

# How Big Tech Uses Sex To Destroy Lives

## Sex bomb: The collateral damage of OnlyFans' explosive success

REUTERS/Illustration/Catherine Tai

The porn-heavy website says it has prospered by building a "nicer, kinder" community for creators and consumers. Yet OnlyFans also has upended people's lives. Reuters delves into U.S. police files to reveal stories of financial ruin, family trauma and extreme behavior.

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Filed



DENVER, COLORADO

*This story contains offensive language and descriptions of sexually explicit conduct.*

Melinda Lam's husband had a secret.

Lam said she discovered it after a credit card payment for her son's karate lessons was declined in December 2021. That led the 46-year-old pharmacist from Colorado to check the accounts she shared with her husband.

At least six credit cards were maxed out, she said, and nearly \$40,000 had been drained from their savings. One card statement suggested where the money might have gone.

"It says OnlyFans, OnlyFans, OnlyFans," recalled Lam, who was then undergoing chemotherapy for breast cancer.

Her husband would ultimately spend \$135,000 on porn creators on OnlyFans, a subscription-based website, according to Lam and records she shared with Reuters. She said she was preparing to file for bankruptcy – and finalizing a divorce.

“Not only was it shocking,” she said, “it was devastating.”

OnlyFans and its supporters portray the platform as a safe and empowering outlet for lucrative, socially acceptable sex work. Nurses, teachers, police officers and Olympic athletes have posted racy content in pursuit of extra cash.

As OnlyFans takes porn into the mainstream, however, the platform also has generated ripple effects that have upended lives in unexpected and sometimes traumatizing ways.

Reuters reported some of the most direct harms in investigations that exposed [child sexual abuse material](#) and [nonconsensual or “revenge porn”](#) posted on the site. Those findings were drawn from police complaints obtained from more than 250 of the largest U.S. law enforcement agencies.

A Reuters Investigation

ONLYFANS EXPOSED

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But the files also reveal collateral harms: families torn apart, reputations threatened, finances ruined.

Aside from Melinda Lam, who said her husband’s porn-buying spree destroyed her marriage, the police files describe a creator who unwittingly made sex videos for a close relative; women and girls shocked to find their likenesses stolen to sell porn; and passersby who found naked men making porn in public for their “fans.” Another creator filmed himself in lewd acts with a dog.

“There’s something different happening with OnlyFans,” said Meagan Tyler, a researcher at Australia’s La Trobe University, who specializes in harms against women in porn. “It’s really affecting norms and even our everyday experiences in public places, in private homes, in relationships – and it’s having that effect even if we’ve never visited the site ourselves.”

OnlyFans didn’t respond to questions about Lam’s case or others in this story. On its website, however, OnlyFans says it’s building the world’s safest digital media platform for creators to express “their most authentic selves.” In a speech last year, CEO Keily Blair described OnlyFans as a “real community”

