

In the Iowa District Court for Polk County

STATE OF IOWA, *ex rel.*

ATTORNEY GENERAL BRENN A BIRD,
Plaintiff,

v.

TIKTOK INC., TIKTOK LTD., TIKTOK
PTE. LTD.,
BYTEDANCE LTD., and
BYTEDANCE INC.,
Defendants.

Case No. _____

PUBLIC REDACTED

Petition

1. TikTok¹ represents to Iowa parents and Iowa children that inappropriate content on its platform, including drugs, nudity, alcohol, and profanity, is “infrequent.” Those representations are lies. Music, videos, and other content available on the TikTok app contains sexual content, drugs, alcohol, intense profanity, self-harm messages, and other X-rated content, all of which are frequently and easily accessible at the fingertips and swipes of Iowa tweens and teens.

2. TikTok is lying to Iowa consumers, particularly parents, about the content available on its app. TikTok claims a “12+” rating in

¹ This petition refers to Defendants TikTok Inc., TikTok Ltd., TikTok Pte. Ltd., ByteDance Ltd., and ByteDance, Inc. collectively as “TikTok” throughout.

Apple's App Store, and makes specific representations there about its content, including that the TikTok app contains only:

- “Infrequent/Mild Sexual Content and Nudity”
- “Infrequent/Mild Profanity or Crude Humour”
- “Infrequent/Mild Mature/Suggestive Themes”
- “Infrequent/Mild Alcohol, Tobacco, or Drug Use or References”²

3. Those representations are false. The TikTok app contains frequent and intense sexual content and nudity, profanity and crude humor, mature and suggestive themes, and alcohol, tobacco, and drug use and references. TikTok knows and intends to evade the parental controls on Apple devices by rating its app “12+.” If TikTok correctly rated its app, it would receive a “17+” age rating, and parental restrictions on phones would prevent many kids from downloading it.

4. There is no doubt that TikTok has been misrepresenting itself in Apple's App Store. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

² *App Store Preview, TikTok- Videos, Music & Live, APPLE*, <https://apple.co/3MPvIDXj>. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

5. [REDACTED] TikTok continues to violate its App Store representations because content in every category TikTok claims to be “infrequent/mild” is in fact “frequent/intense.” Iowa’s own investigation reveals that users who register to use the TikTok app as 13 years old can readily find: recipes for “jungle juice” and highly alcoholic drinks, including versions meant to mask the flavor of alcohol; women dancing provocatively in thong bikinis, including in close-up butt and crotch shots; advice and encouragement about using marijuana, vaping devices, and hallucinogenic mushrooms; videos filmed inside schools set to music with extremely profane lyrics and explicit subject matter; and videos promoting eating disorders, suicide, and self-harm. Not only is this content available on the TikTok app, but TikTok’s algorithm recommends it to 13-year-old users.

6. Parents deserve to know the truth about the TikTok app. Iowa law requires TikTok to stop lying to them about it.

7. The State of Iowa seeks a preliminary and permanent injunction under the Iowa Consumer Fraud Act to compel TikTok to cease its deceptive, misleading, false and unfair statements and conduct related to the frequency and severity of alcohol, tobacco, and drug content, sexual content, nudity, mature/suggestive themes, and profanity on the TikTok app; its inaccurate age rating statements in the App Store; and its other misleading, deceptive, and unconscionable statements about Restricted Mode, in the TikTok app's Community Guidelines, and in the Google Play and Microsoft stores.

8. The State also seeks civil penalties, disgorgement, and other costs and fees permitted by the Act in light of TikTok's deceptive, misleading, and unfair conduct and misrepresentations, which have harmed and continue to harm Iowa consumers.

I. Jurisdiction and Venue

9. This Court has jurisdiction over this matter under Iowa Code § 714.16(7). Polk County is a proper venue because this is a "county where the transaction or any substantial portion of the transaction occurred" and "where one or more of the victims reside." Iowa Code § 714.16(10).

10. Defendants operate a social media application and platform that they have purposefully directed to operate in the State of Iowa. The TikTok app has been activated by a device located in Iowa at least hundreds of thousands of times. Defendants actively market and advertise their product in Iowa on the Apple App Store, Google Play and Microsoft stores. Defendants then actively serve content to and collect data from those devices and accounts located in Iowa.

11. Defendants use data collected from Iowa users, including location-based data, to serve content to those users in Iowa. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

For example, if a user's location reveals she is in Iowa, it may suggest content about the University of Iowa Hawkeyes. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

12. TikTok also serves users in Iowa location-specific advertisements. For example, a TikTok app user might see an advertisement for a local florist based on his location in Iowa City.

[REDACTED]

13. TikTok compensates users in Iowa for content that they create and post on the TikTok app.⁵

14. When Iowans register to use the TikTok app, they enter a contract with TikTok, known as the Terms of Service. The contract is supported by consideration: Iowa users gain access to the TikTok app and platform, and in consideration for that benefit, they “acknowledge and agree that [TikTok] may generate revenues, increase goodwill or otherwise increase [its] value from your use of the [TikTok] Services” (among other things).⁶ The Terms of Service explicitly allow TikTok to collect and use Iowans’ geographic information: Iowa users grant TikTok contractual permission to “automatically collect certain information,” including “your IP address” and “geolocation-related data,” and TikTok informs users that it may link them with their offline activity, like where a user shops in-person.⁷ TikTok has entered such contracts with at least hundreds of thousands of Iowans.

15. TikTok allows Iowa users to buy monetary “gifts,” which they can send to other users. TikTok Shop also allows users to shop for and purchase items inside the TikTok app. Those items will be shipped to the

⁵ *Creator Fund*, TIKTOK, <https://bit.ly/47EJ4Gw> (Last visited Nov. 15, 2023).

⁶ *Terms of Service*, TIKTOK (last updated July 2023), <https://bit.ly/3RG602u>.

⁷ *Privacy Policy*, TIKTOK (last updated May 22, 2023), <https://bit.ly/3OXgKGH>. [The Terms of Service incorporate the Privacy Policy.]

user, including users within Iowa. TikTok directly fulfills some of those purchases.

