

# An exploratory study of the future paranormal tourist experience on ghost tours

Carmen Pedreño-Peñalver, Irene Huertas-Valdivia and Alicia Orea-Giner

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this study is to explore the paranormal tourist experience on ghost tours, taking into account the participants' perceptions and their prior knowledge of the paranormal, in order to determine the principal components of the future of paranormal tourist experience.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study is divided into two phases. The first phase is based on participant observation during a ghost tour. The second phase is based on a previously published framework for paranormal tourism. It introduces a qualitative adaptation of the orchestra model to look in-depth at how experiences with paranormal tours might shape the future of tourism as a major subtype.

**Findings** – Paranormal tourism has external (situational-enchantment, historical, mystical, ghostly and unsolved mysteries) and internal (affective, cognitive, sensory, behavior and relationship) components that are inter-linked. Future paranormal tourist experiences (FPTEs) must be focused on enhancing these aspects in order to offer an immersive experience.

**Originality/value** – Consequently, this paper proposes the FPTE model.

**Keywords** Paranormal tourism, Ghost tour, Future trends, Enchantment, Experiences, Orchestra model

**Paper type** Research paper

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## 1. Introduction

Paranormal tourism is considered a type of dark tourism, which is currently gaining popularity, producing a future interest in paranormal places that defy modern reality (Pharino *et al.*, 2018). Paranormal tourism can range from ghost walks to haunted houses or hotels, to even traveling to locations where aliens or UFOs (Unidentified Flying Objects) have supposedly been spotted (Wright, 2022), and visiting locations where one can “establish communication” with the dead (Houran *et al.*, 2020; Pharino *et al.*, 2018). Paranormal tourism is not a new phenomenon; during their own personal time for enjoyment, people have traveled to watch witch trials, search for fairies, and experience ghostly encounters for many centuries. Nonetheless, the popularity of this form of tourism is increasing thanks to social media, marketing techniques and the Internet – all of which actively promote these haunted destinations (Dancausa *et al.*, 2023) and influence the travel behaviors of the Millennial generation (Ketter, 2020).

Nevertheless, academic literature on paranormal tourism remains scarce; a total of 35 articles in Scopus and 28 in the Web of Science focused solely on “paranormal tour\*” (keywords) have been published since the beginning of June 2023 (half of them since 2019), and similar results are found when “ghost tours and tourism” are inputted as a search string into those databases (28 and 22, respectively). A large part of the published literature focuses on the supply side, while dark/paranormal tourists' motivations and experiences remain an under-researched area (Farmaki, 2013). There is a lack of research clarifying why tourists are drawn to either a certain location, their motivations, their intentions or what holds them back (Dancausa *et al.*, 2023). To fill this gap in the literature on paranormal tourism, this exploratory study aims to explore future paranormal tourist

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experiences (FPTEs) on ghost tours, as well as to study participants' perceptions, taking into account their previous knowledge on the paranormal.

According to [Pearce \(2011\)](#), the process of constructing an experience involves the convergence and interaction of various elements (coordinated sensory inputs, emotional responses, cognitive processes for perceiving and comprehending the environment, actions taken and the meaningful relationships that shape individuals' realities), akin to the harmonious interplay within an orchestra. Pearce introduced the orchestra model in 2011, using it as a metaphor to illustrate analogical reasoning ([Pearce and Mohammadi, 2021](#)). His research focused on exploring tourists' perceptions and emotions, as well as examining the dynamics of social contexts and psychological processes. The fundamental objective of the orchestra model is to depict the immediate sensation experienced by an attendee during an encounter ([Pharino et al., 2018](#)). This paper adds another layer of understanding to paranormal tourism by reviewing the paranormal tourist experience and motivation using the orchestra model ([Pharino et al., 2018](#)) in a qualitative way and implementing it in a ghost tour organized and carried out in Madrid, Spain.

Nowadays, ghost tours, which are a significant part of paranormal tourism, are emerging and will be a booming type of tourism in the future ([Dancausa et al., 2023](#)); guided paranormal tours can be found in almost every Spanish city. As one proceeds on one of these tours, one gradually discovers the diverse paranormal stories typical of the destination – those scary stories that are spread by word-of-mouth. To gain insight about this type of tourism, participant observation ([Holloway, 2010](#)) is performed as well as an evaluation of participants' experience by collecting data during four ghost tours organized by a company that operates in Spain's most significant cities and abroad. From this, the following research questions arose:

- RQ1. Do tourists that participate in paranormal tours have previous interest in this topic?
- RQ2. Is there a direct link between a participant's interest in the paranormal and the emotions they feel after the tour has finished?
- RQ3. Regarding the paranormal tourist experience, what are its main affective, cognitive, sensory, behavioral and relationship elements?

