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Greek urban legends and their function on the internet

Abstract:

The spread of urban legends internationally is declining with the advent of the 21st century. However, the internet seems to be a new environment of their reactivation with new features and function, based on the possibilities provided by this tool, which urban legends incorporate. Through the search and study of Greek urban legends, it turned out that the new characteristics they adopted led these folk narratives to join a new multimedia narrative genre, which has emerged from the internet, the 'scary stories' (*creepypasta*).

The urban legends, integrated in this kind of digital popular lore and spread in the internet with a new function, have, therefore, lost some of the main characteristics given to them by their definition. They are still a reflection of aspects of the unfamiliar, the delinquent and the supernatural that are experienced in modern urban culture, with their plot still revolving around stress caused by modern attitudes and behaviours having a content that is strange, scary or macabre. Nevertheless, these aspects have been converted into just a frame of dread, since the aim of their spread is to entertain users through horror.

Keywords:

Urban legends, Internet, popular culture, Digital Folklore, scary stories (*creepypasta*).

Introduction

Urban (or Contemporary) legend is a genre of folk narratives that emerged after the Industrial Revolution, incorporating elements of modernity into its earlier counterpart, the traditional legend (Klintberg 1990, 268-277).

Stories belonging to this genre circulate spontaneously mainly wherever informal encounters take place. Thus, a word-of-mouth spreading is

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most common. That is the reason why the textual structure of the narrative was considered to be loose, and it is not conveyed in the same way every time. These are stories transmitted through 'a friend of a friend' and are reflecting multiple aspects of the unfamiliar, the delinquent, and the supernatural experienced in the modern urban cultural context, claiming to be believed as real experiences. Their plot often revolves around stress caused by modern attitudes and behaviours, and their content is usually bizarre, scary or macabre. We quote:

"I will tell you what happened to a friend of a friend of mine. He went to a bar, met a girl and brought her back at his place. They had a drink and from that moment on he can't remember anything, only that he woke up the next day in his bathtub which was filled with ice and found next to him his phone and a note: Call immediately for an ambulance. We removed one of your kidneys!" This guy survived and is still alive, although he is really lacking one kidney³.

They function as a means of disciplining cultural groups, as defined by Dundes (1980, 6), which consist of people who have at least one thing in common perceiving them as true stories. For this reason, the narrated event is delimited close to the place and time of its transmission, creating conditions of appropriation by the group in which it circulates (Pettitt 1996, 7-14). In fact, until the first decade of the 21st century, urban legends are perceived by their scholars as a living genre that is spreading - either through word of mouth or digitally - in order to maintain or shape the social norm, so the narrative is considered a "political act" (Ellis 2001b, 64, see also Fine & Turner 2001, 17).

The stories of these legends could be placed somewhere between the trivial secular everyday life and the unusual, giving to that everyday life an unexpected upheaval (Smith 1995, 99). However, not all urban legends are about the gloomy side of life. Many also refer to funny incidents (Smith 1986a, 15), as it is showed by the following example:

The pharmacist⁴

A young man was getting ready to visit his girlfriend at her home. He previously went to a pharmacy to get condoms. The pharmacist, seeing

3 See 'Kidney Heist', in Brunvand (2012, 355-357).

4 See 'The blind date' in Brunvand (2012, 64).

The genre resembles to other narrative forms, such as rumour, gossip, conspiracy theories due to its textual characteristics and its subject matter. Its narration can easily transform to a joke, which relates to the narrator's belief in the subject of the story (Smith 1997: 494; Clarke, 2008). But it is also a fact that urban legends can refer to funny facts as well. The fluidity of the narration and its ability to resemble or even transform to other narrative genres has been pointed out from Dégh & Vazsonyi (1971, 283).

See also Bowman (1987, 171-176), Davies (1990 49-68), Oring (1992), Ellis (2001, <https://cutt.ly/Kv4bKOA>, Accessed 31/7/2020).

the boy's embarrassment, made some jokes to "break the ice". Later, when he went to his girlfriend's house and knocked on the door, the girl's father opened it. It was the pharmacist!

Their context, as Smith (1986b, 9-10) points out, may be different, but they are essentially universal, occult and anecdotal about life in the 20th century.

