

AI Augmented Legend Narratives on Tiktok: When the Acting Parts Become the Tellers of Their Own Stories

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Abstract

In an era when data visualization underpins digital communication, visually driven social platforms—TikTok foremost among them—increasingly integrate generative tools to enrich user expression. Building on this premise, the present study examines how content-creators on TikTok employ AI-generated imagery and narrative scripts to animate contemporary legends, a narrative genre that has been continually renegotiated across successive social-media innovations. Accordingly, drawing on a longitudinal research that combines actor-based and topic-based methodologies, a purposive sample of AI-augmented legend videos is being analysed alongside their associated user engagements to identify which morphological and functional features are amplified through this practice.

The findings reveal that, beyond visually rendering plot elements, AI integration produces a significant narrative shift: from conventional third-person recounting to first-person testimony, thereby empowering characters—whether villain or victim—to tell their own story. This innovation transforms the genre's traditional role as a cautionary story into a form of immersive entertainment that provokes fear. Finally, comment-thread analysis illuminates patterns of perceived authenticity, collaborative storytelling, and ethical reflection, underscoring the complex dynamics of legend diffusion in AI-mediated environments.

Keywords: Digital Folklore, TikTok, Generative AI, Contemporary Legends, Digital Ethnography, Data Visualization

Introduction

It is well established that the internet facilitates the dissemination and reproduction of both pre-existing and emerging narrative genres—contemporary legends among them—and that social media platforms offer novel avenues for this process. Digital platforms have transformed folklore production and circulation further, with social networks enabling rapid reiteration and innovative reinterpretation of narratives, as of other forms of folklore too. One such digital environment is TikTok, which, launched in 2017, has become a nexus for short-form video trends characterized by visual effects, soundscapes, and user-generated challenges. Whereas early scholarship on TikTok emphasized its playful and ephemeral nature, recent developments demonstrate

how generative AI tools are now used to visualize and narrate complex genres [1-5].

Central to TikTok's ecology is the creation and propagation of "trends": users routinely replicate or adapt popular sounds, phrases, and filters introduced by others, integrating them into their own content. These trends—whether a specific audio clip, a distinctive effect, or an AI filter—often surge in popularity before quickly giving way to new ones. Their defining feature is responsiveness to users' evolving expressive needs: participants may adopt precedents (as in the case under study, where AI is harnessed to reframe urban legends) or repurpose existing content to convey personal perspectives or align with particu-

lar cultural stances. Audience relevance—namely, the extent to which content resonates with ongoing trends or addresses topics of current social concern—plays a pivotal role in trend adoption. Moreover, digital-media research has shown that communities and networked actors play a decisive role in content diffusion: when prominent users or influencer networks promote a particular format, it can swiftly achieve visibility and widespread engagement [6-10]. The phenomenon under investigation here exemplifies such dynamics—albeit in a niche context—by virtue of its reliance on advanced technical proficiency to deploy AI tools for animating and disseminating contemporary legends on TikTok.

AI as a Trend on TikTok

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) underpins much of the content production on TikTok, serving as an enabling technology for augmented-reality (AR) effects that obviate the need to design visual assets from first principles. As a subset of machine-learning algorithms, generative AI ingests existing data—images, text, or audio—and produces novel content across multiple modalities, including synthetic imagery and audio, as well as text and structured data. Its capacity for rapid image generation renders it particularly well-suited to prototyping visual concepts, allowing creators to mock up diverse scenarios with minimal technical overhead.

Methodological Considerations, Approaches, and Ethical Protocols in the Digital Ethnography of TikTok Research

The methodological approach to TikTok employed in this research emphasizes manual curation over automated tooling. Rather than relying primarily on the platform's recommendation algorithm, it seems preferable to identify relevant material through targeted hashtag searches and selectively save videos to the researcher's private account. Regarding the case in this research, hashtags are a much effective research 'tool'. Due to the sometimes particularly realistic performance of AI-generated video content, the platform itself encourages creators to explicitly mention the use of this technology in the description of the videos they create by using relevant hashtags, in order to avoid the spread of fake news or the creation of any kind of 'misunderstanding', what was very helpful in this particular research, adding to the hashtag search at least one with certain content.

