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Folk Narratives in Transition: Linguistic Adaptations and Digital Folklore Transmission in Urban Legends

Sukhdeep Kaur

Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh

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ABSTRACT

Folklore encompasses the cultural narratives, practices, and traditions passed down through generations. Urban legends, a subgenre of folklore, once transmitted orally, have found new life in digital spaces, undergoing linguistic and structural transformations. They reflect modern anxieties about personal safety, particularly in urban spaces where danger lurks in mundane environments like cars or bathrooms. This paper explores how Digital Humanities tools aid in the preservation and adaptation of urban legends like *The Killer in the Backseat* and *Bloody Mary,* focusing on linguistic diversity and digital folklore transmission. Using corpus analysis, digital archiving, and AI-driven storytelling, the study examines how folklore shifts across platforms like YouTube, Reddit, and Creepypasta Wiki. The paper also investigates the impact of machine translation, code-mixing, and vernacular creativity in shaping multilingual adaptations of urban legends. It traces the evolution of two American urban legends, *The Killer in the Backseat* and *Bloody Mary*, from their oral origins to contemporary digital adaptations across various media. This study utilizes Linda Hutcheon's Adaptation theory and Trevor J Blank's theory of Digital folklore which views folklore as a dynamic process gaining new interpretations. It argues that while digital spaces preserve folklore, they also standardize narratives, raising questions about linguistic homogenization. By bridging Digital Humanities and Folklore Studies, this research highlights the evolving role of digital

storytelling in maintaining linguistic plurality and intangible cultural heritage. Urban legends have not only survived the transition into the digital age, but also evolved into powerful cultural artifacts that continue to reflect societal fears and anxieties in meaningful ways.

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1. 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 communal product, formed and reshaped by collective processes of recreation and reinterpretation, as described by McEdward Leach. Over time, its definition expanded to encompass not only these historical practices but also modern traditions of material culture. In non-literate societies, folklore serves as an essential pedagogic tool which codifies beliefs and enforces morality through myth. In the digitized world, these stories are undergoing a profound transformation, shifting from oral and written traditions to dynamic digital adaptations.

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 provide insights into broader digital storytelling patterns. In this paper, For the analysis of earlier versions of *The Killer in the Backseat,* I have drawn upon Jan Brunvand's works, *Too Good to Be True, The Mexican Pet*, and Carlos Drake's *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends*; *Indiana Folklore*. 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 Legend*s, the short film adaptation *High Beams*, and for Bloody Mary, the video game *Identity V*, the 1992 film *Candyman*, and the 1998 film *Urban Legends*.

The 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 *The Folk Culture in Digital Age* 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. In the study of urban legends, a comparative approach is applied for understanding the

narratives' consistency and variation across different contexts. This multidisciplinary approach aims to highlight the evolving nature of urban legends and their relevance in contemporary digital contexts.

Linda Hutcheon's adaptation theory examines the transformation of these legends across mediums, while Freud's symbolic interpretation provides insights into the subconscious fears embedded in them. Media adaptations, such as *Candyman (1992), Identity V, The Twilight Zone,* and YouTube channels like *After Dark* and *Why Is It Trending,* reveal how urban legends blend traditional elements with modern aesthetics to engage contemporary audiences.

2. 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. Though conscious manipulation and reshaping of folk materials, often driven by aesthetics and capitalism, raises questions about the authenticity of these materials in the digital realm. However, Gertrude P. Kurtah points out that putting oral stories into writing or print does not lessen their authenticity; rather, it helps them survive and spread, ensuring that folklore is still available to people who are not part of its original cultural context.

Urban legends, traditionally passed down through oral storytelling, have undergone significant transformations in the digital age. These legends, once embedded in localized cultural contexts, now traverse digital spaces, reshaped by linguistic diversity, multimedia adaptations, and online communities. This paper explores how Digital Humanities tools facilitate the preservation and adaptation of urban legends, with a particular focus on The Killer in the Backseat and Bloody Mary. Through corpus analysis, digital archiving, and AI-driven storytelling, this study examines the intersection of folklore, linguistic diversity, and digital media.

The paper aims to address two key questions: (1) How do digital spaces influence the transmission and adaptation of urban legends? (2) To what extent do machine translation, code-mixing, and vernacular creativity shape multilingual storytelling in digital folklore? Drawing from Folklore Studies and Digital Humanities methodologies, this research underscores the evolving nature of digital storytelling and its implications for cultural heritage.

Urban legends, a subgenre of folklore, reflect modern anxieties about personal safety, particularly in urban spaces where danger lurks in mundane environments like cars or bathrooms. Urban legends, as analysed by scholars such as Jan Harold Brunvand, are not merely fictional stories for

entertainment but serve as reflections of society's deepest fears, anxieties, and moral concerns. They represent broader societal concerns about unpredictability of modern life. A key narrative device in these legends is the "friend of a friend" (FOAF) structure, which lends authenticity and immediacy to the stories. This structure makes them compelling. This reinforces the emotional and cultural resonance of urban legends across generations which ensures their continued relevance in modern society. Through the theory of adaptation, this paper traces how urban legends, once rooted in word-of-mouth transmission, are now disseminated through social media, film, and online platforms.

