inform users about them: “Despite some awareness, most users have little experience using the community tools TikTok LIVE offers. Despite welcoming the idea, users currently lack a ‘reference point’ on how to use these tools and how they may be effective.”¹¹⁶

113. For example, as of April 2023, TikTok knew that “keyword filters,” a feature which allows users themselves to block certain words through LIVE’s comment function, needed to add more “keyword signals” for minor safety.¹¹⁷ TikTok also knows that the “mute” function, which lets LIVE hosts mute viewers that they find abusive, had an incredibly low adoption rate.

114. TikTok has also disincentivized use of its self-report feature, through which TikTok allows users to report LIVE sessions for Community Guideline violations or to indicate that they are not interested in viewing similar content, because users lack confidence in TikTok’s ability to adequately enforce its policies. “Viewers tend to quickly swipe to the next LIVE

¹¹⁴ TT-MS-AG-000265480 at 494.

¹¹⁵ *LIVE Safety Features: Tools to Keep Your LIVE Safe*, TikTok (Oct. 21, 2022), <https://www.tiktok.com/live/creators/en-UK/article/live-safety>.

¹¹⁶ TT-MS-AG-000265480 at 481.

¹¹⁷ TT-MS-AG-004179029 at 046.

instead of ‘reporting’ or [selecting] ‘not interested,’ as the general perception is that they are not effective (slow, ambiguous platform response)[.]”¹¹⁸

115. TikTok employees have consistently recognized the dangers of its open-door policy for underage users on LIVE, and yet the company refuses to enact adequate controls. In a document from June 2022, the company admitted that it “[l]ack[ed] identity verification mechanisms” which meant that it could not “systematically prevent minors from going LIVE or sending virtual gifts[.]”¹¹⁹ Documents from the same time showed that the company’s policies were failing and admitted that minors were bypassing age restrictions and “easily accessing Livestream feed.”

116. In reaction to the “highly visible” prevalence of sexually suggestive content on LIVE, TikTok leaders suggested as early as December 2021 that access to LIVE should have a “much much higher bar” and be limited to “people who have demonstrated they are responsible and can create good content.”¹²⁰

117. While publicly touting the “robust” measures the company employed for child safety in response to the *Forbes* story, TikTok confirmed internally that it had “[n]o age-related feed strategy.”¹²¹ Rather, even when a TikTok employee found “numerous under 18s on LIVE,” that employee could not get the accounts banned because “policy is clear that although they’re suspected of being under 18 they won’t be banned[.]”¹²²

118. These failures have held true since the early days of LIVE. In June 2021, a senior TikTok employee admitted:

¹¹⁸ TT-MS-AG-000265480 at 490.

¹¹⁹ TT-MS-AG-000703405 at 411.

¹²⁰ Utah AG Public Complaint ¶ 138, *Utah Div. Consumer Prot. v. TikTok Inc.*, No. 240904292 (3d Jud. Dist. Ct. Jan. 3, 2025).

¹²¹ TT-MS-AG-000205212 at 274.

¹²² TT-MS-AG-000866626 at 626.

At this point we have very limited options to actively protect minors from live content Currently we are NOT able to age gate livestreams because we do not have the functional capability to do so. We also do not have the ability to show warning screens. . . . Until we establish reliable content filtering strategies, we need to consider BLOCKING all L1s [13–15 year olds] from viewing (or interacting in any capacity) with Live.¹²³

119. On information and belief, formed through the State’s investigation and public statements from TikTok, this blocking of users TikTok predicted to be minors was not implemented, despite the company recognizing that these failures left TikTok “vulnerable.”¹²⁴

120. Even if TikTok had adequate procedures in place, it still proved willing to circumvent its own policies for its profit interests, particularly when popular influencers fell under its own minimum age requirements.

121. TikTok’s Community Guidelines have routinely changed over the years. The Community Guidelines currently read:

We’re committed to making TikTok a safe and positive experience for people under 18. This is who we mean when we refer to “youth” or “young people” in these Community Guidelines.

You need to be at least 13 years old to create a TikTok account.¹²⁵

122. TikTok’s Accounts and Features of the Community Guidelines also emphasize the age requirement: “**You must be at least 13 years old to have a TikTok account**” and “**LIVE creators must maintain a safe environment. . . . You must be 18 and older to go LIVE and to send gifts to a creator during a LIVE session.**”¹²⁶

¹²³ TT-MS-AG-000332032 at 033–034.

¹²⁴ Utah AG Public Complaint ¶ 142, *Utah Div. Consumer Prot. v. TikTok Inc.*, No. 240904292 (3d Jud. Dist. Ct. Jan. 3, 2025).

¹²⁵ *Youth Safety and Well-Being*, TikTok (Sept. 13, 2025), <https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/en/youth-safety>.

¹²⁶ *Accounts and Features*, TikTok (Sept. 13, 2025), <https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/en/accounts-features>.

123. These policies do not adequately safeguard children and, furthermore, are not consistently applied. In 2020, TikTok unveiled an “internal program” to “protect creators and other accounts that [TikTok] deem[s] to be high value.”¹²⁷ The program featured policy shortcuts like “[d]elayed enforcement,” “[d]eferred policy decisions,” or “[n]o [p]ermanent [b]an on Elite+ Accounts[,]” to protect its popular users who violate TikTok’s policies.¹²⁸ TikTok deployed this look-the-other-way policy despite knowing that the “majority of elite accounts appear to run afoul of [TikTok’s] policies on sexually explicit content,” among other violations.¹²⁹ Approximately 1,400 minors were considered “elite creators.”¹³⁰

124. Because LIVE gifting makes TikTok so much money, TikTok executives have routinely applied pressure to reduce safety restrictions regardless of their impacts. For example, while the company was being alerted to sexual exploitation on LIVE, internal planning documents for the U.S. market from 2021 demonstrate that TikTok was focusing on increasing LIVE revenue to “\$750K/day” while also “[r]educ[ing] ban rates of LIVE creators.”¹³¹

125. At critical points TikTok could have affirmatively taken steps to keep children off of LIVE or, at the very least, implemented reasonable safety measures to keep them from engaging in sexual activity on LIVE. Instead, TikTok rejected these reasonable measures and product alternatives. For instance, its own Content Advisory Council experts recommended a seven-second delay akin to television broadcasting’s “profanity delay,” which would allow a

¹²⁷ TT-MS-AG-000843204 at p. 1.

¹²⁸ *Id.* at p. 11.

¹²⁹ *Id.* at p. 5.

¹³⁰ *Id.* at p. 1.

¹³¹ TT-MS-AG-000757032 at pp. 1, 6.

short period for content moderation.¹³² Instead, TikTok’s product team told the experts that they were “unwilling to consider” the experts’ recommendation.¹³³

126. In 2023, U.S. users reported in a survey that 13.7% of LIVE streams contained what TikTok calls “adult nudity and sexual activity”—1.9% higher than the rest of the world.¹³⁴ At the same time, TikTok cannot guarantee that this reported “nudity and sexual activity” on LIVE is actually performed by adults, rather than children.¹³⁵

127. As TikTok employees recognized, the company “created an environment that encourages sexual content. . . . [The] Live Recommendation algorithm prefers feeds with gifts, so [it] incentivizes sexual content.”¹³⁶

C. TikTok’s beauty filters harm children by distorting their self-image.

128. Another important aspect of the TikTok experience is the “beauty” features it creates and offers that allows users to change their online image and thereby encourage unhealthy, negative social comparison, body image issues, and related mental and physical health disorders. In particular, beauty filters can exacerbate eating disorders as the filters create an impossible standard for teens who are forming opinions of themselves, and which teens receive as an unmistakable message that they are “not enough.”¹³⁷

129. The TikTok platform’s filters (or “effects”) allow users to alter their appearance in photos and videos before they are posted, with some filters dramatically altering the user’s

¹³² TT-MS-AG-000674897 at p. 4.

¹³³ *Id.*

¹³⁴ Utah AG Public Complaint ¶ 149, *Utah Div. Consumer Prot. v. TikTok Inc.*, No. 240904292 (3d Jud. Dist. Ct. Jan. 3, 2025).

¹³⁵ *Id.*

¹³⁶ TT-MS-AG-000698065 at 067.

¹³⁷ See, e.g., Anna Haines, *From ‘Instagram Face’ To ‘Snapchat Dysmorphia’: How Beauty Filters Are Changing The Way We See Ourselves*, *Forbes* (Dec. 10, 2021, at 8:30 AM), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/annahaines/2021/04/27/from-instagram-face-to-snapchat-dysmorphia-how-beauty-filters-are-changing-the-way-we-see-ourselves>.

appearance. Unrealistic changes to appearance are especially dangerous to young users because they can cause negative self-obsession or self-hatred of their appearance.

130. In a 2016 study, 52% of girls said they use filters every day, and 80% had applied a filter or used a retouching app to change their appearance in their photos before the age of 13.¹³⁸ Studies also show that 24% of girls with lower body self-esteem believe they do not look good enough without photo editing and 77% reported trying to change or hide at least one part of their body using these filters.¹³⁹

131. Beauty filters cause body image issues, including through perpetuating certain beauty stereotypes, such as structural facial features and skin color that favor Caucasian or European features, and encouraging eating disorders, body dysmorphia, and related problems.¹⁴⁰

132. The harm arises before the user even posts a photo or video: it comes from the editing/filtering of the image itself. A recent study found that even users reporting a higher initial level of self-esteem felt they looked 44% worse before their image was edited using a filter. In a follow-up survey, “when the AR [augmented reality] filter increased the gap between how participants wanted to look and how they felt they actually looked, it reduced their self-compassion and tolerance for their own physical flaws[.]”¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Dove, *Dove Invites You To Take A Stand And #TurnYourBack To Digital Distortion*, PR Newswire (Mar. 8, 2023, at 4:00 PM), <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/dove-invites-you-to-take-a-stand-and-turnyourback-to-digital-distortion-301766207.html>.

¹³⁹ *Id.*

¹⁴⁰ See Siân McLean *et al.*, *Photoshopping the Selfie: Self Photo Editing and Photo Investment are Associated with Body Dissatisfaction in Adolescent Girls*, 48 *Int'l J. Eating Disorders* 1132, 1133 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1002/eat.22449>; Jing Yang *et al.*, *Selfie-Viewing and Facial Dissatisfaction among Emerging Adults: A Moderated Mediation Model of Appearance Comparisons and Self-Objectification*, 17 *Int'l J. Env't Rsch. & Pub. Health* 672, 672 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17020672>; Scott Griffiths *et al.*, *The Contribution of Social Media to Body Dissatisfaction, Eating Disorder Symptoms, and Anabolic Steroid Use Among Sexual Minority Men*, 21 *Cyberpsychology, Behav., & Soc. Networking* 149, 149 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2017.0375>.

¹⁴¹ Matthias Bastian, *TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat – AR Filters Change Self-Perception*, MIXED Reality News (Dec. 26, 2021), <https://mixed-news.com/en/tiktok-instagram-snapchat-ar-filters-change-self-perception>.

133. Another significant and harmful beauty feature is “RETOUCH,” formerly called “Beauty” mode. This feature incorporates artificial intelligence to artificially augment (retouch/beautification/skin smoothing) the user’s appearance. It allows users to adjust many of their physical attributes to align with aspirational beauty standards. For example, the feature can change the size and shape of a user’s jaw, nose, lips, and eyebrows, whiten their teeth, smooth their skin, and adjust their skin tone or color.

134. A button to enable the RETOUCH feature is presented to users on the right-hand side of the screen whenever a user is preparing a video on TikTok.

135. TikTok even applied these settings to automatically retouch and alter the faces of its users, including users in the U.S.¹⁴² “ [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] ”¹⁴³

136. There was “ [REDACTED] ” that this was being done to their face and “ [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] ”¹⁴⁴

137. TikTok was “ [REDACTED] ”¹⁴⁵

138. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] ¹⁴⁶ An employee stated that she was “ [REDACTED]

¹⁴² Katie Mather, *Creator notices something 'off' while using TikTok's in-app camera: 'It's not my face'*, InTheKnow (May 25, 2023), <https://www.intheknow.com/archive/tiktok-automatic-filter-charlotte-palermينو.html>; TT-MS-AG-000743034 at 051.

¹⁴³ TT-MS-AG-000743034 at 051.

¹⁴⁴ *Id.*

¹⁴⁵ *Id.*

¹⁴⁶ *Id.*

██████████” from “██████████,” and that TikTok was “██████████
██████████.”¹⁴⁷

139. TikTok’s Trust and Safety team recognized internally that “██████████
██████████
██████████.”¹⁴⁸

140. But through 2023 TikTok created, designed, and made available other filters that altered users’ appearances in even more pronounced ways, including a filter known as “Bold Glamour.”¹⁴⁹

141. An example of the dramatic changes shown by Bold Glamour is below:¹⁵⁰



¹⁴⁷ *Id.*

¹⁴⁸ TT-MS-AG-002149933 at p. 1.

¹⁴⁹ José Mendiola Zuriarrain, ‘Bold Glamour’ filter ignites TikTok: ‘It should be illegal’, EL PAÍS (Mar. 2, 2023, at 6:01 AM), <https://english.elpais.com/science-tech/2023-03-02/bold-glamour-filter-ignites-tiktok-it-should-be-illegal.html>.

¹⁵⁰ *Id.*

142. Like the RETOUCH feature, the body glamour filter does not just apply makeup, but appears to alter the shape of the face, eyes, lips, nose, and jaw.

143. Other filters, like the Body Shrinking filter, make users appear thinner.¹⁵¹



144. TikTok knows these filters can harm users but chooses to keep them on the platform. TikTok does not warn users, including young users, and their parents about the dangers of these filters.

145. A TikTok employee even determined that beauty filters are associated with harm, stating that they have “high potential from a research perspective to lead to negative body image and body dysmorphia [sic] symptoms, especially among teenage girls.”¹⁵² TikTok internal documents report that “[t]eens are more susceptible to harm when it comes to the usage and consumption of beauty filters and effects as they are developing their self-image [and] are at a

¹⁵¹ Video posted by sibunenakkanka (@bune1407), TikTok, *Transform Your Look with AI Body Slimming Filter*, <https://www.tiktok.com/@sibunenakkanak/video/7482211229549776146> (last visited Oct. 27, 2025).

¹⁵² TT-MS-AG-000743034 at 051.

critical period for developing body dysmorphia [sic], eating disorders, over sexualization, and are more easily pressured by the opinions of others.”¹⁵³

146. Even though TikTok’s employees sounded the alarm about beauty filters, TikTok kept them on the app, and continues to offer them to minors, because they increase usage. Some employees complained that they “pushed hard” to slightly reduce the presence of RETOUCH on the app, and just for minor users under age 16.¹⁵⁴ But, according to internal documents, for an extended period, TikTok rejected those suggestions that focused only on minor safety because those reductions would have “impacted negatively key growth metrics.”¹⁵⁵ A 2022 TikTok study found that use of TikTok was indirectly related to body dissatisfaction due to more upward appearance comparison (users comparing their appearances to those of individuals they deem more attractive than themselves) and body surveillance (users scrutinizing and monitoring their own bodies).¹⁵⁶

147. TikTok’s image-altering filters can cause mental health harms in multiple ways.¹⁵⁷ First, because of the popularity of these editing tools, many of the images teenagers see have been edited by filters, and it can be difficult for teenagers to remain cognizant of the use of filters. This creates a false reality wherein all other users on the platforms appear better looking than they actually are, often in an artificial way. As children and teens compare their actual appearances to the edited appearances of themselves and others online, their perception of their own physical features grows increasingly negative. Second, Defendants’ platform tends to

¹⁵³ TT-MS-AG-002149933 at p. 1.

¹⁵⁴ TT-MS-AG-003847796 at 801, Commented [10].

¹⁵⁵ *Id.* at Commented [11].

¹⁵⁶ Danielle Bissonette Mink & Dawn M. Szymanski, *TikTok use and body dissatisfaction: Examining direct, indirect, and moderated relations*, 43 *Body Image* 205 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2022.09.006>.

¹⁵⁷ Anna Haines, *From ‘Instagram Face’ To ‘Snapchat Dysmorphia’: How Beauty Filters Are Changing The Way We See Ourselves*, *Forbes* (Dec. 10, 2021, at 8:30 AM), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/annahaines/2021/04/27/from-instagram-face-to-snapchat-dysmorphia-how-beauty-filters-are-changing-the-way-we-see-ourselves>.

reward edited photos, through an increase in interaction and positive responses, causing young users to prefer the way they look using filters. Many young users believe they are only attractive when their images are edited, not as they appear naturally. Third, the specific changes filters make to an individuals' appearance can cause negative obsession or self-hatred surrounding particular aspects of their appearance. The filters alter specific facial features such as eyes, lips, jaw, face shape, and face slimness—features that often require costly medical intervention to alter in real life.

