

## “Meme-Spirited”: I. The VAPUS Model for Understanding the Prevalence and Potency of Ghost Narratives

SHARON A. HILL, CIARÁN O’KEEFFE, BRIAN LAYTHE, NEIL  
DAGNALL, KENNETH DRINKWATER, ANNALISA VENTOLA, &  
JAMES HOURAN

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**Abstract:** A review of nearly 20 years of sociocultural research and trends on “ghostly episodes” (ghosts, haunted houses, and poltergeists) suggests that personal accounts, group investigations, and popular depictions of anomalous experiences function as active, meaningful, and potent cultural memes. These, in part, reflect interpersonal or group dynamics grounded in Durkheimian models, as well as Social Identity and Conflict theories. Expanding on and integrating these themes, this paper provides a general framework that explains the enduring popularity of ghost narratives in terms of their versatility, adaptability, participatory nature, universality, and scalability (VAPUS model). This perspective implies that ghostly episodes, as experiences and narratives, embody and exemplify the marketing concepts of “brand personality” and consumer engagement. Accordingly, social and cultural influences are discussed as important and inherent contextual variables that help to produce, promote, shape, and sustain these narratives.

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**Keywords:** branding, engagement, ghost, haunt, media, meme, popular culture.

### INTRODUCTION

Ghosts are alive and well in modern civilization and academia. Beyond scholarly discussions about the ontological reality of poltergeists and haunted houses (see e.g., Baker, 2002; Houran & Lange, 2001a; Maher, 2015; McCue, 2002; O’Keeffe & Parsons, 2010), surveys have shown that these anomalous experiences—and their underlying narratives—exist as potent and widespread shibboleths with the same legitimacy as other social facts and religious or transpersonal practices

(Haraldsson, 1985; Palmer, 1979; Ross & Joshi, 1992). This viewpoint unfortunately can go under-appreciated.

Illustratively, one recent book reviewer evaluating lay-audience tone stated (Romer, 2017), “what [the author] writes about is *our reaction to it*—literary, cultural, folkloric, religious, cinematic, even briefly in terms of video games ... from the introduction onwards, the book deals with *what ghosts mean to us*, and I suspect some ambiguity on [the author’s] part as to whether they actually exist in an objective sense at all” (p. 123, emphasis added). Yet, this criticism overlooks the reality that sociocultural trappings to these occurrences are a powerful context for shaping perceptions or reports (Harte, 2000; Houran, 2000; Lange & Houran, 2001a; Lange, Houran, Harte, & Havens, 1996).

Acknowledging this, authorities in the psychology of religion and anomalistic psychology increasingly emphasize the difference between anomalous experiences versus their interpretations (David, 2010; Irwin, Dagnall, & Drinkwater, 2013; Van Leeuwen & van Elk, 2018). This suggests that, irrespective of potential biomedical correlates of percipients (Houran, 2002; Houran, Wiseman, & Thalbourne, 2002; Laythe, Houran, & Ventola, 2018; Laythe, Laythe, & Woodward, 2017; Laythe & Owen, 2012; Parra, 2018; Parra & Argibay, 2016), people’s beliefs, reactions, musings, and group affiliations and identities are influential elements in a comprehensive understanding of the construction or maintenance of ghostly narratives. In a sense, the proverbial river has jumped its banks to a new streambed, and we need new yardsticks to take into account the growing literature and diverse ideological assumptions in this area.

Accordingly, we introduce a sociocultural framework termed the “VAPUS model” to understand the power of ghost accounts in their myriad of forms. Our proposal derived from an integrative review of the social and cultural landscape against which these episodes occur and manifest into general narratives. This was achieved by examining trends across news media and the internet, as well as searching popular academic databases (e.g., Google Scholar, PsychInfo, ResearchGate) for sociocultural studies (2001 to present, i.e., since the publication of Lange and Houran, 2001a) using the keywords: “apparition, entity encounter experiences, ghost, haunt, haunting, poltergeist, sensed presence, and spirit.” We considered also how the cultural contexts and ramifications of these episodes are couched within Social Conflict (Marx, 1972; Obershall, 1972), Social Identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and Durkheimian (2013) models, as well as consumer marketing theory (e.g., Aaker, 1997).

## THE VAPUS MODEL

The proliferation and diversity of activities devoted to ghosts parallel “participant observation” approaches popular in cultural anthropology and sociology (Houran, 2017), whereby a researcher assumes the role being studied and partakes in ongoing activities and records observations. This approach transcends naturalistic observation, because the observer is a “player” in the action. Consequently, ghostly episodes are not stagnated, passive, cultural narratives, but seemingly active, reflective, and experiential memes. To explain this, we propose that five core features—defined by the acronym VAPUS<sup>1</sup>—characterize ghost narratives as a sociocultural construct:

- **VERSATILITY**, representing the cross-section of moods, locations, and themes embodied within diverse literary genres;
- **ADAPTABILITY**, evolving in accordance with longitudinal societal changes;
- **PARTICIPATORY NATURE**, inviting interaction via individual or social activity and engagement, such as tours, clubs, private excursions, and field research;
- **UNIVERSALITY**, interesting or relevant to diverse demographic populations, including individuals spanning the paranormal belief-disbelief spectrum;
- **SCALABILITY**, engaging to people individually and collectively, via meme-like ‘contagious’ processes.

The VAPUS model is not simply a list of features but instead advocates that ghost narratives possess widespread appeal and endurance due to their capacity to foster emotional and rational engagement within diverse demographic populations. Furthermore, they promote or reinforce social interaction and status. These facets might even collectively capitalize on humankind’s potential biological basis or genetic predisposition for anomalous experience (McClenon, 2004; Persinger, 2007; Winkelman, 2004). In short, our sociocultural perspective hypothesizes that ghostly episodes possess a particularly persuasive and flexible *brand personality* relative to other human experiences, and even

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<sup>1</sup> Curiously, *Vapus* is a boy/male name of Tamil origin, meaning ‘wonderful’, ‘admirable’.

those of an anomalous or putative parapsychological nature. Baker and Bader (2014) asserted, somewhat similarly, that the “*inherent liminality* of spirits as cultural constructs accounts for their persistence, power, and continual recurrence (p. 569, emphasis added),” and Davies (2007) has noted that the geographical and architectural location of the ghost narrative has, itself, taken on a “brand identity” (p. 64).

