Capturing the Slender Man:
Online and Offline Vernacular Practice in the Digital Age

Andrew Peck
Miami University
USA

Abstract

This article argues that networked digital media technologies enable vernacular practices to become both more mediated and more visible. Using the case of a popular digital legend known as "The Slender Man" to illustrate this argument, this article suggests that this increased visibility circulates awareness and encourages an open-source sense of collaboration. As users collaborate on creating and sharing vernacular practices, they begin to develop hierarchies of performance that privilege certain types of interaction, creating an atmosphere that facilitates vernacular critique. The result is that the digital age creates new possibilities for both the networked circulation of vernacular practice and for the meta-discursive interactions surrounding those practices.

The room went silent as the eyes of a dozen middle schoolers fixed on the front of the room. Side conversations, under-the-table texting, and notebook doodles ceased. The question I had just asked resonated with a grim electricity, garnering me their undivided attention.

On that particular overcast June morning, I found myself the invited guest of a summer journalism program for local middle schoolers. Because of my research in digital communication and everyday life, I had been asked to talk to them about their project on digital privacy. Afterward, I continued chatting with the kids and answering their questions about digital media. After answering several of their questions, I posed one of my own, "What do you know about the Slender Man?" This was the moment the room went silent.

In retrospect, I shouldn't have been surprised by this reaction. Only three weeks prior, two girls in a nearby town had attempted to stab their friend to death. When authorities asked the girls why they had done it, they said it was to win the favor of the Slender Man, an urban legend they had learned about online. News media narratives focused on these surprising events, frequently encouraging parents to more closely monitor their children's digital media use. As a result, this was probably a question they'd gotten from their parents at some point during the last several weeks, and those parents likely asked it in a much more concerned or accusatory tone.

Worried that I had just horrified a group of middle schoolers, I offered them assurance. I promised them I wouldn't judge, that I was just curious. There was a lot of misinformation spreading, and I was wondering if they wanted to talk about it. Several nodded slightly. So, after another brief pause, I reiterated my question, "What do you know about the Slender Man?"

One girl, sitting in the far corner of the room, began to speak. She knew the character looked like a tall, faceless humanoid wearing a black suit. She mentioned having read some stories that other people had posted about him online. She knew that the character was made-up, although she didn't know where or how it had originated.

Another student told me about watching his brother playing one of the Slender Man video games and being scared by it. Grabbing my laptop, I showed the class an image of a Slender Man monster in a different videogame—Minecraft. A chorus of ahhs suggested the majority of them were familiar with this iteration. Several students mentioned hearing about the Slender Man from the news or from their parents after the stabbing. Others admitted that they had initially learned about the Slender Man from friends or from stories they had heard on the playground.

As we continued to talk, it became obvious that these different entry points were not as discrete as they initially seemed. One student, for example, told me that he had originally heard about the Slender Man through stories told by a friend at school who played the video game. This student later played the game at his friend's house, which, in turn, led him to look up Slender Man videos on YouTube after he returned home. In this instance, the Slender Man bounced from an oral-retelling (based on a mediated product), to a mediated experience, to an exploration of digitally mediated folklore. Many of the students experienced the legend through a similar collection of fragments.

Our discussion that day left me with a lingering set of questions. I had assumed that since the Slender Man was digital folklore, then digitally mediated versions would be the most familiar material for these young "digital natives." Instead, talking to these young people revealed a complex web of introductory points to the Slender Man legend that included elements of oral storytelling, video games, mass media, rumors, social media, horror-themed wikis, fan websites, and YouTube videos which blurred over time. Even though this web included elements that resembled traditional folkloric circulation, they were connected to other new and mass media elements in ways that would not have been possible three decades ago. I began to wonder about how this legend was circulating, not only among children but also adults. How might these online and offline forms of vernacular practice influence each other? What are the implications for the circulation of vernacular practices as digital media becomes increasingly mobile, prevalent, and everyday?

The everyday circulation of vernacular practice in the digital age is a multi-mediated process defined by a sense of increased visibility that creates new opportunities for vernacular collaboration and critique. Technological affordances made available by digital communication technologies have resulted in social norms that encourage the documentation and sharing of everyday behaviors across networks. The result of this shift is that everyday life (including a variety of vernacular practices) becomes both more mediated and more visible. Hence, the technological affordances of the digital age fundamentally extend how vernacular practices circulate. Using everyday performances of the Slender Man legend to illustrate this argument, I suggest that this increased visibility circulates awareness which, in turn, encourages a sense of

collaboration. As users collaborate on creating and sharing vernacular practices, they begin to develop hierarchies of performance that privilege certain types of interaction, creating an atmosphere that facilitates vernacular critique.

Circulation of Vernacular Practice in the Digital Age
In the digital age, the scope of our everyday interactions is no longer constrained by geography (Howard and Blank 2013, 10). For a variety of vernacular practitioners—legend trippers, cryptid enthusiasts, Slender Man costume-makers—the Internet offers the potential to seek out others with similar interests and share their experiences (Howard 2011, 17-18). A group that forms around a shared interest hails engagement from other users that expresses both personal uniqueness and group connectivity (Shifman 2014, 30). This engagement emerges collaboratively and through a variety of media and expressions (including creating, viewing, sharing, remixing, and commenting) (Peck 2015). By documenting and sharing these expressions, users not only demonstrate their group connectivity but also help shape the emergence of future examples of vernacular expression.

Technologies do not dictate how they are used, but they encourage certain uses over others (Winner 1986). The relationship between technology and society is a reciprocal one, in which neither force is solely dominant and each is continually influencing the other (McNeill 2012). Scholars in a variety of disciplines, including communication scholar Nancy Baym as well as sociologists Donald MacKenzie and Judy Wajcman, call this perspective the "social shaping of technology" (Baym 2010, 44-45; MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999). This perspective suggests not only that technologies have certain uses to which they are better or less suited, but also that people often adapt technologies to serve their needs (Baym, Zhang, and Lin 2004, 316).

