



Folk Narratives in Transition: A Comparative Study of Urban Legends

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Abstract

Folklore encompasses the cultural narratives, practices, and traditions passed down through generations. Folklore is often misunderstood as belonging to a static, rural past, untouched by urban or literary influences, when in fact it permeates both traditional and modern urban contexts. Urban legends, a form of folklore, express contemporary concerns about personal safety in urban areas, where danger can be found in everyday objects like cars or bathrooms. The paper delves into the evolution of two American urban legends, *The Killer in the Backseat* and *Bloody Mary*, from their oral origins to contemporary digital adaptations. This study utilises Linda Hutcheon's "Adaptation theory" and Trevor J Blank's theory of "Digital folklore" which views folklore as a dynamic process gaining new interpretations. Urban legends have maintained their credibility with the "FOAF" (friend of a friend) structure. The study explores the relationship between traditional oral narratives and modern adaptations, revealing how these narratives have evolved to address contemporary issues like gender, safety, and vulnerability, and how urban legends have become cultural artifacts that effectively convey societal fears and anxieties.

Keywords: Adaptation Theory, Digital Adaptation, Film Adaptation, FOAF Structure, Intermediality, Urban Legend

Introduction

Folklore represents a collective form of expression shaped by shared experiences, beliefs, and wisdom. Folk narratives have long served as mirrors of societal values, fears, and aspirations, evolving alongside the cultures that create and share them. Folklore is a

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communal product, formed and reshaped by collective processes of recreation and reinterpretation (Leach 15). Over time, its definition expanded to encompass not only these historical practices but also modern traditions of material culture. Folklore, a crucial pedagogical tool in non-literate societies, is undergoing a significant transformation in the digital world transitioning from oral and written traditions to dynamic digital adaptations (Blank 9).

This paper explores the evolution of two iconic urban legends—*The Killer in the Backseat* and *Bloody Mary*. Studying these legends in digital spaces is a relatively underexplored area, but examining their adaptation and influence in digital media provides insights into broader digital storytelling patterns. In this paper, for the analysis of earlier versions of *The Killer in the Backseat*, Jan Brunvand's *Too Good to Be True*, *The Mexican Pet*, and Carlos Drake's *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends*; *Indiana Folklore* have been drawn upon (Brunvand 45; Drake 210). The earlier versions of *Bloody Mary* are analysed with reference to Alan Dundes' *Bloody Mary in the Mirror*, along with versions documented in *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends*. The analysis of digital adaptations of these legends draws upon a range of sources, including *YouTube* channels *After Dark* and *Why Is It Trending*, the 1998 film *Urban Legends*, the short film adaptation *High Beams*, and for *Bloody Mary*, the video game *Identity V* and the 1992 film *Candyman*. By using comparative approach, this paper aims to explore the linguistic, thematic, and performative changes that occur during the transition from folklore to digital folklore. Trevor J Blank's theory of digital folklore, proposed in *Folk Culture in the Digital Age: The Emergent Dynamics of Human Interaction*, is employed to analyse the functioning of these legends in virtual space. This facilitates the transmission of vernacular expressions and cultural meanings across corporeal and virtual worlds (Blank 10). Linda Hutcheon's "adaptation theory" examines the transformation of these legends across mediums (20), while Freud's symbolic interpretation provides insights into the subconscious fears embedded in them. Media adaptations and *YouTube* channels reveal how urban legends blend traditional elements with modern aesthetics to engage contemporary audiences.

Folklore and Urban Legends: An Overview

As R D Jameson suggests, folklore serves as immediate and potent evidence of the human condition which reveals how communities and individuals navigate their fears, aspirations, and the quest for elusive security (Jameson 23). Gertrude P Kurtah argues that reshaping folk materials, driven by aesthetics and capitalism, does not diminish their authenticity; it helps them survive and spread, preserving their original cultural context (Kurtah 44). Understanding American folklore is crucial for analysing urban legends like *The Killer in the Backseat* and *Bloody Mary*. Folklore is often misunderstood as belonging to a static, rural past, untouched by urban influences, when in fact it permeates both traditional and modern urban contexts (Brunvand 28). Urban legends, known for their fast narratives, bizarre themes, and universal appeal, have gained popularity due to their accessibility and cultural resonance, making them ideal for adaptation.

