

# TikTok is on the Gabby Petito case. Are these true crime sleuths helping solve it?

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

The Gabby Petito case is the latest social media whodunit for a true-crime obsessed generation on TikTok.

The #GabbyPetito hashtag has more than 500 million views on the short-form video app. And many TikTok creators share updates including unconfirmed reports, screenshots of texts from amateur sleuths about their theories and their own feelings about the case.

Some of the crowd-sleuthing on [social media](#) has even turned up leads.

Authorities found human remains they believe to be Petito near Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming. A second search for her fiancé and the sole person of interest in the case, Brian Laundrie, came up empty. FBI agents on Monday searched the Florida home of Petito and Laundrie.

The two were living at his parents' Florida home before leaving from Long Island in July on a weeks-long, cross-country adventure. Laundrie, who returned to Florida alone Sept. 1, intensified the mystery by refusing to discuss Petito's whereabouts with authorities, then disappearing himself last week.

Miranda Baker, in videos posted to TikTok, said she and her boyfriend picked up Laundrie, who was hitchhiking, on Aug. 29 at Grand Teton Park. She said they notified police of the brief encounter.

Travel vloggers Jenn and Kyle Bethune said on Instagram they spotted Petito's white van in GoPro footage they recorded while camping in late August. They shared the footage with the FBI before posting it online. What are thought to be Petito's remains were found close to that spot.

Jenn Bethune said she reviewed the footage after someone tagged her in a social media post calling on people who had visited the national park on Aug. 27 to help investigators.

Banding together on social media to play amateur detective can help

investigators. It can also spread falsehoods and speculation.

Social media users helped track down hundreds of people suspected of taking part in the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol, but also falsely identified several people in the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing.

Petito, who planned to chronicle the cross-country trip on the couple's YouTube channel, was a budding internet personality. She and Laundrie posted about their vanlife travels on TikTok, Instagram and YouTube.

"Many people following (Petito) feel like they have a vested interest in her because she was a part of their lives as she told her stories, and when it abruptly ends because of a tragedy, they want to help find out who did it," said Todd Shipley, president of the High Technology Crime Investigation Association.

But an missing person investigation this massive staffed by untrained volunteer investigators can create problems for law enforcement and investigators trying to sort through thousands of leads, Shipley said.

"You have to evaluate what's real and what's not and sort through all of the information and determine what's of value," he told U.S. TODAY. "With thousands of tips coming in it can be both valuable and overwhelming."

One TikTok creator, Jessica Dean, called out what she says was insensitive behavior as people investigated Petito's disappearance on social media.

"Oh, you haven't heard of Gabby Petito? Oh my god, girl, you are missing out. This stuff is so good," she said in her video that's been viewed over half a million times. "I made a 28-part monetized series on my TikTok all about it, going over every single detail, including her

Spotify playlist. I just dig up every inch of this poor girl's life for my personal entertainment."

Dean told BuzzFeed News she felt she needed to speak up, having lived through a true-crime tragedy when she was in high school. She lived in the same neighborhood as the girls convicted in the Slender Man stabbing in 2014 and knew everyone involved in the case.

Some TikTok users were "tremendously insensitive," Dean said.

"A lot of videos would start with things, like, 'Omg, guys, we are watching a true crime episode unfold in real life,' or people saying, 'I can't wait to be a part of the Netflix documentary,'" she told BuzzFeed News. "Someone should get the movie rights to this before someone else does."

With amateur detectives dissecting every shred of visual evidence they come across, some are asking why the cases of other missing people aren't getting the same kind of attention.

Accounts like Indigenous Women Hike on Instagram say that missing people of color and Indigenous people deserve as much energy.

The Black and Missing Foundation and Missing and Murdered Indigenous People regularly share flyers asking for help finding missing people via social media.

A viral tweet on Sunday reminded the public to keep watch for another missing person, 24-year-old Daniel Robinson, a Black geologist who was last seen on June 23 before going missing in the desert.

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