

## A Dive into the True Crime Community

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In this article, Crabtree explores the true crime discourse community. Through P-CHAT, and other key ISU Writing Program terms, she works to better understand how the expanding true crime community functions and creates new members. She also takes time to understand why such a gruesome topic has grown in popularity and how its consumption can affect our personal lives.

### How It All Began

It was ten o'clock on a school night and I couldn't sleep. I snuck out of my bed to get a glass of cool water to refresh my dry throat. As I made my way to the kitchen, I got distracted by the flashing red lights and violent stabbing noises coming from my Mom's room. I inched my head through her open door, trying to remain unseen. The screen captivated me. It was a show I now recognize very well: *Snapped*. *Snapped* is a nonfiction true crime-based TV show that explains a killer's motives with plenty of reenactments included. The show also includes interviews and stories from the families of the victims, adding an element of reality to the show. Back in the day, my Mother would watch *Snapped* every night religiously; her favorite segments involved the killer spouses. Looking back, I'm glad my Dad made it this far (all jokes). I would ask to sleep in her bed, just so I could listen in on the episodes. This sparked my fascination with true crime. The killer's motivation for killing captivated me and made me want to know how I could better defend myself against dangerous people.

## The True Crime Discourse Community Today

My exposure to true crime at a young age only made my curiosity grow as I got older. I was obsessed with watching and discussing true crime cases so much, I joined the true-crime discourse community for the popular true crime YouTuber, Kendall Rae. There are many different discourse communities under the true crime-related umbrella. Typically, every true crime content creator (YouTuber, podcaster, etc.,) has a discourse community of their own, so their members can discuss their content and the contents of the cases. Kendall Rae's discourse community could function completely differently than the discourse community for *Snapped*. They could talk about different cases or use a different mode of communication. However, both communities are ongoing due to the creation of true crime related content. A discourse community can be a complicated phrase to understand, so let's look to the ISU Writing Program for help.

The Illinois State University Writing Program refers to a **discourse community** as “a group of people who have some common publicly stated goals, mechanisms of participation, information exchange and feedback, community specific genres, a specialized terminology and threshold level of members.” A person involved in a true crime discourse community may talk about the cases with others and watch, research, read, or listen to true crime cases. The goals of Kendall Rae's channel and inherent discourse community is to spread awareness about the cases, share the stories of the victims involved, and raise money for the victims' families. Everyone in the discourse community has an interest in crime but everyone's reasoning is different. Some like to understand the murderer's thought process and others want to know how to spot warning signs in others. There isn't a single specific reason people watch true crime and most of the time there are multiple reasons. However, you would join a discourse community that matches your reasoning for watching. For example, in Shawna Sheperd's article, “Is it More Than Morbid Fascination? The Empowering Effect of True Crime Podcasts,” she discusses how true crime communities can promote social justice and spread awareness to underrepresented cases. If that part of true crime interests you, you will join a community that seeks social justice and change. Someone who watches true crime for pure entertainment might lean away from this branch of true crime. That's not to say the two cannot intertwine but people join True Crime discourse communities that keep them interested and involved.

## Multimedia in True Crime

The best definition I found for true crime would be, “a nonfiction literary, podcast, and film **genre** in which the author examines an actual crime and

details the actions of real people” (“True Crime”). Note the ISU Writing Program definition of a genre, “a kind of production that is possible to identify by understanding the conventions or features that make that production recognizable.”

Here are some notable genre conventions for true crime:

- A backstory for both the victim and the criminal
- The details of before and after the crime took place
- The status of the case: solved or unsolved
- Actions being taken to solve the case/actions that occurred to solve the case