Urban legends, a subgenre of folklore, are stories that reflect modern anxieties about personal safety in urban spaces. They are not just fictional stories, but also reflect societal fears, anxieties, and moral concerns. The “friend of a friend” (FOAF) structure in legends enhances authenticity, immediacy, and emotional and cultural resonance across generations (Brunvand 13). Urban legends persist despite digital advancements, due to modern fears, gender roles, power dynamics, and societal shifts in technology dependency and urban violence. The depiction of women as vulnerable reflects societal anxieties about urban safety, reinforcing gender stereotypes and fears of male aggression. As evolving narratives, urban legends both mirror and respond to cultural fears, which Brunvand classifies as “living folklore” (4). Brunvand, in the introduction of his work, *Too Good to Be True* explains that urban legends often push the boundaries of believability. Urban legends are polished, realistic stories with bizarre or comic incidents that seem far from reality. They are well-balanced, clean, concentrated, and polished, and are often structured to be factual, making them seem too good to be true. Brunvand defines urban legends by their folkloric qualities of “oral repetition and variation,” which are the distinguishing characteristics of any folklore (5).

Echoes of the Past: Traditional and Early Print Versions of Urban Legends

“All matter is translated into other matter.”

—Kate Atkinson, *Not the End of the World*

Kate Atkinson’s statement encapsulates the idea that though the material form of folk legends that is spoken word, print, or visual media changes but the underlying themes, emotions, and societal fears remain intact. In folklore studies, rather than viewing alternate versions as “corruptions,” scholars understand that adaptations allow legends to evolve alongside the cultures they inhabit. Each version acts as a cultural mirror, highlighting shifts in societal fears, norms, and attitudes.

This section aims to explore the material variations in the traditional versions of *The Killer in the Backseat* and *Bloody Mary* by adopting a comparative approach. At the heart of all versions prevails a core narrative structure in which there is a female character who is unaware of a hidden danger in her car. A man hides in her car to kill her, but a third party intervenes, preventing the attack. The moral lesson is vigilance and safety. Urban legends serve as cautionary tales, teaching societal values like safety and distrust of strangers, and fostering situational awareness.

The Killer in the Backseat is an urban legend originating from real-life incidents in remote locations and popularised by popular culture. The Ogden, Utah version, recorded in *Indiana Folklore*, introduces suspense with the savior’s involvement. The Chicago legend, recorded by Larry Miller in 1965, reflects racial tensions in American cities during the 1960s. In New York City, an incident in 1964 grounded the legend in reality. The narrative shifts between regions, illustrating how gender roles can change in adaptation. However, the focus is on the professional competence of the detective, rather than vulnerability (Brunvand 30). Folklore’s adaptive capacity is evident in the core tale, which evolves based on local anxieties, race, safety, and social dynamics. Female vulnerability, victimhood, and the male savior complex recur in most versions. Traditional folktales were shared orally to encourage

communal vigilance, but digital adaptations have made people feel isolated and intensely personal. The focus has shifted from delivering communal messages of caution to generating thrill, suspense, and shock for individual viewers. Urban legends have evolved to focus on private spaces, like cars, bathrooms, enhancing the sense of vulnerability in these once-safe environments. Brunvand's *Too Good to Be True* discusses the use of "pseudo-verification" strategies in urban legends, such as the "ritp" or "rip" approach, where a narrator claims to have read an incident without providing a reference, and the FOAF formula, which makes it difficult to trace or verify.

In *The Choking Doberman*, Brunvand includes a version of the legend documented by Ann Landers, characterised by its direct and cautionary narrative style. Prioritising pragmatic warning over dramatic suspense, this rendition underscores latent threats, particularly those faced by women in private or domestic spaces, thereby evoking fear through everyday vulnerability. *Urban Legends 666 Absolutely True Stories That Happened to a Friend*, by Thomas J Craughwell, recounts the legend *The Murderer in the Backseat*. The story revolves around a woman who accidentally becomes a target while leaving a Phoenix shopping center. She is followed by a car flashing its high beams, and after fleeing to her brother-in-law, a police officer, she discovers the man in the other car was alerting her to an armed assailant in her car. The story is set in a modern urban setting, reflecting societal concerns like crime and loneliness (Craughwell 60). Drake's version incorporates rural or small-town settings, highlighting the importance of modern vigilance and law enforcement in contemporary society (Drake 102).

