



TECHNOLOGY

Jury finds Meta and Google negligent in social media harms trial

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Bobby Allyn

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Laura Marquez-Garrett (center), a plaintiffs' attorney for the Social Media Victims Law Center, gathers with family members of victims as they react to news that the jury has found Meta and Google liable in the social media addiction trial, outside the Los Angeles Superior Court on March 25, 2026.

Frederic J. Brown/AFP via Getty Images

A California jury on Wednesday found that Meta and Google were to blame for the depression and anxiety of a woman who compulsively used social media as a small child, awarding her \$6 million in a rare verdict holding Silicon Valley accountable for its role in fueling a youth mental health crisis.

The jurors concluded that Meta and Google should pay the woman \$3 million in compensatory damages and an additional \$3 million in punitive damages, with Meta on the hook for 70% of that amount.

While the financial punishment is miniscule for companies each worth trillions of dollars, the decision is still consequential. It represents the first time a jury has found that social media apps should be treated as defective products for being engineered to exploit the developing brains of kids and teenagers.

The verdict validated the plaintiff's lawyers' approach of shifting the legal target; instead of focusing on the content people see on social media, the case put the spotlight on how social media services were designed. Meta's apps, including Instagram, and Google's YouTube, the jury concluded, were deliberately built to be addictive and the companies' executives knew this and failed to protect their youngest users.

The outcome of this case could influence thousands of other consolidated cases against the social media companies. The litigation has drawn comparisons to the legal crusade in the 1990s against Big Tobacco, which forced the industry to stop targeting minors with advertising.

While exactly how the litigation may upend the social media landscape is uncertain, the lawyers involved in the cases against the tech giants view the Los Angeles verdict as a promising early sign that the dam is breaking in favor of industry-wide changes.

"Today's verdict is a referendum — from a jury, to an entire industry — that accountability has arrived," Joseph VanZandt, the co-lead lawyer for families and others suing social media companies, said in a statement after Wednesday's verdict.

The lead trial lawyer for the plaintiff, Mark Lanier, conceded that the jury could have imposed greater financial penalties on the companies.

Lanier, a Texas-born longtime litigator who has a folksy manner and is also a part-time pastor, had shown the jury a jar full of M&Ms during arguments on punitive damages on Wednesday. He said each piece of candy represented a billion dollars of the companies' worth. "You've got to talk to Meta in Meta money," he told the jury.

After the total \$6 million in damages was announced, Lanier told reporters outside the courtroom, "I would've thought it was likely we would have gotten a bigger number." But, he added, "I trust the system and trust people to assess what's right and best."

Just before he spoke, two jurors appeared in the hallway of the courtroom and a swarm of reporters quickly encircled them.

The jury foreman, who provided only his first name, Matthew, said jurors tried to keep their emotions and personal experiences out of deliberations. "We stuck to following the law and how it was presented to us."

Another juror, who gave her name only as Victoria, acknowledged that the jury wanted to send a message to the companies. "We wanted them to feel it," she said. "We wanted them to realize this was unacceptable."

Meta and Google vowed to appeal. In a statement, Meta said teen mental health is "profoundly complex and cannot be linked to a single app," saying the company remains confident in its record of protecting teens online.

"This case misunderstands YouTube, which is a responsibly built streaming platform, not a social media site," said Google spokesman José Castañeda.

Meta hit with \$375 million in damages in separate New Mexico trial

The verdict in Los Angeles came a day after a jury in a separate trial in New Mexico ordered Meta to pay \$375 million in damages for failing to protect young users from child predators on Instagram and Facebook. The New Mexico jury found Meta responsible for misleading consumers about the safety of its platforms, declaring that the tech company had flouted state consumer protection laws.



LAW

New Mexico jury says Meta harms children's mental health and safety, violating state law

That trial will enter a second phase in May in which a judge will decide whether Meta created a public nuisance and if the company must pay additional penalties to address harms. New Mexico Attorney General Raúl Torrez said he will also ask the court to force Meta to change its apps to make them safer.

"Juries in New Mexico and California have recognized that Meta's public deception and design features are putting children in harm's way," Torrez said in a statement on Wednesday.

The blockbuster verdicts land against the backdrop of school districts and state lawmakers around the country limiting or banning phone use in schools. This week's verdicts mark the first time juries have decided that tech companies are at least partially liable for online and off-line dangers kids and teenagers encounter after incessantly using social media.



