

Actions needed beyond lawsuit to address social media's influence on youth, say experts

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While four Ontario school boards recently announced a \$4.5-billion lawsuit against the social media giants behind Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok, Brock University experts are calling for additional

actions to address the influence popular online platforms have on teens.

Professor Shauna Pomerantz in the Department of Child and Youth Studies says that although a leak from whistleblower Frances Haugen shows that Meta was aware of the harm teenaged girls experienced using Instagram, she also fails "to see how suing social media corporations will stop bullying, mental health crises and inattentive students."

She suggests that other options, such as regulating or banning smartphones in schools, could make a big difference in spite of the complexities of culture change and rule enforcement.

"Students face a world full of trauma, pain, hate and judgment, and while social media may be a symptom of these things, it is not the sole cause, and to suggest so is to overlook a thousand other contexts that shape [young people](#)'s lives," says Pomerantz. "There is no magic bullet here—no one problem that, when solved, will fix everything."

Her research on TikTok has shown that adults do not understand the role of social media in the lives of young people, pointing to a need for creative thinking to come up with new approaches to the issues raised in the lawsuit.

"A decision about social media and smartphone usage without consultation from those deemed to be affected—kids—is doomed to fail because kids always find a way around the rules, bans and blocks," Pomerantz says. "The point of most of these platforms is that young people can operate outside of adult surveillance, and they'll continue to do so whether adults like it or not."

Assistant Professor Michelle Chen in the Department of Communication, Popular Culture and Film says that while [social media platforms](#) may "facilitate and encourage toxic and harmful behavior,"

new technologies are often blamed for broader issues.

"These are enduring problems seen in many older discussions around new types of media," Chen says. "Decades ago, action movies and [television shows](#) and, later, video games were blamed for promoting aggressive and addictive behavior in young people."

Chen believes that while the current lawsuit will reignite public conversations around [social media use](#) and regulation, expecting social media companies to make meaningful changes at the expense of their profit margin may be unrealistic "because their business model hinges on their ability to keep audiences engaged on their platforms for long periods of time regardless of age."

Instead, she says public attention would be better focused on digital literacy and empowering young people to understand the impact of social media use.

"While the lawsuit may be an effective strategy in drawing attention to the need for more regulation, digital literacy education will go a long way toward helping young people navigate social media and better equip them with digital skills for the next 'big thing' in technology," says Chen.

Assistant Professor Mohammed Estaiteyeh in the Department of Educational Studies asserts that [digital literacy](#) is paramount to student success.

"Social media is a typical if not essential part of today's students' lives, and classrooms must reflect that reality and equip students with the skill set to navigate it," says Estaiteyeh. "The guided use of social media is crucial to teach students about digital citizenship and digital literacies."

He suggests that ministries of education and [school boards](#) could

leverage the use of technology in the classroom by providing devices such as tablets or laptops, ensuring that everyone has equitable access and minimizing the use of personal devices at [school](#).

"The use of smartphones and the consumption of social media can happen independently of each other," Estaiteyeh says. "If school-issued devices are available to students, a teacher can use social media creatively in the classroom for teaching and assessment purposes in a carefully monitored and regulated approach. This minimizes distractions and negative consequences and also models proper use of these sites."

Associate Professor Karen Louise Smith in the Department of Communication, Popular Culture and Film, says the lawsuit signals that "school boards want to make visible and name the kind of harms related to social media apps for young people and school boards."

"They are very clearly seeking collective redress in the form of more than \$4 billion dollars to support mental health support, curriculum innovation, IT services and other costs school boards face," she says.

Smith describes the choice by the Schools for Social Media Change group to engage personal injury firm Neinstein LLP and file the lawsuit is "a bit of a Robin Hood move."

"Through this lawsuit, school boards are trying to compel social media companies to pay out some of the massive wealth they've accumulated," she says. "They would redistribute it towards community good, through our public education system."

Provided by Brock University

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