Drake's version features characters that are more archetypal, such as farmers, townsfolk, or mythical figures from local lore, rather than focusing on law enforcement and modern threats. Traditional folklore contains moral lessons that are more related to community values, such as the importance of hard work, honesty, or respect for nature. The Craughwell version adopts a straightforward narrative style that reflects the journalistic approach to urban legends, often presenting them as "true" stories. This style adds an element of credibility and immediacy that appeals to contemporary audiences. Another version of *The Killer in the Backseat* is recorded

in Cheryl Herbert's *Night Chase*, a collection of true stories for young readers, featuring a suspenseful urban legend with three key messages: lock your car doors, look beneath the car before entering, look in the back before entering, and be mindful of your surroundings, especially at night. The story has been adapted for younger audiences through social media, with modern elements like smartphones and text messages, where a friend alerts the woman through phone calls instead of face-to-face interaction.

In some adaptations, the woman is proactive—checking her backseat before entering the car or aware of her surroundings. In contrast to the *Indiana* version, where the woman is primarily a damsel in distress, these variations challenge traditional gender roles by portraying female characters with agency. Some versions feature a darker twist, where the assailant successfully harms the woman, or the story concludes with ambiguity regarding her safety. That is the reason why scholars find the title misleading. As Xenia Cord suggested that *The Assailant in the Backseat* may be a more accurate descriptor, as the man is always detected before he can act on his intentions. The linguistic approach to analyse *The Killer in the Backseat* highlights significant differences between its traditional and digital adaptations. Labov recognised six structural elements: Abstract, Orientation, Complicating Action, Evaluation, Result, and Coda (Labov 22). Traditional stories follow a clear linguistic framework, while digital adaptations alter key information to create suspense and engage users through hypertext or interactive media. Digital platforms are transforming the way urban legends are interpreted and shared, fostering new forms of communal re-creation that merge traditional folklore with modern technological narratives.

From a psychological standpoint, *The Killer in the Backseat* taps into two core fears: isolation and the unknown (Dundes 50). The unknown threat in the backseat symbolises unseen fears and hidden dangers in familiar places, challenging our sense of safety. Urban legends are retold in the third person, relying on suspense and anonymous narratives, while survivor accounts, told in the first person, bring raw emotional intensity and blur the line between myth and reality, amplifying the impact of the legend. These narratives tap

into our instinctive fears and make routine acts like driving alone memorable.

The *Bloody Mary* legend is a haunting urban legend rooted in superstition, mystery, and societal fascination with the supernatural. It involves adolescent girls repeating Mary Worth's name in front of a dimly lit mirror, causing fear and intrigue. They enter a darkened room, chant variations of "I believe in Mary Worth" with a flickering candle, and dare each other to summon the vengeful spirit. The name of the spirit varies, but the core concept remains the same: a vengeful female spirit is said to scratch the summoner's face. This rite is typically performed at gatherings like parties or summer camps, emphasising the social aspect as a thrilling experience. The name of the spirit varies—from "Mary Worth" to "Mary Lou," and even "Kathy." "Bloody Mary" is a historical and cultural mythological figure, associated with violence and vengeance, with Mary I of England being a prominent historical reference. This fascination with female figures with violence and vengeance is evident. The public burnings during Mary's reign, intended to reinforce Catholic orthodoxy, led to fear and resistance, earning her the nickname "Bloody Mary." Elizabeth Báthory, a seventeenth-century Hungarian countess, is also linked to the Bloody Mary myth, accused of committing crimes against young women. This diversity underscores how the *Bloody Mary* myth has been shaped over time, blending historical elements with evolving social and cultural fear.