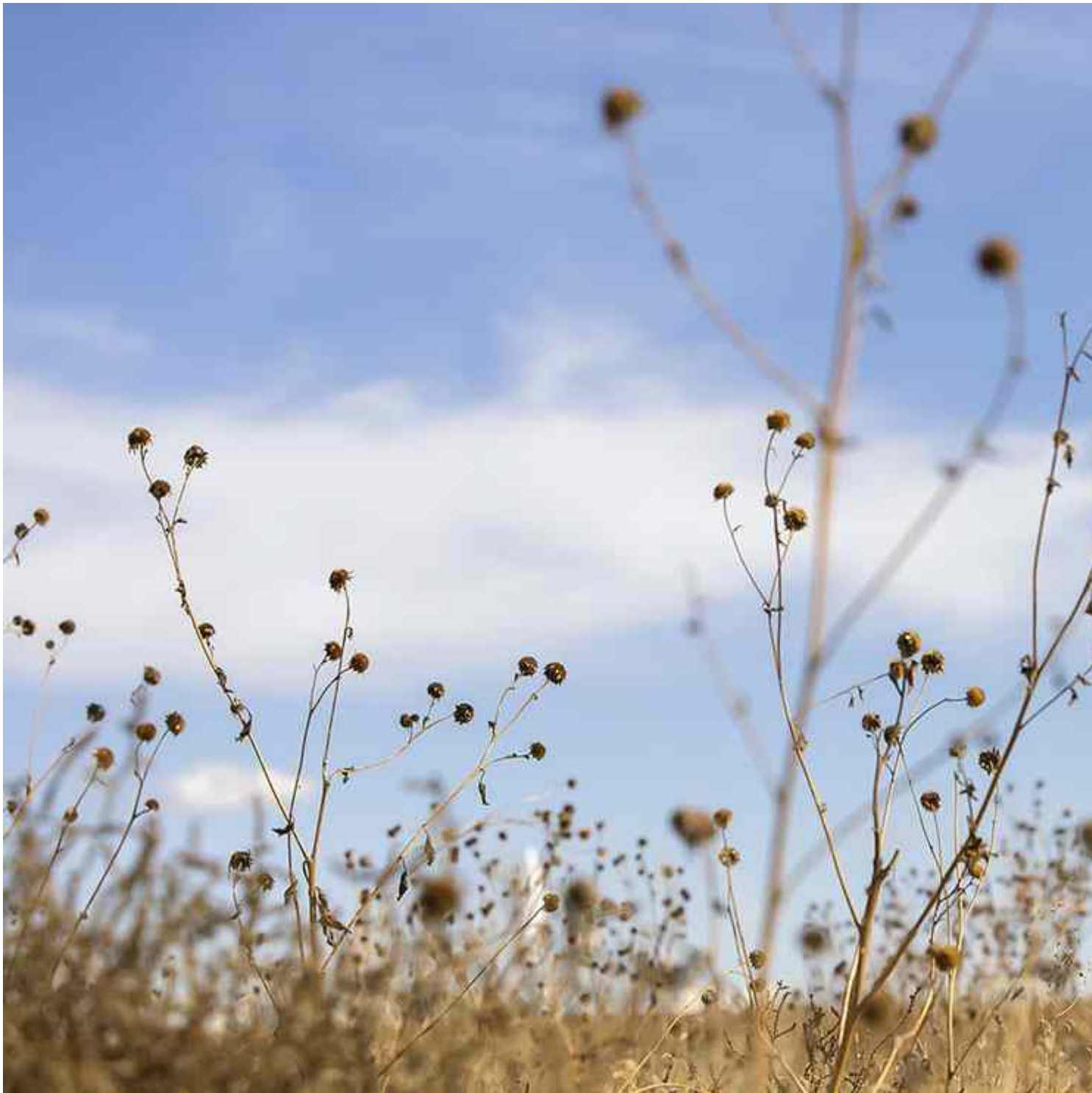
where creators and subscribers had “nicer, kinder, more supportive conversations” than on other platforms.

During their interactions with subscribers, creators sell customized content and solicit extra money in tips. It’s proved a winning formula: By offering to make creators richer and consumers less lonely, OnlyFans has enjoyed huge success in monetizing porn – a product otherwise widely available online for free – and helped to revolutionize the business.

OnlyFans earned \$1.3 billion in revenue in 2023 alone. Top creators earn millions of dollars a year and their success has spawned a freewheeling industry of promoters and talent agencies. In a sign of the site’s growing influence, planes this summer pulled banners advertising OnlyFans creators over beaches in Florida and Alabama.

Less visible are the unsuspecting victims caught up in OnlyFans when users break social norms – or the law.

Here are their stories.



“They’re making all this money at the expense of people like me.”

Aggrieved wife

After discovering her husband's credit card spending in January 2022, Melinda Lam decided not to confront him right away. She said she was too ill from chemotherapy and radiation treatments. "I didn't have any energy."

She did some sleuthing on a home computer and discovered that much of the money went to an OnlyFans creator called Laura Shine, from Bogota, Colombia. Shine's online profile once described her as "the FREAKIEST Girl on OnlyFans."

