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In:

Kerstin-Anja Munderlein (Ed.), Crime Fiction, Femininities and Masculinities : Proceedings of the Eighth Captivating Criminality Conference, Bamberg : University of Bamberg Press, 14p.. 2024. DOI: 10.20378/irb-92502

Bookpart - Published Version

DOI of the Article: 10.20378/irb-94623

Date of Publication: 15.04.2024

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Digitalizing Femicide: The Gabby Petito Case as a Technocentric Crime Narrative

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Abstract

Few criminal cases have galvanized the global public like the murder of travel vlogger Gabby Petito in 2021. The fact that it was solved with the help of social media has perceptibly shifted public discourses on the merits of amateur internet sleuthing. But at the same time, media narratives of Petito's death have been widely framed as a cautionary tale about the dangers of the online environment for women, thus reproducing a centuries-old pattern of linking female victimization to female public visibility. This article examines the Gabby Petito case as a cultural phenomenon, illustrating how collective perceptions of crime are shaped by the social concerns of the day – and how timeworn gender biases are replicated in allegedly disembodied virtual spaces.

Keywords

Gabby Petito, femicide in popular media, cultural impact of social media, domestic violence, online misogyny

“She touched the world,” Joseph Petito posted on Instagram the day after the body of his daughter Gabrielle “Gabby” Petito was found in late September 2021. Repeated in countless press releases, makeshift memorials and murals, this phrase became shorthand for the extraordinary level of public interest in the young woman's fate. Almost immediately after the twenty-two-year-old travel vlogger was reported missing, her story was taken up by the press and quickly grew from a national to an international news item. Mainstream networks breathlessly reported on every new development, and an army of internet sleuths from all over the world sifted through emerging footage with forensic interest, some of them even physically travelling to the site of the crime in search of evidence. Within a few weeks, the hashtag #FindGabby amassed a billion views, and the production of a film about her disappearance and death was announced even before the basic facts of the case had been established.¹ The media spectacle also featured colorful figures like Duane Chapman, better known as television personality Dog the Bounty Hunter, who inserted himself into the investigation (Jancelewitz). Even QAnon weighed in to claim that the entire incident was a ‘false flag’ operation to distract the world from President Biden's failings (Palmer).

¹ *The Gabby Petito Story* was released in October 2022 on the Lifetime network to mostly unenthusiastic reviews.

There is ongoing speculation as to what made this particular case such a media magnet. Almost unanimously, Petito's physical attractiveness and girl-next-door charm have been identified as the factors that elevated her story above the more than 90,000 other active missing persons in the US at the time. As legal analyst Mary Fulginiti has commented in a recent interview, "there seems to be a tendency in these types of cases to give a disproportionate amount of attention to a certain type of individual, and I think Gabby Petito was a young, beautiful, blonde, blue-eyed girl" (Fulginiti 27:47-27:59). In other words, hers is a prime example of the 'missing white woman syndrome,' a term famously coined by US journalist Gwen Ifill for the tendency of media coverage to focus on white, middle-class, female victims while disappearances of people of color, especially if they are male and come from the lower strata of society, usually go unreported.²

This article examines the Gabby Petito case as a cultural touchstone. In keeping with the understanding that "the cultural dynamics carry within them the meaning of crime" (Ferrel et al. 2), it seeks to go beyond generalized explanations based on sensationalism, racial bias, and stereotypical images of female innocence by exploring the strong collective response to this personal tragedy in the context of social debates that are unique to the present cultural moment. These include the increased public attention to issues of sexism and domestic violence in the wake of the #MeToo movement, the collective longing for personal mobility during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the growing discontent with traditional career paths especially among young people. But most crucially, it looks at the ways in which media narratives of this murder reflect the deeply ambiguous contemporary attitudes towards social media, which are cast both as a utopian realm of new possibilities and a crime-ridden danger zone. Reflecting this dichotomy, the online community was widely celebrated for its constructive role in solving this case at the very same time that Gabby's victimization was conflated with her online presence, thus reproducing a centuries-old narrative about the dangers attached to female public visibility. The following case analysis draws on cultural studies, media studies, and criminology to interrogate what makes certain crimes representative of their time – and to highlight how true crimes are framed, and often misframed, by collective anxieties.