Urban Legends by Thomas J Craughwell, presents Mary Worth, as a disfigured woman from seventeenth-century Massachusetts. She is branded as "Bloody Mary" by children who mock her scars and later chant her name to summon her spirit in a mirror. The story's terrifying appeal is heightened by a vengeful ghost with clawed hands attacking children through a mirror, highlighting themes of vengeance, supernatural retribution, and fear of mirrors, which are common in horror folklore. Indiana folklore versions of ghost stories and spirit conjuring incorporate unique elements based on local history or cultural fears. For example, Indiana folklore leans towards tales set in rural or small-town contexts, with ghosts tied to the land (such as abandoned houses or graveyards) or local tragedies. Moreover, the variations in the *Bloody Mary* tale, with different

names like “Mary Whales,” “Mary Johnson,” or “Mary Lou,” suggest a shared cultural motif across the United States—similar to *La Llorona* in Hispanic folklore. The “Bloody Mary ritual”, a practice where young women use mirrors to predict future spouses or deaths, has evolved from a divination practice to an entertainment form. The ritual’s language varies across cultures and regions, and social media platforms use shorter phrases to engage viewers. The legend’s unsettling nature is heightened by various outcomes. Mirrors in folklore are metaphors for confronting fears and truths, acting as portals between physical and spiritual worlds. Covering mirrors in homes with deceased loved ones prevents spirits from being trapped. The “Bloody Mary ritual”, rooted in tradition and folklore, may symbolise the transition from girlhood to womanhood, particularly menstruation. Dundes suggests this ritual helps young girls navigate their identities through fear, transformation, and social bonding, influencing psychoanalytic interpretations.

Bill Ellis, in his work, *Lucifer Ascending* discusses the concept of a “mythic realm” created by magical rituals, where participants temporarily step outside their mundane existence and engage with mythic figures and supernatural forces. Ellis argues that occultism allows marginalised individuals to “vent their own social aggression” (Ellis 27). The text explores the diverse “Bloody Mary” chant variations, highlighting their cultural influence and adaptability. It explores how these elements, including mirrors and darkness, can be altered, and the methods of summoning the chant, which can be influenced by timing and atmosphere. Alan Dundes, in his article *Bloody Mary in the Mirror*, provides ten variants of the urban legend. The text discusses various variations of the “Bloody Mary” chant, highlighting their adaptability and cultural influence. Each variant includes a mirror, darkness, and the chant, with variations demonstrating how these elements can be modified. The text delves into the various methods of summoning Bloody Mary, their cultural significance, and their ability to be influenced by timing and atmosphere. However, “text 9” in Dundes’ article suggests male involvement, reflecting societal views on gender roles, where female experiences of bodily change are shrouded in mystery and fear, while male experiences are perceived differently.

In the film version of *Bloody Mary*, the depiction of blood streaming from the top of the head is a striking visual element that heightens fear. The Freudian concept of “Bloody Mary” symbolises fear of bodily changes, life, death, and transformation, linked to power, fertility, and fear. The “blood running down her face” symbolises physical injury and internal turmoil from growing up, fearing losing control over one’s body. Freud’s theory of “upward displacement” in the context of blood issuing from the head becomes a metaphor for the repressed anxieties surrounding the transition from girlhood to womanhood, symbolising a repressed fear of transformation and bodily autonomy.

Thus, the printed existence of urban legends like *The Killer in the Backseat* and *Bloody Mary* preserves their content and encourages their reinterpretation. Brunvand argues that folklore is dynamic and adaptable, allowing legends to adapt to societal values and technological advancements while maintaining themes of fear, humor, and social commentary.

Digital Adaptations: New Mediums and Interpretations

“Adapting is a bit like redecorating.”

—Alfred Uhry

Alfred Uhry’s comparison of adapting to redecorating aptly captures the idea that just as redecorating transforms the appearance of a space without altering its structure. Urban legends are being adapted with modern elements like technology, new fears, and contemporary settings, with digital platforms like *YouTube* and social networking enhancing their performance and transmission, making them crucial for studying legends, hoaxes, and jokes. This section examines digital reinterpretations of *The Killer in the Backseat* and *Bloody Mary*, focusing on their depictions across various mediums. These urban legends in the current era of netlore are not fixed tales; instead, they constitute a dynamic process of negotiation and reinterpretation within digital communities. According to Hutcheon, adaptations are usually viewed as “minor and subsidiary” in comparison to their originals; this is also true of digital copies of urban legends (Hutcheon 19).

