

Ghost hunting events and storytelling.

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RESEARCH NOTE

GHOST HUNTING EVENTS AND STORYTELLING

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Ghost hunting events are a popular leisure activity providing visitors with an immersive dark experience, connecting them with the dark heritage and supernatural legends of a place. This research note aims to conceptualize the role of storytelling in the promotion, production, and participatory aspects of ghost hunting events. In doing so, the article argues that ghost hunting events draw upon coproductive and experiential forms of storytelling, and proposes a cyclical model to illustrate an ongoing, iterative process of narrative construction. As this research note suggests, preexisting narratives framed by the dark history and supernatural legends of a place help to frame promotional discourse and the production of events. However, extraordinary personal experiences, mediumistic intuition, and the collective interpretation of unusual activity shape and transform existing narratives. As such, this research note concludes that ghost hunting events are shaped by, and shape, storytelling through interactive and interpretative processes.

Key words: Ghost hunting; Event; Storytelling; Coproduction; Experiential; Dark tourism

Introduction to Ghost Hunting Events

As I prepare this article, Halloween of 2023 is approaching. Neighbors have started putting up themed decorations in their windows and pumpkins have made their way onto supermarket shelves. On my social media feed, I also notice the promotion of Halloween events, including the opportunity to join ghost hunters as they explore reputedly haunted locations. Out of curiosity I click on one of the company websites, Haunted Happenings, to

find out if ghost hunting events are still as popular as they were 12 years ago (when I first started my research). All 43 Halloween events are sold out. Ghosts, it seems, are still big business for the events industry.

Ghost hunting (otherwise known as paranormal investigation) events fall under the wider umbrella of paranormal tourism, a market that has seen considerable growth in recent years (Bader et al., 2017; Obradović et al., 2021). Paranormal tourism incorporates a much wider range of travel, hospitality,

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and event experiences, which may include the search for Bigfoot, UFO spotting, or ghost tours. Destinations and businesses have capitalized on the unique experimental offering presented by paranormal tourism for diversification and branding (Davies, 2007; Houran et al., 2020). As such, places may become synonymous with their supernatural legends [see, for instance, Salem (Gencarella, 2007), Transylvania (Light, 2007) and Roswell (Meehan, 2008)]. Ghost tourism has arguably become the largest growth industry and is defined by Garcia (2012) as “the desire to encounter ghosts, interest in the supernatural, and visitation of places associated with the spirit world such as cemeteries, haunted houses, castles, and historic towns” (p. 14). For clarification, ghost tours/walks and ghost hunting present different experiential offerings to visitors (Hanks, 2016). Ghost tours/walks guide visitors around places (usually a town/city) or buildings relaying supernatural stories; ghost hunting immerses visitors in a reputedly haunted environment to “experience ghosts” through a combination of spiritual and pseudoscientific practice (Ironsides, 2016). It is the latter that has captured the imagination of the event industry and forms the focus of this research note.

The ghost hunting experience is generally considered a form of dark tourism due to its connection to dark narratives and human tragedy (Garcia, 2012; Houran et al., 2020; Ironsides, 2018; Sharpley & Stone, 2009). With the growing academic interest in “dark events,” ghost hunting has also been considered as an event, and even festival, experience (Beisaw, 2016; Holzhauser, 2015; Ironsides, 2018; Pharino et al., 2018)—the Mary Kings Ghost Fest in 2022 hosted a series of ghost hunting events and workshops in Edinburgh. Like festivals such as Dia De Los Muertos (in Mexico) and the Hungry Ghost Festival (or *Zhongyuan Festival* in Asia), ghost hunting events seek a connection to the dead through rituals and storytelling practice (Ladwig, 2012). However, arguably, the format, purpose, and experiential offering differs from traditional “ghost” festivals. Instead of honoring the dead, the experience is primarily orientated towards direct interaction with and consumption of the dead with the purpose of facilitating paranormal experiences (Hanks, 2016).