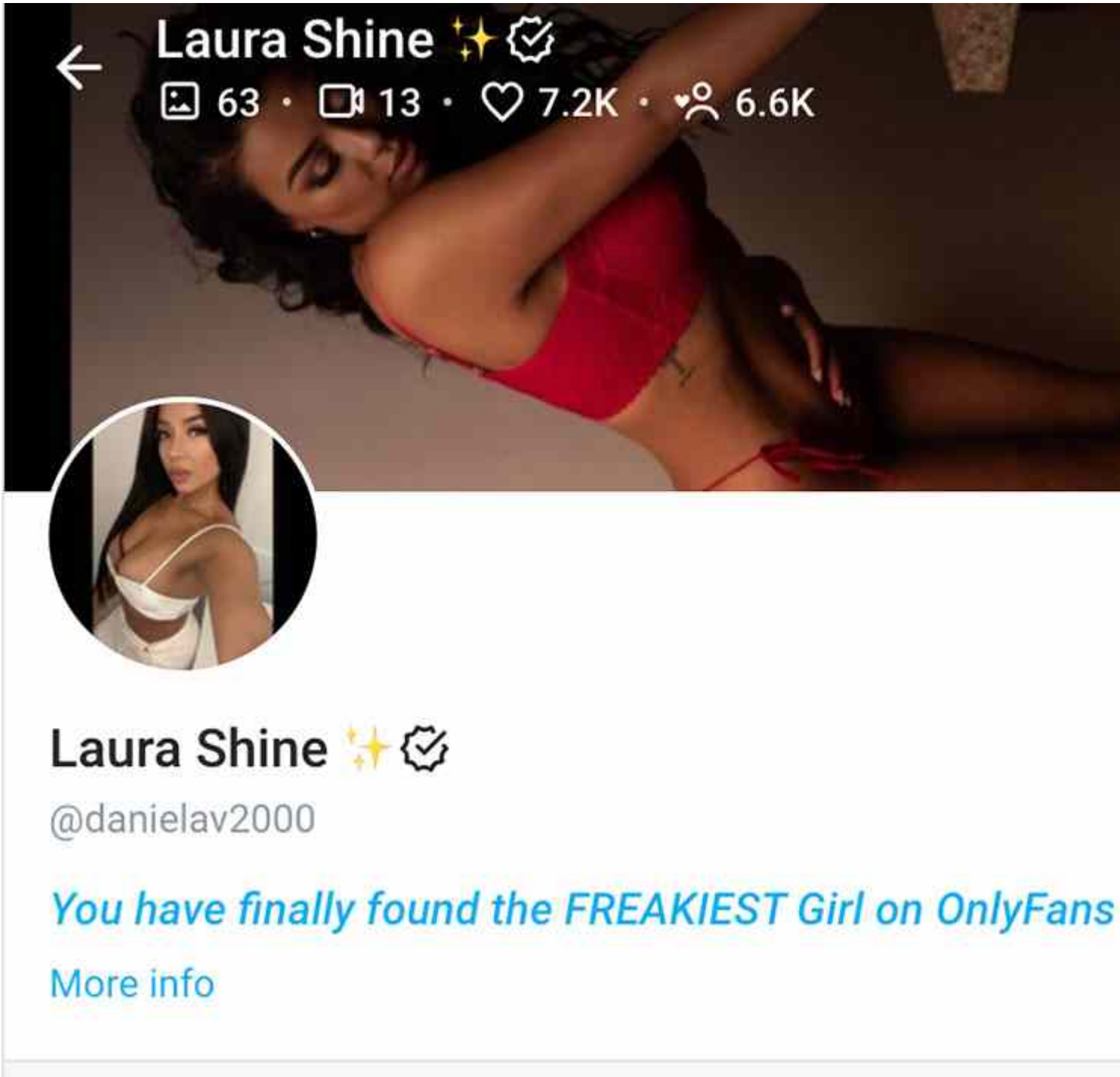
Some of the money, Lam said, had been withdrawn from her husband's pension.

Soon the marriage began to implode, according to Reuters interviews with Lam and police and court records.

Lam eventually confronted her husband in February 2022. He slammed her head against a car window and punched her repeatedly, she alleged in court records on an assault complaint against her husband.

The next month, Lam called police to report that her husband had become angry at their 5-year-old son and thrown him to the ground, nearly injuring him, according to an Aurora Police Department report. She told a responding officer that her seven-year marriage had become "rocky" and she feared her husband would only become more violent.

By that point, Lam's husband had spent \$65,000 on OnlyFans, plunging the family into "major debt" and causing her "major emotional damage," according to the police report.



Lam told Reuters she moved out, taking her son with her.

A month later, with the husband's OnlyFans spending now at \$80,000, he assaulted her again, according to his arrest warrant affidavit prepared by a police detective. She told Reuters she was picking up their son from a visit when, the affidavit says, her husband chased her into the bathroom, smashed her head against a mirror and tried to strangle her.