Although in this case, the algorithm was occasionally 'train' by engaging with thematically related content, depending on it to surface pertinent examples is not always considered necessary or in any means more effective. This hand-on strategy ensures capturing the specific phenomena that are intended to be analyse. Aligned with qualitative folkloristic inquiry, the goal in relevant research is not to catalogue every instance of a given theme, but to assemble a sufficiently robust corpus—through deliberate, thematic selection—that can validly support the interpretive arguments.

Besides the practical issues of locating the factual material, the interaction with its creators and its viewers is a negotiable issue. Although netnographic scholarship urges both participatory and non participatory engagement in digital fields, the adaptation of a

non participatory or 'lurking' stance—an emic practice whereby the researcher observes without posting, reacting, or otherwise revealing their presence—is intentional [11,12]. This approach minimizes researcher influence on community dynamics and allows the unobtrusive collection of naturally occurring data. By privileging lurking over overt engagement, the researcher can interpret the material with greater fidelity to users' authentic practices and narrative constructions. After all, the comments section usually provides answers to most questions that may arise while studying the material.

Another issue that arises in such research has to do with copyright and ethics about how the content being studied can be utilized beyond the limits of the field. On TikTok, even though the content seems public—because of the extent of the platforms use and the intention to get as many views as possible by every post—the creator still holds exclusive rights to reproduce or distribute their audiovisual work outside TikTok. By tagging the videos with hashtags, creators are actively "publishing" into TikTok's broader public sphere—inviting anyone (and any researcher) to find and view their work. But that visibility alone doesn't dissolve copyright protections or guarantee the researcher a free pass to republish their images or video frames into a written paper or a presentation. Research in digital environments reveals a rich array of cultural practices and narratives that are both lived and continuously mediated online. Yet the integration of such user-generated material into scholarly analysis raises significant ethical and methodological concerns—particularly when content includes personally identifiable information, such as facial imagery.

To mitigate these challenges, it seems useful for researchers to adopt a policy of minimal reproduction, limiting themselves to a single, heavily anonymized screenshot, cropped tightly around the relevant structural or thematic element, and employed solely to support analytical insight rather than serve as illustrative decoration. This practice not only preserves the original post's visibility—thereby encouraging readers to engage directly with the creator's work—but also aligns with prevailing fair-use exceptions. Still fair-use rules vary.

This balanced approach upholds both ethical respect for content creators and the methodological rigor of digital-ethnographic research. Although obtaining direct permission from content creators can alleviate many ethical and legal ambiguities, the act of soliciting consent risks disrupting the spontaneity of the digital field and may introduce participatory biases that compromise the authenticity of the data. Solicitation of permission transforms what would have been naturally occurring posts into co-constructed artifacts, potentially altering both creator behaviour and audience reception, and thereby affecting the validity of subsequent analysis.

Additionally, it seems preferable for researchers to limit their analysis to publicly accessible TikTok content, capturing only anonymized screenshots directly within the platform's native in-

1. TikTok is a social media app-platform. An app is the user-facing tool, while the platform is the underlying ecosystem that powers it.
2. Indicatively on campfire lore see Ellis (2001: 64) and Fine & Turner (2004: 17).
3. On creepypasta see Tolbert (2018: 25-51).
4. See par example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NiBya4zPYLo> (last retrieved: 20/5/2025).
5. See par example the following YouTube channels: <https://www.youtube.com/@GloomyGentlemen> (last retrieved: 20/5/2025) and <https://www.youtube.com/@giorgosuper3> (last retrieved: 20/5/2025).

terface rather than downloading or storing video files offline. By preserving each image in situ—including its original contextual metadata—investigators can uphold the integrity of source material while remaining consistent with ethical best practices in digital ethnography.