Ghost hunting often occurs in places of death or suffering such as such as cemeteries, hospitals,

prisons, and asylums (Garcia, 2012; Thompson, 2010), yet may also occur in hotels, heritage sites, and former homes where dark histories are evident. They also occur in places imbued with supernatural legends, and it is these two elements that lend them credibility as sites of potential ghostly activity (Eaton, 2019). For example, in the UK, 30 East Drive, a former home now reputedly haunted by the Black Monk of Pontefract, and the Galleries of Justice, a former prison now museum attraction—both of which offer ghost hunting events. As regular or seasonal events offered at haunted locations and tourist attractions, the format of ghost hunting events may vary slightly. However, they tend to follow a fairly standard format, which involves: an initial tour of the location relaying supernatural stories and dark histories; interaction with a medium who will try and connect with spirits of the deceased; several vigils or seances throughout the night where guests have the opportunity to use ghost hunting equipment and engage in experiments to contact the dead (such as table tilting, glass divination, or Ouija Boards); short breaks for refreshments and discussion (see Hanks, 2016). These events may last from 4 to 8 hr, host approximately 10–25 people, and almost always take place overnight, in the dark (Ironsides, 2016).

Ghost Hunting as Coproductive and Experiential Storytelling

Storytelling plays an important role in the promotion, production, and participatory experience of ghost hunting events. Paranormal reality television programs, such as *Most Haunted* and *Ghost Adventures*, have strongly influenced their format and popularity (Eaton, 2019; A. Hill, 2011) acting as a significant driver for visiting haunted places (Dancausa et al., 2023; A. Hill, 2011; Holloway, 2010). This is a phenomenon recognized by Hanks (2016) as the “Most Haunted Effect.” Paranormal reality television also perpetuates folkloric tropes (Eaton, 2019; Edwards, 2020), building upon the story of a place and transforming viewers’ understanding of their supernatural associations. Through their production, media may also construct, destabilize, and frame places as uncanny (Smith & Ironsides, 2022). In their marketing materials, which primarily utilize online content, ghost

hunting events draw upon the dark narratives and supernatural associations perpetuated by the media in their promotional storytelling. 30 East Drive, for instance, was first investigated by *Most Haunted* in 2015, and was also featured in the film *When the Lights Go Out* (2012). The reputation and story of the “Black Monk of Pontefract” poltergeist built by the media is drawn into the promotional narratives used by ghost hunting events to sell the location:

30 East Drive, also known as The Poltergeist House, is reputed to be one of the most haunted houses in the UK. . . . The activity here has been so intense causing a family to abandon their home in the mid 1970’s. This house is said to be haunted by a demonic entity and poltergeist activity here is rife with objects being moved, lights being switched on and off and bumps and noises being heard in the hallway. (Haunted Happenings, 2023a)

Similarly, the dark history and supernatural legends of the place form a significant part of the ghost hunting narrative, heightening the authenticity and “potential” for a ghostly encounter (Thompson, 2010). For example, in promoting a ghost hunt event at the Galleries of Justice (UK), the Haunted Happenings website references the “medieval cave where sacrifices were thought to have been made” as a particular highlight. Personal paranormal experiences also form a significant part of the promotional discourse, and those experiences encountered by more than one person gain an elevated status in the narrative. For example:

Whole groups have witnessed the apparition of a figure stooping through doorways during ghost hunt vigils and people have become completely paralyzed with fear in this dark and foreboding location. . . . On one of our previous ghost hunts here, we heard the most hideous noise in the caves, which was witnessed by all 10 of us! It was guttural and gruesome. (Haunted Happenings, 2023b)

As S. A. Hill et al. (2018, 2019) recognize ghost narratives have enduring qualities. They are versatile, adaptable, participatory, universal, and scalable, and this gives them brand power and compels their production in multiple cultural and media forms (S. A. Hill et al., 2019). Ghost hunting events utilize these qualities in their promotional storytelling, drawing upon universal ghostly tropes, popular

ghost hunting trends, and the collective interpretation of ghostly phenomena to heighten the appeal of a paranormal location and, consequently, the event.