Brand personality is a concept in consumer marketing theory and practice that Aaker (1997) defined as, “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (p. 347). Indeed, considerable research (see e.g., Aaker, Benet-Martinez, & Garolera, 2001; Goldsmith & Goldsmith, 2009; Graeff, 1996; Jamal & Goode, 2001; Kressmann et al., 2006; Lin, 2010; Zinkhan, Haytko, & Ward, 1996) supports the notions that: (i) brands have personalities or human-like characteristics that distinguish them from each other, with these personalities being important to consumers; and that (ii) consumers become “engaged” with brands, meaning that they feel special emotional or symbolic connections with them.

This idea of branding relates directly to the persuasive power of ghostly narratives (and consumer products related to this domain). Essentially, the ability of a ghost narrative to enforce, promote, or encourage an embedded message as a function of its commonality and salience in popular culture. It might act as a test of the “contagiousness” of the Cultural-Source Hypothesis (Merton, 1968) for ghosts. We next support and expand on each proposed feature of the VAPUS model via a review of recent literature.

#### FEATURE 1: GHOST NARRATIVES ARE *VERSATILE*

Formally stated, ghost narratives can contain a variety of different embedded moods, morals, and themes of cultural norms that exist outside and independently of the supernatural account itself. Thus, ghost narratives possess additional layers that often serve a cultural purpose of boundary work or moral judgment. For instance, Edwards (2001) discussed how themes related to ghosts and “supernatural beings” function as effective media for storytelling. However, Hollywood’s narrative of supernatural experiences is “hyperbolic” (Goldstein, Grider, & Thomas, 2007), whereas personal experiences are typically less dramatic and nuanced. The modern “haunted house” represents a threshold (e.g., boundary) space and a trial of courage (Goldstein et al., 2007) where the living must cope with the lingering dead in everyday life (Wilson, 2010).

For instance, Waskul and Waskul (2016) explored broadly-defined encounters with ghosts and highlighted our problematic relationship with them in ordinary life. Lipman (2016) similarly re-evaluated the behaviors

of residents who attempt to cope with the uncanniness and confusion created by purported paranormal events in their home. Additionally, Tucker (2007) chronicled the haunted dormitory rooms and collegiate spaces where ghost stories create a bond between young adults experiencing stress in transitioning to independent life. Ghosts, as experiences and narratives, therefore might serve as universal personifications of troubled psyches (von Franz, 1995), or at least partly represent idioms of distress (for discussions, see: Houran, Kumar, Thalbourne, & Lavertue, 2002; Lange & Houran, 2001a).

Of course, accounts can also capture other moods or motivations, as illustrated by the publication of two Special Issues of peer-reviewed journals that addressed the versatile and adaptable functions of ghost narratives. In particular, *Cultural Geographies* (2008, Vol. 15, Issue 3) related hauntings to different geographical and geo-political contexts, and the *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* (2007, *Spectres, Screens, Shadows, Mirrors*) explored the array of conceptual, metaphorical, and symbolic meanings that spectral themes can take in language and exposition.

In the early 2000s, several authors likewise published new social and cultural histories of ghosts (Clarke, 2012; Davies, 2007; Middleton, 2018; Morton, 2015; Pulliam & Fonseca, 2016). These include Dickey's (2016) informative historical-themed approach to American ghosts and their social value; Blum's (2006) sympathetic look at early psychical researchers for popular audiences; and Roach's (2006) discussion on the use of science in examining the afterlife from historical to modern approaches.

There are other important contributions. Houran (2004) edited a collection of essays that explored diverse biopsychosocial motivations for humanity's historical interest in spirits. Additionally, Davies (2007) presented a social history of ghosts that uniquely expands upon traditional ghosts, and the plethora of general history texts on the subject and incorporates the ongoing modern history of haunts. His work, constructed in a thematic rather than chronological manner, tackles the experience of, explanation for and representation of ghosts, without reference to existence. Other edited anthologies have focused on the survival question from both *sympathetic* (e.g., Storm & Thalbourne, 2006) and *skeptical* orientations (e.g., Martin & Augustine, 2015).

Furthermore, Healy and Cropper (2014) created a catalog of poltergeist reports featuring several personal investigations, mostly in Australia. This book served as a reminder that typical poltergeist characteristics, such as stone throwing, fire starting, and adeptly evading documentation, still occur today. Counter to this, Wiseman's (2011) text, *Paranormality* was a fully-referenced, interactive book (i.e., contained

video demonstrations and tests) examining the psychology of paranormal belief and current theories with relevance to ghostly episodes. Finally, Bartholomew and Nickell (2015) published a collection exposing the decidedly non-paranormal stories behind infamous American hauntings. They implicated the film and television industry as complicit in promoting “Hollywood” aspects of these tales, even when claims were unsubstantiated.

Versatility, as we define it, has led to complicated political themes within ghost narratives. An important stream of research focused on language, meaning, and culture has developed in the humanities relating to hauntings. This new perspective de-emphasized the physical reality of ghosts and instead applied them as a metaphor, rich with cultural meaning (Partridge, 2013). This “*spectral turn*” approach blossomed in the 2000s in the fields of media studies and sociology, where the notion of ghosts signified socially “missing” people and cultures (Lipman, 2016).

Within Jacques Derrida’s (1993) hauntology, “ghost” became “spectre.” This framing acknowledged the sociocultural function of hauntings. Derrida (1993) coined the term to express sentiments of Marxist neoliberal capitalism that loomed over Europe at that time (Hanks, 2015). Since its inception, del Pilar Blanco and Peeren (2013), and Peeren (2014), have collected influential writings on the concept. Braudy (2016) adopted a more pop culture-oriented perspective on hauntology that explored why science and reason oriented cultural forces could not effectively limit its influence.