The term "affordances" refers to the capabilities enabled by a technology (Baym 2010, 17). These affordances influence—but do not determine—use (Baym 2010, 45). A standard household claw hammer, for instance, is well-suited to pounding in a nail. In a pinch, it could also be used as a weapon. It would make a terrible toothbrush. This perspective suggests technology exists in a state of "interpretive flexibility." In other words, different groups can have very different understandings of a technology (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999, 21); similarly, different groups may also have very different understandings of the customs and norms related to using a technology. As a technology becomes a natural part of daily life, certain norms of behavior begin to form around its usage based on these affordances. This is not to suggest that everyone will use a technology in exactly the same way; technologies provide users with structure while also leaving potential for individualization and variation inside that structure. It does, however, reflect a social pressure that can help us understand the emergence of expectations that undergird a practice. Hence, when discussing the changing nature of how vernacular practices circulate in the digital age, I am neither speaking in absolutes nor determinants. Instead, I am referring to capabilities enabled by digital network technologies and seeking to understand the various ways in which users have engaged that potential.

Digital network technologies are increasingly commonplace in everyday life. As of 2015, over 84 percent of American adults are online, a number that has been holding steady since 2012 (Perrin and Duggan 2015). Due to the proliferation of smartphones, tablets, and other Internet-ready portable devices that we are rarely separated from, more than one-in-five Americans report going online "almost constantly" (Perrin 2015). Pocket-sized digital media devices are ubiquitous. They are perpetually within arm's reach as people move about their everyday lives. While these technologies make it easy to document the everyday, it is the networks they connect to that enable the circulation of this documented media via the click of a button. "The proliferation of visual technologies has become a key aspect of digital culture," writes sociologist Martin Hand, "digital imaging and photography have become thoroughly *ordinary* accompaniments to communication and connection practices in daily life" (2012, 11, emphasis in original). Hand's observation of the mundanity of capturing and sharing everyday experiences on the Internet suggests digital technologies may enable these practices but social norms have embraced the affordances of these technologies in ways that make the documentation and circulation of everyday life not only possible, but also *expected*.

This shift in social norms toward the public sharing of the mundane means that, as individuals document and share their everyday practices across networks, everyday practices become increasingly visible. Communication scholar Zizi Papacharissi notes how the digital age complicates our notions of public and private practice, explaining that "bloggers voluntarily expose the privacy of diary-form introspection to multiple public audiences [and] YouTube videos broadcast context-free pieces of deeply idiosyncratic experiences" (2010, 69). Similarly, social networks provide a space to share pictures of children, vacations, and soon-to-be-consumed meals. Vernacular practices are offered the same potential. One user can document her search for Bigfoot in words and pictures on her blog, another user may upload stories told by his immigrant grandmother to YouTube, a third may post pictures of a homemade Slender Man costume to Reddit or Facebook. In all these instances, formerly private, dyadic, or small-scale vernacular practices become public through remediation. It is these acts of public sharing, that, when done on a mass scale and considered in aggregate (Howard 2011, 19; Howard 2013, 80-81), create new visibility for everyday vernacular practices.

The visibility of everyday life enabled by new media also creates an awareness that individual actions exist as part of a larger body of practice. As everyday acts circulate across networks and become more visible, users begin to recognize them not only as distinct actions but also as parts of a larger practice. Digital communication scholar Limor Shifman observes that by documenting and sharing everyday actions across networks, users make these formerly ephemeral and interpersonal communication events more visible across space and more persistent over time.[1] An adolescent at a sleepover, for example, might use a smartphone to record a friend trying to summon Bloody Mary and later share the video via social media with other friends who weren't present. Similarly, that same adolescent could experience the legend by gathering a

group of friends around the computer to watch videos of Bloody Mary summonings on YouTube that other vernacular users have created. The sum total of these interactions is catalogued across a variety of web locations,[2] allowing previously uninitiated users to quickly learn about the myriad variations at play (Kaplan 2013). This mass sharing inadvertently results in a widely accessible archive of everyday practice where "it only takes a couple of mouse clicks to see hundreds of versions" (Shifman 2014, 30). The outcome of these changes in visibility, Shifman argues, is an increase in user awareness of the overall sum of these actions (2014, 29). In other words, the affordances of the digital age enable users to see their individual actions not only as discrete vernacular expressions but also as connected to a larger body of vernacular practice.

As a practice circulates, accruing increased visibility and awareness, it hails a sense of collaboration from users. Harvard law professor and digital communication scholar Yochai Benkler suggests the following link between widened circulation and hailing participation in the digital age, "The emergence of a new folk culture and of a wider practice of active personal engagement in the telling and retelling of basic cultural themes … makes culture more participatory, and renders it legible to all its inhabitants" (Benkler 2006, 299-300). This legibility comes from the increased recognition of an action as belonging to a larger genre of practice—emerging in light of a constellation of other, similar forms and variations. Visibility and awareness hail collaboration because they translate an idea as a public resource for expression while also making available all the variable ways others have engaged in such expression.

This increase in collaboration also inspires vernacular critique. As vernacular practices circulate across networks and hail collaboration, they inspire competition. More collaboration means more variation, and more variation means users develop ways of categorizing some performances as better (or more authentic) than others. As Whitney Phillips explains in her study of 4Chan, when Internet memes (a popular genre of vernacular practice on the site) started becoming popular in other web locations due to the emergence of exterior meme-based websites and easy-to-use image macro generators, 4Chan users were incensed. This "explosion of participation," sparked by affordances related to digital circulation and creation, made the practice more visible and more collaborative. It became more widely accessible, but users on 4Chan were livid about "the increasing number of 'bad' memes, that is, memes that deviated significantly from the established subcultural format" being shared on more mainstream websites, like Facebook (Phillips 2015, 144). As Phillips demonstrates, when a vernacular practice circulates beyond a single location, there is a rise in the amount of possible variation displayed by users. To respond to this, users engage in acts of vernacular critique that construct and reinforce their own sense of vernacular authority.