In the international literature the modern influences on the traditional narrative genre, the pre-industrial legend, were recognized early (in the 1930s), but the final definition of the genre was given much later (in the late 1990s)⁵. Research on this genre therefore followed a long course of inquiry at a theoretical level that revolves around the identification of the genre itself, its relationship with its pre-industrial counterpart and other genres that resemble to it, the proper use of terms and so on. It became eventually clear that the configuration of a definition that would include all of its features and functions was impossible. At the founding meeting of the *International Society for Contemporary Legend Research*, Hobbs and Bennett recognize that there is no consensus on many levels among the genres' scholars and, therefore, suggest that it should be treated as broadly as possible so that all those involved can find a reference to the ISCLR regardless of their own position on the 'nature' of the genre⁶ (Smith 1991, 1-3). Ever since, free from the burden of a precise definition, scholars study the genre through fieldwork research and case studies that result in a wide variety of papers, which are presented in the annual conferences held by the ISCLR, published in its journal *Contemporary Legend* and many other folklore journals, as well as books.

The central feature of urban legends is that they emerge in the era after the industrial revolution, in the modern bourgeois world, elements of which they incorporate. In Greece the transition from pre-industrial social structures to modern ones was slow. It is defined to have taken place after the Second World War. This means, also, that the achievements of the Industrial Revolution were embodied (if they ever fully did) into the Greek social sphere, in its structures and in its popular culture with a severe delay. Greek folklorists resisted strongly to study anything considered as 'new', at least during the first scientific phase of folklore studies in Greece. They were zealously engaged in collecting the traditional forms of life and culture with the aim of saving it from the 'new' that was considered alienating (Αυδίκος 2009, 20). However, from an early time the local folklore research examines the pre-industrial legends as texts that

5 About the whole course of the study of urban legends see Bennett & Smith (1996, xxi-xliv).

6 This situation has become the Aims and Scope of the *Contemporary Legend*, the annual journal of the ISCLR.

reflect the traditional man's fear of the world around him and his attempt to interpret it⁷. This led inevitably to the finding of its “new” version, the urban legend. The genre, however, was located only after 2000 and had received little attention from Greek scholars⁸. For this reason, it was considered necessary to conduct a more extensive research on the genre of urban legends, some aspects of which are presented in this article.

Greek Urban Legends in the Internet

Thus, with main guide the international literature and the respective motif indexes that have been compiled⁹, an attempt was made to locate similar narratives on the Greek internet. Their ‘Greekness’ (locality) is constituted not by their spatial or temporal reference, but the language to which they are attributed and their activeness on the field. That is because some of the “active” urban legends circulating on the “Greek web” are pre-industrial legends. Also, many stories were reactivated because they were promoted by commercial cultural products of the 20th century. Based on this, any such narrative transferred to the Greek language and, thus, to the ‘Greek web’, was considered a Greek urban legend. One such example is the story of the beautiful Elisa Day (a well-known medieval European legend), who was murdered by the man she loved. It became widely known to the Greek public from the song of Nick Cave and Kylie Minogue “Where the Wild Roses Grow” in 1996, from the video-clip of which comes the picture that regularly accompanies this story on the internet,



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7 On this subject see Πολίτης (1904).

8 See Μπενέκος (2006a), (2006b, 159-170), and Κούζας (2017, 363-381).

9 For example, the *Encyclopaedia of Urban Legends* by Brunvand et al. (2012).

10 <https://cutt.ly/Kv4bOfD> (Accessed 1/8/2020)

or the one entitled *The Woman with the Torn Mouth*, in which the event depicted in it is explicitly placed in a foreign country (Japan):

A woman cheated on her samurai husband, who teared her mouth from one ear to the other and cursed her never to die to punish her. She is still wondering in the world asking account for her beauty by passers-by. When she gets a positive answer, she removes the surgical mask she wears, revealing her horrific scar, asking again if she is beautiful. The passer-by who no longer finds her beautiful finds a tragic death!