148. Filters, especially in combination with other design features, directly cause body image issues, eating disorders, body dysmorphia, and related issues.¹⁵⁸ As one study of 481 university students found, spending more time viewing selfies can increase dissatisfaction with one's own face, and spending more time looking at selfies (and reviewing likes and comments) can cause users to draw more comparisons between themselves and others, prompting even more self-criticism.¹⁵⁹ As one psychodermatologist explained, “these apps subconsciously implant the notion of imperfection and ugliness, generating a loss of confidence[.]”¹⁶⁰

149. In another study, even users that report a higher initial level of self-esteem, felt they looked 44% worse before their image was edited using a filter. When a filter increases a gap

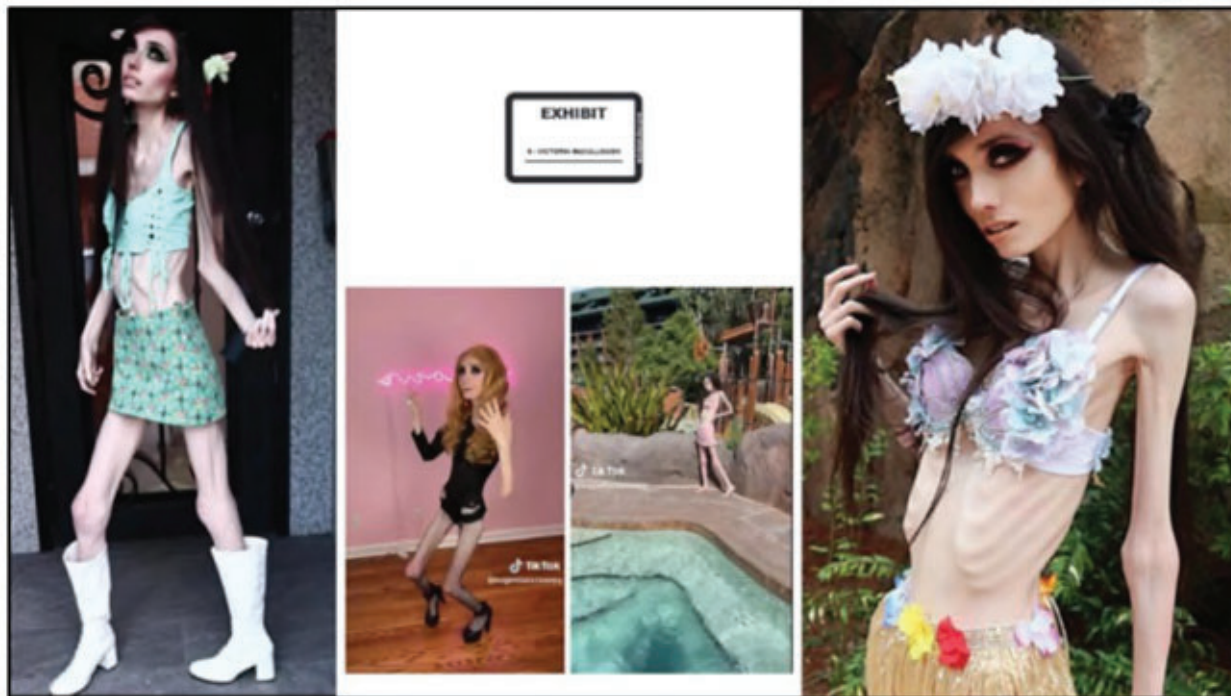
¹⁵⁸ See Siân McLean *et al.*, *Photoshopping the Selfie: Self Photo Editing and Photo Investment are Associated with Body Dissatisfaction in Adolescent Girls*, 48 Int'l J. Eating Disorders 1132, 1133 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1002/eat.22449> (presenting a 2015 study involving 101 adolescent girls, more time spent editing and sharing selfies on social media raised their risk of experiencing body dissatisfaction and disordered eating habits); Jing Yang *et al.*, *Selfie-Viewing and Facial Dissatisfaction among Emerging Adults: A Moderated Mediation Model of Appearance Comparisons and Self-Objectification* at 1, 17 Int'l J. Env't Rsch. & Pub. Health 672 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17020672>; Scott Griffiths *et al.*, *The Contribution of Social Media to Body Dissatisfaction, Eating Disorder Symptoms, and Anabolic Steroid Use Among Sexual Minority Men*, 21 Cyberpsychology, Behav., & Soc. Networking 149, 149 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2017.0375>.

¹⁵⁹ Jing Yang *et al.*, *Selfie-Viewing and Facial Dissatisfaction among Emerging Adults: A Moderated Mediation Model of Appearance Comparisons and Self-Objectification* at 5–6, 17 Int'l J. Env't Rsch. & Pub. Health 672 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17020672>.

¹⁶⁰ Genesis Rivas, *6 Consequences of Social Media Filters, According to Experts*, InStyle (Jan. 22, 2024, at 3:32 PM), <https://www.instyle.com/beauty/social-media-filters-mental-health>.

between how individuals want to look and how they feel they actually look, it “reduce[s] their self-compassion and tolerance for their own physical flaws.”¹⁶¹

150. Exacerbating these issues, TikTok also choose to manage a “[c]ontroversial influencer who is widely known in the eating disorder community for having anorexia nervosa,” Eugenia Cooney.¹⁶²



151. TikTok managed her, paid her for posting on TikTok, and promoted her at branded events, including TikTok’s LIVE programming and TikTok’s “Road to Superstar,” to the dismay of TikTok’s Trust and Safety Team: “*Wow re: her being managed by us*”.¹⁶³ TikTok did not disclose this relationship to organizations with whom it consulted regarding eating disorders and failed to warn the public despite experts advising them to do so.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ Ana Javornik *et al.*, *Research: How AR Filters Impact People’s Self-Image*, Harv. Bus. Rev. (Dec. 22, 2021), <https://hbr.org/2021/12/research-how-ar-filters-impact-peoples-self-image>.

¹⁶² Joint Letter Br. Pls.’ Mot. Compel Written Disc., Docs., & Deps. Regarding Creator Eugenia Cooney at 4, *In re: Soc. Media Adolescent Addiction/Pers. Inj. Prods. Liab. Litig.*, No.4:22-md-3047-YRG (N.D. Cal. Sept. 12, 2025), ECF No. 2255-2.

¹⁶³ *Id.*

¹⁶⁴ *Id.*

152. TikTok’s deliberate cultivation of the youth market for its platform has foreseeably resulted in an increased risk of a variety of harms for today’s youth, including, but not limited to, social media addiction, withdrawal (from friends, family, and social and academic advancement), lack of focus, anxiety, body dysmorphia, eating disorders, depression, radicalization, difficulty sleeping (e.g., later sleep and wake times on school days and trouble falling back asleep after nighttime awakening), self-harm, and other risk-taking behaviors.

D. TikTok takes advantage of children’s inclination to engage in dangerous and risky behavior.

153. Another TikTok feature is “challenges.” Challenges are campaigns that encourage users to create and post certain types of videos on TikTok, such as a video of a user performing a certain dance routine or a dangerous prank. Challenge videos are a cornerstone of the platform and are among the most popular videos on the platform.

154. TikTok actively promotes what they determine to be the “best” (*i.e.*, most likely to keep users engaged) challenges to its users and fosters the associated competition and social rewards to achieve near-continuous engagement with the platform.

155. ByteDance also encourages businesses to create challenges as a form of marketing, explaining that challenges are “geared towards building awareness and engagement,” and “research shows that they can deliver strong results” and increased return on ad spending “at every stage of the funnel.”¹⁶⁵

156. Numerous teen users have injured or even killed themselves or others participating in viral pranks to obtain rewards and increase their number of “Likes,” views, and followers, a foreseeable consequence of TikTok’s engagement-maximizing design.

¹⁶⁵ *What’s new Blog: Branded Hashtag Challenge: Harness the power of participation*, TikTok Bus. (Oct. 18, 2021), <https://ads.tiktok.com/business/en-US/blog/branded-hashtag-challenge-harness-the-power-of-participation>.

157. A study of adolescents and young adults who participated in dangerous challenges found that “engaging in online challenges to gain likes and views [] was reported as highly important” to the participants.¹⁶⁶ Study participants claimed to have received from sixty likes and views to two million of their challenge videos.¹⁶⁷ The study also found that “[o]ur participants overlooked or were unaware of the associated short-term and long-term risks associated with the challenges.”¹⁶⁸ Moreover, “[p]articipants also frequently encouraged others to perform the same or similar challenges in their posts, thus potentially contributing to social media through propagating the challenge.”¹⁶⁹

158. TikTok’s own internal platform research has found that the number one most identified reason for teen participation in challenges is “[g]etting views/likes/comments[,]” followed by “[i]mpressing others online[.]”¹⁷⁰ ByteDance knows, or should know, that young users’ quest for social acceptance will cause them to participate in dangerous online challenges to get “likes” or impress their peers. It was foreseeable that the challenge architecture on TikTok would be used by young users to promote dangerous, deadly, and destructive challenges.

E. TikTok is addictive.

1. The neurobiology of children.

159. In addition to being dangerous, TikTok is also deliberately addictive, particularly for young users.

160. The frontal lobes of the brain—particularly the prefrontal cortex—control higher-order cognitive functions. This region of the brain is central to planning and executive decision-

¹⁶⁶ Rebecca Roth *et al.*, *A study of adolescents’ and young adults’ TikTok challenge participation in South India*, 1 Hum. Factors in Healthcare 100005, at 4 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hfh.2022.100005>.

¹⁶⁷ *Id.* at 5.

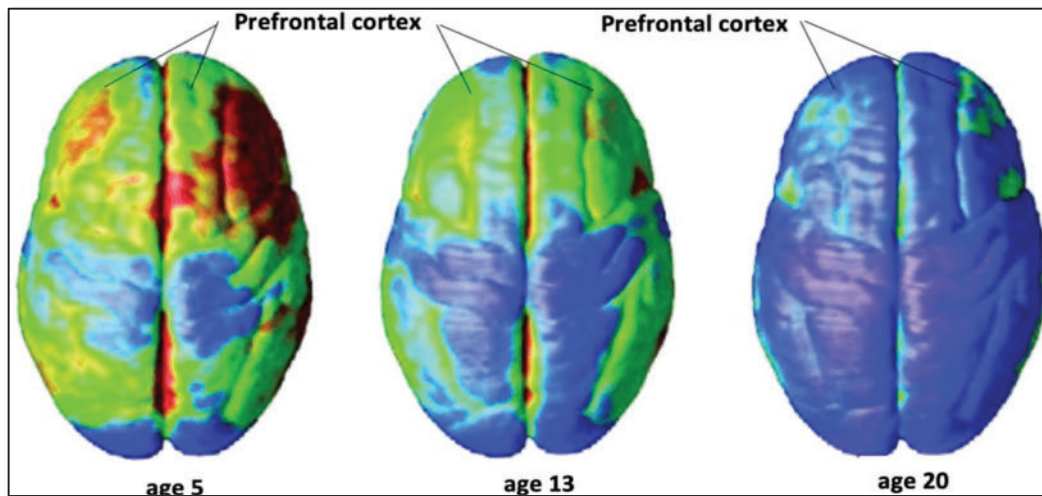
¹⁶⁸ *Id.* at 6.

¹⁶⁹ *Id.* at 5.

¹⁷⁰ TT-MS-AG-000025819 at 824.

making, including the evaluation of future consequences and the weighing of risk and reward. It also helps inhibit impulsive actions and “regulate emotional responses to social rewards.”¹⁷¹

161. Children and adolescents are especially vulnerable to developing harmful behaviors because their prefrontal cortex is not fully developed.¹⁷² Indeed, it is one of the last regions of the brain to mature.¹⁷³ In the images below, the blue color depicts brain development.¹⁷⁴



162. Because the prefrontal cortex develops later than other areas of the brain, children and adolescents, as compared with adults, have less impulse control and less ability to evaluate risks, regulate emotions, and regulate their responses to social rewards.

¹⁷¹ Zara Abrams, *Why young brains are especially vulnerable to social media*, Am. Psych. Ass’n (Aug. 3, 2023), <https://www.apa.org/news/apa/2022/social-media-children-teens>.

¹⁷² Nino Gugushvili et al., *Facebook use intensity and depressive symptoms: a moderated mediation model of problematic Facebook use, age, neuroticism, and extraversion* at 3, 10 BMC Psychiatry 279 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-022-00990-7>.

¹⁷³ *Id.*; see also Fulton Crews et al., *Adolescent cortical development: A critical period of vulnerability for addiction*, 86 Pharmacology Biochemistry & Behav. 189, 191 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pbb.2006.12.001>.

¹⁷⁴ Heiner Böttger & Deborah Költzsch, *The fear factor: Xenoglossophobia or how to overcome the anxiety of speaking foreign languages*, 4 Training Language & Culture 43, 46 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.22363/2521-442X-2020-4-2-43-55>.

163. Social rewards deliver a rush of dopamine and oxytocin, sometimes called the “happy hormones,” to the part of the brain called the ventral striatum.¹⁷⁵ Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that is central to the brain’s reward system.¹⁷⁶ While the same hormones are released in youth and adults, there are two key differences. As Professor Mitch Prinstein, Chief Science Officer of the American Psychological Association explained: “First, adults tend to have a fixed sense of self that relies less on feedback from peers. Second, adults have a more mature prefrontal cortex, an area that can help regulate emotional responses to social rewards.”¹⁷⁷

164. Although the decision-making region of the brain is still not fully developed, regions such as the ventral striatum, which are involved in the reward pathway and closely tied to social media activity, begin to develop during adolescence.¹⁷⁸

165. Between the ages of 10 and 12, dopamine receptors multiply in the ventral striatum, which makes social rewards—like compliments or laughter from a friend—more pleasant, and adolescents become more sensitive to attention from others.¹⁷⁹ Adolescents are at a stage where their personalities and identities are forming, much of which “is now reliant on social media.”¹⁸⁰

166. During development, the brain is exposed to stimuli (e.g., TikTok) that becomes associated with a reward (e.g., Likes) and a release of dopamine throughout the reward pathway. The feeling derived during the reward experience drives an individual to seek out the stimulus

¹⁷⁵ Zara Abrams, *Why young brains are especially vulnerable to social media*, Am. Psych. Ass’n (Aug. 3, 2023), <https://www.apa.org/news/apa/2022/social-media-children-teens>.

¹⁷⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷⁷ *Id.*

¹⁷⁸ *Id.*

¹⁷⁹ *Id.*

¹⁸⁰ Betül Keles *et al.*, *A systematic review: the influence of social media on depression, anxiety and psychological distress in adolescents*, 25 Int’l J. Adolescence & Youth 79, 81 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2019.1590851>.

again, and the association between stimulus and reward grows stronger with repetitive activation.¹⁸¹ Repeated spikes of dopamine over time may cause “neuroadaptation,” where the brain adapts for the increased dopamine levels caused by external stimuli by downregulating its production of and sensitivity to dopamine.¹⁸² As a result, the individual develops tolerance, and the brain requires increasingly more of a stimulus to experience the same feeling of reward.

167. This can lead to a vicious cycle. Worse, this cycle can cause decreases in activity in the prefrontal cortex, leading to further impairments of decision-making and executive functioning.

168. Imaging studies show that during a period of craving, there are also decreases in frontal cortex activity and executive functioning, leading to impaired “decision making, self-regulation, inhibitory control, and working memory[.]”¹⁸³

169. As New York University professor and social psychologist Adam Alter has explained, features such as “Likes” give users a dopamine hit similar to drugs and alcohol:

The minute you take a drug, drink alcohol, smoke a cigarette . . . when you get a like on social media, all of those experiences produce dopamine, which is a chemical that’s associated with pleasure.

When someone likes an Instagram post . . . it’s a little bit like taking a drug. As far as your brain is concerned, it’s a very similar experience.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹ Bryon Adinoff, *Neurobiologic Processes in Drug Reward and Addiction*, 12 Harv. Rev. Psychiatry 305 (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10673220490910844>.

¹⁸² George F. Koob & Nora D. Volkow, *Neurobiology of addiction: A neurocircuitry analysis*, 3 Lancet Psychiatry 760 (2016), [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(16\)00104-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(16)00104-8).

¹⁸³ *Id.* at 8.

¹⁸⁴ Eames Yates, *What Happens to Your Brain When You Get a Like on Instagram*, Bus. Insider (Mar. 25, 2017), <https://www.businessinsider.com/what-happens-to-your-brain-like-instagram-dopamine-2017-3>; *see also* Sören Krach *et al.*, *The rewarding nature of social interactions*, 4 Frontiers Behav. Neuroscience 1 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnbeh.2010.00022>; Julian Morgans, *The Secret Ways Social Media is Built for Addiction*, Vice (May 17, 2017, 11:09 PM), <https://www.vice.com/en/article/vv5jkb/the-secret-ways-social-media-is-built-for-addiction>.