This facilitates the creation of hierarchies through which users not only judge vernacular expression but also engage in ongoing acts of vernacular discourse on the nature of the practices themselves. Folklorist Jeff Tolbert, writing on vernacular practices and mediated narratives related to the Slender Man calls this function a "meta-discourse"—a mode of deliberation surrounding a vernacular practice through which

users deliberate about the function, meaning, and significance of that practice (2013). Elsewhere, scholars have drawn on Alan Dundes' (1966) conception of "metafolklore" to suggest the utility of observing folklore as commentary on folklore (Tolbert 2016; Blank 2016). Extending this to consider how vernacular practice comments on vernacular practice, scholars are enabled to, in Tolbert's words, "discover assumptions about what forms specific folklore genres should take, how they should be performed, and who occupies a position of authority on folkloric matters" (2016, 123).

The Many Faces of the Slender Man
On June 10, 2009, SomethingAwful.com user **Victor Surge** posted a pair of photoshopped images to a discussion thread called "Create Paranormal Images." These images were black-and-white and featured children playing in the foreground while a faceless, tall, eerily long-limbed humanoid clad in a black suit lurked behind them. Although Victor Surge presented his contribution with sincerity, the creature was clearly fictitious (Peck 2015, 337). When other users asked Victor Surge if the creature was an original creation, he replied that it was and that he had based it on an amalgamation of horror tropes that scared him. In a few lines of text that accompanied these images, Victor Surge referred to the lurking figure as "the Slender Man."

Although details were sparse, the character gained immediate popularity. As users told stories, shared images, and theorized as to the nature of the nascent Lovecraftian horror, they also participated in its creation. Each performance added to and subtracted from how the entity was imagined by the group. Users critiqued these performances, discussing what elements made them most effective. Successive performances built upon existing performances and discussions. Through social interaction, users collaborated in an ongoing process of performance, interpretation, and negotiation that constructed the details, motifs, and shared expectations of the Slender Man legend cycle. Although the specifics of the creature vary by the telling, the Slender Man usually takes the form of a tall, thin humanoid wearing a black suit. His face is featureless, and it is often shown with long wispy black tendrils emerging from his back. In user-circulated legends, it is often associated with madness, disappearance, and murder.[3] As more and more users began creating and circulating their own variants, the character began to spread beyond the Something Awful forums.

Within a few short years, the Slender Man could be found in a wide variety of digital spaces, including blogs, vlogs, drawings, forums, wikis, stories, photoshops, and augmented reality games. The character was so popular that it had started appearing in a variety of other media. The Slender Man appeared in several video games, including *Slender: The Eight Pages* and its sequel *Slender: The Arrival*. A 2014 episode of the television show *Supernatural* saw the main

characters on the trail of a malevolent photo-lurking entity known as the Thin Man. *Marble Hornets*, a Slender Man web series, has over 55 million views on YouTube, and a *Marble Hornets* movie entered production in the spring of 2013.[4]

As the character circulated online and became more popular, users began to find ways to engage with the legend in offline contexts as well. The most common offline practices inspired by the Slender Man legend cycle include making and wearing Slender Man costumes, playing Slender Man pranks (such as wearing a costume while lurking in a public place or photobombing),[5] creating Slender Man graffiti, or going on Slender Man legend trips (such as hunting the creature in a wooded area at night).

Indeed, the Slender Man legend cycle is noteworthy for the many interrelated ways it is performed in both online and offline contexts. For instance, an individual might first learn about the Slender Man by viewing a combination of pictures, prank videos, and user-written stories posted on the web. That user may then develop an affinity for the character and decide to make a Slender Man costume for Halloween, using what he or she has seen online as a guide. While walking with friends on the way to a Halloween party, that individual could act in character, lurking behind trees and jumping out to scare pedestrians. Friends may shoot photos or record videos using their smartphones and then post the scares to social media sites like Facebook, Reddit, or YouTube. In this act of sharing via networks, the individual act rejoins the chorus of examples that influenced its emergence, becoming another visible example of this vernacular practice.

Since there are so many distinct manifestations and sub-genres of vernacular practice related to the Slender Man, it would be impossible to cover all of them here. Instead, I choose to focus on one specific subset of vernacular practice—the making, wearing, documenting, and sharing of Slender Man costumes.[6] Combining observations of digital communities, ethnographic fieldwork, and in-person interviews, my analysis of this sub-genre of vernacular practice provides an ideal starting point to demonstrate how the affordances of digital communication technologies offer new potential for the circulation of vernacular practice in the digital age.

Capturing the Slender Man Online and Off

For this project, I conducted recorded interviews with six individuals who identified as fans of the Slender Man over the course of 3 months during the summer and early fall of 2014. In the course of these interviews, many of these self-professed fans discussed the web locations they associated with the Slender Man and the places where they had seen examples of people wearing Slender Man costumes. Reddit was the most
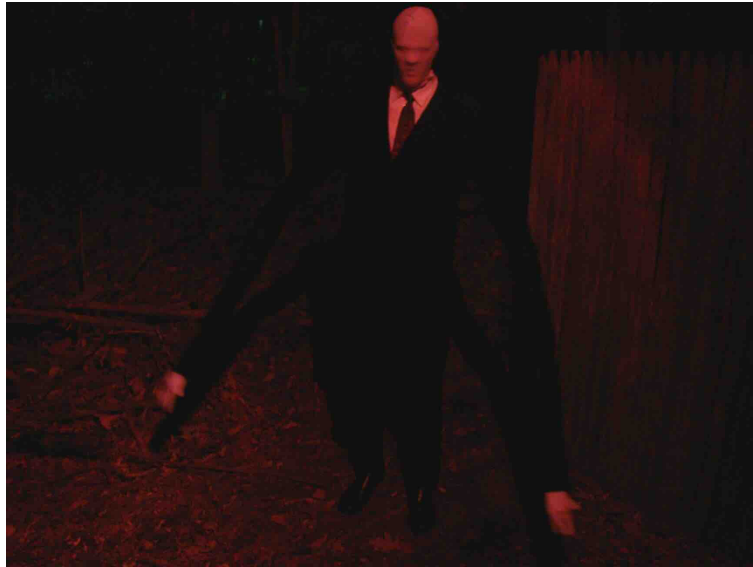
Figure 1. A Slender Man costume posted to Reddit's Slender Man forum by user handsomegiant (2014).

frequently mentioned website, although prank videos on YouTube were also notable.

