



Court File No.:

**ONTARIO
SUPERIOR COURT OF JUSTICE**

B E T W E E N:

PEEL DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD

Plaintiff

-and-

**META PLATFORMS INC., META PAYMENTS INC., META TECHNOLOGIES
LLC., INSTAGRAM INC., INSTAGRAM LLC., FACEBOOK HOLDINGS LLC.,
FACEBOOK OPERATIONS LLC., FACEBOOK CANADA LTD., SICULUS INC.,
SNAP INC., BYTEDANCE LTD., BYTEDANCE INC., TIKTOK LTD., TIKTOK
INC., TIKTOK LLC., AND TIKTOK TECHNOLOGY CANADA INC.**

Defendants

STATEMENT OF CLAIM

TO THE DEFENDANTS

A LEGAL PROCEEDING HAS BEEN COMMENCED AGAINST YOU by the plaintiff. The claim made against you is set out in the following pages.

IF YOU WISH TO DEFEND THIS PROCEEDING, you or an Ontario lawyer acting for you must prepare a statement of defence in Form 18A prescribed by the *Rules of Civil Procedure*, serve it on the plaintiff's lawyer or, where the plaintiff does not have a lawyer, serve it on the plaintiff, and file it, with proof of service, in this court office, **WITHIN TWENTY DAYS** after this statement of claim is served on you, if you are served in Ontario.

If you are served in another province or territory of Canada or in the United States of America, the period for serving and filing your statement of defence is forty days. If you are served outside Canada and the United States of America, the period is sixty days.

Instead of serving and filing a statement of defence, you may serve and file a notice of intent to defend in Form 18B prescribed by the Rules of Civil Procedure. This will entitle you to ten more days within which to serve and file your statement of defence.

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IF YOU FAIL TO DEFEND THIS PROCEEDING, JUDGMENT MAY BE GIVEN AGAINST YOU IN YOUR ABSENCE AND WITHOUT FURTHER NOTICE TO YOU. IF YOU WISH TO DEFEND THIS PROCEEDING BUT ARE UNABLE TO PAY LEGAL FEES, LEGAL AID MAY BE AVAILABLE TO YOU BY CONTACTING A LOCAL LEGAL AID OFFICE.

IF YOU PAY THE PLAINTIFF'S CLAIM, and \$5,000 for costs, within the time for serving and filing your statement of defence you may move to have this proceeding dismissed by the court. If you believe the amount claimed for costs is excessive, you may pay the plaintiff's claim and \$400 for costs and have the costs assessed by the courts.

TAKE NOTICE THIS ACTION WILL AUTOMATICALLY BE DISMISSED if it has not been set down for trial or terminated by any means within five years after the action was commenced unless otherwise ordered by the court.

Date: March 27, 2024

Issued by _____

Local registrar

Address of Superior Court of Justice
court office: 7755 Hurontario St.
Brampton, Ontario
L6W 4T6

TO: META PLATFORMS INC.
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AND TO: META PAYMENTS INC.
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AND TO: INSTAGRAM INC.
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AND TO: FACEBOOK CANADA LTD.

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AND TO: SICULUS INC.

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AND TO: SNAP INC.

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AND TO: BYTEDANCE LTD.

Vistra (Cayman) Limited
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AND TO: BYTEDANCE INC.

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✓

AND TO: TIKTOK LTD.
Vistra (Cayman) Limited
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AND TO: TIKTOK LLC.
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AND TO: TIKTOK INC.
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AND TO: TIKTOK TECHNOLOGY CANADA INC.
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CLAIM

1. The Plaintiff, Peel District School Board (“PDSB”) claims:
 - a) General and special damages in the amount of \$600,000,000;
 - b) Aggravated damages in the amount of \$100,000,000;
 - c) Punitive and exemplary damages in the amount of \$600,000,000;
 - d) Prejudgment interest in accordance with section 128 of the *Courts of Justice Act*, R.S.O. 1990, c. C.43, as amended;
 - e) Postjudgment interest in accordance with section 129 of the *Courts of Justice Act*, R.S.O. 1990, c. C.43, as amended;
 - f) The costs of this action, together with all applicable taxes; and
 - g) Such further and other relief as this Honourable Court may deem just.

OVERVIEW

2. The *Education Act* R.S.O. 1990, c. E.2 (“the *Act*”) provides the legal and regulatory framework for the education system in Ontario. In accordance with the *Act*, a strong public education system is the foundation for a prosperous, caring, and civil society.
3. The *Act* grants authority to district school boards (“boards”) to operate their constituent schools for educational purposes, and to carry out their statutory responsibilities to promote the education and well-being of the student population within their constituent jurisdiction.
4. A school is a body of pupils that is organized as a unit for educational purposes, under the jurisdiction of the appropriate board. A board is the statutory representative of its student population and is a corporation that has all the powers that are conferred or imposed on it under the *Act*.
5. PDSB (or “the Board”) is one of the largest public school boards in Canada, with jurisdiction over approximately 257 schools and approximately 153,000 students in the Greater Toronto Area, Ontario.
6. In accordance with the *Act*, PDSB provides students the opportunity to realize their potential and to develop into highly skilled, knowledgeable, caring individuals who contribute to their society.

7. PDSB claims the Defendants have negligently interfered with PDSB's statutory mandate to promote student achievement and well-being and to carry out its statutory obligations on behalf of its student population.
8. Specifically, the Defendants employ exploitative business practices and have negligently designed unsafe and/or addictive products that the Defendants market and promote to students, including PDSB students.
9. The widespread and compulsive use of the Defendants' products has consequences beyond harms to the individual users. It has fundamentally changed the learning and teaching environment at PDSB schools, and affected the student population, administrators, educators, staff, and other members of the PDSB community.
10. The Defendants have knowingly and/or negligently disrupted and fundamentally changed the school, learning, and teaching climate by creating and sustaining prolific and/or compulsive use of their products by students. As a direct result of this conduct, PDSB has suffered, and continues to suffer, substantial damages. These damages include, but are not limited to, a significant diversion and drain on PDSB's resources and personnel that is caused by the conduct of the Defendants.
11. The Defendants knew, or ought to have known, that their conduct is having a serious impact on schools and would cause widespread disruption to the education system, including to PDSB.
12. The Defendants have targeted PDSB's schools and the student population to increase overall product usage and engagement. As part of their business practices, the Defendants analyze and strategize based on the market penetration of their products at the school-level.
13. The Defendants chose to maximize profits at the expense of student well-being and without due regard to the foreseeable harm and damage caused to PDSB.
14. The Defendants knew, or ought to have known, that their negligent conduct seriously and negatively impacts the student population by causing maladaptive brain development, compulsive use, disrupted sleep patterns, behavioural dysregulation, learning and attention impairment, and other serious issues that impact the school, learning, and teaching climate.

15. The Defendants knew, or ought to have known, of internal and external research, data, and reports about the unreasonably high frequency of negative experiences occurring on their products, as well as the risks of harm to student users. The Defendants have failed to respond responsibly to this information and failed to make their social media products reasonably safe for students. Instead, the Defendants have continued to deny that their products are harmful and dangerous. The Defendants have engaged in a long-standing pattern of obfuscating the truth, mischaracterizing the scientific and technical literature, and minimizing the seriousness of the harms occurring on, and resulting from, the use of their social media products.
16. The Defendants knew, or ought to have known, of the various safety risks associated with their negligent conduct, including creating a forum for cyberbullying and harassment.
17. The Defendants knew, or ought to have known that the design of their products facilitates connections between vulnerable students and sex predators leading to an increased risk of child sex abuse, child sex trafficking, and the proliferation of Child Sex Abuse Materials (CSAM) on their social media products, among other serious issues that impact school climate. As a direct result of the Defendants' failures to design a safe product, PDSB expends and diverts significant financial and administrative resources to protect students from social media harms and risks.
18. The student population of PDSB and its schools were the direct target of the Defendants' wrongful and tortious conduct. The harm to students' attention, emotional and social well-being, and to their ability to learn and the corresponding impact of these harms on PDSB was foreseeable and proximate.
19. While deliberately seeking to attract students to their platforms, the Defendants knew that school boards, including PDSB, would be forced to address, through financial and human resources, the devastating impact that compulsive social media use has on the student population and on their mental health.
20. Schools have been uniquely harmed by the Defendants. The PDSB has a unique responsibility to operate its public schools and has suffered damage different in kind and in quality from that suffered by the public in common.
21. The social media related harms caused by the Defendants require a response that far exceeds PDSB's available resources.

22. PDSB seeks compensation and remediation costs to address the harms directly flowing from the conduct of the Defendants, which include but are not limited to:
- a) Increased educator time and resources spent addressing and/or managing social media use, including issues caused by compulsive social media use;
 - b) Increased educator and administrator time and resources to promote students' learning, as a result of students' focus and attentional issues;
 - c) Increased costs to address the need for special or alternative education services to respond to attention deficits;
 - d) Increased costs to address the need for digital literacy and/or online safety programming, and other costs related to increased vigilance and harm prevention;
 - e) Increased costs to address the need for additional mental health supports;
 - f) Increased disciplinary services and administrator time to address increased behavioural aggression and incidents;
 - g) Increased costs and need for additional personnel including clinicians, and caring and safe schools staff, the diversion of staff resources, and costs for third parties, such as educational speakers, to address social media harms;
 - h) Increased need for information technology ("IT") professionals, IT infrastructure and cyber security;
 - i) Increased resources to investigate and respond to threats made against schools, staff, and students through social media products;
 - j) Increased resources to prevent, investigate, and deal with the consequences of cyberbullying caused by, and occurring over, social media products;
 - k) Property damage and vandalism in response to viral social media challenges purposely and/or knowingly promoted by the Defendants;

- l) Increased resources to respond to the Defendants' products increasing students' risks of experiencing sexual harassment, sexual abuse, CSAM, and similar serious harms.
23. PDSB brings this action in negligence including general negligence, defective product design (design negligence), negligence in manufacturing/manufacturing an inherently dangerous product, and negligent failure to warn.
24. PDSB brings this action in public nuisance to protect the public interest in a strong public education system. The tortious conduct of the Defendants constitutes an unreasonable interference with an important public right to education.
25. The harm to PDSB and to the education system as a result of the Defendants' reprehensible conduct is extensive and warrants an award of aggravated damages.
26. The Defendants have acted in a high-handed, reckless, malicious, and reprehensible manner without due regard for the well-being of the student population and the education system, warranting an award of punitive and exemplary damages.

PARTIES

A. The Plaintiff

27. PDSB is a corporation that is conferred authority pursuant to the *Act*. PDSB's powers, duties, and obligations are set out in the *Act*, related *Regulations*, and the *Policy and Program Memoranda* issued by the Ministry of Education.
28. PDSB is one of 72 district school boards in Ontario who receive a majority of education funding from the provincial government. PDSB is responsible for making local decisions in using its finite resources.
29. PDSB's statutory mandate extends beyond providing an academic education. Pursuant to sections 29.6 and 169 of the *Act*, PDSB is required to educate its students on mental health, promote student well-being, and educate students on the risks associated with drug and alcohol use. PDSB is to provide a safe, positive and inclusive learning environment. PDSB is statutorily authorized to limit the public's access to its schools to keep students safe from harm, and in particular to protect students from sex predators.

30. PDSB brings this action to hold the Defendants' accountable for the harm they have caused to PDSB including its student population, schools, educators, administrators, and staff, and for interfering with its statutory duties.

