"Meme-Spirited": II. Illustrating the VAPUS Model for Ghost Narratives

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Abstract: We continue our integrative review of nearly 20 years of sociocultural research and popular trends on ghosts, haunted houses, and poltergeists (collectively termed "ghostly episodes") that commenced in Part I (Hill, O'Keeffe, Laythe, Dagnall, Drinkwater, Ventola, & Houran, 2018). That analysis characterized the powerful brand personality of ghost narratives in terms of their Versatility, Adaptability, Participatory nature, Universality, and Scalability. This VAPUS model emphasizes that these narratives serve as cultural memes which, in part, reflect interpersonal or group dynamics. We illustrate these themes via three analyses that explore the role of the media, the use of technology to legitimatize amateur organizations, and the resulting conflict between popularized ghost-hunting groups, skeptic organizations, and parapsychology. Optimistically, we expect the VAPUS model can guide the development of new means or methods that aim to delineate and even bridge some of the competing social forces that shape or sustain these narratives in the popular culture and thereby constructively advance research in this domain.

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

INTRODUCTION

Part I of this two-part article (Hill et al., 2018) explored how ghosts, haunted houses, and poltergeist-like disturbances (collectively denoted here as *ghostly episodes*)—as anomalous experiences and cultural narratives— are particularly appealing, meaningful, and enduring due to their capacity to foster emotional and rational engagement across diverse demographic populations, as well as their capability to promote social interaction. Stated

from a marketing perspective (e.g., Aaker, 1997), ghostly episodes apparently possess an influential "brand personality" that parallels, for example, strong consumer engagement with social media or the most popular commercial products or services. In fact, marketers and product designers have strived to identify the defining factors (e.g., intensity, familiarity, tangibility, and shareability) that make ghostly phenomena so captivating, and then used these as inspiration to develop new elements and features in displays to engage consumers or users (Annett et al., 2016).

Based on a literature review, we specifically described the branding power or sociocultural influence of these narratives in terms of five features that define our VAPUS model (Hill et al., 2018, p. 119):

- **VERSATILITY**, in that narratives have flexibility to represent a cross-section of moods, locations, or themes that span diverse literary genres;

- **ADAPTABILITY**, in that narratives morph, at least in part, longitudinally in accordance with societal changes;

- **PARTICIPATORY NATURE**, in that narratives invite interaction via individual or social activity and engagement, such as tours, clubs, private excursions, and field research, etc.;

- **UNIVERSALITY**, in that narratives are interesting or relevant to diverse demographic populations, including individuals spanning the paranormal belief-disbelief spectrum;

- **SCALABILITY**, in that narratives engage people individually and collectively, via meme-like 'contagious' processes.

This paper expounds on this framework and emphasizes some of its important conceptual and practical implications via three analyses.

These contemporary illustrations continue an integrative literature review we began in Part I, whereby we examined trends across news media and the Internet, as well as searched common academic databases (e.g., Google Scholar, PsychInfo, and ResearchGate) for sociocultural studies (primarily 2001 to present, since the publication of Houran and Lange, 2001) using the keywords: "apparition, entity encounter experiences, ghost, haunt, haunting, poltergeist, sensed presence, and spirit." We also addressed how the situational contexts and ramifications of these episodes are couched within Social Conflict (Marx, 1972; Oberschall, 1973), Social Identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and Durkheimian (2013) models, as well as consumer marketing theory (Aaker, 1997).

These perspectives fundamentally argue that haunt experiences and their underlying narratives are best viewed through the lens of "systems (ecosystem or biopsychosocial) theory"; i.e., environment-person bidirectional influences (e.g., Mash, 1989). We acknowledge that other researchers have drawn on similar premises in conceptualizing ghost narratives as (i) broad sociocultural constructs (see Baker & Bader, 2014; Eaton, 2019), and (ii) having features which promote experiential engagement (i.e., Annett et al., 2016). However, to our knowledge, our VAPUS model is more robust and comprehensive in that it uniquely characterizes the cumulative branding power of these narratives as an interplay among five specific features, as we explore next.

RAMPANT MEDIA AND POPULARITY AS PARTICIPATORY IMPETUS

Nowhere do we see the impact of the VAPUS model more clearly than in the motives and use of ghost narratives across media outlets. Their *versatility* is apparent when allegory gives way to explicit references in literature. For instance, paranormal-themed books are thriving in the 21st century (Partridge, 2013). In addition to the array of paranormal fiction, popular non-fiction volumes are frequently associated with specific places (i.e., towns, states, or regions) or concrete themes (e.g., Civil War, hospitals, cemeteries, or animal ghosts).

The popularity of television ghost-hunter shows facilitates book sales, especially among those seeking their own personal experiences. These texts frequently employ dramatic license for enhancement and provide unsourced individual, and sometimes historical, accounts. We note the ability of various organizations and motivated individuals to use a ghost narrative successfully for specific gain. Further, many paranormal investigators write their own guidebooks, aided by ease of self-publishing and distribution of inexpensive print-on-demand and electronic books.

In comparison, skeptical books on ghost investigations are relatively scarce (see e.g., Nickell, 2012; Radford, 2010, 2018). A well-known textbook publisher produced an (uncritical) ghost-hunting guide aimed at teens (Gibson, Burns, & Schrader, 2009). The guide portrayed science as difficult and boring, and comprised snippets of apparently sound advice mixed with scientific confusion and magical ideas. Moreover, "para-celebrities" have published their own biographies, or guidebooks. Notably, Jason Hawes and *The Atlantic Paranormal Society* (*TAPS*) of the *Ghost Hunters* television show (2004-2016) wrote three, Zak Bagans of *Ghost Adventures* (2008-present) published two books, and Ryan Buell (Buell & Petrucha, 2010) and Chip Coffey of *Paranormal State* (2007-2011) penned biographies.

Highlighting *versatility*, there was a short-lived surge in the production of glossy magazines or small-scale "zines" aimed at the community of paranormal researchers and hobbyists. These mixed real-life ghost-hunting tales and guidance with horror tropes and entertainment news (Blanco & Peeren, 2010). The most popular of these included *Haunted Times* and the *TAPS Paramagazine*. Generally, magazines provided a medium for enthusiasts to connect without face-to-face interactions and allowed them to generate interest and share techniques.

Affected by the downturn in print media, some periodicals resurrected in exclusively digital format. Arguably, the most successful was *Haunted Magazine* in the UK (distributed in print and digital). This trend coincided with the Internet becoming the primary vehicle for interaction within the paranormal sub-community (Kinsella, 2011). Two key, long-running remaining print magazines are *Fate* and *Fortean Times*. These stalwart publications feature the weird and unusual and have successfully adapted to modern para-culture. Although these publications regularly contain peer-reviewed articles, they are generally not at the same academic level as established, traditional journals. However, formal, peer-reviewed e-journals have appeared, such as the establishment in 2010 of *Paranthropology: Journal of Anthropological Approaches to the Paranormal*.