Reddit is a website comprised mainly of user-submitted content and links. Each submission has a comment thread attached to it where users can engage in discussion. Users post their content to specific topic-oriented sub-forums on the website (known as "subreddits"). Many of my interview subjects specifically mentioned the Slender Man subreddit as a place where they had seen Slender Man costumes. As a result, I observed activity on the subreddit from June to November 2014, cataloging any thread that involved a Slender Man costume. I then searched for material posted during the previous three years, in order to capture examples of Slender Man costumes dating back to the subreddit's creation in 2011. By December 2014, I had documented 35 discussion threads involving Slender Man costumes.

On October 19, 2014, Reddit user **handsomegiant** submitted a post titled "My Homemade Slender Man costume" to Reddit's sub-forum dedicated to the Slender Man (r/Slender_Man). In the initial post, handsomegiant provided other users with a photo of himself wearing a Slender Man costume and posing malevolently in a dark wooded area (Figure 1). Many elements of this original post are constructed to demonstrate a working knowledge of the vernacular practices surrounding this legend cycle. By framing the costume as homemade, the user acknowledges that he is engaging in an ongoing vernacular practice and locates this practice on a deeper level than being a casual fan or consumer donning a pre-packaged costume for Halloween.[7] By posing "in character"—choosing an appropriate stance, location, lighting—the image itself also demonstrates knowledge of the legend and asserts what this user feels makes for a good example of vernacular expression, worthy of sharing on social media.

The subsequent discussions in this thread provide typical examples of the collaborative dynamics enabled by the affordances of the digital age. The majority of responses were simple sentiments of appreciation or fear, with users commenting that the costume is "pretty sweet" or "Omg!"[8] However, a few users more actively engaged the original poster. User **NyanDerp**, for example, wrote "Dang, that's not bad for home-made. Make sure you hide in some bushes and scare some people for me! (Extra points if you record it!)." Here this user acknowledges (and appreciates) the challenges of costume-making while also suggesting how to engage in further action. By encouraging handsomegiant to engage, record and upload some behaviors while in costume, this comment overtly demonstrates the widespread expectation for the documentation and sharing of vernacular practice. On this call for further action, handsomegiant writes: "I'm working at a haunted house and I made a 40 year old old man cry. Keep in mind that I'm 6'10 and I added an extra 3ft onto my arms, so my wing span is about 13ft. I got some great reactions!" Here handsomegiant makes up for the lack of further mediation by relaying the experience verbally, and NyanDerp responds appreciatively, "Holy crap, you're my new favorite person. I wish I could do the same, but I'm kind of short and I'm a girl, so yeah. That's amazing, though, I can just imagine their faces as they turned the corner." The description provided by handsomegiant has invited Nyanderp to imagine herself as part of the vernacular experience he shares. Her admission that she probably would be unable to engage in these actions herself turns the tables on this interaction, allowing handsomegiant to offer his own advice, "You could always get stilts! I wanted to get some, but I had no time." This exchange demonstrates the inherently participatory nature of vernacular practice in the digital age, with multiple users engaging to appreciate and perpetuate these practices, thereby displaying both their uniqueness and connectivity.

These collaborative expressions of uniqueness and connectivity enabled by networked communication continue to exert influence on vernacular practices, even in primarily offline contexts. To observe offline expressions of this digital practice, on November 1, 2014, I attended a massive public Halloween celebration in Madison, Wisconsin. Known as "Freakfest," the event attracts tens of thousands of college-aged individuals into the State Street area of the city, encompassing a half-dozen city blocks between the University of Wisconsin and the State Capitol. I was surprised by how many Slender Man appearances I was able to record (Figure 2).

While walking near the Langdon Street neighborhood,[9] I passed a young couple on their way to a party. The man wore a black business suit with a red tie; white gloves hid his hands and a white mask covered and obscured the features of his face (Figure 3 [left]). He was flattered when I stopped to ask him if he was the Slender Man. In briefly talking to the couple it became apparent that he had donned the costume because the young woman he was with had shown him several examples of Slender Man legends, including *Marble Hornets*, *Slender: The Arrival*, and various costumes other users had shared. They were well versed in many of these specific variants. Putting together the costume was easy, they assured me, and just involved combining a mask and gloves with an existing suit and tie combo. The couple reveled in being recognized and

Figure 2. Several examples of Slender Man costumes observed in Madison, Wisconsin on Halloween night 2014. Photos by Andrew Peck, Nicky Kurtzweil, and Emily Sauter.

photographed, and they told me that few people had been able to identify the Slender Man costume. Despite this, the costume had been freaking out several of the other pedestrians they had encountered—serving as an introduction to those unfamiliar with the legend cycle. Although they were not actively documenting the occasion, they hoped the costume would be picked up in the background of photos and videos taken by others.

As they left, the young man reached in his suit and pulled out a folded scrap of paper, one of many in his breast pocket. He handed the note to me. Unfolding it revealed a crude pen drawing of the Slender Man, surrounded by the word "NO" scribbled over-and-over again. This note mimicked a recurring element in many Slender Man stories, where the protagonist is driven to madness because the Slender Man is stalking them. This madness manifests in drawings, vivid dreams, or unhinged mantras. As part of the costume, this couple had created a way to engage in spreading the Slender Man's trademark madness. Although the note was familiar (I instantly recognized the trope it was drawing on), this was the first time I had seen this specific variant. They suggested I was neither the first nor last to receive such a gift that evening. This crumpled note serves as a memento of our encounter (Figure 3 [right]).