While the digital age allows for rapid debunking of urban legends, it also provides fertile ground for their continued spread and adaptation. Despite being debunked as fiction, urban legends retain their cultural significance by evolving with new social contexts, particularly in response to modern-day fears like technological dependency or urban violence. Moreover, the adaptation of these legends reflects societal shifts, especially in terms of gender roles and power dynamics. The portrayal of women as vulnerable figures underscores societal concerns about safety in urban spaces. These stories reinforce cultural stereotypes, while reflecting societal anxieties about male aggression and female vulnerability. As urban legends continue to be retold and reinterpreted, they serve as both reflections of and responses to cultural fears. Jan Harold Brunvand categorized them as "living folklore".

Brunvand, in the introduction of his work, *"Too Good to Be True"* explains that urban legends often push the boundaries of believability. They are "too good to be true", vividly realistic in familiar settings and actions, such as homes and offices, yet featuring bizarre or comic incidents that seem far from reality. The stories reveal a highly polished and tightly plotted structure that suggests intentional design rather than spontaneous truth. They are coincidentally structured to be factual, especially as they are retold across contexts. According to Brunvand, what defines urban legends, isn't strictly their truth or fiction but rather the folkloric qualities of "oral repetition and variation." They maintain only a core narrative. ULs are simply too very good—that is, well-balanced, clean, concentrated, and polished—to be true, as Brunvand puts it. However, an urban legend isn't actually defined by fact or fiction. Oral repetition and modification are the distinguishing characteristics of any folklore, and these tales undoubtedly belong to our contemporary folklore.

3. Digital Humanities and the Study of Urban Legends

Digital Humanities provides a methodological framework for analyzing folklore in digital contexts. Traditional folklore studies relied on ethnographic documentation and comparative analysis, but digital tools now offer new ways to trace linguistic and structural shifts in urban legends. Some key Digital Humanities methodologies applied to urban legends include:

Corpus Analysis: Large-scale textual analysis of urban legends across platforms such as Reddit, YouTube transcripts, and Creepypasta Wiki allows for linguistic pattern identification.

Digital Archiving: Projects like the American Folklife Center and Digital Folklore Archive curate and preserve evolving versions of urban legends, ensuring accessibility for future researchers.

AI-Driven Storytelling: Neural networks and language models contribute to digital folklore by generating variations of existing urban legends, influencing how these narratives are retold and perceived.

4.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 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. The hidden danger is in the form of a man who hides in her car with the intention to kill her and then the entry of an unexpected saviour—a third party helps in preventing the attack. The moral lesson at the end remains the same that is vigilance and safety. These stable elements underscore the functionality of urban legends as cautionary tales, teaching societal values (safety, distrust of strangers) and situational awareness. However, the fluidity of details varies in different versions which reflects changing social anxieties and audience expectations.

The Killer in the Backseat, which originated from real-life incidents and was popularized by popular culture, has become a mainstay of urban legend and reflects societal concerns about vulnerability and safety, especially in remote locations like a car on a dark road. The Ogden, Utah version of story, which was told by Erin Buckner is recorded in *Indiana Folklore* (1968). In this version, the saviour’s involvement introduces a level of suspense. This is quite ambiguous about the intentions of the stalker and the failure of the legend to alert the victim initially. In the Chicago version, which was

recorded by, Larry Miller from Russiaville in 1965, the killer was a Negro man. This introduces themes of racial fear and urban crime which reflects the racial tensions prevalent in American cities during the 1960s. In 1964, an incident occurred in New York city which grounds the legend in reality. This version involved an escaped murderer hiding in the detective's car, not in a lone woman's vehicle. The focus was shifted from personal safety to law enforcement. The shift, wherein the detective saves himself, illustrates how gender roles can shift in adaptation. The narrative focuses on professional competence of the detective rather than vulnerability. It offers a glimpse of how narratives adapt when the protagonist's identity change. These narrative shifts between regions indicate the adaptive capacity of folklore, where the core tale is continuously evolving based on the local anxieties of crime, race and safety and social dynamics whether it is of urban life or suburban life. In most versions, female vulnerability, victimhood and the male saviour complex recur where the central figure is a young woman, alone at night.

With emerging technologies, these tales not only inform and warn audiences but, ironically, provide new ideas to criminals. This alters the foundation of their cautionary purpose. Traditional folktales were communal and shared orally to encourage communal vigilance. Digital adaptations, on the other hand, have made the experience of people more isolated. This made the fear more intense and personal rather than communal. Furthermore, the focus of these modern adaptations has moved away from delivering communal messages of caution or moral values. Instead, they are crafted to generate thrill, suspense, and shock for individual viewers. This change underscores how digitalization has redefined the way urban legend's function. Now, however, these stories have become highly personalized, centred around private, intimate spaces like cars, bathrooms, and kitchens, places once considered safe and familiar. By infiltrating personal spaces and adapting to reflect individual fears, these tales contribute to a heightened sense of vulnerability.