When he released his grip, he warned, “I’ll finish you up later,” before leaving the house, according to the affidavit. Lam called the police and was hospitalized. Shards of glass fell out of her bra as she changed into a hospital gown, the affidavit said.

Although Lam pursued assault charges against her husband, she later dropped them. She said the side effects from her cancer treatment made it difficult to muster the strength to get through a trial. Lam, who underwent surgery to remove a tumor, said she is expected to survive the cancer.

Lam’s husband did not respond to emails, text messages or phone calls. According to the arrest warrant affidavit, he denied all allegations to police, including that any assault took place.

While extreme, Lam’s case illustrates how an OnlyFans subscriber can become hooked and quickly rack up spending on the site. The platform’s users must supply a credit card to pay for subscriptions, customized porn and tips.

“You put your card in once” and from then on, you simply click a button to buy, said Rob Weiss, a California-based sex-addiction specialist and author of “Sex Addiction 101.” Chatting with models on OnlyFans can fill a void, he said. “It’s like the drug addict who’s buying drugs and says, ‘I know I’m spending my kids college fund, but hey, I want to get high.’”

The OnlyFans creator, Shine, promised Lam’s husband a future together and repeatedly asked him for large sums of money, according to Lam and screenshots of OnlyFans messages.

“Would you be able to send the \$2,000 baby,” Shine asked while chatting with Lam’s husband on OnlyFans in May 2022. Soon after, he uploaded a receipt showing he had wired \$2,000 through Western Union. The two made plans to vacation together the next month at a resort in the Dominican Republic – a trip Lam said they took.

Shine declined to comment.

Lam called her husband’s obsession with OnlyFans “the ultimate betrayal.” What hurt most, she added, was dealing with this “mess” while fighting cancer.

OnlyFans is “making all this money at the expense of people like me,” she said. “It’s just money in their pocket. They don’t think about the repercussions.”

“It’s one of the worst things that ever happened to me in my life.”

OnlyFans creator

Sometimes OnlyFans creators themselves are left traumatized.

In March 2020, as U.S. cities went into pandemic lockdown, a 21-year-old Seattle woman lost her job as a restaurant server. Seeking a quick way to make ends meet, she created an OnlyFans page and posted sexy photos of herself.

Soon, she said, a man paid \$25 a month to subscribe to her account. He also began messaging her directly on the platform, saying he'd pay extra for racier videos. "He was obsessed with me," said the woman, who spoke on the condition she be identified by her initials, D.W., to preserve her privacy.

After about a year and a half, she closed her OnlyFans account. "I just got tired of it," she said. "It just wasn't for me."

But the arrangement with her most enthusiastic fan continued after he found her on Instagram.



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Apr 13, 2020

💰 I sent you a \$5.00 tip ❤️  
for this post



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She still needed money, she said, and he paid well – about \$10,000 for explicit photos and videos of her for more than two years.

“What are you wearing? Cause I know you need more \$\$\$,” he messaged her on Instagram, according to a screenshot from the Seattle Police Department.

“He would send messages like, ‘I wish we were in bed together right now,’” D.W. said in an interview. “‘I wish I could build a family with you.’” He paid her to call him “Daddy,” the screenshots show, and called her his “whore.”

In July 2022, the man phoned her on Instagram, according to a Seattle Police Department report and screenshots D.W. provided to Reuters.

“This is your Uncle Eugene,” he said, according to her account to police. He was the husband of her mother’s sister. “I don’t see you as my niece, I see you as a woman,” she recalled him saying. “Please don’t tell your auntie.”

She couldn’t believe it, she told Reuters. “I screamed and I was like, ‘How could you do this to me?’” He responded, “I’m sorry, I’m a sick person.”

D.W.’s ordeal highlights a fundamental risk for OnlyFans creators: They often don’t know the true identity of even their most loyal subscribers. Creators know their fans by usernames they choose – D.W.’s uncle called himself “Wizard.” They can turn out to be relatives, employers, exes or stalkers.

Similar accusations have appeared in social media and news stories. An Australian woman went public with a claim that her top subscriber was her stepfather. The woman, who uses the screen name Taila Maddison, told Reuters he’d paid \$1,500 for custom videos while they lived in the same house. “I was just a mess,” she said. Another Australian creator, Sharna Beckman, told Reuters and others she cut off a video-hungry fan when she learned he was a cousin she’d grown up with.

On July 12, 2022, D.W. walked into the Seattle Police Department to report what felt to her like a sexual assault, the police report said.