The definition of true crime in the paragraph above fits into **multimedia**, which involves thinking about all the different media people can use when communicating (ISU Writing Program). Media itself can be *any* method or tool for making a production (a text) that communicates (ISU Writing Program). The way true crime cases are portrayed can fit into this definition of multimedia. For example, you will see true crime cases in the form of Netflix shows, blockbuster movies, research articles, and bestselling books. You will also see true crime cases being discussed on multiple different social media platforms. The true crime podcast, *Crime Junkie*, has their podcast available on Spotify, Pandora, Amazon Music, and Apple Podcasts, just to name a few. You can also follow them on Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter, or sign up for their newsletter. True crime does not simply exist in one medium, which is how it’s been made more accessible to so many people. Due to its accessibility, people have been able to form an interest in it and even join the community. These multiple media sources for talking about and presenting true crime stories are not just useful for people who take an interest as observers or participants of a true crime community. They can also be sources for victims or the families of victims to seek to publicize their case and encourage an ongoing investigation. For example, in the case of a missing person, family or friends might use different kinds of true crime media sources to try to spread information to advance the investigation.

## P-CHAT and the True Crime Community

We use **P-CHAT** to help us think about and study the complex genres we encounter in the world (ISU Writing Program). P-CHAT stands for pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory and includes seven key terms, including production, representation, distribution, reception, socialization, activity, and ecology. I’m going to explore six of these terms and how they

pertain to the true crime community, in order to better understand the community and the ways in which they function. I will refer to the definitions provided by the Illinois State University Writing Program to get a better grasp of how these terms apply to real-life examples.

### ***Production***

Production deals with the means through which a text is produced. Many members of the true crime discourse community communicate via the Internet. Whether it be in a chat room, social media account, or under the comment section of a true crime video. To do this, they need access to the Internet. You will need an account on some sort of social media platform, so you can find other members and communicate with them. For example, I had to create both a YouTube account and a Discord account to comment on and discuss cases with members of Kendall Rae's following. To be a part of the community, you just need to watch true crime and form an interest in it.

### ***Representation***

Representation highlights issues related to how the people who produce a text conceptualize and plan it. People who lead or facilitate a true crime community might do this through the use of a particular kind of social media. They must establish their presence on the platform to reach out to true crime fans and gain new ones. Typically, the platform they choose will be one in which members of the community (fans) can interact in some way. YouTube is a wildly popular social media platform with plenty of true crime cases to binge-watch. In addition to creating a presence, a true crime host needs to discover cases to present, which involves all kinds of different writing work and research. For example, in the community I belong to, Kendall Rae puts her content on YouTube, so a lot of people can see her videos. To create one of her videos, she must research cases, edit the video, and create an outline of what she wants to say.

### ***Distribution***

Distribution involves the consideration of where texts go and who might take them up. It also considers the tools and methods that can distribute text, and how distribution can sometimes move beyond the original purposes intended by the author(s). The creators of true crime content will want to use eye-catching titles on a true crime video to get more people to watch it, which will create more true crime fans. Figure 1 is a thumbnail for one of Kendall Rae's videos ("The Zodiac Killer 'Identified'?!"). She has the word "solved" in giant letters with both a question mark and an exclamation mark. This would make a viewer question if the case were solved or not, which might

lead them to click on the video. The caption and thumbnail mention The Zodiac Killer, who is an infamous serial killer yet to be discovered. She knew his popularity, so she knew making a video about him would generate views. In one day, the video reached roughly 357,000 views, so her distribution tactics worked.



Figure 1: Thumbnail for Kendall Rae’s true crime YouTube video “The Zodiac Killer “Identified”?! Who is Gary Poste?”

A true crime content creator might also want to turn the comment section on under their video, so people can discuss their thoughts. The more comments there are, the more likely the video will be recommended to other viewers. People in the community might recommend a true crime video to other fans and share the link to it, increasing the view count as well.

### *Reception*

Reception deals with how a text is taken up and used by others. A fan might repurpose a true crime video or article into a talking point during a true crime discussion. A fan will probably talk to their friends or family about a true crime case that interests them. As far as true crime content creators are concerned, the number of likes, comments, and views under a certain true crime video will indicate how interesting or important it is to the community. Kendall Rae usually has significantly more likes compared to dislikes, which tells me people receive her videos well.