The legend of *The Killer in the Backseat* has transitioned from oral folklore to written anthologies, and now, to digital storytelling formats. Earlier versions, as recorded by Jan Harold Brunvand (Too Good to Be True) and Cheryl Herbert (Night Chase), emphasized cautionary themes about female vulnerability and unseen threats. However, digital adaptations modify the narrative in distinct ways:

1. **YouTube and Video Narrative**s: Channels like Why is it Trending? reshape the legend's structure through visual storytelling, altering the suspense-building techniques and character roles.

2. **Reddit and First-Person Adaptations:** The interactive nature of Reddit's r/nosleep allows users to personalize the legend, incorporating modern fears such as surveillance technology and ride-sharing dangers.

3. **Machine Translation and Code-Mixing:** Multilingual retellings incorporate linguistic shifts, such as Hindi-English code-mixing in Indian adaptations, where "killer" may be replaced with hatyara or aatankwadi, reflecting cultural anxieties.

The standardization of narrative elements in digital folklore raises concerns about homogenization, yet it also enables wider dissemination and adaptation of the legend across linguistic boundaries.

In *Too Good to Be True,* Brunvand states that urban legends often employ "pseudo- verification" tactics to lend credibility to their narratives. One method is the “ritp” or “rip” approach, where a narrator asserts, they “read it in the paper”, despite never providing an actual reference or clipping. This tactic implies documented evidence without substantiating it, relying instead on the vague claim of published authority. Another involves the FOAF formula, where the storyteller claims the incident happened to someone just outside their immediate circle, rendering the source difficult to trace or verify. The “ritp” and FOAF techniques are both stereotyped but unsupported claims, mirroring customary oral storytelling techniques that give urban legends a sense of legitimacy despite their lack of factual support.

Brunvand's collection of urban Legends *the Choking Doberman* contains another version of this legend which is recorded by Ann Landers. This version presents the tale in a straightforward and cautionary manner. Unlike more elaborate or suspense-driven renditions, this emphasizes immediate, practical advice, aiming to instill caution rather than pure thrill. This version is more about invoking fear and tapping into the audience’s anxieties about unseen dangers lurking close by, especially threats to women in private or personal spaces.

In *Urban Legends 666 Absolutely True Stories That Happened to a Friend by* Thomas

J. Craughwell recounts the legend *The Murderer in the Backseat*. The narrative tells the tale of a woman who unintentionally becomes a target while leaving a Phoenix shopping center. She sees a car flashing its high beams as it follows her closely as she drives. After fleeing to her brother-in-law, a police officer, she finds that the man in the other car was actually attempting to alert her to the presence of an armed and ready-to-attack assailant in her own backseat. Craughwell includes a variation of the tale, where the woman is warned by a gas station attendant instead. The story is set in a modern urban setting, reflecting societal concerns like urban crime and loneliness. On the other hand, Drake’s version incorporated rural or small- town settings, drawing on the state's agricultural roots and its specific cultural history. The main characters are a woman, a stranger, and her brother-in-law which highlights the importance of modern vigilance and law enforcement in contemporary society.

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* (1977). This book compiles "true stories that will please any youngster". In her retelling, Herbert includes a unique detail: two rescuers keep their car's bright lights on to deter the hidden assailant. This version maintains the suspenseful elements typical of urban legends, tailored to appeal to a younger audience. But this legend delivers three messages. Always lock your car doors, look beneath the car before you approach it to re-enter, look in the back before you get in, and most importantly, always be mindful of your surroundings and other people around you, especially at night! With the advent of the internet, several contemporary versions of the legend have emerged, circulated through social media or websites. These digital iterations include modern elements such as smartphones and text messages, where a friend alerts the woman through a phone call 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 that 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 recognized six structural elements: Abstract, Orientation, Complicating Action, Evaluation, Result, and Coda. In traditional forms, the story usually follows this clear linguistic framework. In contrast, digital adaptations frequently experiment with these elements, omitting or rearranging key information within the orientation to create suspense or engage users. This provides a more immersive experience as audiences navigate through hypertext or interactive media. This shift not only reflects a transformation in narrative syntax but also underscores how digital

platforms influence the reception and reinterpretation of urban legends which enables new forms of communal re-creation that blend traditional folklore with modern technological narratives.

From a psychological standpoint, *The Killer in the Backseat* taps into two core fears: isolation and the unknown. The unknown threat in the backseat represents the unseen fears, the hidden dangers in familiar places that can challenge the sense of safety. It taps into our instinctive fears by transforming a routine act—driving alone—into a tense, suspenseful experience. This highlights vulnerability where isolation and silence can make even the most trivial sounds seem ominous. Urban legends are retold in the third person, with a certain detachment and a tone that allows for embellishments, humour, or whimsical elements to make the story memorable. They rely on suspense and the thrill of an anonymous narrative, rather

than personal or emotional involvement. In contrast, survivor accounts shift the tone entirely. Told in the first person, they bring a raw emotional intensity. They blur the line between myth and reality which amplifies the impact of the legend.