16. Defendants have availed themselves of the benefit of transacting business in Iowa through the marketing, sale, and operation of a well-known social media and advertising network. Defendants are aware of their presence in Iowa and the financial rewards they receive from operating within Iowa. Defendants can attribute, at a minimum, millions of dollars in revenue to activities in the State of Iowa. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Defendants have targeted Iowa as a market for the TikTok app and sought to gain business and political advantages from Iowa-based users and their content. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

II. Parties

19. Plaintiff is the State of Iowa, *ex rel.* Brenna Bird, Attorney General. Under Iowa Code § 714.16(7), the Attorney General may seek civil enforcement of the Iowa Consumer Fraud Act. Polk County is a proper venue because this is a “county where the transaction or any substantial portion of the transaction occurred” and “where one or more of the victims reside.” Iowa Code § 714.16.

20. Defendant TikTok Inc. is a for-profit entity incorporated in California. It operates a social media application and platform known as “TikTok.” TikTok Inc. is headquartered at 5800 Bristol Pkwy., Culver City, CA 90230-6696. TikTok Inc. has a valuation of at least \$50 billion. TikTok Inc. made nearly \$4 billion in revenue in 2021 and an estimated \$10–12 billion in 2022.

21. Defendant TikTok Ltd. is incorporated in the Cayman Islands and wholly owned by ByteDance Ltd. TikTok Ltd. is the parent company of wholly owned U.S. subsidiaries TikTok Inc. and TikTok Pte. Ltd.

TikTok Ltd. is listed in the App Store as the entity offering the TikTok app.

22. Defendant TikTok Pte. Ltd. is headquartered at 1 Raffles Quay, #26-10, South Tower, Singapore 048583. TikTok Pte. Ltd. is nominally listed in the Apple App Store as the “Seller” of the TikTok app and in the Microsoft Store as having “[p]ublished” the TikTok app, and in the Google Play Store beneath the name of the TikTok app, without further description.

23. Defendant ByteDance Inc. is a for-profit entity incorporated in Delaware. ByteDance Inc. is headquartered at 250 Bryant St., Mountain View, CA 94041. ByteDance Inc. is wholly owned by ByteDance Ltd.

24. Defendant ByteDance Ltd. is a multinational internet technology holding company and is a parent company of TikTok Inc, TikTok Ltd., TikTok Pte. Ltd., and ByteDance Inc. It is headquartered in Room 503 5F, Building 2, 43 North Third Ring West Road, Beijing 100086 China and incorporated in the Cayman Islands, where it is registered at C/O Vistra (Cayman) Limited, P.O. Box 31119, Grand Pavilion, Hibiscus Way, 802 West Bay Road, Grand Cayman, KY1 – 1205. ByteDance Ltd. is valued at more than \$400 billion and reported \$58 billion in revenue in 2021.

25. There is no separation between and among the ByteDance and TikTok Defendant entities. ByteDance Ltd. exercises control over

TikTok Inc., TikTok Ltd., TikTok Ptd. Ltd., and ByteDance Inc., which are its alter egos. ByteDance Ltd. created TikTok’s algorithm, which still belongs to it.⁸ ByteDance Ltd. “plays a role in the hiring of key personnel at TikTok.”⁹ High-level ByteDance Ltd. employees serve in dual roles for ByteDance Ltd. and other TikTok entities, including TikTok Defendants.¹⁰ In April 2021, TikTok’s current CEO, Shou Zi Chew, was named as CEO of TikTok while also serving as CFO of ByteDance Ltd.¹¹ He reports to the CEO of ByteDance Ltd. Former TikTok and ByteDance employees confirm that ByteDance Ltd. exercises functional control over other TikTok entities and their employees.¹²

⁸ Letter from Shou Zi Chew to U.S. Senators at 4 (June 30, 2022); Z. Zhou Xin & Tracy Qu, *TikTok’s algorithm not for sale, ByteDance tells US*, SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST (Sept. 13, 2020), <https://bit.ly/3Uje9HQ>.

⁹ June 2022 Letter to U.S. Senators, at 5; *see also* Drew Harwell Elizabeth Dvoskin, *As Washington wavers on TikTok, Beijing exerts control*, WASH. POST (Oct. 30, 2022), <https://wapo.st/3VjMvLV> (managers in Beijing are “even the final decision-makers on human resources matters, such as whether an American employee can work remotely”).

¹⁰ Decl. of Vanessa Pappas ¶ 1, *TikTok Inc. v. Trump*, No. 20-cv-02658 (D.D.C. Sept. 23, 2020), ECF No. 15-3; Decl. of Roland Cloutier ¶¶ 1–2, *TikTok Inc. v. Trump*, No. 20-cv-02658 (D.D.C. Sept. 23, 2020), ECF No. 15-2).

¹¹ *TikTok Names CEO and COO*, TIKTOK (Apr. 30, 2021), <https://bit.ly/3OVyvWh>; Ryan Mac & Chang Che, *TikTok’s CEO Navigates the Limits of His Power*, N.Y. TIMES (Sept. 16, 2020), <https://nyti.ms/3OT6grk>.

¹² Emily Baker-White, *TikTok is Bleeding U.S. Execs Because China is Still Calling the Shots*, FORBES (Sept. 21, 2022), <https://bit.ly/3XTSnNF>; Emily Baker-White, *A China-Based ByteDance Team Investigated TikTok’s Global Security Chief, Who Oversaw U.S. Data Concerns, Ex-Employees Say*, FORBES (Oct. 25, 2022), <https://bit.ly/3B3v5Lt>; Salvador Rodriguez, *TikTok insiders say social media*

26. TikTok's Trust and Safety teams are responsible for developing safety and well-being policies for the TikTok app, creating and implementing safety and parental control features, and reviewing and investigating problematic content on the app. Those teams report to ByteDance's General Counsel first, and only then to the TikTok CEO.¹³

[REDACTED]

27. Employees can use a TikTok and a ByteDance email address interchangeably, and both email addresses use a single inbox. One former TikTok employee reported to *Forbes* that TikTok paychecks showed ByteDance as the drawer; another reported that TikTok employees' W-2s reported ByteDance as their employer.