Traditional narrators of these legends may feel that digital versions found on *YouTube* channels such as the *Why is it Trending?* lack the realism of oral storytelling. These adaptations, however, could be justified for bringing these stories into the modern era and making them available to a wider range of people worldwide (Blank 62). Hutcheon's theory highlights the importance of digital adaptations in modernising urban legend stories, challenging the hierarchy between originals and adaptations. Hutcheon suggests that adaptations are dynamic texts influenced by social and cultural experiences, rather than mere formal replications. Traditional urban legend audiences focus on risks, while contemporary digital audiences prioritise privacy and safety.

An important analytical perspective is offered by Hutcheon's idea that the "adapted text" is plural and exists laterally rather than vertically (Hutcheon 53). Urban legends have multiple coexisting versions, with no preference given to any one. Each retelling coexists laterally, reflecting distinct social or cultural influences. Hutcheon argues that adaptation is a type of repetition that involves change, even without intentional modification. The concept of digital storytelling is applicable as it adapts to new platforms while maintaining a recognisable story line and central theme. The earliest adapted version of *The Killer in the Backseat* appears in the 1998 film *Urban Legends*. The film explores the cultural anxieties surrounding urban legends through a series of murders on a college campus, each staged to resemble a well-known urban legend. Michelle Mancini is murdered by a hidden attacker in her car, a nod to the "killer in the backseat" legend. Natalie and her friends become aware of these murders, and Brenda hides in the backseat with the intention to kill her. A violent struggle ensues, and Brenda is thrown from a window. The 1998 film *Urban Legends* reimagined the classic story of Michelle Mancini's death, transforming it into a complex exploration of grief and vengeance, with ambiguous motives and fear-evoking fear. Brenda, the driver, as an antagonist driven by revenge for her fiancé's death.

The urban legends often follow a straightforward narrative arc: setup, confrontation, and resolution. But in movie adaptations, they employ a multi-layered narrative structure interweaving various

urban legends and personal stories (Blank 70). This movie has a contemporary setting of university and modern cultural elements, such as college party scenes and modern technology tools for communication. It resonates with a generation that was navigating new social dynamics and heightened fears about violence and crime on campuses. Another digital adaptation is featured on the *YouTube* channel *After Dark*. The tone of *After Dark's* adaptation of *The Killer in the Backseat* is eerie as the murderer serves as the narrator. The suspense and horror in a murder story increases when the killer's intentions and actions are revealed, adding psychological depth and prioritising horror over moral warning. Drake's version features a pursuing driver who alerts the protagonist, while *After Dark's* version leaves the killer unchecked, killing the protagonist and stealing her car, neglecting saviors or police involvement. This shift reflects a darker, more sinister tone, emphasising fear over community intervention. Another version, featured on the *YouTube* channel named *Why is it Trending?*, introduces striking shifts amplifying horror and suspense. In this animated version, Penny, a young girl, leaves work at night and drives along a deserted road. She encounters a car behind her, which signals with lights. Fearing the car, she accelerates and hits her rear bumper. When she arrives home, she sees the chased car. The driver, a short and frightened man, warns her not to open the door and calls the police. A man wearing a trench coat and an axe attacks the driver, dismembering him. Penny's body is found in her home, but the killer remains unidentified.

In contrast to previous iterations, in which the automobile behind only honks and flashes its lights to warn, in this adaption, the car approaches so closely that it actually collides with Penny's vehicle, intensifying her fear. This change intensifies the chase, turning it from a spooky hint to a full-on run. In a chilling twist, the driver who tries to warn Penny meets a brutal end at the hands of the killer, who then targets Penny as well. This shift removes the typical "saviour" role, turning the hero into a victim. The digital version emphasises the killer's visual identity—a figure in a trench coat with a bloody axe—shifting the tale from a simple warning to a full horror narrative. These adaptations heighten the women's portrayal as the classic "damsel in distress." Another adaptation of this legend named, *High Beams*, is a short film by Stephen Simmons which is

inspired by Alvin Schwartz's work *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* (Schwartz 45). The film adaptation of Schwartz's urban legend uses flashing headlights to build tension but portrays the killer as nervous rather than menacing, creating ambiguity around his intent. The modern setting and familiar cars add realism, grounding the legend in a relatable context by adding layers of realism.