Movies portraying realistic paranormal phenomena reflect *adaptability*. Notable examples are *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick & Sanchez, 1999) and *Paranormal Activity* (Peli, 2007). These films drew attention to the work of non-fictional parapsychologists (Pierce, 2012) and in doing so blurred the line between reality and a sensationalized depiction of reality (Lauro & Paul, 2013). Inspired by the success of *The Blair Witch Project* in 1999, found footage movies became a popular genre in the 21st century. The first-person perspective, relayed through video camera, was particularly attractive to new filmmakers with budget constraints. Hence, there was a proliferation of such films.

On a positive note, found footage movies provided novel ways to present ghost stories. For instance, the 2011 film *Grave Encounters* (Minihan & Ortiz, 2011) uses the narrative arc of a ghost-hunting reality television show investigating at an abandoned psychiatric hospital, where the ghosts of former patients terrorize the crew. Another notable instance is the 2015 movie *Unfriended* (Greaves & Gabriadze, 2014). This vengeful ghost story takes place entirely within an online video chat room. These motion pictures illustrate the *versatility* and *adaptability* of ghost narratives in creating scenarios consistent with modern technology.

Prior to 2001, unambiguously fictional movies, *Ghostbusters* (Aykroyd, Ramis, & Reitman, 1984) and *Poltergeist* (Spielberg et al., 1982), drew on existing parapsychological concepts of the paranormal.

Subsequently, they proved influential to aspiring real-life ghost-hunters (S. Hill, 2017). Similarly, post 2001, popular ghost movies, such as *The Others*, (Amenabar, 2001)*, Insidious* (Whannell & Wan, 2010), *Sinister* (Derrickson & Cargill, 2012) and *The Awakening* (Volk & Murphy, 2011), peaked interest and fueled aspirations. Supernatural-themed media reflected a need for re-enchantment, making up for the lack of magic and emptiness in real life (Booker, 2009). The universal popularity of the Harry Potter canon is a notable illustration (Hanks, 2015).

Ed and Lorraine Warren, active in psychical research for decades and influential in prompting other paranormal researchers, especially in New England (Brown, 2008), became celebrities anew in the 2000s. This was due largely to the success of *The Conjuring* (Hayes, Hayes, & Wan, 2013) movie franchise, which features the couple (Blake, 2013). These movies have received criticism for exaggerating and fictionalizing the Warrens' participation in famous hauntings (Bartholomew & Nickell, 2015). This is particularly true of their involvement with the Enfield Poltergeist as depicted in *The Conjuring 2* (Hayes, Hayes, & Wan, 2016). Although Ed died in 2006, Lorraine continued to appear in television shows, specifically *Paranormal State* (2007-2011). As such, we see an example of *scalability* and *participation* from the VAPUS model directly resulting in the newfound fame of these researchers.

Movies about demonic influences remained in the mainstream and encouraged acceptance of such forces. *Deliver Us from Evil* (Derrickson & Boardman, 2014) is a retelling of a true story of a New York police officer, who faces demonic elements as part of his ongoing investigations. Perhaps more significantly, *The Conjuring* (Hayes et al., 2013) was a supernatural horror recounting the events of the Perron family haunting and the Warrens' involvement as "demonologists." It is one of the highest-grossing horror films of all-time. Widespread representations of exorcisms and media coverage of older demonic claims surged (Welch, 2018). The popularity of "darker" paranormal movies and demonic themes in reality television programs had some influence on the perceived hazard of demons as part of amateur paranormal investigations. We note that *versatility* as defined by the VAPUS model is evident in the moral story-telling involving demons, demonic possession, and cultural notions of evil.

Aside from the propagation of literature and movies using ghost narratives, the *participatory* aspect of VAPUS plays a significant role in the popularity of ghost narratives. Paralleling the "spectral turn" in social sciences and humanities, interest and acceptance of paranormal-themed facets of pop-culture has increased as a function of news and entertainment media, conventions, tourism, and commercial products (Hanks, 2015; Pierce, 2012). A special day has even been designated "National Ghost Hunting Day" to raise awareness of the importance of ghost hunting in

American heritage (http://www.nationalghosthuntingday.com/). Jacobs (2010) attempted to explain this popularization by arguing that the ubiquity of paranormal themes in society is a safe way of indulging in and exploring people's fears.

The most significant driver of visitors to a haunted place is undoubtedly notoriety arising from its appearance on media (A. Hill, 2011; Holleman, 2017; Holloway, 2010). "Most Haunted" now forms part of the English tourism experience (Davies, 2007), and the "Most Haunted Effect" (Hanks, 2015) refers to the increase in visitor interest that occurred after the airing of the show *Most Haunted* (2002-2018) filmed at a specific location. As the haunted reputation grows, ghost teams visit the same locations in what becomes a self-reinforcing, or self-fulfilling, mechanism.

Eager capitalists, or "hauntrepreneurs," looking for an investment return on a hotel or historic building, will market their ghosts, real or fictional, to draw the curious. We acknowledge that the ghostly reputations of certain places have occasionally provoked real estate lawsuits about undisclosed 'stigmatized properties' (Murray, 2017). In fact, houses rumored to be haunted can suffer significant value diminution, and this is especially true in countries like Taiwan and Hong Kong (China) where haunted properties have cultural associations with bad luck (Bhattacharya, Huang, & Nielsen, 2017; Chu, 2016). However, houses with a haunted reputation can sell for higher prices when a paranormal stigma is regarded as a benefit by buyers (Behar, 2017). Along these lines, Holloway (2010) argued that legend-tripping (with "ghost walks" included as a form of this) transforms the visited space "into something charged with the strange and anomalous" and that the "infrastructure relies on the engineering of dispositions that are both shaped on and brought to the tourist event itself" (p. 618).

An easy and inexpensive 'hauntrepreneur' start-up business is a local ghost walk (Seeman, 2002). Ghost tours are a staple attraction of major cities around the world—some having several in competition within a small area. Notable examples are Gettysburg, Pennsylvania (Thompson, 2010) and York, England (Hanks, 2015). Though not new, these tours have exploded in popularity as a fun way for individuals or groups to spend an evening while vacationing and offer a unique view of the city. The tour guides, often costumed, theatrically emphasize the spooky aspects over historical facts (Holloway, 2010). Participants are encouraged to take pictures and share them on social media (Lauro & Paul, 2013). Visitors often enthusiastically attribute photographic anomalies to paranormal energies.

Some people are not content being passive participants on a guided tour but wish to interact with "legitimate" paranormal investigators in search of authentic ghost experiences. Hanks (2015) examined how

followers of television shows will make personal sacrifices to have these experiences, traveling long distances and spending considerable funds for a "pilgrimage" and adventure that they hope will be a transformative experience (see also Caterine, 2011). Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas (2007) refer to paranormal-themed visits as part of "belief" tourism encompassing various religious and New Age beliefs. The term "dark tourism" has gained favor to describe a fascination with visiting disturbing places of misery, death, and injustice, such as slave quarters, hospitals, sanatoriums, prisons, and locations of disasters, although it has taken on a relevance here when such dark locations are also marketed as haunted (D'Harlingue, 2010; Holloway, 2010; Kerr, 2015; Marshall, 2004). Many believe the tortured souls remain in these places (Rittichainuwat, 2011; Sachdeva, 2010). Neglected and decayed buildings enhance the sense of being out of time and place (Dickey, 2016a; D'Harlingue, 2010). Kerr (2015) explored the fear factor in visiting such places and considered the appeal they have. The switch from revulsion to interest in haunted places signals a change in how society views the "haunted landscape".