28. [REDACTED]

company is tightly controlled by Chinese parent ByteDance, CNBC (June 25, 2021), <https://cnb.cx/3NYLiXS>.

¹³ See Drew Harwell & Elizabeth Dwoskin, *As Washington wavers on TikTok, Beijing exerts control*, WASH. POST (Oct. 30, 2022), <https://wapo.st/3VjMvLV> (emphasis added).

¹⁴ [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

III. Factual Allegations

29. The TikTok app is a social media platform that centers on short videos created and uploaded by users, often set to popular music, which TikTok makes available in its music library. The TikTok app is available as an application to download on smartphones and tablets, and most users interact with the TikTok app that way. Users can download the TikTok app from the Apple App Store, the Google Play Store, or the

[REDACTED]

Microsoft Store. The TikTok app was the most downloaded app globally in 2022.

30. To register to use the TikTok app, the user must provide a birthday. A user can access the regular TikTok app only if the birthday provided indicates that the user is at least 13 years old. This means that TikTok knows which users have told TikTok they are 17 years old or younger. [REDACTED]

31. A user lands on the TikTok app's "For You Feed" when opening the app. The For You Feed is a never-ending stream of videos personalized for the user by TikTok's algorithm.

32. Users of the TikTok app can also search for content on the TikTok app using keywords and hashtags. When a user types in the TikTok app's search bar, the "Autocomplete" function will suggest search results.

33. TikTok publishes "Community Guidelines," a set of rules governing the content users are allowed to post on the TikTok app. TikTok relies on "content moderation" to police the Community Guidelines. Moderation is carried out through artificial intelligence and human moderators. [REDACTED]

A. TikTok’s Lies And Its Listing In Apple’s App Store.

34. Apple requires developers submitting an app to be included in Apple’s App Store—like Defendants—to answer an age-rating questionnaire. Apple says that apps that host user-generated content (like TikTok) “should share the age rating of the highest age rated creator content available in the app.”¹⁸ Apple alerts developers to the reality that “[w]e have lots of kids downloading lots of apps,” and that app developers like Defendants “have to do your part” to keep kids safe.*Id.* Apple also tells developers to “[a]nswer the age rating questions in App Store Connect honestly so that your app aligns properly with parental controls.” *Id.* “If your app is mis-rated,” Apple warns, “customers might be surprised by what they get, or it could trigger an inquiry from government regulators.” *Id.* Apple also informs developers, “[Y]ou are responsible for complying with local requirements in each territory where your app is available.” *Id.*

35. Apple’s age-rating questionnaire asks Defendants to describe the content available on the TikTok app in each of these categories: “Alcohol, Tobacco or Drug Use or References,” “Sexual Content or Nudity,” “Mature/Suggestive Themes,” and “Profanity or Crude Humor.” Based on the self-selected answers to these questions—“none,” “infrequent/mild,” or “frequent/intense”—Apple suggests an age-rating.

¹⁸ *App Store Review Guidelines*, APPLE, <https://apple.co/3syB5el> (last visited Nov. 16, 2023).

Apple also offers every app developer (including Defendants) the option to self-select a higher age rating than the one Apple suggests.

36. TikTok self-selects the answer “infrequent/mild” for every category. By doing so, TikTok chooses to have the following statements displayed on its page in the App Store:

- “Infrequent/Mild Profanity or Crude Humor”
- “Infrequent/Mild Mature/Suggestive Themes”
- “Infrequent/Mild Sexual Content and Nudity”
- “Infrequent/Mild Alcohol, Tobacco, or Drug Use or References”

App Store Preview, *supra* n.2.

37. Defendants’ answers also cause Apple to offer a “12+” age rating option. Apple defines apps with the “12+” age rating as apps that “may also contain infrequent mild language, frequent or intense cartoon, fantasy, or realistic violence, infrequent or mild mature or suggestive themes, and simulated gambling, which may not be suitable for children under the age of 12.”¹⁹ TikTok chooses to rate its app “12+.”

38. The next higher (and highest) age rating is “17+.” Apple offers Defendants the option to choose this rating, but Defendants have never done so. Apple defines apps with the “17+” age rating as apps that “may also contain frequent and intense offensive language, frequent and

¹⁹ *App Store Preview, Age Ratings*, APPLE, <https://apple.co/3uivN7k>.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

47. TikTok uses content moderators to detect and remove content from its platform that violates its policies. But those efforts fail to limit

minors' exposure to Apple's identified categories of content to "infrequent/mild" occurrences. That is largely for two reasons. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

1. Profanity or crude humor.

52. Profanity on the TikTok app is neither infrequent nor mild.

[REDACTED]

54. “Push notifications” are notifications that the TikTok app sends to users’ phones, usually inviting them to engage with content on the platform. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

55. TikTok also exempts profanity—no matter how extreme—from its content restrictions if it appears in song lyrics. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] For example, a video set to music with these lyrics is available to all users on the TikTok app and eligible to be served in any user’s For You Feed: “I just want you to fuck me to sleep. Fuck me so

good; I want my cheeks clapped daddy. Clap'em. So lay me down while I arch that ass back back. I need that good pipe daddy.”

56. The State’s own research using a test account reveals that videos containing profanity and crude humor appear frequently, are intense on the TikTok app and are visible to minors. These are just a few of many examples:

57. A video of a woman lip-synced to the lyrics: “Lick me, fuck me, kiss me, tease me, Bitch, take out your titties, I wan’ see ‘em.” This video has been “liked” more than 65,000 times on the TikTok app.

58. A video of a girl in school lip-syncing to the lyrics: “I’m drop the bitch off when I’m done/ You kiss her on her lips when my dick was on her tongue/ I know what’s going down when her hair in a bun/ you putting all yo’ trust in that bitch.” This video has been “liked” more than 136,000 times on the TikTok app.