A Crime of the Digital Age

Since the emergence of mass media, crime has been a staple of the public news diet. In fact, the history of crime and the evolution of media have often gone hand in

² A 2016 analysis of race and gender disparities in the treatment of missing person cases arrives at the conclusion that "[n]ot only are missing blacks and missing men less likely at the outset to garner media coverage than other types of missing persons, but they also receive a lower intensity of coverage when their stories are, in fact, picked up by news outlets. In other words, there is a two-stage discrepancy that limits the amount of coverage certain types of missing persons receive" (Sommers 280).

hand. For instance, the Jack the Ripper murders of 1888 ushered in a heyday for daily newspapers in England, the massive public interest in the legal proceedings against Ted Bundy in 1979 spurred the decision to allow cameras in US courtrooms, and the O.J. Simpson trial boosted the popularity of cable TV in the 1990s. By the same token, the Gabby Petito case has been momentous for the digital age not only because it generated record-breaking levels of online attention, but also because it gave credence to ‘armchair detectives’ as genuine assets to law enforcement. Although this is not the first time that hobby criminologists have helped solve crimes, the sheer scale of the publicity surrounding this murder has caused a marked shift in the discourse on citizen participation in criminal investigations.³ Traditionally, criminology professionals have tended to take a skeptical view of amateur involvement, citing its propensity to sensationalize crimes, foster vigilantism, misdirect resources towards false leads, interfere with the work of trained experts, and destroy people’s lives through false accusations (Fisher et al.; Marx and Archer; Ortiz; Powell). By contrast, in the context of the Gabby Petito case, eminent members of the legal and law enforcement communities have encouraged laypersons to come to the aid of a chronically understaffed police force. One of them is criminal justice professor and former NYPD detective Michael Alcazar, who pointed out in a *Washington Post* interview that “[m]ost agencies don’t have that many detectives to canvass for witnesses, to canvass for any kind of evidence. Now we have so many eyes out there, millions of civilian investigators, because now they’re on the lookout. It’s kind of like an Amber Alert, but more effective” (Anders and Kornfield). Along the same lines, Adam Scott Wandt of *NBC News* has stated that

The phenomenon of Americans crowdsourcing their time and attention to assist law enforcement is not new. But Petito’s case adds a new wrinkle, because it shows what a difference these citizen detectives can make when armed with social media Indeed, widespread citizen engagement on social media could be the secret weapon that turns the tide in the fight for missing persons. (Wandt)

But in parallel to this enthusiastic view of new media’s impact on fighting crime, there has been a counter-narrative which makes sense of Gabby’s death within the context of her social media activity. Although her aspiration to become a successful blogger was merely circumstantial to her death, her murder has been widely construed as a cautionary tale about the pitfalls of the online environment. This ties into a broader historical pattern of associating women’s victimization with their forays into public territory. Incidentally, it is probably more than a coincidence that many of the landmark cases that shaped the relationship between crime and media are femicides. Throughout history, the female body has been a canvas for the projection of moral standards and cultural anxieties, with public discourses on crime, victimhood, and punishment habitually revolving around the question of women’s proper

³ For instance, the online forum Websleuths.com has had a crucial role in solving multiple cold cases, and police have actively reached out to individual users for help (Murphy).

conduct in public spaces, whether it be the streets of Whitechapel in the nineteenth century or online dating sites in the twenty-first. The true crime genre in particular has been noted for its conservative bent. Combining “intensely gendered appeal and misogynist subject matter” (Murley 3) with “prurient interests in the untimely demise of ‘innocents’” (3), it has tended to reinforce rather than challenge traditional gender norms.