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Paranormal tourism and ghost tours

Tourists want to visit hidden attractions and learn about the country's history from a different perspective ([Powell et al., 2018](#)). Paranormal tourism is not based on a true and verifiable source; instead, it is based on popular folklore and imagination ([Houran et al., 2020](#)). The distinguishing aspect of the paranormal is the primary and basic interest in paranormal phenomena that defy any scientific explanation ([Dancausa et al., 2023](#)). *Paranormal* means believing in different supernatural entities, linked to religion, witchcraft, the occult or even extra-terrestrial beings, and, in some cases, it means experiencing them as well ([Pharino et al., 2018](#)). The paranormal also encompasses extra-sensory perception, psychokinesis, events that have no explanation (out-of-body, near-death and end-of-life experiences) and after-death communication, such as through a Ouija board, lucid dreams and spirits or ghosts, to mention a few examples of the phenomena ([Puhle and Parker, 2021](#)).

Among the activities that are part of paranormal tourism, the most popular nowadays are ghost tours or ghost hunting; ghost perception or appearance is intrinsically related to paranormal phenomena and beliefs ([Holzhauser, 2015](#)). [Edwards \(2019\)](#) defines *ghost tourism* as "any form of leisure or travel that involves encounters with or the pursuit of knowledge of the ghostly or haunted" (p. 1314). Based on this definition, the only way in which ghost tourism differs from the paranormal is that it is specifically linked to Gothic tourism, in which tourists experience the horrors of ghosts and literary events of a Gothic aesthetic in the flesh ([Edwards, 2019](#)). Ghost tourism is thus the act

of traveling to destinations where the presence of ghosts has been reported (Dancausa *et al.*, 2023). Destinations of this kind are highly visited, with the media being the main cause for such a reputation by sharing the names of these tragic places (Edwards, 2020). Local people tend to share spooky stories – such as apparitions, legends or paranormal sightings – by word-of-mouth (Cornell *et al.*, 2019), which are linked to the enchantment of the experience of paranormal (Drinkwater *et al.*, 2022).

## 2.2 Consumer motivations in paranormal tourism

Consumer motivation is crucial in understanding why an individual becomes engaged in an activity; Farmaki (2013) compiles the most prevalent motives that drive tourists to visit a “dark” site, referencing “curiosity, entertainment, empathic identification, compassion, nationalistic motives, pilgrimage, event validation, identity search, education and a sense of social responsibility” (p. 282). Raine (2013) suggests that people who visit these sites are curious about seeing the unique setting and, ultimately, also feel compassion for the victims. Dancausa Millán *et al.* (2021) posit that tourists travel to the attraction because they are driven by their interest in the niche topic of the paranormal or because they are looking for something new and exciting to experience. Sometimes, people who participate in ghost tours may be accompanied by tourists interested in historic heritage and temples, or by others that might be interested in spiritual beliefs but who are, at the same time, indifferent to religious institutions (Dancausa *et al.*, 2023).

Dancausa *et al.* (2023) explore *push* and *pull motivations and restraints* for tourists when it comes to participating in a ghost tour in Spain. *Push motivations* are associated with the socio-psychological aspects that pertain to the individual, more explicitly, their own interest. *Pull motivations*, on the other hand, are those external aspects of the destination or the service itself that the individual perceives. Both motivations are key to the individual’s decision whether or not to participate in a ghost tour.

## 2.3 Enchantment of the experience of paranormal

Some businesses have even transformed their service into experiences to be remembered in a bid to offer the most memorable experience. The *experience economy* (Pine and Gilmore, 1998) not only places tourists physically within the experience but also immerses them mentally (Drinkwater *et al.*, 2022). Paranormal tourism, therefore, can be seen as part of the experience economy, as consumers are totally immersed in the paranormal situation before even experiencing it. A theory developed by Hennig (2002) holds that one of the multiple functions of tourism is to create physical representations of myths (Raine, 2013), and myths are included, to a considerable extent, in the sphere of the paranormal.

Drinkwater *et al.* (2022) state that tourism companies seek to market how tourists can make a connection with the place they visit, creating what is known as *situational-enchantment*; for these authors, *enchantment* is a highly personal feeling, influenced by both the context and the individual’s own suggestion. It is assumed that this is one of the reasons why paranormal tourism businesses are becoming increasingly popular worldwide (Houran *et al.*, 2020). These businesses promote a unique experience that cannot be found anywhere else (Holloway, 2010); the context is perfectly arranged to encourage visitors to feel and experience the paranormal (Edwards, 2019).

A person’s cognitive state is essential when it comes to engaging with the environment in an emotional and psychological manner, leading, therefore, to tourist/consumer satisfaction (Drinkwater *et al.*, 2022). As a result, each experience is personal and subjective and is influenced by different variables, such as existing biases, unconscious interference, suggestions and even simple coincidences (Drinkwater *et al.*, 2022). For instance, a ghost tour in a cemetery at night will place tourists in an environment that greatly favors suggestion, even more so for those who are willing to experience something out of the ordinary.