59. A video of a girl dancing to the lyrics: “Baby, I’m good at fuckin’, hey/ bring that ass here, let me touch it/ She don’t even notice, I nuttetted/ Slow that ass down, got me runnin, bitch/ I’m tryna pull on her sexy red hair/ Snatch off that motherfuckin’ bonnet/ She got that good ghetto pussy that put you to sleep/ While she run through your motherfuckin’ pockets, nigga.” This video has been liked more than 295,000 times on the TikTok app.

60. A video of two girls in a high school dancing to the lyrics “Lil’ bitch really fuck it up/ On her hand stand, doin’ tricks fuck it up/ If you

aint from the gang you get hit with these slugs/ Eight point stand lil' bitch fuck it up/ on the gang, gang, gang, gang/ Bitch do yo' thang, thang, thang, thang/ and yo' bitch in the party getting' hit by/ The whole damn gang, gang, gang, gang.” This video has been liked more than 197,000 times on the TikTok app and was recommended to a 13-year-old user by TikTok's For You Feed algorithm.

61. A video of a burning cigarette set to the audio: “You know what? My life is fucking miserable! I fucking hate my life, man. I hate it. I'm fucking depressed and fucking miserable. I don't sleep, I eat like shit, I have no friends, no social life, and I'm fucking miserable.” This video has been liked more than 79,000 times on the TikTok app.

62. A video of a drunk man staggering and falling over, with a voice-over saying: “On today's episode of how fucked up is fucked up? That's fucked up.” This video has been liked more than 726,000 times on the TikTok app.

63. Videos like these are readily available on the TikTok app, yet Defendants tell consumers in the App Store that “profanity or crude humor” is “infrequent/mild” on the platform. That is deception, a false promise, and a misrepresentation.

64. Defendants' display of profanity and crude humor on the TikTok app despite their representation that such content is “infrequent/mild” constitutes an unfair practice. Any consumer benefit to exposing young Iowans to profanity and crude humor content is far

outweighed by the substantial, unavoidable injury to young Iowans, who cannot unsee harmful content once TikTok has exposed them to it.

2. Alcohol, tobacco, and drug use or references.

65. Alcohol, tobacco, and drug use or references on the TikTok app are neither infrequent nor mild.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

75. The State’s own research using a test account reveals that alcohol, tobacco, and drug use or references appear frequently, are intense on the TikTok app and are visible to minor users. These are just a few of many examples:

76. A young man demonstrating how to make and drink an “Angry Bomb” by mixing a can of hard cider with a shot of Fireball cinnamon liquor, a shot of Jameson whiskey, and a shot of Skrewball peanut butter whisky. This video has been liked more than 100,000 times on the TikTok app.

77. A young woman in a car mixing a “strawberry rita” premixed cocktail into a Starbucks iced tea drink, with the text, “When I say this mix is dangerous, it tastes like no alcohol,” and the caption, “That shit bomb, got me shaking ass for no reason.” This video has been liked more than 747,000 times on the TikTok app.

78. A video of a young woman cleaning out her purse, showing that it is filled with “Zyns” (nicotine pouches), a vaping device, Lexapro (a prescription antidepressant), and a Red Bull energy drink. Someone asks, “That’s your dinner?” She says, “Yeah.” This video has been liked 80,000 times on the TikTok app and was recommended to a 13-year-old user by the For You Feed algorithm.

79. A video of a young man listing five things he likes about “Za,” a slang word for marijuana. The reasons include: (1) the smell, (2) you won’t get angry when you are “fried,” (3) the process of using it, (4) that it is plant-based and therefore organic (“It comes out of the motherfucking ground, dude, how unhealthy could it be?”), and (5) it makes friendships because “it brings people together.” This video has been liked more than 13,000 times on the TikTok app.

80. A video posted by username “BuyMagicBars” of someone making crispy rice treats with hallucinogenic mushrooms. The video has been liked more than 76,000 times on the TikTok app. It was recommended to a 13-year-old user by the For You Feed algorithm.

81. A video of a young man vaping an entire cartridge of marijuana in a day and describing how he feels while doing it. This video has been liked more than 150,000 times on the TikTok app.

82. Even though videos like these are readily available on TikTok, Defendants tell consumers in the App Store that “alcohol, tobacco, and

drug . . . references” are “infrequent/mild” on the platform. That is deception, a false promise, and a misrepresentation.

83. Defendants’ display of alcohol, tobacco, and drug references on the TikTok app despite their representation that such content is “infrequent/mild” is an unfair practice. Any consumer benefit to exposing young Iowans to alcohol, tobacco, and drug content is far outweighed by the substantial, unavoidable injury to young Iowans, who cannot unsee harmful content once TikTok has exposed them to it.

3. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

88. TikTok also contains an in-app browser that allows users to click on a link and view an external website without exiting TikTok. Users have been able to use this feature to link to a search engine, then search for and view hard-core pornography—all without leaving the TikTok app. Young users have been able to use this feature to access hard core pornography through the TikTok app even if parental controls were enabled on their device and would otherwise have prevented the user from accessing this content on an ordinary web browser.

89. The State’s own research using a test account revealed abundant sexual content on the TikTok app, including:

90. A video of a woman shaking her butt in a string thong bikini.

91. A video of a black screen and audio of sex noises, tagged as “#whimperingaudio,” “#whimpering,” and “#whimperinggirl.” This video has more than 119,000 likes on the TikTok app.

92. A video of a young woman in a string bikini, with the audio: “This is a stress toy. Any time you feel the urge to cause chaos, just squeeze.” On the word “squeeze,” she squeezes her breasts.

93. A video of a woman pole-dancing in a thong bikini, tagged as “#eroticdance.”

²⁰ Content created by users in other countries is visible to U.S. users.

94. A video of a woman pulling down her pants to show her thong bikini, then shaking her butt for the camera.

95. Even though these videos and many others like them are readily accessible on the TikTok app, Defendants tell consumers in the App Store that “sexual content and nudity” is “infrequent/mild” on the platform. That is deception, a false promise, and a misrepresentation.