B. The Defendants

The "Meta" Defendants and Products: Instagram & Facebook

31. The Defendant, Meta Platforms Inc. ("Meta Platforms"), is a multinational technology conglomerate or "parent company" operating and controlling approximately 94 subsidiaries, as of the time of filing.
32. Meta Platforms oversees, develops, directs, designs, markets, operates, and maintains its social media products and technological products. Material to this claim is Meta Platforms' "family" of social media products, such as Facebook (including Facebook Messenger, Messenger Kids, and Facebook Marketplace), Threads, and Instagram.
33. Meta Platforms includes, but is not limited to, the following named subsidiary Defendants: Meta Payments Inc.; Meta Technologies LLC.; Instagram Inc.; Instagram LLC.; Facebook Holdings LLC.; Facebook Operations LLC.; Facebook Canada Ltd.; and Siculus Inc. (collectively "Meta").
34. The Plaintiff has made every effort to identify the specific arms of Meta Platforms responsible for certain business decisions, as applicable, throughout this claim. However, due to the opaque nature of its business organization, the purpose of many of its subsidiaries is known only to the Defendant.
35. Meta Platforms' principal place of business is in Menlo Park, California.
36. Meta Platforms acquired the social media company Instagram (launched in 2010) on April 9, 2012 for approximately 19 billion USD.
37. Meta Platforms had its initial public offering on May 8, 2012, and is a publicly traded company on the Nasdaq under the ticker "META." Meta Platforms' revenue is almost exclusively generated from harvesting user data to sell lucrative ad space on its various social media products. Its market capitalization is approximately 1 trillion USD, as of January 2024.

38. In October 2021, Facebook Inc. filed an amended and restated certificate of incorporation in Delaware and rebranded itself as “Meta Platforms Inc.”
39. Meta Platforms wholly owns Defendant Meta Payments Inc. (“Meta Payments”). Meta Payments is incorporated in the State of Florida. Its principal place of business is in Menlo Park, California. Meta Payments processes payments made through Meta’s various social media platforms.
40. The Defendant, Meta Technologies LLC. (“Meta Technologies”), is a Delaware limited liability company and an agent of Meta Platforms. Meta Technologies shares its principal place of business in Menlo Park, California, with Meta Platforms. Previously known as Facebook Technologies LLC., Meta Technologies is responsible for developing Meta’s virtual reality line of products and technologies.
41. The Defendant, Instagram Inc., is a wholly owned subsidiary of Meta Platforms. It is incorporated in Delaware with its principal place of business in Menlo Park, California.
42. The Defendant, Instagram Inc., in turn, owns and controls the Defendant, Instagram LLC. (together “Instagram”), also incorporated under the laws of Delaware with its principal place of business in Menlo Park, California.
43. The Defendant, Facebook Holdings LLC., is a wholly owned subsidiary of Meta Platforms. It was incorporated in Delaware on March 11, 2020, and is primarily a holding company for entities involved in Meta Platforms’ international business operations. Its principal place of business is in Menlo Park, California.
44. The Defendant, Facebook Operations LLC., is a wholly owned subsidiary of Meta Platforms. It was incorporated in Delaware on January 8, 2012. Its principal place of business is in Menlo Park, California.
45. The Defendant, Facebook Canada Ltd., is a wholly owned subsidiary of Meta Platforms and was incorporated on October 21, 2008 in accordance with the *Canada Business Corporations Act* (RSC, 1985, c. C-44). Its principal place of business is in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.
46. The Defendant, Siculus Inc., is a wholly owned subsidiary of Meta Platforms. It was incorporated in Delaware on October 19, 2011. Siculus constructs data

facilities and other projects for Meta Platforms. Its principal place of business is in Menlo Park, California.

47. At all times material to this Claim, acting alone or in concert with its subsidiaries, Meta has advertised, marketed, offered, and distributed its social media products to consumers throughout Ontario, Canada.

The Snap Inc. Defendant and Product: Snapchat

48. The Defendant, Snap Inc. (“Snap”), oversees, develops, directs, designs, markets, operates, and maintains its social media product, Snapchat.
49. Snap was incorporated in Delaware on May 24, 2012 under the name Snapchat Inc.
50. Snap’s principal place of business is in Santa Monica, California.
51. Snap previously conducted business under the name Snapchat Inc. It filed an amended and restated certificate of incorporation in Delaware in September 2016 and rebranded itself as “Snap Inc.”
52. Snap had its initial public offering on March 2, 2017, and is a publicly traded company on the NYSE under the ticker “SNAP.” Snap’s revenue is almost exclusively generated from harvesting user data to sell lucrative ad space on Snapchat. Its market capitalization is approximately 26.6 billion USD, as of January 2024.
53. At all times material to this Claim, Snap has advertised, marketed, offered, and distributed Snapchat to consumers throughout Ontario, Canada.

The ByteDance Ltd. Defendants and Product: TikTok

54. The Defendant, ByteDance Ltd. (“ByteDance”), is a multinational technology conglomerate and parent company, operating and controlling multiple subsidiaries, as of the time of filing.
55. ByteDance oversees, develops, directs, designs, markets, operates, and maintains its social media product, TikTok.

56. ByteDance includes but is not limited to, the following named subsidiary Defendants, ByteDance Inc., TikTok Ltd., TikTok Inc., TikTok LLC., and TikTok Technology Canada Ltd. (collectively, “TikTok”).
57. The Plaintiff has made every effort to identify the specific arms of ByteDance responsible for certain business decisions, as applicable, throughout this claim. However, due to the opaque nature of its business organization, the purpose of many of its subsidiaries is known only to the Defendant.
58. ByteDance was incorporated in the Caymen Islands with its principal place of business in Beijing, China.
59. The Defendant, ByteDance Inc., is a Delaware corporation with its principal place of business in Delaware.
60. The Defendant, TikTok Ltd., is a wholly owned subsidiary of ByteDance. It was incorporated in the Caymen Islands with its principal place of business in the Caymen Islands.
61. The Defendant, TikTok LLC., is a wholly owned subsidiary of ByteDance. It was incorporated in Delaware, with its principal place of business in Delaware.
62. The Defendant, TikTok Inc., is a wholly owned subsidiary of ByteDance. It was incorporated in California on April 30, 2015, with its principal place of business in Culver City, California.
63. The Defendant, TikTok Technology Canada Ltd., is a wholly owned subsidiary of ByteDance.
64. ByteDance is a privately owned corporation and its valuation is estimated at approximately 268 billion USD.
65. At all times material to this Claim, acting alone or in concert with its subsidiaries, ByteDance has advertised, marketed, offered, and distributed TikTok to consumers throughout Ontario, Canada.

JURISDICTION

66. The acts of negligence as disclosed in this action, and other tortious conduct of the Defendants, were committed in Ontario, Canada.
67. The Ontario Superior Court of Justice has general and specific jurisdiction over this Claim. There is a real and substantial connection between the actions of the Defendants and the damage to PDSB.
68. The Defendants have directly and continuously conducted their business affairs in Ontario, Canada. The Defendants have advertised, marketed, offered, and distributed their social media products to consumers in Ontario, Canada.
69. Further, the Defendants have fixed offices / residences in Toronto, Ontario. As such, they have a long-standing active presence in Ontario.
70. The Defendants have committed multiple torts against the Plaintiff, an Ontario corporate entity, affecting its student population, its schools, and its staff. The damage caused to PDSB is a direct result of the Defendants' business activities in the Province of Ontario. Accordingly, it is in the interests of justice for this Honourable Court to exercise jurisdiction over this litigation.
71. The Province of Ontario is the most convenient forum for the trial of this action in that the damages were suffered in the Province of Ontario, and the community in which the Plaintiff operates has a vested interest in hearing these issues of public importance in its own jurisdiction.

FACTS

A. Overview of material facts

72. The Defendants' profits are tied to maximizing youth engagement on their social media products. The Defendants collect youth user data to sell targeted ad space to increase advertising revenue.
73. The Defendants knowingly and/or negligently engineered products and design features to manipulate brain neurochemistry and to induce excessive and/or compulsive and/or addictive and/or problematic use amongst students.
74. The Defendants analyze the penetration of their products at the school-level and contemplate and/or develop strategies to target schools and the student population.

75. The Defendants knowingly promote their products to student-age children, including during school hours, without due regard for the disruptive effects on the student population and the education system.
76. The Defendants' algorithms intentionally amplify and push harmful content to maximize engagement with the social media products, often referred to as negative content bias, and/or preference amplification.
77. The Defendants knowingly profited from the proliferation of CSAM on their social media products, facilitated child sexual abuse, child sexual harassment, "sextortion," child sex trafficking and encouraged the connection of adults to children and youth, and vice versa.
78. The Defendants' representations about the safety, and the design of their social media products, both express and implied, have been false and misleading. The Defendants failed to disclose material information about the harmful effects of their products.
79. PDSB is now left grappling with the consequences of the Defendants' misconduct, such that the Defendants' misconduct has directly caused substantial harm to PDSB.

B. The Products

The Meta Products

80. The Meta Products include Instagram and Facebook (including Facebook Messenger, Messenger Kids, and Facebook Marketplace).
81. In brief, the Instagram interface includes Stories, Reels, an Explore Page, and a home screen or user "Feed."
82. "Reels," are auto-playing short videos that are recommended and curated to users by Instagram's algorithm. "Stories" are time limited user posts, usually pictures or videos.
83. The posts in the feed include those from accounts that the user has chosen to follow and "suggested posts," which consists of posts from accounts the user has not chosen to follow, as well as advertisements.

84. The “Explore” page is content that Instagram has decided the viewer would like to consume and/or engage with.
85. Users can make multiple accounts, known as Single User Multiple Accounts (SUMAs) or FINSTAs (short for Fake Instagram), generally viewed by youth as a more “candid” Instagram or a means of circumventing parental control. Instagram accounts can be completely anonymous, and identities are not generally verified.
86. There is no age verification process to access Instagram without a user account. To sign up for an account, a user must merely input a date of birth alleging that they are 13 years or older. No other protocol or barrier is in place to prevent users under 13 years old from accessing the product.
87. In 2018, Instagram shifted away from organizing a user’s feed chronologically, and instead opted to organize a user’s feed by a measure it calls, “Meaningful Social Interactions” (MSI). MSI causes youth users to see less content from users they follow and more content Meta believes the youth user will “engage with.” Often this content is celebrity or “influencer” content highlighting unrealistic lifestyles and/or body image. This shift to MSI was in direct response to lagging user numbers, including slowing rates of Daily Active Users (DAUs) and Monthly Active Users (MAUs).
88. Instagram also offers the ability to have an account verified, a social signifier, denoted by a blue checkmark.
89. Meta intentionally designed its MSI-focused algorithms to collect and analyze several kinds of student data, including but not limited to, a user’s profile, content the user reports, content the user posts, content viewed, content engaged with, navigation paths, watch time, hover time (the amount of time a user viewed a piece of content), whether a user mutes or unmutes a video, and whether a user makes a video full screen, among other data.
90. Facebook is a social media product that has the highest global market penetration of any social media product. It has approximately 3.049 billion MAUs, and approximately 2.09 billion DAUs. It has gone through many design updates and alterations since its initial form in 2004. In September 2006, Facebook became available to all internet users. To register as a user an email account is required, and the person must self-declare that they are 13 years or older.

91. The Facebook product is interactive and includes various tools such as News Feed (a newsfeed of stories and posts published on the product, some of which are posted by connections, and others that are suggested by Meta), People You May Know Suggested for You, Groups You Should Join, and Discover (recommendations by Meta).
92. Facebook users who meet certain criteria are eligible to participate in “Facebook Stars,” a program whereby the user receives “Stars” or “Gifts” that other users purchase directly from Meta and can be exchanged for money. In order to qualify for this program, a user must have 500 followers for at least 30 days and allege to be at least 18 years old.
93. Meta Platforms is growth oriented, frequently acquiring new companies, and is constantly seeking to expand its user base, as well as retool its products to promote user engagement with its apps.
94. Targeting student users and their schools is a part of Meta’s marketing and growth strategy.