Many towns have capitalized upon (or transfigured) their history to promote paranormal tourism (of various kinds) and bring revenue to struggling downtown areas (Conner, 2017; Dickey, 2016a; Marshall, 2004; Roney, 2009). It may become difficult to manage the demands of today's ghost tourists. In 2008, a major Gettysburg "ghost summit" was unable to proceed because the military park officials, intent on historical preservation, would not accommodate the large crowds who wished to hunt for ghosts (James, 2008). Local residents are also generally not amenable to large groups traversing the streets at night (Thompson, 2010). Haunted spaces attract thrill-seekers (Fiedler, 2017). Correspondingly, many incidents of damage have occurred under the excuse of "ghost-hunting". The historic LeBeau mansion in Louisiana sustained damage in 2013 after seven people seeking ghosts caused a devastating fire (Watkins, 2013; see also Omarzu, 2012; Sawer, 2017). Legend-trippers and investigators sometimes trespass and vandalize in their quest for experiences—perhaps not unlike admirers or stalkers in an unbridled attempt to interact with celebrities who are the objects of their affection or obsession (see also Lange, Houran, & McCutcheon, 2011). As a counter to this proliferation of unethical behavior, Baker and O'Keeffe (2007) produced a set of ethical guidelines for the investigation of haunts by professionals and amateur ghost-hunters.

Particularly within media forms, the VAPUS aspects of *universality* and *scalability* are inherently evident. As shown above, media production has effectively produced multiple forms of ghost narratives to suit particular beliefs, ideologies, and demographic groups, all of which keep a ghost narrative central to their story. In terms of *scalability*, we demonstrate below the degree of impetus created by these shows to induce the layperson

to *participate* in ghostly activities. Despite the unquestionable influence of famous ghost-hunter groups, little work has considered the forms, messages, and memetic influence of paranormal media, an inarguably popular genre (Sparks & Miller, 2001). Popularity alone bestowed a backdoor legitimacy to the field (Northcote, 2007). In *Paranormal Media*, A. Hill (2011) provided the most comprehensive examination of paranormal content of the past 20 years and the infusion of media messages into the mainstream. Television was cited as the largest influence on modern paranormal researchers in almost all examinations of amateur paranormal researchers, where it was observed that various televisions shows, mostly non-fictional, were an impetus that their sparked interest (A. Hill, 2011). In the US, from the late 70s to early 90s, shows most cited were *In Search Of...* (1976-1982), *Sightings* (1991-1997), *Unsolved Mysteries* (1987-2010), and various popular paranormal reality shows including *Ghost Hunters* (2004-2016) and *Most Haunted* (2002-2018).

These shows compelled many to undertake do-it-yourself paranormal investigations (Brown, 2008; Hanks, 2015; A. Hill, 2011; S. Hill, 2017) including legend-tripping, the engagement of paranormal-themed commerce, and exploring the past through ghost experiences (Beisaw, 2016). The explosion of paranormal reality television shaped how we consume and process ideas about the paranormal, especially in terms of using technological devices as symbolic forms of legitimacy (Foucault, 2002; Lauro & Paul, 2013; Williams, 2010). It has also had great appeal for the curious who wished to experience real-world investigation less directly, in the comfort of their own television rooms (Jacobs, 2010).

Beyond Edwards' (2001) original media synopsis, Sagers (2016) offered a thorough overview of the modern paranormal reality television history and landscape. Paranormal reality television shows, via creative editing, provide entertainment, not truth, to a mostly pro-paranormal crowd eager for escapism (Burger, 2010; Radford 2010; Walter 2013). They cater to shorter attention spans and evoke emotional responses using the theatrics of "spooky" visuals and music (Clarke, 2012). This promotes a sense of uncanniness, which provides a backdrop to formulaic narrative structure (Lipman, 2016; Stockly, 2011). These shows provide no definitive evidence of the paranormal or answers to questions (Hale, 2009). However, many viewers treat the information seriously and assume evidence presented is both factual and scientific (Dobry, 2013; A. Hill, 2011; S. Hill, 2017). Amateur researchers, originally enthused by these shows, often subsequently reject them as fake or criticize improper content as they gain personal investigative experience (Hanks, 2015; Rotondaro, 2010).

The dozens of paranormal shows appearing through 2000-2017 were geared towards niche audiences—women, children, young adults—and had their own flavor based on the network host (e.g., Travel Channel, SyFy

Channel, A&E) and the *versatile* and *universal* nature of these programs ('sciencey', religious/demonic, dangerous, ethnic, historical) (Williams, 2010). A chronological listing of these shows is available at http://sharonahill.com/paranormaltv/.

In contrast to shows featuring witness storytelling and re-enactments, reality paranormal television presented key innovations and beneficially moral attributions (i.e. *versatility* in action). These defined the genre in terms of overcoming fear, suffering hardship in pursuit of the unknown (Renner, 2013), and undertaking a personal journey to seek answers (Williams, 2010). The emotional reaction of participants is the most compelling aspect for viewers of these programs (A. Hill, 2011). The paranormal event registers to the audience via these reactions (often filmed with close-ups), or as a measured phenomenological experience—cold spot, noise, or shadow (Williams, 2010). The investigators themselves frequently serve as instruments, reporting physical sensations as evidence to support the evolving narrative related to the location. Environmental detectors act as objective measuring instruments. Night-vision cameras render the surroundings uncanny and cast objects and people in an eerie green glow to great effect (Jacobs, 2010).

Part of these moral themes are displayed in media shows via the *participatory* nature of the ghost narrative itself creating a sense of an intimate, live experience through camerawork that allows the viewer to walk along with on-site investigators (Williams, 2010). Involvement, through regular viewing and social media interaction, is also encouraged (Burger, 2010). The notion that viewers should "decide" for themselves maintains the trope of perpetual uncertainty (A. Hill, 2011; Jacobs, 2010; Lauro & Paul, 2013). These shows also use documentary techniques and technical jargon as rhetorical devices to stress the reality aspect. Framing the events in scientific terms minimizes the superstitious aspects of ghosts and presents the topic as serious-minded (Burger, 2010), and the reliance on subjective experiences keeps viewers returning (Lauro & Paul, 2013). The emphasis is on the quest for evidence, as opposed to detailed analysis or concrete conclusions (Hanks, 2015).

Ultimately, programs are pieced together to form a whole that is compelling to believers, but illogical and frustrating to skeptics (Stockly, 2011; Walter, 2013). As paranormal shows became routine, typically presented weekly, new programs embraced sensationalism. For example, in 2015 a live exorcism (of a haunted house) occurred on television (Yahr, 2015). Although hyped as the first event of its kind, nothing of paranormal interest transpired. We describe several themes exhibiting VAPUS *versatility*, *universality*, *scalability*, and most evidently, *participatory* aspects of several more popular shows below.