Similarly, Davies (2007) has argued that ghost narratives change to mirror societal developments. For example, he noted, how the once legendary reports of phantom coaches and horsemen gave way to ethereal automobiles to reflect the advent of transport technologies. Additionally, the significant increase of reports of roadside ghosts (hitchhikers, accident victims, etc.) in the 20th century “are folkloric signifiers of the increasing cultural importance of the car” and how the ritualistic “practice of planting memorial crosses and laying flowers at the locations of fatal accidents act as focal points for the generation of new hauntings,” (Davies, 2007, p. 248). In further recognition that accounts morph in various ways over time, Irwin (2004) has noted:

First, some supposedly real-life cases initially may have been devised as a good story but then presented as authentic in the hope of enhancing their commercial potential. Second, fictional ghost stories (and folklore too) promote a particular stereotype of an apparitional experience and it is feasible that witnesses’ accounts of their experience unwittingly are distorted to conform to these popular expectations (p. 199).

The versatile nature of ghost narratives is also significant given their representation of a cross-section of themes embodied within diverse literary genres or human experience. Within this core feature there is recognition that accounts morph over time. In particular, the terms “haunted,” “ghosted,” and “uncanny” (Royle, 2003) proliferated in academic literature creating a “haunted aesthetic” (Thompson, 2012) that spilled over into music (Fischer, 2017), literature, and film (van Elferen, 2010). Reduced to metaphor, the ghost of yore lost its traditional cultural meaning. The “ghost” instead referred to a range of dysfunctional social states. Specifically, dispossession, post-colonial guilt about suppressing indigenous people and minorities (Berglund, 2000; Cameron, 2008; Lincoln & Lincoln, 2015; Richardson, 2005), disappointment in the utopian future that never materialized (Fischer, 2017; Gordon, 2008), preoccupation with trauma and millennial anxiety (Weinstock, 2004), and the realization that nothing was original, but all a product of the past (see Holloway & Kneale, 2008; Machon, 2013; Peeren, 2010). Moreover, “ghosted” as a metaphorical concept expanded in the common lexicon, understood as being not all there, invisible, ineffectual, or lingering on the margins as applying to modern technology and social behaviors (del Pilar Blanco & Peeren, 2010).

#### FEATURE 2: GHOST NARRATIVES ARE *ADAPTABLE*

This second feature represents the universal force of culture throughout time. Just as social views change on a decade-to-decade basis, so too have the contents or meanings of ghost narratives. Specifically, they maintain core features while adapting to changes in morality, technology, and society—often to suit the motives and needs of groups and organizations (Haslam, Oakes, Turner, & McGarty, 1995; Hogg & Turner, 1987).

The sociological literature has widely addressed a range of factors regarding ghostly accounts and experiences. These include *cultural identity* (Bird, 2002; del Pilar Blanco & Peeren, 2013; Goldstein et al., 2007; Gordon, 2008), the *role of narrative* (del Pilar Blanco & Peeren, 2010; Wooffitt, 1992), ghosts and the *sociology of place* (Bell, 1997), the importance of making a *personal connection to the past* (Beisaw, 2016; Hanks, 2015), and ghost themes as a reflection of *social changes* (Davies, 2007; del Pilar Blanco & Peeren, 2010; Finucane, 1996; Richardson, 2005). The latter factor is profoundly evident in the “spectral turn” and the “hauntology” trend (Davis, 2005; Derrida, 1993), two coined terms signifying a recent interest in the supernatural.

Potts (2006) echoed the universal appeal of ghosts, which changes with the times, and the utility of a compelling narrative to keep the past alive, though most researchers still hint at the potential for the modern commercially-driven mass media discourse to overtake folklore. Other studies have used qualitative methods—like *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis* (e.g., Childs & Murray, 2010; Drinkwater, Dagnall, & Bate, 2013; Simmonds-Moore, 2016) and *Conversation Analysis* (Murray & Wooffitt, 2010). These papers explore how witnesses construct meaning from their experiences and likewise how experiences affect individuals. This last approach is particularly relevant given that percipients often realize that their anomalous experiences are unconventional. Hence, they sometimes rationalize them with orthodox beliefs when discussing them publicly (Drinkwater et al., 2013; Schmied-Knittel & Schetsche, 2005) or otherwise ‘mould’ their accounts in the face of overt skepticism (Ohashi, Wooffitt, Jackson, & Nixon, 2013).

*Adaptability* is similarly evident when the themes or contents in narratives change with psychological, physical, or cultural settings, thereby reinforcing their personal-relevance to percipients. In particular, some researchers have argued that accounts of ghosts closely parallel reports of “entity encounter experiences (EEEs),” such as extraterrestrials, elves and folklore-related beings, Men in Black (MIB), demons, and angels (Evans, 1987; Hansen, 1988). As an example, Musgrave and Houran (2000) outlined similar structures and contents between Medieval-era experiences, known as the flight to the Witches’ Sabbath, and modern accounts of UFO abductions. Such studies imply the existence of a core phenomenon (or phenomena) that changes its appearance in accordance with the sociocultural context in which the phenomenon manifests (cf. Evans, 1987; Hufford, 1982).

These ideas draw on earlier psychological discussions of apparitions (e.g., Tyrrell, 1943/1973), and some empirical evidence supports this line of thinking. For instance, Houran (2000) published a meta-analysis of four EEE studies that examined the relation between contextual variables and witness accounts of *ghosts and haunts*, *angelic visitations*, *deathbed visions*, and *shamanic-trance journeys*. Results revealed important findings. Firstly, there was a strong congruence between the content of the experiences and the nature of the contextual variables (i.e., psychological or environmental cues) available to percipients. Secondly, the number of contextual variables was related to percipients’ state of arousal immediately preceding the experience. Finally, the number of contextual variables were also associated with the number of perceptual modalities involved in experiences.

Consistent with the adaptability premise, these findings suggest that sociocultural context shapes the phenomenology of witness perceptions or



reports. Moreover, research has also found that individual events or manifestations that define EEEs—e.g., apparitions, possession, folklore beings, and physical effects typical of poltergeist disturbances—can be statistically modelled as a *unidimensional factor* constituting a probabilistic hierarchy or continuum (Houran & Lange, 2001b). Lastly, percipients of EEEs also share a common psychometric profile, characterized by a permeable (or loose) mental boundary structure (e.g., Laythe et al., 2018; Parra, 2007, 2018; Parra & Argibay, 2016). Overall, from this perspective, ghosts, haunted houses, and poltergeists seem to represent merely one portrayal of a broader, adaptable narrative.