Bloody Mary legend stands as one of the most haunting and enduring urban legends in folklore, with its roots tangled in superstition, mystery, and a societal fascination with the supernatural. The ritual of summoning *Bloody Mary,* involved the repetition of her name in front of a dimly lit mirror, has sparked fear and intrigue across generations. Participants, mostly adolescent girls, enter a darkened room, most commonly a bathroom, chant variations of “I believe in Mary Worth” a specified number of times, armed with a flickering candle and a sense of anticipation, often daring one another to summon the vengeful spirit who is said to appear in the mirror. This rite is typically performed at gatherings like parties or summer camps, emphasizing its social aspect as a shared, thrilling experience. The name of the spirit varies—from ‘Mary Worth’ to ‘Mary Lou’, and even 'Kathy'—but the core concept remains the same: a vengeful female spirit said to scratch the face of the summoner.

Bloody Mary functions as both an urban legend and a ritualistic game, making its digital adaptations particularly interactive. Key transformations include:

1**. TikTok and Challenge Culture:** The legend’s ritualistic element has been amplified through viral trends, with users filming their attempts to summon Bloody Mary in dark rooms, often incorporating augmented reality filters.

2**. Digital Folklore and AI-Generated Horror:** AI-generated storytelling platforms introduce new variations of the legend, incorporating AI-driven plot developments that personalize the experience based on user interactions.

3. **Vernacular Creativity and Regional Adaptations:** In Spanish-speaking digital communities, La Llorona is sometimes blended with Bloody Mary, resulting in hybridized folklore reflecting transnational influences.These transformations illustrate how digital spaces reshape not only linguistic elements but also ritualistic and performative aspects of urban legends.

The figure of "Bloody Mary" has roots in both historical narratives and cultural mythology, embodying the fascination with female figures associated with violence and vengeance. One of the most prominent historical references is Mary I of England, the Catholic monarch. The burnings carried out in public in her reign to reinforce Catholic orthodoxy instead fostered fear and resistance, ultimately earning Mary the nickname "Bloody Mary." There are other figures in history who have been linked to the Bloody Mary myth. Elizabeth Báthory, the Hungarian countess of the 17th century, committed heinous crimes against hundreds of young women, with sensational accounts suggesting she bathed in their blood to preserve her beauty. This diversity underscores how the *Bloody Mary* myth has been shaped over time, blending historical elements with evolving social and cultural fears.

Urban Legends by Thomas J. Craughwell, presents Mary Worth, as a disfigured woman from 17th-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. Her vengeful ghost, appearing hideously altered with clawed hands, reaches through the mirror to attack the children, reinforcing the tale’s terrifying appeal. This version emphasizes the themes of vengeance and supernatural retribution, fear of mirrors, which are recurrent in horror folklore. In comparison, *Indiana folklore* versions of such ghost stories or spirit conjuring incorporate different elements, specific to local history or cultural fears. For example, Indiana folklore lean 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 practice of young ladies utilizing mirrors to glimpse their future spouses or predict an early death highlights the importance of marriage and mortality in society. The modern adaptation has transformed this into a playful yet eerie game. This evolution from divination practice to a form of entertainment highlights the changing cultural significance of folklore. The language of the *Bloody Mary* ritual varies across cultures and regions. Janet Langlois highlights how the chant “I do believe in Mary Worth”—has numerous iterations, reflecting regional differences in expression and belief. Social media platforms prefer to use shorter punchier phrases to keep viewers engaged. Another dimension

which adds to the unsettling nature of legend is the variety of outcomes reported in different versions. The spirit might claw the eyes out of her summoner, inflict insanity, or drag them into the mirror, never to be seen again.

In folklore, mirrors serve as a means of revelation and a metaphor for confronting one's deepest fears or truths. The mirror, as a liminal space, serves as both a reflective and projective device. Mirrors acted as portals between the physical and spiritual worlds. This idea is rooted in various cultural beliefs, such as the tradition of covering mirrors in homes with deceased loved ones to prevent spirits from being trapped. This notion ties into psychoanalytic interpretations, suggesting the participant's subconscious guilt or anxieties manifest through the apparition of Mary. Alan Dundes' analysis of the ritual provides deeper insight, suggesting that the act of summoning Bloody Mary may symbolize the transition from girlhood to womanhood, particularly the onset of menstruation. Dundes posits that the Bloody Mary legend encapsulates a blend of fear, transformation, and social bonding which serves as a vehicle for young girls to navigate the anxieties surrounding their evolving identities while participating in a communal experience steeped in tradition and folklore.

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 marginalized individuals to "vent their own social aggression" (Ellis, 27). In this way, Bloody Mary is more than just a ritual; it is an act of rebellion against the norms of society, particularly against the rational, secular world dominated by adults. Ellis' assertion that "occultism among adolescents is also about power" (Ellis,89) is reflected in the *Killer in the Backseat* legend, where the protagonist's awareness of the danger in the backseat becomes an assertion of control over the situation, even though the threat itself is supernatural. This tension between control

and helplessness can be seen as a symbolic expression of social anxieties, particularly those relating to power dynamics and the loss of personal security.