170. Notably, once the brain has learned to make this association, dopaminergic neurons “shift their . . . activation from the time of reward delivery to the time of presentation of [a] predictive cue[.]”¹⁸⁵ In other words, the anticipation of a reward can itself trigger a dopamine rush.

171. Conversely, if the stimulus is withheld, feelings of fatigue and anxiety or depression may be experienced, along with decreased sensitivity to the stimulant, which is associated with the withdrawal component of addiction.¹⁸⁶ Youth are more susceptible than adults to feelings of withdrawal when a dopamine hit wears off. Depending on the intensity, delivery, and timing of the stimulus, and the severity of its withdrawal, these feelings can include emotional pain, dysphoria, and irritability.¹⁸⁷ Children and adolescents also are more likely to engage in compulsive behaviors to avoid these symptoms, due to their limited capacity for self-regulation, relative lack of impulse control, and struggle to delay gratification. Together, this means that children and adolescents are uniquely vulnerable and easy targets for the reward-based systems that Defendants build into their social media platform.

172. A recent article coauthored by former Google CEO Eric Schmidt and social psychologist Jonathan Haidt warns that “the greatest damage from social media seems to occur during the rapid brain rewiring of early puberty, around ages 11 to 13 for girls and slightly later for boys.”¹⁸⁸ Schmidt and Haidt urged action, writing that “[w]e must protect children from

¹⁸⁵ Luisa Speranza *et al.*, *Dopamine: The Neuromodulator of Long-Term Synaptic Plasticity, Reward and Movement Control* at 8, 10 Cells 735 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.3390/cells10040735>.

¹⁸⁶ *Facing Addiction in America: The Surgeon General’s Report on Alcohol, Drugs, and Health*, U.S. Dep’t Health & Hum. Servs. (2016), https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK424857/pdf/Bookshelf_NBK424857.pdf.

¹⁸⁷ George F. Koob & Nora D. Volkow, *Neurobiology of addiction: A neurocircuitry analysis*, 3 *Lancet Psychiatry* 760 (2016), [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(16\)00104-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(16)00104-8).

¹⁸⁸ Jonathan Haidt & Eric Schmidt, *AI Is About to Make Social Media (Much) More Toxic*, *Atl.* (May 5, 2023), <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2023/05/generative-ai-social-media-integration-dangers-disinformation-addiction/673940/>.

predation and addiction most vigorously during this time, and we must hold companies responsible for recruiting or even just admitting underage users[.]”¹⁸⁹ As they point out, “[a]s long as children say that they are 13, the platforms let them open accounts, which is why so many children are heavy users of Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok by age 10 or 11.”¹⁹⁰

173. Studies indicate that social rewards such as reputation, maternal and romantic love, positive emotional expressions, and the stimuli of perceived beautiful faces are processed along the same neural reward network as non-social rewards and drug addiction.¹⁹¹ Dopamine receptors were found reduced in the striatum (central component of the reward system) of the brain in individuals with internet addiction.¹⁹² Like other addicting products, TikTok’s platform hooks its users by disrupting their brains’ reward circuitry.

174. When the release of dopamine in young brains is manipulated by TikTok, it interferes with the brain’s development and can have long-term impacts on an individual’s memory, affective processing, reasoning, planning, attention, inhibitory control, and risk-reward calibration.

175. “Everyone innately responds to social approval, but some demographics, in particular teenagers, are more vulnerable to it than others.”¹⁹³ Given their limited capacity to

¹⁸⁹ *Id.*

¹⁹⁰ *Id.*

¹⁹¹ Sören Krach *et al.*, *The rewarding nature of social interactions*, 4 *Frontiers Behav. Neuroscience* 1 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnbeh.2010.00022>.

¹⁹² Sang Hee Kim *et al.*, *Reduced striatal dopamine D2 receptors in people with Internet addiction*, 22 *NeuroReport* 407 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.1097/wnr.0b013e328346e16e>.

¹⁹³ Von Tristan Harris, *The Slot Machine in Your Pocket*, *Spiegel Int’l* (July 27, 2016, at 5:25 PM), <https://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/smartphone-addiction-is-part-of-the-design-a-1104237.html>.

self-regulate and their vulnerability to peer pressure, children (including teens) are at greater risk of developing a mental disorder from use of social media platforms, including TikTok.¹⁹⁴

176. TikTok has deliberately designed, developed, engineered, and implemented dangerous features in its platform that limits the ability of children and their parents to control social media use and present social-reward and other stimuli in a manner that has caused Hawai'i youth to compulsively seek out those stimuli, develop negative symptoms when they were withdrawn, and exhibit reduced impulse control and emotional regulation.

177. In short, children find it particularly difficult to exercise the self-control required to regulate their use of TikTok given the stimuli and rewards embedded in the platform, and as a foreseeable and probable consequence of TikTok's design choices its users tend to engage in addictive and compulsive use.¹⁹⁵ TikTok engaged in this conduct even though it knew or should have known that its design choices would have a detrimental effect on youth, including those in Hawai'i, leading to serious problems in the community and its schools.

178. These problems are further exacerbated by TikTok's use of physical-augmentation technology, which allows users to utilize photo and video filters to remove blemishes, make their faces appear thinner, and lighten skin tone, all to make themselves appear more "attractive." Appearance-altering filters are widely used across TikTok's platform. Especially in combination with the platform's general-feed algorithm, these filters can cause users to make false comparisons between their real-life appearances and the appearances in the feed.

¹⁹⁴ Betul Keles *et al.*, *A systematic review: the influence of social media on depression, anxiety and psychological distress in adolescents*, 25 Int'l J. Adolescence & Youth 79, 81 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2019.1590851>.

¹⁹⁵ Fulton Crews *et al.*, *Adolescent cortical development: A critical period of vulnerability for addiction*, 86 Pharmacology Biochemistry & Behav. 189, 194 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pbb.2006.12.001>.

2. TikTok was well aware that its features fostered addictive behavior and excessive use.

179. TikTok’s platform is highly addictive because TikTok intended it to be so.

180. TikTok knowingly created features on the TikTok platform that were intended to cause excessive, compulsive, and addictive use. While listed and discussed below individually, users were subjected to these features in the aggregate, as part of the complete TikTok experience.

181. These features, which TikTok’s *own* employees describe as “coercive design tactics,” are particularly effective at enticing younger users, who TikTok’s employees acknowledge “have minimal ability to self-regulate effectively.”¹⁹⁶

182. TikTok’s design choices exploited dopamine “rewards,” which can lead to addictive behavior, particularly when rewards are unpredictable.

183. The report *Disrupted Childhood: The Cost of Persuasive Design* (co-authored by a future TikTok executive Alexandra Evans) explained how variable rewards produce dopamine rushes:

Variable rewards hold a special thrill, as the user anticipates a reward that they know could come but is tantalisingly just out of reach. A gambler waiting to see where the roulette wheel will stop or a viewer watching a presenter’s dramatic pause before they announce a winner. In both cases, the individuals experience a dopamine rush as they anticipate the unknown outcome.¹⁹⁷

184. The anticipation of the reward, not just the reward itself, drives compulsive and unhealthy habit formation. TikTok knows that “[o]nce the reward has been absorbed, the dopamine fades leaving the desire for more.”¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁶ TT-MS-AG-000226709 at 712.

¹⁹⁷ Baroness Kidron *et al.*, *Disrupted Childhood: The Cost of Persuasive Design* (“*Disrupted Childhood*”) at 20, ResearchGate (June 2018), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329035489_Disrupted_Childhood_The_cost_of_Persuasive_design.

¹⁹⁸ *Id.*

185. TikTok knows that minors are particularly susceptible to compulsive use of its platform. A TikTok-commissioned report corroborates that young, developing brains are vulnerable to harmful addictive behaviors:

[I]f adapting to physical changes poses a new set of challenges to the developing young person, the rapid development of the brain brings additional and perhaps greater ones. In healthy development, the limbic system of the brain (which regulates emotion and feelings of reward) undergoes dramatic changes between the ages of 10-12 years. These changes then interact with the pre-frontal cortex of the brain (the judgement centers) to promote novelty-seeking behavior, risk-taking and interactions with peers. In simple terms, this means there is a phase of intense emotion, while judgment can appear to be less acute, as those ‘judgement centers’ of the brain are being revised. . . . UNICEF describes early adolescence as a time of rapid learning and brain development, which facilitates increases in sensation-seeking, motivation for social relations and sensitivity to social evaluation[.]¹⁹⁹

186. As the *Disrupted Childhood* report found, “[c]hildren’s predilection to seek immediate gratification makes them particularly susceptible to habit-forming rewards.”²⁰⁰ TikTok knowingly takes advantage of this vulnerability, admitting that “minors do not have executive function to control their screen time[.]”²⁰¹ And creating this addiction is TikTok’s intent.

187. TikTok also knows that its platform harms young users. Its own research states that “compulsive usage correlates with a slew of negative mental health effects like loss of analytical skills, memory formation, contextual thinking, conversational depth, empathy, and increased anxiety[.]”²⁰² The research also states that “[c]ompulsive usage interferes with

¹⁹⁹ Zoe Hilton *et al.*, *Exploring effective prevention education responses to dangerous online challenges* at 18, Praesidio Safeguarding (Nov. 2021), <https://praesidiosafeguarding.co.uk/safe-guarding/uploads/2021/11/Exploring-effective-prevention-education-responses-to-dangerous-online-challenges-English-US-compressed.pdf?x70166>.

²⁰⁰ Baroness Kidron *et al.*, *Disrupted Childhood: The Cost of Persuasive Design* at 20, ResearchGate (June 2018), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329035489_Disrupted_Childhood_The_cost_of_Persuasive_design.

²⁰¹ TT-MS-AG-000229158 at 158.

²⁰² TT-MS-AG-000200080 at 088.

essential personal responsibilities like sufficient sleep, work/school responsibilities, and connecting with loved ones[.]”²⁰³

188. In a recent article, clinical psychologists predicted social media addiction will become a formal diagnosis, with many of the same effects as substance abuse.²⁰⁴ The negative impacts of excessive and addictive social media use are especially harmful to youth and interfere with development of healthy “[c]oping strategies, social skills, and emotion regulation.”²⁰⁵ To treat social media addiction, clinical psychologists recommend strategies used in substance abuse treatment, including detox, full-stop periods, reducing access, and identifying triggers for the addictive behavior.²⁰⁶

189. In a study conducted in 2021, researchers asked adolescents substantially the same questions psychologists use to assess substance use disorders, but instead of asking about the use of a drug, like heroin, they asked about the use of “social media.”²⁰⁷ The researchers found that the majority of adolescents answered affirmatively to questions like: “Does social media use ever get in the way of things you are supposed to be doing (sleep, exercise, school, work)?”; “Do you ever use social media even after you realized that it was getting in the way of what you thought was best for you?”; and “Do you ever have a craving or strong desire to use social media?”²⁰⁸ More than 50% of adolescents in the study answered “Sometimes” or “Often” to each of those questions.²⁰⁹ Addiction to social media is so prevalent among adolescents that

²⁰³ TT-MS-AG-000028353 at 356.

²⁰⁴ Melissa Rudy, *Excessive social media use has many of the same effects as substance abuse, says expert*, FoxNews (Aug. 15, 2023, at 4:00 AM), <https://www.foxnews.com/health/excessive-social-media-use-same-effects-substance-abuse-expert>.

²⁰⁵ *Id.*

²⁰⁶ *Id.*

²⁰⁷ Kaitlyn Burnell et al., *U.S. adolescents’ daily social media use and well-being: Exploring the role of addiction-like social media use*, 19 J. Child. & Media 194 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2024.2402272>.

²⁰⁸ *Id.* at 201.

²⁰⁹ *Id.*

nearly half of the respondents answered “Sometimes” or “Often” to all seven initial questions.²¹⁰ And over half answered that they may have some level of addiction to social media ranging from mild to severe.²¹¹

190. Similarly, a survey of teenagers ages 13 to 17 that Boston Children’s Digital Wellness lab ran across all 50 states, 83% of respondents reported some level of addiction to social media.²¹²

191. TikTok internal documents confirm awareness of the same problem. TikTok knows that “[REDACTED],” defined as the “[REDACTED] [REDACTED],” is “[REDACTED] [REDACTED].”²¹³ Further, TikTok internal documents report that in a February 2020 survey of over 2,300 TikTok users, “respondents were asked to give a score out of 5 to indicate strength of the agreement with the statement ‘I spend too much time on TikTok,’ the average response was 4.0.”²¹⁴

192. Ultimately, TikTok’s business model is to increase advertising revenue by maximizing young users’ engagement with the TikTok platform. The more time young users spend on the platform, the more ads they can be served. TikTok admits that “[t]he advertising-based business model encourages optimization for time spent in the app[.]”²¹⁵

193. User engagement is measured by a number of different metrics including the amount of time spent on the platform, the number of times (and times of day) a user opens the

²¹⁰ *Id.*

²¹¹ *Id.*

²¹² David Bickham *et al.*, *Adolescent Media Use: Attitudes, Effects, and Online Experiences*, Bos. Child.’s Digit. Wellness Lab (Aug. 2022), https://digitalwellnesslab.org/wp-content/uploads/Pulse-Survey_Adolescent-Attitudes-Effects-and-Experiences.pdf.

²¹³ TT-MS-AG-000226709 at 710.

²¹⁴ TT-MS-AG-000199596 at 607.

²¹⁵ *Id.*

platform, whether a user allows a video to play to completion or swipes to another screen before it is done, and whether a user clicks the “Like” or “Share” buttons.

194. Due to their vulnerable developmental stage, youth are particularly susceptible to addiction to TikTok. An internal review of user engagement noted that “[a]s expected, across most engagement metrics, the younger the user the better the performance.”²¹⁶ According to internal data from 2019, users aged 14 years old and under consume more videos per user per day than any other age group on TikTok.²¹⁷ One TikTok 2019 internal presentation states that the app’s “ideal user composition” would be for 82% of its users to be under the age of 18.²¹⁸ TikTok considers users under the age of 13 to be a critical demographic, believing young users will continue to use the platform to which they are accustomed “after they grow up.”²¹⁹

3. TikTok uses multiple features to manipulate users into compulsive and excessive use.

195. TikTok has built a number of features that operate in tandem to increase users’ time spent on the platform. Those features create the compulsive use that harm TikTok’s young users. Alarming, TikTok’s own documents reveal the intent behind these features and demonstrate that the compulsive use (or ever-increasing time on the platform) was not an accidental or unintended by-product, but rather was the primary purpose of the design of the feature.

²¹⁶ TT-MS-AG-000080491 at 491.

²¹⁷ Compl. (“N.Y. AG Complaint”) ¶ 51, *New York v. TikTok Inc.*, No. 452749/2024 (N.Y. Sup. Ct. Dec. 27, 2024), ECF No. 66.

²¹⁸ TT-MS-AG-000080077 at slide 7.

²¹⁹ *Id.*

a. “For You” Feed

196. The central feature of the TikTok platform is its “recommendation system,” which is a complex series of algorithms that powers the “For You” feed. According to ByteDance, this feed is “central to the TikTok experience and where most of our users spend their time.”²²⁰

197. Users do not know what the next video will be, and they struggle to resist the pull to continue using the platform to find out.

198. As one expert has explained, “[t]he [TikTok] algorithm is able to find the piece of content that you’re vulnerable to, that will make you click, that will make you watch, but it doesn’t mean that you really like it. . . . It’s just the content that’s the most likely to make you stay on the platform.”²²¹ As another commentator put it, “[y]ou don’t tell TikTok what you want to see. It tells you.”²²²

199. Internal presentations note that TikTok’s goal is to have new users reach a “[h]abit moment” of watching videos in their first week because such users become “highly active” and “start to form a habit of coming to TikTok regularly[.]”²²³ TikTok even sought to create a daily habit for minors. One of TikTok’s internal goals in 2020 was to “[p]romote TikTok LIVE as a daily habit” in users as young as 16.²²⁴

²²⁰ *How TikTok recommends videos #ForYou*, TikTok (June 18, 2020), <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/how-tiktok-recommends-videos-for-you>.

²²¹ *Investigation: How TikTok’s Algorithm Figures Out Your Deepest Desires* at 10:20–10:39, Wall St. J. (July 21, 2021), <https://www.wsj.com/video/series/inside-tiktoks-highly-secretive-algorithm/investigation-how-tiktok-algorithm-figures-out-your-deepest-desires/6C0C2040-FF25-4827-8528-2BD6612E3796>.

²²² Drew Harwell, *How TikTok ate the internet*, Wash. Post (Oct. 14, 2022, at 5:00 AM), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/interactive/2022/tiktok-popularity/>.

²²³ TT-MS-AG-000138333 at slides 29, 34.

²²⁴ TT-MS-AG-000080170 at slide 66.