The SnapChat Product

95. The Defendant Snap’s flagship product is Snapchat, which includes its five core tabs, as evolved over time - a camera tab, an ephemeral visual and text messaging conversation tab (2012), a proprietary “Snapmap” (2017), a Stories tab (2013) and a Spotlight feature (2020).
96. Snap has evolved by adding various tools such as Video-Sharing (2012), Geo-Filters (2014), beautification and other Filters, also called Lenses (2014), Discover (2015), Memories (2016), and virtual avatars called “Bitmojis” (2016). Snapchat has always leveraged time limited or ephemeral content to create pressure for users to frequently engage with the products. The pictures or videos self destruct and there is a second-to-second count down shown on the screen, before the content disappears. Snap is known for providing a venue for sharing explicit content, colloquially known as “sexts.”
97. Snap uses end to end encryption on its product.
98. Snap “gamifies” its product to encourage compulsive use with Snapchat Streaks (launched in 2016 and requiring daily use to maintain), various “Trophies / Charms” (such as for sending a snap in the middle of the night) and other “rewards”

- based features, such as a socially comparative “Snapscore” that is based on the total number of snaps sent and received, and is viewable to other users.
99. Snapmap allows users to locate each other via location, and there is a “heatmap” of recent snaps posted to a communal and public “Our Story” tab. The “Our Story” feature shares videos and pictures related around place, time, or event to users who are not otherwise connected.
 100. Snapchat employs a variety of algorithms, which collect data about a user and then make recommendations to the user, based on that collected data.
 101. Snapchat’s “Quick Add,” “Discover,” and “Spotlight” features all employ manipulative algorithms to keep users interacting with the product.
 102. The Quick Add feature uses an algorithm to suggest new friends to a Snapchat user. Snap also utilizes geo-local information to suggest users to each other based on proximity.
 103. The Discover feature curates content for the user based on extracted data, collected from the user’s history of activity within the product.
 104. The Spotlight feature, which is also based on an algorithm, presents an endless stream of the most entertaining snaps.
 105. Snap also develops, operates, and maintains another product, a virtual or alternative reality eye glass called “Spectacles” with the ability to interact with its flagship Snapchat product.

The TikTok Product

106. The Defendant TikTok’s product is a social media product consisting of different options, and tools, primarily designed to share and consume short form audio-visual videos. The main feature of TikTok is a “For You Page” (FYP) an infinite stream of continuous content dictated by the Defendants’ machine learning algorithms, termed its “Recommendation Engine.”
107. TikTok limits the length of videos that can be created over TikTok or uploaded to TikTok - a deliberate design choice to keep the consumer’s attention. TikTok has experimented with its maximum video length and assessed the impact of this factor

on user engagement. TikTok videos frequently range from a few seconds to a few minutes long, and are usually no more than three minutes long.

108. TikTok offers a variety of effects, sounds, editing options, such as interactive “duets” with other users, stitches, slowing down or speeding up videos, or options to engage with “trending” content including certain music or skits.
109. The TikTok product creates and maintains a user’s “flow-state,” a hyper-focused, near hypnotic state, where bodily movements are reflexive and the user is totally immersed in smoothly rotating through the product. Users are sucked into the product, without any conscious awareness of the amount of time passing. The Defendant utilizes several features such as full screen videos, video autoplay, and seamless content with no breaks or barriers to induce this state.
110. TikTok zealously guards the specifics of its Recommendation Engine algorithms. A key factor in what content gets promoted is how long a user lingers over a certain video, and whether they rewatch it. An estimated 90-95 percent of the content viewed on TikTok comes from its algorithms (as opposed to selection), the highest amongst the Defendants’ products. TikTok shows users what it thinks the user wants to see, overriding a user’s preference to decide what content to consume.
111. The TikTok app can be downloaded and all content can be accessed without signing up for an account. Even without a user account, the Defendant collects a “guest” user’s data and the algorithms recommend personalized content to the user. The only limitation is that a guest user cannot create content or engage interactively (for example like content or comment on content).
112. TikTok also offers the option to have an account “verified.” TikTok offers “Promote,” an advertising tool that boosts content by pushing it to users as an ad. Promote lets the “content creator” track the number of video views, video shares, likes, comments, and how many individuals clicked through the TikTok profile to a third-party website. It also tracks the demographic information of the viewer, such as age and gender.
113. The product has tools for users to create or share Artificial Intelligence (AI) generated content such as images, video, audio that may be highly realistic or created in a particular artistic style (e.g. painting, cartoons, and anime).

114. TikTok pays certain content creators out of a “creator fund” based on a TikTok formula considering factors such as the number of views, the authenticity of those views, and the level of engagement with the content. Content creators can also receive “tips” directly from users over TikTok via Stripe, TikTok’s payment provider.
115. Creators can also earn virtual diamonds, a rewards-based program based on the “quality” and “popularity” of the content, as decided by TikTok. There is also an option for “LIVE Gifting” when content creators “go live” on the app. Users purchase virtual TikTok coins. The coins can then be exchanged for virtual gifts and given to a creator who can, in turn, redeem the gift for virtual diamonds, and then money. Coins can be purchased during a live session.

C. Features common to Defendants’ social media products

116. The social media products have been designed, maintained, and updated by data scientists, systems design engineers, user experience (“UX”) researchers, and others to appeal directly to the student population. Every detail, including but not limited to, the colour of product icons, the placement of buttons within the interface, and the timing of notifications, has been carefully crafted to maximize the intensity, frequency, and length of user sessions.
117. The Defendants’ products all utilize algorithms, machine learning, and AI to execute various tasks. In simple terms, an algorithm refers to a defined sequence of steps, taken to solve a problem or obtain a certain result. Within social media products this often means code that is written to assess certain data inputs, and then an application of rules to that data to generate outputs or carry out commands. “Machine learning” refers to algorithms that execute tasks under various levels of human oversight and may be largely autonomous - this is a form of AI.
118. The Defendants’ products include many common features:
 - a. they are embedded into the interface of a cell phone or other electronic device in the form of an application (“app”);
 - b. they provide users with an unlimited stream of content to consume;
 - c. users are able to “sign up” with an email account;

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- d. they have interactive features that allow users to engage with the content of classmates, friends, family, celebrities, businesses, and/or strangers;
- e. they use “notifications” such as eye-catching banners, haptics, vibrations or sounds to create user engagement and re-engagement with the products throughout the day;
- f. users have the option to share content in an ephemeral format, either in real time, or in a time restricted manner (ranging from mere seconds to 24 hours depending on the app). The design intent of this feature is to promote reengagement by creating a sense of urgency to view content before it expires;
- g. they contain a feature to message another user, or groups of users, directly, in either a disappearing or lingering format;
- h. the interface of the products operates through machine – human interactions, swiping left or right, double tapping, dictation (speaking), and reflexive infinite scrolling. The products are so sensitive to the most minute expression of the human user, such that a lingering gaze on a screen is logged as integral data by the products, and the app calibrates the experience of the user, in response;
- i. they all utilize some form of engagement based ranking system to promote content that they predict will increase a user’s engagement and interaction with the products. This tends to be content that will provoke an emotional reaction from the user, regardless of whether it’s a negative or positive reaction;
- j. users are often fed content that becomes more extreme with more use of the products to promote user re-engagement and to prevent boredom;
- k. they use geo-local tagging allowing a user to share where exactly they are in the world, including the specific address or location; and
- l. they push suggested content, suggested ads, and engage in paid partnerships with various individuals, “influencers,” and/or businesses to curate content.

D. The Defendants' products were deliberately designed to manipulate the developing brain of students to promote excessive, compulsive, and unsafe use of their products

119. The Defendants' social media products are designed to manipulate users' neural networks, specifically the dopaminergic reward and motivational pathways in the brain, which are implicated in compulsive use, addiction, impulse regulation, goal setting, attention, risk assessment, impulsivity, pleasure, and other critical functions.
120. The Defendants exploit the fact that children, youth, and young adults ("students") have a developing pre-frontal cortex. This region of the brain is central to planning and executive decision-making, including the evaluation of future consequences and the weighing of risk and reward. It also helps to inhibit impulsive actions and to regulate the emotional responses to social rewards.
121. Dopamine release and circuitry is critical to motivation, completing "hard" tasks, and is a key factor in reinforcing behaviour, leading to habit formation.
122. School-age children and adolescents are especially vulnerable to developing harmful behaviours because their pre-front cortex is not fully developed. Students are prone to engage in reward seeking behaviour, tend to engage in upward social comparison, and engage in riskier behaviour than adults. Their developing brain is unable to defend against the barrage of novel, and dopamine inducing stimuli being constantly pushed on the Defendants' products.
123. When the release of dopamine in young brains is manipulated by the Defendants' products, it interferes with the brain's development and can have long-term impact on an individual's memory, affective processing, reasoning, planning, attention, inhibitory control, and risk-reward calibration. The normal neurodevelopment of students is interrupted, and they can develop maladaptive tendencies. In some circumstances this harm may be irreparable.
124. Through understanding and leveraging the human need for connection, and in particular the youth tendency for upward social comparison, the Defendants have made it extremely difficult for students to disengage with the products.
125. In particular, the Defendants have exploited the vulnerability in human psychology by creating a social-validation feedback loop.

126. The Defendants' products deploy dopamine hits, such as likes, or push an engaging video at opportune times, such as right before a user is likely to lose interest and log off. This "Intermittent Variable Reward" (IVR) scheduling prolongs the use of social media products. IVR is a well-known psychological tactic that spaces out dopamine triggering stimuli (such as a perceived reward) with a variable time gap, and in turn causes craving and anticipation. The Defendants' products exploit the fact that dopamine is released in anticipation of a rewarding event. This anticipation creates tension within the user, and frequent reengagement with the social media apps to seek reward.
127. Further, dopamine circuitry is manipulated in response to both pleasurable, novel, and adverse stimuli. The Defendants knew, or ought to have known, that students are prone to engaging with extreme content or content that provokes a reaction – even if it is a negative reaction, such as sadness or anger.
128. Like with any addictive substance, students are at special risk of developing compulsive use and/or addiction. The harmful effects of that compulsive use and/or addiction are the same as any other substance, including experiencing withdrawal type symptoms without use.
129. Meta knew, or ought to have known, that its users experience what it internally calls "problematic use," defined as lacking control over one's social media use, and using social media despite experiencing material harm, such as health issues or interference with schoolwork and homework.
130. Meta knew, or ought to have known, that many of its child and youth users have an addict's narrative around their use of Meta's products. Students are unhappy with the time they spend on the products but find it difficult to stop due to their under-developed brains. As students have a harder time with impulse control and regulating dopamine, they tend to keep scrolling.
131. Further, Meta studied the developing brain in designing its products. Meta knew, or ought to have known, that students' brains are still developing and are particularly vulnerable to stimulus, novelty, and reward.
132. TikTok also leveraged human biology and psychology to induce excessive use of its products. A key metric of its success is not just user growth but user retention, and time spent on the app, per session. TikTok's growth strategy contemplates pulling in and retaining new users by discovering what rewards they are seeking, and encouraging them to associate using TikTok with habitual cues such as

boredom, bedtime, or similar. TikTok knows its product and algorithms cause real harm.

133. Snap also capitalized on these inherent vulnerabilities in students, by creating SnapStreak, making Snapscore viewable to other Snap users, and giving students “rewards” in the form of trophies and other tools to promote excessive use.
134. Snap also capitalized on children’s impulsivity and limited cognitive development by alleging that its content disappears, even though there are numerous workarounds, such as screen grabbing the content, or taking a photo of it with another device. Snap’s promise of no consequence disappearing content is a deception and misrepresentation.
135. Social media products also impact attention, which is regulated by a number of mechanisms in the brain. In particular, compulsive social media use negatively impacts students’ executive functioning and increases impulsivity.
136. Further, students are engaging in task switching, such as checking their social media or phone, far more frequently than past generations. Studies show that the average youth can only focus for about six minutes on a task before seeking diversion on an electronic device or the Defendants’ products. This frequent task switching negatively impacts students’ ability to learn and is evident in the challenges the Plaintiff is facing to educate students.
137. The Defendants capitalized on their knowledge that the developing child brain is particularly vulnerable and prone to manipulation by their social media products. By manipulating the neural circuitry of the various dopaminergic pathways, the Defendants create compulsive, problematic, addictive, and unsafe use.
138. The conduct of the Defendants in facilitating and promoting compulsive use amongst students has caused direct harm to school climate, and to PDSB and its student population, as enumerated below.