One societal change that has clearly influenced ghost narratives is the resurgence of interest in the history and analysis of Spiritualism that is evident both in *popular* (Blum, 2006; Jaher, 2015; Roach, 2006) and *academic* (Caterine, 2011; Natale, 2016) treatments. For example, Spiritualistic themes prevail within contemporary television (Sausman, 2010). Spirit interactions as a coping mechanism for grief, and as a means for desired reconnection with the deceased, rose in popularity, particularly after September 11, 2001, and in the event of traumatic loss generally (Seirmarco et al., 2012). A psychic's function in society has changed. Currently, there exists a proliferation of celebrity psychics and professional mediums, who have essentially assumed the role of grief counsellors using *after death communication* (Kwilecki, 2009; Weinstein, 2004). Davies (2007) has also noted that modern, TV-based, mediums are no longer praying for resident spirits, but have taken on the role as *ghost counsellors* and, to a certain extent, exorcists, where the mental afflictions of ghosts are relieved through spiritualistic communication of various types. Commodification of psychic powers have reached new heights as celebrity psychics featured in popular television series and participated in live tour events. These promotional activities mirrored those used by famous psychic mediums during the heyday of Spiritualism (Natale, 2016).

### FEATURE 3: GHOST NARRATIVES ARE *PARTICIPATORY*

This third component draws on the notion that beyond their physical status, it is the observation or participation with a “ghost” that makes the event culturally “real.” In other words, the relationship between the *observer* and their *interpretation* of a “ghost” creates the narrative. Further, as a second component of participation, ghost narratives serve as powerful social motivators towards group construction and social participation in both a positive and negative (conflict) sense.

For example, Eaton (2018), proposed a five-phase development process of the narrative accounts specifically using a paranormal

investigation as a model. Within this narrative account, he argued, the legitimacy of a ghost narrative “was evaluated on the basis of its contribution to *status* reinforcement within the idiocultural group” (p. 23). This means the basis for dismissal of the account was whether the narrator was within the group or a marginal member, even if there were significant other reasons to accept the account as legitimate (Eaton, 2018). Thus, within the overarching VAPUS model, “participatory” represents the inherent tendency of ghost narratives to form groups and organizations via Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and the inevitable conflict that results from group formation.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) is a well-researched set of principles that involve the influence of the group upon the individual, and how groups reliably interact with each other. Early studies by Sherif (1956) demonstrated in-groups and out-groups as a root precursor of conflict (Allport, 1954) and group conformity effects (Asch, 1955). These seminal works demonstrated the inherent tendencies for group formation and the degrees of both conformity and prejudice that often result. Research prior to SIT revealed the human proclivity towards group affiliation with the Minimal Group Paradigm (MGP: Brewer, 1979; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). MGP is a laboratory design that created artificial *in-groups* (i.e., the group a participant belongs to) and *out-groups* (i.e., the group the participant does not belong to) while controlling for environmental cues to individual’s group membership (Bourhis, Sachdev, & Gagnon, 1994; Tajfel et al., 1971). These studies demonstrated in-group bias (i.e. preference towards one’s own groups) in minimal conditions, supporting a theory that in-group bias requires little environmental context (Brewer, 1979; Tajfel et al., 1971).

Henri Tajfel expanded on MGP and subsequently presented a body of research that developed as SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; for a historical review see Hogg & Abrams, 1999). SIT is a series of premises that hold one’s sense of self and behavior partially derive from the collective self (Hogg & Williams, 2000). That is, our affiliation with groups within society partially dictates our sense of self and behavior towards other groups. These social affiliations correspond to our *social identity*, the parts of the “self” that are dependent on social group context and affiliation. Conversely, SIT also proposes the construct of *personal identity*, a sense of self derived from personal qualities and interpersonal relationships (Hogg & Abrams, 1999).

According to SIT, the motivational components of “in/out group” classification is to maintain *positive social identity which in turn promotes positive self-image* (Tajfel, 1981). We assume that social categories (e.g., skeptic, scientist, psychologist, ghost- hunter, or parapsychologist) partially define one’s identity by providing behavioral, attitudinal, and evaluative

norms (Haslam et al., 1995). Because group memberships help to foster a positive self-image, the evaluations of other groups are often less favorable than evaluations of the group to which an individual belongs (Brewer, 1979; Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Tajfel et al., 1971; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In sum, SIT postulates that in-group bias and out-group derogation occurs because people wish to maintain a positive sense of self.

The participatory aspect of ghost narratives promotes SIT-oriented group dynamics to form. Modern paranormal-themed trends emphasize and require the need for and value placed on personal experiences—although they lack evidential weight given their subjective and unverifiable nature (Hanks, 2015; Houran, Lynn, & Lange, 2017). However, at the societal level, anomalous experiences remain a core driver for belief in the paranormal and social acceptance (see e.g., Clarke, 1995). Furthermore, Beisaw (2016) has explored the usefulness of ghost narratives in relating archeological information, since it allows modern audiences to feel empathy for and a connection to those who lived in the past. One manifestation of this connection is through visits to ostensibly haunted locations. *Legend-tripping* represents deliberate excursions to places associated with spooky events, with the intention of having paranormal experiences.

Folklorists from the late 1960s used this term to describe a ritual performance, often by teens, to test the truth of popular tales by visiting certain locations and taking prescribed actions (Bird, 2002). Kinsella (2011) related the increasing popularity of legend-tripping, both in reality and virtually, via live-streaming videos of their experiences or exploits. Ghost-hunting reality television shows broadcast interactive live specials that act as a virtual legend trip. Any resulting events that are attributable to the paranormal become part of the legend causing it to further evolve and gain new narrative details. Legend-tripping allows a distinct “being in the moment” experience (A. Hill, 2011). This somewhat immersive aspect involving media is not new though the frequency of such occasions is unparalleled. The infamous ghost-hunter, Harry Price, for example, worked with BBC Radio to produce the first live broadcast from a haunted house in 1936 (Davies, 2007). Performative acts, especially when enacted with others, form and reinforce beliefs (Childs & Murray, 2010; Goldstein et al., 2007).