## 2.4 Tourists experience: the orchestra model

In the *experience building process*, multiple forces take part and interact with each other, as happens in an *orchestra*. The orchestra model was designed by Pearce in 2011 as a metaphor for analogical reasoning (Pearce and Mohammadi, 2021); his fundamental interest and research area were gaining insight into *what tourists think and feel*, as well as exploring social settings and psychological processes. The primary aim of the orchestra model is to show how an experience is felt by a user in the moment (Pharino et al., 2018).

The orchestra model is composed of five components: (1) *sensory elements* (seeing, hearing, smelling, touching and tasting), (2) *affective components* (happiness, surprise, fear and love), (3) *cognitive elements* (thinking, choosing, learning and understanding), (4) *behavioral components* (texting, taking photos, etc.) and (5) *relationships* (with tourists and other stakeholders). The orchestra model takes these five components in an integrative approach in order to conceptualize the *experience*.

The orchestra model has recently been utilized specifically to measure onsite paranormal tourism experiences in Bali, notably in the study by Pharino et al. (2018). Considering that this model is aligned with both this research aim and the research questions, this study is based on its implementation in a paranormal tour in Spain.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Design of the research and approach

This exploratory study is based on the paranormal tourism framework previously presented, as well as on the orchestra model (Pearce and Mohammadi, 2021; Pharino et al., 2018) in order to offer an analysis on how paranormal tour experiences could influence the future of tourism as an important sub-typology. To this end, this exploratory research is carried out in two phases. The first one focuses on participant observation, and the second one is based on conducting an evaluation form based on the orchestra model to analyze participants' experience during four ghost tours.

### 3.2 Selection of the field work

The first and second phases were conducted during the *Retiro Misterioso* tour (at the Retiro Park of Madrid, Spain) organized by *Rutas Misteriosas* (<https://rutasmisteriosas.es/>) during the summer of 2022. This company was selected due to its size and importance as a business in the paranormal landscape in Spain – they operate in more than 30 Spanish cities. Founded in 2013, this business's aim is to cover unsolved mysteries and popular legends across Spain by following and listening to a guide along a previously determined route. The *Retiro Misterioso* tour was selected due to its popularity on social media, the recommendation provided by the company selected, as well as the attractiveness of the place where it was organized. The tour is held at night in small groups at a centrally located, well-known place, which influences people's perception of sensations. This company granted us permission to take part and conduct surveys on tourists that participated in these tours.

### 3.3 Phase 1. Participant observation

Holloway (2010) proposes participant observation in paranormal tourism activities in order to gain deeper insights into the paranormal tourist experience; this helps to "investigate how sensations of wonder and delight are achieved and how affective charges of enchantment are given consistency" (p. 618). Participant observation was then conducted by the researchers with the aim to portray all the details that characterize this particular tour so as to have a first-person description of the experience. Moreover, as in Pharino et al. (2018), spending time at the site allowed the researchers to observe public tourist behavior and helped to interpret the questionnaire responses. The research team took notes during the process in order to be able

to analyze the data later and add complete information about the ghost tour experience. The research team had no prior knowledge of paranormal tourism, which is essential for demonstrating that the research had no prior biases regarding the tour. Through this experience, we were able to review and narrate first-hand the flow of the tour and how the historically explicable is interspersed with mysteriousness and the *unsolved*.

### **3.4 Phase 2. Evaluation of the tourist experience using the orchestra model approach**

**3.4.1 Evaluation form design.** In order to measure customer experience, an evaluation form was designed which was inspired by the application of the Orchestral Model in a paranormal tourism setting – including all cognitive and affective components (Pharino *et al.*, 2018). This model treats tourism as a shared experience, rather than treating tourists as isolated units that have individual experiences (Pearce and Mohammadi, 2021). Before the questionnaire tool was used in the field, it was tested on a sample of five participants to ensure that the statements could be understood.

The questionnaire was divided into three sections. The first one was related to paranormal interest and motivation; four questions were asked to contextualize each participants' prior background knowledge. The second part of the evaluation form measured the five components of the orchestra model in order to evaluate participants' emotional experience during the tour; it included nominal questions in order to evaluate the relationship, sensory and cognitive components of the model. In this section, an open-ended question was included to allow them to express any other emotions they may have experienced during the tour. The third section of the evaluation form included questions to retrieve demographic data from the participants (but with guaranteed anonymity).

**3.4.2 Evaluation form distribution.** The research team personally handed out the evaluation form to the participants that volunteered to participate in the study at the end of four ghost tours on different days during the summer of 2022. Due to time and travel constraints, "opportunistic sampling was used to recruit participants at the selected site," as in Pharino *et al.* (2018, p. 23). Typically, small group tours are organized at an average frequency of one to two tours per month, accommodating approximately ten to fifteen participants per tour.

