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Urban Legends: Their Role in Cultural Identity

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ABSTRACT

Urban legends are a pervasive form of modern folklore that reflects society's fears, morals, and cultural values. While often dismissed as trivial or fictional, these narratives offer critical insight into collective identity, social anxieties, and informal systems of moral instruction. Rooted in oral traditions and evolving with technological advancement, urban legends adapt to contemporary settings, offices, schools, and cities and maintain relevance through their emotional appeal, narrative flexibility, and the internet's viral capabilities. This paper explores the historical development, typologies, psychological mechanisms, and media transformations of urban legends. It also examines their function in shaping and reinforcing cultural identity, particularly as substitutes for fading religious narratives or traditional mythologies. By analyzing case studies such as the "Kidney Theft" and "Halloween Candy Tampering," the paper reveals how urban legends serve as cautionary tales that help individuals navigate a complex, modern world. Ultimately, urban legends remain a dynamic cultural force, part entertainment, part moral compass, and wholly a reflection of society's shifting norms.

Keywords: Urban legends, modern folklore, cultural identity, oral tradition, internet myths, social anxiety, collective memory, cautionary tales.

INTRODUCTION

An urban legend is a contemporary story framed as a first-person account and circulated by word of mouth or on the internet. Although many urban legends contain a kernel of truth, they can be exaggerated, misconstrued, or fabricated stories presented as truth. The term urban legend was coined in the 1960s by social psychologist and folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand to describe the types of anecdotes circulated within traditionally oral storytelling networks in contemporary urban life. Urban legends, old or new, are full of stories featuring typically contemporary settings; for example, an office, a school, a workplace, or a library are typical loci for an urban legend to take place. The vast majority of examples all seem to share the characteristic of having a clear moral or warning; the legend, therefore, often has a lesson to impart to its audience, usually in the form of advice or a cautionary tale. From a folkloric perspective, a legend is a story that is narrated as though it were true, and which is set in the present or recent past, with the narrator often making claims of direct knowledge, witness, or interaction with the central figures in the plot. Modern examples are characterized by shifts less in their fundamental nature and identity than in the language and details used to describe a particular set of circumstances or events. Proper legends have a specific range of times and places, while folktales usually remain identical regardless of variations of setting. An urban legend is a form of modern folklore, and usually consists of fictional stories, sometimes presented as factual, with macabre or humorous elements, rooted in local popular culture. Key motifs often are presented as based on recent events and contain an element of humor or irony. The stories can be understood as a reflection of modern collective fears, hopes, or moral concerns [1, 2].

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Informal legends trace back to Neolithic times, exemplified by The Smith and the Devil, the oldest known story. Archaeological findings indicate that legends arose due to illiteracy and dissatisfaction in societies including Jewish, Greek, and Christian cultures. The 6th and 19th centuries produced numerous intentional legends as historians often used biased or forged materials to align with political interests. Scholars and anthropologists began investigating urban legends across historical periods, especially as electronic communication and the Internet boosted their popularity, leading to a rapid social and political influence. Urban legends, characterized by their narrative structure featuring characters and plots, often blend humor, horror, and moral lessons. A prime example is the organ harvesters' tale, warning of danger while capturing societal fears regarding violence and deceitful entities. Their persistence is attributed to the entertaining nature of folklore, fulfilling a human need for storytelling. Scholars like Campbell and Brunvand explore these modern myths, with Brunvand examining widespread urban legends, uncovering deeper themes, and contributing to American folklore studies. The rise of electronic media has further propagated urban legends, with Barbara Mikkelson documenting countless researched tales, revealing them as symbolic expressions of fiction. While some anthropologists connect ancient and contemporary myths, few do so extensively. Modern Americans often feel disconnected from older myths, viewing them as childish or exotic, leading to superiority complexes regarding one's own folklore. Jung emphasized that ancient myths were crafted with significant intelligence, a quality that should inform the understanding of contemporary stories within their cultural context. An objective analysis, therefore, must acknowledge how basic concepts are interwoven in community storytelling [3, 4].