Ghost-related tourism flourished in the 2000s, buoyed by media depictions of haunted places. Hanks (2015) provided a comprehensive guide separating types of tourism experiences into ghost tours, commercial ghost-hunts, and amateur investigation activities. These categories reflect the degree of serious interest by participants. These activities, she concluded, are a modern way for individuals to understand, interact with, and reinterpret the past on one’s own terms. This view of reclaiming

personal heritage is more prevalent in the U.K. The origin and rise of paranormal popular culture reflect this (Clarke, 2012; Davies, 2007). Haunted tourist spots feel more atmospheric in October, and tales of local haunts manifest every Halloween season in local and national news outlets (Howells, 2008; Wadler, 2008). However, the topic remains popular throughout the year. This theme is prominent in American culture (Baker & Bader, 2014; Booker, 2009) and has become pronounced worldwide (Molle & Bader, 2013).

#### FEATURE 4: GHOST NARRATIVES ARE *UNIVERSAL*

We describe this fourth component in two principal ways. First, ghost narratives are universal across all cultures and societies. Second, they appeal to and involve individuals who both reject or accept the narratives as relevant to their identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) or ideology. Key to the sociological approach is the notion that researchers should understand the universal culture of belief. Explicitly, who believes and why it matters (Goode, 2012; Laycock, 2011; Ridolfo, Baxter, & Lucas, 2010), how beliefs are socially-constructed or mediated (Bader, 2017; Baker & Bader, 2014; Childs & Murray, 2010), and the extent to which media and popular culture influence beliefs (Hanks, 2015; A. Hill, 2011; S. Hill, 2017; Leeder, 2013; Markovsky & Thye, 2001). Paranormal beliefs are important, because they challenge scientific and cultural authorities (S. Hill, 2017; Northcote, 2007) and provide an alternative view of the world (Bader, 2017; Cameron, 2008; Clark, 2003; Goode, 2012; A. Hill, 2011; Holloway, 2010; Ridolfo et al., 2010).

Bader (2017) observed that distinct paranormal belief sub-cultures and ideologies can exist without an equitable connection or overlap. Similarly, Clarke (2012) noted that paranormal belief spans the spectrum from local neighborhoods to celebrity circles. Bader (2017) defined paranormal as being deliberately outside religion and lacking the stability of religious institutions. Likewise, Lipman (2016) noted the separating of religious concepts from ghostly phenomena or appearances. Some researchers disagree with these views. For instance, Laycock (2011, 2014) contended that serious study by religious scholars parallels traditional religion. The reporting of paranormal phenomena in religious texts further complicates the religious-paranormal divide.

This separation and crossing of religious and paranormal “boundary space” (Durkheim, 2013) is further convoluted by some Judeo-Christian sects engaging in orthodox prejudice against what are deemed “demonic” or unholy manifestations of the paranormal (Baker, Bader, & Mencken, 2006; MacDonald, 1995; Mencken, Bader, & Kim, 2009). As a prominent

example in measurement, the Rasch scaled version of the Revised Paranormal Belief Scale recognizes this distinction by reframing the measure into two separate factors *New Age Belief* and *Traditional* (i.e., Christian) *Paranormal Belief* (Lange, Irwin, & Houran, 2000). Furthermore, modern amateur paranormal investigators weave spiritual aspects, such as “cleansing rituals,” the use of prayers and protective devices, and the demonic interpretation of various haunt or poltergeist phenomena into their practices (e.g., Guiley, 2007; Tilley, 2002).

Parapsychologists frequently use self-report surveys to assess the prevalence of paranormal or unorthodox beliefs (e.g., Dagnall, Drinkwater, Parker, & Clough, 2016; Palmer, 1979). This emphasis differs to that of conventional psychologists, who tend to focus on belief *strength* rather than *prevalence* (see Drinkwater, Denovan, Dagnall, & Parker, 2017). Alongside academic surveys, public opinion polls provide important insights into the incidence of specific paranormal beliefs. For instance, the Gallup polls of 1990, 2001 and 2005 reported that a substantial proportion of respondents believed in ghosts and hauntings (Dagnall, Drinkwater, Denovan, & Parker, 2015). Specifically, the 2005 Gallup poll observed that 37% of the sampled group believed that houses could be haunted, and 32% thought that the spirits of dead people could return to certain places/situations (Moore, 2015). Other surveys report similar figures. Notably, a Pew Research Center (2009) poll found that 18% of Americans claimed to have seen a ghost and 29% felt “in touch” (communication) with someone who had passed (Lipka, 2015).

Regarding incidence rates, it is important to note that belief in ghostly episodes is a social phenomenon that varies in accordance with *time* and *place*. Consequently, whereas belief levels remain relatively high within contemporary western cultures, endorsement rates of ghostly episodes fluctuate over time. For instance, the Harris poll (<http://www.theharrispoll.com>) revealed a decline of 10 points in the belief of ghost existence between 2003 (51%) and 2016 (41%). Recent YouGov polls produced similar levels of agreement (McCarriston, 2017). In percentage terms, YouGov polls documented a slight increase in belief in ghosts since 2015. This corresponds more generally with the decline in organized religious belief documented in the first decade of the 21st century (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009). The Chapman University (2018) polls, conducted from 2016 to 2018 and framed within the subject of “American fears,” showed a rise in belief in nearly all Fortean topics (including alien visitation, haunts and ghosts, telekinesis, and Bigfoot) except “psychic fortune telling” (Chapman University, 2018). In the present context, 58% of the 2018 respondents agreed (“somewhat or strongly”) with a belief in hauntings by ghosts.

Polls also reveal important age-related differences. For example, Francis and Williams (2007) examined teen belief in England and Wales. Collectively, their data suggest that juveniles exhibit high levels of belief. An earlier study by Francis and Kay (1995) demonstrated the extent of 13- to 15-year-old interest in the ghosts. Within a sample of 13,000 respondents, 31% believed it was possible to contact the spirits of the dead, and 37% believed in ghosts. Similarly, Boyd's (1996) large-scale survey of 14- to 15-year-olds found that 41% believed it was possible to contact the spirits of the dead, and 28% disagreed that it was wrong to contact the spirits of the dead using a Ouija board.

Relatedly, polls often conflate *interest* and *belief*. Paranormal themes and images are readily available in the media and potentially prime respondents toward positive responses (Nisbet, 2006). Consequently, it is difficult to determine whether numbers represent *belief* or *curiosity*. To an extent, examination of concurrent information can provide guidance. The rise of belief in Scandinavian countries, typically and historically less prone to supernatural-themed belief, provides additional evidence that the increase spans Western nations (Maher, 2015).

