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NEWS FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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AG Kaul Sues TikTok for Allegedly Damaging Youth Mental Health

Lawsuit against TikTok follows a multi-billion dollar settlement with Meta requiring the company to implement sweeping child-safety reforms

MADISON, Wis. – Attorney General Josh Kaul announced that he has sued TikTok, alleging that the social media platform knowingly deployed features that addict and harm Wisconsin children while deceiving parents and the public about the dangers of its app, thereby contributing to the children's mental health crisis.

"We owe it to our kids to stand up for a world in which they're free to learn and grow up without being commoditized for the profit of big tech companies," said AG Kaul. "With this suit, we're seeking change and accountability."

The lawsuit, filed Wednesday in Dane County Circuit Court, alleges that TikTok is violating the Wisconsin Deceptive Trade Practices Act and the state's public nuisance law.

In the lawsuit, AG Kaul alleges that, much like a slot machine, TikTok uses addictive design features, such as its recommendation engine, infinite scroll, auto play, push notifications, and LIVE, to target children as its intended users and to compel users to spend as much time as possible on the TikTok app. Many of these features have been linked to damaging psychological outcomes.

A significant portion of TikTok users in the U.S. are children, with a 2024 Pew Research Center Survey reporting that 63% of teenagers ages 13 through 17 use the TikTok app, with 57% using it daily.

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As alleged in the lawsuit, TikTok's business model is to take advantage of addictive behaviors, which children and teenagers are particularly vulnerable to experiencing. Like many social media platforms, TikTok sells access and information about users to advertisers and companies to sell products. Every minute spent on the TikTok platform helps to generate revenue for the company.

TikTok's platform allegedly drives compulsive behavior, interferes with sleep and education, and includes features that can lead to mental health risks, such as depression, anxiety, body image issues, and thoughts of self-harm in young people.

The U.S. Surgeon General has confirmed that "[e]xcessive and problematic use of social media can harm children and adolescents by disrupting important healthy behaviors" and that social media platforms "designed to maximize user engagement … [have] the potential to encourage excessive use and behavioral dysregulation." As the Surgeon General noted, "[a] systematic review of 42 studies on the effects of excessive social media use found a consistent relationship between social media use and poor sleep quality, reduced sleep duration, sleep difficulties, and depression among youth."

The lawsuit alleges that TikTok has internally been aware of the dangers of its platform to children for years while it misleads Wisconsin users about the safety of its platform. As further alleged, TikTok executives have internally admitted that the platform "in itself has baked into it compulsive use" and internal TikTok documents have acknowledged that "minors do not have the executive function to control their screen time[.]"

The lawsuit further alleges that TikTok deceived parents about the safety and appropriateness of the content their children will have access to on the TikTok app. As alleged, TikTok advertises itself on app stores as being appropriate for children 13 years and older, and it characterizes the mature themes on its App, including sexual content, drug and alcohol content, and profanity, as "mild" and "infrequent." Yet those themes are frequently encountered on the app and can include graphic details, as alleged in the complaint.

This lawsuit is part of Wisconsin DOJ's ongoing efforts to protect kids online and confront the negative impacts of social media platforms on young Wisconsinites. In August of this year, AG Kaul announced a landmark of up to $17.1 billion multistate settlement with Meta Platforms, Inc. – the owner of Facebook and Instagram – that requires the company to impose sweeping new measures to protect kids' mental

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health. As part of that settlement, Wisconsin will receive $219 million and up to $313 million if certain industry conditions are met.

This week's lawsuit is a result of a bipartisan multistate investigation into TikTok.

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