Bloody Mary, an urban legend, has been adapted into interactive games like *Identity V*, where she is renamed the Bloody Queen. The game combines historical details from Marie Antoinette's story with the mythology, with the Bloody Queen wielding a mirror as a weapon. The game's "Aqua Mirror" feature adds tension to the story, while scripted objectives and rewards transform passive folklore consumption into active engagement. The game's well-placed position and the ability to trade places with the mirror image enhance its appeal. Ellis asserts that folklore practices have evolved with the encroachment of modernity, but they still serve the basic functions: addressing fears, anxieties, and the need for social connection (Ellis 27). Digital adaptations of *Bloody Mary* reinforce this idea. On *YouTube*, participants engage in the ritual with cameras, capturing their reactions and sharing them (Ellis 30). Video technology enhances the authenticity of supernatural experiences, making them more accessible while broadcasting participants' reactions to a wider audience. This "legend-tripping" in the digital age becomes a shared ritual, where participants not only confront their fears but also engage in collective storytelling (Ellis 35).

The *Bloody Mary* legend has left a lasting imprint on popular culture by appearing in films like *Candyman*, *Urban Legends* and television series like *the X-Files* (Blank 75). These digital adaptations have altered the psychological impact of the mirror. For example, a horror video may use edited footage to show *Bloody Mary* emerging from a reflection, adding a layer of visual realism absent from traditional storytelling (Blank 77). This change affects how audiences perceive the legend, shifting from a personal, introspective fear to an external, spectacle-driven experience (Blank 78). Fears of surveillance and the loss of privacy in the digital age parallel the fear of confronting one's reflection. The story was earlier confined to physical spaces—bathrooms, mirrors, and campsites—

where the fear was immediate and shared by a small group (Dundes 115).

Alan Dundes' analysis of Bloody Mary highlights the cultural and psychological tensions experienced by pre-adolescents, arguing that the ritual reflects pre-pubescent anxieties, particularly about menstruation and the transition from childhood to adulthood. The presence of blood in some variations of the ritual is symbolically connected to the first signs of physical and biological changes in girls. The ritual primarily practiced by young girls highlights the gendered nature of folklore, as it is both a "legend" and a "game." This debate reveals the fluid character of folklore. The mirror serves as a boundary between reality and the supernatural, and the choice of location, bathrooms, is intriguing as they are private spaces where individuals often confront their physical selves and engage in rituals of cleanliness.

In the short film, *Dark Fun Original*, the ritual is shortened to just two repetitions, using visually shocking horror elements. The hand appearing to twist the actress's neck introduces an unexpected, physical manifestation of the spirit. The earliest tale often lacks post summoning hauntings, with the encounter limited to the mirror. In film, however, the haunting extends into the real world. Lights turning off and the spirit's voice calling the victim's name creates a more immersive and menacing atmosphere. The use of cinematic devices, like writing on the mirror ("I am here") and sudden physical violence (the neck twist from behind), adds a tangible danger that moves beyond the abstract, psychological fear of the original version.

Candyman (1992) is an adaptation of *Bloody Mary*. In both, the ritual of speaking a name into a mirror is central. The act of invoking "Candyman" five times, rather than three times as in *Bloody Mary*, serves to heighten suspense and create a sense of ritualistic dread. This change not only emphasises the summoning act but also reflects the gravity and inevitability of supernatural retribution. In *Bloody Mary*, the mirror connects the summoner to the ghost world, causing psychological tension. "Candyman" elevates the mirror's symbolic power, allowing a vengeful spirit to physically manifest brutal violence. This shift intensifies the horror and addresses social issues

like systemic racism and racial injustice in America. “Candyman” replaces the female spirit with a male spirit rooted in Gothic narratives of racial violence, making the horror more poignant than *Bloody Mary*’s ambiguous motivations.