Around 100 such narratives have been located on the internet¹¹. Some of them are local variations of internationally known stories (such as the ‘Apparition of the Penteli Mountain’¹² or the ‘Ravisher of Seih Sou park’¹³ that are the localised versions of ‘The Vanishing hitchhiker’¹⁴ and ‘The boyfriend’s death’¹⁵). Some others are localised in foreign places, such as e.g., ‘The Boyfriends’ Death’ that has prevailed on the Greek internet as a narrative from France or the ‘Choking Doberman’¹⁶ that has prevailed as a narrative from Australia. The majority of the stories circulating in the Greek web, though, are without any spatio-temporal specification. So, the urban legends circulating on the Greek internet are well-known legends such as ‘The Vanishing Hitchhiker’ with three localised variants (‘The Apparition of the Penteli Mountain’, ‘The soldier and the

11 It was held in two stages. A long-term web research has been carried out in the “surface web” by searching for keywords through the Google search engine. A similar search was conducted in the most popular social media (Facebook, Tweeter and Instagram), which are an intermediate point between the “surface and the deep web”, due to their characteristics. From the “surface web” were collected and analysed articles that emerge from a hundred and three (103) websites, fifty-nine (59) (open) blogs, twelve (12) (open) Fora, but also videos from twenty-seven (27) YouTube channels. In the examined social media accounts seventy-eight (78) Facebook pages and groups were located, fourteen (14) Instagram profiles and no results found on Tweeter. For these online environments see indicative, Plaza (2009, 37-52), Price (2010, 140-142), Poell (2009, 239-252), Papakosta (2016, 292-298) etc.

12 The Penteli Mountain is one of the mountains around the city of Athens. Although nowadays the city spread and almost covered these mountains, until the 90s they were considered remote and there was no reason to drive through their streets. This might have been the reason why a ghostly appearance has been established to its streets.

13 This was the only serial killer ever existed in Greece. He lived in the '60s in Thessaloniki and was killing girls in the park mentioned above, which is located in the edge of the city. He was caught and convicted to death, although it is still a mystery whether the person convicted was the real killer. To the acts of this real person a story has been added that is the known urban legend ‘the boyfriend’s death’ which includes some motives of ‘the hook’ as well.

14 A fair girl appears to drivers hitchhiking in a deserted place, asking to be transferred to a nearby place but ends up disappearing from the moving vehicle. See Brunvand (2012, 686-690).

15 A young couple gets attacked in a deserted place by a killer who hangs the boy over the car in which the girl sits frightened. See respectively Brunvand (2012, 76-78).

16 A woman finds her dog choking on something, carries it to the vet who calls to warn her that there is a burglar in her house missing a finger. See Brunvand (2012, 115-119).

girl¹⁷ and 'Maria'), 'The Boyfriend's Death' with two variants, and many other known stories like 'The Roommates'¹⁸, 'Not Only Dogs Lick'¹⁹, 'The Kidney Theft' and so on.

So, on one hand the aim of this research is to create a collection of Greek urban legends -since there is nothing similar- and on the other hand, to highlight the impact of the new environment on the genre itself, its spread on the internet and the way internet users perceives it.

The Impact of the Internet on the Genre and the Alteration of its Function

The genre seems to be in full bloom in the Western World during the last decades of the 20th century (1980-90), as well as its research and analysis by European and American scholars. Nevertheless, with the turn of the millennium, both seem to be declining.

At the same time, there is a general concern in the scientific community about the future of folklore in general. The environment of technology emerged as a field in which folklore could evolve, because at the same time a great development was taking place in its context. The modern Internet appeared in 1989 with the creation of the World Wide Web. The next significant development in this field took place in the early 2000s, which marked the technological transition to the new (21st) century with the creation of Web 2.0. As Blank (2009, 2-3) mentions, through Web 2.0 new ways of communication are introduced on the Internet and facilitate its use, thus promote its further commercialization. The Internet – through Web 2.0 – actually provides its users with a field in which they can easily communicate and disseminate any information to each other. Therefore, folk narratives are evolving by adapting and integrating data of the new era. The internet can be seen as a new environment, which facilitates the spread of folklore more widely – even globally – and quickly (Blank 2009, 9).

17 A boy serving duty lends his jacket to the local girl he dates. He goes to her home to pick it up, only to find out that the girl is long dead proven by his jacket that is found on her grave.

18 A girl goes out one night while her roommate stays home. The girl returns, enters her roommate's room in the dark to take something she needs. She enters it again the next day, finds her friend stabbed to death without being able to tell whether the killer was there when she went in the night before. This is a Greek variation. For the most known one, see Brunvand (2012, 538-539).

19 A girl gets comfort by the licking of her dog, because she is at home alone and hears a weird sound only to find that it was caused by the dripping blood of her killed dog. See "The Licked Hand" in Brunvand (2012, 375-376).