From our short interview, it became evident that this couple saw themselves as engaging with a larger networked practice beyond their immediate surroundings. Although many elements of the performance were unique (the details of the costume, how they interacted with passersby, the note), they simultaneously displayed the couple's connectedness to a larger body of vernacular practice. Digital communication enables practices to emerge from users who are more keenly aware of their permutations. These variants are not just in the realm of rumor or word-of-mouth, they can be directly seen and interacted with. As a result, new vernacular actions emerge in more direct conversation with the myriad variants that preceded them, as exemplified by the litany of Slender Man artifacts this couple acknowledged as their inspiration. This suggests that even a singular vernacular act in the digital age has many collaborative
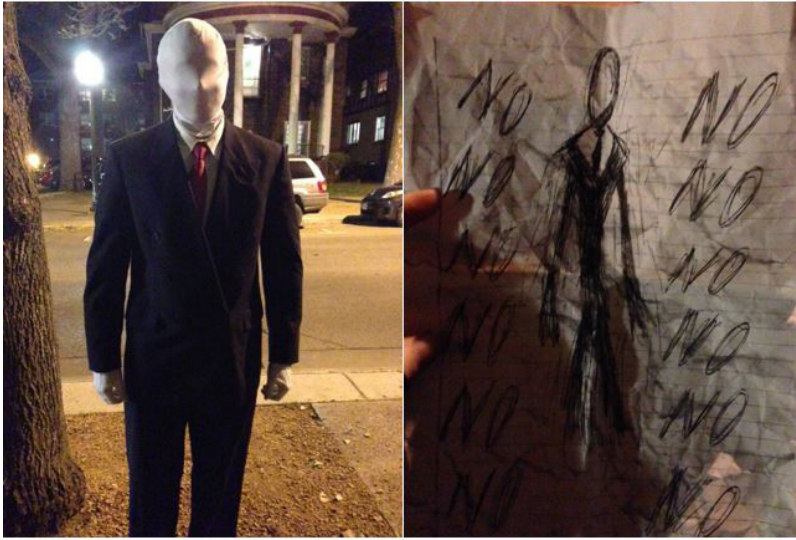
Figure 3. A young man wearing a Slender Man costume on Langdon Street in Madison, Wisconsin for Halloween 2014 (left); one of the many notes he gave out to passersby (right). Photos by Emily Sauter.

facets influenced by the existence of a large vernacular practice. This young couple, for instance, collaborated not only with each other and all the existing variants they had both viewed, but they also hailed others in their immediate vicinity to engage in their vernacular expression—via lurking, jump scares, dropping notes, or even their very presence. They also hoped the costume would be captured on film and recirculated by others, feeding back into the pool of digital variants that had influenced them. Hence, at every level of this process, this couple is co-creating an act of vernacular expression in dialog with the constellation of existing online documents that inspired them. This suggests a blurred boundary between online and offline vernacular practice—they are not discrete and, instead, exist in a continuous, mutually constitutive feedback loop wherein one is always considering the other.

Because of this increase in user awareness and shift in collaborative potential, users are more enabled to engage in acts of vernacular critique. In contrast to the Halloween costume mentioned above, one of my respondents—Ethan, a male in his mid-20s and frequent viewer of the Slender Man on Reddit, Imgur, and YouTube—had a different take on creating an effective Slender Man costume:

Ethan: I've seen plenty of Slender Man costumes online. The best one I ever saw, the guy wore sheetrocking stilts so he was actually like 10 feet tall. Then he did the blanked out face, and held onto some poles with hands on the end, and I think he had the tendrils coming off of him as well. And he extended the arms and legs on a suit to cover everything.
Andrew Peck: That sounds pretty elaborate.
E: Well, if you don't go all out, it's a pretty vague costume.

AP: Just a person in a suit and mask?
E: Pretty much.

This exchange elucidates a tricky tension brought about by the visibility of vernacular practice in the digital age. On one hand, this visibility hails more individuals to view and participate in vernacular practices, but, on the other, users can casually sort through so many variations that they begin to create hierarchies of performance. In Ethan's view—based on, as he admits, the many variants he's seen online—a Slender Man costume is something anyone can do because the barrier to entry is so low. Doing it well, then, requires more than mere reference, it requires showing commitment and knowledge of the fine details of the character.

E: Depends on how well they are playing the part. If they are drinking and laughing and partying and stuff, then I would actually think it's kind of a lame costume. But if they are really into it, I'd probably feel compelled to talk to them, just to be sure.
AP: How would one 'play the part' well?
E: Keep quiet, stay to the back if you are with a group, while alone keep to the shadows. Watch others.

Many of the qualities that my respondents suggested made for a good Slender Man costume—lurking, sneaking into photos, being homemade, and crafting an otherworldly appearance—were elements that made for a more convincing experience. Although individuals differed in their exact preferences, everyone I spoke with had a clear opinion on the matter with no more than minimal hesitation. The fact that different motifs exist and users have different expectations is unsurprising. What is new here is that this element of critique emerges naturally in vernacular discourse in a variety of web locations.