Gabby Petito’s murder is no exception. While her wholesome appearance does not easily lend itself to overt moralistic judgment, press coverage of her death has been following a familiar discursive norm by portraying her as an example of fragile female innocence in a treacherous, male-connoted online world. If, as Jean Murley has stated in her book *The Rise of True Crime*, true crime is “a cultural barometer that registers shifting fears about crime and violence” (Murley 44), then what does it say about our culture that the death of a young woman is almost universally associated with the dangers of new technology despite her killing being unrelated to her online activities? Before going on to examine this question, the following section provides an outline of the case as a basis for my argument.

Synopsis of the Gabby Petito Case

On July 4, 2021, Gabby Petito and her fiancé Brian Laundrie of New Port, Florida, embark on what is supposed to be a four-month road trip across the US. Their plan is to visit various national parks in Gabby’s converted van and post about their travel experiences on Instagram, YouTube and TikTok under the popular hashtag #van-life. Both had previously quit their jobs – Gabby as a nutritionist and Brian as a content manager – with the aspiration of building a large enough social media following to become full-time influencers. The photos and clips they post along the way show a happy couple enjoying the trip of a lifetime. But on August 12, 2021, police in Moab, Utah receive a 911 call by a passerby who reports witnessing a physical confrontation between Gabby and Brian. Police quickly spot the couple’s van, which is driving erratically, pull them over, and proceed to question them separately, with bodycam video recording the entire incident. While Brian seems relatively collected, Gabby is visibly distressed. Crying, she tells the officer that her relationship with Brian is going through a difficult phase because her “really bad OCD” (Moab Police bodycam video 2:38-2:40) keeps colliding with his more relaxed attitude towards tidiness. She also mentions feeling stressed by the work it takes to start up her blog and expresses her disappointment at the lack of support from her fiancé who “doesn’t really believe that I can do any of it” (3:30-3:34). Police notice scratches and bruises on Gabby as well as Brian, but both downplay their altercation. Based on Gabby’s repeated assertions that it was her who had initiated the physical fight, officers identify her as the main aggressor but decide to make no arrest under the

condition that the couple keep apart for the night, with Gabby staying in the van and Brian checking into a nearby hotel.

A video posted on the couple's YouTube channel some days later shows them laughing and kissing. Gabby's last social media post is made on August 25, 2021. In the following days, texts sent from her phone notify her family that there will be no cell service at the pair's next destination. Although the wording of the messages strikes Gabby's mother as unusual for her daughter, she is not immediately alarmed. But after ten days without any contact or social media activity from the otherwise communicative Gabby, her family decides to file a missing person report. The ensuing police inquiry finds Brian already back in New Port where, it turns out, he had been already for nearly two weeks after having returned in Gabby's van alone. Refusing to talk to authorities about his fiancée's whereabouts, he is declared a person of interest. Despite being put under surveillance, he evades police by absconding to an unknown location. With the case already in the public limelight, speculations, conspiracy theories, and false sightings of Gabby and Brian proliferate particularly on social media. But all the online publicity also reaches genuine witnesses, who turn out to be valuable sources of information regarding the couple's last interactions and movements. The most important lead comes from a couple who, much like Gabby and Brian, had set out to document their cross-country journey for the online community. They provide the FBI with coincidentally captured footage which shows Gabby's van parked at Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming around the time of her last sighting. Only hours later, a search of the surrounding area results in the discovery of Gabby's body, with autopsy later revealing manual strangulation as her cause of death. A month later, following an intense manhunt, Brian's remains are found in the Carlton Reserve in Florida. It is determined that he died by a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. Among his belongings is a notebook which contains his written confession to killing Gabby.

