

# Urban legends

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Urban legends The next Pepsi you drink could be your last bottle of poisoned water. Rumor has it that many were warned not to drink cola after a certain date. While there is no substantial proof on how much is true, the fact is that such urban legends are many. These are famous the world over, across cultures and communities. Even during the 9/11 attacks many such legends circulated and stayed for a long time. Here I take two such legends and analyze why the public believes them.

#### The case of the bottle of Pepsi

A young woman was standing in the queue in a popular supermarket. A man seemingly from mid-East stood before her in the line. When his turn came to pay the bill, he realized he did not have enough money. The lady offered to pay a dollar to make up for the difference. The man was grateful and as she left the store, he walked up to her and thanked her. He offered to pay her later, but she refused. As she was leaving the store, the man confronted her and said that this was the nicest thing anyone had did for him, and he wanted to return the favor. He then told her not to drink any products of Coke or Pepsi after August and saying so left the store. The story has many versions, and the thread is common. There is a man from Middle East who is short of change or has a flat tire. He is offered help by a lady. In a gesture to return the kindness he tells her not to drink Coke or Pepsi products on a certain date or for a certain period. In some versions the lady who is warned reports to the FBI and the man from Arab is put under surveillance.

#### The story of 9/11

As soon as the twin towers were attacked various legends spread quickly. Few of these stories revolved around the number of planes hijacked. 1 Another popular rumor that did its round was about an advanced warning.

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Many stated that an advance warning was issued to a few occupants in the World Trade center. The rumor went that 'My friend knows someone in the world trade center who received a call on the cell phone 45 minutes before the first hit telling him to leave the building'.

#### Reasons why people believe urban legends

People often believe these tales completely and start following the advice. In the case of Coca cola the company had to issue a notice, stating that with the stringent quality checks followed, it was impossible to contaminate the drink. Here are a few reasons why people believe these legends so strongly. The way they are told: Strong belief in these legends often stems from the way they are told and by whom. In many cases the story is told by a trustworthy friend as a case that happened to someone she knew. You believe your friend completely, after all why would she lie. When you hear the same story from a few other friends, you take the secondhand information as truth.

Degree of Believability: What makes these stories believable is that unlike mythology, these stories are about real people in believable situations. We tell our friends and family about these stories because we find them interesting and fear that they may be true. In the case of the twin towers, the story was believable, but unsubstantiated. Had there been a few occupants receiving such calls, the matter would have reached the mainstream media in some form. It never did, there was not a single proof of such a warning and there were no reports on the same.

Warning and moral lessons: Many legends issue a warning or hold an important moral lesson. In both the cases, there was warning against

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impending danger, and there was a moral lesson. If you help someone, chances are that you will receive life saving help in return. As per human nature, we want our loved ones to be safe and so we too warn them.

The fears of the community: Folklorists say that urban legends are a way of expressing what we fear most. After the twin towers were attacked and the violence by Osama Bin Laden loomed large, people feared a larger biological attack. The cola legend simply reflected the fear. The 9/11 attacks were so massive that the community needed the comfort that some were warned and the stories did their rounds. Old folklores related things that people feared in those times, the dangers of the forest, the danger of eating the unknown fruit<sup>2</sup> and the fears of darkness. As times change, fears turn towards gang violence, biological warfare and psychopaths. Today's urban legends reflect those fears.

Some of what we hear may be true. But like with any story, one can be sure that it would badly be twisted and turned till it reaches the next person.

Probably the person in the twin towers received a phone call from his wife to rush home to take her to the doctor. When he told his friend how lucky he was to be warned like this, the story traveled and contorted as it traveled. As we study and understand the varied urban legends, we need to be rational before we start following the advice. A few legends may just be interesting trivia but a few may inflict fear in us for the rest of our lives. Such stories we need to analyze and realize the truth.

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