Through vernacular negotiation and critique users circulate and maintain expectations for authenticity in their own vernacular practices, a facet made evident by the two very different discussions that emerged surrounding a pair of Slender Man costume threads posted on Reddit in the fall of 2012. The first thread, which was received poorly, began with an image instructing other users to create the "best halloween costume!" by combining a morph suit with a suit and tie in order to make a Slender Man costume (xXRoflFalafelXx 2012; Figure 4). Amid collaborative suggestions by many users about how to engage while wearing such a costume, several users pushed back against the original post, suggesting this costume lacked effort and authenticity. User **Bazofwaz**, for example, balks at the terrible quality of the costume and suggests that the original poster should consider ways to add more authentic extras, like using stilts for long legs or adding tendrils made from cloth to "do it right." Many other users shared this sentiment, suggesting that the perceived ease of making a Slender Man costume (and the implied lack of effort) depreciated the character's value through overexposure and a lack of originality. As user **Poseidon-SS** noted, "If you go to a Halloween party with this, there will be at least five other people with the same costume" to which user **Kinomi** added "and none of them will be able
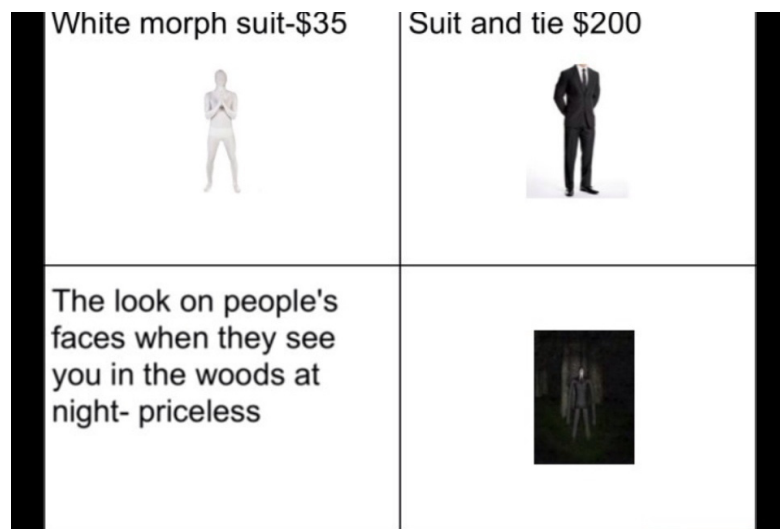
Figure 4. Instructions for a simple Slender Man costume posted to Reddit in the fall of 2012.

to drink. DEFINITELY a well thought out costume." This exchange underlines that the frustration shared by many users was about not only the perceived lack of originality, but also—echoing Ethan's comments—a lack of commitment to the character. As Kinomi's comment reveals, the idea of the Slender Man having fun and drinking at a party lies in direct contrast to the expectations held for the vernacular practice by many users—and such *in*action represents the waste of a costume and expressive potential.

Another Slender Man costume discussion thread posted around the same time demonstrates how criticism may emerge differently if the engagement with vernacular practice is received positively. In posting a thread to Reddit titled "I know you guys aren't digging Slender costumes, but I think my buddy was able to pull it off better than the rest" user **The_Bhuda_Palm** acknowledges the myriad of low-effort variants and rhetorically positions this thread as containing something different and worthwhile (The_Bhuda_Palm 2012). Unlike the "best halloween costume!" thread, this user's original post shares several pictures that document The_Bhuda_Palm's friend getting into an elaborate homemade Slender Man costume and wearing it while skulking around a dark suburb (Figure 5). The costume used stilts and wooden planks to provide the illusion of elongated, unnatural limbs. Many users directly expressed their appreciation for this play toward authenticity, with user **Drewboy64** commenting that "the pants are a bit baggy, but finally, someone actually acknowledging the fact that the slenderman is supposed to be slender." Furthermore, the criticism in this post (regarding the baggy pant legs) provided a moment for collaboration, with many users offering suggestions to refine the costume to make it even more authentic. User **SewCreative** offered the most in-depth advice on circumventing this issue:

Sewing contractor here, Cheap elastic webbing in the area's of bending & contact,
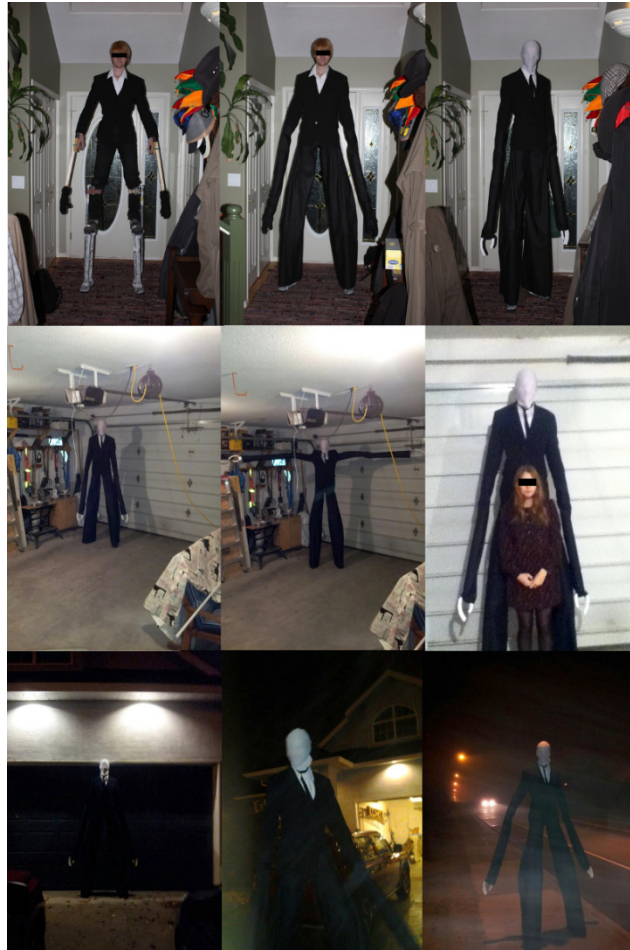
Figure 5. A series of photographs posted by Reddit user The_Bhuda_Palm in October 2012 gives an in-depth look at how his friend constructed and wore a Slender Man costume.

while placing elastic loops on the bottom pant legs would give him optimal tightness. The only issue to this would be reinforcing the waist line to keep the pants up.
[…]
Do the sides of the pant legs have zippers? Or are they slip overs? I suggest cutting down the inner sides of the pant legs and sticking adhesive Velcro to the stilts and inside pant leggings if the above option is out of question. The issue to the velcro is; lowered mobility, sewing on zippers with extra fabric on the zipline, & if not done properly, will cause a crease in the fabric that will be noticed by angle.
Cheers, and if you have any questions feel free to send me a PM ["Private message"].

As shown by this comment (and many others like it in the thread), even well-received instances of vernacular practice offer the space for vernacular critique. This critique differs from those in the poorly regarded "best halloween costume!" thread by offering constructive feedback to help refine the costume. In this instance, a

reciprocal relationship between collaboration and criticism emerges. In this example of vernacular practice, the vernacular dynamics of collaboration and critique enabled by the affordances of the digital age constitute two parts of a singular whole—here collaboration enables critique while critique facilitates collaboration.