Alan Dundes, in his article *Bloody Mary in the Mirror,* provides ten variants [1] of the urban legend. They share core elements but differ significantly in their ritualistic details. Each variant includes a mirror, darkness, and the chant *Bloody Mary* but the adaptations demonstrate how these elements can be modified. The chant changes from a simple repetition of "Bloody Mary" (Texts 3, 4, 6, 8, 10) to more elaborate phrases like "Bloody Mary, show your fright. Show your fright this starry night" (Text 1). These linguistic differences emphasize how the invocation ritual adapts based on regional influences,

suggesting a localization effect. The text (1, 4, 8) describe various methods of summoning Bloody Mary, such as spinning around, sprinkling water on the mirror (Text 7), and flushing the toilet (Texts 7, 8, 10). These variations highlight how rituals are influenced by their settings (e.g., school bathrooms) and available cultural references. The timing (e.g., midnight in Text 6 vs. any time of day in Text 8) and the atmosphere (e.g., hot water in Text 8) modifies the ritual's suspense. Adaptations incorporate sensory elements like flushing toilets and the sound of water, which add tension and signify purification, emphasizing how the setting influences the ritual's performative aspect. The Bloody Mary legend is primarily a girls' ritual, emphasizing themes of female embodiment and societal expectations. The narrative serves as a space for girls to address fears and curiosities about womanhood. But text 9 hints at the possibility of male involvement. This reflects 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. In Freudian terms, the displacement of blood from the head, is a psychological manifestation of this fear of bodily changes. Blood, as a symbol of life, death, and transformation, is linked to power, fertility, and fear. In *Bloody Mary*, the "blood running down her face" represents not only physical injury but also the internal turmoil associated with growing up and the accompanying fears of 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, symbolizing a repressed fear of transformation and bodily autonomy.

Thus, the printed existence of these urban legends *The Killer in the Backseat* and *Bloody Mary* not only preserves the content of urban legends but also serves as a catalyst for their reinterpretation and dissemination. As Brunvand argues, folklore defies preservation in any fixed form; the moment a story, song, or saying is documented, it reappears in a different

version, tailored to the current cultural moment. This interplay between print and oral culture fosters an environment for urban legend to adapt according, to changing societal values and technological advancements while retaining their themes of fear, humour, and social commentary.

5.The Role of Digital Media in Linguistic Standardization and Plurality

One of the paradoxes of digital folklore transmission is the tension between linguistic diversity and standardization. While digital spaces enable folklore to be shared in multiple languages, algorithmic and

AI-generated storytelling often promote dominant linguistic structures, leading to: **Homogenization of Folklore:** Automated translation tools frequently simplify linguistic nuances, resulting in a loss of culturally specific expressions.

Memetic Adaptations: Viral folklore, such as creepypasta versions of The Killer in the Backseat, often follow a formulaic structure, reinforcing a standardized digital folklore aesthetic.

Subversive Linguistic Play: On the other hand, online folklore communities engage in vernacular creativity by incorporating slang, dialects, and code-mixing, preserving linguistic plurality.

6.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. Adaptations update the form by incorporating modern elements such as technology, new fears, and contemporary settings. Digital platforms like YouTube and social networking sites have not only reshaped the narratives but also enhanced the performance and transmission of these urban legends. As Trevor J. Blank asserts the internet is rapidly becoming the premier forum for the study of legends, chain letters, hoaxes, and jokes. This section aims to examine the adaptations and digital reinterpretations of *The Killer in the Backseat* and *Bloody Mary* by focusing on their depictions across 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.

Traditional narrators of these legends may feel that digital versions found on You Tube 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. As a result, Hutcheon's theory highlights the importance and relevance of these digital alterations while challenging the hierarchy between originals and adaptations. Traditional urban legend audiences have been more aware of the risks associated with travelling alone, but contemporary digital audiences are focused on the ways in which technology affects privacy and safety. This

human component supports Hutcheon's claim that adaptations are dynamic texts influenced by social and cultural experiences rather from only being formal replications.

An important analytical perspective is offered by Hutcheon's idea that the "adapted text" is plural and exists laterally rather than vertically. Both the urban legends have several coexisting versions, none of which is given preference over the others. Every retelling coexists laterally, regardless of whether it is transmitted orally, in writing, or online. The idea of a hierarchical "original" is called into question by this lateral existence, which instead proposes a network of equally significant variations that each reflect distinct social or cultural influences. Hutcheon contends that even in the absence of intentional modification, adaptation is a type of repetition that invariably entails change. This concept is relevant to the digital versions of these stories. When repeated on new platforms, they evolve, while retaining recognizable story line and central theme.

