

Leah\* is a 27-year-old Aboriginal woman who met her partner, Chris\*, through social media. Their relationship quickly became intense. Chris would send Leah daily messages, constantly video call her, and express how deeply he cared for her. Chris often told Leah that she was the only one who understood him and that they were destined to be together.

At first, Leah was flattered by his attention, feeling loved and valued. Chris showered her with affection and gifts, including a new phone “so they could stay connected all the time”. However, Chris soon began using this as a form of control. He insisted on having access to her passwords, checking her social media accounts, and installing tracking apps on her phone under the guise of “keeping her safe.” If she didn’t respond immediately to his messages or if she was talking to her friends or family, Chris would accuse her of hiding things and become angry, demanding an explanation. The more she tried to maintain some privacy, the more controlling and aggressive he became.

Chris also used technology to manipulate Leah’s sense of trust and self-worth. On several occasions, he would post private conversations between them online, twisting the context to make Leah seem unfaithful or dishonest. In moments of anger, he threatened to share intimate photos of her with her family, saying things like, “I’ll show your mob what you’ve been doing behind their backs.” This constant threat of public humiliation kept Leah on edge, fearful of what Chris might do next.

Leah felt trapped. As an Aboriginal woman, her connection to family, community, and her heritage was deeply important to her, but Chris used these connections against her. He would belittle her culture, telling her that her family was “too controlling” and “too involved in her life,” and that she needed to be independent from them. He would often accuse her of using her Aboriginality to “gain sympathy” or make excuses for her actions. He would also use negative stereotypes about her culture to manipulate her emotions, saying things like, “You’re just acting like your mob—too dramatic, too emotional.” His words undermined Leah’s identity and made her feel disconnected from the people who had always supported her.

Leah’s isolation deepened as Chris continued to control her communication with family and friends. He blocked her from contacting certain people and monitored her interactions, often accusing her of “talking behind his back” or betraying his trust. Leah became afraid to speak to her loved ones, fearing it would lead to more conflict with Chris. The stigma around domestic violence in her community also made it difficult for Leah to reach out for help. She feared being judged and was worried that her situation would become the subject of gossip. She felt ashamed, unable to escape, fearing she would be labelled as “weak” or as “bringing shame” on her family.