96. Defendants’ display of sexual content and nudity on the TikTok app despite their representation that such content is “infrequent/mild” is an unfair practice. Any consumer benefit to exposing young Iowans to sexual content and nudity on the TikTok app is far outweighed by the substantial, unavoidable injury to young Iowans, who cannot unsee harmful content once TikTok has exposed them to it.

4. Mature/suggestive themes.

■ “Mature/suggestive themes” include content related to the topics already described—alcohol, tobacco, drugs, sex, nudity, profanity, and crude humor—as well as other complex themes that are suitable only for adult audiences. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Filter bubbles can occur for all types of content but particularly damage young users when they concern mature or suggestive themes, which can be psychologically harmful. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

98. The State’s own research using a test account reveals that videos containing mature and suggestive themes often occur on the TikTok app and are intense. These are just a few of many examples:

99. A video of a man attacking and choking a woman, with the text “how I let him treat me because he was nice to me once,” and the audio: “No need to ask, just tell me what to do and I’d do it. I don’t care what it is because I’ll do anything for you.” This video has been liked more than 64,000 times on the TikTok app.

100. Three pictures (including one of a girl wiping away a tear) set to music with the words, “if my next attempt works ... js know ... i wont be hurting anymore.” This video has been liked more than 182,000 times on the TikTok app and was recommended to a 13-year-old user by the For You Feed algorithm.

101. Pictures set to music with the text: “tw: mention of weight;” “me pretending to sleep so i won’t have to eat breakfast;” “me listening to music to distract myself from thinking about food;” “me trying to eat in front of my family;” “me after overworking myself and almost collapsing;” “me drinking a lot of water so my hunger will go away;” “me showing my mom the food I made knowing as soon as im upstairs I’ll throw it away.” This video was recommended to a 13-year-old user by the For You Feed algorithm.

102. A video clip from a movie with the audio, “Girls who eat their feelings,” and “girls who don’t eat anything” with the text: “Me bc it’s either 3000 cals in 30mins or 3cals in 3 days.” This video has been liked more than 125,000 times on the TikTok app and was recommended to a 13-year-old user by the For You Feed algorithm.

103. A cinematic clip of a pretty girl saying, “Oh wow. ... I didn’t eat for three days so I could be lovely.” This video has been liked 88,000 times on the TikTok app and was recommended to a 13-year-old user by the For You Feed algorithm.

104. Even though these videos and many others like them are readily available on the TikTok app, Defendants tell consumers in the App Store that “mature/suggestive themes” are “infrequent/mild” on the platform. That is deception, a false promise, and a misrepresentation.

105. Defendants’ display of mature/suggestive themes on the TikTok app despite their representation that such content is

“infrequent/mild” is an unfair practice. Any consumer benefit to exposing young Iowans to mature/suggestive themes on TikTok is far outweighed by the substantial, unavoidable injury to young Iowans, who cannot unsee harmful content once TikTok has exposed them to it.

B. TikTok Live

106. TikTok also has a feature called “TikTok Live,” which allows users to broadcast live videos to other users. TikTok promotes some Live content through a feature called “TopLives,” which recommends Live video content to users. Violative content is more likely to appear in Live videos than on the rest of the platform, and young users are more likely to see it. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Teen” rating in the Google Play and Microsoft Stores is a deception, a false promise, and a misrepresentation. TikTok can accurately claim only an “M for Mature” rating in the Google Play and Microsoft Stores.

D. TikTok’s Lies About Restricted Mode.

109. TikTok offers “Restricted Mode” to Iowa consumers:

If you’d like to limit content with a broader brush stroke, you can turn on Restricted Mode. Restricted Mode is an option at the account settings level that limits the appearance of content that may not be appropriate for all audiences. Restricted Mode can always be turned off, so if you find yourself missing videos you want to see, you can switch it back whenever you like. Restricted Mode is also one of the features that a parent or caregiver can turn on when Family Pairing is enabled.²²

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

111. [REDACTED] Restricted Mode does not work and has never worked the way TikTok claims it does. When Restricted Mode is enabled, users—even users logged in as 13-year olds—can see mature content (sexual content, nudity, mature and suggestive themes, profanity, and content related to alcohol, tobacco and drugs) on

²² *Safety & privacy controls*, Content controls, TIKTOK, <https://bit.ly/3QWyVyp>.

the TikTok app, including content served in the algorithmically-driven For You Feed where users have not explicitly requested it.

112. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] In a 2021 *Good Morning America* segment about Restricted Mode, the host asked based on her own experience, “My eyeballs are

bleeding . . . if that's Restricted Mode, what's not restricted?"²³ [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

115. Yet TikTok touts Restricted Mode as a safety feature without warning parents that Restricted Mode does not meaningfully restrict the visibility of mature content on the TikTok app. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

²³ Good Morning America, *TikTok updates privacy protections for teen users*, at 2:06–2:17, YOUTUBE (Jan. 8, 2024), <https://bit.ly/40Hsvq1>.

[REDACTED]

116. TikTok currently tells users that “[y]ou shouldn’t see mature or complex themes” on the TikTok app with Restricted Mode enabled, including “[p]rofanity, [s]exually suggestive content, [r]ealistic violence or threatening imagery, [f]irearms or weapons in an environment that isn’t appropriate, [i]llegal or controlled substances/drugs, [and] [e]xplicit references to mature or complex themes that may reflect personal experiences or real-world events that are intended for older audiences.” *TikTok Help Center, Restricted Mode*, TikTok, <https://bit.ly/3N8fNvh> That is a deception, a false promise, and a misrepresentation.

