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## **The “Serbian dancing lady”: legend enactment as a TikTok trend**

### **Abstract:**

In the first months of 2023 a video of a woman dancing in a peculiar manner in the middle of a dark street went viral on TikTok. This video shows the “Serbian Dancing Lady”, who was characterized as mysterious and acquired legend dimensions on the internet, “escaping the boundaries” of the platform on which it first became popular and spreading all over the net, and even beyond reaching mass media.

One outcome of the popularity this particular footage took, was that mainly young people not only saw it and shared it as a new contemporary legend, or as a fun “creepypasta”, but several also acted out the content of this video, posted their representation of its content (accompanied by a specific sound) on the platform and had fun “reviving” it, becoming a TikTok trend.

Though the trend eventually faded, it persisted long enough to solidify the “Serbian Dancing Lady” as a digital contemporary legend. Because of this new case of a digital urban legend, this paper aims to demonstrate the new life such legends acquire in social media environments and also explore how “ostensive practices” evolve and are reshaped on social media.

**Keywords:** “Serbian Dancing Lady”, digital folklore, contemporary legend, ostensive practice, social media.

### **Introduction**

The case of the “Serbian Dancing Lady” serves as a compelling example of a digital-born contemporary legend, a form of folklore that

thrives in the virtual space. The internet has become a fertile ground for the evolution and dissemination of supernatural and mysterious narratives. Digital platforms provide a participatory environment where users can actively engage with, adapt, and even enact legends, thus creating a dynamic interplay between traditional folklore elements and new media contexts (Kinsella 2011, 14). Similarly, the “Serbian Dancing Lady” emerged as a viral phenomenon on TikTok, embodying the characteristics of a contemporary legend.

The distinctly digital nature of this legend, however, underscores how social media transforms folklore. It is commonly accepted by now that the internet enables the rapid spread of legends while encouraging participatory practices that were previously limited to face-to-face interactions (Blank 2012, 9). The “Serbian Dancing Lady” exemplifies this shift, as its virality depended not only on passive consumption but also on user-generated content, performances, and “re-creations”. This case thus highlights how digital-born legends are shaped by, and in turn shape, the participatory cultures of new media platforms.

The trend of users enacting the “Serbian Dancing Lady’s” plot and sharing these performances online invites a reconsideration of ostensive practice in the context of social media. Ostensive practices, as defined by Dégh and Vázsonyi (1983, 5), involve actions that bring a legend to life through performance, enabling participants to engage with the narrative in a tangible way. That is, the term refers to the enactment of legends or folklore plots and engaging with behaviours that bring legends to life trying to experience their stories. Such actions blur the boundaries between belief and enactment, as individuals either intentionally or inadvertently perform elements of the legend to explore its veracity or entertainment value. On social media, these practices evolve further. As Kinsella (2011, 14) notes, digital platforms offer unique opportunities for users to reenact legends in visual and performative ways, extending traditional forms of legend engagement into dynamic, participatory spaces.

The “Serbian Dancing Lady” trend exemplifies this shift, where TikTok users replicated her eerie dance as a form of playful engagement, yet also contributed to the legend’s circulation and credibility. These digital enactments highlight how social media provides new venues for ostensive practices, reshaping the ways legends are both performed and understood in contemporary contexts.

## Introducing the “Serbian Dancing Lady”

The original “Serbian Dancing Lady” video shows a lone woman dancing erratically in the middle of a dark, deserted street. Her movements are unsettling and appear disconnected from any musical rhythm, evoking a sense of unease. The eerie atmosphere is heightened by the poor lighting and the isolation of the scene, creating a visual narrative that seems almost staged for mystery. The woman’s identity remains unknown, and her actions appear inexplicable, contributing to the video’s haunting allure.



Figure 1<sup>1</sup>

The origins and nature of the “Serbian Dancing Lady” video has been the subject of intense speculation. As it went viral in early 2023, theories about its background proliferated. Some claimed it depicted a mentally ill woman or a social prank, while others ascribed sinister motives, such as intent to lure victims or enact violence. The most fantastical interpretations suggested supernatural elements, framing the figure as a ghostly or demonic presence.

Online, the video was presented in various ways: as a mysterious urban legend, a potential creepypasta, or an unsettling real-life incident. The perception of the video evolved through user interactions, with some

1 [https://www.tiktok.com/@aatc13/video/7199705232396356869?is\\_from\\_webapp=1&sender\\_device=pc&web\\_id=7330545829118363168](https://www.tiktok.com/@aatc13/video/7199705232396356869?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7330545829118363168). All webpages utilised in this paper were last retrieved on 25/1/2025

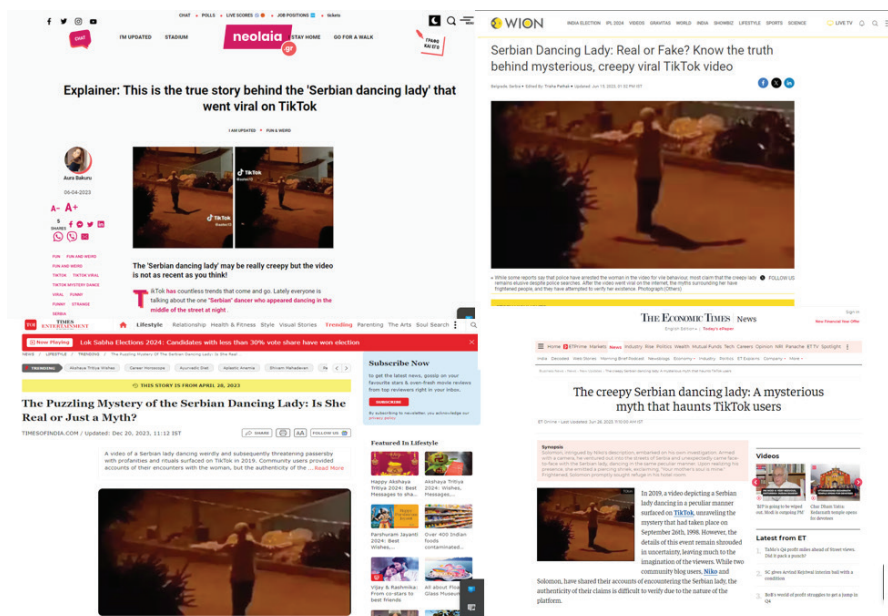
treating it as a fictional performance meant for entertainment, while others viewed it as evidence of paranormal phenomena. Its supernatural framing is consistent with broader folkloric tendencies to attribute inexplicable events to otherworldly forces, a theme that resonates deeply with digital audiences. This blending of reality, folklore, and participatory engagement exemplifies how social media facilitates the rapid evolution and reinterpretation of contemporary legends.