The earliest adapted version of *The Killer in the Backseat* appears in 1998 film *Urban Legends.* This film effectively uses this legend as a motif to expose the cultural anxieties surrounding urban legends. This adaptation follows a series of grisly murders in a college campus, each staged to resemble a well-known urban legend. The killings begin with Michelle Mancini, a student who is murdered by a hidden attacker in the backseat of her car—a nod to the "killer in the backseat" legend. Eventually, Natalie and her friends become aware that these murders are modelled on familiar urban myths. In last scene, Brenda hides in the backseat of Natalie's car with an intention to kill her. A violent struggle ensues between Paul, Brenda and Natalie. Ultimately, Brenda is thrown from a window. The 1998 film *Urban Legends* adapted this narrative within a contemporary setting, altering and expanding its themes and implications. But in this adaptation instead of merely escaping, Michelle Mancini got killed. In traditional version, usually, the killer's motives are ambiguous, which serves more as a narrative device to evoke fear and caution among listeners. The driver is portrayed as an innocent victim, but in this movie, Brenda is portrayed as an antagonist driven by revenge for her fiancé's death, caused by Natalie and Michelle. This backstory adds layers to her character by transforming the narrative from a simple cautionary tale into a complex exploration of grief and vengeance.

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. This movie has 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 *After Dark* You Tube channel. 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 increase when viewers learn about the killer's thinking through hearing him reveal his intentions and acts. By giving the audience an impression that they are privy to a perverted confession, it adds psychological depth. It prioritizes horror over the moral warning. In Drake's version, the girl reaches home safely with help of the pursuing driver who continuously flashed high beams to alert her about the danger. However, in *After Dark'*s version, the killer remains unchecked. In this version, the killer not only kills the protagonist but also steals her car. This version completely neglects any saviour or police involvement. This shift reflects a darker, more sinister tone which emphasizes on fear rather than community intervention or vigilance.

Another version which is featured on YouTube channel named *Why is it Trending?* introduces striking shifts amplifying horror and suspense. In this animated version, a girl named, Penny leaves work at night and drives along a deserted road. She notices a car behind her, which begins signalling with its lights. Being terrified, she accelerates when the other car follows closely, eventually hitting her rear bumper. Reaching home, she rushes inside and opens her window to see the car that chased her. The driver, a short and frightened man, yells at her not to open the door and to call the police. Suddenly, a man wearing a long trench coat and wielding an axe emerges from her own car. He attacks the driver who had been trying to warn Penny, dismembering him in seconds. The next day, police discover Penny's body in her home, with broken window panes. Despite investigations, the killer in the back seat 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 change undermines the usual "saviour" element, turning the would-be hero into another victim. Moreover, this version focuses on visual identity of the killer. He is shown as wearing a long trench coat and wielding a bloody axe, which adds a sinister, more cinematic presence that was absent in earlier, more ambiguous portrayals. This digital adaptation shifts from a mere urban warning story to a full-fledged horror narrative with a heightened sense of helplessness and terror. These adapted versions amplify woman's role as the quintessential "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*. The film adaptation translates visual and fear elements into visual cues, such as the use of flashing headlights, a technique that enhances the tension. However, the adaptation also introduces notable changes like the killer being nervous rather than menacing. The decision to portray the killer as nervous may create an atmosphere of doubt about his intentions or the circumstances surrounding his actions. The film's setting and the contemporary depiction of cars make the adaptation relatable. Unlike Schwartz's version, which leaves much to the imagination, the visual medium adds layers of realism that anchor the urban legend in a more familiar context.

*Bloody Mary'*s enduring appeal lies in its adaptability, as each generation reshapes the narrative to reflect their fears and fascinations. This urban legend has been adapted into interactive games like *Identity V* where Bloody Mary was renamed the Bloody Queen. The game combines historical details from Marie Antoinette's story with this mythology. The Bloody Queen is a formidable huntress whose weapon is a mirror. She can create a mirror image that can harm players using her "Aqua Mirror" ability, which combines the terror aspects of the urban legend with captivating gameplay elements. Aqua Mirror's well-placed position and the ability to trade places with the mirror image add tension similar to the fear felt while calling forth Bloody Mary in legend. The scripted objectives and rewards system add a layer of gamified storytelling that alters the passive act of listening into an active, strategic engagement with the legend. Intermediality transforms passive folklore consumption into
participatory experiences.

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. Digital adaptations of *Bloody Mary* reinforce this idea. On YouTube, participants engage in the ritual with cameras, capturing their reactions and sharing them. The use of video technology adds authenticity, making the supernatural experience seem real and accessible. The reactions of participants are broadcast to a wider audience, turning it into a social event. This "legend-tripping" in the digital age becomes a shared ritual, where participants not only confront their fears but also engage in collective storytelling.

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.* 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. This change affects how audiences perceive the legend, shifting from a personal, introspective fear to an external, spectacle-driven experience. 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.