200. TikTok sets forth these goals in an internal “Onboarding Presentation” that describes the “[g]oals of the recommendation system” as increasing how long users spend on the TikTok platform and how often they engage with it:²²⁵

Goals of the recommendation system

- Ultimate goal of the system is to increase **DAU** (Daily Active Users): attract new users and retain existing users (**retention**)
- App **playtime** is regarded as a similar indicator as retention
- Video views
- Interactions: like, comment, share, etc

201. An internal document titled *TikTok Algo 101*, “explains frankly that in the pursuit of the company’s ‘ultimate goal’ of adding daily active users, it has chosen to optimize for two closely related metrics in the stream of videos it serves: ‘retention’—that is, whether a user comes back—and ‘time spent.’”²²⁶

202. “This system means that watch time is key[,]” explained Guillaume Chaslot, the founder of Algo Transparency.²²⁷ Chaslot noted that “rather than giving [people] what they really want,” TikTok’s “algorithm tries to get people addicted[.]”²²⁸

203. This algorithmic encouragement of continuous scrolling and interaction makes it hard for users to disengage from the platform. A ByteDance-funded study, which imaged the brains of TikTok and other social media platform users, found that users engaged with TikTok about 10 times a minute, twice as often as with peer apps.²²⁹

²²⁵ TT-MS-AG-000201228 at slide 5.

²²⁶ Ben Smith, *How TikTok Reads Your Mind*, N.Y. Times (Dec. 5, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/05/business/media/tiktok-algorithm.html>.

²²⁷ *Id.*

²²⁸ *Id.*

²²⁹ *TikTok Ads Break Through Better Than TV And Drive Greater Audience Engagement*, TikTok, <https://www.tiktok.com/business/library/TikTokDrivesGreaterAudienceEngagement.pdf> (last visited Oct. 20, 2025).

b. Autoplay

204. When a user launches the TikTok platform, a video automatically begins to play in the user's "For You" feed. This "autoplay" feature is designed to immediately grab the user's attention. TikTok does not allow users to disable this feature.

205. The autoplay feature encourages young users to continuously watch video because it does not require user intervention to choose to view a video. The video is already loaded. This reduces so-called "friction" in the user experience (i.e., something that slows down a user from performing an action) and keeps young users on the platform for longer periods of time.

c. Endless Scroll

206. Another addictive feature of the TikTok platform is the "Endless Scroll" (also referred to as infinite scroll or continuous scroll). When a user watches a video on TikTok, he or she can seamlessly move from one video to the next simply by swiping up, without ever reaching a "last" video.

207. Endless scrolling causes young users to spend more time on the platform by making it harder to disengage.²³⁰ This perpetual stream is designed to "keep [users] scrolling, and purposely eliminate any reason for [them] to pause, reconsider or leave."²³¹ The user's experience is a bottomless "state of flow" that fully immerses users, distorts their perception of time, and has been shown to be associated with problematic use of social media platforms.²³²

²³⁰ *Digital Media Literacy: Why We Can't Stop Scrolling*, GCFGlobal, <https://edu.gcfglobal.org/en/digital-media-literacy/why-we-cant-stop-scrolling/1/> (last visited Oct. 20, 2025).

²³¹ Von Tristan Harris, *The Slot Machine in Your Pocket*, Spiegel Int'l (July 27, 2016, at 5:25 PM), <https://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/smartphone-addiction-is-part-of-the-design-a-1104237.html>.

²³² Nino Gugushvili *et al.*, *Facebook use intensity and depressive symptoms: a moderated mediation model of problematic Facebook use, age, neuroticism, and extraversion* at 3, 10 BMC Psychiatry 279 (Nov. 28, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-022-00990-7>; see also Hannah Jantos, *The Psychology of TikTok: Why You Can't Stop Scrolling*, Social Fixation (Sept. 20, 2022), <https://www.socialfixation.com.au/post/why-its-hard-to-stop-scrolling-psychology-behind-tiktok-scroll>.

208. Internal documents show that TikTok knows that “continuous scroll [and] few or no breaks between content” makes it more difficult for users to manage their time spent on the platform, and it intentionally maintains those features to encourage this behavior.²³³

d. Ephemeral Content: TikTok Stories and TikTok LIVE

209. Another addictive feature is TikTok Stories, which lets users share content that vanishes two hours after being posted. It is designed to encourage young users to compulsively return to the platform to view their friends’ or favorite creators’ new content by exploiting young users’ unique sensitivity to the “fear of missing out” (“FOMO”).

210. TikTok similarly leverages users’ FOMO with the TikTok LIVE feature. By default, LIVE content—livestreamed videos and real-time interaction with TikTok users—is only available during the livestream. Users must tune in immediately or lose the opportunity to interact.

211. TikTok compounds the urgency to immediately view LIVE videos with push notifications (discussed below) that encourage users to get back on the platform to watch the livestreamed videos, even during the school day or late at night.

e. Push Notifications

212. Push notifications are signals displayed on a TikTok user’s device that alert them to activity on the platform, such as new Live videos or a “Like” on one of their own videos, to prompt them to open the app.

213. These push notifications send alerts to users on their smartphones and desktops even when the app is not open. TikTok designed these notifications to include lights, sounds, and

²³³ TT-MS-AG-000200103 at 109.

onscreen messages with the goal of drawing users' attention back to their phones and desktops, and ultimately to the TikTok platform.²³⁴

214. Push notifications are also accompanied by a “badge,” a red circle sitting atop the TikTok application icon on the user’s smartphone, to further draw the user’s attention. The badge remains until the user opens the TikTok platform.

215. TikTok employees described the goal of push notifications as being “to encourage users to open the App more and stay longer[.]”²³⁵

216. TikTok is very deliberate with the timing and the number of notifications it sends to users. It runs tests to “[f]ind the best push time and best push count for every user to maximize dau [daily active users] and retention[.]”²³⁶

217. While on one hand, notifications are good for TikTok’s business, they also harm young users by “interfer[ing] with sleep.”²³⁷ TikTok only stopped sending notifications during certain nighttime hours years after launching in the United States. But even that was not sufficient: Almost 20% of users aged 13–15 and 25% of users aged 16–17 remained active on TikTok between 12:00 AM and 5:00 AM.²³⁸

218. TikTok has even misrepresented the number of badge notifications to lure users onto the platform. It displayed badges with random numbers unconnected to any actual content or interactions available on the platform. TikTok employees describe this as “an on purpose strategic choice” to display numbers “inconsistent with the actual number of unread

²³⁴ Trevor Haynes, *Dopamine, Smartphones & You: A Battle for Your Time*, Harv. Kenneth C. Griffin Graduate Sch. Arts & Scis. Blog (May 1, 2018), <https://sites.harvard.edu/sitn/2018/05/01/dopamine-smartphones-battle-time/>.

²³⁵ TT-MS-AG-000201282 at 283.

²³⁶ TT-MS-AG-000201282 at 289.

²³⁷ TT-MS-AG-000199596 at 607.

²³⁸ TT-MS-AG-000329164 at 164.

messages.”²³⁹ As one employee remarked, “I have been getting a badge with 2 every morning, and it disappear [sic] as long as I open the app. When I open the app, it’s not clear where those unread notifications come from.”²⁴⁰

f. Likes, Comments, and Other Interactions

219. TikTok enables users who have posted content on the platform to receive feedback from other users through “Likes” and comments on their content. When content has been “Liked” or has received a comment, TikTok notifies the poster. These notifications are addictive, relying on variable rewards, and are “effective in driving sustained changes in user behavior[.]”²⁴¹

220. A New York University professor describes what happens to the brain when a user receives a notification that “someone ‘likes’ your post” on a social media platform as “[t]he minute you take a drug, drink alcohol, smoke a cigarette if those are your poison, when you get a like on social media, all of those experiences produce dopamine, which is a chemical that’s associated with pleasure.”²⁴²

221. TikTok’s delivery of these dopamine rewards encourages users to post more videos and spend more time on the platform, which promotes user retention and financially benefits TikTok through more time on the platform and thus more ad revenue.

222. In internal documents, TikTok admits that “[t]he core user experience emphasizes and celebrates like and comment count, which can leave people without them feeling self-conscious, jealous, and bitter[.]”²⁴³

²³⁹ TT-MS-AG-000253648 at p. 1.

²⁴⁰ *Id.* at Comment by N. Xia.

²⁴¹ TT-MS-AG-000139373 at 377.

²⁴² Eames Yates, *What Happens to Your Brain When You Get a Like on Instagram*, Bus. Insider (Mar. 25, 2017), <https://www.businessinsider.com/what-happens-to-your-brain-like-instagram-dopamine-2017-3>.

²⁴³ TT-MS-AG-000200080 at 093.

223. TikTok’s own research shows that young people spend excessive amounts of time on the platform to avoid missing out on rewards such as likes or comments. Alexandra Evans, again prior to becoming a TikTok executive, co-authored *Disrupted Childhood* and explained how coercive design impacts teenagers:

Persuasive design strategies exploit the natural human desire to be social and popular, by taking advantage of an individual’s fear of not being social and popular in order to extend their online use. For young people, identity requires constant attention, curation and renewal. At key development stages it can be overwhelmingly important to be accepted by your peer group.²⁴⁴

224. TikTok’s design and display of highlighting social validation and quantification metrics is addictive and has an especially powerful effect on teenagers.

4. TikTok put in place significant impediments to discontinuing use.

225. Even if a user decided to delete their account, TikTok made doing so a lengthy and complex undertaking. The deletion process is designed to encourage users to retain their accounts, even if their stated reason for deletion is that the platform is endangering their safety or health.

226. When a user selects the “Deactivate or delete account” in the “Account” section of the TikTok app, the user is presented an option: “Delete or deactivate?” Deactivating an account will preserve the user’s data, but hide it from the platform; deleting, on the other hand, will permanently delete all data associated with the account.

227. However, ByteDance designed TikTok so that deletion is not immediate. The data and account are preserved for 30 days, during which time the user can reactivate their account.

228. In addition, if a user selects the “Delete account permanently” option, the user is asked “Why are you leaving TikTok?” The user must select from the following list: (1) I’m

²⁴⁴ Baroness Kidron *et al.*, *Disrupted Childhood: The Cost of Persuasive Design* at 21, ResearchGate (June 2018), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329035489_Disrupted_Childhood_The_cost_of_Persuasive_design.

leaving temporarily; (2) I'm on TikTok too much; (3) Safety or privacy concerns; (4) Too many irrelevant ads; (5) Trouble getting started; (6) I have multiple accounts; or (7) Another reason.

229. If a user selects "I'm on TikTok too much," TikTok makes a last-ditch effort to retain the user by reminding the user that a limit can be set on the user's watch time on the platform. If a user selects "Safety or privacy concerns," the user is provided a list of resources to "secure" the account. If the user selects "[a]nother reason," a written explanation must be provided. The only option that does not provide or require further information is "I have multiple accounts." TikTok is not worried about users deleting merely one account if they already have multiple others.

230. Once a user selects a reason for deletion, the next screen prompts the user to download their TikTok data.

231. Then, TikTok requires the user to check a box at the bottom of the screen that says, "[b]y continuing, you reviewed your data request and wish to continue deleting your account." This contrasts with the process of a user "agreeing" to the Terms of Service and Privacy Policy during the registration process, which does not require a separate confirmation.

232. Once the user reaffirms their desire to continue with the deletion process, the platform takes the user to yet another screen, which once again asks whether the user wants to "delete this account?" The text also explains that the account will be deactivated for 30 days, during which the user may reactivate the account, and after 30 days, the account and data associated with it will be permanently deleted. It goes on to warn that if a user deletes the account, the user will no longer be able to do many things in the app.

233. Once a user again confirms that they want to delete their account, TikTok requires validation with a 6-digit code sent to the telephone number or email address associated with the

account. Only after the user receives and enters the code may they finally “delete” their account (after waiting 30 days).

234. TikTok’s cumbersome multi-step account deletion process is designed to deter users from deleting their account by providing multiple holding gates in the hopes that the user will ultimately change their mind. This strategy is particularly effective for deterring younger users. By requiring a child to go through multiple steps, while repeatedly offering alternatives, as well as a list of things they are giving up, the process is designed to convince them to change their mind rather than facilitate account deletion. Moreover, requiring the user to maintain a deactivated account for 30 days, rather than deleting it on demand, increases the chance that an addicted user will relapse and return to the app.

5. Minors are especially susceptible to compulsive use of TikTok.

235. Children and teens are particularly vulnerable to addiction to social media because their brains—including the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that governs higher reasoning, goal setting, and impulse control—are still developing. According to studies, cortical development during adolescence is a critical period of vulnerability to addiction.²⁴⁵

236. According to a 2025 study, 45% of U.S. teens say they use social media “too much.”²⁴⁶ According to a 2022 study, more than half say that giving it up would be “somewhat” or “very” hard.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁵ Fulton Crews *et al.*, *Adolescent cortical development: A critical period of vulnerability for addiction*, 86 *Pharmacology Biochemistry & Behav.* 189 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pbb.2006.12.001>; Zara Abrams, *Why young brains are especially vulnerable to social media*, *Am. Psych. Ass’n* (Aug. 3, 2023), <https://www.apa.org/news/apa/2022/social-media-children-teens>.

²⁴⁶ Michelle Faverio *et al.*, *Teens, Social Media and Mental Health*, Pew Rsch. Ctr. (Apr. 22, 2025), <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2025/04/22/teens-social-media-and-mental-health>.

²⁴⁷ Emily A. Vogels *et al.*, *Teens, Social Media and Technology 2022*, Pew Rsch. Ctr. (Aug. 10, 2022), <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/08/10/teens-social-media-and-technology-2022>.

237. Teen overuse of social media, including TikTok, has broad, harmful impacts on virtually every indicator of youth mental unwellness, including increased rates of major depressive episodes and anxiety, body image problems and eating disorders, sleep disturbance, loneliness, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts.²⁴⁸

238. Despite a lack of transparency by TikTok and other social media companies, which impedes research, a growing body of peer-reviewed scientific literature confirms that social media addiction and overuse worsens mental health outcomes significantly more than other types of “screen time,” like video games or television.²⁴⁹

239. Research further indicates that going through puberty while being a heavy social media user interferes with a sensitive period for social learning and friendship formation.²⁵⁰

240. Not only can social media harm mental health, but studies show that mental health improves when social media use is limited. In a controlled experiment, college students who scored high on a depression scale improved significantly once they limited themselves to 30 minutes per day, as compared to students who continued using social media as usual.²⁵¹

241. By maximizing TikTok’s addictive properties, TikTok further harms minors by displacing time young people should be spending on more beneficial activities, like socializing with friends and family in person, playing outside, exercising, reading, doing homework, and

²⁴⁸ See, e.g., Jonathan Haidt *et al.*, *Social Media and Mental Health: A Collaborative Review* (N.Y.U., unpublished manuscript), <https://tinyurl.com/SocialMediaMentalHealthReview> (last visited Oct. 20, 2025); Jacqueline Nesi *et al.*, *Handbook of Adolescent Digital Media Use and Mental Health*, Cambridge Univ. Press (2022), <https://tinyurl.com/5d2ad58w>.

²⁴⁹ Jean Twenge & Eric Farley, *Not All Screen Time Is Created Equal: Associations with Mental Health Vary by Activity and Gender*, 56 Soc. Psychiatry & Psychiatry Epidemiology 207, 207-17 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-020-01906-9>.

²⁵⁰ Amy Orben *et al.*, *Windows of developmental sensitivity to social media*, 13 Nature Commc’ns 1649 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-022-29296-3>.

²⁵¹ Melissa G. Hunt *et al.*, *No More FOMO: Limiting Social Media Decreases Loneliness and Depression*, 37 J. Soc. & Clinical Psych. 751, 751 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.2018.37.10.751>.

sleeping. Indeed, interfering with sleep is one of the primary ways that social media use harms minor users. That, in turn, causes or exacerbates symptoms of depression and anxiety.²⁵²

6. The United States Surgeon General’s warning.

242. In late 2021, the U.S. Surgeon General issued a public health advisory to “highlight the urgent need to address the nation’s youth mental health crisis[,]”²⁵³ as well as to call on “technology companies” to “step up and take responsibility.”²⁵⁴

243. In a statement accompanying the advisory, the Surgeon General stressed that “[m]ental health challenges in children, adolescents, and young adults are real and widespread” and represent “the leading cause of disability and poor life outcomes in young people[.]”²⁵⁵

244. According to the Surgeon General, “national surveys of youth have shown major increases in certain mental health symptoms, including depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation.”²⁵⁶ From 2009 to 2019, the number of high school students reporting “persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness increased by 40%[,]” to more than one in three students.²⁵⁷ “[Y]outh psychiatric visits to emergency departments for depression, anxiety, and behavioral challenges increased by 28%.”²⁵⁸ Perhaps most alarmingly, the number of U.S. youth seriously considering attempting suicide increased by 36%, and the number creating a suicide plan

²⁵² See, e.g., Holly Scott *et al.*, *Social media use and adolescent sleep patterns: cross-sectional findings from the UK millenium cohort study*, 9 *BMJ Open* 1, 1–9 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2019-031161>; Garrett Hisler *et al.*, *Associations between screen time and short sleep duration among adolescents vary by media type: evidence from a cohort study*, 66 *Sleep Med.* 92, 92–102 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sleep.2019.08.007>.

