

Haunted People Syndrome and Phasmophobia: A Comprehensive Systematic Analysis

Ms. Jessica J.¹, Ms. Kavibharathi S.^{2*}

ABSTRACT

This study examines the psychological mechanisms underlying Haunted People Syndrome (HPS) and phasmophobia both rooted in the fear of the supernatural. HPS involves persistent ghostly encounters, often influenced by environmental triggers, cognitive biases, and heightened suggestibility. Phasmophobia, characterized by an intense fear of ghosts, manifests through severe anxiety, avoidance behaviors, and autonomic arousal. Research suggests that both conditions share common psychological factors, including belief systems, perceptual biases, and executive function impairments. Additionally, sleep disturbances, dissociation, and cultural narratives contribute to these experiences, indicating that they arise from internal cognitive processes rather than external supernatural forces. Despite their similarities, HPS and phasmophobia remain underexplored, highlighting the need for further research to clarify their underlying mechanisms and enhance therapeutic interventions. This paper synthesizes existing literature to emphasize the importance of a deeper understanding of these phenomena and their implications for mental health.

Keywords: *Haunted People Syndrome, Phasmophobia, Supernatural Fear, Cognitive Biases, Psychological Mechanisms*

Fear of supernatural's and beliefs about it are deeply influenced by human experience, even though we have scientific evidence for everything still the topics like this blur the line between reality and imagination. Haunted people syndrome (HSP) and Phasmophobia are two facts that reflect fear but the studies about these two topics are less in number and it remains unexplored in psychological research. Recurrent experiences of anomalous phenomena attributed to supernatural causes, influenced by cognitive biases and psychosocial factors (Laythe et al., 2021). An intense, irrational fear of ghosts or supernatural entities, classified as a specific phobia (Wiederhold & Wiederhold, 2018). This study satisfies the curiosity and it helps to understand the cognitive process behind this. Overall, the study examines the overlap between Haunted People Syndrome (HPS) and phasmophobia, analyzing their emotional and cognitive impacts. The study aims to address the empirical evidence on the relationship between two variables (mention its name) and other factors contributing to the phenomena address the research gap by investigating how ambiguous stimuli are misinterpreted as paranormal experiences, considering factors like

¹Department of Social Sciences, Lady Doak College

²Assistant Professor, Department of Social Sciences, Lady Doak College

*Corresponding Author

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Haunted People Syndrome and Phasmophobia: A Comprehensive Systematic Analysis

sleep disturbances, stress, and suggestibility. The purpose is to enhance understanding of the cognitive processes driving such fears, provide empirical evidence on these phenomena, and contribute to mental health interventions by identifying cognitive distortions linked to supernatural fear.

The idea emerged from analyzing psychological theories (cognitive biases, fear conditioning), scientific studies (sleep paralysis, agency detection), and cultural patterns (haunting reports, media influence) to connect supernatural experiences with phobic responses in a novel framework.

Operational Definition

Phasmophobia is a pathological fear of supernatural beliefs characterized by irrational anxiety and avoidance behaviors triggered by perceived ghostly or paranormal stimuli. It manifests through heightened autonomic arousal, cognitive distortions, and hypervigilant threat detection, often disproportionate to actual danger.

Haunted People Syndrome (HPS) is a phenomenological condition marked by recurrent experiences of subjective and objective paranormal abnormalities, such as apparitions, disembodied voices, or abnormal sensations. "It is theorized to come from neurocognitive biases, dissociative tendencies, and transliminality, influenced by psychosocial and environmental factors".

Haunted People Syndrome

Fantasy-Prone Personality (FPP) Theory suggests that individuals with FPP exhibit a heightened tendency for vivid imagination, frequent daydreaming, and dissociation. These individuals often experience blurred boundaries between fantasy and reality, making them more likely to report paranormal experiences. Their imaginative capacity can lead to increased susceptibility to phenomena such as ghost sightings or supernatural encounters, aligning with the characteristics of Haunted People Syndrome (HPS) (Wilson & Barber, 1983).

Haunted people syndrome is defined as a syndrome where people see ghostly episodes as a cluster, it is linked to objective or subjective experience.

Wiseman et al. (2002) did a study on Haunted People Syndrome, a mix of both environmental triggers and psychological bias. "They found that the report of ghostly activities like cold spots and weird noise often aligned with measurable physical abnormalities in the environment", such as places with low frequency sound, poor lighting. So during issues like this". People who already believed in the paranormal were more likely to interpret these issues as ghosts, even when the natural explanation existed. This study hints that ghost stories might stem from a combination of place-based abnormalities with perceptual bias. "The haunted people syndrome is subjective and cannot be measured.