The stakes for these exchanges are social clout, what many of my respondents called a type of Internet prestige or "nerd cred," further underlining the shared nature of vernacular practice in the digital age. As Rob, a 27-year-old male, put it:

> I think 'Internet prestige' is a good word for it. You know, it's something that you could, if you're looking for karma or points or whatever your current forum uses for currency, it would be a safe bet to create content based on the Slender Man if you were, you know, really good at it. And put something out there if it was kinda creepy and people would eat it up.

When pressed on why this might be the case, Rob suggested that the often insular nature of web communities that engage in these vernacular practices exerted great force on the potential for engagement. Like an inside joke, the Slender Man relies on the paradox of simultaneously being known while also being niche. If it strides too far toward either direction, it loses appeal to users, becoming too overdone or too obscure. The dynamics of collaboration and critique enabled by the digital age work to both propagate and police widespread engagement. Hence by engaging in acts of collaboration and critique in the pursuit of asserting "nerd cred," these users are also self-regulating their own vernacular practices.

"What do you know about the Slender Man?"

"Is the Slender Man real?" I asked the group of middle schoolers near the end of our day together. The Internet-savvy girl in the corner firmly shook her head, but other students—many of whom had learned about the legend in more fragmented ways—seemed less certain. Many looked to her or me for confirmation and began shaking their heads as well. One boy, who looked a little younger than his peers, seemed unsettled by the conversation and asked me if I was sure the Slender Man wasn't real. His brother, he elaborated, had shown him a picture online that appeared to have the Slender Man in it. It looked very real. Raising my hand into an oath position, I promised him (100%, on my honor as an expert, hope to die) that the Slender Man was not real. He seemed to breathe a sigh of relief and smiled.

As I compiled my data for this project some months later, this boy's question began to seem less and less unusual. After all, I had seen, met, and talked with a number of "real"[10] Slender Men over the course of the last several months. I'd seen even more online, and many of those digital pictures were created to seem as authentic as possible. Indeed, for the adults and young adults I had been observing, these were the very qualities that emerged as important through the collaboration and vernacular critique made possible by the affordances of the digital age. This boy's question reminded me that even though the digital age allows for the creation of a huge variety of mediated documents that capture and circulate vernacular practice, this constellation

of fragments merely provides the starting point for user interpretation and discussion, and there are too many fragments for any single user to see all of them. Like stars in the sky, certain forms become more visible than others and different groups draw different lines between them. Although these children knew about many of the same mediated vernacular practices that influenced my adult respondents, they connected them in their own ways. As danah boyd reminds the reader in her study of adolescents' digital media use, being raised in a digital world does not make one a "digital native." In fact the idea of a digital native ignores the often difficult, trial-and-error based process of learning to communicate and evaluate information online (boyd 2014).

The adults I observed and the children I spoke with initially seemed very difficult to reconcile. However, understanding the changes in circulation of vernacular practice in the digital age revealed significant similarity between these two groups. Elements like circulation (and the visibility and awareness it creates) remained constant across both age groups. For both groups, these facets served as the basis for further vernacular practice and discussion. The difference occurred in the *ways* each group participated in and discussed the vernacular practice. This is a matter not of digital circulation but of everyday acts of *interpretation,* which emerge from different contexts and cultural groups. Because of the nature of how vernacular practice circulates in the digital age, both groups evolved in similar ways toward different outcomes.

Notes

1   Specifically, Shifman is writing about Internet memes, which several folklorists have also suggested constitute a genre of vernacular expression (see Foote 2007; McNeill 2012; Kaplan 2013; Blank 2015). Lynne McNeill, for instance, writes that, "The emergence of traditional expressive forms on the Internet, and the observation and re-creation of them by other people in new contexts, has not gone unnoticed by the Internet community itself, which has adopted the concept of *memes* to identify what folklorists would call folklore" (2009: 84, emphasis in original). Trevor Blank offers a similar viewpoint, "In computer-mediated contexts, the folkloric process of repetition and variation is often identified by emergent patterns of widely disseminated, visually oriented vernacular expression; these constructs are emically referred to as *memes*" (2012: 8). Although the term is still somewhat contentious in folkloristics (see Ellis 2001: 76-80; Oring 2014), many scholars agree regarding the folkloric nature of the underlying vernacular practice.

2   To provide an example germane to my case study, a user making a Slender Man costume may post a video of herself wearing the costume to YouTube, link that video on a creepypasta discussion board, and post a picture of herself in costume to the r/creepy subreddit.

3   For additional background on the nature and key characteristics of the Slender Man, see Peck (2015) and Tolbert (2013).

4   Production was later halted due to a copyright dispute.

5   "Photobombing" is a colloquial term describing the act of intentionally sneaking into the background of someone else's photograph without their awareness in an effort to disrupt the picture's integrity. In this instance, such an act mimics the "lurking in the background" trope frequently used in visual expressions of the Slender Man legend.

6   Such behavior represents individuals enacting elements of the Slender Man legend cycle

in everyday life, a type of behavior that folklorists call "ostension." For a more in-depth discussion of the Slender Man, ostension, and the digital age, see Peck 2016.

7 Commercial Slender Man costumes were widely available in 2014 (Mejia 2014). I did not find any instances of them in either online or offline observations, but the large amount of costume submissions to this subreddit suggests the separation from commercial costuming is an important rhetorical move.

8 "Omg!" is Internet shorthand for "Oh my god!" and indicates this user found the costume well-done and unsettling.

9 Langdon Street is located one block north of State Street (the central venue for Halloween festivities near the University of Wisconsin) and home to most Greek life on campus.

10 As this paper has shown, real-life, embodied performances and digital media co-create the production and circulation of authenticity. So, in this instance, "real" is a loaded term. These costume-wearing legend performers are imitating material they had seen online in order to play at being the "real" Slender Man. One could argue that the "real" Slender Man is actually an idea that circulates online, belonging simultaneously to both everyone and no one. Such an interpretation is significant because it complicates popular conceptions of authenticity that privilege the embodied ("real") over the digital.