#### FEATURE 5: GHOST NARRATIVES ARE *SCALABLE*

This fifth component emphasizes that narratives are contagious and generalizable to small and large sets of people. Along these lines, Harvey (2013) has argued that supernatural themes have become urbanized, domesticated, democratized, and commercialized. Paranormal belief now unsurprisingly spans the spectrum from local neighborhoods to celebrity circles (Clarke, 2012). Ghosts are consequently ubiquitous in contemporary American life (Booker, 2009; Heffter, 2014; Wadler, 2008)—a continuous presence (Peeren, 2010) that is socially-acceptable (Hanks, 2015; Pierce, 2012). The experience narrative, in turn, contributes to the construction of social reality (Childs & Murray, 2010; Goldstein et al., 2007; Ironside, 2016; Mayer & Grunder, 2011). The constructed narrative finally becomes evidence to the experiencer and the audience (Kinsella, 2011; McNeill, 2006).

This evidence can subsequently scale quickly from the individual-level to group-level via perceptual or psychological contagion (Nisbet, 1979; Romer, 2013)—paralleling outbreaks of mass psychogenic illness (Houran, Kumar et al., 2002; Lange & Houran, 1999, 2001a). The engagement of people in ghost narratives via meme-like ‘contagious’ processes is not a new idea. Contagion is the triggering of similar accounts in individuals proximal to the initial reported anomalous experience (O’Keeffe & Parsons, 2010). Houran and colleagues (Houran & Lange,

1996; Lange & Houran, 2001a, 2001b) have often discussed and empirically explored the notion that ghost, haunt, or poltergeist-like experiences involve a catalyst or instigating event that starts a germination process, with anomalous experiences subsequently multiplying and spreading like a contagion or meme across a set of observers. Although the related phenomenon of *suggestion* has been extensively studied (e.g., Dagnall, Drinkwater, Denovan, & Parker, 2015; Granqvist et al., 2005; Lange & Houran, 1997; Terhune & Smith, 2006; Wiseman, Watt, Greening, Stevens, & O’Keeffe, 2002), research on contagion is sparse.

Literally, this means that haunt narratives have a powerful propensity to ‘go viral’ across media platforms. This process has been aided, if not enabled, by the 21st century’s landscape of web-based and 24-hour news sources that have regularly incorporated ghost stories into local and national feeds. This has been aided, if not enabled, by the 21<sup>st</sup> century, web-based, and 24-hour news landscape that incorporated ghost stories into local and national feeds. These appeared and then spread via social media. The rapid development of the internet has facilitated an ease of communication with “personal stories, footage, products and services ... shared and commodified like never before” (Haynes, 2016, p. 13). As a result, countless claims of ghosts caught on phone cameras and surveillance cameras are shared with a worldwide audience. These frequently show vague figures, faces, or human simulacra, which the media labels as “mysterious” or “ghostly.” Many claims are obvious hoaxes or a result of optical distortion or glitches. Yet, the stories gain viewers with a “sharing unprecedented in known human history” (Haynes, 2016, p. 13). Web feeds of tabloid media outlets and paranormal-themed blogs have reached saturation. Stories prove irresistible to those who wish to speculate on the cause, enhance their existing beliefs, or display skepticism (Clarke, 2012; Edwards, 2008).

Stories of families terrorized by ghosts resemble Hollywood scripts. For example, the 2014 story of the Ammons family “demon house” in Indiana drew international attention when they claimed paranormal activity affected them both inside and away from their house (Kwiatkowski, 2014). Eyewitness testimony from police, health officials, and a clergyman bolstered the drama and resulted in heavy media coverage, including commentary and interest from so-called paranormal reality show celebrities (for example, *Ghost Adventures* [2008-2018] host Zak Bagans, who purchased the house and released a movie based on the case titled *Demon House* [Bagans, Dorse, & Taglieri, 2018]). Simultaneously, there was an absence of scholarly interest.

Entertainment news media report celebrity encounters with ghosts and their attempts to manage their haunted mansions/rentals or technical malfunctions. A modern trend reinvigorated the connection of ghosts and

sex. In Victorian England, there was a conflation of deviant sexual activity with supernatural events (Middleton, 2018). Internet-based media—particularly tabloids—have eagerly posted modern salacious ghost sex stories. Some celebrity women made headlines by admitting to having sexual encounters with spirits and sometimes even liking it. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the term *spectrophilia* has entered the Google search rankings. We should mention that there are cases in the academic literature related to this basic concept. Perhaps the most sensationalized example is the 1970s-era “Doris Bither case” in Culver City, California (see e.g., Taff, 2014). Bither, a mother of four children, claimed that she was repeatedly attacked and raped by invisible entities that she believed were the ghosts of three men. The case inspired Frank De Felitta’s 1978 book *The Entity*, which was made into a 1982 film of the same name. Instances of less intense, albeit still frightening, ‘supernatural assaults’ have likewise been documented (see e.g., Houran, 2002; Hufford, 1982, 2001).

Beyond books and movies, however, the Internet paved the way for the democratization of information. This was key to the proliferation of paranormal expertise and authority without professional qualifications. Online interaction provided the ultimate alternative to physical meetups, eliminating distance between those of like interests, and served to reinforce and grow paranormal belief systems (Bader, 2017; S. Hill, 2017; McNeill 2006). From 1996 to 2017, About.com’s page on the paranormal was a popular site for general paranormal interest (Dreyfuss, 2017). GhostStudy.com, created in 1999, was a high-ranking site that featured content typical for many such sites—news stories copied verbatim from media outlets and public contributions of stories, photos and videos. A huge volume of websites devoted to ghost research, investigation, theorizing, and presenting evidence developed in the early to mid-2000s (Potts, 2004).