The platform through which the video became viral is TikTok,<sup>2</sup> but soon the references on this new legendary phenomenon spreading online beyond TikTok, as shown in the examples that follow. In fact, on these webpages shown here, not only the story of the “Serbian Dancing Lady” is presented, but also its back story, plausibility and factuality is elaborated. There were relative examples all over the internet, from several local webpages. The articles shown here, that explore the mystery and authenticity of the “Serbian Dancing Lady” video, are just a very small sample for Greece and India, from various news outlets discussing the “Serbian Dancing Lady” phenomenon and its spread on TikTok.

<sup>2</sup> TikTok, launched in 2017, is a social media app that allows users to create, share, and consume short video content, often centred around fun and light-hearted themes. The app’s key feature is the creation and reproduction of “trends”, where users frequently recreate or adapt trends they see, such as using specific sounds, phrases, or filters. These trends evolve quickly, with older ones being replaced by new ones in a short span of time. The “Serbian Dancing Lady” phenomenon, for instance, became a popular trend on TikTok, with users spreading and reenacting the story, but like many trends, it eventually faded. On further elaboration about TikTok, see indicatively Bhandari & Bimo (2022) and Schellewald (2023). When conducting research on TikTok, the “For You” page, with its ever-changing content driven by an effective algorithm, may not be ideal for structured study. Instead, using hashtags and keywords in the search function provides a more manageable way to locate relevant material. For example, searching hashtags like #SerbianDancingLady, #DancingSerbianLady, or similar terms in different languages, such as “dancing shadow”, proved more effective for organizing and analysing content systematically.

The prevailing way to “store” the material, according to the humanity studies, is on the platform using the like or the favourite button, that puts the TikTok video on the researchers own list. This way the opportunity given to the creator to control whether the content they create will remain available online or not. Surely the risk for the research is high, because this method is not always future proof, but it seems more important to respect people’s choice on the content they create. One way to reconcile these two dimensions is to take screenshots of the videos and use them as examples in papers or in presentations, practice used in this paper too. It seems most appropriate to present videos that are still available, that is why all the links were reopened to make sure they are still accessible by the time this paper was submitted. Of course, the link of the post must be quoted.

So, in this research about 180 (183 to be precise) posts were located in 2023, when the trend was still on, from which about 117 are still available. Nevertheless, in research as this the goal is to spot just as many examples as necessary to highlight the prevailing trends. And, by analysing comments, the user’s engagement is highlighted too, in order to draw a conclusion that is as complete as possible.

Figure 2<sup>3</sup>

The story became also a game and found its place in online collections of urban legends too, as shown in the following pictures. The first one shows the description of the game, the theme and some technical issues, while the second one depicts the entry of this legend in a site which is a collection of urban legends. On this, not only the main story and its background are being presented, but also the creatures “skills”, meaning what it is able to do and describing the ways it can harm its potential victim.

3 <https://www.neolaia.gr/2023/04/06/explainer-ayth-einai-h-alhthinh-istoria-pisw-apoth-serviki-xoreytria/>, <https://www.wionews.com/world/serbian-dancing-lady-real-or-fake-know-the-truth-behind-the-mysterious-creepy-viral-tiktok-video-604003>, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/etimes/trending/the-puzzling-mystery-of-the-serbian-dancing-lady-is-she-real-or-just-a-myth/articleshow/99848603.cms>, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/new-updates/the-creepy-serbian-dancing-lady-a-mysterious-myth-that-haunts-tiktok-users/articleshow/101270448.cms?from=mdr>

**Buy Serbian Dancing Lady** €0.99 [Add to cart](#)

**ABOUT THIS GAME**

**Plot**  
This game is based on the popular urban legend of a strange dancing woman. If you are very unlucky, then you can meet her at night in deserted places. She is passionate about her dance and probably won't pay attention to you unless you approach, but if she notices you, then you better run...

**Game**  
This game is an indie horror classic. You should explore the level in search of images. You have no weapons and no way to defend yourself, when you meet a Serbian lady, you can only run away.  
There are 3 levels available to you:  
**Forest.** In the forest, you have to explore the location to find 10 pictures of creepy creatures. Find all the pictures before the Serbian lady finds you.  
**School.** At night, when all the people are already out of here, it seems that someone performed some terrible ritual in this school and now this creature appeared here... It seems that it only shows aggression in the dark and you have a flashlight, so everything is good. That's just the flashlight batteries run out quickly.  
**An abandoned hospital.** You woke up in some abandoned building on the outskirts of town and a Serbian lady is chasing you. All you have to do is run. Go to the exit and don't let the Serbian lady catch you.

**Are you interested in this game?**  
Log in to see why you might like it based on the games, friends, and editors you follow.

[Connection](#) [the](#) [Open on Steam](#)

**A player**  
Common use  
Limited profile features

**Languages**  
Interface: English ✓  
Sound: Not supported  
Subtitles: English ✓

**TITLE:** Serbian Dancing Lady  
**GENRE:** Action, Adventure, Casual, Indie, RPG, Simulation  
**CREATOR:** Astra Playroom  
**PUBLISHER:** Astra Playroom  
**RELEASE DATE:** 16 Feb 2024

[Update history](#)  
[Related news](#)  
[Discussions](#)  
[Community Groups](#)

[Sharing](#) [Integration](#)

**Urban Legends Wiki** 242 PAGES

**Serbian Dancing Lady** [SIGN IN TO EDIT](#)

**Serbian Dancing Lady** is internet urban legend about woman who dances at night in Zvezdara. She chases anyone she hears or sees.  
The woman's name is allegedly Mira, she lives at Cvetkova.