In their production, ghost hunting events are also layered with opportunities for storytelling. The event usually starts with a ghost walk of the location where place-based stories are relayed to guests. As scholars have observed, ghost walks utilize storytelling to emphasize the authenticity of a paranormal location and its ghostly potential (Hanks, 2016; Sobaih & Naguib, 2022; Thompson, 2010). The past is narrated through ghost stories (Garcia, 2012), and is often constructed with a “nip and bite” of playfulness to frame serious topics (e.g., death, suffering) in a not-so-serious way to help construct a meaningful, yet entertaining, experience (Thompson, 2010). In addition to connecting guests with the dark history of a location, retelling these stories also heightens the expectation of a paranormal experience (Garcia, 2012) and may influence the type of experience encountered (Pharino et al., 2018).

Ghost hunting events also frequently use mediums (those claiming the ability to speak to the dead) who may lead or contribute towards the tour at the start of the night and the proceeding vigils, adding to or commenting on the stories. As Hanks (2016) observed, mediums play an important role in building the expectation of paranormal activity on the night, acting as a conduit between participants and supernatural agencies. During the event, mediums may “pick up” on a ghostly presence, relay messages from the dead, or actively seek interaction by “calling out” during vigils. In this way, mediums become storytellers by connecting the dead and living in an emerging dialogue. Unlike ghost walks, these stories are transient and amorphous; they are not preestablished stories presented by a guide, but rather emerge spontaneously through interactive and interpretive processes.

Indeed, ghost hunting events are inherently participatory in focus. A significant motivator for participating in ghost hunting activities is to experience unusual or extraordinary phenomena (Ironside, 2018), and as such events are produced to enable interaction between guests, the host(s), and the dead (Houran et al., 2020). As Doyle and Kelliher (2023) and Mathisen (2018) observed, this guest–host interaction facilitates cocreative storytelling,

increasing the memorability and value of the experience for visitors as they become active participants in story construction. The tools and equipment drawn upon during ghost hunting events help to facilitate interaction and enable narrative construction. For instance, guests may use electronic equipment during vigils, such as thermometers, to detect anomalous fluctuations in temperature (commonly associated with paranormal experiences). Or they may participate in experiments, such as a Ouija Board, where multiple participants place their fingers on a planchette (or glass) and ask the dead to respond by moving the planchette towards letters laid out on a table. In both instances, participants contribute their observations of unusual activity and construct an ongoing narrative of unexplained activity for wider interpretation by the group.

Like Chronis (2008) observed in the Civil War narratives shared and consumed in Gettysburg, USA, guests actively shape the story and connect fragments of the past through their own personal experience and familiarity with the place and its stories. As Eaton (2019) observed, the personal experiences encountered by guests are often interpreted based on their resonance to wider cultural representations and place-based narratives. This is to say that those experiences that align with the dark history of the location or those supernatural associations already framed by the medium/host in their walkaround, or known previously via media representation, gain the greatest legitimacy as potentially paranormal. The contextual and collective environment of ghost hunting events thus contributes to the construction and interpretation of paranormal experiences (Eaton, 2019; Ironside & Wooffitt, 2022; Lange et al., 1996; Pharino et al., 2018). However, these interpretations also feed into the narrative construction of place, shaping the ongoing identity of a location as haunted (Houran et al., 2020).

The ghostly experiences encountered by guests are, therefore, both constructed by, and construct, storytelling in an ongoing, iterative process. The stories promoted by the media and promotional activities of ghost hunting events frame the type of stories and paranormal expectations of a place. They also shape the production of ghost hunting activity, including the stories told and focus of the night's event (for instance, *which dead* become the focus of the vigils and experiments, and *where*

interaction with the dead will occur). These stories are predetermined and constructed from the location's dark history and supernatural legends. However, the participatory nature of ghost hunting events builds upon and shapes preexisting stories. Extraordinary personal experiences, mediumistic intuition, and the collective interpretation of unusual activity, which are all encouraged during ghost hunting events, add to, affirm, and challenge already existing stories. Guests are encouraged to share these stories and their experiences through online platforms (Lauro & Paul, 2013), thus contributing to the promotion and evolving narrative of haunted places. Unlike ghost walks, in which the same stories are told to new audiences each night, ghost hunting events engage in coproductive and experiential forms of storytelling in which the guests, host(s), and dead transform the stories of place through participatory and interpretative practice. Chronis (2008) noted that "consumers at storyscapes do not act independently from the storytellers, but rather, they contribute to storytelling during multiple moments of interaction" (p. 22). For ghost hunting events, these interactions extend beyond the experiential offering of the event and into wider cultural forms where the spectral narratives of haunted places can be presented, contested, and reimagined. In essence, ghost hunting creates new ghosts (or indeed new interpretations of ghosts), which contribute towards the ongoing promotion and production of future events (see Fig. 1).