**3.4.3 Participants.** A total number of thirty-one respondents volunteered to participate in our study over a total of four tours. Prior studies have been published with similar convenience sample sizes in order to conduct exploratory studies (Mitas *et al.*, 2022). The researchers checked whether any participants had attended the tour in the past; all the participants were doing this tour for the first time. They were all from Spain. Table 1 summarizes the participants' profiles, as well as indicates the code assigned to each participant.

### **3.5 Analysis of results**

The results were analyzed from a complementary perspective. Results from the participant observation were presented to offer a comprehensive overview of the experience, as in Holloway (2010). Then, the answers to the evaluation form were analyzed using a quantitative approach, similarly to in Pharino *et al.* (2018), to obtain information about the participants' perception through the Likert-scale results by employing SPSS 25.0 (IBM Corp. Released, 2017), and the open-ended questions were examined using Nvivo (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2020), as in Ferrer-Roca *et al.* (2021).

## **4. Results and discussion**

The following section presents the results obtained from the participant observation and the evaluation form distribution. All the results are discussed with previous publications in mind. Participants' answers to the open-ended questions were codified using *P + number* (i.e. P1).

**Table 1** Participants' profile

Gender	Age	Company for the route	Previous experience with paranormal tours	Code
Woman	22	Family	No	P1
Woman	54	Family	No	P2
Woman	46	Family	No	P3
Woman	19	Family	No	P4
Woman	18	Family	No	P5
Woman	26	Family	No	P6
Woman	61	Solo	No	P7
Woman	54	Partner and family	No	P8
Man	52	Solo	No	P9
Man	45	Friends	Yes	P10
Man	28	Friends	No	P11
Woman	23	Friends and partner	Yes	P12
Woman	34	Partner	Yes	P13
Woman	57	Friends	Yes	P14
Man	53	Friends	No	P15
Woman	54	Friends	Yes	P16
Man	25	Friends	Yes	P17
Woman	24	Friends and family	No	P18
Woman	25	Friends, partner and Family	No	P19
Man	18	Friends and partner	No	P20
Man	48	Friends	No	P21
Woman	25	Partner	No	P22
Woman	22	Friends and partner	No	P23
Man	35	Partner	Yes	P24
Man	28	Partner	Yes	P25
Man	35	Partner	Yes	P26
Woman	23	Friends	No	P27
Man	25	Friends and partner	No	P28
Man	21	Family	No	P29
Woman	23	Family	No	P30
Woman	24	Solo	No	P31

Source(s): Table by authors

#### 4.1 Participant observation

The Retiro Park closes at 9 pm, but two doors remain open until later. The tour is carried out inside the park until 10 pm, so there are very few people walking around the vicinity and it is already quite dark. All these contextual factors easily disorientate the participants. Ghost tourism makes participants experience feelings in an unfamiliar and new context (Holloway, 2010); this fact combined with the narration of the site's history and the strange stories builds a sense of the park's endless possibilities. The term *paranormal* commonly refers to haunting and ghosts, and is vital to the portrayal of contemporary paranormal tourism. Paranormal media helps to develop tourism in a decisive way by promoting an imaginative and emotionally charged atmosphere at a particular site (Edwards, 2019). Ghost tours are also an emerging concept in a substantial number of destinations, thus increasing the general interest in the paranormal (Holzhauser, 2015). In order to attract tourists interested in the paranormal, Western countries are promoting the mysteries that can be found in their history, as is the case in Spain and Portugal (Dancausa et al., 2023).

Moving on to the main components and the different stories that are told, *history* is the main aspect with which the tour begins, and this remains a constant throughout. First, the origins of the park are explained (it was built as a private park for King Felipe IV of Spain in the 17th Century) and attention is directed toward several mythical creatures that are present on the tour (automatons). Next, the guide tells the story of a worker that experienced the paranormal phenomena of *clairsalience*, or the perception of a sudden smell that does not come from any physical source – a *mystical phenomenon*. The group then moves on to a different symbolic place in the park where there is a

statue of a goblin on top of a cage (see [Plate 1](#)). Several legends about the park's previous use as a zoo are told at this point. The guide also discusses the legend of Felipe VII's gardeners, who claimed to have seen a goblin gardening and that is why the plants grew in the most unusual places. The guide then encourages participants to look for the goblins of Retiro, who may jump out at any time. The statue, along with the telling of the folk tale, work together to generate a sense of possibility, thanks to the literal and discursive framework in which it is situated. At a different point on the tour, other stories about a human zoo in the parks' Crystal Palace are told, revealing historical dark atrocities that took place in the park (see [Plate 2](#)).

The last three parts of the tour are the most heavily related to paranormal and ghostly components, which coincides with the audience walking through the park in total darkness (using only their phone torches). Society has long been fascinated by ghost stories, or those tales related to the paranormal, the irrational or things that cannot be explained ([Wright, 2022](#)). Stories related to dead people in the Battle of Independence and mysterious suicides are recounted at this point with the use of a pendulum to channel the energy of the place, revealing the presence of a spirit. This scenario, together with the story of the lost souls just told, creates the perfect atmosphere for immersing the audience in the paranormal. Moreover, near the statue of the Fallen Angel (strategically located at 666 meters above sea level), other paranormal experiences are detailed (see [Plate 3](#)).

