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I'm the TikTok Couch Guy. Here's What It Was Like Being Investigated on the Internet.

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DEC 06, 2021 • 12:36 PM



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loyal.” “Red flag! He didn’t get up off the couch and jump up and down in excitement.” “Bro if my man was on a couch full of girls IM WALKING BACK OUT THE DOOR.”

As comments accusing me of infidelity rolled in, the video quickly became the topic of fierce online debate, à la “[The Dress](#).” I, an ordinary college sophomore, became TikTok’s latest meme: [Couch Guy](#). TikTok users made [parody videos](#), American Eagle advertised a [no-effort Couch Guy Halloween costume](#), and [Rolling Stone](#), [E! Online](#), [The Daily Show](#), and [The View](#) all covered the phenomenon. On TikTok, Lauren’s video and the hashtag #CouchGuy, respectively, have received more than 64 million and 1 billion views.

While the Couch Guy meme was lighthearted on its surface, it turned menacing as TikTok users obsessively invaded the lives of Lauren, our friends, and me—people with no previous desire for internet fame, let alone infamy. Would-be sleuths conducted what Trevor Noah [jokingly](#) called “the most intense forensic investigation since the Kennedy assassination.” During my tenure as Couch Guy, I was the subject of frame-by-frame body language analyses, armchair diagnoses of psychopathy, comparisons to convicted murderers, and general discussions about my “bad vibes.”

At times, the investigation even transcended the digital world—for instance, when a resident in my apartment building posted a TikTok video, which accumulated 2.3 million views, of himself slipping a note under my door to request an interview. (I did not respond.) One viewer gleefully commented, “Even if this guy turned off his phone, he can’t escape the couch guy notifications,” a fact that the 37,600 users who liked it presumably celebrated too. Under another video, in which hall mates of mine promised to confront Couch Guy once they reached 1 million likes (they didn’t), a comment suggested that they “secretly see who’s coming and going from his place”—and received 17,800 approving likes. The New York Post reported on, and perhaps encouraged, such invasions of my privacy. In an [article](#) about the “frenzy ... frantically trying to determine the identity” of the “mystery man” behind the meme, the Post asked, “Will the real ‘couch guy’ please stand up?” Meanwhile, as internet sleuths took to public online forums to sniff out my name, birthdate, and place of residence, the threat of doxxing loomed over my head.

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Mercifully, my memedom has died down—interest in the [Google search term “Couch Guy”](#) peaked on Oct. 5—and I have come to tolerate looks of vague recognition and occasional selfie requests from strangers in public. And my digital scarlet letter has not carried much weight offline, given that Lauren and the other co-stars of the now-infamous video know my true character. Therefore, my anxiety rests only in the prospect that the invasive TikTok sleuthing I experienced was not an isolated instance, but rather—as tech writer [Ryan Broderick](#) has suggested—the latest manifestation of a large-scale sleuthing culture.

The sleuthing trend sweeping TikTok ramped up following the disappearance of the late Gabby Petito. As armchair TikTok sleuths flexed their investigative muscles, the app’s algorithm boosted content theorizing about what happened to Petito. Madison Kircher of Slate’s [ICYMI podcast](#) noted how her “For You page just decided I simply needed to see” TikTok users’ Gabby Petito videos “over and over again.” It appears that a similar phenomenon occurred with my lower-stakes virality, as I found myself scrolling through countless tweets bemoaning the inescapability of “Couch Guy TikTok.” One user despairingly [reported](#) seeing “five tik toks back to back on my [For You page] about couch guy.” (I assure you, though, that nobody despised Couch Guy’s omnipresence more than myself.)

The most recent target of the app’s emerging investigative spirit was [Sabrina Prater](#), a 34-year-old contractor and trans woman, who went viral in November after posting a video of herself dancing in a basement midrenovation. The video’s virality began with parody videos, but quickly veered into the realm of conspiracy theory due to (you guessed it) the video’s apparent “bad vibes”—at which point I got a dreadful sense of déjà vu. As Prater’s video climbed to 22 million views and internet sleuths came together to form a [r/WhosSabrinaPrater](#) community on Reddit, Prater faced baseless murder accusations, transphobic comparisons to Buffalo Bill from *The Silence of the Lambs*, and overzealous vigilantes who threatened to go to her neighborhood to investigate further. This incident reveals the harmful potential of TikTok sleuthing. One expert aptly summed up the Prater saga to Rolling Stone: “It was like watching true crime, internet sleuthing, conspiracy

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value of the meme began to overshadow our humanity. Stirred to make a TikTok of my own to quell the increasing hate, I posted a video reminding the sleuths that “not everything is true crime”—which commenters resoundingly deemed “gaslighting.” Lauren’s videos requesting that the armchair investigation stop were similarly dismissed as more evidence of my success as a manipulator, and my friends’ entreaties to respect our privacy, too, fell on deaf ears.

Certainly, noncelebrities have long unwillingly become public figures, and digital pile-ons have existed in some form since the dawn of the digital age—just ask Monica Lewinsky. But on TikTok, algorithmic feedback loops and the nature of the For You page make it easier than ever for regular people to be thrust against their wishes into the limelight. And the extent of our collective power is less obvious online, where pile-ons are delivered, as journalist Jon Ronson put it, “like remotely administered drone strikes.” On the receiving end of the barrage, however, as one finds their reputation challenged, body language hyperanalyzed, and privacy invaded, the severity of our collective power is made much too clear. ■

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