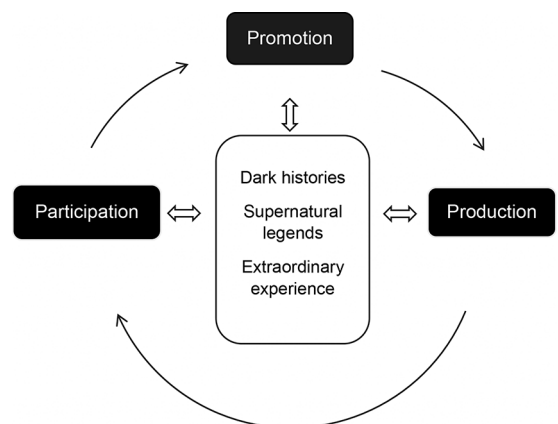


Figure 1. Ghost hunting as a coproductive and experiential storytelling cycle.

In Figure 1, dark histories, supernatural legends, and extraordinary experience are positioned as central to ghost hunting as a coproductive and experiential storytelling cycle. Dark histories, supernatural legends, and extraordinary experiences all frame the paranormal potential and authenticity of a location, feeding into promotional activity. They also influence the production of ghost hunting events, including who and where interaction with the dead will take place and encourage participation with their evolving narratives. However, participation between guests, host(s), and the dead lead to the coproduction of new extraordinary experiences and the reshaping and reimagining of supernatural legends and dark histories. In a cyclical fashion these narratives, now transformed, are drawn into promotional discourse and the production of the event experience.

Final Remarks and Future Research

In this short research note, I have attempted to conceptualize the role of storytelling in ghost hunting events. As dark events, ghost hunting engages with dark histories and supernatural legends to imbue places with a ghostly potential and the possibility of experiencing the dead. Storytelling is coproductive and experiential in form, in which guests and host(s) draw upon preexisting narratives and emerging experiences to shape the ghost hunting event and the haunted reputation of a place. Importantly, the participatory nature of ghost hunting can transmogrify stories, leading to new interpretations that influence the promotion and production of future events. It is, therefore, perhaps unsurprising that ghost hunting events are still so popular when the storytelling and experiential offering is constantly evolving.

Relatively little research has explored the role of storytelling in ghost hunting events. Eaton's (2019) study offered a contribution to understanding the narrative construction of hauntings through interpretative processes and others have considered how ghost hunting engages visitors in the presentation of dark histories (Hanks, 2016; Ironside, 2018). However, the coproductive, experiential nature of storytelling and ghost hunting events present an interesting opportunity to explore how stories construct, and re(construct) the event experience. Understanding the role of storytelling in the coproduction and experiential nature of ghost hunting

events also helps to distinguish it from ghost walks/tours where the two are often conflated. While, arguably, ghost walks exhibit many of the characteristics of ghost hunting events (namely the sharing of dark histories and supernatural legends), the direct interaction between guest, host(s), and dead facilitates the coproduction of extraordinary experiences and stories (which may indeed become part of future ghost walk narratives).

This cyclical model proposed suggests that in a ghost hunting context, the coproduction of new narratives through participatory practices influences promotion and production. It would be valuable to explore this relationship in the wider festival, and dark event, context to consider the role of coproductive storytelling in the transformation and evolution of the event experience.

To return to my earlier observation regarding the popularity of ghost hunting events, for the dark events industry ghost hunting provides an interesting success story. Driven by popular culture, yet embedded in spiritual, storytelling, and pseudoscientific practices, they represent a unique example of contemporary events being used as a format to connect, literally, with the dead. As such, further examination of ghost hunting offers scholars the opportunity to consider how the dead are consumed, negotiated, and produced as an event experience.

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