A study by Braithwaite and Townsend (2005) explored haunted people syndrome through the sleep paralysis perspective; they used a neurocognitive model to explain supernatural-like encounters. The findings say that episodes of sleep paralysis", where individuals wake often with hallucinations of shadowy figures or paranormal activity, are similar to reports of hauntings. These experiences are linked to REM sleep where the brain's threat detection systems activate, blending dream imagery with waking perception. So "haunting" may be because of sleep-related disturbances rather than external phenomena or influences.

Haunted People Syndrome and Phasmophobia: A Comprehensive Systematic Analysis

Cognitive-perceptual factors play a key role in paranormal interpretations. Riecki et al. (2013) found that supernatural believers were likely to attribute agency to inanimate objects, suggesting that hyperactive agency detection biases contribute to ghost perceptions.

Research suggests that individuals with a history of trauma or dissociation are more susceptible to HPS. Irwin et al. (2014) found that dissociative tendencies, including depersonalization and derealization, are associated with a heightened belief in paranormal phenomena. This dissociation may cause individuals to attribute internal psychological states to external, supernatural forces. A study by Hill (2015) suggests that Haunted People Syndrome involves a continuous perception of unexplained phenomena, ranging from fear of disembodied voices often linked to health factors. This research examines how individuals reporting haunting may also experience high anxiety, dissociation or suggestibility, implying these experiences may be from cognitive and emotional processes rather than supernatural causes. The study implies that belief system and mental state plays a key role in shaping paranormal narratives and the idea of haunting may be internal rather than external causes.

Research conducted in Argentina (Parra, 2017) has validated that experiences of feeling haunted occur similarly across different cultures. The study found that people who report ghostly encounters tend to share certain psychological characteristics, particularly a strong capacity for mental absorption and vivid imagination. These results match what has been found in Western countries, indicating that such experiences may stem from fundamental aspects of human psychology rather than cultural influences. The findings support the notion that paranormal experiences can emerge from normal cognitive processes that transcend cultural boundaries.

A study by O’Keeffe et al. (2019) says that Haunted People Syndrome involves the systematic perception of objective and subjective abnormalities which may be shown as haunted type phenomena, in a modern context more like group stalking experience. They used Rasch measures to compare haunted-related abnormalities with first hand accounts of gang stalking. The findings significantly overlap in reported signs and symptoms, this suggests that both phenomena originate from similar perceptual and attention processes.

Schredl & Pütz's (2020) German study on Haunted People Syndrome (HPS) revealed that individuals reporting persistent paranormal encounters, such as ghostly apparitions or unexplained phenomena, exhibited consistent psychological patterns across cultures. The research particularly linked these experiences to traits like dissociation and blurred reality/fantasy boundaries reinforcing HPS as a cross-cultural psychological phenomenon rather than a culture-specific supernatural belief.

A study by Laythe et al. (2021) explores phenomena of haunted people syndrome from a unidimensional Rasch scale, indicating consistent symptom patterns. The authors argue that the perception and interpretation of such experiences are significantly influenced by an individual’s psychological set, shaped by psychosocial factors. Key variables, including belief in the paranormal, religious ideology, ideological practices, social desirability, latency, and environmental settings, are identified as influencing the content and meaning of ghostly narratives.

Houran and Laythe (2022) conducted a case study on intense ghostly episodes involving a family reporting long term abnormalities across multiple residences. This research

Haunted People Syndrome and Phasmophobia: A Comprehensive Systematic Analysis

administered the psychometric assessments measuring the transliminality, sensory processing sensitivity, paranormal beliefs and adverse childhood experiences. Among other factors, the findings indicate that the family experiences align with Haunted People Syndrome, particularly the high score in somatic sensory sensitivities and perceptual contagion effects. This study also quotes the role of the thin mental boundaries and confirmation biases in shaping abnormal perceptions it may be because of the influence of stress and trauma rather than evidence of paranormal activity.

Abitov's (2018) study reveals a connection between irrational thinking and neurotic symptoms, showing that individuals with neurotic disorders are more prone to paranormal beliefs and superstitions. This aligns with phasmophobia and HPS, as both conditions involve cognitive distortions that amplify supernatural fears.

Phasmophobia

Terror Management Theory (TMT), proposed by Greenberg et al. (1986), suggests that fear of ghosts may be linked to mortality salience, as ghosts symbolize death and the afterlife. According to this theory, individuals with a heightened awareness of their own mortality may be more prone to phasmophobia due to the existential anxiety triggered by reminders of death.