**Contents** (hide)

- Description
- History
- Skills
- Appearance
- Weaponry
- Trivia

**Description**  
The Serbian Dancing Lady is described as a middle-aged lady who according to the legend, can be seen dancing early late at night at random locations around Serbia and when approached by a civilian, she would pull out a knife and chase him/her in abnormal speed to presumably kill the victim.

**History**  
This woman was seen dancing at hospital in Zvezdara. The police made several searches for the woman, but she just disappeared. She was seen for the first time at the end of September 2019. She was believed to be threatening bystanders with a knife and despite the authorities search for her, she was never found and was believed to be mentally handicapped.  
Since then, many videos were uploaded on social media of alleged Serbian Lady sightings all across Europe, some even reaching East Asia. However, all of the videos were false and were mainly following a trend where users would upload a laughably fake sighting of the Serbian Lady.

**Skills**  
**NOTE:** This section is dedicated to the character itself of the Serbian Lady, not the actual woman Mira.  
**Intimidation** - Учинеја је за утрнаван њаје.  
**Skilled with Weapons** -She is skilled with a knife.  
**Dancing** -It is confirmed that she can dance well.

**Also known as** The Dancing Lady  
**Location** Serbia  
**Status** Partially true  
**Created since** 2019

**Recent Images**  
Nenek Gayung in Moma Fandi's room  
Others like you also viewed  
Juanna Lopez, Selene Delgado, Saki Sanobashi

**Popular Pages**  
Selene Delgado Lopez, Saki Sanobashi, Serbian Dancing Lady, Juanna Lopez, Red Room Curse

Figures 3a and 3b<sup>4</sup>

The story gained widespread popularity among young people across Europe and Asia and even reached audiences in America, growing to a prominence comparable to that of Slenderman in the USA. In fact, as 4 [https://urbanlegend.fandom.com/wiki/Serbian Dancing Lady](https://urbanlegend.fandom.com/wiki/Serbian_Dancing_Lady)

shown in the next video, Slenderman has been placed in the place of the woman, implicitly giving her the same recognition and acceptance.

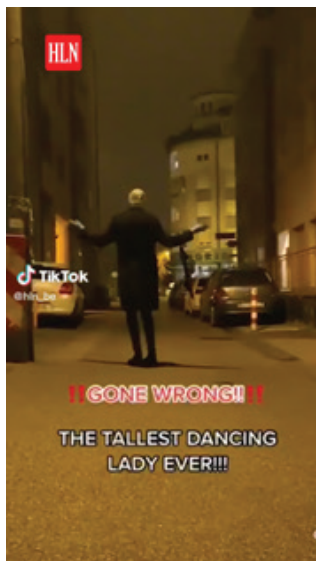


Figure 4<sup>5</sup>

So, we are talking about a new contemporary legend. The lore escaped the boundaries of the platform and that of the internet and came out in “the real world” as well, this much that adolescents and children in the streets of Athens referred to it casually as a given in their everyday conversation mainly in the winter of 2023 or used it as a thread to each other. This is an indication that the narrative was perceived as a legendary one, because even the behaviour controlling aspect is on – “Don’t walk on that dark street, the dancing lady might get you!”

Still, the interesting part are not the various online attempts to describe or explain the “phenomenon”, but the uptake of the story by the users who recreated the actions of this “supernatural being”, both the dancing part and the hunting and assaulting one. The videos in the following example are uploaded on TikTok by young users from several countries (in fact the once showed here are from the Philippines, Germany and Norway) who are enacting the initial video’s content.

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.tiktok.com/@hln\\_be/video/7208564638269721861?q=the%20tallest%20serbian%20dancing%20lady&t=1715433941305](https://www.tiktok.com/@hln_be/video/7208564638269721861?q=the%20tallest%20serbian%20dancing%20lady&t=1715433941305)



Figure 5

### Recreations by Everyday Users

The TikTok posts analysed for this study primarily focus on recreations of the initial “Serbian Dancing Lady Video”, emphasizing on the peculiar dance and the lore-associated element of the “creature” chasing those who approach it – a narrative absent from the original video but integral to the legend’s evolution. These recreations can be categorized into two types: spontaneous acts often performed by groups of young people on the street for fun, and more deliberate productions. In the videos that belong to the first category, the young people seem to take the relevant video on a typical evening on the street while walking with their friends. The spontaneity of the creation of such a video is distinct from the fact that there are no elaborate manipulations and of course from the laughter of the participants. In the second case, on the contrary, the videos seem curated. The participants, especially the one who plays the main character, wear clothes reminiscent of an old woman or try to replicate the exact image of the woman, for example wearing a shawl, like the woman in the original video. The participants also follow a studied “direction” and appear rehearsed. Also, in the first category, the group is typically smaller. Notably, most of these recreations – from both categories described previously – are usually created by random users whose content does not typically focus on scary stories or legends.

The cultural impact of this legend extended beyond user-generated

content. For instance, a local escape room in Athens capitalized on the story's popularity by incorporating it into its TikTok advertisements. As shown in the following picture, the main character of the escape room, a scary hotel room, recreates the "Serbian Leidy's" dance in the middle of the street that lays in front of the escape room, chases the cameraman and then, as he comes closer to the camera, an unexpected twist follows, a scary woman-like monster appears and scares the viewer of this advertising video.



Figure 6<sup>6</sup>

Interestingly, the music accompanying these recreations is often the same track used in the initial "Serbian Dancing Lady" video: a preexisting sound available on the platform titled Creepy and Simple Horror Background Music (1070744) by howling indicator.

### **The viewers uptake of these recreations**

From the viewers' comments it becomes obvious that the story is known to them. In the comments they often discuss details about the

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.tiktok.com/@athenshallofhorrors/video/7213771407363263750>

story and about how scary the story is. The plausibility of it being true is also a grate issue that troubles them frequently. But such comments on the stories plot are mainly to be seen under the posts describing or trying to debunk the legend. An example of this is the case of the first video, part of the commentary for which is shown in the following example. In this video from the TikTok profile [screamful](#), the narrator claims that it depicts the first instance of the “Serbian Dancing Lady’s” reaction being filmed, specifically the first time her face was captured on camera. It shows the first person who allegedly recorded this entity pursuing her. The video continues by describing the entity, who she is, and the fact that there are now numerous recordings of her in other countries outside Serbia, where the first sighting of the “Serbian Dancing Lady” supposedly took place (hence her name). As shown in the example below, user comments focus on her identity, provide information about her nature, but also describe the feeling of terror evoked by seeing her on this video. The rest of the comments come from two other TikTok videos similar to the one described previously.