The last section of the tour ends with the guide sharing, what they consider to be, *real* psychophonies recorded by the guards of the *Casón del Buen Retiro*, a former museum, where the tour ends. None of these commercial tours aim to convince customers that ghost hunting is real; instead they portray that hunting is a possibility, which keeps their expectancy levels high ([Edwards, 2019](#)). All the featured mysterious stories may or may not be fictional, but they do serve to maintain the popularity of the sites.

**Plate 1** Goblin's statue at Retiro Park



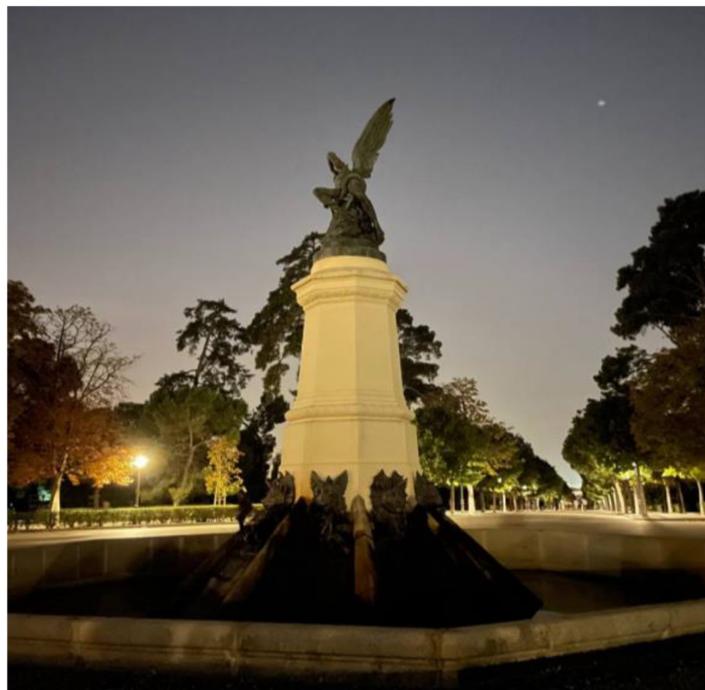
**Source(s):** Authors' own photograph

**Plate 2** Retiro's Crystal Palace at night



**Source(s):** Authors' own photograph

**Plate 3** The fountain of the fallen angel



**Source(s):** Authors' own photograph

#### 4.2 Evaluation of the paranormal tourist experience based on the orchestra model

The tourist experience of the paranormal tour is evaluated, taking into account the five components of the orchestra model (affective, cognitive, sensory, behavior and relationship) by means of the paranormal experience index. The use of the orchestra model of onsite experience and the analysis of different emotions in this research is directly related to the fact that those interested in dark tourism share a personality trait that has a direct influence on them, namely sensation-seeking (Edwards, 2020). In a similar fashion to Pharino *et al.* (2018), we distribute three equally sized groups for the index, divided into low, moderate and high levels of interest for the affective component of the model. In a nutshell, the orchestra model posits that tourists' experience is found in the individual consciousness and may be recalled over time (Pearce and Mohammadi, 2021). The model also strives to be precise in the use of the term *experience*: its aim is that both the research community and businesses understand the model, its implications and value.

The tour under study seems popular among educated Millennials (in the 18–30 years age bracket) who attended the tour with friends. None of them attended with a work colleague. This result suggests that this type of activity (i.e. participating in a paranormal tour) is not a popular team-building activity. However, it may prove to be a powerful way to attract potential new markets.

In terms of interest in the paranormal, our results show that the tour fulfills customers' expectations in terms of arousing interest and making a strong impression on its participants. Participants' motivation and interest are analyzed, finding that the majority of them have a high interest in the paranormal in their everyday life. This fact links to previous studies that confirm that people become attracted to the paranormal because of its presence in the media (Dancausa *et al.*, 2023), where macabre trauma is discussed, and expectation of and, similarly, fascination of "the dark" can be found (Edwards, 2020). In terms of how much respondents knew about paranormal sites in Madrid prior to the study, we found that the majority of those who displayed high prior interest in the paranormal then showed a high level of interest during the tour, while those who had a high knowledge about the paranormal showed less excitement during the tour. Some of the reasons to go on this tour that are indicated are curiosity, the quest to discover new places and to experience something mysterious.

Table 2 presents participants' responses about their paranormal experience through the implementation of the orchestra model. In terms of the affective elements, 57.1% of respondents who had low previous knowledge on paranormal sites in Madrid showed a high surprise level during the tour, and those who had moderate knowledge still had a high level of surprise (41.7% of respondents). The majority of those who had a low level of surprise during the tour had moderate knowledge on paranormal sites in Madrid (44.4%). These findings show that respondents who did not have prior knowledge of paranormal sites in Madrid experienced high levels of surprise during the tour. A similar finding is also made for those with moderate knowledge, who were still surprised with the tour itself.