Case Study Findings: AI-Augmented Legend Narratives on TikTok

As Smith (1995: 99) and numerous other folklorists studying contemporary legends have observed, altering the context in which a legend is performed can significantly affect both its function and its mode of transmission—an observation that holds true for legends circulating online too. A narrative form that once served primarily to discipline members of cultural groups and reinforce shared norms has thus, in many contexts, undergone a functional transformation into a mode of entertainment. While the entertainment aspect has always been inherent in the genre—evident in its traditional use to provoke fear and amusement, such as in campfire lore—it now appears to dominate in online environments, particularly on platforms like TikTok.

Moreover, it is widely recognized that the online dissemination of contemporary legends has acquired additional functions, much like their transmission in face-to-face settings. These narratives are increasingly embedded within broader digital genres such as “creepypasta,” which circulate in online environments specifically curated for entertainment purposes. Within this framework, various forms of related content—including urban legends and other frightening narratives or multimedia content classified or perceived as creepypasta—operate in ways analogous to horror cinema, offering audiences a mode of ‘terrifying entertainment.’ These narratives, irrespective of their historical or cultural origins, are often recontextualized and repackaged with the primary intention of provoking fear while simultaneously entertaining the viewer. This aesthetic paradox—where fear becomes a pleasurable experience—has been notably addressed by Alfred Hitchcock in his 1949 essay, “Can Fear Be Pleasurable?” [13].

Initially, only textual versions of these narratives were circulated online. However, with the rise of social media platforms and the increasing accessibility of multimedia tools, users began incorporating visual and audio elements to enrich their narration. It is therefore not uncommon to find contemporary legends represented not only through text but also through accompanying images that visually evoke the narrative content. On platforms that prioritize visual content—such as YouTube—digital narratives have become particularly prominent. Digital storytelling, in this context, can be understood as a contemporary extension of traditional oral storytelling, now embodied through multimedia and supported by the full range of available technological tools (Latham, 2005). Digital storytelling thus, constitutes a creative art form by integrating audiovisual media into the construction of narrative [14].

YouTube is one of the most significant digital environments first to offer such tools, enabling the fusion of narrative and visual media. In the Greek digital context, digital storytelling on YouTube has been employed extensively for the dissemination of

folk tales, particularly during the COVID-19 quarantine period, where it served as a component of remote education. However, digital storytelling is not limited to traditional folklore. A range of narrative genres—such as contemporary legends, true crime stories, ghost stories, and others—are now shared in this format. Notably, YouTube has played a key role in transitioning urban legends from primarily textual forms to rich, multimedia presentations. In doing so, the platform has also helped pave the way for the incorporation of AI technologies, which further animated and brought such legends once again to life in a novel manner.

Thanks to its capacity for image generation, generative AI can be leveraged to visualize any form of information, enabling users to produce diverse visuals at speed. In essence, the most fundamental affordance it offers is the ability for any individual—regardless of technical expertise, specialized equipment, or access to actors—to “direct” and “script” their own short film. By supplying the AI with suitable prompts and a narrative outline, creators can generate videos on any topic they choose. Consequently, users may either originate entirely new stories—presenting them as AI-directed, AI-scripted videos—or reinterpret existing narratives, overlaying a personal perspective through AI-mediated visuals. Although the resulting aesthetic often leans toward the stylized or cartoon-like rather than photorealistic—a reflection of both the creator’s prompt design and their technical familiarity—the most intriguing aspect is how users employ these tools to project their own visions of the uncanny.

A key question that arises is why contemporary legends are increasingly being adapted and transmitted through new technologies, particularly within digital environments such as TikTok. The recurring user engagement with these narratives suggests that the genre continues to exhibit vitality and cultural relevance, even as its function is reshaped through technological and aesthetic renegotiations. While traditional uses of contemporary legends were often didactic or cautionary, in their current digital forms—especially those augmented by AI—the function has partially shifted toward immersive entertainment and emotional resonance.