A Picture-Perfect Femicide

The media frenzy that accompanied these events was to a large extent fueled by the wealth of audiovisual material, which not only appealed to the voyeuristic appetites of our visual culture but also catered to the participatory ethos of digital networking sites. Gabby's active social media accounts, the ubiquity of CCTV recordings, and the publicly released police bodycam footage yielded digital puzzle pieces that piqued the public's curiosity and spurred the ambitions of hobby detectives. The online peeks into Gabby's private life combined with the rawness of the police video showing her in a moment of extreme vulnerability created a sense of intimacy which made her seem particularly relatable.⁴ This identification effect was even amplified

⁴ Similar viral phenomena developed around other missing young women who have left large digital footprints, for instance twenty-one-year-old Canadian student Elisa Lam, who went missing

by the fact that her story contained key elements that reflected profound collective shifts impacting people's realities across the globe. Most notably, the COVID-19 pandemic had disrupted accustomed ways of living, drastically limiting personal freedom of movement and making people more than ever reliant on online communication. Concomitantly, it exacerbated preexisting social inequalities and intensified the widespread discontent with the economic status quo which has been fermenting since the financial crisis of 2008. With working conditions rapidly deteriorating in numerous sectors, especially young people began quitting their jobs in record numbers in what has been dubbed "The Great Resignation." Publicly deplored by many employers as a sign of the young generation's lack of work ethic, it is in fact the culmination of growing collective disenchantment with the labor market after decades of decreasing upward mobility. In this atmosphere of precarity, where good qualifications and hard work no longer come with the promise of professional advancement or, for that matter, even a minimal level of financial stability, many young people are on the lookout for alternatives to traditional career options.

This is one of the reasons why 'influencer' or 'social media star' has become one of the main career aspirations for young people in the West. According to a much-quoted US-based survey conducted in 2019, as many as 86 percent of respondents aged 13 to 38 say "they're willing to try out influencing on their social media platforms," and 54 percent would become full-time influencers, given the opportunity (Morning Consult). Similar findings have been reported from other countries like Great Britain and New Zealand (Harris Poll; New Zealand Tertiary Education Commission). And so, in the midst of a once-in-a-century public health crisis, when many people were spending increased amounts of time online, craving physical travel and contemplating alternatives to dead-end jobs, the story of a young couple trying to carve out a better future in the online universe struck a nerve with a worldwide audience, speaking to major collective desires as well as to major collective frustrations.

The deeply conflicted contemporary discourse on social media falls into both these categories. As numerous scholars have noted, especially the last decade has seen a shift from a predominantly optimistic to an ambiguous and even dystopian view of new media (Schradie; Salter). When the first networking platforms cropped up in the mid-noughties, they were widely heralded as emancipatory forces that would encourage social collaboration, enable more rewarding modes of working, and amplify the voices of subaltern groups. In many ways, this vision has indeed come true as the online environment has veritably created new career options, and hashtag campaigns such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter have had a game-changing im-

in Los Angeles in 2013. In her case, the interest was additionally fueled by the fact that her disappearance and death were tied to the notorious Cecil Hotel, the site of multiple well-publicized murders and suicides.

pact on public conversations on sexism and racism. But at the same time, the proliferation of misinformation, political extremism, and hate speech in online spaces has cast a negative light on the internet and social media as sinister tools of corporate control and the romping ground of terrorists, frauds, and sexual predators. In medical and psychological research, online activity has been associated with mental health issues such as depression, stress, and suicidality (American Psychological Association). Warnings against mind-corroding tech industry practices have also been issued by several whistle blowers, and popular documentaries like *The Great Hack* (2019) and the *The Social Dilemma* (2020) have sounded the alarm over the detrimental effects of social media particularly on the mental health of young people. It is this discursive tension between technological optimism and moral panic that has also provided the framework for the press narratives of Gabby Petito's murder.