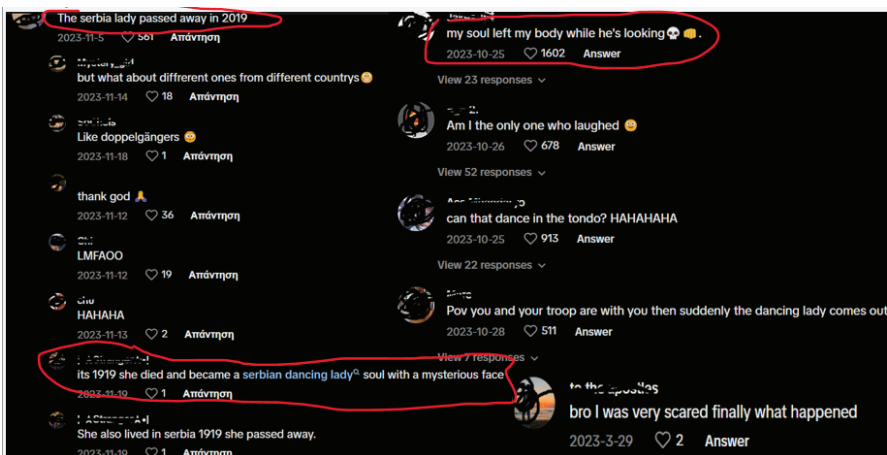
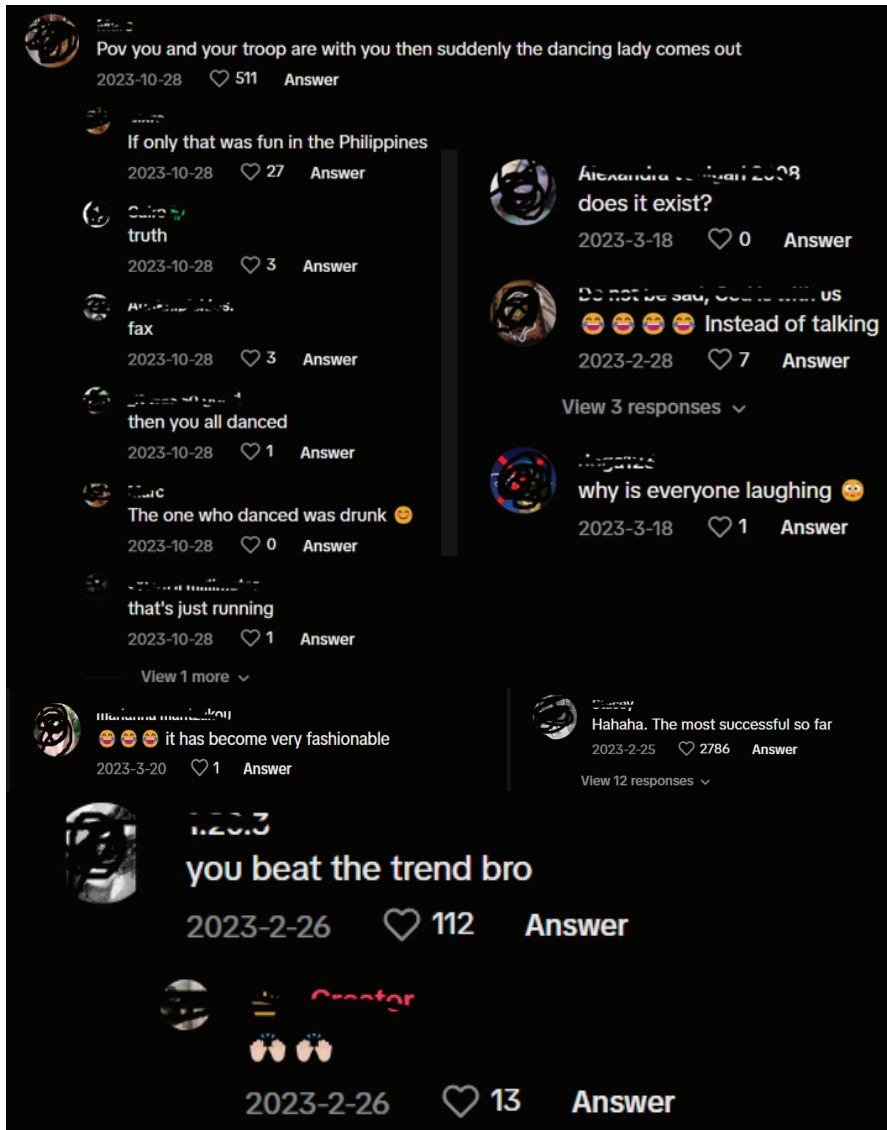


Figure 7<sup>7</sup>

The comments under the “enactment” post differ. Of course, there are, as shown in the following example, discussions about the truth of the story and about the way the viewers would react in case they saw the “Serbian Dancing Lady” themselves, but they seem to focus on other aspects too having mainly to do with the trend.