Contemporary legends, creepypastas, and this new mode of AI-enhanced digital storytelling all fall within what scholars describe as “small stories” gaining new layers and twists in the digital environments they now inhabit. Although the term originally emerged from sociolinguistics to describe everyday narratives told by and about ordinary people, it has since broadened to encompass a wide range of thematic material and storytelling contexts, particularly within social media platforms [15]. In practice, urban legends often emerge as informal anecdotes within conversation, rhetorically deployed to reassert dominant social norms or anxieties.

Likewise, AI-generated horror tales exemplify a co-creative narrative form in which users draw upon platform-specific trends and emerging technologies to craft unsettling yet captivating stories. Platforms like TikTok—with its rapid, fragmented, and highly visual feed—offer an ideal ecosystem for these practices, enabling a continuous, ever-evolving mosaic of digital storytelling. Visualization, a defining characteristic of contemporary

6. Find one such example here <https://www.tiktok.com/@terror.tracks/video/7344525182821846315> (last retrieved: 20/5/2025). In this post the “Russian sleep experiment” is being presented through utilizing AI to animate the creators uptake of the story.
7. <https://www.tiktok.com/@horrordaily98/video/7314086989165284651> (last retrieved: 20/5/2025), <https://www.tiktok.com/@terror.tracks/video/7338593131127999786> (last retrieved: 20/5/2025), <https://www.tiktok.com/@urbanamerica/video/7280308151130377515> (last retrieved: 20/5/2025).

media culture, is also fully embraced by TikTok's aesthetic and algorithmic architecture. The platform encourages creators to animate the characters and events described in these legends, often allowing viewers to visually 'confirm' or co-construct the imagined appearance of legendary figures.

A particularly noteworthy innovation that is, is the narrative shift from third-person to first-person storytelling. Traditionally, contemporary legends are conveyed by narrators who recount the experiences of an acquaintance or a "friend of a friend"—someone who has allegedly encountered a frightening entity and, in most cases, is ultimately harmed or overpowered by it. In the AI-enhanced TikTok adaptations, however, the perspective is often inverted: the central figure of the legend—whether a monstrous entity or a wronged victim that became a villain—becomes the narrator. These characters now recount the origin of their transformation, revealing the trauma, betrayal, or rage that gave rise to their supernatural and monstrous nature [16].

This shift is significant. It transforms the narrative from an external report of fear to a subjective articulation of it. By giving voice to the villain or a victimised persona, creators endow these figures with narrative agency and emotional complexity. Rather than being presented as anonymous threats, they become characters with backstories, motives, and in some cases, tragic depth. Viewers are thus not only confronted with a source of fear but are also drawn into the psychological and emotional landscapes that produced it. This reframing contributes to a deeper affective engagement, making the horror more intimate and, paradoxically, more relatable.

It is, of course, important to recognize that not all contemporary legends are rooted in the supernatural. The genre encompasses a diverse thematic range, including contemporary anxieties expressed in several ways. Nevertheless, supernatural elements remain especially prominent and resilient. Their symbolic flex-

ibility, cultural adaptability, and emotional impact have enabled them to persist across different media formats, from oral tradition to digital storytelling, retaining their relevance even in AI-generated narratives [17].

The contemporary legends featured in the analysed content are largely limited to a small number of highly recognizable examples. Notably, content creators frequently blend narrative genres, often labelling as 'urban legends' a variety of well-known pre-industrial or traditional legends, thereby demonstrating a fluid and sometimes ambiguous use of genre classification. Additionally, although the scripts in AI-generated legend videos may occasionally resemble one another—drawing on shared tropes or viral soundtracks—the visual and narrative interpretation often varies significantly.

Different creators infuse the same story with distinct aesthetic styles, emotional tones, and representational choices. Even individual creators may produce multiple renditions of the same legend, each with subtle or significant differences. This variability underscores the creative flexibility afforded by generative AI and speaks to the participatory, iterative, and performative nature of contemporary digital folklore. A representative example of this trend is the story of La Llorona, a well-known tradition and urban legend originating from New Mexico.