E. The Defendants’ algorithms intentionally amplify and push harmful content to student users to maximize engagement with the products, often referred to as negative content bias and/or preference amplification

139. The Defendants purposefully designed their products to be addictive and to deliver harmful content to students. Harmful content includes, but is not limited to, content related to self-harm, suicidal ideation, drugs, alcohol, eating disorders, hate speech, and sex (particularly that encourages non-consensual sexual activity).
140. The Defendants’ social media products rely on sophisticated, subsurface algorithms to generate recommended content, designed to maximize user engagement, and provoke user reaction. The algorithms deliberately and/or recklessly push negative and extreme content, resulting in cycles of “amplification” with increasingly extreme and/or harmful content being promoted.
141. Meta knew, or ought to have known, that its algorithms push harmful content (“a negative content bias”) and often leads to preference amplification (sometimes called going down “rabbit holes”). Indeed, it runs its own experiments, called “proactive incident responses” to see what, and how fast, certain harmful content will be pushed to users.
142. Further, Meta knew, or ought to have known, that its algorithms boost suicide and self-injury (SSI) content.
143. TikTok’s algorithms are designed to begin working the minute a user opens the app. A second of viewing or hesitation indicates interest; a swipe suggests a desire for something else.
144. The TikTok algorithms also amplify harmful content, including SSI content.
145. Further, TikTok also pushes so called “corpse bride” diet content (content glorifying being so thin that bones are protruding). TikTok is a gateway to developing disordered eating, and anorexia, which is pervasive on the product.
146. TikTok users often participate in trending challenges, connecting them to other participants and viewers, to gain exposure and go viral. Numerous students have injured themselves, injured others, or destroyed property participating in viral TikTok challenges. Examples include the “devious licks” challenge, filming oneself trashing a school bathroom or stealing items from schools, or a “blackout” challenge, filming oneself choking or holding their breath until they pass out.

147. Snap also utilizes algorithms to push inappropriate and harmful content to youth users, including its Quick Add, Spotlight, and Our Story features.
148. The Defendants knew, or ought to have known, that their algorithmic product features are unsafe for students.
149. The main goal of the Defendants' "attention economy" is to push so called viral content, regardless of whether it is making students sick and compromising the education of the student population.
150. The conduct of the Defendants in exploiting the negativity bias amongst vulnerable students has caused direct harm to school climate, and to PDSB and its student population, as enumerated below.

F. The Defendants' core business is promoting engagement on social media products to sell targeted ad space: Ontario students a targeted demographic

151. The "Internet of Things" has ushered in new technological products at a rapid pace. Legal remedies and regulatory legislation lag behind technological developments. Within this gap, the Defendants' social media products have proliferated and exploded. The Defendants have achieved remarkable levels of market penetration within PDSB schools. A large proportion of the student population is engaging with social media products for several hours per day.
152. The student population is a key target demographic for each of the Defendants, who know that students are typically engaged in school or school-based activities for a majority of the day.
153. The conduct of the Defendants in targeting schools, and promoting excessive student engagement with its products has caused direct harm to school climate, and to PDSB and its student population, as enumerated below.

Meta targets schools and Ontario students to generate profit

154. Meta Platforms' revenue is derived almost exclusively from collecting user data and selling ad space on its social media products, including ad space targeted towards students. Meta Platforms' revenue over the past five years has continued to rise: approximately \$134 billion in 2023; \$116.609 billion in 2022; \$117.92 billion in 2021; \$85.965 billion in 2020 and \$70.7 billion in 2019.

155. Meta leverages the fact that children are legally required to attend schools, and therefore congregate there in mass numbers, to collect demographic data or analytics around schools.
156. Meta recognized a decrease in its high school users and strategized to remediate that by targeting schools directly. Meta uses geo-local targeting to try to pull high school students on its app during school hours.
157. Meta has explicitly devoted strategy and marketing budgets towards targeting students and their schools.
158. Meta views students as commodities to be won at all costs. Meta's exploitative business strategies include methods of pulling students onto their products during the school day, and incentivizing excessive use amongst students.
159. Meta is aware that its monthly active user engagement is highly dependent on maximizing penetration within schools and building a prolific presence within schools. Meta categorizes schools based on the level of market penetration.
160. Additionally, Meta did not historically distinguish between content that is suitable for the average social, emotional, and cognitive development of older versus younger users.
161. The advertising targeted towards students includes suggestions about abuse of prescription drugs, anorexia, romantic relationships, and other problematic tropes for such an audience.
162. The PDSB student population is among those targeted by Meta's harmful suggested content and harmful ads without seeking out this content, which causes a direct impact on the school, learning, and teaching climate at PDSB, and its student population.
163. Meta collects data for selling and assessing the efficacy of targeted ads including detailed demographics, such as information about youth based in a specific location, however, that data is solely within the purview of the Defendant. The Plaintiff alleges that given its significant market penetration within Ontario, and within the youth demographic, that Ontario students and PDSB students are a target market of Meta.

Snap targets schools and Ontario students

164. Snaps' revenue is almost exclusively generated from third parties advertising on its Snapchat product. Advertising revenue accounted for approximately 99 percent of total revenue in the fiscal years, 2022, 2021, and 2020. Snap's approximate total revenue was \$4.5 billion in 2023; \$4.6 billion in 2022; \$4.1 billion in 2021; \$2.5 billion in 2020; and \$1.7 billion in 2019.
165. Snap's large market capitalization and valuation is dictated by the perceived value of its younger, active user base. This includes the value of their data, and time, as well as Snap's perceived growth opportunities.
166. The Snap product, Snapchat, has been marketed to youths since its inception. Its features were designed to be sleek and to confound an older audience, and instead appeal to a younger, digitally native audience. Snap knows its appeal amongst school-age children, which is a significant factor in its business decisions.
167. A public statement from Snap's CEO as far back as May 2012 on Snap's website confirms that the Defendant contemplated students using the app, during the school day - "we were thrilled to hear that most of them [early users] were high school students who were using Snapchat as a new way to pass notes in class - behind-the-back photos of educators and funny faces were sent back and forth throughout the day."
168. Snap highlights its connection to schools when communicating with advertisers, promoting "Back to School on Snapchat" and "Snap to School" rhetoric on its product.
169. Snap has about 406 million DAUs, as of 2023. Snap collects users' location, real time activity, and historical activity to allow advertisers to target specific ads across the entire product to specific users. According to Snap's publicly available Securities Exchange Commission (SEC) 2023 annual report, Snap's primary commodity is trading in its users' attention - "[w]e compete to attract and retain our users' attention, both in terms of reach and engagement." Students and young adults are its primary user base and target market.
170. It is easy for new users to join Snap and there is a low barrier to entry. Resultingly, Snap has acknowledged that its demographic data, including age, can be incomplete or inaccurate.

171. The PDSB student population is among those targeted by Snap's practices, which causes a direct impact on school, learning, and teaching climate at PDSB.
172. Snap collects data for selling and assessing the efficacy of targeted ads including detailed demographics, such as information about youth based in a specific location, however, that data is solely within the purview of the Defendant. The Plaintiff alleges that given its significant market penetration within Ontario, and within the youth demographic, that Ontario students and PDSB students are a target market of Snap.

TikTok targets schools and Ontario students

173. TikTok generates revenue from "ads" which are promoted video content, whether "creator content" or an actual product.
174. TikTok has the highest user engagement of any of the Defendants' social media products. The majority of TikTok users are children, youth, or young adults. TikTok expressly does not want old content creators on its product including those with "too many wrinkles" or "abnormal body shape."
175. TikTok is a privately owned company, and therefore not subject to the same disclosure obligations as the Defendants Meta and Snap. As such, much of its demographic and financial information is solely within the purview of the Defendants.
176. TikTok's exploitative business practices target students and schools causing a direct harmful impact on PDSB's school, learning, and teaching climate.
177. PDSB alleges that TikTok collects data for selling and assessing the efficacy of targeted ads including demographics, such as information about youth based in a specific location, however, that data is solely within the purview of the Defendant. The Plaintiff alleges that given TikTok's significant market penetration within Ontario, and within the student demographic, that Ontario students and PDSB students are a target market of TikTok.

G. The Defendants' products facilitate and cause the sexual exploitation and abuse of the student population

178. The Defendants have created an economy based on the sexual exploitation, sexual abuse, and sexual harassment of students. The Defendants' social media products

- host sexually suggestive content of students, illegal CSAM material, and facilitate the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC). CSAM refers to imagery or videos showing a child engaged in an explicit sexual activity or that is graphic and primarily sexual in nature. Contrary to the Defendants' public representations, their products contain account after account of CSEC / CSAM material, often with large followings, "menus" and options to buy additional similar content.
179. The design of the social media products endangers students by encouraging connections with predatory individuals that increase the risk of sexual harassment, sextortion, and similar harms. Sextortion is a term that captures many scenarios where an individual is threatened with the release of explicit content if the individual does not meet certain demands.
 180. Sexual crimes against Canadian children, including the Plaintiff's students is rising at an alarming rate. Reported incidents of sexual interference are up 18 per cent in 2022. Similarly, possessing and accessing CSAM increased by 21 per cent in 2022 compared to the previous year.
 181. PDSB's clinicians, child social workers, psychologists, educators, and administrators are in a state of constant vigilance to mitigate these risks, as they are concerned about students' unsafe social media use. PDSB staff respond to signs of social media risks and harm, such as students being subject to predatory behaviour over the products, or meeting unknown individuals from social media off school premises.
 182. PDSB designs policies and provides educational materials to prohibit and discourage students from sharing explicit images over the Defendants' social media products. PDSB expends considerable resources to counter the insidious and harmful effects that use of the Defendants' products is causing within its schools.
 183. Students' pervasive use of social media products is challenging to supervise, and students' use outside of school hours often impacts school climate. Students' pervasive use of social media products is contributing to an increasingly dangerous, harmful, and disengaged environment for learning.
 184. PDSB expends considerable resources to promote student safety outside of school hours and off school premises, because of social media harms. The need for additional resources to address issues that start off school premises, but then permeate the school climate, is a significant aspect of this claim.

185. The Defendants' products allow CSEC, CSAM, and similar high engagement content to be monetized. TikTok and Meta also allow users to pay each other directly for this content over the products, or to pay using the products' virtual currencies that are exchangeable for dollars. Snap functioned similarly until its Snapcash tool was disabled in 2018. Snap provides financial compensation to content creators and/or for high engagement sexually suggestive content.
186. PDSB is expending unanticipated levels of time and fiscal resources to investigate, interrupt, remediate, and provide services to children who have been exposed to various forms of sexual exploitation, sexual abuse, and sexual harassment facilitated by, occurring over, or caused by, the design of the Defendants' social media products. These forms of harm are occurring at high volumes, collectively, amongst the student population.
187. On January 31, 2024, the CEOs of Snap, Meta, and TikTok were compelled to provide sworn testimony to a US Senate Hearing Committee on child safety issues, including the sheer volume of child sexual abuse and exploitation facilitated by the products. The Defendants were questioned about their historical and ongoing failure to mitigate this problem.
188. The Defendants' public representations that their AI content filters proactively, accurately, and sufficiently remove this harmful content was and is false. The Defendants regularly fail to fulfill their legal obligations to report CSAM on their social media products.
189. Meta's content screening AI tools sometimes identified material as CSAM, and generated a warning to users seeking to access this material stating that it is likely CSAM. However, this warning contained a bypass option to allow users to access this content anyways.
190. Specifically, Meta has:
 - a. proactively served and directed children to a stream of egregious, sexually explicit images through recommended users and posts – even where the child has expressed no interest in this content;
 - b. enabled adults to find, message, and groom minors, soliciting them to sell pictures or participate in child sex abuse (so called “pornographic”) videos;
 - c. fostered unmoderated user groups devoted to and/or facilitating CSEC;

- d. allowed users to search for, like, share, and sell a large volume of CSAM;
 - e. failed to respond when this content was flagged as breaching Meta’s code of conduct;
 - f. failed to detect a fictitious account created by investigators posing as a mother offering her fictitious 13-year-old daughter for trafficking; and
 - g. solicited the daughter, who had alleged to be 18 years old but had posted content of her school and her interests, consistent with a 13 year old, to create a professional page and sell advertising on the product due to the high volume of engagement with her overtly underage profile, predominately by adult men.
191. The scope of the problem is immense. As of June 2020, it was estimated that 500,000 underage Instagram accounts receive what is termed inappropriate interactions with children or “IIC” on a daily basis. Meta has not prioritized child safety although it knew, or ought to have known, of the severity of the problem.
192. This is also a pervasive problem on TikTok. The TikTok algorithms push extreme content and regularly recommend inappropriate adult 18+ content, and content related to non-consensual sex to students and users registered as being under 18 years old. PDSB has incurred unanticipated expenses and diverted significant resources to counter this type of harmful ideology that students are learning over social media.
193. Snap has long been on notice that its product is the tool of choice for sex predators and that it facilitates sextortion, in large part due to its anonymity, end to end encryption, disappearing content, and a secure for “My Eyes Only” folder. Snap also recommends students to adults and vice versa via its “Quick Add” mechanism.
194. Snap altered its Quick Add algorithm in 2022, such that it recommends adult users to students aged 13 – 17 and vice versa when they have a “number” of connections in common. Snap has refused to disclose the number of “friends” in common needed to suggest the connection between adults and youth. Snap refuses to conduct age or identity verification.
195. The Defendants fail to consistently or reliably action requests to remove and take down content of students that is sexually suggestive and/or explicit. The harm to the student population and to school climate is immense.