117. Mature content is readily available when Restricted Mode is enabled, and TikTok knows it.

E. TikTok’s Misrepresentations In Its Community Guidelines.

118. TikTok’s Community Guidelines purport to inform users about what content TikTok permits. TikTok says the Community Guidelines “apply to everyone and everything on our platform.” *Community Guidelines, Overview*, TIKTOK (last updated Mar. 2023),

<https://bit.ly/3Hc5jsl>; [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

119. TikTok’s Community Guidelines have informed users that “Our Community Guidelines establish a set of norms and common code of conduct that provide for a safe and welcoming space for everyone,” and “[w]e will remove any content—including video, audio, livestream, images, comments, links, or other text—that violates our Community Guidelines.” The Community Guidelines also have contained the following misleading and deceptive statements, among many others:

- “We do not allow the depiction, promotion, or trade of drugs or other controlled substances.”
- “Do not post, upload, stream, or share: ... [c]ontent that depicts or promotes drugs, drug consumption, or encourages others to make, use, or trade drugs or other controlled substances,” or “[c]ontent that depicts or promotes the misuse of legal substances, or instruction[s] on how to make homemade substances, in an effort to become intoxicated.”
- “We do not allow the depiction, including digitally created or manipulated content, of nudity or sexual activity.”
- “Do not post, upload, stream, or share: ... [c]ontent that depicts a sexual fetish,” or “[c]ontent that depicts genitals, buttocks, the pubic region, or female nipples,” or “[c]ontent that contains sexually explicit language for sexual gratification.”

120. In March 2023, TikTok updated its Community Guidelines, but they remain misleading and deceptive to Iowa consumers. In the updated Community Guidelines, TikTok says its “content moderation is built on four pillars,” which include “Remove violative content from the platform that breaks our rules” and “[a]ge-restrict mature content so it is only viewed by adults (18 years and older).” *Community Guidelines, TIKTOK*, <https://bit.ly/3Hc5jsl>. Specifically:

- “We do not allow showing or promoting recreational drug use, or the trade of alcohol, tobacco products, and drugs,” and “[w]e do not allow showing or promoting young people possessing or consuming alcohol, tobacco products, and drugs.”²⁴
- “We do not allow sexual activity or services,” including “sex, sexual arousal, fetish and kink behavior, and seeking or offering sexual services.”²⁵ Also “[n]ot allowed” are “sexual chats, imagery, and pornography” and “[s]exual services, including offering or asking for sexual services (solicitation), sexual chats, imagery, pornography, member exclusive content, and streaming of adult content through a webcam.” *Id.* (“Sexual Activity and Services”). The only content noted as specifically “[a]llowed” “Sexual Activity and Services” is “[r]eproductive health and sex education content, such as the use of birth control and abortion discussed in an [sic] medical way.” *Id.*

²⁴ *Community Guidelines, Regulated Goods and Commercial Activities*, TikTok (last updated Mar. 2023), <https://bit.ly/3R25BXs>.

²⁵ *Community Guidelines, Sensitive and Mature Themes* (last updated Mar. 2023), <https://bit.ly/3Hc5jsl>.

- “Seductive performances,” “[s]exualized posing,” and “[a]llusions to sexual activity” by adults are allowed, but TikTok claims to restrict such content to those 18 years and older. And TikTok claims that “[c]ontent is age-restricted if it shows significant body exposure of an adult,” where “significant body exposure” includes “uncovered genitals and buttocks, as well as nipples and areolas of women and girls.”²⁶

121. As already alleged, drug-related, sexual, and other mature content and profanity is abundant on TikTok and is not restricted to users aged 18 and older. The Community Guidelines are misrepresentations, deceptions, and false promises because they mislead many users by creating a net impression that these kinds of content are unavailable on TikTok and, in particular, that they are unavailable to minors. [REDACTED]

And the Community Guidelines further fail to warn users and parents about the intensity or frequency of mature and vulgar content on TikTok.

²⁶ *Community Guidelines, Nudity and Body Exposure* (last updated Mar. 2023), <https://bit.ly/3SMbxF7>.

122. The Community Guidelines did not mention profanity at all until March 2023, when TikTok added that “some artistic content with sexual references, such as song lyrics” is allowed on TikTok. Even this addition is inadequate because, in fact, TikTok exempts song lyrics entirely from the Community Guidelines’ coverage.

F. TikTok’s Misrepresentations are Relevant and Material.

123. Defendants’ misrepresentations—the age ratings and associated statements, the Community Guidelines, and Defendants’ statements about Restricted Mode—are material to the decisions that parents and other consumers make about how, and even whether, to use the TikTok app. Just as parents might determine which movies are appropriate for their children based on the “rating” a movie receives (G, PG, PG-13, or R), parents might also check the age rating of apps before allowing their children to download and use them. Parents may supervise their children’s devices to see which apps their children are downloading or use parental controls to prevent their children from downloading apps with particular age ratings. Parents also read information about apps before allowing their children to download them, and they research apps’ parental-control features.

124. TikTok’s representations and acts are particularly material to Iowa parents and other TikTok users because once a TikTok user sees

harmful content on the app, it is impossible to “unsee” the harmful material.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

TikTok’s

misrepresentations seek to prevent parents who are unfamiliar with the content on the TikTok app from developing such concerns.

IV. CLAIMS

127. Under the Consumer Fraud Act:

The act, use or employment by a person of an unfair practice, deception, fraud, false pretense, false promise, or misrepresentation, or the concealment, suppression, or omission of a material fact with intent that others rely upon the concealment, suppression, or omission, in connection with the lease, sale, or advertisement of any merchandise or the solicitation of contributions for charitable purposes, whether or not a person has in fact been misled, deceived, or damaged, is an unlawful practice.

Iowa Code § 714.16(2)(a).

128. Defendants advertise merchandise as defined by the Act. *Id.* Advertisement “includes the attempt by publication, dissemination, solicitation, or circulation to induce directly or indirectly any person to enter into any obligation or acquire any title or interest in any merchandise.” *Id.* § 714.16(1)(a). Merchandise “includes any objects, wares, goods, commodities, intangibles, securities, bonds, debentures, stocks, real estate or services.” *Id.* § 714.16(1)(e). The TikTok app is an intangible or a service that TikTok presents for publication, dissemination, or circulation in the Apple App Store, Google Play and

Microsoft stores to induce individuals to download the app, thus entering into an obligation to abide by TikTok’s Community Guidelines and Terms of Service and to gain an interest in the App by using it in exchange for valuable consideration.

