CLIENT ALERTS & INSIGHTS

California's Social Media Litigation Poses Potential to Reshape the Legal Landscape

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Key Takeaways

- Major social media companies are facing a wave of personal injury lawsuits in California state and federal courts, with recent settlements by TikTok and Snap leaving Meta and Google heading to trial over claims that addictive platform features harm teens' mental health.
- These lawsuits could reshape the legal landscape for social media, especially as legislative efforts to regulate platform features have faced First Amendment challenges and inconsistent enforcement. Companies face significant business risk from both regulatory uncertainty and potential liability for platform design.
- Social media companies and related businesses should closely monitor these proceedings, review their platform design and user safety features, and prepare for evolving compliance and litigation risks as courts, rather than legislatures, increasingly define the boundaries of liability.

On January 27, 2026, the eve of the jury trial, ByteDance ("TikTok") reached a settlement to avoid the California state court landmark trial on social media addiction and the negative impact on teens' mental health. This happened about a week after another defendant Snap Inc. ("Snapchat") settled, leaving two other major social medial companies, Meta Platforms Inc. (Facebook and Instagram, collectively "Meta") and Google ("YouTube"), with the seminal trial. In federal court, which is also overseeing lawsuits alleging harms by social media platforms, all four major companies are facing trial set for June 15, 2026. These private tort actions against social media companies have potential to reshape the legal landscape where state legislators have not completely succeeded in regulating and restricting social media features that allegedly impact teens' mental health and development.

Legislative Efforts to Limit Social Media Exposure.

Various states have tried legislating preventive measures to address parents' and schools' concerns about social media impact on teens. These include parental consent requirements or banning addictive algorithms. *See e.g.*, L.B. 383, 109 Leg., 1st Sess. (Neb., 2025)(requiring parental consent); S.B. 854 (Va. 2025)(requiring parental consent for social media use for more than one hour a day); S.B. 1295 (Ct. 2025)(requiring parental consent and ban offering certain mechanism that impair user autonomy or decision making), S.B. 7964A (N.Y. 2023)(prohibiting use of addictive feeds to minors). However, these legislative initiatives have faced First Amendment challenges. For example, in 2024, California enacted the Protecting Our Kids from Social Media Addiction Act (SB 976), which imposed several restraints, such as requiring parental consent for minors and banning the display of "like" counts. Cal. Civ. Code §§ 1798.99.28 *et seq*. However, in March 2025, the Ninth Circuit granted a preliminary injunction which enjoined the California Attorney General from enforcing the Act, finding that the Act might violate the First Amendment. In Ohio, the district court permanently banned the Parental Notification Act in 2025 for the same reason. The Act required social media companies to assume that their contents were to be accessed by children, seek parental consent for minor's use and provide parents with information about censoring and monitoring features. Thus, state legislative efforts have consequently created an inconsistent patchwork of regulations across the country creating compliance challenges to the social media companies.

Private Efforts to Hold Social Media Companies Liable for Personal Injury.

At the same time, individuals have taken matters into their own hands by filing thousands of personal injury suits against social media companies. California, the home to most social media companies, is the center of it all. Two parallel state and federal personal injury proceedings are advancing in California, which are moving forward piercing the First Amendment defense to address these concerns about social media features where state legislatures stopped short.

A. ***State Court Consolidated Cases***

With the flood of state court personal injury lawsuits against the major social media companies, the Superior Court of California proceeded with the first three bellwether cases of the coordinated judicial proceeding against Meta, Snapchat, TikTok and YouTube. *Coordinated Proceeding of Social Media Cases*, Case no. JCCP 5255. After the complaint survived rounds of motions, the issue before the court is now narrow: whether the plaintiffs were harmed by social media platforms that allegedly created an addictive algorithm, knew they had done so and failed to warn users or take corrective action.

It their motion for summary judgment, the social media companies argued that plaintiffs' claims were barred due to First Amendment. For example, Meta argued that any alleged harm due to contents were barred by Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, because Meta should not be held liable due to third-party content providers. 47 U.S.C. § 230. Furthermore, Meta argued that how it organizes and presents content is expressive activity protected by the First Amendment. While the Court previously struck the content-based claims (ex. Blackout challenges), it allowed claims alleging harm due to addictive design to proceed. The court found that those addictive features on the platform (such as endless scroll) were design features affecting users regardless of third-party content.

B. ***Federal Multidistrict Litigation***

More than 2,000 plaintiffs, including users, parents, school districts and state governments, have filed lawsuits similar lawsuits in nationwide district courts. In early October, the Judicial Panel on Multidistrict Litigation created a multidistrict litigation to handle these actions and assigned the case to District Judge Yvonne Gonzalez Rogers in the United States District Court for the Northern District of California for consolidated pretrial proceeding. The Master Complaint alleged that the social media platforms targeted youth using addictive design features, which harmed minors' mental health. Based on the allegations, the complaint asserts 18 claims including strict liability and negligence on design defect and failure to warn, and wrongful death.

The federal court, which is a step behind the California court, has taken similar steps. It has reviewed various motions and selected 11 bellwether cases from six state school districts and five individual plaintiffs. On January 27, 2026, the court heard oral arguments on summary judgment, which again included arguments that plaintiffs' claims were barred due to the First Amendment. While parties wait for an order, the district court set jury trial for June 15, 2026.

Conclusion

The legal landscape regulating the use of social media continues to shift as private lawsuits proceed both in state and federal courts. Certain social media platform features and uses, which the state legislatures could not fully address, are now being brought under the federal and state courts' lens. As the courts address plaintiffs' allegations and claims, we expect social media platforms and features will continue to change.