H. PDSB is now left grappling with the consequences of the Defendants' misconduct, such that the Defendants' misconduct has directly caused substantial harm to PDSB

196. School boards, including PDSB, have been, and continue to be, uniquely harmed by the Defendants' conduct. Students' compulsive, problematic use of social media products results in significant disruption to schools' operations and public educational missions, greatly frustrating PDSB's ability to achieve their mandate of educating students in a safe and healthy environment, and forces PDSB to expend or divert significant resources in response.
197. Children spend about 195 days a year, and spend about six to eight hours a day, in school.
198. The Defendants have achieved remarkable levels of market penetration within PDSB schools. Recent data from 2021 confirms that approximately 91 percent of Ontario students, grades 7 – 12, use social media daily. A staggering 31 percent of these students use social media for five hours or more a day (increasing from 20.5 percent in 2019). About 14 percent of these students use social media for seven hours or more daily (increasing from 6.6 percent in 2019). This does not include any other form of recreational screen time such as playing video games or watching tv.
199. Approximately 83 percent of Ontario students have three or more hours of recreational screen time, (unrelated to work or school), on a daily basis. This is a significant jump from 64 percent in 2017.
200. Further, a majority of secondary school students (52 percent) spend five hours or more in their free time on their electronic devices. One in five students report they neglect homework to spend recreational time on their electronic devices and one in four students report that they lose sleep because of device use at night.
201. Pursuant to the *Act*, PDSB is obligated to provide a safe, inclusive, and positive school climate. Students with exceptionalities, and students from disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionately vulnerable to being harmed over social media, or as a result of social media use. PDSB expends considerable resources to promote student achievement and well-being, and to remove systemic barriers to learning. The Defendants' misconduct undermines PDSB's actions to promote equity in education.

202. PDSB is also a primary provider of mental health supports, and resources for many students, as students' mental health impacts their ability to learn. The Defendants' misconduct has compelled PDSB to divert resources, and time, and to incur unanticipated expenses to mitigate social media caused harms.

Endemic social media use is causing an unprecedented youth mental health crisis

203. Endemic social media use is causing an unprecedented youth mental health crisis within the Plaintiff's schools, and amongst its student population. Students' social media use is causing significantly increased rates of anxiety, depression, social media addiction, body dysmorphia, anorexia, low self-esteem, disordered eating, suicidal ideation, pervasive loneliness, self-harm, and suicide. Increased use of the Defendants' products, per session, and over time, exponentially increases the risk of experiencing such adverse effects.
204. Addictive and compulsive use of the Defendants' products can entail a variety of behavioural problems such as, loss of control over use, extended use, cravings to use, and using the products despite significant harm to the user's physical and mental health.
205. Students using social media for three hours or more per day are at increased risk of experiencing depression and anxiety. Limiting students' social media use to ten minutes per day or less is known to rapidly reduce loneliness and depression in a matter of weeks.
206. The design of the products causes and contributes to the student mental health epidemic by deliberately pushing harmful content that causes body dysmorphia, anorexia, low self-esteem, disordered eating, and negative comparison, such as influencer content. These trends are particularly notable for teenage female students and can result in serious physical health complications, such as gastrointestinal issues, hair loss, nutritional deficiencies, and time off school.
207. Teen students' displeasure with their appearance and body image can be predicted based on the frequency of their social media use, and worsens with behaviour such as posting selfies over the social media products and frequent use of beautification filters. It is estimated that the majority of females under age 13 have used a beautification filter, and more than half of teenage females use the Defendants' filter technology daily, without which they do not feel they look good enough to post to social media. Students expend disproportionate amounts of time projecting and monitoring their social media image, leading to increased anxiety.

208. Excessive social media use is known to interfere with students' sleep, increasing their risk of experiencing poor health outcomes, major depression (by a factor of three), and is a predictor of future suicidal behaviour. Students are chronically tired. There has been a spike in student absenteeism because of health and mental health concerns related to social media use.
209. The Defendants' products frequently expose students to self harm and suicidal ideation content, and communities that encourage this behaviour. Frequent social media use increases the risk of suicidal behaviour and/or suicidal ideation in students.
210. The deliberate and negligent design of the products cause serious mental harms and those harms have proliferated across the Ontario student population. The results are drastic. During the 2020 – 2021 school year:
- i. 26 percent of Ontario students report feeling as though they are in serious psychological distress;
 - ii. 30 percent of Ontario students feel they have low status at schools;
 - iii. 20 percent of Ontario students report poor or fair health;
 - iv. 38 percent of Ontario students report poor or fair mental health;
 - v. over half (51 percent) of Ontario students are not getting adequate sleep, less than 8 or more hours of sleep a night;
 - vi. almost half (46 percent) of Ontario students are constantly worried about their weight;
 - vii. about one in five Ontario students report feeling consistently lonely;
 - viii. about one in five Ontario students report self-harming; and
 - ix. about one in five Ontario students have seriously contemplated suicide.

Expending and diverting significant time and resources to address youth mental health crisis, and social media addiction and/or compulsive use

211. Students' social media use is causing a student mental health crisis, for example, increased rates of anxiety, depression, social media addiction, body dysmorphia,

anorexia, low self-esteem, disordered eating, suicidal ideation, self-harm, and suicide.

212. The number of Ontario students self-reporting an unmet need for mental health services, and counselling, up from 27.9 percent in 2013, to 42.4 percent in 2021.
213. About one in six (17.8 percent) Ontario secondary school students report symptoms that may suggest a moderate-to serious problem with technology use. About 4.7 percent of those students report symptoms that may suggest a serious problem with technology use. The most prevalent form of problematic technology use that is experienced “quite often” or “very often” is staying on electronic devices longer than intended (41.3 percent).
214. About ten percent of Ontario students report feelings of pervasive nervousness when not using their electronic devices, and that this discomfort is relieved by “use.”
215. The COVID-19 pandemic pushed students online. The Defendants’ conduct during those years further entrenched students in harmful social media use. The Defendants’ revenues all increased over the Pandemic years.
216. The role of guidance counsellors has shifted from aiding with long term career goals, and educating students about college or university options, to disproportionately responding to students in crisis. PDSB clinicians are helping students connect with mental health supports and partner agencies – some explicitly for social media overuse.
217. PDSB developed a BeWell support line that is monitored by PDSB’s clinicians and registered mental health professionals in response to the urgent and unprecedented need for mental health supports within schools. Students can access the support line anonymously or non-anonymously in order to receive consultation, counselling, supports, and referrals to community and school services. Students using this tool consistently identify social media as a source of harm.
218. Further, many critical incidents occurring in the PDSB community have a social media element. These catastrophic incidents can be very serious, including violence or suicide. Whenever such a tragedy occurs, PDSB deploys additional supports such as grief counseling.

219. PDSB funded numerous positions in 2023-2024, in part to manage and respond to social media related harms including: consent culture research and writing teams; safe schools professional development, writing, and response teams; and various positions related to students social, and emotional well being.

Expending and diverting significant time and resources to address youth barriers to focused learning, because of compulsive social media use

220. The prolific and/or compulsive use of the Defendants' products is a significant distraction to focused learning and a disruption to the overall learning ecosystem. Educators expend increased time and effort responding to issues related to compulsive social media use including behavioural dysregulation, increased acts of aggression, and increased friction in the teacher-student relationship caused by attempts to manage or restrict use. This results in decreased instructional time.
221. The Defendants also disrupt the education, and social / emotional development of pre-teen students, as the social media products tacitly encourage underage users (i.e. users under age 13) to sign up.
222. As previously stated, compulsive and/or inappropriate social media use is causing and contributing to a student population that is struggling to focus, is dysregulated, and is prone to seeking distraction. These behavioural changes are caused and contributed by the Defendants' negligence and exploitative business practices.
223. This behaviour is reinforced during leisure time, and during time that should be allotted to homework or proper sleep.
224. PDSB is expending resources to address the behavioural changes amongst the student population caused and exacerbated by the conduct of the Defendants.
225. Chronic and problematic social media use is altering and impacting students' ability to engage in sustained focus. Depending on the age and maturity of students, schools may be responsible for administering prescription medication and for the related costs.
226. The Plaintiff has been compelled to "compete" with the Defendants' products for the students' attention and time, as students' have become habituated to immediate gratification.

227. The ubiquitous use of social media products by students is a barrier to the deep learning required to develop competency in literacy, numeracy, and other core educational objectives.
228. Misinformation / disinformation, extreme political views, and harmful ideologies (discriminatory, racist, homophobic, and similar) proliferate over the Defendants' products, and are pushed at an exponentially greater rate than accurate information or moderate views. Students are increasingly unable to distinguish fact and propaganda and are increasingly lacking the criticality to vet the misinformation they encounter on social media. Resultingly, educators are expending disproportionate amounts of time and resources to help students learn the necessary skills to learn (i.e. critical thought), counter misinformation (that often directly contradicts the curriculum) and prevent students from adopting the harmful, prejudicial, or discriminatory ideologies that they are constantly exposed to on social media.

Expending and diverting significant time and resources to address youth anti-social behaviour, rise in cyberbullying, and rise in serious violent incidents related to social media

229. The Defendants' products facilitate and promote cyberbullying, harassment, hate speech, misinformation / disinformation, and other harms. Endemic social media use is accelerating and escalating harmful incidents in schools, such as physical violence and conflicts.
230. Under the *Act*, PDSB is obligated to investigate, and respond to serious violent incidents that will impact school climate. PDSB is also obligated to promote a caring and safe school climate. There has been a steady and marked increase in spending related to school safety that will be maintained for the 2023 – 2024 school year. For the 2023 year suspensions, expulsions, safe schools incident reports and employee workplace violence incident reports increased. Disciplinary measures are particularly time, labour and resource intensive.
231. The spike in the severity and frequency of antisocial behaviour including incidents such as assault with weapons, physical conflicts, sexual assault and similar harms frequently have a social media element. Social media is facilitating these harms in key ways:

- a) social media has the ability to magnify disputes before they can get de-escalated or resolved, especially if students feel their social media image, self-identity, or self-esteem is being threatened;
 - b) an incident shared over the Defendants' products rapidly escalates due to the virality of the design, for example 100 people can be involved on either "side" in a matter of minutes;
 - c) geolocation sharing over the Defendants' products also serves to escalate conflicts;
 - d) when an incident does occur it is often filmed and put on social media for views, likes and comments, thereby re-victimizing the victim;
 - e) there have been incidents of "fight clubs" and similar content posted on social media to generate views, as students seek to have their "viral" moment; and
 - f) the products facilitate impulsive and risky behaviour by youth through their technological design choices, as well as, the negative impact on children's developing brain and self-regulation.
232. Problematic social media use is encouraging more negative peer to peer interactions. The perceived anonymity of social media emboldens students to be cruel. There has been a decrease in positive, in person, peer to peer interactions.
233. PDSB expends resources to prevent, monitor, and respond to cyberbullying and harassment – cyberbullying is a defined term in the *Education Act* that contemplates it occurring over social media. Cyberbullying is a pervasive problem and almost 30 percent of Ontario students report being cyberbullied during the 2020 – 2021 year, frequently over social media. Problematic and/or compulsive social media use compounds cyberbullying.
234. Prolific social media use amongst students has largely eroded the distinction between acts committed during school hours and on school grounds and acts committed during students' recreational time. Students bring their disputes outside school into school via social media, a modern day trojan horse.