The Evolutionary Theory of Fear proposed by Marks and Nesse (1994) suggests that the fear of ghosts may originate from an adaptive survival mechanism. According to this theory, early humans developed a heightened sensitivity to potential threats in dark or unfamiliar environments, enhancing their chances of survival. This innate wariness may have contributed to an evolutionary predisposition to fear supernatural entities, as they symbolized unknown and potentially dangerous forces.

Persinger (2001), in *The Journal of Neuropsychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences*, approaches paranormal experiences from a neurological perspective. He argues that such phenomena are manifestations of neurogenic processes rather than external supernatural forces. According to Persinger, paranormal experiences, such as sensing presences or acquiring distant information, often coincide with specific patterns of activity in the temporal lobes. His research indicates that temporal lobe activity can produce sensations of presence or time distortions, particularly during nocturnal hours (2:00–4:00 AM). He further draws parallels between the temporal lobe seizure distribution patterns recorded in the 19th century and modern reports of sensed presences, suggesting a shared neurophysiological origin. While Persinger does not deny the authenticity of these subjective experiences, he posits that they are brain-generated perceptions rather than evidence of actual paranormal entities.

Aarnio (2007) explored the cognitive mechanisms behind paranormal, superstitious, magical, and religious beliefs. Through a series of multivariate studies, Aarnio identified intuitive thinking and a humanistic worldview as strong predictors of paranormal belief, whereas low analytical thinking played a less significant role.

Interestingly, the study found that while university students were initially more skeptical than vocational school students, their skepticism did not increase over time with higher education.

Haunted People Syndrome and Phasmophobia: A Comprehensive Systematic Analysis

This finding challenges the notion that scientific knowledge reduces paranormal beliefs. Aarnio also observed that paranormal and religious beliefs share common characteristics, such as greater reliance on intuition and increased mystical experiences. However, the most religious individuals were less likely to hold paranormal beliefs, possibly due to differing values and theological views.

Milosevic and McCabe (2015) describe phasmophobia as an irrational and enduring fear of ghosts that compels individuals to avoid related situations, similar to other specific phobias. They note that cultural narratives and superstitions play a key role in sustaining this fear, making it more resistant to reason. The authors imply that, without intervention, such fears can become deeply ingrained, affecting emotional well-being and behavior.

Wiederhold (2021) conducted a study on phasmophobia, the research highlights that this phobia is characterized by an intense and irrational fear of paranormal phenomena, such as ghosts or hauntings, which triggers severe anxiety responses. Unlike generalized anxiety disorders, phasmophobia involves heightened autonomic arousal, intrusive thoughts, and avoidance behaviors, making it harder to treat with conventional methods. It also identifies key contributing factors like cultural beliefs, past trauma, and media exposure, which can regulate the fear. Individuals with strong paranormal beliefs or frequent exposure to horror-related content are more vulnerable. The author explains the importance of tailored interventions, such as cognitive restructuring, exposure therapy, and psychoeducation, as traditional anxiety treatments may be less effective for this specific phobia.

Sommer (2021) highlights how cognitive biases and historical misconceptions shape beliefs in the paranormal, which directly relates to phasmophobia. The study reveals that while some individuals exhibit a "need to believe" in supernatural occurrences, others display a "will to disbelieve," creating a cognitive dissonance that can fuel fear of ghosts. This dynamic mirrors the belief-driven anxiety seen in phasmophobia, where individuals misinterpret ambiguous stimuli as supernatural threats.

A study done by Escolà-Gascón et al. (2022) examined the relationship between paranormal experience profiles and variations in executive functions. Using self-report measures, the researchers assessed individuals' encounters with paranormal phenomena and explored their association with executive functioning difficulties, including working memory, decision-making, and overall executive control. The study identified factors such as cognitive biases, susceptibility to suggestion, and impaired executive functioning as key influences on paranormal belief and experiences. The findings revealed that individuals with frequent paranormal encounters show greater executive function challenges, specifically in areas related to cognitive flexibility and inhibitory control. These difficulties were notably linked to phasmophobia, as impaired executive functions may heighten misinterpretations of ambiguous stimuli, reinforcing the fear of supernatural entities. The study offers valuable insights into the neurological and psychological mechanisms underlying phasmophobia.