Technocentric Framing of Physical Violence

Significantly, the killing of Gabby Petito by her fiancé occurred at a time when the #MeToo movement had brought violence against women to the forefront of public awareness. Especially during the pandemic, when lockdowns increased the potential for domestic conflicts and at the same time cut victims off from their support networks, intimate partner abuse gained widespread attention as a high-priority social problem.⁵ Against this background, it is noteworthy that even though domestic violence was consistently brought up as a catchword in Gabby's case, engagement with this issue was tangential at best. In interviews, her friends and family were regularly asked whether they had witnessed any tell-tale signs of Brian's violent nature, which most of them negated, conversely describing their impression of him as good-natured, polite, and quiet. And yet, the fact that the toxicity of the relationship evidently went unnoticed for what experts retrospectively concluded must have been years of abuse did not elicit further reflections on the dynamics in the couples' immediate social environment. Instead, it typically served as a thematic gateway to discussing Gabby's activity on social media. What emerged as the overwhelming leitmotif was the perilousness of the online environment, with the language typically evoking a deadly clash between reality and fiction. To give just a few samples, a report by *60 Minutes Australia* opened with the ominous commentary that

Gabby Petito and her fiancé Brian Laundrie were a young couple who seemed to have it all Like so many others, they also had a desire to show off their idyllic and carefree lives on YouTube and Instagram. But now we know the postcard images and million-dollar smiles were hiding an ugly and murderous truth. (0:05-0:32)

⁵ According to *The American Journal of Emergency Medicine*, domestic violence cases increased by 25% to 33% globally during the first weeks of the pandemic (Boserup et al.).

Along the same lines, the 2021 documentary *The Murder of Gabby Petito: Truth, Lies, and Social Media* concluded that “there was more to the relationship than we saw on social media,” and an episode of the true crime show *48 Hours* titled “Gabby Petito: The Untold Story” kept reminding viewers that “Gabby posted constantly, every little detail. But all those selfies may have been hiding a darker story” (9:55-10:15). In a similar vein, an op-ed in *Teen Vogue* titled “Gabby Petito’s Seemingly-Idyllic Online Life Highlights a Dark Side of Social Media” issued a warning to its young readers that “just because you’re passively consuming images and stories of a stranger’s life in unprecedented detail doesn’t mean you’re friends” (Kabas). What is revealing about this social-media-centered angle is that it explicitly or implicitly conflates Gabby’s murder with her online presence. Instead of focusing on the reasons for the *actual* violence levelled at the *actual* victim, it redirects attention to the perils which arise to her audience from social media’s deceptive potential. In other words, the discrepancy between Gabby’s offline life and her carefully curated online showcase is honed in on as the main transgressive moment while the concrete act of killing fades into the narrative background.

The collective reflex to package this femicide as a dark tale about the hazards of social media is particularly telling because it is utterly at odds with the facts. Unlike in other instances where victims have attracted the attention of stalkers through social media posts, were deceived by fake online personas, or became the targets of cyber-bullying, in Gabby’s case the online realm is not a functional element of the crime. After all, she neither encountered Brian online – they had known each other for many years from high school – nor was she an online recluse with atrophied social skills, which would have made her particularly vulnerable ‘in real life.’ By all accounts, the very opposite was the case, as Gabby has been universally described as an exceptionally active and socially well-adjusted young woman. Given that her death had nothing to do with her online presence and everything to do with her real-life environment, the thematic fixation on social media says less about the intrinsic logic of the murder than about the cultural preoccupations of our time.⁶

⁶ The fascination with female visibility on social media is also dominating the reporting on a more recent sensational crime, the so-called Idaho student murders of 13 November 2022, when four University of Idaho students, three females and one male, were fatally stabbed in their residence by an intruder. Ever since the suspect, a 28-year-old doctoral student in criminology from nearby Pullman, Washington, was arrested, there have been speculations as to whether specifically the female victims caught their murderer’s attention online. For instance, in a podcast episode of the true crime show *Dateline* titled “The Killings on King Road,” host Keith Morrison repeatedly ponders the vulnerability of “young, open lives on campus, people who loved and lived on social media” (6:38-6:46). After presenting TikTok clips of two female victims, he goes on to explain that “this is how life is lived for millions, out loud where everybody can see, no matter what a secret observer’s motive might be” (7:15-7:26), which is followed by further discussion of how people can be contacted and tracked by strangers through social networking technology. As of the time of writing in June 2023, no evidence has been published to suggest that the contact between the murderer and his victims was made through social media.