²⁵³ *U.S. Surgeon General Issues Advisory on Youth Mental Health Crisis Further Exposed by COVID-19 Pandemic*, Se. ADA Ctr. (Dec. 14, 2021), <https://adasoutheast.org/u-s-surgeon-general-issues-advisory-on-youth-mental-health-crisis-further-exposed-by-covid-19-pandemic/>.

²⁵⁴ *Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory* at 26, U.S. Dep’t Health & Hum. Servs. (2021), <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>.

²⁵⁵ *Id.* at 4, 8.

²⁵⁶ *Id.* at 8.

²⁵⁷ *Id.*

²⁵⁸ *Id.*

increased by 44%.²⁵⁹ Between 2007 and 2018, suicide rates among youth increased by almost 60%.²⁶⁰

245. More recently, the Surgeon General called for a warning label on all social media.²⁶¹

246. Mental health challenges are especially acute for teen girls. In 2023, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released new statistics revealing that, in 2021, nearly three in five teenage girls experienced persistent sadness—defined as sadness every day for at least two weeks in the past year—and one in three had seriously considered suicide.²⁶²

7. Hawai‘i children and teens are struggling with mental health and other issues.

247. Many children and teens in Hawai‘i use the TikTok platform. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED].²⁶³

248. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED].²⁶⁴

249. TikTok has also provided grants to organizations in Hawaii, including Lahainaluna High School Parent Teacher Student Association, but on information and belief,

²⁵⁹ *Id.*

²⁶⁰ *Id.*

²⁶¹ Vivek H. Murthy, *Surgeon General: Why I’m Calling for a Warning Label on Social Media Platforms*, N.Y. Times (June 17, 2024), <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/17/opinion/social-media-health-warning.html>.

²⁶² Azeen Ghorayshi & Roni Caryn Rabin, *Teen Girls Report Record Levels of Sadness, C.D.C. Finds*, N.Y. Times (May 10, 2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/13/health/teen-girls-sadness-suicide-violence.html>.

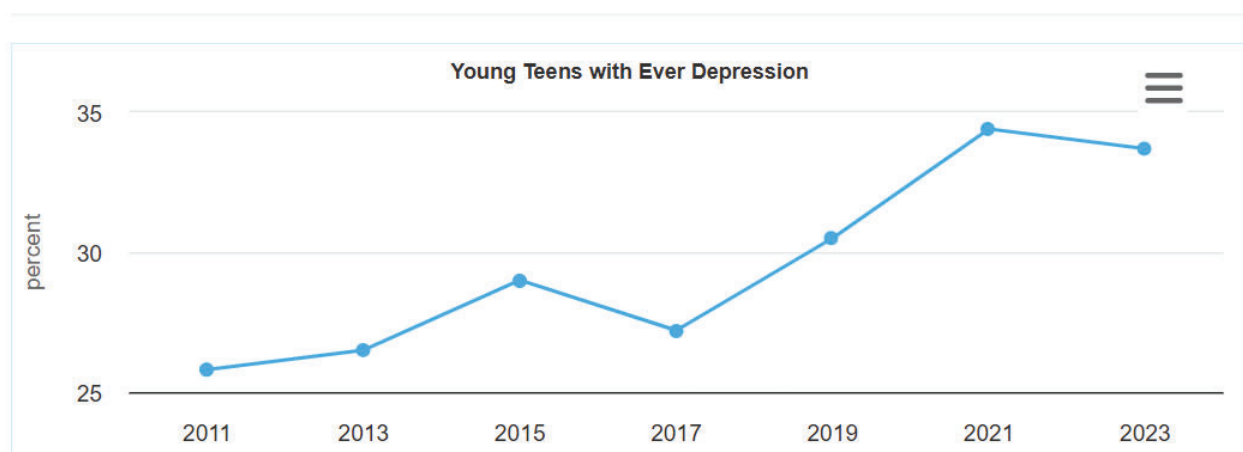
²⁶³ TT-MS-AG-000331240.

²⁶⁴ *See, e.g.*, TT-MS-AG-000228823.

failed to warn to recipients about the dangers posed by its platform, including risks of addiction and mental health harms, and its deceptive and unfair practices alleged below.²⁶⁵

250. Meanwhile, as is occurring elsewhere in the country, Hawai‘i is struggling to deal with its own youth mental health crisis.

251. According to the 2023 Hawai‘i Youth Risk Behavior Survey (“YRBS”), for public middle school students, about 34% have felt sad or hopeless almost every day for two or more weeks in a row so they stopped doing some usual activities.²⁶⁶ Even more alarming, this data indicates an upward trend.²⁶⁷



252. For public middle school students, 26% have seriously thought about killing themselves.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁵ Cassie Ordonio, *Lahainaluna High PTSA receives TikTok grant for online safety education*, Hawai‘i Public Radio (Dec. 6, 2024), <https://www.hawaiipublicradio.org/local-news/2024-12-06/lahainaluna-high-ptsa-tiktok-grant-online-safety-education>; TT-MS-AG-000009675 ([REDACTED]); TT-MS-AG-000021164 ([REDACTED])

²⁶⁶ *Community Dashboard: Child & Family Mental Health Tracker - Young Teens with Ever Depression*, Haw. Health Matters (2023), <https://www.hawaiihealthmatters.org/indicators/index/view?indicatorId=13425&localeId=14>.

²⁶⁷ *Id.*

²⁶⁸ *Community Dashboard: Child & Family Mental Health Tracker – Young Teens with Suicidal Thoughts*, Haw. Health Matters (2023), <https://www.hawaiihealthmatters.org/indicators/index/view?indicatorId=13353&localeId=14>.

253. Ninety-two percent of middle school students spend more than 1 hour a day on screentime, roughly three quarters of survey respondents spend more than 3 hours per day on their screens, and almost half of those surveyed (42% spent 5 hours or more a day).²⁶⁹

254. For public high school students, in the past 12 months, about 35% felt sad or hopeless for two or more weeks in a row, and 16% have seriously considered attempting suicide.²⁷⁰ There is a significant gender disparity in the data, with 46.2% of girls reporting depression compared with 24.2% of boys.²⁷¹

255. For lesbian, gay, or bisexual public school students, 31% have seriously considered attempting suicide.²⁷²

256. From 2018 to 2022, 51 youth in Hawai‘i between the ages of 10 and 19 died from suicide; making suicide the leading cause of death in this age group.²⁷³ Suicide surpassed traffic crashes (27 deaths) and cancer (19 deaths) as the leading cause of death.²⁷⁴

²⁶⁹ *Query Results for Hawai‘i Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) Data - Screentime - hours per school day (2021+), Middle Schools, State-level*, Haw. Health Data Warehouse (2023), https://hhdw.org/report/query/result/yrbs/ScrnTimeNewCat/ScrnTimeNewCat_MS_ST.html.

²⁷⁰ *Community Dashboard: Child & Family Mental Health Tracker- Teens with Recent Depression*, Haw. Health Matters (2023), <https://www.hawaiihealthmatters.org/indicators/index/view?indicatorId=13423&localeId=14>; *Community Dashboard: Child & Family Mental Health Tracker- Teens with Suicidal Thoughts*, Haw. Health Matters (2023), <https://www.hawaiihealthmatters.org/indicators/index/view?indicatorId=13355&localeId=14&localeChartIdxs=1|2|3|4|5>.

²⁷¹ *Community Dashboard: Child & Family Mental Health Tracker- Teens with Suicidal Thoughts*, Haw. Health Matters (2023), <https://www.hawaiihealthmatters.org/indicators/index/view?indicatorId=13355&localeId=14&localeChartIdxs=1|2|3|4|5>.

²⁷² *Community Dashboard: Child & Family Mental Health Tracker- LGB Teens with Suicidal Thoughts*, Haw. Health Matters (2023), <https://www.hawaiihealthmatters.org/indicators/index/view?indicatorId=11723&localeId=14&localeChartIdxs=1|2|3|4>.

²⁷³ Child & Adolescent Mental Health Division, *Suicide Awareness Data & Prevention Resources: Hawai‘i Youth Data Overview*, Haw. Dep’t Health (Apr. 2024), <https://health.hawaii.gov/camhd/files/2024/09/Suicide-Prevention-Awareness-Infographic-April2024.pdf>.

²⁷⁴ *Id.*

257. Despite these challenges, fewer than 1 in 4 public middle school students and 1 in 5 public high school students report receiving the kind of help they need most of the time or always (among students who reported having felt sad, empty, hopeless, angry, or anxious).²⁷⁵

258. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (“NAMI”), based on March 2025 data, 17,000 Hawai‘i adolescents experience a major depressive episode each year and 14,000 Hawai‘i adolescents have serious thoughts of suicide each year.²⁷⁶

259. Sixteen percent of youth under 17 in Hawai‘i have experienced 2+ adverse childhood experiences, which are linked to mental illness and substance misuse in adulthood.²⁷⁷ Two hundred and thirty-four thousand adults in Hawai‘i have a mental health condition—more than 5x the population of Hilo.²⁷⁸

260. School-based behavioral health providers and educators have reported to the Hawai‘i State Department of Education that excessive social media use has contributed to increased anxiety, sleep disturbances, and challenges in attention and focus among students. Parents have expressed concerns about their children’s emotional well-being, often linking issues like cyberbullying and social comparison to online activities.

261. Schools have also shared concerns about increased peer conflict, distractions from devices, and the emotional toll of online interactions.

²⁷⁵ *Community Dashboard: Child & Family Mental Health Tracker- Young Teens Who Get Mental Health Help They Need*, Haw. Health Matters (2023), <https://www.hawaiihealthmatters.org/indicators/index/view?indicatorId=13421&localeId=14>; *Community Dashboard: Child & Family Mental Health Tracker- Teens Who Get Mental Health Help They Need*, Haw. Health Matters (2023), <https://www.hawaiihealthmatters.org/indicators/index/view?indicatorId=13419&localeId=14>.

²⁷⁶ *Mental Health in Hawaii*, Nat’l All. Mental Health (Mar. 2025), <https://www.nami.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Hawaii-GRPA-Data-Sheet-8.5-x-11-wide.pdf>.

²⁷⁷ *Id.*

²⁷⁸ *Id.*

F. TikTok misrepresents the platform as being safe and appropriate for minors.

1. TikTok consistently tells users the platform is “safe” and “appropriate for teens,” and that safety is a “top priority.”

262. TikTok has actively misrepresented on its website the platform’s safety for young users. It falsely represented:

A. “We work to make sure this occurs in a supportive space that does not negatively impact your physical or psychological health.”²⁷⁹

B. “Creating a welcoming environment where everyone feels safe and comfortable is our highest priority.”²⁸⁰

C. “We are deeply committed to TikTok being a safe and positive experience for people under the age of 18.”²⁸¹ It goes on to say, “We do not allow content that may put young people at risk of psychological, physical, or developmental harm.”²⁸²

D. “We have a vibrant and inspiring community on TikTok, and it’s important that our platform remains a safe, supportive, and joyful place for our community.”²⁸³

263. The CEO of TikTok has said the following in public forums:

A. In written testimony to Congress on March 23, 2023, CEO Shou Chew, explained that he is “responsible for all business operations and strategic decisions for

²⁷⁹ *Mental and Behavioral Health*, TikTok (May 17, 2024), <https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/en/mental-behavioral-health> [<https://web.archive.org/web/20250812091952/https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/en/mental-behavioral-health>].

²⁸⁰ *Safety Center*, TikTok, <https://www.tiktok.com/safety/en> (last visited Oct. 21, 2025).

²⁸¹ *Youth Safety and Well-Being*, TikTok (May 17, 2024), <https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/en/youth-safety> [<https://web.archive.org/web/20250715224021/https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/en/youth-safety>].

²⁸² *Id.*

²⁸³ *Enhancing the LIVE community experience with new features, updates, and policies*, TikTok (Oct. 17, 2022), <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/enhancing-the-live-community-experience>.

TikTok,” and that “[s]afety and wellness—in particular for teens—is a core priority for TikTok.”²⁸⁴

B. Shou Chew’s written testimony further noted that TikTok “will keep safety—particularly for teenagers—a top priority[.]”²⁸⁵

C. In a TED Talk in April 2023, Shou Chew referred back to his commitments before Congress, reiterating his first commitment “that we take safety, especially for teenagers, extremely seriously, and we will continue to prioritize that.”²⁸⁶ He went on to say, “[y]ou know, I believe that [we] need to give our teenage users, and our users in general, a very safe experience. . . . If they don’t feel safe, [we] cannot fulfill [our] mission. So, it’s all very organic to me as a business to make sure that I do that.”²⁸⁷

D. As recently as April 2021, TikTok maintained an official media statement in response to the deaths of a Colorado child and a Pennsylvania child from a “Blackout Challenge” posted on TikTok, stating in part: “At TikTok, we have no higher priority than protecting the safety of our community, and content that promotes or glorifies dangerous behavior is strictly prohibited and promptly removed to prevent it from becoming a trend on our platform.”²⁸⁸

²⁸⁴ *TikTok: How Congress Can Safeguard American Data Privacy and Protect Children From Online Harms: Hearing Before the H. Comm. on Energy & Com.*, 118th Cong. 1 (2023), <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/IF/IF00/20230323/115519/HHRG-118-IF00-Wstate-ChewS-20230323.pdf> (written testimony of Shou Chew, CEO, TikTok Inc.).

²⁸⁵ *Id.*

²⁸⁶ *TikTok's CEO on its future — and what makes its algorithm different* at 25:27–26:19, TED (Apr. 2023), https://www.ted.com/talks/shou_chew_tiktok_s_ceo_on_its_future_and_what_makes_its_algorithm_different?hasSummary=true&language=en.

²⁸⁷ *Id.*

²⁸⁸ *Colorado Boy Dies After Taking Part in 'Blackout Challenge'*, NBC Bay Area (Apr. 15, 2021, at 8:11 PM), <https://www.nbcbayarea.com/news/national-international/colorado-boy-dies-after-taking-part-in-blackout-challenge/2520008/?os=vbkn42tqhpnxgo4ij&ref=app&noamp=mobile>.

264. Relatedly, TikTok Executives have misrepresented TikTok’s extensive efforts to encourage addiction to its platform through the development of compulsive design elements:

A. When asked by Congress in October 2021 if TikTok is specifically designed to keep users engaged as long as possible, TikTok’s Vice President and Head of Public Policy testified: “[W]e want to make sure that people are having an entertaining experience. You know, like TV or movies, you know, TikTok is meant to be entertaining. But we do think we have a responsibility along with parents to make sure that it is being used in a responsible way.”²⁸⁹

B. In the April 2023 TED Talk, Shou Chew reiterated that TikTok’s “goal is not to optimize and maximize time spent. It is not.”²⁹⁰ He further denied that TikTok has a financial incentive to maximize users’ time spent on the platform, stating: “Even if you think about it from a commercial point of view, it is always best when your customers have a very healthy relationship with your product.”²⁹¹

265. These responses misrepresent TikTok’s relentless targeting of users’ time and attention through addictive design features, and measuring success based on metrics such as how many young people use the platform per day and month, how long they spend watching videos, how many videos they watch, and whether they keep coming back.

266. According to internal documents, one TikTok employee acknowledged that while the app’s features, like the algorithm, are powerful at keeping people engaged and on the app, “I

²⁸⁹ *Protecting Kids Online: SnapChat, TikTok, and YouTube: Hearing Before S. Subcomm. on Consumer Prot., Prod. Safety, & Data Sec. of S. Comm. on Com., Sci., & Transp.* at 59, 117th Cong. 1 (2021), <https://www.congress.gov/117/chrg/CHRG-117shrg54901/CHRG-117shrg54901.pdf>.

²⁹⁰ *TikTok's CEO on its future — and what makes its algorithm different* at 20:41–20:55, TED (Apr. 2023), https://www.ted.com/talks/shou_chew_tiktok_s_ceo_on_its_future_and_what_makes_its_algorithm_different?hasSu mmmary=true&language=en.

²⁹¹ *Id.* at 23:26–23:57.

think that we need to be cognizant of what it might mean for other opportunities,” clarifying that “I literally mean sleep, and eating, and moving around the room, and looking at somebody in the eyes.”²⁹²

267. By engaging in these and similar misrepresentations, and by failing to disclose critical, material information regarding its platform’s risks, TikTok deceives users. TikTok’s deception and lack of transparency prevents young users and their parents from making truly informed decisions about platform usage.

2. TikTok misrepresents the efficacy of its safety tools.

268. After being consistently pressured to do so, TikTok adopted a series of so-called safety features to protect young people on its platform. However, TikTok misrepresents the efficacy of these features.

a. TikTok’s claimed 60-minute time limit is not a limit.