### *Socialization*

Socialization describes the interactions of people and institutions as they produce, distribute, and use texts. Those involved in the discourse community would share their viewpoints on a true crime story and ask other members for their opinion. They usually tag a friend or fan under a post to get them to communicate their thoughts. I’ve sent my sister cases I found particularly chilling, then we discuss our thoughts after. This communication keeps the community going and creates new members. It is also why multimedia in true crime is so important. As a case is reported and discussed through media, the details of the story are also shared and thus seen and discussed by more people.

### *Activity*

Activity is a term that encompasses the actual practices people engage in as they create text. A true crime content creator would have to create or be a

part of a platform/server for fans to communicate with to create their own personal discourse community. Kendall Rae has her own Discord, which is a platform for her fans to talk about the videos she has made. She even asks fans for video suggestions. The creation of her true crime videos is what sparks new fans and members of her discourse community. To create a true crime video, you'd need a camera, editing software, plenty of research, and a script for the research. Most true crime content creators get their information from news stories or articles, social media posts, and videos made by other true crime content creators.

### Thinking about the Ethics of True Crime Communities

People who host true crime podcasts or create documentaries, as well as people, like me, who follow and interact with these different kinds of media, all engage in a range of different kinds of literate activities, using different kinds of media, texts, and tools, and engaging in a range of different kinds of research. P-CHAT can help us look at these activities, but I want to consider one aspect of these literacies that P-CHAT didn't really help me to think about, and that is—are the kinds of writing and communicating that surround true crime ethical? Are they even healthy for people?

I love Kendall Rae's channel because she is always providing links to mental health resources and GoFundMe's or donation sites for the victims' families. Kendall Rae and her following actively practice **ethical communication**. The site Ethic Comm states, "to be an ethical communicator in this age means you are accurate, truthful, and honest. Principles within ethical communication are autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, justice, and fidelity ("Ethical Communication Matters")." True crime dives into super dark topics like murder, kidnapping, and assault. There are real-life victims involved in these cases, so someone must discuss these cases carefully and respectfully. If the facts are not represented truthfully, the victim and their family will receive the consequences. Take the case of Georgia Leah Moses for example. Her police reports had her middle name down as Lee instead of Leah. A person's name is a key part of their identification, so it only made it harder for accurate information to spread about Georgia (*Crime Junkie*).

True crime content creators who take the time to get the facts down and seek justice for the victims play a key role in the ethics of the community. The *Guardian* article, "The Rise of 'Citizen Sleuths': The True Crime Buffs Trying to Solve Cases," mentions podcasters doing social justice work within their content creation (Tait). Much too often, the media reports focus on the

offender. Marissa Jones is the host of the podcast, *The Vanished*, which centers on the friends and families of missing people in its storytelling. Jones' podcast focuses on victims who are traditionally ignored by the media, amplifying their stories. In addition, she works directly with law enforcement. Her conversation with the husband of a woman who went missing in 2018 opened the door for detectives to try him again. This ultimately led to his murder conviction. Jones' work is just one example of real change being made by true crime content creators and their communities.

You do not need a giant platform to spark change. According to the same *Guardian* article, “more than 600 [million] people have viewed #GabbyPetito TikToks” (Tait). Gabby Petito was a missing woman whose body was found in September. More views mean more people are learning about a case and sharing possibly important information. Today, we can make progress within the palms of our hands. I call on people to make these changes in an ethical manner.

## The Unethical Side of the Community

Over the years, the true crime community has gotten a bad rap. From glorifying serial killers to making money off a victim's case, the community does not always act ethically. There are different **subgenres** of discourse communities within the genre of the true crime community. One infamous group calls themselves “Columbiners.” This is the name given to the fanbase of the Columbine massacre. The YouTuber, ReignBot, made a detailed video about the Columbiners that idolize and sympathize with the shooters (“Exploring Obsessive True Crime Fandoms”). ReignBot stated some people are attracted to the shooters because they think they could change them or are attracted to the dangerous nature of the murderers. Romanticizing murder has been popular in entertainment and in the plot of television shows and movies. I can think of countless examples of TV shows that have a serial killer as the protagonist or love interest. My favorite show, *American Horror Story*, includes several real-life famous serial killers like Richard Ramirez and Madame LaLaurie. And just recently, Netflix released season three of *YOU*, a show about a serial killer that kills for the people he is obsessed with. Many fans will justify his murders because they sympathize with his issues and find him attractive. It makes you wonder: *would we obsess over this killer if they were not an attractive white man?*