Ghostwatch (Volk & Manning, 1992), aired on the BBC, was ahead of its time in depicting a haunted family home under investigation (Leeder, 2013). The ingenious broadcast was both a critique of the media through the vehicle of a ghost story and an excellent example of horror. Television became the spirit "medium" as the storyline (and real-life claimants playing a role) asserted that activity was spreading everywhere. *Ghost Adventures* would later assert a similar claim about demonic spirits. O'Keeffe (2011) contended that the *Ghostwatch* structure undoubtedly influenced later shows, most notably *Most Haunted*. Key elements were the format, an investigative film crew led by a television presenter supported by a studio of experts, and the blurring of fiction with reality. Additionally, the success of "found footage" films, with its often-shaky and amateurish camera footage and frequent close-ups of the terrified protagonists, had an additional influence on the television ghost-hunting genre (O'Keeffe, 2011).

MTV's *Fear* (2000-2002) was a bold direction in paranormal television. The show appealed to a youthful audience, using horror tropes (Blanco & Peeren, 2010) and a game show framework along with the groundbreaking point-of-view camera rigs. The emotional responses were the core draw of the show as the audience could see the contestants frighten themselves (Rotondaro, 2010). This show began a trend to popularize historic places as haunted.

Most Haunted, which began in 2002, was a less tech-heavy celebration of the paranormal that embraced psychics, gothic imagery, and feminism (Hanks, 2015; Heholt, 2012; A. Hill, 2011). Koven (2007) viewed it as a blend of folklore and reality television and called it a "televised legend-trip" or a mass-mediated form of ostentation. To suggest a haunting, the production focused on an exaggerated background and atmosphere (Sagers, 2016). Illustratively, the resident psychic, Derek Acorah, would recurrently be "possessed" by spirits. Regular assertions of fakery and complaints to the British television standards authority undermined the program's credibility. Hence, the live shows carried disclaimers of being "for entertainment only". Despite lacking perceived sincerity, *Most Haunted* did have an important social influence. Clarke (2012) and Davies (2007) remarked how it renewed interest in historical ghost-hunting and spawned spin-off programming, as well as evoking new and democratic concepts of heritage and the historical past (Hanks, 2015).

A few years after *Most Haunted* appeared in the UK, *Ghost Hunters* in the US featured *TAPS* (The Atlantic Paranormal Society) with lead-investigators Hawes and Wilson. The early shows depicted the real-life ghostbusters as blue-collar plumbers with normal lives, who acquired unusual expertise in an unconventional side job (Blake, 2013; Leland, 2002; Maddox, 2009). Many cited this show as being credible because of its

attempts, although minimal, to find natural, non-paranormal explanations for observed events (Anderson, 2012; Burger, 2010).

Ghost Hunters used a vague definition of "paranormal," which was "anything they couldn't explain" (Stelter, 2009). Content came from the narratives of residents and business people, who were willing to share their stories in a public sphere. In this context, participants avoided potential ridicule and received positive attention (Williams, 2010). The show's audience reached a peak of three-million viewers (Sagers, 2016; Stelter, 2009), mostly female (Seidman, 2009). *Ghost Hunters* was socially impactful. It spawned several catchphrases ("Did you hear/see that?" "What the [Hell] was that?" and "Dude, run!"). Additionally, the program received the ultimate pop-culture skewering on *South Park* (Hale, 2009). The goal of the show, *TAPS* stated, was to help people deal with their paranormal situations, educate the public, and ultimately provide "proof" (Maddox, 2009) of paranormal activity. Eschewing psychics, but still employing a demonologist when needed, *Ghost Hunters* popularized the use of gadgets, emphasized technology (Jacobs, 2010), embraced science talk (S. Hill, 2017), and raised public acceptance of real-life ghost investigation (Ironside, 2016; Maddox, 2009).

Ghost Adventures (2008-present) aired on the Travel channel in 2008 to near one-million viewers (TV By the Numbers, 2009) and became the network's most popular show. Fronted by Zak Bagans, the show was non-rigorous, often vulgar and comedic. *Ghost Adventures* relied heavily on spooky imagery and cheap thrills (Jacobs, 2010; Lauro & Paul, 2013). Renner (2013) cited this production for its hypermasculinity, which contrasts with historically women-oriented spiritualism. Bagans' role extends beyond investigator—he acts as an action-adventure hero harassing and baiting ghosts and daring them to interact with him. *Ghost Adventures* appealed to younger audiences (Sagers, 2016). Despite its flaws, devotees took the show seriously.

With a comparable viewer demographic, *Paranormal State* portrayed college students as seekers and warriors, often fighting demonic forces with modern technology in consultation with Vatican exorcists. The narrative structure was that of a mystery requiring solution by the team of detectives that included a haunted leader (Buell & Petrucha, 2010), technicians, and sensitives (Walter, 2013; Williams, 2010).

One consequence of the *scalable* nature of the ghost narrative is the *participatory* application of spiritual mediums in a quasi-therapeutic role towards the public. The evolution of paranormal media increased the profile of psychic mediums. Mediums featured prominently on most paranormal reality shows and developed a significant broadcasting presence. Accordingly, mediums were highly sought for appearances and private readings, regardless of their vague responses. The modern medium's

version of death and afterlife was almost entirely positive (Dobry, 2013). Their main intention being to assuage the grief of those left behind. Celebrity psychics in the US and UK were frequently dogged by skeptical critics. Alleged psychic Sally Morgan sued a media outlet for slander (Green, 2011). In particular, following settlement of the case, Morgan's publicity machine demanded that all mention of the fraud allegation be removed from the first author's website.

In closing our review of media, we note that the *participatory* nature of ghost narratives, combined with the other VAPUS components has led academics and non-proponents of the ghost narrative to question the extent to which the explosion of media regarding ghost narratives has affected paranormal belief. Research strongly suggests the influence is not a clear case of cause and effect. Only a few studies since the seminal work of Sparks, Nelson, and Campbell (1997) have investigated this relationship. Sparks and Miller (2001) produced a follow-up to the 1997 study and findings were inconsistent. This may be because the blending of nonfiction with dramatic depictions of the paranormal obfuscates meaning. Brewer (2013) noted that viewers often regarded reality paranormal television as scientific and credible. Shows adopting a documentary style appeared truthful while entertaining and the dramatic depictions of the paranormal appealed to both believers and non-believers alike.

Sarapin and Sparks (2014) looked at dramatic and real-life crime-oriented shows and found a positive relationship between paranormal television viewing by police officers and their belief in the effectiveness of psychics to solve crimes. Sparks and Miller (2001) proposed there is a "resonance" effect, whereby certain themes connect with viewers who adopt them, or they seek out these programs to reinforce their views. Questions remain whether belief informs media choice or media messages feed belief. The public leans toward belief tempered with uncertainty (Hanks, 2015; Holloway & Kneale 2008; Kinsella 2011).

TECHNOLOGY AS VALIDATION AND BOUNDARY-KEEPING

The topic of *gadgetry* is common in professional and non-professional fields. Within ghost-hunting, however, it facilitates group functioning and contributes to boundary-keeping (i.e., delineates in-groups versus out-groups). Explicitly, access to knowledge and relevant technology serve as validation and gate-keeping mechanisms (cf. Foucault, 2002; Rose, 1998). The participatory feature of the VAPUS model acknowledges the importance of technology and group boundaries. Applied to our discussion of the ghost narrative, ghost-hunting "technology" provides paranormal enthusiasts with an apparent connection to science, as well as demarcating

groups in terms of the level and type of "scientific" technology used. Moreover, gadgets add a tangible facet to involvement by enabling participants to assume the role of 'scientific or expert ghost-hunter' with gadgetry serving as props.