269. TikTok has repeatedly said that it sets an automatic 60-minute daily screentime limit for teens.

270. However, this tool does not actually impose a screentime limit. After using TikTok for 60 minutes, teens are simply prompted to enter a passcode to continue watching. Moreover, users can change the setting to up to 2 hours on TikTok per day or disable the tool entirely.

271. Indeed, this tool is ineffective at reducing the amount of time teens spend on the platform. In a March 2023 internal study, TikTok found that the default screentime use prompts had almost no impact, reducing the average time per day teens spent on TikTok per day from

²⁹² TT-MS-AG-000285717 at 49:23.

approximately [redacted] minutes to approximately [redacted] minutes.²⁹³ Yet the company did not revisit the tool’s design.²⁹⁴

272. Nowhere in its testimony, posts, or advertisements does TikTok disclose that the screentime limit is ineffective and can be easily bypassed, extended, or even disabled.

273. These representations leave consumers—especially parents who are unlikely to use the platform—with a false impression that this tool imposes an actual limit on teen screentime and a false belief that TikTok effectively addressed concerns around excessive use.

b. TikTok’s promotion of its screentime management tool.

274. TikTok has also adopted several purported screentime management tools, including a dashboard that gives users data about how much time they are spending on TikTok, “take a break” videos that encouraged disengagement, and family pairing (discussed above), which allows parents to customize screentime. However, TikTok has consistently misrepresented the efficacy of these tools in reducing screentime.

275. Indeed, internal analyses show that the features TikTok touted were actually designed to make no material dent in young users’ excessive use of the platform. Rather, “leadership’s guidance” was to stay within so-called “[g]uardrail metrics” when creating new safety features.²⁹⁵

276. In an internal document describing these screentime management functions, a product manager confirmed: “Our goal is not to reduce the time spent[.]”²⁹⁶

²⁹³ N.Y. AG Complaint ¶ 180, *New York v. TikTok Inc.*, No. 452749/2024 (N.Y. Sup. Ct. Dec. 27, 2024), ECF No. 66.

²⁹⁴ *Id.*

²⁹⁵ TT-MS-AG-000229158 at 158, 163, 168.

²⁹⁶ TT-MS-AG-000229218 at p. 8.

277. Similarly, in a chat message discussing features purporting to help users manage their screentime, a TikTok employee confirmed that the “goal is not to reduce the time spent” on the TikTok app, but rather to ultimately “contribute to DAU [daily active users] and retention” of users.²⁹⁷

278. Instead, TikTok measured the success of its screentime management tools in part by how they were “improving public trust in the TikTok platform via media coverage.”²⁹⁸

279. Not only are these screentime management features ineffective, but TikTok also makes them hard to find. Many of the features are hidden behind multiple screens, reducing their use and effectiveness. Internal documents criticize this approach because hiding these features results in “limiting users’ ability to find and take advantage of these features. If [screentime management] is actually an important problem to solve, we should make our entry points more prominent[.]”²⁹⁹

280. TikTok touts these time management and other safety tools as if they are legitimate interventions designed to promote young users’ healthy usage of the platform, which they are not. Moreover, TikTok withholds material information about the effectiveness of these tools and does not provide consumers with information that is relevant for assessing the safety of the platform.

(i) Dashboard

281. The screentime dashboard provides users with a summary of the time they spend on TikTok. It was widely promoted as a tool to help minors in managing screentime, including in

²⁹⁷ TT-MS-AG-000204080.

²⁹⁸ TT-MS-AG-000215600.

²⁹⁹ TT-MS-AG-000200080 at 098.

the press, in external newsletters, and via posts on TikTok’s website.³⁰⁰ TikTok also promoted it to parents and guardians through partnership with the National PTA and in press releases on its website.³⁰¹

282. When it was introduced in February 2020, TikTok posted on its website it was because “the wellbeing of our users is incredibly important to us. We want people to have fun on TikTok, but it’s also important for our community to look after their wellbeing which means having a healthy relationship with online apps and services.”³⁰²

283. However, an internal document seeking approval for the screentime dashboard noted that “we don’t expect significant impact to stay time with this feature since it is only improving awareness and is not an intervention.”³⁰³

284. In fact, TikTok found—as it expected—that the screentime dashboard did not affect minors’ usage because “minors do not have executive function to control their screen time[.]”³⁰⁴

³⁰⁰ *Screen Time*, TikTok, <https://support.tiktok.com/en/account-and-privacy/account-information/screen-time> (last visited Oct. 21, 2025).

³⁰¹ See, e.g., Jordan Furlong, *Investing in our community's digital well being*, TikTok (June 9, 2022), <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/investing-in-our-communitys-digital-well-being>.

³⁰² Cormac Keenan, *Introducing Family Safety Mode and Screentime Management in Feed*, TikTok (Feb. 19, 2020), <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-gb/family-safety-mode-and-screentime-management-in-feed>.

³⁰³ TT-MS-AG-000028368 at 373.

³⁰⁴ TT-MS-AG-000229158 at 158.

✓ **Expectations Met**

- Slight drop in stay duration (-0.07%) as we expected, but no impact to other core metrics (retention, publish, active days). This aligns with leadership's guidance (1) keep stay duration impact within a reasonable threshold (2) no impact to retention. This drop in stay duration is correlated with L3 users and medium to heavy users of the platform.
 - An explanation for no correlation with L1+2 is that minors do not have executive function to control their screen time, while young adults do (this is supported by our partners at Stanford Brainstorm). Also, [[HYPERLINK "https://bytedance.feishu.cn/wiki/wikcnLZoAu0mQDBGQ7eVKnS8tHb?from=from_ark_index_search"\h](https://bytedance.feishu.cn/wiki/wikcnLZoAu0mQDBGQ7eVKnS8tHb?from=from_ark_index_search)] should drive more adoption for L1+2

285. Leadership directed TikTok employees to “keep stay duration impact within a reasonable threshold”—meaning not significantly reduce the time users spend on the app—and have “no impact to [user] retention.”³⁰⁵

286. More specifically, for several safety features, TikTok’s goal was to only allow “a maximum 5% drop in stay time for . . . minors.”³⁰⁶ The screentime dashboard did not appear to have any impact on the usage of minors.

(ii) “Take a Break” Videos

287. TikTok also touts its “Take a Break” videos that ostensibly encourage users to stop using the TikTok platform after long sessions. TikTok CEO Shou Chew even mentioned the videos in an interview with the *New York Times*. But as one of TikTok’s executives noted, the videos are “useful [as] a good talking point” when meeting with policymakers, but “they’re not altogether effective[.]”³⁰⁷

³⁰⁵ *Id.*

³⁰⁶ TT-MS-AG-000028353 at 358.

³⁰⁷ TT-MS-AG-000285687 at 22:25.

(iii) Family Pairing

288. In April 2020, ByteDance created a “Family Pairing” feature on TikTok.³⁰⁸ The supposed purpose of this feature was to allow parents to link their accounts to their children’s accounts and enforce certain controls (such as screentime limits and restriction of “content that may not be appropriate for all audiences”).³⁰⁹

289. “Family Pairing” is meant to allow parents to prevent their children from direct messaging other TikTok users. But ByteDance has designed TikTok’s “Family Pairing” feature so that it is not mandatory for minor users. It is also unwieldy for adults to use, requiring that a parent or guardian must create their own TikTok account to pair it with their child’s account. Further, the “Family Pairing” feature is available only on the TikTok mobile app. It provides no protection when a child accesses TikTok through a web browser. And because this feature requires parents to know the name of their child’s account to pair it, youth can easily evade the protections of the “Family Pairing” feature by creating anonymous accounts, again without parental approval or knowledge.

290. ByteDance further stymies parents’ ability to supervise minor children’s use of TikTok by permitting minor users to block their parents’ profiles, post ephemeral videos called “Stories” that disappear after 24 hours, and post those Stories to “Friends Only.”

291. TikTok is aware that many youth are using the platform late at night and admits that such use is a “strong indicator” that those users are not getting the recommended eight hours of sleep necessary for their health and well-being.³¹⁰ Internal TikTok documents reveal that more than 20% of children are active on its platform between 12:00 AM and 5:00 AM, when they

³⁰⁸ Jeff Collins, *TikTok Introduces Family Pairing*, TikTok (Apr. 15, 2020), <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/tiktok-introduces-family-pairing>.

³⁰⁹ *Id.*

³¹⁰ TT-MS-AG-000329164 at 164.

should be sleeping.³¹¹ Specifically, 19% of TikTok’s 13-15-year-old users globally and 25% of users aged 16-17 are active on TikTok between 12:00 AM and 5:00 AM.³¹² Further depleting parents’ and guardians’ ability to supervise children’s use of TikTok, until August 2021, TikTok would send push notifications to young users at all hours of the day or night to persuade them to log back on to TikTok. Since then, push notifications have been cut off at 9:00 PM for users self-identified as 13 to 15 years old, and after 10:00 PM for users self-identified as 16 or 17 years of age, but parents remain unable to set further limits on notification frequency and timing.

292. Until January 13, 2021, ByteDance also interfered with parental supervision and endangered children by defaulting all accounts, including those registered to children as young as 13, to “public.” That allowed strangers to contact minor users regardless of age or location. ByteDance also intentionally and actively promoted these types of connections by suggesting accounts to follow through the “Find Friends” or “People You May Know” features.

293. Today, for users self-identified as 16 and over, ByteDance still sets the default privacy setting for all registered accounts to “public,” meaning that anyone can view a user’s profile, on or off TikTok, request the user as a friend, or engage with the user’s videos.

3. TikTok misrepresents the efficacy of its “Refresh” and “Restricted Mode” features.

294. TikTok also misrepresents the efficacy of tools that users can employ to manage the content the recommendation system feeds them, including the “Refresh” feature, which allegedly allows users to “reset” their “For You” feeds, and “Restricted Mode,” which allegedly limits the appearance of content that may not be appropriate for all audiences.

³¹¹ *Id.*

³¹² *Id.*

a. **TikTok falsely represents users’ ability to “Refresh” their feed and escape harmful rabbit holes.**

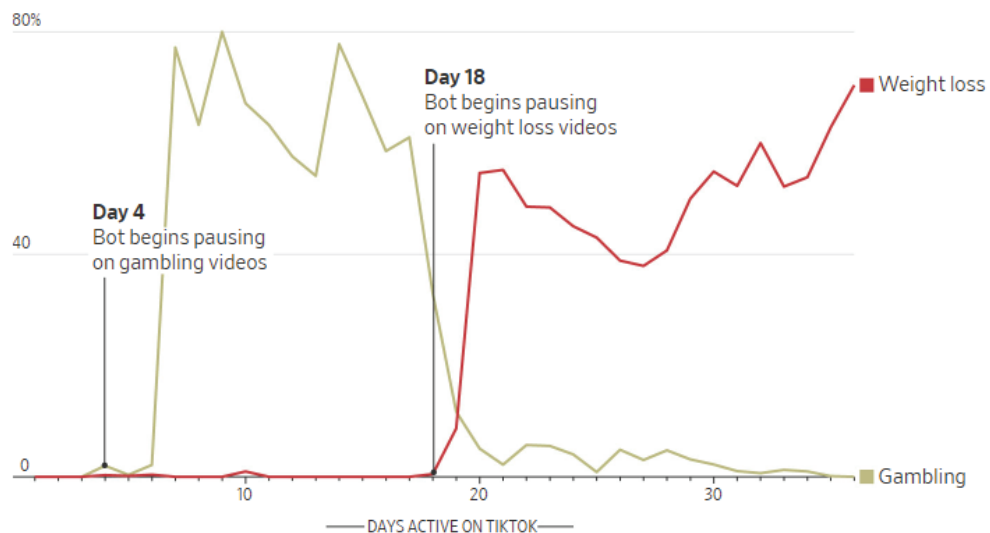
295. A TikTok user experiences a “rabbit hole” (also known as a “filter bubble”) when he or she encounters a high percentage of videos on the same or similar topics on his or her “For You” or other pages as part of TikTok’s continuous scroll.

296. The recommendation system creates rabbit holes by quickly evaluating users’ interests and then repeatedly pushing videos about those interests regardless of content. The *Wall Street Journal* published a chart showing just how quickly the recommendation system learns a user’s interest and then pushes content related to that interest.³¹³

Fast Learner

TikTok’s algorithm quickly gives users the content they’ll watch, for as long as they’ll watch it. When one bot began re-watching videos about gambling, the platform pushed more of the same—until the bot was programmed to switch to dwelling on videos about weight loss, at which point the algorithm quickly adapted.

Percent of total videos watched per day



Note: When giving this bot its interests, reporters first searched for and favorited several gambling and weight loss videos.
Source: Wall Street Journal analysis of 21,491 TikTok videos served to this bot.

³¹³ Tawnell D. Hobbs *et al.*, ‘The Corpse Bride Diet’: How TikTok Inundates Teens With Eating-Disorder Videos, *Wall St. J.* (Dec. 17, 2021, at 10:45 AM), <https://www.wsj.com/tech/how-tiktok-inundates-teens-with-eating-disorder-videos-11639754848>.

297. In internal documents, TikTok discussed at length how rabbit holes can cause serious psychological harm to users.

298. TikTok internally defines a “[f]ilter bubble[.]” as “a situation in which an internet user encounters only information and opinions that conform to and reinforce their own beliefs, caused by algorithms that personalize an individual’s online experience.”³¹⁴ The same document states that “users are placed into ‘filter bubbles’ after 30 minutes of use in one sitting[.]”³¹⁵

299. One internal presentation in 2020 warned that “[f]ilter bubbles exist, and they can serve potentially harmful content expeditiously.”³¹⁶

300. One employee that ran a test account wrote, “After following several ‘painhub’ and ‘sadnotes’ accounts, it took me 20 [minutes] to drop into [a] ‘negative’ filter bubble. The intensive density of negative content makes me lower down mood and increase my sadness feelings though I am in a high spirit in my recent life.”³¹⁷

301. Another employee with a test account wrote that “there are a lot of videos mentioning suicide,” including one asking, “If you could kill yourself without hurting anybody would you?”³¹⁸

302. TikTok also acknowledges that having more human moderators to manually label content is possible, but that type of labeling “requires large human efforts.”³¹⁹

³¹⁴ TT-MS-AG-000027954 at 956.

³¹⁵ *Id.*

³¹⁶ TT-MS-AG-000138464 at slide 27.

³¹⁷ TT-MS-AG-000027949 at 952.

³¹⁸ *Id.*

³¹⁹ TT-MS-AG-000139183 at 191.

303. After the *Wall Street Journal* printed its exposé on TikTok’s algorithm and the harm caused to users stuck in rabbit holes, TikTok made changes to its platform in 2023 that it calls “Algo Refresh.”

304. The Algo Refresh feature purportedly allows users stuck in rabbit holes—or who are otherwise dissatisfied with the videos TikTok feeds them—to “reset” their “For You” feed. According to an internal planning document, TikTok believed that “[o]ffering users a full reset button would go a long way to addressing policy makers’ concerns about our algorithm,” including users’ inability to escape from filter bubbles.³²⁰

305. TikTok billed the Refresh feature on its website as “[t]he option to start fresh on TikTok.”³²¹ It further explained that: “When enabled, this feature allows someone to view content on their “For You” feed as if they just signed up for TikTok. Our recommendation system will then begin to surface more content based on new interactions.”³²²

306. TikTok makes similar statements to users who access the Refresh feature on the TikTok platform. When users open the “Refresh your For You feed” page in the platform’s settings, they are asked: “Want a fresh start?” The platform informs users that activating the Refresh feature will allow them to “launch your new feed.”

307. Spokespeople for TikTok repeated these claims to reporters. For instance, the news outlet *TechCrunch* reported that:

With the new refresh button, which will be available in account settings, users will be able to force the app to bring “new, diversified content not based on previous activity or interactions” to their For You feed.

After hitting the button, users will then begin to see content that’s based on their new interactions, a TikTok spokesperson told TechCrunch. In addition to providing

³²⁰ TT-MS-AG-000245459 at 464.

³²¹ Sandeep Grover & Mabel Wang, *Introducing a way to refresh your For You feed on TikTok*, TikTok (Mar. 16, 2023), <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/introducing-a-way-to-refresh-your-for-you-feed-on-tiktok-us>.

³²² *Id.*

a refreshed feed, the company noted that the feature could serve as a way to support potentially vulnerable users who want to distance themselves from their current content experience.³²³

308. These public statements would lead a consumer to believe that resetting the “For You” feed would result in a completely new feed as if they were new users, and that they would be able to escape rabbit holes of harmful content.

309. But that is not what it does. The refresh lasts for only 200 videos, after which the algorithm returns to incorporating the user’s pre-refresh interactions with the platform into its calculus of which videos it should display. In other words, TikTok designed the Refresh feature to reset users’ recommendations only temporarily. After the user views or swipes through 200 videos, the platform’s recommendation system resumes pushing users’ videos based on all of their past engagement data.