“He didn’t physically touch me,” she told Reuters. But “I feel more than violated.”

She said police told her that they couldn’t pursue criminal charges against her uncle because the transactions were consensual. Seattle police told Reuters that no criminal investigation is being conducted at this time.

When Reuters reached Eugene by telephone, he declined to comment and asked that he not be included in the story because “it’s not going to be positive for me.”

D.W. said she plunged into depression, struggled to sleep at night and was prescribed anti-anxiety medication. With the help of a therapist, she said she’s now “doing a lot better.” She’s trying to launch a new career.

“When you’re making an OnlyFans, you are gambling,” she said – betting that your clients are strangers who won’t cross into your real world.

“It was one of the worst things that ever happened to me in my life,” she said.

In February 2022, a Missouri animal shelter received an unusual tip: A man was posting sexually explicit videos on OnlyFans involving a dog.

The videos featured Aubrey Jones, now 25, in various sexual encounters with a gray pitbull named Rocko, according to records filed by prosecutors in a Missouri court. The tipster told the KC Pet Project shelter that he had discovered the bestiality several months earlier and alerted OnlyFans, which took the account offline, the records showed.

But since then, Jones had created a new OnlyFans account where he reposted the old sex videos with Rocko and even added a new one, the records said.

Jones ultimately pleaded guilty to animal abuse, a misdemeanor, and was sentenced to two years of supervised probation. He was forbidden to own an animal during that time.

Jones declined to comment.



OnlyFans says it has sophisticated measures in place to identify and monitor content, and prohibits illegal videos and images, including bestiality. The UK-based company says it cooperates with law enforcement agencies and can deactivate OnlyFans accounts that post illegal content.

But records and interviews in Jones' case reveal several lapses: The same bestiality content slipped by OnlyFans moderators more than once. OnlyFans didn't report Jones' illegal content to Kansas City Missouri Police when the tipster told the company about it, according to a department spokesperson. And although OnlyFans deactivated the initial account, Jones was able to create another and resume illicit posts.

The second account is no longer active.

When detectives questioned Jones about the videos in April 2022, Jones said he posted “nudes and stuff” on his OnlyFans account to earn money, according to the court records. His dog Rocko had joined him in a video, he said, but “he was like to the side.”

Kansas City Pet Project reported the following: They received information that JONES, Aubrey [redacted], the suspect, had been posting videos on OnlyFans, an internet content subscription service, depicting bestiality with a dog named “Rocko.”

When detectives showed Jones a screenshot of his explicit conduct with the dog, he initially denied responsibility. “Somebody edited that,” Jones said.

One four-minute video posted by Jones showed Rocko licking Jones’ anus and penis while he masturbated, according to records from the animal shelter, which reviewed the videos. Reuters was unable to review them. The news organization could not determine the fate of Rocko.

It’s unclear how often bestiality appears on OnlyFans or other online platforms. Although all U.S. states except West Virginia criminalize bestiality, there is no systematic tracking of the abuse in the country, making it difficult to assess its scale online, said David Rosengard, managing attorney at the nonprofit Animal Legal Defense Fund.

Animal sexual exploitation “has existed in American society possibly as long as the country itself,” Rosengard said. “But the monetizing and sharing of animal pornographic content is a new phenomenon” that has grown with the rise of home video and the Internet.

“They can tarnish your name and your reputation forever.”

Law school graduate

Some people said they were victims of another phenomenon: fake OnlyFans profiles.

“Is this you?” a friend messaged Scarlet Riviere, a Florida law school student in September 2022, attaching an OnlyFans link.

When Riviere checked the account, she found her own face staring back at her. Below her profile photo were sexually explicit images of someone else, she said. The OnlyFans account was “purporting to show nude pictures of mine, even though they weren’t my pictures.”

The person who made the fake account had also created an Instagram page in her name, Riviere said. She was angry, frustrated and worried that the fake accounts could damage her job prospects.

Riviere was studying cyber security and cyber law at the time, but that didn’t stop her from being targeted. “It was crazy,” she said.

Instagram parent company Meta didn’t comment on the case. On its website, Instagram says it “takes safety seriously” and advises people to report imposter accounts to the company.

OnlyFans' terms of service prohibit creators from posting sexually explicit content featuring anyone who hasn't given consent. Breaches of its policy can lead to an account being suspended or permanently banned, it says. However, the company also tells its users, "We have no direct control over what your Content may comprise and are not obligated to pre-screen Content."