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Zuckerberg grilled about Meta's strategy to target 'teens' and 'tweens'

During the trial in Los Angeles, the jury of five men and seven women heard competing narratives about what role social media platforms played in the mental health struggles of Kaley, also identified as KGM. Now 20 years old, Kaley, who is from Chico, Calif., said she first started using YouTube at 6 years old and Instagram when she was 11.

Lawyers for KGM argued that Instagram and YouTube were deliberately designed to be addictive and the companies knew the platforms were harming young people, while the tech companies countered that their services cannot be blamed for complex mental health issues.

KGM's legal team showed the jury internal documents from Meta in which CEO Mark Zuckerberg and other executives described the company's efforts to attract and keep kids and teens on its platforms. One document said: "If we wanna win

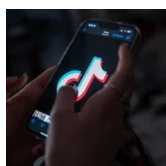
big with teens, we must bring them in as tweens." Another internal memo showed that 11-year-olds were four times as likely to keep coming back to Instagram, compared with competing apps, despite the platform requiring users to be at least 13 years old.



Meta CEO and Chairman Mark Zuckerberg (center) leaves the Los Angeles Superior Court after testifying in the social media trial on Feb. 18, 2026.

Apu Gomes/AFP via Getty Images

Under questioning about those documents, Zuckerberg told the jury that keeping young users safe has always been a company priority. "If people feel like they're not having a good experience, why would they keep using the product?" Zuckerberg said.



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Meta and YouTube head to trial over harm to children after TikTok settles

The trial is a test case, known as a bellwether, tied to about 2,000 other pending lawsuits brought by parents and school districts arguing that social media giants

should be considered manufacturers of defective products for hooking a generation of young people to social media feeds.

Throughout the case, the companies insisted that there is no scientific proof that social media causes mental health issues, suggesting that they are being used as a scapegoat for the multi-faceted emotional issues children face that can have many root causes.

Snapchat and TikTok were also defendants in the case, but both companies settled with KGM before the trial began.

LA case focused on design of social media platforms to overcome liability shield

For decades, tech companies have avoided legal liability over the content that appears on their sites because of a federal law known as Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act, which says that tech companies are not legally responsible for what their users post. This has made it difficult to bring cases over social media harms to trial.

In the Los Angeles case, lawyers took a different approach by focusing on how tech companies built their platforms. They argued that features like infinite scroll, constant notifications, autoplaying videos and beauty filters made apps like Instagram and YouTube equivalent to a "digital casino," which young people found too irresistible to put down.

By taking this tack, the lawyers pursued a case alleging defective design that was able to get around the high bar set by Section 230. It's not what users post, the lawyers argued, but the very architecture of social media platforms.

"How do you make a child never put down the phone? That's called the engineering of addiction," Lanier said during the trial.

Over the course of five weeks, jurors heard from therapists, engineers, tech executives including Zuckerberg, and the plaintiff herself about just how culpable big tech companies should be for contributing to KGM's mental health struggles.

Were her issues pre-existing, or exacerbated by her home life, or deepened by social media?

Meta and Google fought back by underscoring the emotional and physical abuse her medical records indicated she experienced at home. Lawyers for the tech companies also hammered the point that Kaley's own therapist never documented that social media use was a factor in her mental health problems.

From the witness stand, KGM testified that using social media affected her self-worth as she got further drawn into the apps and withdrew from friends and family. She developed depression and body dysmorphia, she said, as she continuously compared herself to others and used beauty filters to enhance her appearance.

She so craved the validation of social media, she said, that she would run off to the bathroom at school to check the number of "likes" her posts had received. She testified that it was hard to concentrate on school because all she wanted to do was stay glued to her social media feeds.

The jury was not tasked with deciding whether Meta and Google had created Kaley's mental health woes, but rather if her compulsive social media use was a "substantial factor" in her struggles and if the defective design of the platforms was the direct cause of her distress.

Lanier, who is known for trotting out large exhibits for trial spectacle, closed his questioning of Zuckerberg with one such display.

The lawyer and several of his associates held up a 35-foot collage featuring hundreds of selfies Kaley had posted to Instagram, many of which used beauty filters, just as she was struggling with body-image issues. Zuckerberg looked on, as Lanier peppered him with questions about how and why a girl under the age of 13, Meta's minimum age to create an account, was able to post to the app so obsessively.

In his closing argument, Lanier drew the jury's attention to internal documents showing how top officials at Meta and Google were aware of how their products were causing harm to young people.

"I don't naysay the opportunity to make money," Lanier said. "But when you're making money off of kids, you have to do it responsibly."

NPR's Shannon Bond contributed to this report.