MySpace, a platform to easily create and manage a personal webpage online, began in 2003. Amateur paranormal researchers used MySpace to advertise investigations and publish evidence. The popularity of Facebook and its public access opening in 2006 meant it took over from MySpace as the platform of choice (Hartung, 2011). Facebook allows groups and individuals, even businesses geared towards the paranormal, to advance their identities and brands. Online forums, especially those related to popular television shows, were places where enthusiasts would gather to share stories and opinions (S. Hill, 2017). Facebook is a primary communication hub because accounts are free, easy to set up, and the platform facilitates networking and discussion. Nonprofit and advocacy groups find marketing success on the platform (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009). Many groups interact with members and the public regularly on Facebook, or produce quick videos posted on YouTube and are shared



via Facebook, which seemingly remains the most popular platform for sharing news stories, videos, or photos that ‘go viral’. The Internet has also become a primary sounding board for crowd-sourced criticism, debunking, and exposure of hoaxes/frauds (Shirky, 2008). Social media will likely remain a crucial mechanism in the evolution and transmission of ghost-related discourse.

Internet radio has also stoked paranormal interest. This derived from late-night radio, which began decades ago and continued to be influential into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Notably, *Coast to Coast AM* is the premier platform for the weirdest “true” tales in America. According to their website (<https://www.coasttocoastam.com/pages/about>), the program is broadcast on over 600 United States affiliates. The quantity of paranormal themes on Internet radio reflects the subject matter’s pervasive content. A search on the various Internet Radio platforms reveals dozens of paranormal-themed shows. Furthermore, live shows are often archived into podcasts that can be downloaded at the listener’s convenience. Over 100 paranormal-themed podcasts appear in a search of Apple’s iTunes store. Producible by anyone at minimal cost with a microphone and easy-to-use recording software, paranormal-themed podcasts (including skeptical treatments of the topic) are difficult to fit into the standard podcast categories. These podcasts are categorized in podcast feeds as “science,” “society and culture,” “religion and spirituality” and “history.” The genre of “real ghost stories” in which people share personal experiences, is also popular (e.g., *Real Ghost Stories Online*,<sup>2</sup> and *Jim Harold’s Campfire*<sup>3</sup>).

Arguably the most famous and influential ghost research group in the world is The Atlantic Paranormal Society (TAPS) headquartered in Rhode Island, U.S. and featured on *Ghost Hunters* (2004-2016). The working-class family, men founders got their big break in a *New York Times* article (Leland, 2002) that featured these plumbers-by-day turned professional ghost-hunters in their free time. Brown (2008) profiled ghost-hunting groups in New England and found nearly all groups were directly or indirectly influenced by TAPS, or Demonologists Ed and Lorraine Warren (from Connecticut). TAPS emphasizes surveillance, collecting evidence with equipment, and at least an attempt at finding a natural cause at work. This is in stark contrast to the Warrens, who used psychic ability and fundamentalist religious beliefs to popularize household demons. The influence of the Warrens continues as many amateur groups now have their own (self-claimed) demonologist (S. Hill, 2017).

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ghostpodcast.com/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://jimharold.com/category/jim-harolds-campfire/>

Millions of people watch *Ghost Hunters* and similar shows on television believing them to be examples of legitimate scientific investigation (S. Hill, 2017; Radford, 2010). What happens on television is a constructed version of inquiry fit into the timeframe of a show. Programs often magnify and dramatize anomalies and attribute their causation to paranormal forces. This conflates interpretation with observation. Television ghost-hunters strive for legitimacy through the use of apparatus and seemingly rational analysis, while playing up contemporary cultural concerns (Potts, 2004). The popularity of the depiction of paranormal investigations made it palatable to mainstream society and reduced the stigma of individuals enlisting on-site investigators (Pierce, 2012). This has also influenced the proliferation of amateur ghost-hunting groups worldwide.

## DISCUSSION

In describing our VAPUS model, we have strived to highlight the changes in media, society, and authority with respect to ghost narratives, as well as acknowledge the proliferation of ghost-hunting as a major cultural establishment. Even though there are different manners or motivations for attempting to interact with the paranormal, it should be clear throughout this review of representative literature that the cultural roles of power, authority, and popularity essentially contaminate the scientific evaluation of ghostly episodes. Simply put, the agendas, goals, and controversies of invested organizations encompassed by our model affect the nature and acceptance of information, media, and science. Such issues, as they revolve around these narratives, are textbook examples of Social-Conflict models within sociology (Marx, 1972; Oberschall, 1973). That is, findings from amateur and professional ghost investigations alike are inherently filtered through various social goals, economics, authority, power, and the competition among these forces.

What Durkheim (1965) called the separation of the “sacred and profane” is relevant here. The assumptions of acceptable and unacceptable beliefs, values, and norms of “science” are being driven not by the quality of research, but by its ideological leanings, which support the authority or rightness of the ideology of a given group (Boudry & Braeckman, 2012). Durkheim went further to define “social boundaries” and “boundary crossing” as the interplay of *expected rules* (e.g., norms) of given groups, and the *role of deviance* (violation of these norms) to shape, define, and clarify acceptable behaviors within each group in a cultural sense. Groups that do not meet these internal norms and beliefs are deemed “other” and are viewed, in the least, with suspicion, and include those within said

groups who do not conform to the predominant ideology (Bauer, 2014; Besta, Mattingly, & Blazek, 2016; Tajfel & Turner, 2004).

We would be remiss not to address the broader picture of how the VAPUS model fits within a field full of concepts and theories. Perhaps most importantly, our framework represents a fundamental and conceptual “meta-model” for identifying the social and interpretive components inherent to ghost narratives. In this way, it allows researchers to deconstruct the inevitable sociocultural components that represent the “other side of the coin” to the ontological study of the phenomena associated with ghostly episodes themselves.

Obviously, VAPUS does not supplant any of the established theories that we have applied within the model. Rather, our model draws on clinical systems theory—also referred as ecosystems or biopsychosocial models (e.g., Engel, 1977; Mash, 1989)—representing the incontrovertible fact that the effects of group dynamics, social forces, and cultural norms are not fully divisible from the attentional, perceptual, or interpretive processes within all aspects of the human psyche (for comprehensive reviews, see Ross & Nisbett, 1991; Zimbardo & Leippe, 1991). Sociocultural variables therefore seem as pertinent and influential as any of the other context effects in haunts that have been popularized by Lange and Houran (2001a; Houran, 2000; cf. Harte, 2000), such as paranormal belief or demand characteristics. Accordingly, it is improper to minimize the role and influence of environmental cues, situational contexts, or cultural ideology as mere “confounds or artifacts” that cloud our understanding of the ontological reality to ghostly episodes. Doing so ignores entire fields of empirical findings and principles that this paper clearly demonstrates. Rather, any comprehensive model for the phenomenon of “ghosts and haunted houses” must accommodate the VAPUS features within a common framework that also includes psychological, environmental, and potentially parapsychological perspectives.