The environment of technology in general, as well as the internet, seemed as a promising field for the spread of urban legends too²⁰. However, it should be noted that this new field cannot be separated from the one in which folk-ethno-anthropological studies are well-established. Blank (2009, 11) recognizes as a fundamental difference their materiality – one is digital, the other physical- but argues that they both refer to common subjects that link them inextricably. As Ellis (2001a) observes, many of those subjects - such as humour, narrative genres, memory, religion, rituals, etc.- have taken on new aspects and dimensions, or have been modified because of their spread through the internet and due to the incorporation of some of its features (Blank 2009, 13). This means that the types of folk narratives, that are spreading through the internet, are influenced by its characteristics. So, the spread of urban legends in it could be taken as an example both of the diffusion of the genre through the internet, and of the evolution of this oral narrative genre in a different context.

The urban legends that are being transmitted via the internet are really incorporating many of its features²¹. The main conjecture that became clear almost at once is the morphological change of the genre. Although the rendering of the stories as “immediate” transcriptions of oral ones is adorned with the use of electronic ‘meta-language, the narration tends to be consolidated morphologically and textually. In other words, these legends have acquired a consolidated body, a fixed narrative with a specific sequence of motifs. No variations are found, only a few different versions of the narratives.



20 This new field has been of considerable interest in the Greek anthropological and folklore research. See Μιχαήλ (2009, 291-305), Κατσαδώρος (2011, 90-99), (2013, 99-122), (2016, 505-518), Γκασούκα & Φουλιδή (2012; 2017), Παπαηλία & Πετριδής (2015), Αυδίκος (2016), Κακάμπουρα & Κασσαβέτη (2018), etc.

21 For instance, the “image equipped writing” of the internet, which suspends the concern of the writer if his writings could be misunderstood, since it provides him with a variety of means to express exactly what he feels, limiting the possibility of misinterpretation.

22 <https://cutt.ly/Nv4mzHR> (Accessed 8/5/2021).

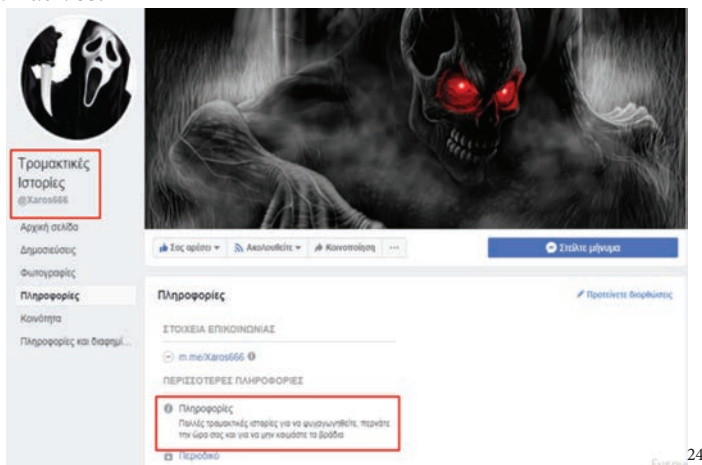
Ήταν κάποτε ένα κοριτσάκι 10 χρονών που οι γονείς της εξαιτίας ενός Meeting έπρεπε να την αφήσουν για ένα βράδυ μόνη της στο σπίτι. Για να μην φοβάται το κοριτσάκι το βράδυ της αγόρασαν ένα εκπαιδευμένο pit bull. Μετά από πολλά κλάματα η μικρή δεχεται να μείνει στο σπίτι. Πριν φύγουν οι γονείς της της είπαν ότι όταν φοβάται αυτή απλώς θα βάζει το χέρι της κάτω από το κρεβάτι και ο σκύλος θα της το γλύφει ώστε αυτή να ξεχνιέται. Αργά το βράδυ όμως κάποιοι παράξενοι ήχοι από την τουαλέτα τρόμαξαν την μικρή που κουκουλωθηκε και έβαλε το χέρι της κάτω από το κρεβάτι. Το σκυλί της το έγλυψε και έτσι αυτή χαλάρωσε. Αργότερα όμως οι ήχοι ξανακούστηκαν και το κοριτσάκι άρχισε να τρομάζει περισσότερο. Ξαναέβαλε το χέρι της στο στόμα του σκυλιού και χαλάρωσε μόνο για λίγα δευτερόλεπτα αφού ο ήχος άρχισε να γίνεται πιο δυνατός από ποτέ. Το κοριτσάκι τρομαγμένο πήγε ως την τουαλέτα για να δει τι συνέβαινε και τότε. . . . Την επόμενη μέρα οι γονείς αντίκρισαν ένα φρικτό θέαμα! Μέσα στην τουαλέτα η κόρη και ο σκύλος τους ήταν ξεκοιλιασμένη και κρεμασμένη γεμάτοι αίματα. Δίπλα τους γραμμένο με το αίμα του σκυλιού τα εξής λόγια "ΔΕΝ ΓΛΥΦΟΥΝ ΜΟΝΟ ΤΑ ΣΚΥΛΙΑ"

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The same story of the ‘Not Only Dogs Can Lick’ urban legend, written in the same exact words in two different websites.