This is not to deny that the cultural obsession with glossy self-promotion may well have played a role in this tragedy. For instance, one cannot help but wonder whether Gabby's unwillingness to open up to friends and family about her abusive relationship can be at least partially ascribed to a perceived need to maintain a flawless veneer in order to be appealing. But whatever the personal reasons for her silence, they ultimately reside in psychology rather than technology. Hence, the technocentric fixation on social media is unwarranted and misleading. It speaks to a problematic collective tendency, as observed by Salter for previous cases, to "inaccurately conflate physical offences with online abuse" (Salter 27), which not only obscures the broader cultural contexts that enable violent behavior but also shifts the focus from the aggressor's wrongdoing to the victim's risk-taking in showing herself online. However, this discursive pattern is not new to the internet age but represents a digital extension of longstanding gendered norms when it comes to safety in public spaces.

Offline Patterns in Online Spaces

In the 1970s, the infamous Yorkshire Ripper spread fear and panic in Northern England. For five years, during which the serial killer murdered at least thirteen women and violently attacked eleven, the Yorkshire police failed to make any progress in the case – in large part due to the false assumption that the Ripper attacked 'only' prostitutes. But instead of reevaluating their methods, officials' response was to effectively impose a nightly curfew on women. As the murders continued, media voices started expressing disapproval of those women who put themselves at risk by venturing out of their home after dark. In response, women took to the streets in what would be the first of a series of Reclaim the Night protest. One of the original organizers, feminist activist Julie Bindel, remembers:

The Reclaim the Night march was saying, the night, the evening, the dark is as much ours to claim as it is men's. There were women from all walks of life on that march, shouting at the police, they were shouting about the media coverage, they were shouting about male violence. It was never just about this killer, it was never just about these murders. Men did commit acts of rape and domestic violence on a regular basis. And I think the women were recognizing that this killer would not have done what he'd done were it not for the culture of misogyny we were living under. ("Reclaim the Night" 35:44-36:31)

Half a century later, the feminist movement has doubtlessly achieved significant progress in asserting women's entitlement to move safely in public spaces. And yet, sexist premises still shape discussions of violence against women. Consider, for example, the social construction of sexual violence on US university campuses, which has been widely recognized as a collective crisis.⁷ As Hayes and Luther have discussed, a common explanation "blames victims for being intoxicated or dressing

⁷ In response to what is often described as a national epidemic of sexual violence on US university campuses, in 2014 the Obama Administration established the White House Task Force to Protect

provocatively and encourages college students to avoid behaving in ways that ‘ask for’ sexual assault” (Hayes and Luther 12). The same logic is applied to online spaces where, on the one hand, “young women and girls are at disproportionate risk of humiliation and intimidation” (Salter 17) and, on the other, questions of their safety tend to be formulated around a “moralistic focus on personal responsibility” (82). In stark contrast to male users, who seldom face serious fallout from transgressive online postings like ‘gross-out videos’ or ‘dick pics,’ girls and women are habitually branded as ‘attention seekers’ and ‘sluts,’ even when the humiliating or provocative content is published without their consent.

Big Tech has been slow to respond to online misogyny, as evidenced by the initial *laissez-faire* attitude towards concerted and sustained abuse campaigns such as ‘Gamergate,’ which explicitly mobilized around the goal of ostracizing female members of the gaming community for challenging misogynist norms, or by the success of *IsAnyoneUp.com*. Famous for contributing the term ‘revenge porn’ to common parlance, this site’s business model was built on humiliating women by uploading nude photos which had been obtained in breach of their privacy. And yet, for the longest time, the victims’ complaints were met in the spirit of Google CEO Eric Schmidt’s oft-quoted statement that “[i]f you have something that you don’t want anyone to know, maybe you shouldn’t be doing it in the first place” (qtd. in Esguerra).