Riders of the American ghost-hunting wave, spurred primarily by the *Ghost Hunters* show, developed an obsession with gadgets as the preferred means to find, track, provide evidence of, and communicate with ghosts (Clarke, 2012; Williams, 2010). There has been a long and somewhat quiet history of researchers experimenting with technology in the pursuit of the supernatural (see e.g., Bebergal, 2018; Houran & Lange, 1998), but ghost-hunts without gadgets nowadays are virtually unheard of (Dickey, 2016b; Houran, 2017; Maher, 2015) as investigators and the public alike regard equipment with reverence (Hanks, 2015).

These devices symbolize "objectivity," and their purpose (consciously or otherwise) is to legitimize various methods and procedure as "scientific." Notably, the quality of method or data itself is obfuscated by the process. The general body of ghost enthusiasts cannot collectively decide if the machines are documenting paranormal activity or displaying environmental changes that may result from paranormal activity. Various machines, sometimes modified to work specifically as spirit communication devices, are said to be a medium for ghosts to contact the living and the living to speak with the dead (Goldstein et al., 2007). Routine equipment includes audio and visual recording devices, meters that measure temperature and electromagnetic fields, and white noise generators.

At the very least, these and other devices serve as tangible, "scientific-looking," and interactive props in haunt narratives. For instance, 'instrumental transcommunication' devices (ITC) include modified equipment called "ghost/spirit boxes" (largely derived from the "Frank's box" invented in 2002). These are essentially radio receivers that scan empty frequencies. Seemingly, sophisticated translation instruments (such as the 'Ovilus') purportedly decode environmental signals into words (Brown, 2016; Lauro & Paul, 2013). Some groups still use old-fashioned devices like the Ouija board or dowsing rods to connect with spirits, though there appears to be a cultural division or boundary between those that use "high-tech" equipment as opposed to occult tools (Jacobs, 2010).

Disputes persist about the paranormality of "orbs" (bright, spherical effects in photographs and sometimes video) (Ventola, 2002). Most orb photography (and video) is commonly explainable as reflections of light or infrared light from moisture particles, dust, or insects (cf. Schwartz & Creath, 2005; Storm, 2001). Despite this, some investigators continue to insist that orbs represent genuine spherical spirit manifestations (Parsons, 2015). Nevertheless, various photographic approaches are still used in empirical ghost-related research, either for *documentation* (e.g., Houran,

1997; Lange & Houran, 1997; Terhune, Ventola, & Houran, 2007), or as *stimuli in studies* on interpretation (e.g., Dagnall, Drinkwater, Denovan, & Parker, 2015; Irwin, 2015b; Mayer, 2014; Ventola, 2007, 2009).

Television shows have popularized the use of technology and its *participatory* aspect. Consequently, the sale of ghost hunting equipment is currently a lucrative business (Blake, 2013; Brown, 2016; Burger, 2010). Manufactures produce approximately 30,000 "K2" EMF meters (popularized by *Ghost Hunters*) every year (Bauerline, 2011). Many of the ghost devices are homemade or self-modifications of existing equipment to make them into "ghost detectors" (Dickey, 2016b). Several online stores also sell equipment directly to paranormal enthusiasts. One of the oldest businesses, "The Ghosthunter Store" in New Jersey, opened in 1999 (http://www.theghosthunterstore.com). Inventors devise and sell their own special creations that they claim can communicate with ghosts (Brown, 2016). Additionally, investigators can carry a multitude of instruments within a smartphone these days (Bauerlein, 2011). New equipment that detects human movement, like the X-Box gaming system, has even been adapted to function as "ghost detectors" (Dickey, 2016b; O'Brien, 2017).

A prominent from of ghostly encounter evidence is "electronic voice phenomena" (EVP). Nearly every investigation group that considers itself professional or scientific regard EVP as evidence of paranormal interactions. This presumption occurs without scientific vetting of the phenomena. Consequently, EVP evidence produced by ghost-hunters and the media is typically unconvincing (i.e., vague recorded noises) or manipulated (e.g., amplified or slowed-down). Furthermore, ghost-hunting organizations fail to control for conventional explanations, such as unaccounted whispers, accidental sounds, and audio glitches. This approach contrasts with academic research, which empirically examines the nature and content of EVPs (see Leary & Butler, 2015 for a review, or Laythe & Owen, 2013 for an applied EVP protocol). Despite these issues, enthusiasts keen to perceive EVP phenomena as evidence of ghostly activity often subjectively interpret recorded audio sounds. Jason Hawes of TAPS refers to the human ability to impose sense on noise as "matrixing". Psychologists refer to the tendency to detect meaning within random noise as *pareidolia* or *apophenia* (for a discussion, see: Brugger, 2001).

The use of technology on paranormal television shows is key to the appeal of the programs. Not only does the equipment portray a veneer of a scientific approach and objectivity, it permits observation of results. Subjective perceptions correlated with device readings provide apparent evidence, even though ghost-hunter investigations lack rigorous controls (cf. Houran & Brugger, 2000). A few groups have determined that these devices are distracting and not of much use (Maher, 2015). Ghost-hunters will typically admit there is no definitive "ghost meter" (S. Hill, 2017). Yet,

TAPS and other groups assume that the key to proving the physical reality of ghosts lies in technological advances (Brown, 2016).

Technology readings are often no better than testimonials, because ghost-hunters can rarely explain how devices work, or appreciate what their outputs represent (Harvey, 2013). Jacobs (2010) suggested that the failure to understand technology produces misunderstanding when equipment malfunctions or behaves unexpectedly. Erratically functioning equipment, when misinterpreted, can represent a key form of evidence in depicting a scenario as paranormal (Drinkwater, Dagnall, Grogan, & Riley, 2017; Lange, Houran, Harte, & Havens, 1996). What can be used to detect anomalies, when interpreted without knowledge or appropriate environmental controls, can result in the manufacture of misguided evidence.

Subsequently, what appears as an application of science via technology is in effect validation and legitimization of practices within a ghost-hunting group. The critique of scientists towards the use of these items is a situation of "boundary protection" (Durkheim, 2013; Foucault, 2002; Rose, 1998), where various scientific communities protect their own boundaries by debunking the inappropriate use and understanding of scientific equipment. In sum, the technology serves as a symbol of the conflict between the scientific and those who attempt to borrow their practices for legitimacy within the ghost narrative (S. Hill, 2017). As such, debates over "science" and "technology" within the ghost narrative highlight the *participatory* aspect of our VAPUS model, in the sense that these deliberations stem from social group boundaries, and not necessarily the use (appropriate or otherwise) of technology per se.