7 <https://www.tiktok.com/@screamful/video/7255379738586303787?q=serbina%20dancing%20lady&t=1714399752717>, [https://www.tiktok.com/@pipoytandocyt/video/7270783432937016582?is\\_from\\_webapp=1&web\\_id=7330545829118363168](https://www.tiktok.com/@pipoytandocyt/video/7270783432937016582?is_from_webapp=1&web_id=7330545829118363168), [https://www.tiktok.com/@thodorisntimo/video/7204213191579012357?is\\_from\\_webapp=1&web\\_id=7330545829118363168](https://www.tiktok.com/@thodorisntimo/video/7204213191579012357?is_from_webapp=1&web_id=7330545829118363168)

Figure 8<sup>8</sup>

In this short of videos the viewers in the comment section question the recreation's accuracy by commenting on the cloths the supposed

8 [https://www.tiktok.com/@thodorisntimo/video/7204213191579012357?is\\_from\\_webapp=1&web\\_id=7330545829118363168](https://www.tiktok.com/@thodorisntimo/video/7204213191579012357?is_from_webapp=1&web_id=7330545829118363168), [https://www.tiktok.com/@pipoytandocyt/video/7270783432937016582?is\\_from\\_webapp=1&web\\_id=7330545829118363168](https://www.tiktok.com/@pipoytandocyt/video/7270783432937016582?is_from_webapp=1&web_id=7330545829118363168), [https://www.tiktok.com/@thodorisntimo/video/7204213191579012357?is\\_from\\_webapp=1&web\\_id=7330545829118363168](https://www.tiktok.com/@thodorisntimo/video/7204213191579012357?is_from_webapp=1&web_id=7330545829118363168), [https://www.tiktok.com/@giwrgos.zrk/video/7204185096725744902?is\\_from\\_webapp=1&web\\_id=7330545829118363168](https://www.tiktok.com/@giwrgos.zrk/video/7204185096725744902?is_from_webapp=1&web_id=7330545829118363168)

dancing lady is wearing, that are the proof of the video not being very well maid (*Ow, yea, cos the old woman would wear nike shoes!*), of the existence of “cameramen” who seem to be “invisible”, because the “being” is not chasing them, only the person pretending the victim, about how good a post is that “has nailed the trend”, or they even tag their friends asking them to do the trend themselves, as shown in the next example.

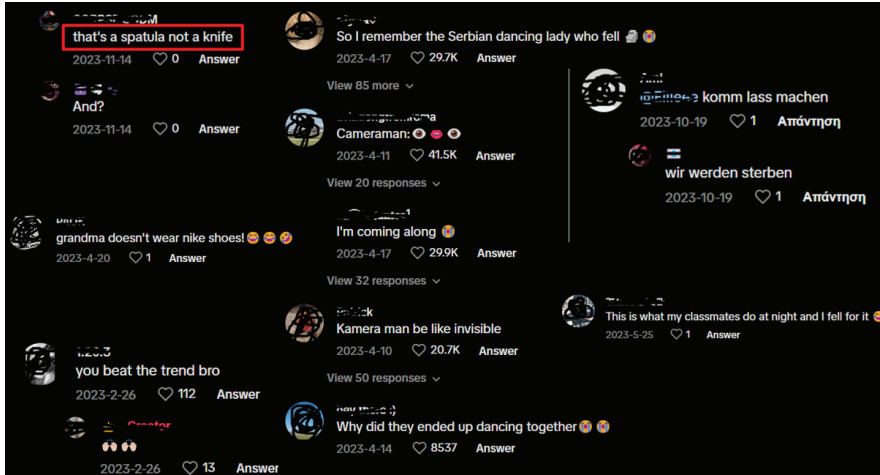
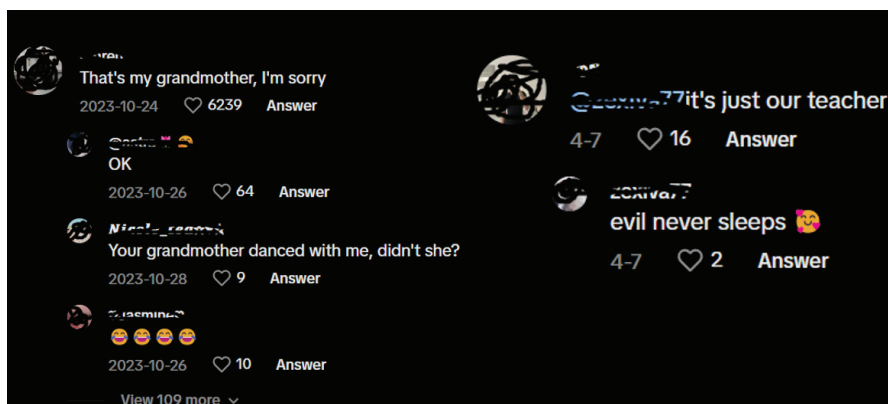


Figure 9<sup>9</sup>

Sometimes they even make fun of the story itself pretending to know who the dancing lady is.

9 [https://www.tiktok.com/@weird\\_doww17/video/7232501489476963589?q=serbi-na%20dancing%20lady&t=1714399752717](https://www.tiktok.com/@weird_doww17/video/7232501489476963589?q=serbi-na%20dancing%20lady&t=1714399752717), [https://www.tiktok.com/@thodorisntimo/video/7204213191579012357?is\\_from\\_webapp=1&web\\_id=7330545829118363168](https://www.tiktok.com/@thodorisntimo/video/7204213191579012357?is_from_webapp=1&web_id=7330545829118363168), <https://www.tiktok.com/@urrxenia/video/7291351637149469985?q=serbian%20dancing%20shadow&t=1714401416514>, [https://www.tiktok.com/@thodorisntimo/video/7204213191579012357?is\\_from\\_webapp=1&web\\_id=7330545829118363168](https://www.tiktok.com/@thodorisntimo/video/7204213191579012357?is_from_webapp=1&web_id=7330545829118363168), [https://www.tiktok.com/@giwrgos.zrk/video/7204185096725744902?is\\_from\\_webapp=1&web\\_id=7330545829118363168](https://www.tiktok.com/@giwrgos.zrk/video/7204185096725744902?is_from_webapp=1&web_id=7330545829118363168), [https://www.tiktok.com/@sophiebhaa/video/7219753889275432219?is\\_from\\_webapp=1&web\\_id=7330545829118363168](https://www.tiktok.com/@sophiebhaa/video/7219753889275432219?is_from_webapp=1&web_id=7330545829118363168)

Figure 10<sup>10</sup>

Still the issue of belief seems like an important aspect, because eventually all the discussions on the comments of those post and the posts themselves, can be looked up through the dipole of belief and disbelief. It might seem at first that “playing”, acting out, recreating, enacting of the story is a playful trend, but the main core remains the attempt to experience the story of a legend.

