

USC

Viterbi professor embattled in lawsuit with his former employee

The lawsuit also makes claims against the professor's company, Pinscreen, which creates 3D avatars.

By: Chandler France

October 30, 2018

A USC Viterbi professor is facing a lawsuit in which he and the company he co-founded are accused of data fabrication, exaggerating outcomes and fraud. The professor of computer science, Hao Li, denies all allegations against himself and Pinscreen, an augmented reality and social media startup.

Former Pinscreen employee and plaintiff Iman Sadeghi previously worked for Li, and said Pinscreen couldn't do everything Li claimed. Pinscreen is a computational imaging company that "enables anyone to create and animate their own personalized 3D avatars from a single selfie," according to its website. It means the app is supposed to generate a 3D animation based on a selfie or a picture—somewhat similar to Bitmoji or other personal avatar-building apps.

In an amended complaint filed on Oct. 5, Sadeghi accused Li of "knowingly misrepresent[ing] Pinscreen's avatar generation capabilities to Sadeghi and conceal[ing] its various illegal practices from him." Sadeghi claims that when he was recruited, Pinscreen did not have the technology it claimed to have, which is automatic creation of avatars; instead, Sadeghi alleged Pinscreen uses manually generated avatars.

"Li's claim that the presented avatars and their hair were automatically generated was a brazen lie," the complaint said.

Sadeghi said in his statement to Annenberg Media that he filed the lawsuit "primarily to preserve the integrity of scientific research."

Li denies Sadeghi's accusations.

"One thing I can say with 100 percent confidence: there has been absolutely no scientific data fabrication at either Pinscreen or at my research labs," Li said.

Investors from Asia and Silicon Valley have bought into the promise of Pinscreen to the tune of \$2 million in their latest funding round on March 16, 2017.

Among Sadeghi's accusations, he claims Li fabricated data in business presentations for these investors and venture capitalists.

In the complaint, Sadeghi included multiple screenshots of chats between himself and Li, which depict Li voicing concern about Pinscreen's capabilities saying "we probably have no choice but to cheat" and "I am really worried that nothing will work by tje [sic] rehearsal and we have to [sic] some shitty cheating again."

Li doesn't refute the existence of the screenshotted messages, but he said in a recent email to Annenberg Media that they are easy to misinterpret.

"The messages and screenshots are presented in a manner that allows them to be taken out of context quite easily," he said in the statement and declined to share more details while the lawsuit is being reviewed.

Li told Annenberg Media that Sadeghi's allegations are false and retaliation for his loss of employment.

"In a hopeless attempt at retaliation, he has falsified communications and other evidence to portray his former employer in bad light. In fact, his most serious claims about fabrication can easily be disproved by a simple demo of our iOS app," he said. The app is available on Apple phones

According to the lawsuit, Sadeghi was working for Google in late 2016 when Li contacted him and offered him a job as vice president of engineering at Pinscreen. Sadeghi said he resigned from Google and began to work at Li's company on February 2, 2017. On August 7, 2017, Sadeghi received a termination notice from Pinscreen. Sadeghi claims that Li terminated him "in retaliation for his objections to Li's and Pinscreen's illegal practices."

In a statement to Annenberg Media, Li said the reason for termination was Sadeghi's "repeated violations of the company's ethical standards and code of conduct." During Sadeghi's six-month tenure at Pinscreen, "he was unproductive and insubordinate," Li said.

Sadeghi responded in a statement that Li's reasoning for his termination is not true. "My termination letter contained no such reference and this is the first time I am hearing such an allegation to be the reason for my termination."

Both men claim criminal activity such as property damage and physical altercation. However, neither provided police reports or documentation of said activity. Annenberg Media made multiple attempts to obtain police reports from LAPD, but did not receive a response before publication.

In his statement, Li said "Pinscreen has retained legal counsel and we have no doubt that once all of the facts come to light, we will be fully vindicated." In response to Li's denial, Sadeghi wrote "Buddha once said, 'Three things cannot be long hidden: the Sun, the Moon, and the Truth.'"