As illustrated in the selected stills from AI-generated TikTok videos in following image, the depiction of the story's central character varies significantly. Although all three representations situate her in a watery environment—aligning with the core theme of the legend—clear differences emerge in their visual interpretations. While the technical skills of the creators can naturally contribute to such variation, in the examples presented here, the level of technical execution is both comparable and sufficiently high, rendering it an unlikely explanatory factor for the divergence in aesthetic choices [18, 19].

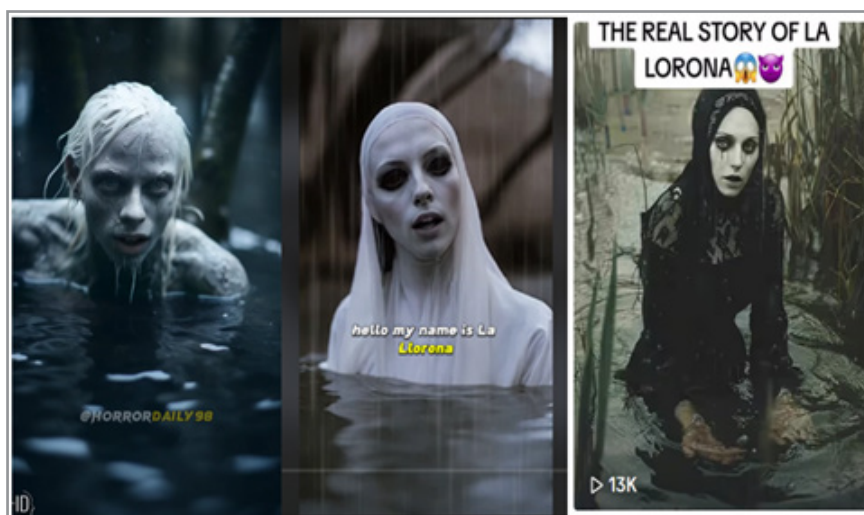


Image 5: Different uptake of 'Llorona'.

The question remains, why do creators increasingly choose to position the central character of a legend as the narrator of their own story? The rationale behind this narrative shift appears to be

twofold, relating both to the emotional immediacy of the storytelling and to a deeper character-focused reconfiguration of the legend itself.

8. See here one illustrative example <https://www.tiktok.com/@aiviking/video/7324116721705618734> (last retrieved: 20/5/2025). In this video, AI is tasked with visualizing familiar motifs from contemporary legends, demonstrating how these digital tools can re-envision and circulate traditional narratives on a world-wide scale.

First, allowing the character to speak in the first person enables a more intimate exploration of their motivations and personal history. Audiences are invited to understand what led the figure—often portrayed as monstrous, malevolent, or tragic—to their current state. This move toward character “deconstruction” humanizes or psychologizes legendary figures who were previously framed as anonymous threats or one-dimensional villains. Second, the narrative structure traditionally mediated by an ‘intermediate’ narrator (often framed as a “friend of a friend”) is now replaced by the internet itself as the medium of distance and circulation. While first-person storytelling might suggest proximity, the digital platform maintains a level of detachment, enabling emotional engagement without breaching the safety of the viewer. In this sense, first-person narration serves to provoke emotional responses—curiosity, empathy, fear—while still allowing for critical distance [20].

TikTok’s core affordances—short-form video, direct-to-camera address, voiceover narration, and minimal reliance on written text—have reinvigorated what Ong (1982) termed “secondary orality.” In this digital milieu, modes of communication once confined to face-to-face interaction are reborn in virtual space: users narrate their experiences, share testimony, and engage in real-time interaction through tools such as stitches and duets. This performative style is replicated in the adaptation of contemporary legends, where legendary figures are depicted as speaking directly to the camera, articulating their stories in the first person and from their own point of view.

