

The Digital Age Of Social Media And Crime Cases

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The Beginning Of A Digital Investigation

What do social media and vacations have in common? Everyone knows where you are and what you are doing every second of every day while you're away. Recently, it's been known to always share your experiences and if you didn't take capture anything, it's labeled as hashtag pics or it didn't happen. Social media has been a resourceful tool when it comes to building your online presence or even solving a crime.

Gabby Petito was a young twenty-two-year-old girl, Long Island native who was traveling across the country in her van. She had started building her online social media presence with the hashtag #vanlife. As she and her fiancé Brian Laundrie embarked on their journey for a 4-month trip, it was quickly turned into a terrifying and gruesome situation.

According to ABC7 Eyewitness News (2021), Their trip started off in Gabby's hometown, Blue Point, NY, for her brother's graduation ceremony on June 17th, 2021. The couple had plans to leave on July 2nd, 2021. They made several stops during the summer months to national parks in Wyoming, Utah, Kansas, and Colorado. The trip was to end on Halloween 2021 in Oregon and the couple was meant to stay with friends that lived there. However, this situation takes a turn for the worse. Gabby Petito's family could not reach her at the end of August. Without actual phone records and other evidence that isn't publicly available at this time, it's hard to know what exactly happened around those days. On September 11th, 2021, according to the New York Times (2021), Gabby's mother Nicole Schmidt files a missing person report to the Suffolk County Police Department. Not long after that people started to quickly notice this case, and social media began to spread her missing person's post around like wildfire. While everyone was sharing this post around, they began to investigate what they could do remotely. Both Gabby's and Brian's social media pages were torn apart by every little detail,

sentence, even by hashtags. Everyone began to come up with their own theories as to what happened, things the police (both Suffolk County Police Department (SCPD) and the Northport Police Department (NPD)) particularly notice on their own.

Many speculate why this case out of all crime cases caught the most media attraction. Some may say that the case is a particularly interesting one due to all of the bizarre details and evidence coming out that aren't "adding up" to what really might have happened. People found it strange because the couple was using their social media as archives to themselves documenting the "#vanlife" lifestyle in odd ways. Then the police bodycam video that was recorded in Moab, Utah was released which gave people more speculation. Once the media informed everyone of the refusal of Laundrie's parents to give a statement about Petitio came out, along with, the other precise details of why this might be peculiar, which will be discussed as you proceed, people started to get a feeling Brian and his family were more involved than they originally thought.

This case is particularly unique because of the quick attraction it received, the bizarre similarities of both Gabby and Brian's social media profiles, and the emotional manipulation to people Brian used through Gabby's captions. While examining Gabby's social media posts, thousands of onlookers, that can include just everyday people, detectives/police, etc., can tell there isn't something quite right with the content being put out. "The media wields tremendous influence in our society. ... Police officers involved in criminal cases may become entangled with the media in the process of providing information about a case" (Capital Punishment in Context, n.d). Capital Punishment in Context (n.d) explains how certain criminal cases can become a headlining story quickly due to information being leaked at times by the investigators that are involved and it's the media that plays a hugely influential part in society to deliver any newsworthy cases.

Social Media is a helpful tool that has been implemented in many criminal cases as of the last 10 years. MVOrganizing (2021) reported that “eight out of every 10 law enforcement professionals (81%) actively use social media as a tool in investigations. 67% of respondents indicate that social media monitoring is a valuable process in anticipating crimes. When used as an investigatory tool, 73% believe social media can help solve cases more quickly” (MVOrganizing, 2021). Law enforcement is more inclined to use social media as the main tool when it comes to investigating criminal cases because, as a society, we are more inclined to post our daily lives and important events that could have a sufficient impact on a case a person was involved in.

Since people post about their daily lives that can attract the attention of followers which good or bad intentions. More people are prone to do their own investigating to see if they can spot out clues that law enforcement might have missed which can lead to several outcomes such as jeopardizing the case from spreading false information, not having the correct investigation techniques and methods to determining whether something is actual evidence, and just simply not having all of the information. With the connection of the theory of Toulmin’s model and the Gabby Petito case, there were millions of people who scoured her social media pages and others who were connected to her social media pages. By doing so, there was an abundance of “internet sleuths” with really helpful information who helped her case and those spreading false narrations on what had happened. Pumphrey Law (2021) explains that internet sleuth is a new term that “... a person who searches the internet for information on a person or an event, doing a kind of detective work through the internet” (Pumphrey Law, 2021). There have been a few social media posts that have been helpful to this specific case - such posts as, the YouTuber couple, Red, White, and Bethune’s video capturing Gabby’s van in Wyoming on August 27th, 2021, and the

TikTok of Miranda Baker explaining her and her boyfriend's interaction with Brian Laundrie on August 29th, 2021.

