



Adolescents' Perceptions of Ghosts: A Phenomenological Study on the Influence of Culture and Digital Media

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Abstract. Ghost stories are part of the culture that plays a role in shaping adolescents' understanding and perception of the immaterial world. However, culture and the role of digital media can also influence adolescents' understanding and perception. This study aims to determine the perception of ghosts in adolescents and understand the subjective experiences of late adolescents (aged 17–19 years) in forming these perceptions. This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis data analysis. Subjects were selected purposively. The data collection process involved in-depth interviews. The results of the study show that adolescents' perceptions of ghosts are complex and influenced by several factors, namely culture, social media, religion, social narratives, and individual experiences. These results indicate that understanding the dynamics of the formation of adolescents' perceptions of metaphysical phenomena in the digital era is very important. This has an impact on developmental and educational psychology, especially in helping adolescents understand and manage their emotions, imagination, and the way they think about supernatural stories.

Keywords: *perception; ghost; adolescents*

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Introduction

Adolescents aged 17-19 are in an important developmental phase where they begin to form an understanding and view of the surrounding world, both real and non-material. At this age, they are strongly influenced by social experiences, media, or culture that shape the way adolescents perceive events and experiences, or what is commonly called perception. A study by Nisa et al. (2023) found that the perception of ghosts in late adolescents is a cognitive process in which individuals form interpretations, perspectives, and understandings of "ghosts" based on knowledge, direct experience or stories from friends and stimuli from their environment. In addition, factors from social media, such as TikTok and YouTube, provide strong visualization which also influence this perception and allow adolescents to perceive ghosts more vividly than before (Astleitner et al., 2023).

According to the cognitive development theory Inhelder & Piaget (1958), adolescents are at the formal operational stage, where the ability to think abstractly, logically, and deductive-inductive processing develops rapidly. This allows adolescents to process information concretely, to imagine things that are not visible, such as the perception of ghosts. A study explained that these abilities help adolescents to integrate various sources of information into their cognitive schema (Nisa et al., 2023) to interpret stories about ghosts in a more complex way.

According to Hergovich et al., (2008), perception is a cognitive process that involves the selection, organization, and interpretation of information to form meaning. In this context, adolescents' perceptions of ghosts are influenced by external stimuli in the form of stories and digital media, which are then processed according to experience, social environment, and culture. Hergovich et al., (2008) also say that perception is strongly influenced by the cognitive schema that individuals have, therefore past experiences and social context are important factors in shaping perceptions. Thus, adolescents' perceptions of ghosts may vary depending on personal experiences, social norms, and exposure to supernatural narratives in their environment.

However, there remains a gap in studies regarding ghost perception, particularly among adolescents. Most previous studies have focused on teenagers, young children, or the general population, leaving limited exploration into adolescents' experiences in understanding ghosts (Nawir et al., 2020). Yet, adolescents are in a complex psychosocial development phase, where abstract thinking and critical reflection abilities are developing. Inhelder & Piaget (1958) state that adolescents are in the formal operational cognitive development stage, enabling them to grasp abstract concepts such as ghost perception. This makes adolescents an intriguing group to study in terms of how they interpret metaphysical phenomena.

Although national quantitative data specifically measuring Indonesian adolescents' belief in ghosts is limited, some studies and observations suggest that belief in supernatural entities

remains strong in society, including among adolescents. A study by (Novita, [2009](#)) examined the response of adolescents in to the horror film and showed that the media has a significant influence in shaping adolescents' perceptions of supernatural phenomena. In addition, the belief in ghosts in Indonesia has developed since the 1980s, influenced by media coverage and popular culture (Pranita & Sumartiningtyas, [2022](#)). This indicates that perceptions of ghosts do not only stem from traditional beliefs, but also from exposure to modern cultural content that continues to grow in Indonesian society.

Globally, the phenomenon of ghost perception does not only occur in Indonesia, but also in various countries with different cultural characteristics. In Japan, for example, there is the concept of Yūrei which is widely told in movies and folklore, while in the United States, ghost stories often appear in urban legends and horror movies as part of popular culture (Della, [2023](#)). In addition, research in Europe shows that belief in supernatural beings is stronger in rural than urban areas, which suggests that the social environment also plays a role in shaping these perceptions (Muktaf, [2008](#)).

By integrating cognitive and sociocultural perspectives, adolescents' perceptions of ghosts can be understood as the result of an interaction between their developing thought structures and the socio-cultural exposures they experience. This distinction demonstrates that ghost perception is influenced by individual factors, cultural constructs, and the social environment. Thus, collective experiences and local traditions also shape how individuals interpret and respond to supernatural phenomena.