Such a revival of orality constitutes, in many ways, a form of “unwriting” the internet: shifting narrative authority away from static, text-based formats toward embodied performance, gesture, and voice. These oral performances function as moments of visible ethnography, where ‘authenticity’ is conveyed not through factual evidence but through affective signals—tone, pacing, eye contact, and vocal nuance [5]. They exemplify how

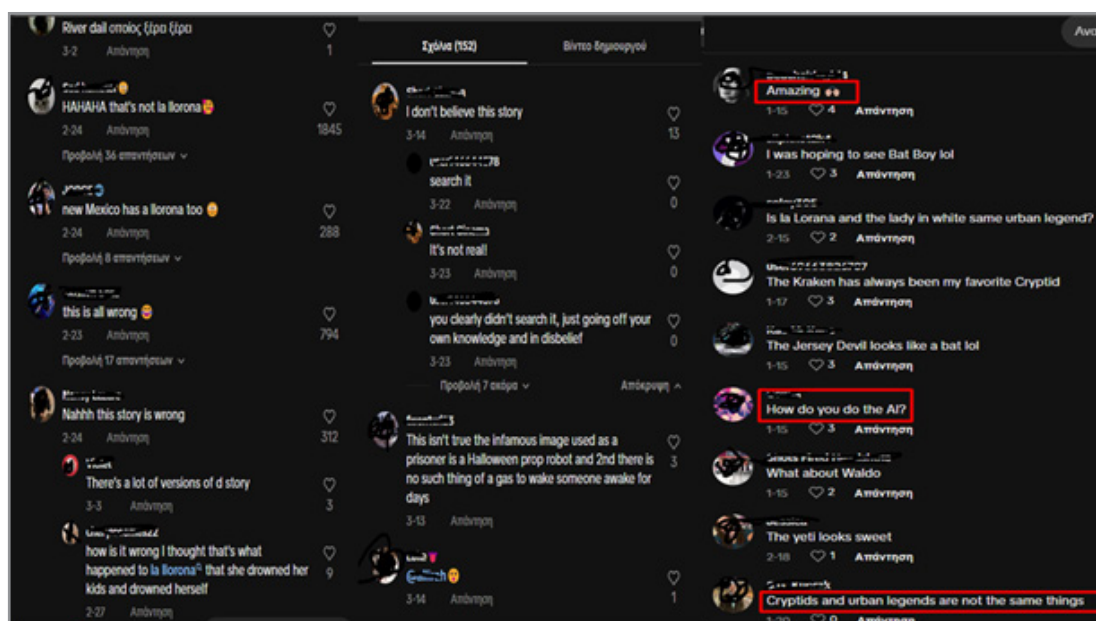
legends are no longer merely retold in digital spaces but re-performed through audiovisual embodiment [21].

Moreover, this trend marks a significant departure from the didactic, socially normative function traditionally associated with the genre. As Abraham (1968: 38-61) has observed, some folkloric narratives often are incorporated into the everyday interaction, while others are utilised in more performative acts (as narrating a fairy tale is). In this concept, contemporary digital rendering of these stories emphasizes narrative immersion, affective resonance, and creative reinterpretation over instruction. Thus, the genre evolves from a conventional, cautionary form into a dynamic, narrative-driven expression suited to participatory digital culture [22].

The Comments

Leveraging generative AI to circulate well-known urban legends on a global scale not only reinvents the narrative conventions of the genre but also underscores the technology’s capacity to reframe folklore, bridge cultural divides, and spark new modes of engagement.

Still, audience engagement with these AI-generated narratives focuses primarily on the content of the stories themselves. The comments sections are often dominated by reactions to the plot, expressions of fear or curiosity, and—most notably, as shown in the following picture too—questions about the truthfulness or authenticity of the events portrayed. Viewers frequently ask whether the story is based on real events -a reaction caused mostly by contemporary legends and not by creepypastas-whether the character actually exists, or whether others have had similar experiences. This emphasis on narrative credibility and emotional resonance reflects a persistent feature of contemporary legends: their power lies in their potential veracity and their capacity to evoke shared cultural fears or curiosities [23].