People have been actively using social media for research in times of investigation whether that's active or cold crimes. It's been known to be a great tool to start off with as a person can make theories based on the foundational idea of the social media content they found regarding a specific case. As we continue to discuss the specifics of social media involvement in criminal cases, you'll begin to notice the techniques used to obtain new information and behaviors people have surrounding the clues.

The Limitations Of Digital Investigations

Involving social media with criminal investigations can influence people to have different thoughts regarding a specific case. At first glance, they can think about how it's a terrible thing that a horrific thing happened and how social media had a first-hand experience as to why that victim went through a certain situation. However, as that person digs deeper - they can start investigating on their own and see things they might have missed the first time. They can, also, get the thought of why the suspect might have done something based on social networking platforms alone.

As we start to look in-depth at related studies and how social media can be used with criminal investigations, you'll begin to realize how we are subconsciously and consciously molded by these social networking platforms daily. You'll, also, be able to perceive that these platforms can create health issues as a prolonged effect. When it comes to criminal cases, these studies explain the difficulties of the technical aspect of these network-sharing websites. Such difficulties include the limited resources police departments have regarding digital evidence and

if it's valid to use and how communication companies use social media to their advantage to monetize particular stories.

Experts are investigating the concept of how these types of network-sharing platforms impact an individual's subconscious and conscious state of mind. "Mass communication theories aim to understand the cognitive, emotional, attitudinal, and behavioral effects of mass communication on individuals or collectivities" (Valkenburg, 2017. P. 477). Many industries are exploring how these impacts can affect an individual's everyday decision-making. Police departments have been incrementing these public internet communities-sharing websites as a tool to help with criminal investigations.

"Social media is also increasingly seen as a beneficial investigative tool for police. The Internet is littered with news stories of how police use of Facebook, in particular, has assisted in solving crime as a result of either information posted on the social networking site or information garnered from the public via the site" (Johnston et al, 2013. P. 1679).

As you continue to read, you'll start to see how there can be limitations in these studies as they might not pertain to real-life situations.

Carlyle (2017) discusses and shows evidence of how social media platforms can play a key factor in violence and how it can lead to long-term public health issues for many. It explains how the media has contributed to the decline of awareness about issues such as social issues and the cause and effects of those issues. The results for preventing this were to educate the younger generations on how to be mindful of their actions and daily decisions that can be influenced by social media usage.

This research is necessary because it points out how abusers can show signs they have domestically abused their loved ones and how they can manipulate others into seeing them as a

victim instead of an abuser through the use of social media. One can, also, argue that it's likely that abusers have been "shaped" by the media, social networking, and their own environment to be violent towards others.

"The relationship between these sorts of electronic intrusions via social media and attachment insecurity in romantic relationships suggested individuals with such anxiety were more likely to perpetrate an intrusion and the researchers argued that social media increases the risk of anxious individuals behaving inappropriately regarding romantic relationships" (Linvill, 2019. P. 373).

In a study by Syam (2018), they demonstrate the uses of forensic linguistics and how it's used in criminal examinations. Forensic linguistics is a subdivision of forensic science and applied linguistics. With the combination of the two, certain experts can use methods to gain evidence digitally using speech and text analysis. As stated by Syam (2018), he explains that this process is used in cases regarding "... Rapes, Murders, Drug dealing, Telephoned Bomb threats, Random threats, Missing, Kidnapping, Counterterrorism, Authorship disputes, Documentation, Text, Media & Social media disputes, Intelligence and Surveillance" (p. 100). The outcome of this journal shows how investigators can access new data that could be useful to cases by certain documentation made online and even offline. Crucial information like this can easily get overlooked by the general public in highly-covered cases by the media. This is a difficult aspect of criminal investigations as there are only one or two specific detectives who can comb through thousands of digital leads in police departments, especially small ones. This exhausts a lot of time, resources, and steps to process each individual tip that is sent in.

"Police executives face a range of choices about how to use their limited time and resources to persuade civilians that they operate professionally and with integrity. These

might include public relations campaigns, retraining patrol officers in managing encounters with the public, improving supervisors' capacity to monitor and improve the behavior of officers in their encounters with the public, and winning over particular segments of the public through specialized community affairs staff. As police executives choose among these options, they will benefit from more information about how public attitudes toward the police are formed" (Miller, 2004. P. 7).