Through my research, I discovered the term *hybristophilia*. The Rpg Monger made a video about bizarre true crime fandoms. They described hybristophilia as “sexual interest in and attraction to those who commit

crimes” (“[OLD] Deconstructing Tumblr’s Most Bizarre Fandom”). You will encounter many people that fit this definition if you explore true crime discourse communities. While there are people in the community that want to fight for justice, advocate for mental health awareness, and share the stories of victims, that doesn’t take away from the damage true crime entertainment has caused and continues to cause. From making a profit from the stories of victims to re-traumatizing families by bringing up old cases, the community has its flaws.

## The Effect True Crime Has on Mental Health

I have witnessed firsthand what true crime can do to someone’s mental health and mental stability. Referring to the beginning of my article, my Mom would watch *Snapped* every single night. She became overly paranoid for me. I couldn’t hang out at a friend’s house, have a boyfriend, or stay out late. She was worried I could become a victim myself. While I understand now she was trying to protect me, her worrying led to unhealthy coping mechanisms. I could not make memories with friends or go to a movie with my crush because of my Mother’s irrational fear of losing me. The website, *Health Essentials*, did some research into people’s fascination with true crime and the effects in their article, “Is Your Love of True Crime Impacting Your Mental Health?” A Dr. Childs contributed to their post: “‘We want to watch true crime in part to learn how to avoid being a victim,’ she says. ‘It can teach us to be prepared in case we’re ever in that situation’” (*Health Essentials*). My Mom was doing just that. She wanted to avoid seeing me on *Snapped*. She wanted to avoid me falling victim to a horrible crime. The article from *Health Essentials* went on to say that true crime bingeing becomes unhealthy when you are scared or anxious all the time, you feel unsafe at home, and you are wary of others. These might be signs it’s time to stop. Personally, too much true crime heightens my anxiety levels. However, when I get invested in a case, it can be hard to take a step back. It is a never-ending cycle of anxiety I have trouble breaking. The *HuffPost* article, “This Is Your Brain on True Crime Stories,” explores the psychological aspect of too much true crime (Smith). They mention that indulging in true crime, especially before bed, can increase anxiety and nightmares. The article goes on to say, “consuming this genre in excess can potentially increase your feelings of paranoia and inhibit you from taking risks, even minor ones” (Smith). Part of true crime’s fascination is we get to explore our deepest fears from the comfort of our own homes. This hobby becomes dangerous when we fail to listen to our body’s responses and triggers such as increased symptoms of depression/ anxiety or trouble sleeping.



I include the effect true crime has on mental health for various reasons. For one, I want to illustrate that the texts and literary work we create and publish have various effects on people, even if some of those effects are unintended. A true crime reporter might create a story around a case to solely entertain people. However, their content could trigger the victims involved or the people with a similar story. What was meant to entertain could evoke trauma responses. This of course can damage the consumer's mental health. The reporters themselves could suffer from depression or anxiety because of reporting on such dark topics. Kendall Rae has been open about how the cases she reports on have not always benefitted her mental well-being. Again, this could be a sign to stop engaging in all things true crime related. Secondly, mental health, in general, is a talking point in the true crime discourse community. You will find members trauma bonding and talking about their experiences with mental illness and abuse. Most people that commit the crimes in true crime cases battle with mental illness and poor mental health. That is why it is vital to continue the conversation, have healthy discussions, and spot warning signs.

## Concluding Thoughts

True crime intertwines with literate activity. You might engage in literate activity while interacting with true crime by reading articles or writing a script for a true crime video, just to give some examples. In this article, I question how the literary works we create or take part in affect us and society. We have observed how true crime can affect mental health negatively, so I've grown a curiosity about how other forms of literary activity affect us and to what degree. I think the key takeaway is what we create affects other people. We need to be responsible for what we create and how we intend to use it. Our creations can take on a life of their own and so we need to be extra aware of this.

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