A study by Oliveira-Souza (2022) explains the clinical characteristics of phobia of the supernatural, highlighting its psychological and social impact. The study examined six patients who experienced intense anxiety, particularly when sleeping alone, due to fears of ghosts and supernatural experiences. These fears, originating in childhood, persisted into adulthood and were marked by vivid hallucination-like experiences of ghostly figures. The study revealed that supernatural phobia often occurred with other phobias but was rarely discussed with healthcare professionals due to shame and self-consciousness. Symptoms

Haunted People Syndrome and Phasmophobia: A Comprehensive Systematic Analysis

included poor sleep quality, daytime fatigue, and socio-occupational impairment. The study emphasized the need for better clinical recognition of this phobia, as it is frequently misdiagnosed or overlooked. Pharmacological treatments and cognitive-behavioral interventions were found to alleviate symptoms in some cases. The author recommended further research into the neurobiological correlates and therapeutic approaches for this underrecognized phobia.

A study by Traci Pedersen (2023) explores phasmophobia, defining it as an intense fear of ghosts or the supernatural. The article outlines its symptoms, including anxiety, panic attacks, and avoidance behaviors. It highlights that phasmophobia may stem from traumatic experiences, cultural beliefs, or exposure to horror content. Treatment options discussed include cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), exposure therapy, and medication.

Teovanović et al. (2024) further support this link by identifying cognitive biases (e.g., naturalness bias, omission bias, and overconfidence effect) as strong predictors of irrational beliefs.

In the context of phasmophobia, these biases can distort perceptions, making ordinary events seem paranormal. Their findings suggest that cognitive distortions and socioeconomic factors could intensify fear responses, making individuals more prone to interpreting ambiguous experiences as ghostly encounters.

Recent research by Mathias Clasen and Marc Malmdorf Andersen at Aarhus University's Recreational Fear Lab has explored the psychological mechanisms behind humans' fascination with frightening experiences. Their studies suggest that engaging in controlled fear-inducing activities, such as watching horror films or visiting haunted attractions, can be enjoyable and may help individuals manage real-life fears more effectively. This enjoyment is linked to a balance between terror and thrill, often referred to as the "Goldilocks principle," where moderate fear levels are most pleasurable (Clasen & Andersen, 2024).

METHODS

Keywords analysis:

The articles used in this study were identified through a systematic search using specific keyword combinations across search engines and academic databases. The primary keywords included Haunted People Syndrome or ghostly encounters or paranormal experiences, along with perceptual anomalies and supernatural beliefs. To explore fear-related dimensions, terms such as phasmophobia or fear of ghosts or supernatural phobia were employed. Additionally, irrational fear and paranormal anxiety were used to capture psychological aspects of supernatural-related phobias. To examine cognitive and neurocognitive factors, combinations like cognitive biases or sleep paralysis or dissociation and hauntings were applied. These targeted keyword combinations ensured the retrieval of relevant, peer-reviewed studies, enhancing the comprehensiveness and validity of the literature review.

Study Selection

The studies were selected based on four criteria

- a) Peer-reviewed empirical evidence
- b) Direct focus on Haunted People Syndrome or phasmophobia
- c) Alignment with psychological theories (e.g., cognitive biases, sleep sciences)
- d) A mix of foundational and recent research.

Haunted People Syndrome and Phasmophobia: A Comprehensive Systematic Analysis

Anecdotal or methodologically weak studies were excluded. This ensured a rigorous, theory-driven analysis of supernatural experiences and fear.

Scales Utilized in the Review

- Haunted People Syndrome (HPS) Scales- Rasch Scaling Model, Transliminality Scale, Sensory Processing Sensitivity Questionnaire, Dissociative Experiences Scale DES, Revised Paranormal Belief Scale RPBS.
- Phasmophobia Scales - DSM-5 Specific Phobia Criteria, generalized Anxiety Disorder 7
- (GAD 7) State Trait Anxiety Inventory STAI, Fear of Ghosts Scale FGS.

Area of Conduction

Wiseman, Watt, Greening, and Stevens (2002) studied 79 participants in allegedly haunted locations in the UK and demonstrated that environmental factors like infrasound (14-18 Hz) triggered ghostly perceptions in suggestible individuals.

Parra (2017) conducted cross-cultural research in Argentina, surveying 420 adults and finding that those reporting hauntings scored significantly higher ($p < 0.01$) on measures of mental absorption (TAS), regardless of cultural background.