THE ADVERSARIAL DYNAMICS AMONG PARAPSYCHOLOGISTS, SKEPTICS, & GHOST-HUNTERS

The real consequence of media-fueled ghost narratives, especially their *participatory* aspect, is that they inevitably create conflict between new and existing groups (cf. Tajfel & Turner, 2004). This is evident when we examine the rise of ghost-hunters in contrast to skeptics, the general scientific community, and parapsychology. Amateur ghost-hunters and investigators dominate modern paranormal culture. Although this movement is a pop-culture phenomenon (A. Hill, 2011; Potts, 2004), very little academic work has examined the social rise and function of these thousands of enthusiasts worldwide, who seek out or are called to homes, businesses, private/municipal buildings and outdoor spaces to document paranormal activity (Ironside, 2016). Their self-promoted image in media

and the public is often that of everyday superheroes fearlessly confronting unseen forces with grim determination (Blake, 2013; S. Hill, 2017).

Organizationally, members of ghost-hunting groups have self-assigned titles and specific roles (McNeill, 2006). Indeed, sense of personal identity is vital to amateurs (Hanks, 2015; S. Hill, 2017). Counting the number of groups is difficult due to their ephemeralness. The largest estimated number in the US was over 4,000. This approximation derived from registrations at the popular website paranormalsocieties.com (Blake, 2013). Yet, the components of *universality***,** *versatility*, and *scalability* spurred by the media, fosters the inevitable spread of groups from the overt *participatory* aspect of ghost-hunting shows.

Paranormal media allow people to virtually *participate* and decide for themselves what is true and real in the comfort of their own homes (Burger, 2010). Paranormal investigation, however, is a populist real-world activity, in demand by the public and media. Once the realm of parapsychologists, now untrained amateurs attend to spontaneous cases (Clarke, 2012) with little or no connection to academia. With entry into this hobby so accessible via local groups and the Internet, anyone with an interest can assume a self-ascribed status within a sub-culture that appears professional and important. Democratization, so key to this niche, may be a reaction against a perceived authority of scientists and historians to dictate knowledge and heritage (Partridge, 2013). Hanks (2015) described how participants create and define their own version of history, whereas S. Hill (2017) noted how amateur research and investigation groups claim scientific authority with the public. Kwilecki (2009) considered ghost interest a product of the new "spiritual marketplace." It is a way for unemployed, underemployed, retired, or stay-at-home individuals to feel like they are making a worthwhile contribution, having meaningful experiences and obtaining personal gain, without additional education or other burdensome requirements.

Those who participate in investigations are a subgroup of paranormal enthusiasts with typically no scientific or professional backgrounds (Clarke, 2012; S. Hill, 2017; Northcote, 2007; Potts, 2004) and no unified, academic understanding of ghostly episodes (Hanks, 2015). Duffy (2012) undertook an independent, informal survey of North American groups showing that the peak year of their formation was 2007. Most participants were 20-40 years old and religiously-ambiguous (see also Bader, 2017). In this vein, Potts (2004) was among the earliest to recognize and study the expansion of ghost-hunter group formation. A. Hill (2011) noted the growth of these organizations in Britain, while Hanks (2015), using ethnographic techniques, participated in the activities of ghost-hunter groups to study their motivations and backgrounds. Mayer (2013) likewise explored the trend in Germany and the USA. Amateur ghost-hunting even spread to

Southeast Asia, where media messages appealing to young adults overwhelmed a taboo against discussing ghosts (Bangkok Post, 2015).

The proliferation of ghost-hunting groups, typically several in a city and 20 or more in a region or state, resulted in an extremely competitive environment where each jockeyed for attention (S. Hill, 2017)—a clear and real-life example of Social Conflict Theory (Oberschall, 1973) and SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Essentially, with the advent of so many ghost-hunting organizations, distrust and discord resulted from the attempt to procure the most "resources" (i.e., popularity, authority, and established power) for each of the competing organizations (e.g., Marx, 1972). In contrast to this, an effort called "paranormal unity" was an attempt to coalesce competing ghost-hunting groups around a serious and scientific purpose. The core goal of this effort was to eliminate toxic criticism between groups (Blake, 2013; Krulos, 2015). However, groups generally did not cooperate with each other or even share data (Blake 2013; Brown, 2008).

Motivated by cultural competition, there exists a loosely connected sub-community of ghost research organizations. These eschew following any guiding authority that would set standards for investigation (Northcote, 2007). Further, there is no accepted handbook or training schedule for paranormal investigations. Some groups use Warren (2004), for example, but it is non-scholarly and employs cultural, theoretical, and religious beliefs to enhance the credibility of the field. Radford (2010, 2018) provided an explicitly rational take on investigating claims. Similarly, Parsons (2015) is critical of common activities promoted by ghost-hunters and contains details about the use and misuse of equipment (see Analysis #2 for the motivations of this issue). Research in this domain remains unstructured and disputed; the huge volume of data remains isolated and unincorporated into any coherent analytic strategy (Dubaj et al., 2011; Houran, 2017).

The ghost-hunting community evolved via the Internet, conventions, and word of mouth. About half of such groups adopt a quasi-scientific approach (cf. S. Hill, 2017). Generally, methods of these organizations represent a mix of empirical, occult, and religious activities (Bader, 2017; Eaton, 2015; Hanks, 2015; S. Hill, 2017; Potts, 2004; Tilley, 2002; Wadler, 2008; Williams, 2010). They adopt parts of applied scientific method (Brewer, 2013; Potts, 2004) but do not apply full scientific methodologies (S. Hill, 2017). Respectively, a portion of the public treats these quasi-scientific ghost-hunting groups like professionals or scientists (S. Hill, 2017). Correspondingly, with the active encouragement of the media, individuals assume the role of paranormal experts (Hanks 2015; S. Hill, 2017; Ironside, 2016; Kinsella, 2011; Potts, 2004).

The use of technology, fueled by the popularizing media, has resulted in several sub-roles within most amateur ghost-hunting groups. These serve to assign status, prestige, and psychologically, help to boost self-esteem through membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Roles include scientist, technician, demonologist, community hero, investigator, spirit exterminator, and reality television star (S. Hill, 2017). Additionally, the role of paranormal investigator is service-oriented (Mayer, 2013) because it often entails visiting private homes by appointment to resolve reported metaphysical problems (Leland, 2002). Ghost-hunting groups often attribute causes of reported events to natural phenomena understood by few (Lauro & Paul, 2013), such as electromagnetic fields, infrasound, and quantum mechanics. Many concede that conducting scholarly research is prohibitive (S. Hill, 2017; McNeill, 2006), thus admitting they are unable to account to the public regarding their knowledge and authority (as exhibited in Wilson 2008, 2012).

Participants within ghost-hunting groups vary widely in their reasons for involvement (Brown, 2008; Northcote, 2007), including wishing to prove the paranormal exists, the desire to challenge science, or to be on television (Blake, 2013; Dickey, 2016a). For others it is a social activity, a means to help their community, or to gain social status as experts. Many acknowledge it is a way to explore their own odd experiences and seek further confirmation of belief (Howells, 2008; Krulos, 2015). This latter observation parallels the growing research in personal religions, or belief systems that have no formal affiliation with any form of a religious institutional body (e.g., quest orientation: Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Maltby, Lewis, & Day 1999).

Panoptically, disconnectedness is conspicuous among the sub-communities that examine the paranormal, especially ghostly episodes. The cultural trend of *hauntology* is indifferent to paranormal investigators' quest for proof. Parapsychologists frequently pursue laboratory-based experiments (Irwin & Watt, 2007). In doing so they abjure the gadgetry favored by ghost-hunters (Cardeña, Palmer, & Marcusson-Clavertz, 2015; Parsons, 2015). It is unclear whether this avoidance reflects empirical or social concerns; that is, avoiding labels that are attached to competing social groups.