This is where the spread of information on the internet comes into play. The users are now given the opportunity to “share” anything they find interesting on the internet, while they can also copy an electronic text and post the whole, or even pieces of it.

The reason why urban legends are spreading on the internet has also changed through the years. They have become part of a wider category of “scary stories” that circulate in online sub-environments dedicated to them, with the aim of entertaining the visiting user. This means that the spontaneous reference to such a story in the informal context of a social encounter has been replaced by a structured environment dedicated to such narratives.



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23 <https://cutt.ly/Bv4mn8L> (Accessed 8/5/2021).

24 <https://cutt.ly/Dv4mf0e> (Accessed 8/5/2021).

A Facebook page called ‘scary stories’, which, as mentioned by its description, includes lots of scary stories to entertain their readers and keep them up at night.

It has already been mentioned before, that urban legends used to act as a means of disciplining the members of the group in which they circulate, keeping them in their given social norms, by convincing them that they narrate true events. However, their function in the internet shows the weakening of their social role. This emerges from the disconnection from any “true” reason attributed to urban legends, giving emphasis on the satisfying feeling of terror they cause – which is also confirmed by users who comment on stories as: “I got goosebumps”, “Why did I decide to watch this video while being alone at home aaaaaa²⁵”, “A big applause to the Gloomy who managed to make me not sleep today²⁶”, and also by the way of their retransmission (mainly through the copy-paste function). These features describe a wider, new kind of digital popular lore defined with the emic term ‘creepypasta’, and by incorporating them, it seems that urban legends have become part of it.

The term comes from the conjunction of the words ‘copy paste’ with the word ‘creepy’. In short, creepypasta consists of limited size electronic entries created by internet users and reproduced mainly through it. They are usually the subject of fiction with supernatural themes that aim to provoke terror. The fact that this is a result of fiction created exclusively for fun through terror is an inherent element and a familiar feature by the users who opt for this kind of entertainment (Blank & McNeill 2018, 6-13).

β. Ξύπνησα από έναν ενοχλητικό συνεχόμενο θόρυβο, σαν κάποιος να χτυπούσε κάποιο αντικείμενο πάνω σε γυαλί. Στην αρχή νόμιξα ότι ο θόρυβος προέρχονταν από το παράθυρο. Όταν ανασηκώθηκα όμως, κατάλαβα ότι είχα κάνει λάθος. Ο θόρυβος προέρχονταν από τον καθρέπτη.

2. Το τελευταίο πράγμα που είδα ήταν η ώρα στο ξυπνητήρι. 12:07. Λίγο πριν νιώσω τα μακριά νύχια του πλάσματος να χύνονται στο στήθος μου ενώ το άλλο του χέρι, μου έκλεινε το στόμα για να μην ακουστούν οι κραυγές μου. Ξύπνησα ανακουφισμένος. Ευτυχώς ήταν ένας ακόμη εφιάλτης. Το βλέμμα μου πήγε στο ρολόι. Έγραφε 12:07.. τότε άκουσα την πόρτα της ντουλάπας να ανοίγει πίσω μου.

3. Μεγαλώνοντας με γάτες και σκυλιά, συνήθισα τους ήχους που κάνουν όταν ξύνουν με τα νύχια τους την πόρτα του υποδιωματίου μου τις ώρες που κοιμάμαι. Τώρα που ζω χωρίς ζώα όμως, αυτοί οι ήχοι ακούγονται πιο τρομακτικοί.

4. Όλο αυτό το καιρό που ζω μόνη μου σε αυτό το σπίτι, ορκίζομαι ότι έχω κλείσει περισσότερες πόρτες από όσες έχω ανοίξει...