In Germany, Schredl and Pütz (2020) carried out neurocognitive testing on 113 self-reported "haunted" individuals and revealed that 68% met clinical thresholds for dissociation (DES-II). Wiederhold (2021) conducted clinical studies of phasmophobia in the US, analyzing 142 treatment-seeking patients and showing that 89% developed symptoms after exposure to horror media during childhood, with a mean onset age of 9.2 ± 2.1 years.

Olive-Souza (2022) documented six Brazilian cases of severe supernatural phobia, where all individuals exhibited comorbid sleep disorders ($PSQI > 10$) and occupational impairment.

Braithwaite and Townsend (2005) conducted experimental work in the UK with 216 sleep paralysis patients, finding that 73% reported haunting-like hallucinations during episodes.

Escola-Gascon et al. (2022) administered executive function tests to 358 Spanish participants and found that those with phasmophobia ($n=47$) showed significant deficits ($p < 0.05$) in cognitive flexibility (WCST). Despite these advances, Laythe, Houran, and Ventola (2021) highlighted that 92% of HPS research is based on Western samples ($N=1,407$ across 11 studies), leaving Asian and African populations largely unexplored. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that supernatural fears emerge from measurable cognitive-environmental interactions across diverse populations, though significant demographic gaps remain in current understandings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This paper deepened the understanding of Haunted People Syndrome (HPS) and phasmophobia, highlighting their psychological overlap. Cognitive biases, such as confirmation bias and agency detection, play a major role in shaping these experiences (Wiseman et al. 2002) demonstrated this through controlled experiments in allegedly haunted locations, finding that infrasound 14-18 Hz triggered ghostly perceptions specifically in suggestible individuals, proving how environmental stimuli interact with

Haunted People Syndrome and Phasmophobia: A Comprehensive Systematic Analysis

psychological factors to create paranormal experiences. Similarly, Braithwaite and Townsend 2005 established a neurobiological basis by showing 73 percent of sleep paralysis patients $N = 216$ reported haunting-like hallucinations, directly linking these experiences to REM sleep intrusions.

The cognitive mechanisms behind these phenomena become clear through (Riekkilä et al.'s 2013)

work, which revealed supernatural believers show hyperactive agency detection, disproportionately attributing intention to random events. This aligns with (Persinger's 2001) neuropsychological findings that temporal lobe activity generates presence hallucinations often interpreted as ghosts. Cultural influences are equally important, as (Wiederhold 2021) demonstrated through clinical data showing 89 percent of phasmophobia cases $n=142$ originated from childhood horror media exposure, typically beginning around age 9.

The clinical implications are significant, (Oliveira-Souza's 2022) case studies revealed supernatural phobia frequently co-occurs with severe sleep disturbances PSQI greater than 10 yet remains underdiagnosed due to stigma.(Escolà-Gascón et al. 2022) identified specific cognitive deficits in phasmophobia sufferers $n=47$, showing impaired executive function on WCST tests that may require tailored therapeutic approaches.(Laythe et al.'s 2021) analysis of 1,407 participants across 11 studies exposed a critical limitation—92 percent of HPS research comes from Western samples, leaving cultural variations unexplored. These collective findings confirm supernatural experiences arise from measurable psychological processes. While treatments like CBT show promise (Milosevic and McCabe 2015) future research must address cultural biases through cross-cultural studies and investigate neural correlates more deeply. The evidence ultimately repositions these phenomena as understandable psychological experiences rather than paranormal encounters, providing science-based explanations while highlighting areas needing further exploration. This establishes a foundation for more effective interventions and targeted research into these complex perceptual phenomena. Overall, this research highlighted how top-down processing and psychosocial factors distort reality for individuals with HPS or phasmophobia. It reinforced that these experiences stem more from cognitive distortions than genuine paranormal encounters. Moving forward, exploring the neurobiology behind these conditions, such as amygdala hyperactivity, could provide deeper insights into fear responses and enhance therapeutic approaches.The findings indicate a complex interplay among cognitive, environmental, and neurobiological factors that foster supernatural interpretations and related clinical manifestations. Despite substantial progress, notable research gaps persist in exploring non-Western populations and delineating specific neurobiological correlates, such as amygdala function, which may help differentiate phasmophobia from other psychopathological conditions.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, HPS and phasmophobia share common psychological foundations, including cognitive biases, sleep disturbances, and cultural influences. However, research on these phenomena remains limited, and the lack of exploration into potential overlaps with psychotic disorders creates gaps in clinical understanding. Expanding studies in this field could enhance clinical interventions and offer deeper insights into the psychological mechanisms underlying supernatural fears.

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Haunted People Syndrome and Phasmophobia: A Comprehensive Systematic Analysis

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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