The contemporary amateur researcher's quest for paranormal evidence is largely detached from the history or science of psychical research and generally disengaged from the cultural need for ghosts (Caterine, 2011). Additionally, skeptics of the paranormal attest to provide a perspective of reason and rationality, but they can remain ignorant of the deep human need for enchantment (Dickey, 2016a; Partridge, 2013), as well as evidence contrary to their ideological assumptions (Cardeña et al., 2015), and thus, the validity of their own perspective.

Within discussions regarding belief, the skeptical voice can be construed as a balancing and necessary role in discourse about the paranormal (S. Hill, 2011). Debunkers have always existed, and audiences expect to hear opposing views (Davies, 2007). The debate between skeptics and believers across all groups again highlights a social conflict perspective (Oberschall, 1973) that fuels in-group and out-group thinking, as well as beliefs regarding ideological superiority (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Skeptical researchers play essential roles in this domain, because they highlight the potential flaws in the investigative process, quality of data, and interpretations of the haunt narrative (Bartholomew & Nickell, 2015; S. Hill, 2017; Nickell, 2012; Parsons, 2015; Radford, 2010).

However, believers often perceive this perspective as disparaging (Wadler, 2008), especially when believers attract negative labels, such as "stupid or gullible" (Lamont, Coelho, & McKinlay, 2009), or when a sense-of-wonder is discredited (Laycock, 2014). Yet, in the VAPUS *participatory* aspect, both skeptics and believers help to drive the ghost narrative. Disagreement and "controversy" sometimes heighten interest, and this was evident even in the early history of Spiritualism (see Jaher, 2015; Natale, 2016).

A common skeptical position laments the rise of irrationalism and lack of scientific literacy (Caterine, 2011), which are often blamed on a failing education system and an uncritical media influence (Northcote, 2007; Sparks & Miller, 2001). However, evidence from academic surveys and polls indicates that outright disbelief, or cynicism, is the unusual, atypical position (Dagnall, Drinkwater, Parker, & Clough, 2016). Irwin's (2015b) small study noted a dearth of research on why skeptics disbelieve. Instead, there are a myriad of reasons as to why the skeptical view is largely unwanted. Critics argue skepticism "breaks the spell" of enchantment desired by amateur paranormal believers (Armstrong, 2013; Davis, 2010; Dewan, 2013; Dickey, 2016a). Pro-paranormal advocates gain an advantage by portraying the skeptic as the hostile "other" and as the "loser" in modern dramas (Northcote, 2007). Such beliefs drive a wedge between organizations and groups based on ideological assumptions and prestige, which obfuscates the genuine study of ghostly phenomena (see DISCUSSION).

Modern parapsychology has coped with irrational skepticism (i.e., representing an unassailable ideology) and found itself associated with amateur organizations of ghost-hunters, who often misrepresent parapsychology. These tensions have produced further in-group and out-group distinctions among those who are interested in the paranormal (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Contrary to the narrative espoused in some cases, skepticism is alive and well within parapsychology itself, highlighted by the fact that only one-third of surveyed parapsychologists advocate spiritual

beliefs (Tart, 2003), and those who do also report taking great pains to ensure objectivity and empiricism in their published works.

Parapsychologists often do not deal with rational skeptics (cf. Truzzi, 1987), in the sense of skepticism representing an appropriate evaluation of hypotheses and the relevant data that supports claims or rejects them in an unbiased and empirical manner (Cardeña et al., 2015; Jahn & Dunne, 2007). Instead, relevantly termed "pseudo-skeptics" are more common critics of parapsychology. The resulting debates have shown many inconsistent claims from both parties, but overall, they have revealed selective and unscientific practices in criticizing parapsychology (see e.g., Hergovich, Schott, & Burger, 2010). Some authors have likewise derided those within the parapsychological community who commit a similar violation of the scientific method by assuming that paranormality *must* exist (Cardeña et al., 2015; Houran, Lynn, & Lange, 2017).

The "conflictual" results of VAPUS *participation*, however, has been used to some groups' positive effect. To add to the traditional narrative of skeptics versus parapsychologists, amateur paranormal enthusiasts systematically produce another deviation from actual skepticism that suits their needs. In media and public portrayals, some investigation groups designate one member as "the skeptic" and state this person is critical or cautious of claims. From a public performance perspective, the use of the "skeptic" invokes what appears to be a questioning attitude. In turn, this exchange of "skepticism" and belief signals to the audience that ghost-hunters are not gullible and promotes the image that they are experienced and reasonable (S. Hill, 2017).

This rhetorical technique is evident when skeptical disclaimers accompany individual narratives (Lamont, 2007). Consistent with Clarke's (1995) finding that belief in ghosts is often attributed to personal experience (see also Drinkwater, Dagnall, & Bate, 2013), witnesses profiled in the media commonly claim that they were skeptical until a noteworthy personal experience changed their mind. Coined the "avowal of prior skepticism" by Lamont (2007, p. 681), this framing serves to convince the listener of the witness' sensibilities and rationality and helps to establish the plausibility of their account (Stone, 2013). Similarly, Bauman (2004) discussed how, in recounting paranormal experiences, the boundary between real and imaginary retains plausibility but becomes blurred. This occurs via the consistent interweaving of details from the narrator's everyday life. 'Conversation analytic' approaches to understanding accounts of paranormal experiences make a similar point. Referring to normality and mundane daily activity at the start of a paranormal account provides the narrator with greater credibility (Wooffitt, 1992).

Applying the VAPUS model to skeptics, ghost-hunters, and parapsychologists leads us to conclude that much of this growing conflict is

not data-driven but based on group prestige or ideology. In truth, the simplified skeptical "straw man" does not exist, but this positive-negative dichotomy created in discourse is necessary for each group to claim ground and define its identity with proponents and skeptics almost dependent on each other for that identity (Northcote, 2007). This builds upon observations by sociologist Trevor Pinch (1987), who described parapsychologists and their critics as being "locked into a symbiotic relationship" (p. 604).

DISCUSSION

These illustrations of the VAPUS model underscore Laythe, Houran, and Ventola's (2018) conclusion that "the available evidence does not favor the idea that haunt-type anomalies are objective, physical forces we can easily understand apart from experients" (p. 210). Indeed, this notion seems to apply equally to investigators and anyone or any group that participates in ghostly narratives. From this perspective, haunted houses represent a metaphorical "hall-of-mirrors" in which perceptions of the anomalous are, in part, distorted reflections of an individual's mental set, ideologies, social affiliations, and cultural norms.

Along these lines, the present paper and previous findings (e.g., Hill et al., 2018; Laythe et al., 2018) could also be constructively interpreted within the Dramatistic Model of Communication by literary critic Kenneth Burke (1969). This model identifies elements of the actor, act, audience, meaning, and scene in any communicative or expressive situation. As such, it nicely aligns with the premise that experiences, interactions, and investigations connected to ghostly episodes are dramatic expressions of motivations, beliefs, messages, and potential actions—i.e., psychophysical parallelisms encompassing dramatizations, personifications, or expressions of psychological issues. Moreover, some of the sociocultural forces that help to shape or sustain these narratives are often competitive and sometimes even combative. For example, parapsychologists have traditionally competed with skeptically-inclined scientists or lay-researchers in terms of interpreting ghostly episodes for the public. Yet, over the last two decades or so, a "third power" of organized ghost-hunting groups has entered the arena of cultural authority.