Media scholars have interpreted such reactions as part of a broad sexist backlash against the massive influx of female users which social media has brought to the previously male domain of the internet. Counter to the common notion of cyberspace as a sphere of disembodiment where identities can be constructed beyond the restraints of sex and gender, the online world has become an aggressively gendered arena. By leaving it to individuals to grapple with the cultural problem of misogyny in what has been labelled ‘digital Darwinism,’ internet and social media are effectively sustained as techno-masculinist territory, in spite of the majority of social media users today being female (Salter; Hayes and Luther). The implicit message is that women enter the jungle of social media at their own peril.

Although online sexism does not relate directly to Gabby Petito’s case, public perceptions of her murder have been informed by the knee-jerk response to invoke social media as a dangerous place for women. The paradoxicality of such technocentric narratives becomes most glaring when even those closest to Gabby adapt their accounts to the social media template. For instance, one of Gabby’s best friends stated in an interview that “anyone that’s met [Gabby and Brian] has been like, they seem like such a nice couple,” then adding with a meaningful expression that “a lot of

Students from Sexual Assault and launched the Not Alone initiative to provide support for victims.

couples look nice on Instagram” (48 *Hours* 2:22-2:29). Similarly, Gabby’s father reflected that “[o]utside looking in she did look happy,” even though in hindsight he concedes that “[i]t might not have been as great as people online perceived” (60 *Minutes Australia* 1:22-1:29). Both these perspectives suggest that, even to family and friends, Gabby was knowable mainly as an online presence, so that her online visibility ironically becomes an explanation for why her struggles remained unnoticed and unaddressed in real life.

All this speaks to a collective subconscious that is all too willing to accept the internet as a no-go zone for women and to pin the blame for longstanding patterns of female victimization on new technology. The gendered dimension of this case is not least underscored by the fact that the narrative focus on social media continued even after new information surfaced which suggested that Brian may have been suffering from mental health issues. The contents of his notebook, in which he bizarrely described Gabby’s murder as a mercy killing, also point in that direction.⁸ And yet, to this day, there has been surprisingly little public interest in the possible mental disturbance of the perpetrator as opposed to the online activity of the victim.

Conclusion: Something Old, Something New

The Gabby Petito case is a prime example of how individual criminal cases become paradigmatic for their time by providing a projection surface for collective desires and anxieties. It also illustrates how easily ingrained cultural assumptions can override the facts of a crime and bend them into a master narrative that blocks more cohesive avenues of interrogating its underlying dynamics and motivations. In our digitally saturated world, this case has marked a new milestone in the ever-evolving symbiotic relationship between crime and media by validating the criminological potential of social networking sites. But at the same time, it has revealed a persistent undercurrent of age-old misogynist tenets which run even through sympathetic portrayals of female victims. While social media has certainly brought new collective challenges, few of them can be grasped through a purely technocentric lens. This is particularly true for domestic abuse. As Gabby Petito’s murder illustrates, the widespread impulse to outsource the issue of women’s victimization to the online realm

⁸ In his notebook, Brian claimed that Gabby sustained injuries while crossing a river, so that he felt he had no choice but to kill her: “I don’t know the extent of Gabby’s ingerys [sic] only that she was in extreme pain. I ended her life, I thought it was merciful, that it is what she wanted, but I see now all the mistakes I made. I panicked. I was in shock. But from the moment I decided, took away her pain, I knew I couldn’t go on without her” (qtd. in Lynch and Woody). This is a perplexing explanation, especially given that there was good cell service at the location where Gabby’s body was found. Besides, as has been established thanks to social media, the couple’s van was parked nearby at the time of her death, so that Brian could have easily called for help or driven her to a place where she could have received medical attention.

stands in the way of recognizing the offline conditions that enable violence against women.

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