235. PDSB is expending significant and additional resources to conduct rigorous investigations in response to cyberbullying, threats and harassment of students over social media. PDSB's obligation to investigate is complicated by the anonymous usernames, and ephemeral disappearing content replete on the Defendants' social media products. It is significantly more time intensive for educators, administrators, and safe school staff to detangle who is committing what harmful behaviours when they are relying on fragments of screen shots, and trying to untangle webs of anonymous usernames.
236. PDSB is frequently the target of so called "confessional" accounts that proliferate over social media. These are anonymous accounts that are created by someone in the PDSB community that target either students and/or staff with false allegations, hateful, and/or derogatory content. The Defendants frequently fail to remove these accounts, whether proactively or at the request of PDSB's legal department, communications department, IT department, staff, administrators, or students, leading to a significant disruption within the education system.
237. Without limiting the generality of the foregoing, the Defendants' conduct causes student safety concerns and negatively impacts students' social and emotional development resulting in an unanticipated and additional strain on the Plaintiff's fiscal and administrative resources.

Expending and diverting significant time and resources to developing policies, programs and educational materials to raise awareness about social media harms, and risks of social media use for students, parents, guardians, staff, and community stakeholders

238. PDSB faces considerable demand for resources to educate students about social media harms and safety risks associated with social media use including educating about caring and safe online behaviours, internet safety, and the acceptable use of technology. PDSB expends and diverts resources to hire external speakers to educate on these topics. PDSB also organizes, hosts, and provides presentations for parents, guardians, community stakeholders, students, and staff to learn about these topics. PDSB curates and provides access to helpful resources on its website.
239. Significant resources at all levels of school administration are required to respond to the harms caused by the prolific and/or compulsive social media use amongst PDSB's student population. This additional resource burden would not exist without the negligent conduct of the Defendants.

Expending and diverting significant time and resources to investigate and remediate the sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and sexual exploitation of students facilitated by and occurring over social media products

240. PDSB has expended significant and unexpected levels of time and resources to address the endemic and commonplace sharing of sexually explicit images of students over the Defendants' products including by children under the age of 13. PDSB has interrupted and saved students from grooming schemes being conducted over social media products for students under age 13.
241. PDSB prohibits and instructs students not to share explicit images of themselves or of other students. However, students are impulsive, vulnerable to peer pressure, and driven by their emotions, facts exploited by the Defendants' designs of the products. The Defendants' products habituate children to being objectified, and reward students who post or share explicit content with likes, comments, attention, engagement, virtual currencies and/or money.
242. Students use the Defendants' disappearing technology to send explicit photos and videos, unaware that it can be screenshot or overridden by other means. Further, students film each other in places where there is a reasonable expectation of privacy, such as a bathroom. This type of content is then shared publicly, or in group chats over the Defendants' social media products, well beyond the intended recipient, if there was one.
243. Every time this type of incident occurs it has a profound impact on PDSB, its student population and school climate. PDSB responds using a comprehensive multi-department approach to investigate, educate, prevent, and remediate each incident, and address the harms, to the extent possible. Children's Aid Services and/or the police are alerted, as required, which then involves liaising and coordinating parallel investigations.
244. Many students desire careers as content creators or influencers, and share their image publicly over the Defendants' products. Students feel pressure to respond to or engage with unknown users on the social media products. The Plaintiff's students frequently experience sexual harassment and unwanted sexual advances over social media products. Risks may range from Direct Messages "DMs" and "dates" with older men to sexual assault. Students are at risk of being sexually exploited and/or sex trafficked over the Defendants' social media products.

245. PDSB provides education to its student population, parents, guardians, and caregivers about the risks of child sex trafficking and that this exploitation often begins over social media. These serious issues of student safety and well-being divert PDSB from its core mission of educating, as it is impossible for students to learn when in crisis, no matter how engaging the teacher or curriculum.

Expending and diverting significant time and resources to address staff mental well-being in response to social media harms

246. PDSB expends considerable resources to respond to staff being harmed over social media products including, but not limited to, staff who are subject to harassment, defamation or have their personal details or image shared on the Defendants' products, without their consent. PDSB staff have been the target of racist, and/or discriminatory content over the social media products. PDSB staff have also had their personal information, such as family details shared publicly over the Defendants' products.

247. Responding to such concerns is an unanticipated time and fiscal resource burden that is compounded by the Defendants' failure to cooperate with PDSB when such matters arise. PDSB, including its communications and other departments request that the Defendants' remove the offensive material. Frequently, the Defendants fail to respond or respond and state that the content does not violate their terms of use and conditions.

248. The harmful effects of the Defendants' products impact staff in a variety of ways, including staff encountering difficulties associated with educating a dysregulated and unfocused student population, or staff who have uncovered or had to respond to child sex abuse being facilitated on the Defendants' products. This can result in unanticipated leaves of absences or human resource matters that impact PDSB.

249. PDSB provides support services to promote staff well-being and the demand for such services is rising.

Expending and diverting significant time and resources to respond to spikes in vandalism, increased property damage, and risky behaviour caused by viral social media challenges

250. Students are exposed to, and often execute, viral challenges over the social media products that endanger themselves, others, or cause property damage to PDSB.

These so-called challenges are particularly rampant on the Defendant TikTok's product.

251. Students may engage in harmful behaviour in the hopes of having a viral moment on social media and misbehave in a manner that impacts the learning environment. Students may slap the teacher's butt or trash the school bathroom and then post this misconduct to social media. Students may engage in reckless behaviour for views, likes, and comments, such as scaling school buildings.
252. PDSB is dealing with a marked and unanticipated spike in this type of student misconduct fueled by social media.
253. TikTok's algorithm functions to boost such content, and the Defendant often fails to shut down or suppress harmful viral challenges targeted to children and youth, in a timely manner resulting in foreseeable damage to the Plaintiff's property.
254. The Plaintiff expends significant time and resources to respond to property damage caused by viral challenges. PDSB also marshals and deploys resources and education materials to prevent and mitigate harms resulting from these challenges. Staff mobilize to alert parents, guardians, and other staff members about the challenge and otherwise create an environment that is on "high alert" – this diverts the Plaintiff from its core mandate of educating young minds.

Expending and diverting significant time and resources to information technology (IT), cyber security, and communication matters related to social media

255. The Plaintiff develops and provides multiple educational materials and programs around responsible digital citizenship.
256. PDSB's IT department, along with its Communications department, educators, principals, lawyers and other professionals frequently contact the Defendants to request certain offensive, violent, harmful, hateful, explicit, and/or exploitative content be removed.
257. Frequently, PDSB does not receive a response to these requests, often requiring follow up and escalation. This material may include content outside of school hours, or off school property that negatively impacts the learning environment at PDSB schools.

258. PDSB purchases as many electronic devices, and annual Secure Access Service Edge (SASE) licenses, as possible, using its finite resources in an effort to prevent students from using their personal devices, and to block the Defendants' products. PDSB requires significant IT investment to regulate, manage, and secure its networks from the deleterious impact of prolific and/or compulsive social media use amongst its student population. PDSB requires approximately 2.7 million dollars in remediation costs to purchase annual SASE zero trust licenses for all 175,000 students and staff.
259. PDSB also requires significant IT investment to regulate, manage, and secure its networks from the deleterious impact of prolific and/or compulsive social media use amongst its student population.

LIABILITY

A. Negligence

Duty of care

260. PDSB is a corporation made up of its constituent schools and student population (or body). The body of students and schools for whom PDSB is statutorily responsible were the direct target of the Defendants' wrongful and tortious efforts, and the harm to their attention, emotional well-being, and ability to learn and its corresponding impact on education was both foreseeable and proximate.
261. The Defendants targeted students and their schools as a key consumer group.
262. The Defendants owe a duty of care to PDSB. The relationship between the Defendants and PDSB is sufficiently proximate, and the harm was reasonably foreseeable.
263. While deliberately seeking to attract students to their platform, including specifically targeting school-time, the Defendants knew that School Boards would be forced to address, through financial and human resources, the devastating impact that compulsive social media use has on the student population and their mental health.
264. The Defendants were aware of the risk that their products would addict or cause compulsive use in school-aged children; they were seeking that result. The Defendants contemplated that the student population would access their products, including on their electronic devices during the school day. The economic costs and

- severe disruption to the learning process that has harmed PDSB were foreseeable to all the Defendants, as the costs were a natural and probable consequence of massive numbers of students becoming addicted to social media products and suffering mental health issues that the products foreseeably caused.
265. At all material times, the Defendants knew or in the exercise of reasonable care should have known that excessive and/or compulsive use by students of their products would result in the disruption and adverse impact on schools.
 266. The Defendants manufactured the forum and circumstances to cause harm to the Plaintiff, the student population, and the education system including foreseeable harm to staff, students, and substantial diversion of Plaintiff time and resources. The Defendants' lack of safeguards, proactive mechanisms to protect users, and creation of risky situations, is a misfeasance lending itself to finding a duty of care.
 267. The public has an interest in the well-being of students. According to the *Education Act*, boards play a role in "maintaining confidence in the province's publicly funded education systems." The Defendants are interfering with, and negatively impacting, this societal good.
 268. The Plaintiff is forced to use its public funding to attempt to mitigate the ongoing damage caused by the Defendants' wrongful conduct.
 269. The Defendants' conduct interferes with the Plaintiff's efforts to fulfill its statutory duties as codified in the *Act*.
 270. At all material times, the Defendants owed a duty to the Plaintiff and its student population, to exercise reasonable care in the creation, production, maintenance, distribution, management, marketing, promotion, and delivery of Defendants' social media products. The Defendants owed the Plaintiff a duty to take all reasonable steps necessary to design, research, market, advertise, promote, operate, and distribute their products in a way that is not unreasonably dangerous to student users, including PDSB's student population.
 271. This duty included a duty to provide accurate, true, and correct information about the harms, risks and adverse effects associated with using the Defendants' products. This duty also included a duty to provide accurate, clear, and complete warnings specific to the harms, risks and adverse effects associated with using the Defendants' products, including but not limited to, the following: students' risk of

extended use; exposure to danger; and exposure to harmful algorithm driven content recommendations.