In terms of the levels of emotions experienced, tour participants experienced both "expectancy" ( $n = 19$ ) and "interest" ( $n = 18$ ) at a high level. On the score assigned to both emotions, we can conclude that the most prominent emotion is interest (202 points). This is consistent with the description offered by the tour guide, who would incorporate a certain degree of suspense when narrating the park's history and legends.

Other emotions that participants experienced to a high degree are "surprise" ( $n = 15$ ) – with a total score of 177 points – and "excitement" ( $n = 14$ ) – with a score of 169. The last emotion felt by a great number of participants was "awe" ( $n = 12$ ). It should be noted that, during the tour, funny comments were frequently made. The rest of the emotions perceived registered a low level of emotion; the majority of those surveyed rated "eagerness" ( $n = 29$ ) and "disgust" ( $n = 28$ ) as low. Respondents felt little "anger" ( $n = 31$ ) during the tour. Contrary to prior studies (Pharino *et al.*, 2018), our results demonstrate that participants in the paranormal tour experienced more positive emotions than negative ones. Excitement and interest are the main emotions felt during the tour. Approximately 66.7% of those who had not previously been on a tour had a high level of

**Table 2** Participants' responses about their paranormal experience

<i>Affective</i>	<i>Cognitive</i>			<i>Sensory</i>		<i>Behaviour</i>		<i>Relationship</i>			
Q: What kind of emotions did you feel about this site? Please tick and circle the number according to the level of your emotion. <i>Mark all that apply (1 = None at all, 9 = Felt very strongly)</i>	Q: What new or surprising information did you get?			Q: Did you experience any unusual sensations? If so, what were they? <i>Mark all that apply</i>		Q: What did you do at this site? <i>Mark all that apply</i>		Q: With whom did you experience this place? <i>Mark all that apply</i>			
<i>Levels of emotion</i>											
<i>Emotions</i>	<i>High (7–9)</i>	<i>Moderate (4–6)</i>	<i>Low (1–3)</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Unusual sensations</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Activities</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Travel companion</i>	<i>No.</i>
Interest	18	8	5	8	23	Temperature	10	Observed	29	Friends	15
Expectancy	19	4	8			No unusual sensations	8	Contemplated	24	Family members	12
Surprise	15	7	9			Sound	7	Talked	19	Partner	11
Excitement	14	8	9			Other	6	Remained silent	19	Tourist guide	2
Awe	12	9	10			Sense of fear	5	Took photos	14	Alone	2
Joy	9	8	14			Smell	4	Other	4	Other tourists	1
Acceptance	4	9	18			Sixth sense	3	Recorded video	3	Colleague	0
Sadness	2	6	23			Sight	1	Prayed	1		
Scared	2	7	22			Taste	0	Made an offering	1		
Fear	1	6	24					Made a wish	0		
Disgust	0	3	28								
Eagerness	0	2	29								
Anger	0	0	31								

Source(s): Table by authors

expectancy, presumably due to the novelty of participating in this type of tour for the first time. Nevertheless, half of those who had previously taken part in a paranormal tour still had a high level of expectancy during the tour. Respondents also reported having experienced intrigue (an emotion not included in the orchestra model, which was gleaned from the open-ended questions). Considering these results, the following statements summarize some of the emotions experienced by participants:

The most intense emotion I felt was sadness. There are different reasons for this, such as the consequences of the French invasion and its destruction of Madrid, the allusions to the civil war, the animals that lived in captivity in the enclosure, the indigenous people who were exhibited like animals at the Universal Exhibition in the Palacio de Cristal, the suicides that took place on this stage . . . (P1)

The most intense emotion I experienced was the joy of learning more about unsolved mysteries and legends (P16)

In terms of the cognitive element of the orchestra model, 74.2% of our respondents went away with something surprising or new from the tour ( $n = 23$ ), while the remaining 25.8% ( $n = 8$ ) did not go away with any new or surprising information from the tour. Our results differ from those of [Pharino et al. \(2018\)](#), as 67.3% of their respondents did not go away with any new information from their paranormal destination. This suggests that the way events are narrated may influence respondents' ability to retain information. Still, participating in a pre-designed tour is different from simply going to a place that is known for its paranormal activity. For instance, the UK has an increasing number of spooky attractions that can be visited and are less structured; common

leisure activities in the country might range from weekend getaways in haunted hotels to going out with friends and drinking in a *ghost pub* – i.e. old pubs that are known for their paranormal history and which people visit for their spookiness or to experience paranormal activity (Edwards, 2019).