Works Cited

Baym, Nancy K. 2010. *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*. Cambridge: Polity.

Baym, Nancy K, Yan Bing Zhang, and Mei-Chen Lin. 2004. "Social Interactions across Media: Interpersonal Communication on the Internet, Telephone and Face-to-Face." *New Media & Society* 6 (3): 299–318.

Benkler, Yochai. 2006. *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Blank, Trevor J. 2012. "Pattern in the Virtual Folk Culture of Computer-Mediated Communication." In *Folk Culture in the Digital Age: The Emergent Dynamics of Human Interaction*, edited by Trevor J. Blank, 1–24. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.

———. 2015. "Faux Your Entertainment: Amazon.com Product Reviews as a Locus of Digital Performance." *Journal of American Folklore* 128 (509): 286–97.

———. 2016. "Giving the 'Big Ten' a Whole New Meaning: Tasteless Humor and the Response to the Penn State Sexual Abuse Scandal." In *The Folkloresque: Reframing Folklore in a Popular Culture World*, edited by Michael Dylan Foster and Jeffrey A. Tolbert, 179–204. Logan: Utah State University Press.

boyd, danah. 2014. *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Dundes, Alan. 1966. "Metafolklore and Oral Literary Criticism." *The Monist* 50 (4): 505–16.

Ellis, Bill. 2001. *Aliens, Ghosts, and Cults: Legends We Live*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Finlayson, Rob. 2014. Personal InterviewSkype. Interview in possession of author.

Foote, Monica. 2007. "Userpicks: Cyber Folk Art in the Early 21st Century." *Folklore Forum* 37 (1): 27–38.

Hand, Martin. 2012. *Ubiquitous Photography*. Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity Press.

handsomegiant. 2014. "My Homemade Slender Man Costume." *Reddit*. http://www.reddit.com/r/Slender_Man/comments/2jq81q/my_homemade_slender_man_costume/.

Howard, Robert Glenn. 2011. *Digital Jesus: The Making of a New Christian Fundamentalist Community on the Internet*. The New and Alternative Religions Series. New York: New York University Press.

———. 2013. "Vernacular Authority: Critically Engaging 'Tradition'." In *Tradition in the Twenty-First Century: Locating the Role of the Past in the Present*, edited by Trevor J Blank and Robert Glenn Howard, 72–100. Logan: Utah State University Press.

Howard, Robert Glenn, and Trevor J. Blank. 2013. "Living Traditions in a Modern World." In *Tradition in the Twenty-First Century: Locating the Role of the Past in the Present*, edited by Trevor J. Blank and Robert Glenn Howard, 1–21. Logan: Utah State University Press.

Jensen, Ethan. 2014. Personal InterviewDigital Correspondance. Interview in possession of author.

Kaplan, Merrill. 2013. "Curation and Tradition on Web 2.0." In *Tradition in the Twenty-First Century: Locating the Role of the Past in the Present*, edited by Trevor J. Blank and Robert Glenn Howard, 123–48. Logan: Utah State University Press.

MacKenzie, Donald, and Judy Wajcman. 1999. "Introductory Essay: The Social Shaping of Technology." In *The Social Shaping of Technology*, edited by Donald MacKenzie and Judy Wajcman, 2nd ed., 3–27. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.

McNeill, Lynne S. 2009. "The End of the Internet: A Folk Response to the Provision of Infinite Choice." In *Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World*, edited by Trevor J Blank, 80–97. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press.

———. 2012. "Real Virtuality: Enhancing Locality by Enacting the Small World Theory." In *Folk Culture in the Digital Age: The Emergent Dynamics of Human Interaction*, edited by Trevor J. Blank, 85–97. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.

Mejia, Paula. 2014. "Slender Man Halloween Costume Horrifies Wisconsin Town Where Attack Occured, Pulled from Shelves." *Newsweek*, September 20. http://www.newsweek.com/slender-man-halloween-costume-horrifies-wisconsin-town-where-attack-occurred-271992.

Oring, Elliott. 2014. "Memetics and Folkloristics: The Applications." *Western Folklore* 73 (4): 455–92.

Papacharissi, Zizi. 2010. *A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age*. Digital Media and Society. Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity.

Peck, Andrew. 2015. "Tall, Dark, and Loathsome: The Emergence of a Legend Cycle in the Digital Age." *Journal of American Folklore* 128 (509): 333–48.

Perrin, Andrew. 2015. "One-Fifth of Americans Report Going Online 'Almost Constantly'." *Pew Research Center*, December 8. http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/12/08/one-fifth-of-americans-report-going-online-almost-constantly/.

Perrin, Andrew, and Maeve Duggan. 2015. "Americans' Internet Access: 2000-2015." *Pew Research Center*, June 26. http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/06/26/americans-internet-access-2000-2015/.

Phillips, Whitney. 2015. *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*. The Information Society Series. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Shifman, Limor. 2014. *Memes in Digital Culture*. MIT Press Essential Knowledge. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

The_Bhuda_Palm. 2012. "I Know You Guys Aren't Digging Slender Costumes, but I Think My Buddy Was Able to Pull It off Better than the Rest." *Reddit*. http://www.reddit.com/r/pics/comments/12g39q/i_know_you_guys_arent_digging_slender_costumes/.

Tolbert, Jeffrey A. 2013. "'The Sort of Story That Has You Covering Your Mirrors': The Case of Slender Man." *Semiotic Review*, no. 2 (November).

———. 2016. "Introduction." In *The Folkloresque: Reframing Folklore in a Popular Culture World*, edited by Michael Dylan Foster and Jeffrey A. Tolbert, 123–24. Logan: Utah State University Press.

Winner, Langdon. 1986. *The Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

xXRoflFalafelXx. 2012. "Best Halloween Costume!" *Reddit*. http://www.reddit.com/r/funny/comments/119y40/best_halloween_costume/?sort=old&limit=500.