### Ostensive Practices in the Age of Social Media

The “enactment” of contemporary legends through participatory activities is not a new phenomenon; it has long been connected to this sort of legends in offline settings. These “enactments” often involve individuals or groups physically engaging with the legend’s narrative, blurring the lines between storytelling and lived experience. In Folklore Studies the term “ostension”<sup>11</sup> (Dégh & Vázsonyi 1983), or better yet, “ostensive

10 [https://www.tiktok.com/@pipoytandocyt/video/7270783432937016582?is\\_from\\_webapp=1&web\\_id=7330545829118363168](https://www.tiktok.com/@pipoytandocyt/video/7270783432937016582?is_from_webapp=1&web_id=7330545829118363168), [https://www.tiktok.com/@lindsayivan/video/7222778704114486533?is\\_from\\_webapp=1&web\\_id=7330545829118363168](https://www.tiktok.com/@lindsayivan/video/7222778704114486533?is_from_webapp=1&web_id=7330545829118363168)

11 Localized contemporary legends allow for enactments that create collective group experiences, which are shared as new stories. Tolbert (2018, 41-43) notes that such actions inspire storytelling, unlike narratives recounting prior events (Blank & McNeill 2018, 7). These “expeditions” often overshadow the original legend, testing the boundaries of reality (Oring 2008, 138; Ellis 2001, 166). Legend tripping, a related concept, involves visiting specific sites associated with tragic or supernatural events to provoke a personal connection, often resembling informal “dark tourism” without commercial organization (Stone & Sharpley 2008, 574-575). Ostension focuses on enacting or interpreting legends in familiar settings without the need for travel. Practices like the “Bloody Mary” ritual exemplify this interaction with folklore (Dégh & Vázsonyi 1983, 534). While legend tripping involves journeys to engage with a site, ostensive acts can occur anywhere and often overlap during trips. Both practices connect

practice” was used to describe the phenomenon. Before the rise of digital platforms, such practices were already a key aspect of legend dissemination, as groups would actively seek out locations associated with legends, attempting to relive or test the boundaries of the stories firsthand. This form of engagement serves not only to reinforce the narrative but also to create shared memories and experiences among participants.

In their 1983 paper, Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi introduced the concept of “ostension”. That is, they describe “ostension” as the process through which legends are enacted or embodied in real-life actions or events. Rather than merely narrating a legend verbally, ostension involves using actions, objects, or situations to communicate a narrative or legend concept. This theory identifies two sub-forms of ostensive practices, which will be employed in this paper to distinguish between those observed in broader internet contexts and those uniquely shaped and amplified by social media. In fact, Dégh and Vázsonyi categorize these forms as Quasi-Ostension and Pseudo-Ostension. Quasi-Ostension refers to real-world events being interpreted through the lens of a legend. For example, if a passerby sees a woman dancing strangely at night, they might interpret it as a manifestation of the “Serbian Dancing Lady”, regardless of the dancer’s actual intentions. Pseudo-Ostension, on the other hand, involves the deliberate staging of events to mimic folkloric narratives. In the context of the “Serbian Dancing Lady”, TikTok users recreating the dance and posting videos of themselves mimicking the figure are clear examples of pseudo-ostension, as will be argued here.

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to the supernatural, but legend tripping emphasizes spatial engagement, whereas ostension focuses on direct interpretation (Ellis 1991, 279-295). In short, ostension and legend tripping are not synonymous, though they are closely related concepts in folklore studies. Ostension can happen anywhere and does not necessarily involve visiting a specific place. Legend tripping could be described as a specific form of ostension that involves visiting a site associated with a legend for the purpose of experiencing or engaging with the legend directly. It is often tied to a geographical location (e.g., a haunted house, a cursed bridge). Participants usually prepare for the trip with the intent of testing the legend, seeking thrills, or performing rituals. Legend tripping emphasizes the journey and the physical interaction with the legend’s setting, while ostension is more encompassing and can occur in any context where a legend is acted upon. Legend tripping seems to be more connected to the “localised” legends (Nounanaki & Kakampoura 2022, 61-78), while ostension can be “practiced” on any sort of legend. While legend tripping can be seen as a form of ostension, not all ostensive acts qualify as legend tripping. Ostensive practice, in short, refers to the enactment of legends or folklore in real life, which can overlap with legend tripping when individuals engage in behaviours that bring legends to life. Legend tripping involves individuals visiting sites linked to local legends or supernatural occurrences to test the veracity of these stories or seek thrilling experiences. This practice can be seen as a form of dark tourism – that involves visiting sites associated with death, suffering, or the macabre, such as battlefields, disaster locations, or memorials (Mionel 2019, 423-437) – when the sites visited are associated with death or the supernatural.

With the growing influence of the internet, ostensive practices have found new expressions in the digital sphere. In *Legend-Tripping Online: Supernatural Folklore and the Search for Ong's Hat* (2011), Michael Kinsella explores how ostension translates into online contexts. He introduces the term "cyber-ostension" to describe this phenomenon, emphasizing the distinct characteristics of online ostensive acts compared to their offline counterparts. Kinsella defines cyber-ostension as the enactment or simulation of legend-related behaviours within digital spaces. This includes participating in online forums, sharing narratives, and engaging in virtual explorations that mirror traditional legend-tripping activities.

Unlike offline ostensive practices, cyber-ostension allows individuals to engage with legends from the comfort of their homes, using the internet as a medium for exploration and interaction. One notable example involves users watching videos – uploaded to platforms like YouTube – of someone documenting an ostensive practice they performed in the offline world. By observing these experiences remotely, viewers gain a sense of participation while maintaining control over their engagement. For instance, if a video becomes too frightening rather than entertaining, they can simply close it, allowing for a tailored interaction with the content.

The concept of ostension, as introduced by Dégh and Vázsonyi, has been applied beyond the realm of the Internet to another technologically mediated and visually oriented domain: film. Mikel J. Koven, in his exploration of films, argues that urban legends and other folk narratives are not merely thematic material for movies but are also given a new dimension through the way films are produced, projected, and received by audiences. In his book "Film, Folklore, and Urban Legends" (2008), Koven examines how films dramatize and recreate urban legends, effectively bringing them to life for viewers. He introduces the term ostensive filmic text to describe films that act as forms of ostension by visually enacting the content of folklore or legends. These films do more than narrate stories; they show them in a way that mirrors the performative and experiential nature of ostensive practices in the real world. Building on Dégh and Vázsonyi's framework, Koven adapts their theory to the cinematic medium, suggesting that films simulate the immersive and participatory qualities of folklore, enabling viewers to engage with legends as though they were participants in an ostensive act. This connection underscores how the cinematic medium serves as both a repository and a reenactment space for cultural narratives.