In the 1998 film *Urban Legends*, Brenda and Natalie invoke the urban legend “Bloody Mary”, evoking terror and impacting young adults’ group dynamics. The film uses ominous lighting, suspenseful soundscapes, to make the ritual visceral. In *X-Files* Season 3, Episode 13, Brenda chants “Bloody Mary” to see her future husband’s face, associating the legend with predicting one’s future. Bloody Mary becomes a tool, exploring adolescent fantasies and fears, and resonating with cultural dynamics, especially in youth and media-driven contexts. The 2007 short film *Dead Mary* showcases the adaptability of folklore through the change of the chant from “Bloody Mary” to “Dead Mary.” Digital renditions of urban legends are compared, demonstrating how they preserve essential elements while updating for modern audiences. As William S Burroughs so eloquently put it, “Adaptations may become quite legitimate adoptions,” highlighting the transformational potential of reimagining stories. In addition to guaranteeing urban legends’ survival, these adaptations enable them to flourish in novel settings while maintaining their essential narrative frameworks.

The Digital Renaissance of Folklore: Exploring Urban Legends through Trevor J Blank’s Lens

Trevor J Blank’s *Folk Culture in the Digital Age: The Emergent Dynamics of Human Interaction* explores how digital platforms transform folklore, creating a hybrid form where users actively contribute to evolving narratives. His theory reveals how digital platforms fundamentally reshape folklore’s creation, dissemination, and transformation. Media technologies bridge virtual and corporeal worlds, influencing behaviors and beliefs. Digital media has transformed urban legends, like *The Killer in the Backseat*, by incorporating modern weapons and surveillance systems, reflecting current technological anxieties. Digital platforms allow for the “reproduction and adaptation” of folkloric forms, even in the face of technological change (Blank 73). Moreover, digital adaptations of

The Killer in the Backseat often evoke communal responses, with viewers commenting and sharing these versions creating a digital interaction, in turn reflecting Blank's "emergent cultural scenes" (Blank 29) where the audience consumes while becoming a part of the folklore process. *Bloody Mary* too has evolved from oral folk to digital platforms like *Reddit*. Users retell the legend in video formats, accessible globally. Digital adaptations often incorporate modern settings, augmented reality, special effects, and modern twists, such as ghost-hunting apps or AR simulations, to create a more immersive experience for viewers (Blank 35). Digital urban legends have become popular platforms for sharing personal encounters and discussing myths, blending supernatural elements with modern social behaviors. These platforms serve as digital "folkloric hubs," combining shared cultural elements and local adaptations. Mass media has democratised access to folklore, making it globally recognisable. Networking sites adapt urban legends with modern fears, showcasing fluidity and modern expression.

Blank in *Folk Culture in the Digital Age: The Emergent Dynamics of Human Interaction* addresses the use of Wi-Fi-enabled devices that have evolved these legends into "shareable" legends that leverage the viral nature of digital communication. Networking platforms facilitate the swift dissemination and remixing of legends, allowing for diverse interpretations and reimaginings, such as the Twitter account of *The Killer in the Backseat*. Folklore is shaped by the social context within a culture, with Malinowski's *Myth in Primitive Psychology* emphasising the importance of understanding the conditions under which it is performed and experienced. Folklore lacks dynamic elements without context, and urban legends were traditionally told in social settings using tone, gestures, and facial expressions. Digital storytelling platforms now transform the narrator's role, using sophisticated techniques like editing and effects to enhance narratives, enhancing the impact of urban legends. The integration of *The Killer in the Backseat* and *Bloody Mary* into digital culture showcases a "cyclical, symbiotic influence" between traditional and digital forms of storytelling. Blank argues that technological advancements have reshaped folklore by shifting it to digital formats such as viral videos and social media trends. This paper adopts an adaptive analytical approach to examine how digital

media transform and perpetuate urban legends as evolving cultural narratives.

Conclusion

Urban legends, such as *The Killer in the Backseat* and *Bloody Mary*, have evolved to reflect societal anxieties and serve as tools for navigating the complexities of the digital age. Digital folklore fosters participatory storytelling, enabling audiences to consume and contribute to these narratives. The shift from traditional storytelling to digital forms has created more personal and solitary horror, transforming ordinary scenarios into intensely suspenseful experiences. Modern adaptations through memes, social media, and *YouTube* focus on individual suspense and shock, with regional and cultural variations available. The study offers an expansive framework for further investigation, particularly in the context of evolving technologies and shifting cultural landscapes. Hutcheon's "Theory of Adaptation" highlights that these legends are more than derivative texts; they are cultural artifacts that continually transform to resonate with new audiences. The study of folklore in the digital age provides insights into how people negotiate their identities and cultural memories in a rapidly changing technological world.

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