TYPES OF URBAN LEGENDS

This chapter explores the various types of urban legends in contemporary culture, characterized by a set of characters, a plot, and a resolution, often blending multiple claims into a piece of folklore. They encompass genres like horror, humor, morality, or empathy. For instance, the "organ harvesters" tale serves as a horror legend with a cautionary message about unfamiliar cities. Such legends are moralistic narratives believed to have happened to someone the narrator knows, often taken at face value. They reveal shared community fears and concerns, confronting risky activities and highlighting social dangers, confirming the belief that the world is filled with threats from criminals, drugs, and negligent authorities. While the origin of these tales may be dubious, they persist due to the human need for entertainment and storytelling. Often told as truths with bizarre elements, these narratives might serve as warnings or mere entertainment. Although some factual basis may exist, elaboration transforms the story into something less credible. Patterns involving comedy or horror, unconventional characters, and bizarre repercussions emerge in these narratives. Their spontaneous circulation often leads to similar stories appearing in various media, highlighting dangers of companies and societal threats alongside warnings about crimes or technological issues. The internet accelerates this process, enabling rapid and widespread transmission, making urban legends a global phenomenon. Even when debunked, these stories endure and evolve, resonating with urban Americans' emotions like fear and disgust [5, 6].

PSYCHOLOGY BEHIND URBAN LEGENDS

Urban legends are modern myths that evolve from real events but transform into entertaining, often bizarre stories shared as truth despite lacking basis in reality. Usually cautionary tales, they mix comedy with horror and feature characters who breach social norms, facing ironic punishments. Their rapid spread among social groups disseminates knowledge and maintains interest. The internet's accessibility facilitates their global rise and allows for instant variation and editing. Urban legends appeal to strong emotions such as disgust, fear, and anger, which helps them circulate. They often involve a cast of characters and plots that blur as the stories are shared. Many contain elements of humor, horror, and morality; for instance, tales of organ harvesters warn against complacency regarding medical care. Such legends serve as cautionary examples, emphasizing behaviors to avoid. They adapt to contemporary societal fears and challenges, and are shared by trusted sources that lend them credibility, making the extraordinary more believable. Urban myths persist because the concerns they address endure and resonate, providing guidance on ongoing human struggles. While many have clear origins, they also echo universal anxieties. Themes include warnings of dangers from killers, deceitful businesses, or dubious neighbors. The timing of updates remains crucial to maintaining relevance, ensuring that narratives stay accessible and engaging. A well-known example is the Halloween candy contamination myth, which lacks contemporary evidence yet continues to generate widespread warnings and media coverage [7, 8].

URBAN LEGENDS IN MEDIA

Urban legends are fascinating tales that are widely disseminated throughout society, often presented as credible accounts that are recounted either first-hand or second-hand by individuals who claim to have experienced or witnessed them. These legends are frequently adapted and transformed for various visual

and textual media, taking on new forms that can engage different audiences. The vast majority of the stories that are recounted in this manner are set in commonplace, familiar locales, and they feature characters that are representative of the storyteller's society and cultural context. While specific details of these legends may shift and evolve, the broad narrative framework, emotional tenor, and underlying moral implications remain remarkably consistent. Certain narrative units within these urban legends, such as those dealing with the fear of contaminated Halloween candy, serve profound symbolic functions that underscore the operation of folklore and rumors. These stories act as mechanisms for both entertainment and reassurance, particularly amid unexamined fears of social hostilities and perceived threats to safety in our everyday lives [9, 10].

CULTURAL IDENTITY AND URBAN LEGENDS

Urban legend stories are commonly told with the claim that they are true events that recently happened to a friend of a friend or, in some cases, to the storyteller. While the details of the story are often vague or inconsistent, the narratives frequently extend claims about the central event to allow them to continue as news stories or as contemporary legends. In addition to being cautionary, the urban legends commonly serve a moralistic function as well, frequently warning of the consequences of disregarding societal mores. Given that urban legends are usually circulated by acquaintances who assert that the story happened to someone they personally know, these narratives maintain a good deal of social appeal and are transmitted out of the belief that they might be true. Adam Douglas contends that the continuing popularity of urban legends is traceable to an intrinsic human need for entertaining narratives and social involvement, irrespective of the veracity of the stories in question. In a cultural environment fraught with anxiety about the bizarre behaviors of untrustworthy others and the growing perception of a world full of suffering and injustice, such stories provide a medium that not only cautions readers into heeding warnings but also facilitates the reinforcement of existing cultural perspectives. As reminders of the importance of dutiful conformity to prevailing laws and regulations, the tales thus function as 18th-century etiquette manuals for remaining vigilant within a society governed by a shaky social contract [11, 12].