5. Ένα κορίτσι άκουσε τη μαμά της να την καλεί να κατέβει στον κάτω όροφο. Την στιγμή που πάτησε το πόδι της στο πρώτο σκαλοπάτι, ένιωσε κάποιο χέρι να την τραβάει ξανά επάνω. Ήταν η μαμά της. “Το άκουσα και εγώ” της είπε.

6. Με ρώτησε γιατί ανόσωνα τόσο βαριά. Δεν το έκανα.

25 <https://cutt.ly/Nv4mi0q> (Accessed 8/5/2021).

26 <https://cutt.ly/mv4mwLD> (Accessed 8/5/2021).

This example includes six well-known creepypastas that circulate on the Greek internet. Typical is the example 5. which states that “A girl heard her mom calling her to go downstairs. The moment she stepped on the first step she felt a hand pulling her up again. It was her mom. I heard it too, she said.”

Of course, creepypasta differs from the urban legends and any other “scary stories” that are spread orally due to the special communicational features of the internet in which it circulates. One of them is the possibility that they provide to the “narrating” user to integrate any kind of multimedia (image, video) in the story, or to transfer it directly in such a form, without including any written text (Lewaleni 2015). So, urban legends become part of a terrifying entertainment, similar to horror movies, in which various stories are told with the common point of causing terror to the user who has fun with them and don’t expect them to be real.

Their new function, which is an indication of the weakening of their social role, brings about changes in it. The stories now have a specific title, as a result of the established narration, the “narrator” is not connected to any of the characters in the story, while the place and time of each event are often indifferent and even omitted.

Check the Backseat

A woman traveling on a deserted country road at night was left out of gas. She stopped at an open gas station, gave her credit card to the clerk to pay, but he told her there was a problem with it. She suspected he was lying, went inside the store and saw him locking the door. Terrified, she hit him and escaped. The clerk ran after her, but she had already left. So, he shouted: “Someone is hiding in the back seat!”.

Urban legends that are reproduced in the internet have lost some of the main characteristics given to them by their definition. They are still reflecting aspects of the unfamiliar, delinquent and supernatural that are experienced in modern urban culture with their plot revolving largely around stress caused by modern attitudes and behaviours and with content that is bizarre, scary or macabre. But, the fears they use to mirror have been turned into just a frame of dread. Thus, these stories are no more perceived as true experiences, seized to be a way of disciplining people in modern social norms, and, hence they spread in the context of websites created specifically for entertaining users.

Conclusions

Greek urban legends are considered as all those stories that circulate on the internet in the Greek language, regardless of whether they are referring to places in Greece or not. Their spread on the internet seems to have affected them. They have lost the main characteristics that were attributed to them, that is, they are no longer considered a narration regarding the experience of a familiar person to the narrator which is shared in a conversation as an example to be avoided by the listener, in an informal means of discipline. They became a de-framed narrative, which are being transmitted along with other scary stories in online environments, aiming to make their audience have fun through horror. This altering of function though is an evolution not a decline. Thus, urban legends, as well as folk narratives in general, are alive, drawing on tradition, yet evolving, adapting to the modern urban environment, changing forms and functions through their diffusion on different environments as the internet is.

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Афродита – Лидија Нунанаки, Реа Какамбура

Грчке урбане легенде и њихова функција на интернету

На међународном плану, ширење урбаних легенди опада с наступањем 21. века. Међутим, чини се да интернет представља ново окружење њиховог поновног активирања, са новим особинама и функцијама, засновано на могућностима које пружа овај алат, а које урбане легенде инкорпорирају. Претрагом и проучавањем грчких урбаних легенди, показало се да су нове карактеристике које су усвојили довеле ове фолклорне наративе до тога да буду придружени новом мултимедијалном приповедном жанру, насталом на интернету – „заstraшујућим причама“.

Интегрисане у ову врсту дигиталног народног знања и, са новом функцијом, раширене на интернету, урбане легенде су, стога, изгубиле неке од главних карактеристика које им даје њихова дефиниција. Они су и даље одраз аспеката непознатог, делинквентног и натприродног, доживљених у модерној урбаној култури, а њихова радња се и даље врти око стреса изазваног савременим ставовима и понашањима са чудним, заstraшујућим или сабласним садржајем. Ипак, ови аспекти су претворени само у оквир страве, будући да је циљ њиховог ширења да ужасом забави кориснике.

Кључне речи:

Урбане легенде, Интернет, популарна култура, дигитални фолклор, заstraшујуће приче („крипипаста“).