310. For users previously stuck in rabbit holes, the recommendation system quickly reintroduces videos based on the same data that led them into the rabbit hole in the first place.

311. The Refresh feature also fails to reset presentation of personalized ads. A user who activates the Refresh feature will still see ads based on their pre-reset engagement history data—ads which are often personalized based on content that pushed the user in a rabbit hole.

312. TikTok also made the feature difficult to find and did not make it available to everyone. TikTok’s Director of Product Management, Privacy & Responsibility admitted in an internal chat in May 2022 that “teams involved may be considering ways to add friction to the user experience that might limit adoption (e.g., discoverability, multiple steps to execute, etc.).”³²⁴

³²³ Sarah Perez, *TikTok introduces a strike system for violations, tests a feature to “refresh” the For You feed*, TechCrunch (Feb. 2, 2023, at 8:54 AM), <https://techcrunch.com/2023/02/02/tiktok-introduces-a-strike-system-for-violations-tests-a-feature-to-refresh-the-for-you-feed>.

³²⁴ TT-MS-AG-000411194.

313. Contrary to TikTok’s representations, users may find that they are quickly back in the same rabbit hole again even after using the Refresh feature.

b. TikTok misrepresents Restricted Mode’s ability to filter inappropriate content for minors.

314. TikTok has represented that its “Restricted Mode” functionality limits the ability of young users to see videos with mature content.

315. TikTok publicly described Restricted Mode in an October 2019 post to its Newsroom as “an option that limits the appearance of content that may not be appropriate for all audiences.”³²⁵ TikTok also advertised Restricted Mode as an “appropriate experience” to “family-oriented partners,” such as the National Parent Teacher Association and Family Online Safety Institute. TikTok’s website specifically advises parents to enable this tool for their teens: “*Note: If you’re a parent and your teen uses TikTok, it might make sense to enable this setting to ensure the content they are viewing is age-appropriate.*”³²⁶

316. On its website, TikTok says that users in Restricted Mode “shouldn’t see mature or complex themes, such as: [p]rofanity[, s]exually suggestive content[, r]ealistic violence or threatening imagery[, f]irearms or weapons. . . , [i]llegal or controlled substances/drugs[, and e]xplicit references to mature or complex themes . . . that are intended for older audiences.”³²⁷

317. But TikTok knew that Restricted Mode did not function in this way, and instead only filtered very limited categories of potentially objectionable content.

³²⁵ *TikTok’s Top 10 Tips for Parents*, TikTok (Oct. 16, 2019), <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/tiktoks-top-10-tips-for-parents>.

³²⁶ *Limiting unwanted content*, TikTok (Apr. 25, 2019), <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/limiting-unwanted-content>; see also *TikTok’s Top 10 Tips for Parents*, TikTok (Oct. 16, 2019), <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/tiktoks-top-10-tips-for-parents> (listing “enabling Restricted Mode” as a tip for parents and describing Restricted Mode as “an option that limits the appearance of content that may not be appropriate for all audiences[.]”).

³²⁷ *Restricted Mode*, TikTok, <https://support.tiktok.com/en/safety-hc/account-and-user-safety/restricted-mode> (last visited Oct. 21, 2025).

318. For instance, TikTok knew that profane content continued to be fed to users who enabled Restricted Mode. Indeed, nearly two years after TikTok touted Restricted Mode’s content filters on its website, TikTok’s Global Head of Minor Safety told TikTok’s U.S. Safety Head that “Restricted Mode does not meet user expectations [for] almost all content themes (violence, gore, profanity, adult, etc.).”³²⁸

319. An internal audit of Restricted Mode found that it did not meet “consumer expectations” because it did not completely filter inappropriate content.³²⁹ For a period, content that Defendants’ team internally tagged with a “Risk” label, such as extremely vulgar content, were still shown to minors whose parents turned on Restricted Mode.³³⁰ Defendants had the technical ability to remove more violative content. Indeed, another country’s version of Restricted Mode removed posts Defendants deemed risky.³³¹

320. The audit recommended changes to the Restricted Mode experience to conform with “how we’ve been advertising this version of the app.”³³²

321. Moreover, Restricted Mode encompasses only the “For You” feed. A minor using the TikTok platform can easily circumvent the feature by, for example, watching videos that they search for, are sent directly to them, or uploaded by accounts they follow.

4. TikTok misrepresents the application and enforcement of its Community Guidelines.

322. TikTok additionally misrepresents and omits critical information about the application and enforcement of its Community Guidelines.

³²⁸ TT-MS-AG-000203939.

³²⁹ TT-MS-AG-000292344 at p. 4.

³³⁰ N.Y. AG Complaint ¶ 219, *New York v. TikTok Inc.*, No. 452749/2024 (N.Y. Sup. Ct. Dec. 27, 2024), ECF No. 66.

³³¹ *Id.*

³³² TT-MS-AG-000292344 at p. 5.

323. Specifically, TikTok misrepresents how effectively the Community Guidelines are applied, to whom and what they apply, and the role of experts in forming the Community Guidelines.

a. TikTok deceives users, their parents, and their guardians about how effectively its Community Guidelines are applied.

324. In its Community Guidelines, TikTok claims that when it “identif[ies] content that falls under the “Not Allowed” rules in our Community Guidelines, we’ll remove it.”³³³

325. TikTok’s Community Guidelines set out a number of rules as to Safety and Civility such as not allowing: violent and criminal behavior; hate speech and hateful behavior; violent and hateful organizations and individuals; youth sexual and physical abuse; adult sexual abuse; human trafficking and smuggling; and harassment and bullying.³³⁴ In addition, it also set out rules disallowing specific content related to additional topics, including, but not limited to: Mental and Behavioral Health, such as suicide, self-harm, disordered eating, risky weight management, body image and dangerous activity and challenges; and Sensitive and Mature themes, such as body exposure, sexualized behaviors, shocking and graphic content, and animal abuse.³³⁵

326. TikTok has long made statements to this effect, including when speaking to reporters, parents, and government regulators. For instance, CEO Shou Chew testified to Congress on March 23, 2023, that “anything that is violative and harmful we remove.”³³⁶ Similarly, when he testified to Congress on January 31, 2024, Chew claimed that TikTok’s

³³³ *Community Guidelines*, TikTok (Sept. 13, 2025), <https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/en>.

³³⁴ *Id.*

³³⁵ *Id.*

³³⁶ *TikTok: How Congress Can Safeguard American Data Privacy and Protect Children from Online Harms: Hearing Before the H. Comm. on Energy & Com. at 42–43*, 118th Cong. 1 (2023), <https://www.congress.gov/118/chrg/CHRG-118hhrg53839/CHRG-118hhrg53839.pdf>.

“robust [C]ommunity [G]uidelines strictly prohibit content or behavior that puts teenagers at risk of exploitation or other harm, and we vigorously enforce them.”³³⁷ TikTok repeated that latter statement on its website.³³⁸

327. TikTok uses the comprehensiveness of its Community Guidelines to reassure parents and others that its platform is a safe product for young users. TikTok represents that its Community Guidelines “apply [equally] to everyone and everything on our platform.”³³⁹

328. But these representations are misleading. TikTok’s actual internal policies and practices have long differed substantially from its Community Guidelines and other public statements, with respect to both user-generated content and advertisements on the platform.

329. For example, even though TikTok’s Community Guidelines claim that content about youth sexual and physical abuse, violent and criminal behavior, and dangerous activity and challenges is removed or not allowed under its terms of service,³⁴⁰ in many circumstances, TikTok knowingly and intentionally permits such content to remain on the platform. Instead of actually removing harmful content, as it claims it does, TikTok often simply moves certain videos out of users’ “For You” feed.

330. Similarly, instead of not allowing “risky weight loss” content on the platform, as stated in the Community Guidelines,³⁴¹ TikTok merely internally labels the videos “not

³³⁷ *Big Tech and the Online Child Sexual Exploitation Crisis: Hearing Before the S. Judiciary Comm.* at 11–12, 118th Cong. 2 (2024), <https://www.congress.gov/118/chrg/CHRG-118shrg57444/CHRG-118shrg57444.pdf>.

³³⁸ *TikTok CEO Shou Chew's Opening Statement - Senate Judiciary Committee Hearing on Online Child Sexual Exploitation Crisis*, TikTok (Jan. 31, 2024), <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/opening-statement-senate-judiciary-committee-hearing>.

³³⁹ *Community Guidelines*, TikTok (Sept. 13, 2025), <https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/en>.

³⁴⁰ *Id.*

³⁴¹ *Id.*

recommended.”³⁴² As TikTok admits in an internal document, this practice contravened their own experts’ suggestions and TikTok’s representations to the contrary:

When moderated appropriately, this potentially harmful content is only made “Hard to find[.]”. For much of this content, this enforcement falls short of addressing the potential real-world danger, and does not reflect the recommendations of experts and those with lived experience. Furthermore, the continued presence of the most egregious content (extreme dieting, exercise and weight-loss) undermines TikTok’s efforts to present the platform as a safe and joyful space for its user base, especially younger demographics.³⁴³

331. Similarly, the Community Guidelines had policies that TikTok “do[es] not allow showing young people possessing or using alcohol, tobacco products, or drugs.”³⁴⁴

332. Yet contrary to this representation, videos that mention illegal drugs remain on TikTok’s platform. Videos promoting drugs by showing persons “[p]retending to consume drugs (pretending to snort cocaine, inject heroin) without displaying the substance” were also left on the platform.³⁴⁵ TikTok only ceased to promote this content in users’ “For You” feed.

333. In some instances, TikTok’s Community Guidelines had policies that were never enforced at all. For instance, a previous version of the Community Guidelines prohibited content that “depicts or promotes the misuse of legal substances . . . in an effort to become intoxicated[.]”³⁴⁶ But until August 2022, moderators were never told to remove such content, and it therefore remained on the platform.

³⁴² N.Y. AG Complaint ¶ 230, *New York v. TikTok Inc.*, No. 452749/2024 (N.Y. Sup. Ct. Dec. 27, 2024), ECF No. 66.

³⁴³ TT-MS-AG-000026032 at 039.

³⁴⁴ *Regulated Goods, Services, and Commercial Activities*, TikTok (May 17, 2024), <https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/en/regulated-commercial-activities> [<https://web.archive.org/web/20250805081240/https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/en/regulated-commercial-activities>].

³⁴⁵ See TT-MS-AG-000000062 at 077.

³⁴⁶ TT-MS-AG-000007685 at 690.

334. This pattern applies to other parts of the platform, too. For instance, the Community Guidelines do not apply to direct messages.³⁴⁷ Thus, even if Community Guidelines claim that the platform does not allow “sexually suggestive acts or significant body exposure involving youth,”³⁴⁸ TikTok does not prohibit or in any way reduce the visibility of such videos when they are sent via direct message. Similarly, content showing minors possessing or using drugs, alcohol, and tobacco are, according to the Community Guidelines, forbidden from the platform.³⁴⁹ But that rule is not enforced for direct messages.

335. Although TikTok touts its moderation system, internally it knows that much of its moderation “not scalable” and often fails because TikTok created an ineffective system.³⁵⁰

336. Moderators are not given enough time or proper tools to moderate content. Moderators complain to TikTok that “AHT [handling time] is unreasonable” and that the targets they are expected to meet impede reviewing videos in full.”³⁵¹ For many types of content, moderators are required to spend an average of 30 seconds per video to moderate, even though many videos are far longer than that. This results in moderators “scrubbing” through videos and only viewing parts—leaving substantial amounts of content not meaningfully reviewed.

b. TikTok omits key metrics in its reported content moderation enforcement.

337. TikTok fails to disclose key metrics in its content moderation policies.

³⁴⁷ N.Y. AG Complaint ¶ 234, *New York v. TikTok Inc.*, No. 452749/2024 (N.Y. Sup. Ct. Dec. 27, 2024), ECF No. 66.

³⁴⁸ *Community Guidelines: Sensitive and Mature Themes*, TikTok (Sept. 13, 2025), <https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/en/sensitive-mature-themes>.

³⁴⁹ *Regulated Goods, Services, and Commercial Activities*, TikTok (May 17, 2024), <https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/en/regulated-commercial-activities> [<https://web.archive.org/web/20250805081240/https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/en/regulated-commercial-activities>].

³⁵⁰ TT-MS-AG-004117425 at 427.

³⁵¹ TT-MS-AG-004021187 at 188, 189.

A. Not Applied to Comments: TikTok misleads the public as to application of its content moderation to comments posted on the platform. Even though 42% of its users only post comments, rather than videos on the app, moderators only review 0.25% of user comments. This lack of meaningful oversight in content moderation exposes youth to harmful harassment, bullying, and solicitation.

B. Misrepresents Removal Rate: TikTok misleads the public as to the diligence of its content moderation. While TikTok publishes their “proactive removal” rate, this metric only captures how fast TikTok removes content that it manages to catch, not how much content it manages to catch overall. Internally, TikTok notes that its moderation metrics are “largely misleading” because “we are good at moderating the content we capture, but these metrics do not account for the content that we miss[.]”³⁵² It does not disclose significant “leakage” rates, measuring the percentage of violative content that is not moderated or removed. Internally, TikTok knows the high rates at which certain categories of content leak through its moderation processes, including: 35.71% of “Normalization of Pedophilia” content; 33.33% of “Minor Sexual Solicitation” content; 39.13% of “Minor Physical Abuse” content; 30.36% of “leading minors off platform”; 50% of “Glorification of Minor Sexual Assault”; and 100% of “Fetishizing Minors.”³⁵³

338. TikTok omits this context from its representations, instead assuring consumers, particularly parents and youth, that its content moderation is effective, an important consideration when making decisions about use of the platform.

³⁵² TT-MS-AG-000009884 at 888.

³⁵³ TT-MS-AG-00139327 at 342.

c. TikTok misrepresents who is subject to its Community Guidelines.

339. On its website, TikTok states that it applies its Community Guidelines “to everyone and everything on our platform.”³⁵⁴ Despite this representation, TikTok treats some users differently.

340. For instance, TikTok intentionally permits popular creators to violate policy to keep them on the platform. One internal analysis in August 2020 noted that “creator management teams sometimes urge policy approval [for important Creators’ videos that violate the Community Guidelines] on the grounds that it is ‘important for the company to succeed.’”³⁵⁵ On information and belief, after being urged by creator management teams—which work with popular creators to produce content for the platform—TikTok allowed otherwise violative content to remain on its platform.

341. Even when TikTok’s moderation team wanted to enforce the Community Guidelines, certain groups of users including “Top Creators” “have extra protection—default is that [standard Community Guidelines] enforcement doesn’t take effect unless [a separate group] actively intervene[s].”³⁵⁶

342. For accounts that TikTok “deem[ed] to be high value,” the internal analysis in August 2020 found that the company regularly, and by its own assessment in violation of its policies, allowed “problematic content” to remain on the platform.³⁵⁷ To appear to comply with its own Community Guidelines, TikTok misled consumers by stating it removed harmful material but left much of that material on its platform.

³⁵⁴ *Community Guidelines*, TikTok (Sept. 13, 2025), <https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/en>.

³⁵⁵ TT-MS-AG-000843204 at p. 4.

³⁵⁶ *Id.* at pp. 18–19.

³⁵⁷ *Id.* at pp. 1–2.

d. TikTok misrepresents use of expert recommendations in its Community Guidelines.

343. TikTok announces on its website that its Community Principles are developed based on “[i]nput from experts in online safety, public health, and related fields[.]”³⁵⁸ However, TikTok contradicts expert recommendations in its application of its Community Guidelines.

344. For example, in a February 2022 internal policy proposal, TikTok employees noted that their failure to remove dangerous weight loss content “does not reflect the recommendations of experts and those with lived experience.”³⁵⁹

345. Additionally, TikTok knew that the experts they consulted in connection with internal policy analysis in 2021 “unanimously” recommended a different strategy to deal with dangerous rabbit holes than TikTok had adopted. The internal analysis noted that the consulted experts recommended an approach that “increased user agency, and building algorithm changes that afford users the opportunity to find other interesting content that shifts away from a given rabbit hole[.]”³⁶⁰

346. Contrary to TikTok’s public statements, it has not aligned its practices with expert recommendations. TikTok misrepresents what experts recommend and its implementation of those recommendations.

5. TikTok does not warn young users about its beauty filters.

347. Despite the known dangers caused by TikTok’s beauty filters and similar features, TikTok fails to provide any warning to its users (or their parents, when users are underage) that using the filters on its platform can be dangerous.

³⁵⁸ *Community Guidelines: Community Principles*, TikTok (Sept. 13, 2025), <https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/en/community-principles>.

³⁵⁹ TT-MS-AG-000026032 at 039.

³⁶⁰ TT-MS-AG-000028003 at 010.

348. TikTok’s decision to design and deploy these beauty filters, especially in combination with other TikTok product features, has caused body image issues, eating disorders, body dysmorphia, and related issues.