272. The Defendants manufactured dangerous and addictive products that they marketed to students as safe. The interface of their products is designed to appeal to student users, and promote excessive engagement, regardless of the impact on students' well-being.
273. The Defendants' business strategies and marketing campaigns center on obtaining more younger, daily, active users. The Defendants portrayed their products as safe for students. The Defendants used young and famous people that would appeal to youth in their marketing campaigns and content creator partnerships.
274. PDSB has suffered proximate and foreseeable harms as a direct result of the Defendants' breaches of their respective duties of care and their wrongful and tortious conduct, including but not limited to:
 - a. Expending time and resources to address an unfocused student population with maladaptive brain development, poor sleep, and behavioural dysregulation;
 - b. Expending time and resources to address a student population afflicted with compulsive use;
 - c. Disrupted school and learning climate;
 - d. Increased educator and administrator resource and time burden;
 - e. Increased vigilance and resources with respect to the safety and protection of students, including child exploitation and sextortion;
 - f. Increased cyberbullying and increased resources required to prevent and respond to this harm;
 - g. Increased student absenteeism;
 - h. Staff encountering or responding to social media caused harm;
 - i. Property damage and vandalism;

- j. Demand for digital literacy, online safety, and similar curriculum/educational materials to address social media harms;
- k. Increased resources to address attentional and focus deficits caused by social media defects;
- l. Increased demand for clinicians, mental health and well being staff, guidance counsellors, and other resources and personnel;
- m. Increased demand for PDSB electronic devices for educational purposes, cyber security and IT professionals, IT infrastructure, and other technology to respond to social media harms in schools;
- n. Increased supports for anorexia, self-esteem, depression, and anxiety disorders;
- o. Reduced privacy and increased voyeurism;
- p. Rise in serious violent incidents requiring investigation, discipline, and remediation efforts and resource burden;
- q. Rise in investigations and safe schools spending to respond to threats made to school, students, and staff including bomb, shooting, and death threats;
- r. Friction in the student-teacher relationship requiring intervention and supports;
- s. Reduced academic compliance, including neglect of homework; and
- t. Other harms as particularized in this claim and as will be revealed in advance of trial.

General Negligence

- 275. The Plaintiff repeats and relies upon the foregoing paragraphs, and incorporates them herein by reference.
- 276. The harms and losses suffered by PDSB were caused and/or contributed to by the joint and/or several negligence of the Defendants, the particulars of which include, but are not limited to, the following:

- a) failure to exercise reasonable care in the creation, production, maintenance, distribution, management, marketing, promotion, and delivery of their products to student users including exposing these users to danger, harmful content, an addictive product, and the serious risk of excessive / compulsive use;
- b) failure to complete adequate pre and post market testing, as well as alpha and beta testing on the safety of the products and other associated risks;
- c) failure to disclose or promptly act on the data, reports, and studies that were commissioned finding negative effects on youth safety, health, and excessive use;
- d) failure to disclose or warn users that the algorithms and AI functions of the products promote excessive and unsafe use to maximize engagement;
- e) failure to disclose or warn of the negative mental, emotional, and health consequences associated with product use;
- f) failure to provide adequate warnings about the real and serious safety risks of using the products;
- g) failure to monitor the safety of their products and/or take appropriate corrective action to adequately inform the Plaintiff and its student population of such safety risks;
- h) designing and publishing safety metrics in a manner that was deliberately misleading in order to obscure and conceal the extent of harm that was actually occurring on the products, with full awareness that this data was irreconcilable with internal unpublished data showing substantial harm and risk to users;
- i) failure to employ adequate safeguards in the creation, maintenance, and operation of their products including effective age restrictions for students under age 13, and to prevent excessive / harmful use;
- j) failure to provide results or material facts underlying internal and/or solicited research showing that their products are harmful for children;
- k) designing a defective and dangerous product including various defective

features both built in and hidden, such as endless content, deploying Intermittent Variable Rewards (IVR), distracting notifications, ephemeral content that encourages CSAM, geolocation, gamification to encourage compulsive use, negative content bias, harmful filters, seamless autoplay promoting flow state and passive content consumption, barriers to deletion, connection of child and adult users, inadequate age verification for under 13's; and

- l) committing other failures, acts, and omissions set forth herein including but not limited to those particularized at paragraph 284.

277. Compulsive and/or harmful social media use has caused increased rates of anxiety, depression, body dysmorphia, anorexia, low self-esteem, suicidal ideation, self-harm, suicide, and social media addiction. The Plaintiff has been forced by the Defendants' misconduct to provide mental health services to attempt to address these harms.
278. Compulsive and/or harmful social media use has caused physical health problems by encouraging excessive screen time, sedentary behaviour, and disrupting sleep. This is resulting in barriers to learning and is a strain on the Plaintiff's resources.
279. Compulsive and/or harmful social media use has caused changes in students' ability to engage in sustained focus, an increase in ADHD and / or ADHD like symptoms, an increase in distractions during instructional time, and other barriers to focused learning.
280. The Defendants' negligence and tortious misconduct is systemic in nature.
281. As a direct result of the Defendants' misconduct, the Plaintiff has incurred significant damages and additional costs in the discharge of its core mandate to educate, protect, socialize, and teach responsibility to its young student population, as well as execute its statutory duties to staff.

B. Defective product design

282. The Plaintiff repeats and relies upon the foregoing paragraphs, and incorporates them herein by reference.

283. The social media products are referred to by the Defendants throughout their marketing materials and financial disclosures as products. The Defendants' products are subject to products liability law.

284. The Defendants' products were negligently and defectively designed including but not limited to the following design defects or features:

- a) endless and infinite content;
- b) lack of effective parental controls;
- c) lack of mandatory screen time limitations;
- d) lack of identity verification;
- e) anonymous accounts encouraged and allowed;
- f) inadequate age verification – no barriers to creating an account under age 13 except to misstate date of birth;
- g) inadequate age verification – barriers to reporting users under age 13;
- h) inadequate parental control – parents/guardians are not authorized to delete a child's account, ages 13-18 years old (Instagram);
- i) inadequate content control – user accounts are not necessary to download the application and view recommended content (TikTok);
- j) user accounts not necessary to view public content via browser (Instagram);
- k) hidden intermittent variable reward structure and other psychological tactics to promote compulsive / harmful use;
- l) constant notifications – especially during sleeping hours and school hours;
- m) ephemeral content that encourages FOMO (“fear of missing out”) to promote reengagement;
- n) ephemeral content that encourages student users to send explicit images / videos to each other, which can then be captured in a permanent format;

- o) ephemeral content that encourages and facilitates CSAM;
- p) disappearing messaging options that allow for “sextortion;”
- q) My Eyes Only feature (Snap);
- r) rampant disinformation and misinformation amplified by algorithms;
- s) geolocation tagging options that create privacy and safety concerns;
- t) deliberate gamification, rewards, and product interface to appeal to students;
- u) creating a streak feature (Snap) that rewards compulsive use;
- v) algorithmic prioritization of harmful content (sexual, violent, SSI, disordered eating);
- w) feed organized by Meaningful Social Interactions (MSI) even though this often results in negative upward social comparison for students;
- x) beautification filters that encourage body dysmorphia;
- y) beautification filters that for many years could be used without any transparency that a filter was being used, leading to unrealistic beauty expectations, especially for teenage girls;
- z) seamless content promoting flow state and passive consumption;
- aa) video and content autoplay promoting compulsive use;
- bb) limit on video length content to promote flow state and excessive engagement;
- cc) barriers to deletion - it is confusing for users to navigate the multistep deletion process;
- dd) barriers to deletion – once a user has deleted their account they must wait a certain time period before the Defendants action this request and if the user re-opens the app within this time period, the deletion request is cancelled;

- ee) barriers to deletion – the Defendants’ fail to action reports about users under age 13 on the products;
- ff) private chat and group chat options;
- gg) connection of child and adult users;
- hh) encouraging and failing to limit secondary accounts;
- ii) lack of effective reporting mechanisms for youth;
- jj) failure to collect and report accurate safety statistics;
- kk) failure to adequately test products for safe user experience;
- ll) failure to ensure children are not targeted with adult content and adult content ads;
- mm) students are able to make public accounts and share content with the public; and
- nn) intentionally addictive product design.

285. There are reasonable alternative designs. The Defendants can carry any costs associated with making their products safer for students. Further, they ought to bear any loss of income caused by designing and marketing a less addictive product, with a higher minimum user age limit, stronger parental controls, and stricter harmful content filters for students. The costs of such a design does not outweigh the substantial risks associated with the historical and current product design.

C. Negligence in manufacturing / manufacturing an inherently dangerous product; the Defendants’ products are dangerous per se

286. The Plaintiff repeats and relies upon the foregoing paragraphs, and incorporates them herein by reference.

287. There is no right to manufacture an inherently dangerous product. No amount or degree of specificity of warning will exonerate the Defendants from liability for manufacturing a product that promotes addiction and/or compulsive use in students,

facilitates connection between students and sex predators, and creates an inherently dangerous situation.

288. The Defendants' products connect adult predators to students, and push sexualized content to students. There were reasonable alternate ways to manufacture the products to make them safer for student use. The Defendants chose not to implement reasonable and effective safeguards.
289. In particular, Meta's algorithms promote CSEC and CSAM to its users, including teenagers and children under the age of 13. If a user searches for a banned term such as "child pornography" the algorithm often recommends alternative terms that predators use to circumvent Meta's blocked terms, such as "cheese pizza," with its similar initials to child pornography, a gateway to illicit material on the product.
290. Meta fails to adequately monitor for these alternative terms. Meta does not flag as suspicious interactions between students and unconnected adults that begin on one product such as Instagram but then move to Meta's WhatsApp, a problematic and well known grooming technique.
291. After years of pressure from child rights activists, Meta has rolled out a bare bones "Protections From Suspicious Adults" tool that despite being only deployed for problematic accounts fails to automatically ban, report, or disable the account. Further, Meta fails to notify predators who initiate inappropriate contact with students, or make inappropriate comments to students, that their conduct violates community standards.
292. Meta knew about the huge volume of inappropriate content being shared between adults and students; a 2021 presentation estimated that 100,000 children per day received online sexual harassment, such as pictures of adult genitalia.
293. The Defendants all have the ability to prevent adults from direct messaging children, or to deploy content filters that automatically screen and remove this harmful content.
294. The Defendants rely on automated detection of CSAM or other violative or illicit content, which is inadequate both because it only identifies exact matches of images that have been previously flagged in a database and because it becomes increasingly ineffective over time, as new content is generated.

295. When the Plaintiff, including its student population or concerned parents and guardians, report CSAM and similar content, there is often inconsistent response, no response, a delayed response, or a response that the material does not violate Meta's Community Standards.
296. The Defendants profit off this exploitative content and resulting increase in user engagement, while the Plaintiff expends considerable resources to investigate and mitigate these serious safety risks.
297. It is only through investigative reports, now publicly available, that the above features are known about Meta. Discovery around Snap and TikTok's algorithms, and how they promote, and foster connections to facilitate CSAM and child sexual abuse will reveal additional details about the inherent danger of the Defendants products.
298. Further, as alleged above, the Defendants' products are associated with the inherent risks of addictive and/or compulsive use.

D. Negligent failure to warn

299. The Plaintiff repeats and relies upon the foregoing paragraphs, and incorporates them herein by reference. The Plaintiff alleges negligent failure to warn in both products liability and in general negligence.
300. The Defendants have benefited from a shroud of secrecy surrounding their operations and products. The Defendants had knowledge that there was danger and risk inherent to the ordinary use of their products.
301. The Defendants had internal reports about the risk of compulsive use and the common negative effects youth experience from accessing their products. The Defendants' failed to voluntarily provide internal reports, data, or information about the risks and harms associated with use of their products.
302. A duty to warn corrects the inherent knowledge imbalance between the Defendants and the Plaintiff including student consumers. Warnings allow consumers to make informed choices about whether they are willing to assume the risk, associated with the use of the product.

303. Warnings serve an important policy function of encouraging manufacturers to be forthright about the risks associated with their products, rather than to downplay those risks.
304. The Defendants failed to warn PDSB and its student population of the risk of compulsive use or addiction.
305. The Defendants failed to properly monitor the safety of their products and/or take appropriate corrective action to adequately inform the Plaintiff and its student population of such safety risks.
306. The Defendants' obligation to warn is continuous and ongoing. Given the serious harms occurring on the products at very high rates, there ought to be a full indication of each of the specific dangers arising from the use of the social media products.
307. As such, the Defendants withheld material information about the risks and adverse effects of their products, failed to exercise reasonable care, and caused substantial harm to the education system.