In U.S. police files that mention OnlyFans, there are dozens of complaints similar to Riviere's – at least 76 between January 2020 and October 2023 in which profiles were allegedly built with stolen names or images of real people. Many said their photographs had been lifted from Instagram, Facebook or other social media and reposted on OnlyFans, sometimes attached to their real names, as in Riviere's case.

## Were you exposed on OnlyFans?

Got a story to share about possible abuses on OnlyFans or other social media platforms? Please contact our reporters via our [confidential tips page](#).

Most of the alleged victims in the police files were women and teenage girls. Some told police they had never once shared an explicit photo of themselves online. Though stolen photos such as Riviere's are often more sexually suggestive than explicit, they can make it appear that the person featured is selling porn, according to the women's accounts to Reuters and police.

"Once somebody does something like that, they can tarnish your name and your reputation forever," Riviere said.

Ann Olivarius of McAllister Olivarius, a British-American law firm specializing in sexual abuse and online reputation cases, underscored the risks.

"These women, they lose their jobs," she said. "It is a nightmare."

Among other examples from the police files: In El Paso, Texas, a woman said she discovered a fake account with her image stating, "you guys convinced me to do an OnlyFans." Under her profile photo were porn videos featuring another woman's body, she told police. In Denver, Colorado, a woman told police that a fake OnlyFans account was set up in her name after a college roommate stole nude photographs from her camera.

After Riviere discovered her face on a fake OnlyFans profile, she filed a complaint alleging misuse of confidential information with the Miami Gardens Police Department in September 2022. A department official said the case is open but inactive, with no leads or witnesses. Riviere said OnlyFans removed the fake profile a few weeks after she and her friends reported it to the company.

People who complain of fake OnlyFans profiles have few legal remedies. Only a handful of states have impersonation laws expansive enough to prosecute the creator of a fake online profile, Olivarius said.

Riviere said her experience left her with "really bad anxiety."

"It just made me feel very unsafe," she said.

Other people were going about their daily lives when they discovered men making porn in public, saying it was for their OnlyFans subscribers. Shocked bystanders called police.

Maureen Leahy told officers her neighbor came across a naked man in the gym of their apartment building in Hartford, Connecticut, in October 2022. Alerted by the neighbor, Leahy confronted the man.

“What the fuck are you doing?” said Leahy, in an encounter she captured on a video that she showed police and Reuters.

“I was just doing something for my OnlyFans,” the man said, pulling on his clothes.

“It was absolutely disgusting,” Leahy said in an interview. “He had coconut oil out.”

Leahy said the suspect barreled into her “like a linebacker” while fleeing the building, according to a Hartford Police Department report.

Police said they couldn’t identify the man and closed the case. The incident prompted Leahy and another resident to sue the man, whom they identified as Kyrone Williams, for alleged offensiveness and indecency. He has not responded to the lawsuit. Williams is serving time in a Connecticut prison for public indecency in a separate case, and his attorney in that case declined to comment.

Public sex is a kink that’s long been featured in risqué videos. But having an audience who will pay for such content on OnlyFans can encourage creators to “go to extremes,” said Ramesh Srinivasan, founder of the University of California Digital Cultures Lab. “Extreme sexual stuff will always grab one’s attention.”

Public indecency is against the law in many jurisdictions. Since early 2021, OnlyFans has prohibited posting sexually explicit videos or photos taken in places where members of the public are present or “reasonably likely to see” it.

Not all aspiring creators have complied, as park maintenance worker Steve Fontaine can attest.

In August 2021, Fontaine reported to police a surprising sight on a football field in Austell, Georgia: a naked man filming himself masturbating while walking.

He observed a thin black male walking naked along the football field while stimulating his genitals and filming himself.

“I had to do a double take just to make sure what I actually was seeing,” Fontaine told Reuters.

A responding officer found the man in a nearby bathroom, now clothed “but visibly distressed and covered in sweat,” a Cobb County Police report said.

The man, Sergio Mininger, 31, declined to comment when reached by Reuters. He was arrested and pleaded no contest to public indecency, a misdemeanor.

Asked why he’d been naked on the field, Mininger told the arresting officer he was making content for his OnlyFans subscribers.

Mininger said he'd do "whatever his fans wanted him to do."

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