In terms of behavior, participants remained silent most of the time when the guide was explaining the history; this suggests that the audience, in general, pays attention to the guide and reflects on the different mysterious stories that are narrated. Also, the following statements highlight that the participants were interested in experiencing real paranormal events during the tour:

I looked a lot at the dark spaces in case I saw any paranormal events (P10)

I tried to communicate with the dead (P30)

It is also worth noting that less than half of the respondents took photos ( $n = 14$ ), in comparison to the study by Pharino *et al.* (2018), where most of the respondents (a total of 93 out of 107) took photos at the paranormal site. A possible explanation for this significant difference is that our respondents took the tour at night, a less favorable time for taking photos, while the participants in Pharino's study were studied between 8 am and 5 pm, so they visited the site during the day. However, when traveling from one point to another, people talked and discussed the story they had just been told. Most respondents "watched/observed" ( $n = 29$ ) and "contemplated" ( $n = 24$ ), which corroborates prior research results in similar tours.

As a general overview of the tour, there are five main components: situational-enchantment, historical, mystical, ghostly and unsolved mysteries. All these elements are interspersed throughout the tour, explained by the guide, who generates a certain degree of suspense with little clues, such as: "but I will reveal this mystery later, in the meantime, I'll leave you wondering to see if someone manages to unravel it" so as to encourage attendees to actively engage in the tour as well. As a summary of this tour experience, Holloway (2010) perfectly captures that "ghost tours [...] are assemblages which seek to engender the *possibility* that the urban realm is haunted and that the dead can appear to the living" (p. 625). The tour guide perfectly conveyed this sense of possibility by talking about their own paranormal experiences and beliefs during the tour, along with the dark heritage and history. It is left to the attendee's own imagination whether or not to believe in these unsolved mysteries, encouraging further research into these phenomena.

## 5. Conclusions

The future of tourism should consider paranormal tourism as a way of connecting with the local population. In order to build on this type of tourism that is gaining attention, having a full understanding of tourists' motivations and their experience is vital in developing an offer that meets tourists' expectations. With the increase in interest in paranormal tourism in recent years, it is time for paranormal businesses to study their target audience, as each experience is unique. We emphasize that every experience, as in orchestral performances, is unique and not identical (Pearce and Mohammadi, 2021).

The results demonstrate that the majority of participants of ghost tours have a previous interest in the paranormal (RQ1). Previous knowledge on paranormal sites influences the paranormal tourist experience, considering that those who did not come to the tour with any prior knowledge of paranormal places in Madrid were among the most surprised (RQ2). The paranormal tourist experience is based on external and internal components that are interrelated and interdependent (RQ3). Through participant observation, five main external components of the paranormal tourist experience could be identified (situational-enchantment, historical, mystical, ghostly and mysterious stories). All these elements are also linked to the internal elements of the paranormal tourist experience evaluated by implementing the orchestra model (Pearce and Mohammadi, 2021; Pharino *et al.*, 2018).