E. Public Nuisance

308. The Plaintiff repeats and relies upon the foregoing paragraphs, and incorporates them herein by reference.

A public right to education and unreasonable interference with that right

309. PDSB and its student population have a right to be free from conduct that endangers health and safety. PDSB's student population has a protected right to education. The tortious conduct of the Defendants has unreasonably interfered with these rights.
310. In December 1991, Canada ratified the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)*, Treaty no. 27531, including every child's right to an education. For the children within PDSB's jurisdiction, the Board is instrumental in realizing that right.
311. The Defendants knowingly and persistently interfered with PDSB and its student population's right to an education that is not disrupted by the Defendants' addictive products. The Defendants have engaged in conduct and omissions which

unreasonably interfere with the public health and safety of the Plaintiff's school communities and student population by designing, developing, promoting, and maintaining their products with features and algorithms described above that are specifically addictive, harmful, and appeal to students who are particularly unable to appreciate the risks posed by those products. School climate has been negatively altered by the Defendants' misconduct.

312. The Defendants' conduct has substantially and unreasonably interfered with the right to a public education in a safe and healthy environment, as it relates to the good and safe working order of the Plaintiff's property, including but not limited to its school buildings. PDSB has the property rights of an occupier in respect to its school sites. The Defendants' conduct adversely impacts PDSB's use and enjoyment of its property.
313. PDSB must mobilize a multi-department response each time a viral social media challenge sweeps across the schools. PDSB is forced into an environment of high alert and dedicates significant resources to mitigating these harms.
314. The Defendants have engaged in conduct that substantially and unreasonably interferes with the health and safety of the PDSB student population and with the function and operations of PDSB schools, and which harms the health, safety, and welfare of the PDSB community.
315. The harm to PDSB is a matter of substantial public interest and legitimate concern to affected individuals, communities, and stakeholders.
316. The Defendants have created a situation in which PDSB is forced to divert financial and human resources to deal with the impact of social media use on the educational environment, interfering with its primary mission. The Defendants' massive disruption to the educational process and to the statutory duties of PDSB is, itself, a public nuisance.
317. The Defendants knew, or ought to have known, that the deliberate design of addictive and defective social media products would interfere with students' access to an education, negatively impact the learning environment, and create a public nuisance within the education system.

318. The Plaintiff pleads and relies upon:

- a. *Negligence Act*, R.S.O. 1990, c. N.1;
- b. *Education Act*, R.S.O. 1990, c. E.2 and *Regulations* issued pursuant to the *Education Act*;
- c. *Human Rights Code*, R.S.O. 1990, c. H.19;
- d. *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989), Treaty no. 27531, ratified by Canada on 13 December 1991;
- e. *Child, Youth and Family Services Act* 2017, S.O. 2017, c. 14, Sched. 1;
- f. *Trespass to Property Act*, R.S.O. 1990, c. T.21.

DAMAGES

A. Compensatory Damages

319. The PDSB seeks compensatory damages for the significant time, money, and other resources that it has to dedicate to managing the social media epidemic in its schools. Damages, include but are not limited to,:

- i. costs to address the altered student population including barriers to focused learning and dysregulated student behaviour;
- ii. costs to educate about the dangers of social media use, digital literacy, and staff training;
- iii. costs related to health care including additional mental health and well being services, counselling, and resources;
- iv. additional hires to respond to social media related harms including the student mental health crisis;
- v. additional technology, IT, and cybersecurity costs;
- vi. loss of personnel hours of PDSB staff who had to direct time and activity towards discipline, education, and mitigating child safety risks caused by the endemic use of social media products;
- vii. increased caring and safe schools costs and increased need for vigilance, as a result of the sexual harassment, and sexual exploitation of the student population;

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- viii. costs associated with discipline and suspensions related to incidents of social media misuse in schools or that impact on school climate including personnel hours;
 - ix. monitoring bathrooms and facilities for property damage in response to viral challenges; and
 - x. such other damages that will be advised of prior to the trial of this action.
320. PDSB seeks forward looking remediation costs to expand the resources and supports directed to addressing the serious harms caused by compulsive, excessive and dangerous social media use.

B. Aggravated Damages

321. The Plaintiff repeats and relies upon the foregoing paragraphs, and incorporates them herein by reference. The Defendants have acted in bad faith.
322. The misconduct of the social media Defendants as particularized in this Claim is outrageous, and reprehensible. Their conduct has caused widespread damage to PDSB and its student population including degradation of the learning environment, reputational harm, mental distress, and a negatively altered school climate. The harm to PDSB and to the education system is extensive, pervasive, and intangible. This harm warrants an award of aggravated damages.

C. Punitive and Exemplary Damages

323. The Plaintiff repeats and relies upon the foregoing paragraphs, and incorporates them herein by reference. The Defendants' misconduct was premeditated, deliberate, deceptive, and has been ongoing for years.
324. The Defendants knew that their conduct was causing significant harm and disrupting the learning ecosystem. The Defendants were, and continue to be, in the best position to address the problem. They have failed to do so.
325. The Defendants have acted in a high handed, reckless, malicious, and highly reprehensible manner with reckless disregard for their duty to consider the social, emotional, and physical well-being of their student users that departs to a marked degree from ordinary standards of decent behaviour. An award of punitive and

exemplary damages is required to achieve the objectives of retribution, deterrence, and denunciation.

326. The Defendants have refused to take accountability for their exploitative products and exploitative business decisions. The Defendants have relied on their intellectual property and advanced technology to obscure how exploitatively the social media products are designed. Much of what is known about the products is the result of concerned whistleblowers, leaked documents, and sworn testimony from senior technology executives before US Senate Hearing Committees in 2021, 2023, and 2024.
327. In sworn testimony before a US Senate Committee in October 2021 executives from TikTok, Snap, and Meta were asked whether they had conducted research on their products' harmful effects on children. Each company responded that they had and were conducting such research. The representative from Snap even alleged that its internal data showed overwhelming feelings of happiness among its users. The Defendants then stated they would make this internal research available and provide the technical details about their algorithms to external, independent researchers outside of the companies.
328. The Defendants have failed to follow through on these promises.
329. The Defendants have internal research on the harmful effect of their products on children and have not made it public or available.
330. Independent third parties have yet to get access to the Defendants' algorithms, which the Plaintiff alleges were deliberately designed in a manner to be both harmful, and to misstate the actual rates of harm occurring over the products. The Defendants remain shielded by black box algorithms.
331. The Plaintiff alleges that the Defendants pay mere lip service to the concept of an effective and functioning parental control feature. Rather, these alleged tools were designed with full awareness that most parents and guardians are not as digitally native as their children, the tools are difficult to locate, and hard to operate. In fact, the Defendants deliberately sought to design a low friction product, with no stop gaps, in order to prey on students' impulsivity and lack of control.

332. The Plaintiff alleges that the Defendants knew their products to be addictive and made the deliberate decision to promote engagement at all costs.
333. The Plaintiff alleges that the Defendants knew that students cannot control their social media use and self-identify as addicted to social media.
334. The Defendants have failed to design effective content filters and effective tools. It would be relatively easy, for example, to build a button or feature allowing students to express that they feel unsafe or have seen content or ads that makes them uncomfortable, yet the Defendants have failed to do so. The Defendants deliberately, recklessly, and/or negligently designed the content filters in their social media products in a porous and ineffective manner.
335. The Defendants have made false and public representations about the rates of cyberbullying, sexual harassment, hate speech, and other serious harms occurring on their products. The real statistics related to harm and risk are profoundly more concerning than the Defendants represented.
336. Meta publishes this inaccurate data in quarterly reports, called Community Standard Enforcement Reports (“CSE Reports”), available on Meta’s Transparency Center. These CSE Reports purport to highlight the safety of Meta’s products by focusing on a metric it designed, called Prevalence that grossly underrepresents the harm occurring over the product.
337. Meta separately and contemporaneously compiled extensive user survey data from a Bad Experiences & Encounters Framework (“BEEF”) survey and a Tracking Reach of Integrity Problems Survey (TRIPS).
338. The disparity between Meta’s BEEF and TRIPS survey data versus its CSE Reports is stark and irreconcilable. Meta’s third quarter 2021 CSE Report stated that less than 0.05 percent of views were of content that violated Instagram’s standards against suicide and self injury. Therefore, Meta publicly reported less than five views of suicide and self-injury content for every 10,000 views of content. However, Meta’s contemporaneous internal BEEF survey data showed that during 2021, 6.7 percent of all surveyed Instagram users had seen self-harm content within the last seven days, and for youth aged 13-15 that number jumped to 16.9 percent.
339. The BEEF survey results revealed similar discrepancies on other safety metrics, pertaining to youth users. For example in 2021:

- i. 21.8 percent of 13–15-year-olds said they were the target of bullying in the past seven days;
 - ii. 39.4 percent of 13–15-year-old children said they had experienced negative comparison, in the past seven days; and
 - iii. 13 percent of Instagram users aged 13-15 self-reported having received unwanted sexual advances over the product within the previous seven days.
340. In October 2021 a Meta whistleblower overseeing the BEEF program informed the company about the scope of the problem, including that the current published safety metrics and reporting mechanisms were grossly inaccurate.
341. The Defendants allege they have effective reporting mechanisms for students to flag offending content. The Plaintiff alleges the Defendants frequently fail to respond to the Plaintiff and its student population's requests to view less harmful content and/or to remove harmful content.
342. The Defendants allege that the minimum age limit to use their products is 13 years old and that this is reasonably enforced. The Plaintiff alleges the Defendants deliberately target the tween or pre-teen market and are aware that under 13's are on their products in large numbers.
343. The Defendants allege that the products are reasonably safe for students. The Plaintiff alleges the products are dangerous per se.
344. Snap's geo-local technology, lack of identity and age verification, anonymity, encryption, and quick add feature connects students to bad actors. Snap is the subject of litigation in the US in a number of cases related to connecting youths to drug dealers resulting in the fatal consumption of fentanyl laced drugs, and its reckless design of a speed filter that resulted in numerous student fatalities.
345. The Defendants have repeatedly, and consistently refused to engage in a transparent exchange of information with concerned stakeholders, activist groups, consumers, legislators, and the public.

346. The Plaintiff alleges that similar to the public health crisis caused by cigarette companies, the Defendants are seeking to shift blame and shirk responsibility through a concerted effort to withhold and distort the facts. The Defendants have committed a mass deception on the public that disproportionately impacts the Plaintiff and its student population.
347. The Plaintiff alleges the Defendants exert significant control over various think tanks, researchers, and lobbyists in order to distort and hide the truth about the harms and risks associated with product use. Whistleblowers, including a former research director at Harvard specializing in misinformation on social media, have alleged the Defendants seek to influence research on their products. The Defendants engaged in a deliberate, and careful strategy to mislead.
348. The Defendants' omissions, the extent of which are still being discovered, are material.
349. The Defendants made representations with the intention that the Plaintiff, its student population, consumers, and the general public would act on them in determining that social media products were safe for users aged 13 – 18. PDSB relied on the Defendants statements, express and implied, including critical omissions, such as the failure to disclose the products' addictive potential and safety risks, especially for children and youth.
350. Issues arising from endemic social media use are now entrenched, as students are unable to disengage from the products and are suffering from social and emotional harm, dysregulation, systemic and disproportionately high mental health issues, and other maladaptive alterations to their developing brains. The harm to the education system, and the Plaintiff is severe.
351. The Defendants have acted in a reckless, highhanded, contemptuous manner. An award of punitive damages is required to punish the Defendants and denounce such conduct. The Defendants are unlikely to make the necessary changes to their products without an award of damages large enough to garner the attention of their senior executives and large awards function to deter such misconduct in the future.

SERVICE OUTSIDE OF ONTARIO

352. This Statement of Claim may be served outside Ontario without an order pursuant to the *Rules of Civil Procedure* because the claims are:

- (a) in respect of torts committed in Ontario (Rule 17.02(g)); and/or
- (b) brought against a person carrying on business in Ontario (Rule 17.02(p)).

DATE: March 27, 2024

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PEEL DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD
Plaintiff

v.

META INC et al.
Defendants

ONTARIO
SUPERIOR COURT OF JUSTICE
PROCEEDINGS COMMENCED IN
BRAMPTON

STATEMENT OF CLAIM

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