When it comes to criminal investigations, certain media outlets will try to spread awareness or promote users to engage with their shows through the means of social media. "With audience targeting being a dominant strategy for advertisers, plus the increasing competition for the advertising dollar, it is becoming customary for media owners to engage in differentiation strategies to promote themselves as being 'niche' and 'highly targeted'" (Nelson-Field et al, 2011. P. 53). In a study by Kämpel (2019), they dispute that because traditional television views are declining, more news outlets and television networks are more inclined to post their stories on social media. They acknowledge that social media has been the current avenue for people to get their everyday news as many people don't have the attentiveness to sit and watch t.v. like they used to. Kämpel (2019) brings awareness to the fact that media outlets have been promoting their social media content for everyone to see through "sponsored" or "boosted" posts, which are paid posts to reach more users that wouldn't normally see their posts. These media outlets can allow users to see a full article about the story they are reporting on or allow them to see a "teaser" or a preview of what they will be covering. Kämpel (2019) discusses the aspect that the media has a major influence over a person's personal communication methods and their social life - in regards to interests, politics, etc.

The result of this study was to get social media users to investigate on their own if they were influenced by these news channels and if they were subconsciously manipulated into viewing their articles on their website, which would increase their digital traffic. In terms of criminal cases, it demonstrates that if a certain missing person or murder case is highly talked about and is getting a lot of views/attention, they will “boost” their social media posts so their targeted audience sees the posts and click on their website to read more about them (Nelson-Field et al, 2011. P. 53).

The limitations to this discovery are how do we differentiate between what’s being forcefully influenced and what is organic learning when it comes to social media? How can we teach ourselves and generations of all ages to be mindful of their actions due to the content they see on social networking platforms? Other questions posed to this case and future criminal cases that have a huge social media impact are how can we get more accurate identifications of factual digital evidence when there are limited resources and time for all police departments? How can this help the future of criminal investigations? Millions of cases over the past few decades have suffered from not being able to find important evidence due to these obstacles present through examinations. When it comes to media news outlets, specific questions cause give a viewer an idea of guidelines to presenting factual information to the public and if it’s not just based on financial or marketing gains.

Important questions are: how do we know if news stations actually are trying to manipulate followers by pretending they care enough about criminal cases? Is this a scheme to just increase their digital ratings? How does this affect actual cases of missing person reports, etc. if their stories are being monetized instead of spreading awareness?

A lot of factors go into what can help and hurt a criminal investigation. As you proceed, I will be addressing the factors of how social media can incriminate criminal cases and how it is used as a tool during the Gabby Petito case. Using the studies mentioned above, my goal is to show how other academic contributions can showcase how social media networking plays a huge part in how we are “molded” into the person we are. I, also, want to show how we can find virtually anything online as millions document their daily lives.

The Practical Methods Of Digital Investigations

Grounded theory is a conceptual way of analytic reflection and constructing theory skillfulness. This theory is an irregular procedure as the structure does not demonstrate the connections between grounded theory’s foundational techniques and related repetitive steps as a researcher must build-up to the overall theory. Grounded theory can be seen in both qualitative and quantitative research studies. It is a general foundation that determines how systematic research is used in either setting, more so qualitative settings (Chun Tie et al. 2019).

This method of thinking is used in qualitative research as a way for someone to build their arguments for an overall hypothesis to an objective, rather than using a method that provides factual variables. Grounded theory is a preference for most researchers because it allows them to use a unique approach to analytic thinking, and build hypotheses in a way that authorizes them to conduct a reasonable and idea-supportive investigation. Khan (2014) explains that using this perspective gives an “interpretive view of the world is subjective, where individuals form their own reality of the world in different contexts through interactions with others” (p. 225).

While conducting research about this case, I came across numerous posts that had significant evidence in support of my grounded theory about why Laundrie had committed this

crime. The remarkable content that supports this theory, which will be analyzed in-depth as you continue, is the leaked police body cam footage from Utah, both Petito's and Laundrie's social media captions, and videos from YouTube and TikTok that gave police insight into where Petito was. Without this evidence to help law enforcement figure out what happened, this case would be a lot more difficult to figure out. The public has yet to know about other critical evidence surrounding this case but internet sleuths had enough to figure out what happened to Petito.

The Analysis of Evidence of Digital Investigations

As social media evolves, networks are being used more in investigations by law enforcement. For every case, detectives have to make sure they have enough evidence that supports their theories on what happened, who committed the crime, and the reason why it happened, including digital tips. When it comes to the Gabby Petito case, thousands of digital clues were sent in for examination. Many tips will turn out not credible while others will help solve the case.