Koven initially elaborates on this connection in his 1999 paper, “Candyman Can: Film and Ostension”, where he analyses the 1992 horror film *Candyman* as a prime example of ostension in cinema. He argues that the film does more than retell an urban legend; it enacts and contextualizes it within the cinematic framework. Through dramatizing key components of the legend, *Candyman* mirrors the performative aspect of ostension, where legends are not just shared but physically or symbolically acted out. The participatory nature of ostension is reflected in how the film engages its audience. For instance, the “say his name five times in the mirror” ritual does not merely depict the legend but invites viewers to consider their own role as potential participants, blurring the boundaries between fiction and belief.

Returning to the online dissemination of ostensive practices, it seems that the internet has profoundly changed how people participate in ostensive practices, effectively “democratizing” these engagements by removing geographical and physical barriers. Unlike traditional ostensive practices and legend trips, which often require physical presence and are accessible only to those who can undertake such journeys, the digital realm allows a broader audience to engage with legends from anywhere in the world. Moreover, digital interactions are not restricted by time. While offline engagements often occur at specific times – such as nighttime to heighten the eerie atmosphere – online participation is asynchronous, enabling users to engage with legends at any hour.

The internet also enriches these experiences through the use of multimedia formats, including text, images, audio, and video. This multimedia approach can make the storytelling and participatory aspects of legends more immersive than traditional oral or written narratives. Additionally, online platforms foster the creation of communities dedicated to specific legends, where individuals can share experiences, theories, and interpretations more easily than in face-to-face settings. These digital communities contribute to the sustenance and evolution of legends over time, offering a dynamic space for collective engagement.

Another key distinction between digital and offline interactions lies in their permanence. While offline practice is often ephemeral – relying on the experience itself the recollection of which is often shaken by the fallibility of memory – digital interactions leave a lasting record. Videos, comments, and shared content can be preserved and analysed, providing a richer and more durable archive of ostensive practises. Watching someone else’s recorded ostensive practice online often evokes the experience

of watching a scary movie. However, it goes a step further by allowing viewers to interact with the content, leave comments, and engage with other users who have seen the same video.

Kinsella's exploration of cyber-ostension highlights how the internet has revolutionized the ways individuals engage with folklore. By expanding the scope and nature of these interactions beyond the physical world, cyber-ostension creates new opportunities for participation and reinterpretation. Returning to Dégh and Vázsonyi's subcategories, cyber-ostension appears to overlap significantly with quasi-ostension. In the digital sphere, individuals may interpret ambiguous online content as evidence supporting a legend, similar to how real-world events are framed through a legend's lens in quasi-ostension.

In essence, the concept of cyber-ostension involves the recording and uploading of ostensive practices performed by a group or individual in the offline world. The engagement of viewers, who interpret and interact with this content, aligns closely with quasi-ostension, further illustrating how the boundaries between offline and online folklore practices are increasingly blurred.

However, with the advancements offered by modern social media, the entire experience of engaging with ostensive practices has evolved even further. Watching these recordings has become more dynamic, but, more importantly, it has also become increasingly simple for anyone to recreate the same process while adding their own unique elements. A central feature of this evolution is the creation and reproduction of trends – a phenomenon particularly prominent on platforms like TikTok.<sup>12</sup>

The new experiences facilitated by social media closely align with pseudo-ostension, which involves the deliberate creation of hoaxes or staged events to mimic legends. The vast reach of social media amplifies the impact of these staged acts, allowing them to gain traction quickly and be perceived as authentic by wide audiences. However, social media platforms have transformed the nature of these "enactments" in ways that differ significantly from earlier online environments.

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<sup>12</sup> Trends often involve users recreating something they've seen in another user's content or incorporating specific elements into their own creations. These elements might include popular sounds, catchphrases, or even specific filters available on the platform. For instance, users might mime someone else's actions, apply a particular filter to their videos, and then share the results by posting their own versions. This cycle of imitation and innovation not only amplifies the reach of certain ideas but also fosters a participatory culture where users collectively shape and redefine the original content.

The key distinction lies in the act of recreation and posting. Social media enables users not only to view ostensive practices but also to actively participate by creating and sharing their own versions. This unique feature differentiates ostensive practices displayed on social media from those typically found in other online contexts.

The numerous recreations of the “Serbian Dancing Lady” legend exemplify this shift. The legend itself originated in the realm of social media is rooted in a digital artefact – a video. This video and its associated legend quickly spread online, eventually becoming a trend. Social media users began producing their own versions of the video, contributing to the legend’s proliferation. This transformative process, where users actively participate in recreating and disseminating the legend, is a hallmark of pseudo-ostension.

Moreover, these videos maintain an immediate and direct connection to the initial legend without requiring an intermediary offline ostensive practice. This direct link highlights how social media uniquely fosters and redefines the relationship between legends and their enactments, further emphasizing the distinct nature of pseudo-ostension in the digital age.

Just as the stories of a group’s experiences during its engagement with a legend (ostension, see Oring 2008, 138) often evolve into narratives that overshadow the narrative of the original urban legend,<sup>13</sup> the “enactment” of a legend – such as the case presented in this paper – takes on a similar dynamic. The “enactment” becomes a new video with its own momentum, ultimately reinforcing the legend, even if it initially appears to be just another trend.

While the representation of a legend is not identical to an ostensive practice, in this instance, a critical element transforms the representation into an ostensive act. This element is the belief surrounding the legend. Even when playfully reproduced by users as part of a trend, this belief continues to provoke questions of credibility and plausibility. It is this enduring sense of belief, embedded in the recreated content that bridges the gap between representation and ostension, highlighting how social media trends can breathe new life into legends while preserving their folkloric essence.