129. TikTok has and is engaged in “deception,” “false promise,” and “misrepresentation.” *Id.* § 714.16(2)(a), by making false, misleading, and deceptive representations related to the age rating of its app and material facts about the content and features available on its app. These statements and acts can mislead a substantial number of Iowa consumers as to material facts surrounding the download and use of the TikTok app.

130. TikTok also engages in “unfair practice[s]” under the Act by continuing to display harmful content to young Iowans despite its assurances that such content is only “infrequent/mild.” The substantial, unavoidable injury to young Iowans from repeated exposure to harmful content on the TikTok app far outweighs any consumer benefit of exposing young Iowans to this content. Defendants advertise the TikTok app as safe and appropriate for users aged 12+ with only infrequent and mild occurrences of various categories of harmful content, yet systematically and continuously display that content to young Iowans in ways that are not infrequent nor mild. That course of conduct is contrary to what an ordinary Iowa consumer would anticipate.

131. Defendants, in short, misrepresent the nature of their app and create a misleading and deceptive net impression for Iowa consumers. Thus, Defendants engage in “an act or practice which has the tendency or capacity to mislead a substantial number of consumers as to a material fact or facts.” *Id.* § 714.16(1)(c). And Defendants have represented that the TikTok app “has certain performance characteristics,” including a 12+ age rating, despite having “no reasonable basis for the claim.” *Id.* § 714.16(2)(a).

132. TikTok’s deceptions are material to the decisions of Iowa parents and other Iowa TikTok users. Iowa TikTok users care about the type and maturity of content and features available on the TikTok app when deciding whether and how to use (or whether and how to let their children use) the app. Once a TikTok user sees harmful content, the user cannot “unsee” the harmful content.

A. Deception, False Promise, Misrepresentation, and Unfair Practices (Iowa Code § 714.16, *et seq.*).

1. Alcohol, tobacco, and drug references.

133. Defendants have represented and are continuing to represent to Iowa consumers that the TikTok app contains “infrequent/mild” “Alcohol, Tobacco, or Drug Use or References.”

134. In fact, the TikTok app contains abundant alcohol, tobacco, and drug use or references, which are neither “infrequent” nor “mild” in nature.

135. Defendants’ “infrequent/mild” representation in the App Store is a misrepresentation, deception, and false promise to Iowa consumers. Iowa Code § 714.16(2)(a).

136. Defendants’ display of abundant alcohol, tobacco, and drug content to young Iowans despite its assurances that such content is infrequent/mild is an unfair practice. *Id.*

137. The State is entitled to civil penalties not to exceed \$40,000 per violation of the Act under Iowa Code § 714.16(7).

2. Sexual content and nudity.

138. Defendants have represented and are continuing to represent to Iowa consumers that the TikTok app contains “infrequent/mild” “Sexual Content or Nudity.”

139. In fact, the TikTok app contains abundant sexual content and nudity, which is neither “infrequent” nor “mild” in nature.

140. Defendants’ “infrequent/mild” representation in the App Store is a misrepresentation, deception, and false promise to Iowa consumers. Iowa Code § 714.16(2)(a).

141. Defendants' display of abundant sexual content and nudity to young Iowans despite its assurances that such content is infrequent/mild is an unfair practice. *Id.*

142. The State is entitled to civil penalties not to exceed \$40,000 per violation of the Act under Iowa Code § 714.16(7).

3. Mature and suggestive themes.

143. Defendants have represented and are continuing to represent to Iowa consumers that the TikTok app contains "infrequent/mild" "Mature/Suggestive Themes."

144. In fact, the TikTok app contains abundant mature/suggestive themes, which are neither "infrequent" nor "mild" in nature.

145. Defendants' "infrequent/mild" representation in the App Store is a misrepresentation, deception, and false promise to Iowa consumers. Iowa Code § 714.16(2)(a).

146. Defendants' display of abundant mature/suggestive themes despite its assurances that such content is infrequent/mild is an unfair practice. *Id.*

147. The State is entitled to civil penalties not to exceed \$40,000 per violation of the Act under Iowa Code § 714.16(7).

4. Profanity and crude humor.

148. Defendants have represented and are continuing to represent to Iowa consumers that the TikTok app contains “infrequent/mild” “Profanity or Crude Humor.”

149. In fact, Defendants know and have reason to know that the TikTok app contains abundant profanity and crude humor, which is neither “infrequent” nor “mild” in nature.

150. Defendants’ “infrequent/mild” representation in the App Store is a misrepresentation, deception, and false promise to Iowa consumers. Iowa Code § 714.16(2)(a).

151. Defendants’ abundant display of profanity and crude humor to young Iowans despite its assurances that such content is infrequent/mild is an unfair practice. *Id.*

152. The State is entitled to civil penalties not to exceed \$40,000 per violation of the Act under Iowa Code § 714.16(7).

5. 12+ age rating.

153. Defendants have represented and are continuing to represent to Iowa consumers that the TikTok app qualifies for a “12+” rating in the Apple App Store.

154. In fact, Defendants know and have reason to know that the TikTok app does not qualify for a “12+” rating in the Apple App Store and can only be accurately rated “17+” in the Apple App Store.

155. Defendants' "12+" age-rating representation in the App Store is a misrepresentation, deception, and false promise to Iowa consumers. Iowa Code § 714.16(2)(a).

156. Defendants' conduct exposing young Iowans to an app that can only be accurately rated 17+ despite its assurances that the app is appropriately rated for users 12+ is an unfair practice. *Id.*

157. The State is entitled to civil penalties not to exceed \$40,000 per violation of the Act under Iowa Code § 714.16(7).

6. T-for-Teen age rating.

158. Defendants have represented and are continuing to represent to Iowa consumers that the TikTok app qualifies for a "T for Teen" age rating in the Google Play Store and Microsoft Store.

159. In fact, Defendants know and have reason to know that the TikTok app does not qualify for a "T for Teen" age rating on those platforms and can only be accurately rated as "M for Mature" (meaning that the TikTok app is appropriate only for users aged 17 and older).