When investigators go through the Petito case, they can see a few themes being shown through these social media posts. Themes such as emotional manipulation, the quick attraction from media outlets, and how internet sleuths played a huge role in solving this case. As you proceed, you will be presented with evidence that helps define a theory as to why Laundrie committed a horrific crime and why everyone including media outlets were infatuated with the Petito case.

Broadcasting networks have integrated grounded theory into their marketing strategy because this allows new ways to increase the number of viewers that are engaging with their content. However, these new ways allow companies to take advantage of social media platforms and these platforms' users. Smith (2015) discusses this more by saying, "strategic

communication should comprise a balance of pursuing the organizational mission and encouraging public participation through social media channels, with the imperative on symmetrical and dialogic communication ... The question of how strategic communicators and organizations should manage social media has been unanswered” (p. 272). Knowing how much control organizations, such as media news outlets, have over millions of users is unknown.

Media outlets can target specific users through demographics to allow them to see the media company’s social media content and big new stories they are covering on their shows that will grab the targeted audience’s attention. Kumpel (2019) supports this technique by saying:

“Importantly, however, using SNS for news does not imply that information about current events is actively searched for. In fact, most users report encountering news incidentally by being exposed to activities or (paid) posts by news providers and friends. SNS users mostly stumble upon illustrated link previews and are free to decide whether they want to follow the link to the full article or just skim through its teaser” (P. 374).

When it comes to big new stories, news outlets want to be the first ones to break the story to the general public and they do that by targeting their audience to get their attention.

One story that broke the internet and caught a lot of attraction is the Gabby Petito case, as I had mentioned earlier. Thousands, if not millions, found themselves engaging in social media content or tangled in the obsession of how this case was portrayed by the media. There was a ton of speculation as to why this case was rapidly at the forefront of every magazine, newspaper, and news channel on t.v. Theories stemmed from strong narrative elements that involved a young couple documenting their #vanlife journey on Youtube which gives the news outlets easy access to public photos, videos, and audio clips. These outlets can be used to fill in the blanks and give a narrative to the case as a whole. The audience was infatuated with the idea that the uncertainty of

outcome is the greatest suspense they have seen in the media recently. The general public was, also, obsessed with the idea that there was a cliffhanger. Media news outlets were quick to jump on monetizing this story as a way to gain views and followers.

Once the media presented leaked police bodycam footage of an incident between Gabby Petito and Brian Laundrie on August 12th in Moab, Utah. Everyone quickly realized discrepancies between Petito and Laundrie's separate conversation with the police as to what had happened. Notably, viewers noticed how Gabby Petito was very emotional describing how she and Laundrie got into an argument over personal issues. Petito showed signs she was blaming herself for the reason they got into an argument, how she has OCD (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder) which explains how she was a perfectionist and hated that the van was not up to her living expectations. These are all signs of victim-blaming, which can make one speculate there were indications of domestic violence going on in their relationship.

"The prevalence of victim blaming in public sphere discourses is problematic not only because such rhetoric supplements victims' physical and emotional scars with discursive attacks but also because rhetorics of blame often prevent victims from reporting assaults. Incidents of gendered violence, including sexual assault and assault by an intimate partner, are consistently underreported" (Edgar, 2014. P. 138-139).

Victim mentality is a learned personality attribute that a person recognizes as a victim in a negative situation. As a viewer looks at Laundrie in this body cam footage, they can tell he's "calm" and analytical as he's trying to joke around with the police officers to see what they are thinking. Laundrie calls Petito "crazy" to make the cops sympathize and feel less tense with him.

“People with a victim mentality are passive-aggressive in their interactions with others.

The passive-aggressive style is a very subtle, indirect, or behind-the-scenes way of getting what they want and expressing anger without openly acknowledging it or directly confronting the source of it” (Kets de Vries, 2012).

Viewers can see Laundrie was emotionally manipulating Petito through this strategy. Investigating this case, a person can detect that Brian Laundrie showed signs he was using a victim mentality while inflicting negative situations on others.

A theme of this victim mentality would be seen as emotional manipulation. In several situations, Laundrie started showing he was emotionally manipulating Petito and her followers through the use of social media. When Petito went missing around August 27th, 2021 - people started to notice changes on Petito’s social media captions. These captions started suggesting that Laundrie was being painted to be seen as a good person and this was good to set up an alibi or defense for him if this case was ever to be prosecuted. Certain captions from Petito’s Instagram posts would be “@bizarre_design_ inspires me everyday on living a more natural lifestyle!” (Petito, 2021) and others would boost his whereabouts with specific details such as captions like:

“On a calm Monday morning, @bizarre_design_ and I decided to take the highly trafficked hike to the Delicate Arch. Not sure if it’s because it was 7AM on a Monday, but there actually were not as many people on the trail as I expected. After waiting in a short line for someone to generously take our photo, @bizarre_design_ and I made our way to the other side of the arch” (Petito, 2021).