Alan Dundes' analysis of *Bloody Mary* encapsulates the cultural and psychological tensions, particularly those experienced by pre-adolescents. Dundes proposes that the ritual serves as a reflection of pre-pubescent anxieties, especially concerning the onset of 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 focus on young girls as the primary practitioners of this ritual highlights the gendered experience of folklore. Dundes recognizes that the ritual is both a "legend" and a "game." This debate reveals the fluid character of folklore. The mirror might serve as a boundary between reality and the supernatural. The choice of location is intriguing. Bathrooms are private spaces where individuals often confront their physical selves, engage in rituals of cleanliness, or experience vulnerability.

In *Dark Fun Original* short film, 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 create 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 emphasizes the summoning act but also reflects the gravity and inevitability of supernatural retribution. The mirror serves as a conduit between the summoner and the ghost world in Bloody Mary, creating psychological tension as the summoner waits for a horrifying glance. *Candyman* retains the mirror's symbolic power but elevates it, making it the threshold through which the vengeful spirit physically enters the world to

exact brutal and explicit violence. This shift from psychological fear to physical manifestation intensifies the horror. The film recontextualizes the legend to address social issues, such as systemic racism and the history of racial injustice in America, by making Candyman a vengeful spirit tied to these themes. Candyman replaces the female spirit, which is frequently associated with themes of revenge, femininity, or tragic history. The male spirit finds roots in a Gothic narrative of racial violence and trauma. Unlike Bloody Mary, whose motivations are frequently ambiguous, Candyman has a backstory that makes his vengeance seem justified, making the horror more poignant.

In 1998 film *Urban Legends,* Brenda and Natalie tries to call forth *Bloody Mary* at Stanley Hall's entryway. It illustrates how urban legends, such as *Bloody Mary*, evoke terror and leave deep psychological impact on young adults' group dynamics. This scene also captures the communal and performative aspect of Bloody Mary rituals. In order to turn the basic act of reciting a name into a visceral and immersive experience, the film employs a variety of cinematic techniques, including ominous lighting, suspenseful soundscapes, and the protagonists' terrified anticipation, as seen through the lens of intermediality. Bloody Mary is invoked at a birthday celebration in a small but important scene in the *X-Files* Season 3, Episode 13 ("Syzygy"). When a spirit board forecasts that Brenda will marry Satan, she angrily withdraws to the restroom. She starts chanting "Bloody Mary" several times with the hope to see her future husband's face. This associates the legend with predicting one's future as young girls perform the ritual more out of curiosity and amusement than genuine belief in supernatural danger. Bloody Mary becomes a tool, exploring adolescent fantasies and fears and resonating with cultural dynamics, especially in youth and media-driven context. In the 2007 short film *Dead Mary*, the chant changes from "Bloody Mary" to "Dead Mary," demonstrating the adaptability of folklore.

This section offers a thorough comparison of digital renditions of various urban legends, showing how they preserve their essential elements while modernizing them for modern audiences. “Adaptations may become quite legitimate adoptions,” as William S. Burroughs so eloquently put it, highlighting the transformational potential of rethinking stories. In addition to guaranteeing urban legends' survival, these adaptations enable them to flourish in novel settings while maintaining their essential narrative frameworks.

7. The Digital Renaissance of Folklore: Exploring Urban Legends through Trevor J. Blank's Lens

Trevor J. Blank in *Folk Culture in the Digital Age* highlights the intersection of vernacular expressions and new media technology. His theory emphasizes that digital platforms have redefined the creation, dissemination and transformation of folklore. Digital folklore is a hybrid of traditional and contemporary elements, with users acting as an active agent who contribute to the evolving cultural content. They

bridge the virtual and corporeal worlds which influences real-world behaviours and beliefs by creating a cycle of cultural exchange. Blank challenges the notion that digital media is incompatible with folklore, arguing that new media technologies preserve and amplify the expression of vernacular culture. He considers platforms like YouTube as spaces for generation, transmission, and performance of folklore.

The emergence of digital media has changed the way urban legends are communicated through in-person interactions. In the case of *The Killer in the Backseat*, YouTube adaptations have adjusted the setting by updating the killer's tactics to include modern weapons as knives or guns and modern surveillance systems as cameras or phone apps that reflect current technological anxieties. This reflects Blank's notion that digital platforms allow for the "reproduction and adaptation" of folkloric forms, even in the face of technological change (p. 73). Moreover, digital adaptations of *The Killer in the Backseat* often evoke communal responses, with viewers commenting, sharing, or remixing these versions, a digital interaction reflecting Blank's "emergent cultural scenes" (p. 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.

Digital versions of incorporate humoristic twists, allowing online audiences to share personal encounters and discuss the myth's truth. Users use the platforms to share their experiences, blending supernatural elements with modern social behaviours. These spaces serve as digital "folkloric hubs" where both shared cultural elements and new, local adaptations coexist. Linda Degh notes, "mass media liberated folklore from its earlier confinement to the so-called lower layers of society and from the prejudice... that stigmatized it" (p. 2). Digital platforms have democratized access to these urban legends, turning them into globally recognizable narratives. This transformation showcases how mass culture has not erased folk culture but instead amplified it, making these legends accessible. This hybridization demonstrates how the folk element continues to thrive, even within seemingly commercial and mass-produced environments. Networking sites adapt urban legends with modern fears, showcasing fluidity and modern expression while maintaining the original story's themes of danger and vigilance through a hybridization of physical rituals and digital media.

