Health & Medicine | Feb 18, 2026 | 9 min read | By Bryan White

Addiction by Design: The Landmark Case Against Meta and Google

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1. Introduction: The Tobacco Moment of the Information Age

In February 2026, the Superior Court of Los Angeles became the epicenter of a defining legal and scientific confrontation: Social Media Cases, JCCP 5255.[1][3] Selected as the lead bellwether trial from more than 1,600 consolidated lawsuits brought by families and school districts, the case pits a twenty-year-old plaintiff identified as K.G.M. ("Kaley") against Meta Platforms and Google (YouTube).[3] On February 18, 2026, as bereaved parents held a vigil outside the Spring Street Courthouse, Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg took the stand to answer allegations that his company engineered a youth public health and epidemiology crisis.[1][2][3]

Led by Mark Lanier, the plaintiff's legal team argued that Instagram and YouTube -- which Kaley began using at age six -- deployed infinite scroll, autoplay, and variable-reward schedules engineered to exploit adolescent neurobiology, triggering compulsive usage, depression, anorexia, and suicidal ideation.[3] By challenging software architecture as a defective product rather than user speech,[7] and unsealing internal corporate research such as "Project Myst," the trial has subjected the attention economy to unprecedented forensic scrutiny.[9]

2. Legal Architecture: Bypassing Section 230 via Product Liability

For three decades, internet tort litigation was blocked by Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996, which immunizes platforms from liability as publishers of third-party content.[8] In JCCP 5255, plaintiffs circumvented Section 230 by asserting strict product liability -- negligent design and failure to warn -- a distinction upheld by Judge Carolyn B. Kuhl.[7][12] The suit targets four architectural defects: infinite scroll and autoplay (removing stopping cues),[3] algorithmic variable-ratio reinforcement,[13] ephemeral 24-hour "Stories" paired with quantified validation metrics,[8] and deficient age verification.[10][14] Days before opening statements, TikTok and Snapchat reached confidential settlements, leaving Meta and Google as the sole defendants.[17][19]

3. The Neuroscience of Engagement: Dopamine, Skinner Boxes, and the Adolescent Brain

Stanford University addiction psychiatrist Dr. Anna Lembke testified on how algorithmic feeds hijack the mesolimbic reward pathway connecting the Ventral Tegmental Area (VTA) to the nucleus accumbens and Prefrontal Cortex (PFC).[20][21] Converting social validation into rapid numerical notifications creates a supernormal stimulus that drives intense release of the neurotransmitter dopamine across synapse junctions.[20][21]

Interface mechanisms like "pull-to-refresh" replicate B.F. Skinner's operant

conditioning box under variable-ratio reinforcement.[23] Because dopaminergic neurons fire action potentials most intensely upon Reward Prediction Error -- when rewards are unpredictable -- intermittent viral feedback locks users into chronic seeking.[13][25] Chronic stimulation triggers an opponent-process homeostasis response that downregulates postsynaptic dopamine receptors, shifting users from hedonic pleasure ("liking") into a dopamine-deficit state of dysphoria relieved only by continued scrolling ("wanting").[22] In adolescent developmental biology, this vulnerability is compounded by asymmetric brain maturation: the reward-processing limbic system is hyper-reactive during puberty, whereas the executive prefrontal cortex is not fully myelinated until the mid-twenties.[22][26][28]

| Architectural Dimension | | Traditional Media (Broadcast / Print) | | Algorithmic Social Platforms | | Neurobiological & Behavioral Impact |

| Stopping Cues | | Chapters, broadcast credits, issue ends | | None (Infinite Scroll & Autoplay) | | Bypasses prefrontal cortex executive stopping decisions.[3] |

| Reward Schedule | | Fixed narrative progression | | Variable-Ratio (Pull-to-refresh) | | Maximizes dopamine reward prediction error and compulsive seeking.[13][25] |

| Social Feedback | | None / Asynchronous | | Quantified Likes, Views, and Streaks | | Triggers limbic hypersensitivity and social comparison in the nucleus accumbens.[22] |

| Temporal Access | | Location- and schedule-bound | | Ubiquitous 24/7 smartphone notifications | | Disrupts adolescent sleep architecture and homeostatic dopamine balance.[3][22] |

4. Internal Corporate Discovery: "Project Myst" and the Tweens Strategy

Subpoenaed corporate records anchored the plaintiff's case for foreseeability and intent:[9]

* "Project Myst": A confidential Meta and University of Chicago study of 1,000 teens and parents concluded that parental supervision tools had "little impact" on teen compulsive use, and that youths facing adverse life events were uniquely vulnerable -- undercutting Meta's defense that parents bore primary responsibility.[9][29][34]

* The "Tweens" Deck: A 2018 Instagram strategy presentation stated, "If we want to win big with teens, we must bring them in as tweens," while internal audits estimated over 4 million underage children used Instagram.[10][14]

* The "18 Experts" Filter Warning & "Pushers" Log: Zuckerberg personally overruled warnings from 18 specialists advising a ban on cosmetic-surgery beauty filters linked to teen body dysmorphia, citing "free expression,"[36] while internal chats showed a Meta researcher stating, "We're basically pushers... causing Reward Deficit Disorder."[38]

| Internal Document | | Provenance | | Core Evidentiary Finding | | Corporate Defense Response |

| "Project Myst" | | Meta / Univ. of Chicago study | | Parental controls have

"little impact" on teen compulsive use.[9][29] | | Study examined self-reported overuse rather than clinical addiction.[29] |

| "Tweens" Deck | | 2018 Instagram strategy memo | | "If we want to win big with teens, we must bring them in as tweens."[10] | | Zuckerberg testified the slide explored safe youth experiences.[10] |

| "18 Experts" Memo | | Executive review on AR filters | | Advised banning cosmetic surgery filters due to body dysmorphia harm.[36] | | Zuckerberg testified banning filters restricted creative expression.[36] |

| "Pushers" Log | | Internal researcher chat | | Compared IG engagement loops to inducing "Reward Deficit Disorder."[38] | | Characterized as informal employee venting rather than policy.[38] |

5. Defense Strategy and Executive Testimony: Causation, Agency, and Clinical Consensus

Meta and Google contested medical nosology, individual causation, and usage metrics. Defense counsel noted that the DSM-5-TR does not recognize "social media addiction" as a clinical disorder.[4] Instagram Head Adam Mosseri favored the term "problematic use," dismissing a prior podcast clip in which he said "addiction" as casual speech,[40] while Mark Zuckerberg testified that scientific literature has not proven social media causes mental health harm and described internal time-spent targets (40 to 46 minutes daily) as utility proxies.[4][14][36] Meta counsel Paul Schmidt argued Kaley's distress stemmed from pre-existing family turmoil and noted her clinicians never diagnosed social media addiction,[14][41][42] while Google counsel Luis Li cited telemetry showing Kaley averaged 29 minutes daily on YouTube and 74 seconds on YouTube Shorts.[9]

6. Conclusion: Digital Product Liability and the Duty of Care

Regardless of the verdict in K.G.M. v. Meta et al., the trial has reshaped digital jurisprudence.[15] By establishing that infinite scroll, variable-ratio reinforcement, and cosmetic filters can be litigated as defective product features outside Section 230 immunity, JCCP 5255 creates a structural precedent akin to Big Tobacco litigation and reinforces statutory "Duty of Care" mandates such as the UK Online Safety Act and proposed U.S. Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA).[7][36][44]

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