

Analysis of Proposed Consent Order to Aid Public Comment
In the Matter of PayPal, Inc., File No. 1623102

The Federal Trade Commission (“Commission”) has accepted, subject to final approval, an agreement containing a consent order from PayPal, Inc. (“PayPal”).

The proposed consent order has been placed on the public record for thirty (30) days for receipt of comments by interested persons. Comments received during this period will become part of the public record. After 30 days, the Commission will again review the agreement and the comments received, and will decide whether it should withdraw from the agreement and take appropriate action or make final the agreement’s proposed order.

This matter involves Venmo, a peer-to-peer payment service owned and operated by PayPal. Venmo has offered its peer-to-peer payment service to consumers since 2011, and was acquired by PayPal in 2013. Consumers can use Venmo to transfer money to one another using a mobile application or through a website at www.venmo.com. Venmo’s payment service incorporates a social networking component through a social “news feed” that shares information about a consumer’s Venmo transactions.

The Commission’s proposed complaint alleges that PayPal, through its operation of Venmo, has violated Section 5 of the FTC Act and the Gramm-Leach-Bliley (“GLB”) Act’s Privacy and Safeguards Rules.

First, the proposed complaint alleges that Venmo has represented to consumers that money is credited to their Venmo account and can be transferred to an external bank account after other Venmo users have sent funds to those consumers, but has failed to disclose, or failed to disclose adequately, that funds could be frozen or removed because Venmo has not yet approved the underlying transaction. As alleged in the proposed complaint, Venmo has made representations to consumers that they have been paid and they can transfer money from Venmo to an external bank account. For example, Venmo has sent users notifications that have stated “Money credited to your Venmo balance. Transfer to your bank overnight.” Despite these claims, the proposed complaint alleges that, in numerous instances, consumers have been unable to transfer funds to their bank accounts as promised. Venmo has waited until a consumer attempts to transfer funds to an external bank account to review the transaction for certain issues. This review has resulted in Venmo delaying the transfer or reversing the transaction in numerous instances.

Second, the proposed complaint alleges that Venmo has failed to disclose material information to consumers about the operation of Venmo’s privacy settings. As alleged in the proposed complaint, by default, all Venmo transactions are shared on Venmo’s social news feed, which displays the names of the payer and recipient, the date of the transaction, and a message written by the user that initiated the transaction. Venmo offers privacy settings that consumers can use to limit the visibility of their transactions. However, to ensure that all future payments remain private, a consumer must change two

similarly labeled settings. The first setting, referred to in the proposed complaint as the “Default Audience Setting,” would lead a reasonable consumer to believe that they can restrict the visibility of their future transactions on the news feed to specific groups, such as “Participants Only” or “Friends.” In fact, however, a consumer must also change a second setting, referred to in the proposed complaint as the “Transaction Sharing Setting,” to ensure that all of her transactions are private. If a consumer fails to restrict this second setting, in some circumstances, transactions will still be published publicly even if the consumer has chosen a “private” default audience.

Venmo also offers a privacy setting to control the visibility of an individual transaction, referred to in the proposed complaint as the “Individual Audience Setting.” The proposed complaint alleges that Venmo failed to disclose, or failed to disclose adequately, that the Individual Audience Setting does not ensure that an individual transaction remains private unless a consumer also separately restricts the Transaction Sharing Setting described above. If a consumer has not changed both settings, there are circumstances where the other participant in the transaction can retroactively change a transaction from private to public.

Third, the proposed complaint alleges that Venmo represented until approximately March 2015 that it protected consumers’ financial information with “bank grade security systems” but in fact failed to implement basic safeguards necessary to secure consumer accounts from unauthorized transactions and did not provide “bank grade security.” For example, Venmo failed to provide consumers with security notifications about changes to account settings from within the consumer’s Venmo account, such as when a consumer’s email address or password had been changed. The proposed complaint alleges that Venmo’s representation that it provided “bank grade security systems” constitutes a deceptive act or practice under Section 5 of the FTC Act.

Fourth, the proposed complaint alleges that Venmo violated the GLB Act’s Privacy Rule and Regulation P by failing to provide users with a clear and conspicuous initial privacy notice, disseminating an initial privacy notice that does not accurately reflect its policies and practices, and failing to deliver the initial privacy notice so that each customer could reasonably be expected to receive actual notice.

Finally, the proposed complaint alleges that Venmo violated the GLB Act’s Safeguards Rule by failing to have a comprehensive written information security program before August 2014, failing to identify reasonably foreseeable internal and external risks to the security, confidentiality, and integrity of customer information, and assessing the sufficiency of any safeguards in place to control those risks before September 2014, and failing to design and implement information safeguards to control the known risks to the security, confidentiality, and integrity of customer information.

The proposed order contains injunctive provisions addressing the alleged deceptive conduct and Rule violations in connection with PayPal’s operation of a payment and social networking service. Part I of the proposed order prohibits PayPal from making misrepresentations regarding material restrictions, limitations, or conditions

to use any payment and social networking service. It also prohibits misrepresentations about data security and privacy, including misrepresentations regarding the extent of control provided by any privacy settings and the extent to which PayPal implements or adheres to a particular level of security.

Part II of the proposed order requires PayPal, when making any representations through any payment and social networking service about the availability of funds to be transferred or withdrawn to a bank account, to provide clear and conspicuous disclosures that transactions are subject to review and, if true, that funds could be frozen or removed as a result of transaction reviews. Part II also requires PayPal to issue a one-time notice informing current Venmo users that when they attempt to transfer or withdraw funds to a bank account, Venmo will perform transaction reviews and based on such review, may block or delay the transfer or withdrawal, and/or reverse a payment transaction.

Part III of the proposed order requires PayPal to provide clear and conspicuous disclosures to users related to how any payment and social networking service shares transaction information with other users and how a consumer can limit the visibility or sharing of transaction information through privacy settings.

Part IV of the agreement prohibits violations of the GLB Privacy and Safeguards Rules.

Part V requires PayPal to obtain biennial data security assessments for ten years.

Parts VI through IX of the proposed order are reporting and compliance provisions, which include recordkeeping requirements and provisions requiring PayPal to provide information or documents necessary for the Commission to monitor compliance. Part X states that the proposed order will remain in effect for 20 years, with certain exceptions.

The purpose of this analysis is to aid public comment on the proposed order. It is not intended to constitute an official interpretation of the complaint or proposed order, or to modify in any way the proposed order's terms.