Blank in *Folk Culture in the Digital Age* addresses the use of Wi-Fi-enabled devices have evolved these legends into "shareable" legends that leverage the viral nature of digital communication. Networking platforms allow for rapid distribution and remixing of these legends into diverse

interpretations and reimaginings. Tweets of *The Killer in the Backseat* may spark online debates, liberating legends from a single storyteller to an active netizen.

The social context of folklore determines how and why these narratives are created, circulated, and adapted within a culture. Malinowski's *Myth in Primitive Psychology* stresses the importance of analysing the conditions under which folklore is performed and experienced. He argues that folklore without context is like a lifeless artifact, missing the dynamic elements that give it meaning and resonance. Urban legends were told in social gatherings or group settings to create an atmosphere of fear and suspense. In oral versions, the role of the storyteller was significant. The function of the storyteller was embodied through tone modulation, facial expressions, and gestures. In digital versions, *Bloody Mary* was invoked during slumber parties, where the ritual of summoning her in the mirror required group participation. The role of the narrator evolves; YouTube creators or podcast hosts become the storytellers using visual effects, background music, and editing.

This section discusses urban legends which have gained vigour with the participatory digital culture. 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. According to Blank, folklore's importance has evolved with technological advancements, which have reduced the reliance on traditional oral forms of folklore. Creation of urban legends in digital formats, such as viral videos or social media trends, represents a new phase in the dissemination of folklore. By comparing how these legends have been transformed in digital mediums, this paper adopts flexible and adaptive approach to analyse how technology influences the perpetuation of cultural narratives.

8. Conclusion: The Continued Relevance of Urban Legends in Contemporary Society

Urban legends permeate contemporary societies by adapting to the shifting mediums and cultures in which they are shared. These narratives, thrive in both traditional and digital formats, maintaining their ability to entertain, inform, and caution. By analysing the adaptations of *The Killer in the Backseat* and *Bloody Mary* through intermediality and digital folklore frameworks, I argue that these legends not only reflect societal anxieties but also serve as tools for navigating the complexities of the digital age. While literature and television document cultural context, oral traditions encourage collective storytelling. Digital media amplifies personal concerns which increases their psychological impact. Digital folklore fosters participatory storytelling, enabling audiences to both consume and contribute to these narratives. This study has revealed that urban legends, in their digital forms, serve as sites of empowerment and recognition, particularly in their ability to address evolving social issues. From amplifying

vernacular expressions to influencing modern myth-making, urban legends have proven to be not only a lens through which societal fears are examined but also a bridge connecting the past with the present.

Urban legends continue to evolve in digital spaces, influenced by linguistic adaptations, digital storytelling technologies, and participatory folklore practices. This paper demonstrates how Digital Humanities tools provide valuable insights into the preservation and transformation of urban legends, bridging the gap between folklore studies and contemporary digital narratives. While digital platforms facilitate the transmission of folklore across linguistic and cultural boundaries, they also pose challenges related to linguistic homogenization. By critically engaging with digital storytelling, folklore scholars can ensure that linguistic diversity and cultural heritage remain integral to the study of urban legends in the digital age.

The shift from traditional storytelling to digital forms has created more personal and solitary kind of horror. These legends transform ordinary, everyday scenarios (such as driving alone or using a public bathroom) into intensely suspenseful experiences. Modern adaptations through memes, social media, and YouTube focus on individual suspense and shock. There are many regional and cultural variations available which highlights their adaptability. The survivor accounts of *The Killer in the Backseat* significantly alter the tone and emotional resonance of the legend. While the typical urban legend is detached, often told in the third person with an air of suspense and exaggeration, first-person perspectives highlight the trauma and fear of encountering such a threat. These accounts feature physical evidence of the encounter, blur the line between myth and reality. Both the legends, analysed using the comparative approach, explore human fears, such as isolation and the supernatural, and societal and personal anxieties in controlled, thrilling contexts.

The study offers an expansive framework for further investigation, particularly in the context of evolving technologies and shifting cultural landscapes. The democratization and expansion of folklore through digital platforms warrant a renewed focus within academia. As these platforms have become fertile ground for folklore, they also pose theoretical and methodological challenges. These challenges can be overcome by applying contemporary theories like Blank's Digital Folklore theory.

By applying Hutcheon's Theory of Adaptation to these legends, it is evident that they are more than derivative texts; they are cultural artifacts that continually transform to resonate with new audiences. The lateral existence of multiple versions, the integration of digital affordances, and the participatory nature of digital storytelling highlight the complexity and significance of adaptations, demonstrating that

these legends are adaptive and reflective of evolving cultural landscapes. This paper finds that traditional narratives like urban legends, do not lose their essence when adapted to digital spaces, rather, they transform to align with contemporary modes of communication and interaction. 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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