349. TikTok did not disclose that it knew effects like beauty filters can harm its young users and did not implement the suggestions of its employees that it “provide users with educational resources about image disorders”; create a campaign “to raise awareness on issues with low self-esteem (caused by excessive filter [use] and other issues)”; and add:

a banner/H5 page to these filters and/or the short-videos which make use of these filters, particularly the Bold Glamour one, including an awareness statement about filters and the importance of positive body image/mental health, [that] could potentially minimize the negative public perception surrounding beauty filters and their reported effect on user mental health.³⁶¹

350. Indeed, one internal report that analyzed TikTok’s “For You” feed saw “a [h]igh volume . . . of not attractive subjects” were filling the feed and note steps taken to address that occurrence.³⁶²

351. TikTok knows that its beauty filters are dangerous to young users yet continues to promote them without disclosing those known dangers to users and their parents.

352. By engaging in these and similar misrepresentations, and by failing to disclose critical, material information regarding its platform’s risks, TikTok deceives users. TikTok’s deception and lack of transparency prevents young users and their parents from making truly informed decisions about platform usage.

³⁶¹ TT-MS-AG-002149753 at 762.

³⁶² TT-MS-AG-000093921 at 925.

6. TikTok misrepresents the platform as being not directed to children.

353. For years, TikTok has represented their platform is not directed to children under 13 years of age and it does not knowingly collect personal information from children under 13 years old.

354. However, the platform is directed to children under 13 years of age and TikTok knowingly collects information from children under 13 years old, in violation of COPPA.

7. TikTok knowingly allows children on the platform.

355. TikTok represents that it requires new users to enter their age, and that for United States users who are under 13 years old, it does not provide them with access to the platform but rather a “special TikTok experience with extra safety features, plus their own Privacy Policy.”³⁶³

356. Despite these representations, TikTok has knowingly allowed children under 13 years old to create and use TikTok accounts on the platform—which lack such safety and privacy protections—without their parents’ knowledge or consent.

357. For example, TikTok did not require users who created an account by entering their Facebook or Google credentials to enter their age, even where the same user had previously stated they were under 13 years old. In fact, where users told TikTok they were under 13 years old but then created an account by entering their Facebook or Google credentials, TikTok imported their earlier-stated age for the account on the platform, but failed to provide any of the safeguards the company represented would be applied for such users. This loophole resulted in approximately 100,000 accounts on the platform with a listed age younger than 13 years old.

³⁶³ *Accounts and Features*, TikTok (Sept. 13, 2025), <https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/en/accounts-features>; *TikTok for Younger Users*, TikTok (Dec. 13, 2019), <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/tiktok-for-younger-users>; see also *TikTok Under 13 Experience*, TikTok, https://www.tiktok.com/support/faq_detail?id=7543604789335071238&category=web_account (last visited Oct. 22, 2025).

358. This was not an isolated incident, and TikTok routinely allowed users younger than 13 to create or maintain accounts on the platform. For example:

A. Internal TikTok documents from 2018 demonstrate that it knew over 50,000 active TikTok accounts had references to being under age 13 in their profiles.³⁶⁴ Even after these accounts were identified, they remained active for months.³⁶⁵ When asked if removing these 50,000 accounts belonging to children was urgent, an employee responded that it was “no rush.”³⁶⁶

B. In February 2020, upon learning that news crews would not attend a public panel that included minor TikTok users, a TikTok employee stated, “[I’m] sort of glad the [n]ews crews cancelled. This student panel is primarily under 13 and they[’]re all talking about what they post [and] why they post and how they know they[’]re not supposed to have an account.”³⁶⁷

C. An internal document from 2020 detailing TikTok’s moderation efforts noted that “[t]here are many [under] 13-users on the platform, and we need to fulfill our platform obligations to discover and deal with these users.”³⁶⁸

D. An internal TikTok Trust and Safety memo from May 2020 states that “more and more users under the age of 13 are on the platform[.]”³⁶⁹

E. In September 2020, one TikTok employee noted a study on the prevalence of child-created CSAM on TikTok, stating “[t]he findings here are concerning and seem

³⁶⁴ N.Y. AG Complaint ¶ 274(a), *New York v. TikTok Inc.*, No. 452749/2024 (N.Y. Sup. Ct. Dec. 27, 2024), ECF No. 66.

³⁶⁵ *Id.*

³⁶⁶ *Id.*

³⁶⁷ TT-MS-AG-000203445.

³⁶⁸ TT-MS-AG-000230421 at 424.

³⁶⁹ TT-MS-AG-000698089 at p. 5.

to confirm suspicions that we have a large base of users under 12 on our platform, AND that they are sharing CSA[M] content.”³⁷⁰

F. Following an August 2021 “sweep” for accounts containing written age admissions in their user-supplied biographic information, TikTok discovered a batch of 10,000 active TikTok accounts on which the user had disclosed their age as under 13. When asking what to do about the under-13 accounts, one employee commented, “kinda feels like we are on notice at least for these accounts?”³⁷¹

G. An internal 2022 document from TikTok’s Trust and Safety team acknowledged the prevalence of under-13 accounts, stating “[t]here are a large number of underage accounts on the platform . . . there are potentially many millions of accounts we need to discover and [take] action [on].”³⁷²

359. Before at least December 19, 2021, TikTok’s content moderation team followed a defective internal policy when removing accounts that TikTok “suspected” belonged to a user under age 13. Under that policy, TikTok would not remove such accounts unless: (1) the user had self-identified as being under 13 years old (e.g., stating their age in their account’s biographical information); or (2) the user had also posted at least four videos in which the user appeared to be under 13 years old.³⁷³ In other words, if a user declared that they were nine years old in their biography, but had only posted three videos in which they appeared to be under 13 years old, TikTok would allow that account to remain on TikTok.

³⁷⁰ TT-MS-AG-000203144.

³⁷¹ TT-MS-AG-000203255.

³⁷² TT-MS-AG-000671561 at 561.

³⁷³ N.Y. AG Complaint ¶ 275, *New York v. TikTok Inc.*, No. 452749/2024 (N.Y. Sup. Ct. Dec. 27, 2024), ECF No. 66.

360. As of June 2023, if TikTok receives a report stating that a user is under 13 years old, it instructs its employees to review the reported user’s profile information and videos featuring that user. This amended policy allows for the deletion of accounts that self-identify as under 13 years old. However, if the user has not self-identified as under age 13, TikTok instructs its employees to allow the account to remain on TikTok unless there are four separate, recent videos featuring the user where the user appears to be under nine years old. Again, if a TikTok employee determines that a user appears to be six years old but has only uploaded three videos, or appears ten years old, TikTok will not remove the account.

361. Internal documents show that accounts belonging to children under age 13 are common on TikTok’s “13+ experience” and the number of these accounts is skyrocketing. TikTok removed 1,768,660 accounts “suspected” to belong to children under age 13 between March 1, 2019, and April 30, 2020.³⁷⁴ Between September 2020 and March 2022, TikTok removed well over 20 million accounts “suspected” to belong to users under the age of 13.³⁷⁵

362. A document from April 2023 shows that TikTok was aware of approximately 797,000 monthly active U.S. users who had no date of birth associated with their account.³⁷⁶ That same document reveals that approximately 20,500,000 U.S. users without an associated birthdate were active on the platform within the preceding twelve months, and that in total, over 96,000,000 U.S. users were allowed to use TikTok without entering a birthdate.³⁷⁷ TikTok was aware that significant numbers of these accounts without an associated birthdate likely belonged to users under the age of 13.³⁷⁸

³⁷⁴ F01-MUS-0000096 at p. 5.

³⁷⁵ N.Y. AG Complaint ¶ 277, *New York v. TikTok Inc.*, No. 452749/2024 (N.Y. Sup. Ct. Dec. 27, 2024), ECF No. 66.

³⁷⁶ TT-MS-AG-000253921 at 923.

³⁷⁷ *Id.* at TT-MS-AG-000253924.

³⁷⁸ *See id.* at TT-MS-AG-000253923–926.

363. In addition to such inadequate policies, on information and belief, TikTok simply failed to remove thousands of children's accounts that (a) parents had requested be deleted and/or (b) TikTok's own content moderators or quality assurance reviewers had tagged as belonging to children.

V. LEGAL CLAIMS

COUNT ONE — DECEPTIVE ACTS OR PRACTICES

364. The State realleges and incorporates by reference herein each and every allegation contained in the preceding paragraphs as though repeated here and set forth fully herein.

365. At all relevant times, Defendants designed, manufactured, marketed, advertised, promoted, supplied, distributed, sold, and/or otherwise placed TikTok in the stream of commerce.

366. Defendants' acts and practices constitute deceptive acts and practices in violation of the UDAP, HRS §§ 480-2(a) and 481A-3.

367. Specifically, Defendants have engaged in the following deceptive acts or practices:

A. Misrepresenting to consumers, expressly and by implication, that its platform is safe and appropriate for teens and pre-teens, including from sexual exploitation;

B. Misrepresenting to consumers, expressly and by implication, the effectiveness of built-in features designed to combat addictive use/harms including parental controls, community standards, and age verification;

C. Misrepresenting to consumers, expressly and by implication, that the platform is not directed to children under 13 years old and complies with federal privacy law; and

D. Failing to disclose the adverse health consequences of the TikTok app and platform.

368. Defendants' acts or practices are material and likely to mislead consumers acting reasonably under the circumstances.

369. Defendants' deceptive acts or practices described above constitute multiple, separate violations of the UDAP.

370. Defendants' violations of the UDAP justify penalties of a sum of not less than \$500 nor more than \$10,000 for each violation pursuant to HRS § 480-3.1. In addition, Defendants' conduct warrants an assessment of punitive damages in an amount sufficient to deter such conduct in the future, the amount of which is to be determined according to proof.

COUNT TWO — UNFAIR ACTS OR PRACTICES

371. The State realleges and incorporates by reference herein each and every allegation contained in the preceding paragraphs as though repeated here and set forth fully herein.

372. At all relevant times, Defendants designed, manufactured, marketed, advertised, promoted, supplied, distributed, sold, and/or otherwise placed TikTok in the stream of commerce.

373. Defendants' acts and practices constitute unfair acts and practices in violation of the UDAP, HRS § 480-2(a).

374. Defendants have aggressively marketed the TikTok platform to minors.

375. Defendants have designed the TikTok platform to be addictive while knowing that minors are especially susceptible to compulsive behavior.

376. Defendants have profited enormously from minors' activity on the TikTok platform, including advertising to minors and TikTok LIVE transactions, even as minors have been harmed by their use of the platform.

377. Defendants have engaged in the following unfair acts or practices:

A. Misrepresenting to consumers, expressly and by implication, that its platform is safe and appropriate for teens and pre-teens, including from sexual exploitation;

B. Misrepresenting to consumers, expressly and by implication, the effectiveness of built-in features designed to combat addictive use/harms including parental controls, community standards, and age verification;

C. Misrepresenting to consumers, expressly and by implication, that the platform is not directed to children under 13 years old and complies with federal privacy law; and

D. Failing to disclose the adverse health consequences of the TikTok app and platform;

E. Targeting the TikTok app and platform to young users, including teens and pre-teens, while knowingly designing TikTok to include features they knew to be psychologically and physically harmful to young users—including features known to promote problematic use by young users;

F. Utilizing platform features that unfairly and/or unconscionably harm young users independently of any actions taken by third-party users of the TikTok platform. These features include, as described above, (a) the “For You” feed, (b) autoplay, (c) endless scroll, (d) ephemeral content including TikTok Stories and TikTok LIVE, (e) push notifications, and (f) like, comments and other interactions, as well as significant impediments to discontinuing platform use. These features were all utilized by

Defendants to extract additional time and attention from young users whose developing brains were not equipped to resist those manipulative tactics.

G. Designing, developing, and deploying disruptive audiovisual and vibration notifications and alerts and ephemeral content features in a way that unfairly and/or unconscionably exploited young users' psychological vulnerabilities and cultivated a sense of "fear of missing out" in order to induce young users to spend more time than they would otherwise choose to on the TikTok platform;

H. Exploiting, through TikTok's features, the concept of dopamine variable rewards, which served to manipulate dopamine releases in young users and unfairly and/or unconscionably induced them to engaged repeatedly with TikTok products; and

I. Collecting personal information of under-13 users on the TikTok platform without obtaining verifiable parental consent.

378. Defendants' deployment of manipulative and harmful features on the TikTok platform, both on their own and especially in combination, for use by young users, and Defendants' failure to provide effective warnings about those features and their effects, are unfair acts or practices.

379. At all relevant times, Defendants had a thorough understanding of the mental and physical harms of addiction suffered by young users of the TikTok platform. Instead of taking adequate measures to mitigate these damaging effects, Defendants ignored them and continued exploiting young users' psychological vulnerabilities.

380. Defendants' acts and practices are unfair because they offend public policy and are oppressive, unethical, immoral, unscrupulous, and substantially injurious to consumers.

381. Defendants' unfair acts or practices described above constitute multiple, separate violations of the UDAP.

382. Defendants' violations of the UDAP justify penalties of a sum of not less than \$500 nor more than \$10,000 for each violation pursuant to HRS § 480-3.1. In addition, Defendants' conduct warrants an assessment of punitive damages in an amount sufficient to deter such conduct in the future, the amount of which is to be determined according to proof.

VI. PRAYER FOR RELIEF

WHEREFORE, the State respectfully requests this Court enter judgment against Defendants and enter an Order:

A. Permanently enjoining and restraining Defendants, their agents, employees, and all other persons and entities, corporate or otherwise, in active concert or participation with any of them, from engaging in unfair or deceptive practices in the marketing, promotion, selling, and distribution of TikTok, pursuant to HRS §§ 480-15 and 481A-4(a);

B. Requiring the payment of civil penalties of not less than \$500 nor more than \$10,000 for each violation of HRS § 480-2(a), pursuant to HRS § 480-3.1;

C. Requiring an equitable accounting of Defendants' revenue from TikTok in the State of Hawai'i and ordering disgorgement of all amounts gathered in connection with unlawful activity;

D. Awarding punitive damages, in an amount sufficient to deter such conduct in the future, the amount of which is to be determined according to proof;

E. Awarding reasonable attorneys' fees and costs, pursuant to HRS §§ 480-14(c) and 481A-4(b); and

F. Granting all other relief to which the State is entitled or which the Court deems necessary or appropriate.

DATED: Honolulu, Hawai‘i, December 3, 2025.

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STATE OF HAWAII CIRCUIT COURT OF THE FIRST CIRCUIT	SUMMONS TO ANSWER CIVIL COMPLAINT /	
CASE NUMBER		
PLAINTIFF'S NAME & ADDRESS, TEL. NO. DOUGLAS S. CHIN #6465 ; JOHN W. KELLY #9907 Starn O'Toole Marcus & Fisher, Pacific Guardian Center, Makai Tower 733 Bishop Street, Ste 1900, Honolulu, Hawaii 96813 Telephone: (808) 537-6100 Attorneys for Plaintiffs		
PLAINTIFF STATE OF HAWAII ex. rel. ANNE E. LOPEZ, ATTORNEY GENERAL	VS.	DEFENDANT(S) BYTEDANCE, INC.; TIKTOK INC.; TIKTOK LTD.; AND BYTEDANCE LTD.
TO THE ABOVE-NAMED DEFENDANT(S) You are hereby summoned and required to filed with the court and serve upon: Douglas S. Chin & John W. Kelly _____, plaintiff, as indicated above/whose address is stated above, an Answer to the Complaint / _____, which is herewith served upon you, within 20 days after service of this summons upon you, exclusive of the date of service. If you fail to do so, judgment by default will be taken against you for the relief demanded in the complaint.		
THIS SUMMONS SHALL NOT BE PERSONALLY DELIVERED BETWEEN 10:00 P.M. AND 6:00 A.M. ON PREMISES NOT OPEN TO THE GENERAL PUBLIC, UNLESS A JUDGE OF THE ABOVE-ENTITLED COURT PERMITS, IN WRITING ON THIS SUMMONS, PERSONAL DELIVERY DURING THOSE HOURS. A FAILURE TO OBEY THIS SUMMONS MAY RESULT IN AN ENTRY OF DEFAULT AND DEFAULT JUDGMENT AGAINST THE DISOBEYING PERSON OR PARTY.		
The original document is filed in the Judiciary's electronic case management system which is accessible via eCourt Kokua at: http://www.courts.state.hi.us	Effective Date of 1-DEC-2021 Signed by: /s/ Patsy Nakamoto Clerk, 1st Circuit, State of Hawai'i 	
 If you need an accommodation for a disability when participating in a court program, service, or activity, please contact the ADA Coordinator of the XX Circuit as soon as possible to allow the court time to provide an accommodation. Phone No. 808-539-4400, TTY 808-539-4853, FAX 808-539-4402 or Send an e-mail to: adarequest@courts.hawaii.gov. The court will try to provide, but cannot guarantee, your requested auxiliary aid, service or accommodation.		