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<sup>13</sup> Prizer (2004, 81) describes such narratives as the point at which the oral narrative becomes a social event and the event becomes a new narrative.

## Conclusion

The “Serbian Dancing Lady” phenomenon underscores the enduring relevance of ostension in folklore studies, particularly in the digital age. By distinguishing ostension from legend-tripping and situating it within the frameworks established by Dégh, Kinsella, and others, this paper highlights the transformative role of digital media in shaping contemporary folklore practices. The emergence of the “Serbian Dancing Lady” as a viral digital legend showcases how online platforms serve as incubators for the creation and dissemination of new folklore, facilitating the interactive, participatory performance of legends. This phenomenon offers fertile ground for further research into the intersections of tradition, performance, and technology in the realm of contemporary folklore.

In fact, the “Serbian Dancing Lady” phenomenon on TikTok exemplifies the dynamic interplay between traditional folklore and modern social media platforms. This case study highlights how contemporary legends are not only preserved but also transformed and propagated through user engagement in the digital age.

The legend of the “Serbian Dancing Lady” has been created and circulated mainly through TikTok, where users share videos depicting a mysterious woman dancing erratically on deserted streets at night. These videos often include narratives suggesting that approaching her leads to perilous outcomes, thereby enhancing the legend’s mystique and appeal. The platform’s algorithmic promotion of trending content facilitates rapid dissemination, allowing the legend to reach a global audience and gain viral status.

TikTok users engage in ostensive practices by reenacting or referencing the “Serbian Dancing Lady” in their content. Ostension, the enactment of folklore in real life, manifests here as users “recreate” the dance, stage encounters, or craft narratives inspired by the legend. These activities serve multiple functions. By participating in these reenactments, users contribute to the legend’s authenticity and ongoing life, transforming it from a static narrative into a dynamic, participatory experience. Such content fosters a sense of community among users, as shared experiences and interpretations of the legend create a collective cultural phenomenon.

The phenomenon of ostensive practice on TikTok, particularly concerning contemporary legends like the “Serbian Dancing Lady”, seems re-

ally intriguing. Users engage with such content by viewing, sharing, and often recreating these narratives, contributing to their viral spread. This participatory culture aligns with the concept of pseudo-ostension, where individuals enact or recreate elements of folklore in real life, but as the deliberate staging of an event to mimic the folkloric narrative. TikTok's platform design encourages user interaction through features like duets, stitches, and challenges, facilitating the rapid dissemination and adaptation of such phenomena. The platform's algorithm promotes content that garners high engagement, further amplifying these narratives. This environment enables users to become active participants in the "storytelling" process, blurring the lines between viewer and performer. The uptake of ostensive phenomena on TikTok reflects a blend of entertainment, curiosity, and community engagement. Users may be drawn to such content for its thrill or mystery, while others participate to showcase creativity or gain social capital within the platform's community. This dynamic interplay between content creation and consumption perpetuates the life cycle of contemporary legends in the digital age.

Thus, besides discussing on the appearance of this novel story and its special features because of its digital origin, in this paper the subcategories of ostensive practices introduced by Dégh and Vázsonyi in their 1983 paper – quasi-ostension and pseudo-ostension – were also described and utilized to provide a crucial framework for understanding the evolution of these practices in digital spaces. It seems that the broader internet facilitated the emergence of cyber-ostension, as explored by Michael Kinsella, where online users engage with legends by interpreting, or interacting with them in virtual spaces. This transition removed physical and geographical barriers, enabling participation through forums, videos, and shared multimedia content. Social media platforms, particularly TikTok, have amplified and redefined these practices. Unlike earlier online environments, social media encourages active user participation in creating and sharing legend-based content, aligning closely with pseudo-ostension. The "Serbian Dancing Lady", for instance, evolved from a digital artefact into a participatory trend, with users recreating and disseminating the legend through staged videos.

These transformations demonstrate how Dégh and Vázsonyi's subcategories remain relevant in explaining the dynamic interplay between belief and participation in digital folklore. They highlight the adaptability of ostensive practices, showcasing how social media fosters new forms of engagement while preserving the essence of traditional storytelling.

The “Serbian Dancing Lady” serves as a case study for understanding the mechanisms of folklore in the social media era. The ease of content creation and sharing on platforms like TikTok allows for rapid proliferation and mutation of legends, reflecting the participatory culture of the internet. Moreover, the global reach of such platforms enables localized legends to transcend their origins, gaining international recognition and reinterpretation.

In conclusion, the “Serbian Dancing Lady” phenomenon illustrates the evolving nature of folklore in the social media age. Through user-generated content and ostensive practices, contemporary legends are not only preserved but also actively transformed and propagated, highlighting the interactive and communal aspects of digital culture.

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## Афродита-Лидија Нунанаки

### Српска плесачица: инсценирање легенде као ТикТок тренд

У првим месецима 2023. године, на платформи ТикТок постао је виралан видео-снимак жене која на необичан начин плеше усред мрачне улице. На снимку се појављује такозвана „Српска плесачица“, која је на интернету окарактерисана као мистериозна фигура, добивши обележја легенде и „пробивши границе“ платформе на којој је првобитно стекла популарност, а потом проширивши се широм интернета, чак и ван њега, доспевши у масовне медије.

Једна од последица популарности коју је овај видео-снимак стекао јесте то што га млади, пре свега, нису само гледали и делили као нову урбану легенду или забавну „крипипасту“, већ су многи и инсценирали његов садржај, објављујући сопствене интерпретације (праћене специфичним звучним записом) на платформи и на тај начин се забављали „оживљавањем“ легенде, што је прерасло у ТикТок тренд.

Иако је овај тренд временом опао, трајао је довољно дуго да „Српску плесачицу“ учврсти као дигиталну урбану легенду. Полазећи од овог новог примера дигиталне урбане легенде, рад има за циљ да прикаже нови живот који овакве легенде стичу у окружењима друштвених мрежа, као и да истражи начине на које се праксе инсценирања легенде (енг. „ostensive practices“) развијају и преобликују у контексту друштвених медија.

**Кључне речи:** „Српска плесачица“, дигитални фолклор, урбана легенда, пракса инсценирања легенде, друштвене мреже.