Petito’s social media captions were usually short with a couple of words, a few icons, and hashtags, Laundrie’s social media captions are long, detailed, with no icons, and one to two hashtags.

Social media is, what some called, a false reality. People always post about the good in their life and not the bad parts that they might deal with on a daily basis. While internet sleuths were searching through digital records available to them about Laundrie and Petito's relationship, they found a now-deleted post with a suspicious caption that Laundrie made when the couple got engaged in July 2020.

"My biggest fear is that one day I'll wake up and it will have all been a dream because that is what every second has felt like since the moment we found each other. Till death do us part or until I wake up, I'm so happy the answer was yes" (Laundrie, 2020). It appears that Laundrie wanted to promote this image of himself as being the "loving, supportive, happy" fiancé which he was emotionally manipulating Petito and followers to believe. However, the references of death and Petito together appear twice on his Instagram account before it was deleted.

Internet sleuths believe that Laundrie was jealous of Petito's attention she was getting on social media from her content on YouTube and Instagram. Laundrie's actions could be a form of gaslighting to followers who were investigating him and his involvement in this case. While investigating this couple, several major social media posts broke the case for detectives. One post, in particular, was the accidental recording of Gabby's white van in the Spread Creek Dispersed Camping area from a YouTube couple, Red, White, and Bethune on August 25th, 2021. This sighting is believed to have occurred around the time of Petito's death. After law enforcement officers were notified of this footage going around on social media, they made a discovery of Petito in this location on September 19th, 2021.

Another huge break, in this case, was the TikTok post by a creator named Miranda Baker. After internet sleuths started piecing little details together, Baker posted about her and her

boyfriend's experience with Laundrie on the night of August 29th, 2021. Baker (2021) describes that they picked Laundrie up and he had an anxious demeanor. Laundrie offered the couple \$200 for a 10-mile car ride, which the couple started to get suspicious of his behavior. Once, Laundrie found out Baker and her boyfriend were going to Jackson, Wyoming - he immediately asked to get out on the side of the road and he'll ask someone else for a ride. Internet sleuths believed that's the location of where he killed Gabby.

Portable devices and the internet have provided so much flexibility to anyone trying to learn, study, or research any topic they need in seconds. Although the title internet sleuth isn't a credible one you can earn through a university or career - it is easy to look up and go through other sources to find clues relating to criminal cases.

From the data I've researched in the Gabby Petito case regarding the themes of Laundrie's emotional manipulation, the media portrayal to the general public, and the internet sleuths researching additional information can influence a person to believe that Petito was in an abusive relationship with Laundrie. Petito trusted Laundrie throughout their relationship. When they embarked on their 4-month road trip in July 2021, he either started showing signs of abusive behavior towards Petito, or the abusive behavior was already established before the trip. A possibility is this could have escalated since they were in close proximity to one another for hours on end. My overall theory is Laundrie noticed the attention Petito was quickly gaining on social media platforms, due to her lifestyle/van life content she made, and he became jealous. The availability of the evidence that is publicly shared by police departments at this time, demonstrates that he probably became enraged towards her because of this, and other reasons that are unknown. I'm assuming that's why he killed her. Laundrie probably saw the quick obsession of this case after Petito's mother had reported her missing, due to everyone talking

about it on social media platforms and on the news. He was probably concerned that the public was going to catch onto his emotional manipulation tactics and that's why he tried to cover up, or provide a foundation to a defense or alibi through Petito's social media content. However, we may never know the real reasons why Laundrie committed this horrific crime, because he committed suicide a week after Petito was found.

Social media has been a great tool, as it's not just professionals anymore looking for new evidence to create theories of how a crime happened, such as the Gabby Petito case. This case has changed the way criminal cases like assault, murder, etc. can be investigated and allows the average person to do their own investigating in times of need, if necessary. This case gives the opportunity for society to learn from these themes by promoting them to report any type of crimes they have witnessed or have been victims of, including domestic abuse cases. It, also, allows individuals to become more aware of gaslighting or emotional manipulation tactics used by the people close to them. Such signs should be taken into serious consideration as they could fall victim to a situation as Gabby Petito did.

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