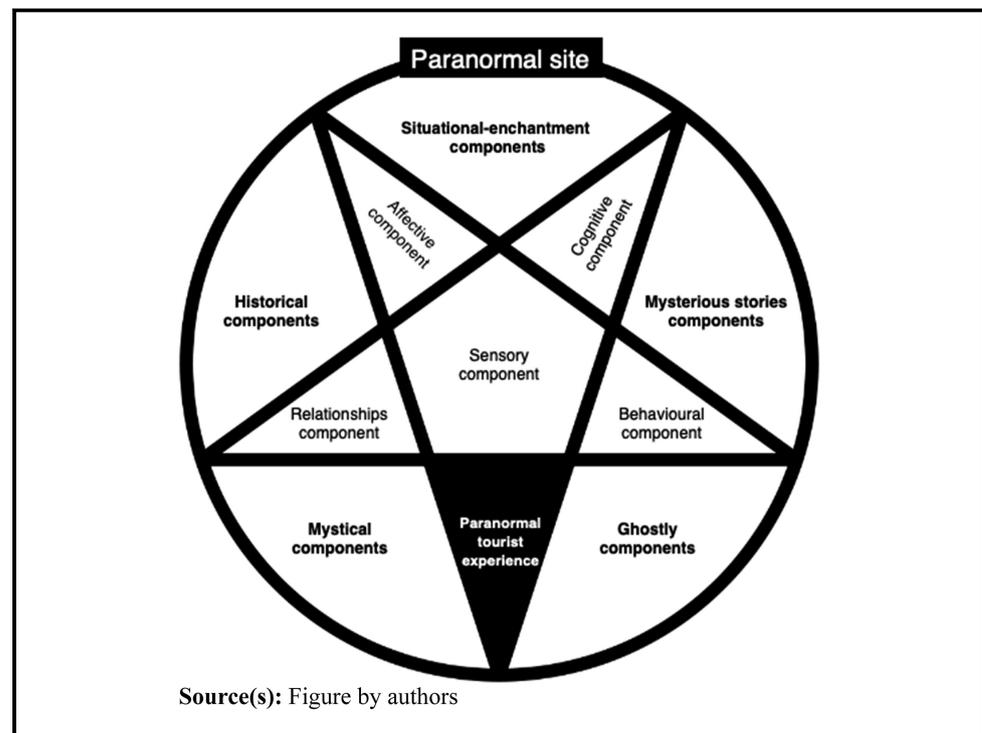
### 5.1 Theoretical implications

The academic implications of this study include the development of a much deeper understanding of the under-researched topic of paranormal tourism, as well as the further development of the FPTE model that can be seen in Figure 1. Future paranormal tourists' experiences can be designed with this model in mind to offer an immersive experience. The FPTE model allows the paranormal tourist experience to be synthesized. Taking a form of an inverted pentagram as a tribute to paranormal symbols, considering that the inverted pentagram represents the supremacy of the elements over the human being. It begins to highlight the importance of the paranormal site, which demonstrates the influence of space on the paranormal tourist experience. It allows us to claim that the paranormal tourist experience is built on different interconnected and interdependent components. In Figure 1, inside the circle, the external elements of the paranormal tourist experience are placed outside the pentagram (situational-enchantment, historical, mystical, ghostly and mysterious stories). The pentagram includes the internal elements of the paranormal tourist experience following the orchestra model sensory, affective, cognitive, behavioral and relationships components, culminating in the paranormal tourist experience.

### 5.2 Practical implications

Regarding the relevance for business, this evaluation form provides an interdisciplinary approach based on five components (sensory, affective, cognitive, behavioral and relationships) to understand and analyze consumer experience. Since the tourism sector is centered on fulfilling the needs of customers through experience design, the producer of the experience – in this case, the paranormal tour business – needs to take into consideration the components that shape each experience (Kartika et al., 2022). For instance, this may be the *situational-enchantment feeling*, which denotes a complex state experienced by a person when they find themselves among various pleasant and unpleasant emotions (Houran et al., 2020).

**Figure 1** Future paranormal tourist experience model (FPTE model)



In the paranormal service under study in this investigation, the paranormal tour is carefully planned and delivered to the potential customer; the customer's experience can be *shaped* but not totally *determined* by the service provider. Building tourist experience and long-term impact is, for managers, an essential part of their work (Kartika *et al.*, 2022), as experiences can become unforgettable events with an affective component, leading customers to recommend the service or come back again. Nevertheless, the customer's reaction is ultimately an individual process which comprises personal characteristics and social and cultural aspects (Pearce and Zare, 2017).

Participants' experiences can be a valuable source of information when it comes to improving the business and retaining and attracting new clients interested in this niche topic. This paper provides valuable information for paranormal businesses and destinations. The orchestra model can help practitioners to better define and understand tourists' reactions with a service based on paranormal tourism. As Pearce and Zare (2017) state: "it is what the user will do and how they are likely to feel, think and act which underpins good experiential design" (p. 59). Furthermore, the marketing and strategic management departments of the business can benefit from better understanding of tourists' motives for participating in paranormal tours; the image and perception that attendees hold of the attraction are highly designed and mediated by the supplier (Farmaki, 2013). As Nguyen *et al.* (2021) affirm, it is very important that all stakeholders, including the local government, businesses and communities, develop a coordinated approach in order to craft a shared perception of the tourist service and create new opportunities for all stakeholders. By understanding and observing tourists' experience during the paranormal tours, this study expands current knowledge and helps interpret each experience as unique and individual, through the lenses of the FPTE model. Therefore, experience suppliers may benefit from those gathered experiences to tailor their service for their potential market and its demands.

### 5.3 Limitations of the study and future research avenues

One of the main limitations of the study is the limited number of participants that agreed to complete the evaluation form after the tours. The novelty of paranormal tourism and the low frequency of ghost tours are the main difficulties encountered in the fieldwork. There is an average of one or two tours per month organized for small groups (around 10–15 participants per tour), which made the process of evaluation form distribution difficult. However, insights were gained from the small sample size, which still offered valuable information, and as Pharino *et al.* (2018, p. 23) affirm, "insights gained from a small number of respondents can still offer valuable information to justify future studies with larger sample sizes." We encourage researchers to use this study as a point of reference to conduct similar investigations in the future with a larger sample that may offer more generalizable results.

Further research could explore the implementation of the FPTE model on the influence of how authentically the paranormal site could generate sympathy in future visitors, as well as the role played by the media, which is responsible for generating interest and hype in the first place (Kang *et al.*, 2012). In line with Moscardo (2021), it could also be worth further studying the potential of storytelling in paranormal tourism destination promotion and experience. Moreover, future research should be focused on the potential ethical implications and the way of connecting with the local population through paranormal tourism activities. Perhaps paranormal tourism can be seen as an opportunity to restart tourism activity after a natural disaster in a certain area (Bhaskara *et al.*, 2020), when there is considerable public interest surrounding the event (Reichenberger, 2021).

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