However, while we would attest that sociocultural factors are conjoined to ghostly phenomena, we must also recognize that the “proof” or lack thereof of anomalous phenomena is quite irrelevant to the cultural “meaning-making” process (e.g. Hufford, 1982) represented by the VAPUS model. As we have argued elsewhere (Laythe & Owen, 2013; Laythe et al., 2017), quantifying “objective” haunt phenomena is extremely challenging without adequate environmental controls. Thus, the focus within parapsychology to document anomalous phenomena empirically, or skeptics’ attempts to disprove the same does not necessarily change the sociocultural narrative that individuals, groups, and sub-cultures maintain about the *interpretation* of ghostly phenomena.

Within the sociocultural domain of our psyches, facts and evidence are mostly irrelevant in comparison to group affiliation (Tajfel & Turner,

1979), and the general acceptance or popularity of a set of cultural beliefs. We illustrated this fact in our introductory examples of the overall popularity of ghost narratives, noting that quality evidence or facts prevent neither the media nor ghost-hunting organizations from becoming “experts” in this space. It is also obvious within the culture of science—in which Auguste Comte’s positivism is still commonly believed—that part of its philosophical assumptions has been clearly debunked within psychology and some argue even within quantum physics. That is, an observation of a thing does indeed change its behavior, from humans and possibly down to sub-atomic particles (for an interesting discussion on this latter issue, see e.g., Podolskiy & Lanza, 2016).

However, considerable social science literature clearly dictates that most of the VAPUS components are inexorably interrelated. As a thought experiment example, the extent to which contagion effects are related to the effects of persuasion or suggestion, if formally tested, is likely neither to be simple nor straightforward. These social effects are inherently interwoven to the extent that their labelling may be considered more of a product of the historical culture of the specific field studying them, as opposed to distinct operational definitions. As such, components of VAPUS should be considered highly interconnected, yet conceptually beneficial for the beginning process of separating the person’s individual contribution of interpretation to the ontological phenomena that are deemed ‘ghostly’. Despite these issues, we offer our model as a viable starting point for the conceptual evaluation of the potentially vast sociocultural influences or nuances within accounts or investigations. We will illustrate these points and further expound on the model in a follow-up paper devoted to salient case analyses.

Creating valid empirical measurements for the five features of our model would seem to be useful in any future research that aims to understand and model haunt-type phenomena. For instance, factors such as *identity fusion* (Gomez et al., 2011) or *behavioral adherence* to ideology (i.e. the extent to which a belief is used as a cognitive schematic mechanism), could provide important clues that help us further to refine aspects of the model. Obviously, more work is needed to separate and define what could be a core phenomenon (or phenomena) from its psychosocial and cultural trappings (cf. Evans, 1987; Houran, 2000; Hufford, 1982)—an arduous task that our VAPUS model might imply is infeasible or misguided, if not impossible.

## THE AUTHORS

*Sharon A. Hill* has a Masters degree in Education focused on Science and the Public and is a professional geologist. As an independent researcher, she studies natural anomalies, paranormal culture, and the investigation methods of amateur paranormalists.

*Ciaran O’Keeffe* (Ph.D.) is Associate Head of the School of Human & Social Sciences at Buckinghamshire New University. He is also Programme Leader for the B.Sc. (Hons.) Criminological Psychology, B.Sc. (Hons.) Psychology & Criminology, and B.Sc. (Hons.) Business & Psychology, in addition to running modules on Exceptional Human Experiences, Investigative Psychology, and Victimology.

*Brian Laythe* (Ph.D.) is the Director of the Institute for the Study of Religious and Anomalous Experience and Managing Partner of Iudicium, a forensic psychological consultancy. He is also an Associate Professor of Sociology and Psychology at Ivy Tech Community College and teaches undergraduate courses at Indiana University Southeast.

*Neil Dagnall* (Ph.D.) is a Programme Leader and a Unit Leader in the Psychology Department at Manchester Metropolitan University, where he teaches at undergraduate and postgraduate level.

*Kenneth Drinkwater* (Ph.D.) is a Lecturer and Researcher in Cognitive Psychology and Parapsychology at Manchester Metropolitan University, where he conducts research in parapsychology and psychology.

*Annalisa Ventola* is the executive director of the Parapsychological Association, an independent researcher, and editor of *Public Parapsychology*; a blog devoted to promoting public scholarship in the fields of parapsychology and anomalous psychology.

*James Houran* (Ph.D.) holds a Master’s Degree in Clinical Psychology (1996) from the University of Illinois at Springfield (USA) and a Doctorate in Medicine (Psychology) (2004) from the University of Adelaide (Australia). He serves as a Research Director at Integrated Knowledge Systems, Research Professor at the Laboratory of Statistics and Computation, ISLA in Vila Nova de Gaia, Porto, Portugal.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank John Potts and Lance Storm for helpful feedback on an earlier draft of this paper.

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*Sharon A. Hill  
Lithospherica, LLC  
6116 Chatham Glenn Way  
Harrisburg, PA, 17111  
USA*

*Ciarán O'Keeffe  
Bucks New University  
School of Human and Social Sciences  
Queen Alexandra Road  
High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire  
UK*

*Brian Laythe  
Institute for the Study of Religious and Anomalous Experience  
32 Beechwood Road  
Jeffersonville, IN, 47130  
USA*

*Neil Dagnall and Kenneth Drinkwater  
Manchester Metropolitan University  
Department of Psychology  
3.11 Brooks Building, Manchester Campus  
Manchester, M15 6BH  
UK*

*Annalisa Ventola  
Parapsychological Association  
PO Box 14884, Columbus, OH 43214  
USA*

*James Houran, Ph.D. (Corresponding Author)  
7041 Briar Meadow Drive  
Dallas, TX 75230  
USA*

Email: [Jim\\_houran@yahoo.com](mailto:Jim_houran@yahoo.com)