CASE STUDIES OF NOTABLE URBAN LEGENDS

An urban legend is a modern story often relayed as having happened to a "friend of a friend." These tales can be entertaining, frightening, or baffling, often featuring bizarre or humorous elements. They typically convey moral lessons and have been widely analyzed for their interpretative value. Examples like "Alligators in the sewers" and "Kidney Theft" showcase recurring themes in this genre, reflecting cultural fascination with stories that both entertain and caution. The kidney theft legend, a malicious myth since the late 1980s, follows a familiar pattern of urban legends that revolve around travel leading to unwanted medical intrusion. This narrative taps into fears about bodily autonomy and the medical field, embodying contemporary anxieties about life, youth, and health, further fueled by distrust of medical practices. Despite lacking empirical evidence, such stories resonate emotionally, fulfilling a cultural need to share narratives shaped by feelings rather than facts [13, 14].

URBAN LEGENDS AND MODERN SOCIETY

Urban legends transcend cultures, embodying contemporary folklore that communicates moral values and societal aversions. They connect individuals to communities, serving as alternatives to discredited theological systems. Urban legends replace outdated religious tales with secular narratives relevant to modern history. Many of these stories focus on ingroup/outgroup conflicts, addressing dangerous or socially inappropriate issues from a secular viewpoint. While resembling traditional tales, urban narratives feature modern settings and themes. They gain strength through referential strategies that uphold traditional virtues by conveying specific stories. Often cited by authority figures as evidence of group identity, these legends do not require empirical validation. Frequently grim, they highlight targets of prohibition, contrasting the interests of protagonists with cultural norms, and revealing hidden or marginalized groups. They provide context for scapegoating, reaffirm popular attitudes through authority endorsement, and act as vehicles for partisan messaging. As imaginative enactments, these narratives let audiences explore diverse roles and reinforce dominant ideals. American folklore evolved with modern elements like telephones and atomic bombs, while the Coachella Valley developed its own myths. This community's oral folklore reflects the revival of memory through cycles of legends that articulate a collective identity amidst California's metropolitan fringes. As such, oral folklore may be viewed as a form of modern mythology, addressing the spiritual essence of transforming social realities [15, 16].

CRITICISM AND SKEPTICISM

The study of folklore and popular culture is complex in a contemporary, transnational, hybrid world. Urban legends found on the Internet closely resemble traditional materials in that both reflect

individuals' concerns about making sense of a world in flux. For this reason, tradition should be viewed as the study of changing cultural processes rather than static, self-contained entities. Critics emphasize that culture is shaped by prejudgments and preconceptions conveyed by human beings themselves, including scientists. Abandoning stereotypical assumptions and employing diverse social science methods facilitate a better comprehension of such cultures. Tradition and modernity, the rural and the urban, are in a state of constant transformation; the pursuit of scientific knowledge consists precisely in following these processes with a neutral mindset. Communication rooted in oral tradition may retain relevance in an age of visual culture, as demonstrated by urban legends. These narratives, which their authors regard as rooted in folklore, continue the practice of oral storytelling. They are continuously reshaped by mass media in the context of modern life [17, 18].

FUTURE OF URBAN LEGENDS

Computer-mediated communication has become a rich and fertile ground for the proliferation of today's most intriguing urban legends. In this digital age, rumors can spread rapidly, and even when certain individuals dismiss them, there are always others who take them to heart, often possessing fewer resources or the desire to check the accuracy of the information being shared. Moreover, spam filters in our email systems frequently fail to block e-mail chain letters along with other related subgenres of urban legend, which allows these myths to circulate freely. While it is true that some urban legends may have been suppressed in earlier, more primitive methods of communication, the current landscape allows for such tales to flourish. The incredible ease with which information can be rearranged, edited, and manipulated in our modern digital platforms enhances the likelihood that urban legends will continue to hold their prominent place in human affairs for many years, perhaps even decades, to come [19, 20].

CONCLUSION

Urban legends persist because they speak to the heart of human social experience—fear, humor, morality, and identity. As modern myths, they act as cultural barometers, reflecting and reinforcing community values while navigating societal uncertainties. Despite being frequently debunked or recognized as fiction, these tales endure through emotional resonance and relevance. They reveal how contemporary societies communicate norms, caution against perceived threats, and find meaning in a rapidly changing world. In this light, urban legends are not merely stories told for entertainment—they are complex, adaptive narratives that help define who we are, what we fear, and how we understand one another. As society continues to evolve through technology and globalization, urban legends will remain a potent form of cultural expression, mirroring the ever-changing human condition.

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