What we hope is evident in the current work is the fact that regardless of our affiliations, much of the conflict between organizations and ideologies resides not in the veracity of the research methods used (or lack thereof), but rather the cultural influence of the above groups in the acceptance (or rejection) of these phenomena, and the benefits of authority, prestige, or power that result among existing authorities (Marx, 1972; Oberschall, 1973). We explicitly note that the correctness of a specific

ideology (scientific or otherwise) is irrelevant in a cultural context beyond the ability to use that "correctness" to garner public favor, acceptance, or popularity (Laythe, 2006; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 2004). The fact that empirical science plays a role in this interaction has essentially proven to be immaterial, both in the past (e.g., see Taves, 2014, for the social reasons that parapsychology was excluded from psychology), as well as seen in the recent rise and popularity of the "unscientific" community of amateur paranormal investigators.

As participants within a culture and members of said groups, most people are expected to be much less concerned about the research methods being used, as opposed to the interpretive implications of the "evidence" to their respective affiliations (Besta, Mattingly, & Blazek, 2016). Supporting Durkheim's (2013) initial observations, social psychology has long demonstrated the effects of *confirmation bias* (Gilovich, Griffin, & Kahneman, 2002; Hergovich et al., 2010; Nickerson, 1998) and *belief perseverance* (Anderson & Kellam, 1992; Anderson, Lepper, & Ross, 1980; Guenther & Alicke, 2008), which show that individuals' preferred beliefs trump actual evidence and that these tendencies seem universal to human functioning. However, in rhetoric between these groups, confirmation bias is often assumed to reside more so with the opposing organization, which does not reflect the evidence of this ingrained cognitive error.

Likewise, research in Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 2004) demonstrates the innate desire of any group to derogate out-group members. Studies in the psychology of religion, with cultural behavior like any other group (Laythe, 2006), have shown clear evidence of prejudice in association with extreme ideological beliefs (Laythe, Finkel, Bringle, & Kirkpatrick, 2002; Laythe, Finkel, & Kirkpatrick, 2001; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Swann et al., 2014). These ideologies can get in the way of facts, evidence, and collaboration—a cornerstone of scientific model-building and theory-formation.

From the above, and as our case analyses show, obfuscation of findings in this domain (within academia or the mass media) can occur as a function of group dynamics playing out on the cultural stage. Regardless of belief or skeptical orientations, some societal realities remain evident that seemingly place parapsychology in a precarious position. In fact, skeptics might face a similar situation given that the skeptic/believer dichotomy ostensibly has a symbiotic relationship (Pinch, 1987). Put bluntly, ghost enthusiasts, regardless of their lack of training or education, have more cultural popularity and vastly outnumber the academics who study (or critique) ghost-related anomalies. Social identity research (Tajfel & Turner, 2004) shows the very limited power regarding the facts that drive groups' ideologies within society. As a result, there is essential truth in the claim that popularity dictates cultural beliefs (cf. Social Reality Theory).

As we explored in the above analyses, the lack of scientific focus, understanding, and rigor within most ghost-hunting organizations (S. Hill, 2017; Potts, 2004), combined with their appropriation of gadgetry to legitimize amateur organizations, has caused rancor among some professional academics. But we must also recognize that most of parapsychology's current methods and theories might be generally inaccessible—*physically* or *intellectually*—to the public. Accordingly, we should consider more effective means for paranormal enthusiasts to access, comprehend, and apply peer-reviewed literature and other available resources.

The websites of some professional organizations have started to remedy this by offering a range of free and user-friendly resources to educate the general public, including the Institute for the Study of Religious and Anomalous Experience (ISRAE), Parapsychological Association, Parapsychology Foundation, Inc., Society for Psychical Research, and the Society for Scientific Exploration. We also note that Annalisa Ventola has taken an important step in this direction with her blog (www.PublicParapsychology.org). However, in an era where universities and researchers often judge academic quality via metrics, the lack of first-rate, open-access journals undermines the accessibility and impact of parapsychological studies. Essentially, the failure or resistance of well-known journals in the field to adapt to the VAPUS component of *versatility* has inadvertently stunted the academic evolution of parapsychology and anomalistic psychology.

From the marketing-based aspect of VAPUS, there are (once again) millions of individuals interested to the point of their routine participation in ghost and haunt "excursions" of various sorts. These individuals remain an immense resource which, frankly, has failed to be systematically utilized or fostered by the parapsychological community. It might also be fair to say that, despite a lack of quality methodology, many amateur enthusiasts have more time or experience in actual field settings attempting to interact with purported spontaneous cases of ghostly phenomena than the bulk of parapsychologists who specifically study (or critique) this domain. One predominant example in the literature is the Barušs (2001) study of EVP collected at a college. The investigator's null findings might have differed had an amateur group been consulted to recommend actual locations known for putative EVP effects.

For those lamenting the general lack of scientific education among ghost-hunting groups, and their ideological or group-oriented motives, technology now allows user-friendly educational and training platforms with a global reach. This opportunity can help to bridge ideological and methodological gaps between amateur and professional research organizations. To be sure, we interpret the appropriation of gadgetry by

ghost-hunting groups as an opportunistic sign that some of them strive for a legitimately scientific approach. With this assumption in mind, we have discussed elsewhere (e.g., Houran, 2017; Laythe et al., 2018) that opportunities for comprehensive 'big data' approaches with mobile technology are readily available.

A mere fraction of cooperating amateur ghost-hunters could provide unprecedented amounts of standardized data from field settings that would have been infeasible, or even impossible, in parapsychology only two decades ago. Beyond this examination of the cultural interplay of VAPUS and related theories to haunt narratives, we might question the reader about who is going to represent the next generation of parapsychologists and carry on the 100-year tradition of studies in this realm. Given that mainstream science is disinclined to support parapsychological studies, and skeptics often continue to debate the relevancy of ghost-related research, is it in the field's best interest to ostracize itself from millions of eager, albeit amateur, ghost-hunters? Perhaps new strategies capitalizing on insights from the VAPUS model should be considered.

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"Meme-Spirited": I. The VAPUS Model for Understanding the Prevalence and Potency of Ghost Narratives. Article. Sep 2018. Participants who believed in ghosts reported significantly more unusual phenomena than disbelievers, and were significantly more likely to attribute the phenomena to ghosts. Participants then walked around an allegedly haunted area of the Palace and provided reports about unusual phenomena they experienced. Ghost stories and tales of the supernatural have been around for centuries and are a feature of nearly every culture. Though many people may not believe in ghosts today, stories about haunted castles, enchanted ruins and spooky spectres are still very popular. Why do we like to be scared so much? One theory is that frightening stories cause a release of adrenaline which makes us feel a 'rush'. Adrenaline is the same hormone that is released in a fight or flight situation, and, because there is no real danger, we enjoy this 'thrill'. So we tell ghost stories around the campfire, go to frighteni