160. Defendants' "T for Teen" age-rating representation is a misrepresentation, deception, and false promise to Iowa consumers. Iowa Code § 714.16(2)(a).

161. Defendants' conduct exposing young Iowans to an app that can be accurately rated only "M for Mature" despite its assurances that the app is appropriately rated as "T for Teen" is an unfair practice. *Id.*

162. The State is entitled to civil penalties not to exceed \$40,000 per violation of the CFA under Iowa Code § 714.16(7).

7. Cumulative misrepresentations, deceptions, and false promises.

163. Defendants represented and continue to represent to Iowa consumers that the TikTok app contains only “infrequent/mild” “Alcohol, Tobacco, and Drug Content,” “Sexual Content and Nudity,” “Suggestive and Mature Themes,” and “Profanity or Crude Humor”; that the app is rated “12+” and is appropriate for children 12 and older; and that the app is rated “T” for “Teen” and is appropriate for teenagers.

164. All those representations are deceptive and constitute misrepresentations and false promises to Iowa consumers. Iowa Code § 714.16(2)(a). They are false not only individually, but cumulatively.

165. Defendants’ cumulative conduct and representations constitute an unfair practice contrary to the reasonable expectations of Iowa consumers and with no countervailing consumer benefits. *Id.*

166. The State is entitled to civil penalties not to exceed \$40,000 per violation of the CFA under Iowa Code § 714.16(7).

8. Restricted Mode.

167. Defendants have represented and continue to represent to Iowa consumers that Restricted Mode “limits the appearance of content that may not be appropriate for all audiences.” Defendants have

marketed and continue to market Restricted Mode as a safety feature and a tool for parents to restrict the ability of their children to encounter inappropriate content on TikTok.

168. Indeed, Restricted Mode restricts virtually no content available on TikTok. Mature content remains widely available to users with Restricted Mode enabled, including in search results and in each consumer's algorithmically driven For You Feed. Restricted Mode does not work and has never worked as TikTok claims. Simply, Restricted Mode does not meet consumer expectations in terms of filtering mature content.

169. Defendants' statements about Restricted Mode are misrepresentations, deceptions, and false promises to Iowa consumers. Iowa Code § 714.16(2)(a). Defendants' continued marketing and use of Restricted Mode is an unfair practice. *Id.*

170. The State is entitled to civil penalties not to exceed \$40,000 per violation of the CFA under Iowa Code § 714.16(7).

9. TikTok's Community Guidelines.

171. Through TikTok's Community Guidelines, Defendants represent to Iowa consumers that TikTok rigorously enforces the Community Guidelines, that TikTok uniformly enforces the Community Guidelines, and that certain drug-related and sexual content is not allowed to remain on the TikTok app.

172. Indeed, Defendants have reason to know, and in fact know, that: content that violates the Community Guidelines remains on the TikTok app, may be promoted, and is widely viewed; that for some types of content, TikTok does not act to enforce its guidelines at all; and that TikTok moderates its Community Guidelines by choosing to leave some violative content on the platform rather than remove it. In particular, the Community Guidelines inform consumers that drug content is not allowed on the TikTok app, but TikTok in fact knows that it allows most cannabis content to remain on the app. Through the Community Guidelines, Defendants represent and have represented that certain drug-related and sexual content is not allowed on the TikTok app, when Defendants know that such content *is* allowed. Defendants also know that they permit other mature content on the platform that they fail to disclose to consumers in the Community Guidelines.

173. Defendants' misrepresentations about the Community Guidelines are a misrepresentation, deception, and false promise to Iowa consumers. Iowa Code § 714.16(2)(a). Defendants' systematic failure or refusal to enforce its own Community Guidelines despite its public assurances to consumers is an unfair practice. *Id.*

174. The State is entitled to civil penalties not to exceed \$40,000 per violation of the CFA under Iowa Code § 714.16(7).

B. Disgorgement.

175. Through Defendants’ deceptions, misrepresentations, false promises, and other unfair practices, Defendants have acquired moneys or property by a means unlawful under the Act.

176. TikTok Inc. made nearly \$4 billion in revenue in 2021 and an estimated \$10–12 billion in 2022. ByteDance Ltd. reported \$58 billion in revenue in 2021. Defendants can attribute, at a minimum, millions of dollars in revenue to activities in the State of Iowa.

177. Because TikTok’s revenue is difficult to disaggregate as to individual users, the cost of administering reimbursement to individual consumers outweighs the benefit to consumers. Further, individual consumer reimbursement could not be completed through reasonable efforts.

178. Thus, the court “may order disgorgement of moneys or property ... by awarding the moneys or property to the state to be used by the attorney general for the administration and implementation” of the Consumer Fraud Act. Iowa Code § 714.16(7).

V. Conclusion and Prayer

WHEREFORE, the State of Iowa, *ex rel.* Attorney General Brenna Bird requests that the Court render judgment in the State’s favor and:

- A. Declare that Defendants have engaged in misrepresentations, deceptions, false promises, and unfair practices against Iowa

consumers in violation of the Iowa Consumer Fraud Act, Iowa Code § 714.16, *et seq.*;

- B. Preliminarily and permanently enjoin Defendants from engaging in the deceptive and unfair acts described in this petition;
- C. Award the State civil penalties civil penalties of \$40,000 per violation under Iowa Code § 714.16(7);
- D. Order disgorgement of all funds and property acquired by Defendants from Iowa consumers through their continued misrepresentations, deceptions, false promises, and unfair practices and award the funds and property to the State to be used by the Attorney General under Iowa Code § 714.16(7);
- E. Award the State its costs and fees under Iowa Code § 714.16(11), including expert-witness expenses; costs incurred in pursuing this action and investigation, including reasonable attorneys' fees; and prejudgment and post-judgment interest at the highest lawful rates;
- F. Declare that each Defendant is jointly and severally liable for all penalties and money damages awarded; and
- G. Grant all other relief to which the State may be entitled.

Date: January 17, 2024.

Respectfully submitted,

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