What is particularly noteworthy, however, is the minimal attention paid to the technical aspects of the content creation process. As observed in the examples, few—if any—comments reference the use of generative AI, the quality of the animation, or the production techniques employed, aspects that are frequently mentioned in AI-generated content of other themes. This absence suggests that the technological mediation of the story becomes invisible in the face of compelling narrative. The immersive quality of the storytelling—enhanced by first-person narration, emotionally charged imagery, and direct-to-camera address—appears to overshadow any curiosity about the artificial means by which the content was created.

This dynamic may indicate a broader trend in digital folklore: as long as the story resonates emotionally or taps into culturally recognizable motifs, the medium or method of its creation becomes secondary. In effect, the success of these videos does not rely on the audience's awareness of, or interest in, the use of AI, but rather on the degree to which the narrative feels “real enough” to provoke engagement. This raises important questions about how narrative authority is constructed and perceived in AI-mediated environments, and to what extent technological literacy shapes (or does not shape) the reception of digital folklore content.

Conclusions

To sum things up, the transformation of contemporary legends in digital environments, particularly on TikTok, illustrates not only the adaptability of the genre but also its enduring relevance in an era defined by technological mediation and visual culture. Originally rooted in oral tradition and characterized by the “friend of a friend” narrative structure, these legends once relied on proximity and plausible social links to establish credibility. The early framing emphasized truthfulness as a prerequisite for narrative effectiveness. Over time, however, this structure evolved into more anonymous accounts—those of unnamed individuals whose personal authenticity is no longer central. Instead, the emotional effect of the narrative, especially the sensation of pleasurable fear, becomes the focal point. Contemporary legends thus shift from functioning as didactic or cautionary tales to serving as immersive entertainment—fully integrated into a broader horror culture that thrives across digital platforms.

The most significant narrative shift observed in this study is the move toward first-person narration, where the central figure—be it a victim, in most cases, evolving into a malevolent entity—relates their own origin story. This transition represents a break from traditional third-person storytelling and introduces a form of narrative agency that is both affectively powerful and technically innovative. By allowing the legendary figure to speak directly to the audience, creators humanize and complexify characters that were once distant threats. Such narratives provide viewers with a sense of intimacy, making the horror more immediate and emotionally resonant. The “unwriting” of third-person distance through this mode of storytelling also mirrors Walter Ong’s (1982) notion of secondary orality, revived here through TikTok’s affordances: direct-to-camera address, short-form video, voiceovers, and minimal textual dependence [24].

TikTok’s platform logic plays a central role in shaping how these legends are told and received. The algorithmic promotion of trends, the use of AI-generated filters and imagery, and the

participatory functions such as “stitch” and “duet” facilitate a co-creative folklore space. Here, users not only consume but actively contribute to the evolution of narrative forms. Drawing on a digital ethnographic methodology grounded in ethical and actor- and topic-based approaches, this study analysed a purposive sample of AI-generated urban legend videos and corresponding user comments. It was observed that while the technological sophistication behind the content (e.g., generative AI visuals) remains largely unacknowledged by viewers, the comment threads frequently engage with the truth status, emotional response, or cultural familiarity of the narratives. This suggests that while the medium is technologically advanced, its reception remains rooted in traditional folklore logics of belief, affect, and communal interpretation.

The study also confirmed that not all contemporary legends are supernatural, encompassing instead a broad thematic spectrum. Nevertheless, the supernatural remains a dominant and persistent narrative thread. Its emotional and symbolic versatility ensures its continued relevance in digital folklore. The use of AI and multimedia not only helps visualize these stories but also enhances their immersive potential, reinforcing the horror effect that is crucial to their function in today’s media landscape.

Importantly, these findings underscore the vitality of the genre in digital culture. Urban legends remain living forms of vernacular expression, continuously renegotiated through new technologies and narrative practices. The adoption of first-person AI-generated storytelling preserves and even amplifies the genre’s core affective component—fear—while offering new modes of engagement and participation. In this way, contemporary legends are not merely reproduced on platforms like TikTok; they are reimagined, recontextualized, and reanimated, sustaining their cultural resonance in the age of algorithmic media and generative technologies.

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