In Indonesia itself, narratives about ghosts are heavily influenced by local culture and media. Viral phenomena such as sighting videos on TikTok or mystical stories on YouTube are the main factors that make teenagers' perceptions of ghosts grow (Astleitner et al., [2023](#)). However, not all teenagers accept ghost stories rawly, as there are groups that begin to question the validity of this phenomenon through a scientific perspective or skepticism (Nawir, et al., [2020](#)). In addition, educational factors and exposure to science also play a role in shaping adolescents' critical attitudes towards mystical stories. Adolescents who have a deeper understanding of psychology or science tend to see ghost phenomena as the result of suggestion, illusion, or cognitive bias.

Unlike previous quantitative or secondary-data-driven studies, this study directly explores adolescents' subjective experiences through a phenomenological approach. Previous studies often measured ghost perceptions through surveys or media content analysis, thus lacking in-depth exploration of the personal, meaning individuals attach to such experiences. Yet, perceptions of ghosts are frequently personal, emotional, and shaped by cultural context and individual life experiences. Therefore, this study emphasizes the importance of phenomenological

understanding, by listening directly to adolescents' narratives, capturing their inner experiences, and examining how they construct meaning from supernatural phenomena in daily life. This approach aims to reveal subjective nuances inaccessible to quantitative methods, while enriching the developmental psychology literature within the local Indonesian cultural context.

By examining adolescents' firsthand experiences, whether through traditional folklore, modern media, digital platforms, or peer narratives, this study is expected to provide new insights for developmental and educational psychology regarding the influence of ghost stories on adolescents' emotions, imagination, and mindset in the digital era. Additionally, this study seeks to uncover how supernatural narratives shape adolescents' anxiety or fascination with the mystical realm. It is expected to trigger educational strategies and psychological interventions, helping adolescents cultivate a more critical and balanced perspective toward supernatural phenomena. It contributes to the advancement of adolescent developmental psychology, particularly within the context of digital culture and local traditions as well as to serve as a practical reference for educators, parents, and professionals in understanding adolescents' complex perceptions of the supernatural.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method. This method aimed to find out the perception of ghosts in adolescents and understand the subjective experiences of adolescents in forming these perceptions. In this study, researchers analyzed data using the *interpretative phenomenological analysis* (IPA) method (Dwiyanto, [2021](#)).

This study focused on a single core variable: adolescents' perceptions of ghosts. This variable encompasses their subjective interpretations, conceptual understandings, and mental imagery of supernatural entities, shaped by personal experiences, environmental factors, and digital media exposure. The study employed a purposive sampling method, selecting two female participants aged 19 years. Key selection criteria included first-hand exposure to ghost narratives through either social environments, digital platforms, or interpersonal communication, and willingness to articulate these experiences in detail. Data collection was conducted through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The interview questions focused on three main dimensions of (Inhelder & Piaget, [1958](#)) namely abstraction ability, hypothesis logic and inductive deductive process.

To increase data validity, the researcher conducted *member checking* by showing the transcripts and preliminary findings back to the participants for confirmation. In addition, *peer debriefing* was conducted by involving colleagues to discuss data interpretation objectively. Researchers also maintained data reliability by consistently following the interview guide and

recording participants' nonverbal reactions. These steps were taken to ensure that the data obtained truly represented the participants' subjective experiences.

To explore respondents' perceptions and understanding of the existence of ghosts, interviews were conducted using a guide that was organized based on certain cognitive dimensions. This guide covers aspects of abstraction ability, hypothesis logic, and deductive-inductive thinking processes. Details of the interview questions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.
Interview Guidelines

Cognitive Dimension	Interview Questions
Abstraction Ability	1. What do you think a ghost looks like? Speak about it! 2. What do you think makes ghosts different from other creatures? 3. When you think of ghosts, what do you think of? What comes to mind most vividly?
Hypothesis Logic	1. Where do you think ghosts come from? Why do they exist? 2. If you've never seen a ghost in person, why can you believe or disbelieve that ghosts exist? 3. If a friend of yours says he or she has seen a ghost, do you think the story is true or not? Why?
Deductive-Inductive Process	1. What ghost stories have you heard from others? Do you think the story is true or not? 2. Do you have a personal experience that makes you believe or disbelieve in ghosts? Tell us about it. 3. Have you ever seen a ghost on social media? Do you believe it? 4. In your opinion, ghosts are more often evil or good? Why do you think that? 5. If you hear a story about a good ghost, what makes you believe or doubt the story?

This study was conducted in December 2024. In this study, data collection techniques were carried out through several stages. The first stage was preparation, where the researcher coordinated with participants to schedule interviews. Furthermore, in the interview implementation stage, the researcher explored adolescents' interpretation and understanding of their personal experiences related to ghost stories. The interview lasted for approximately 45 minutes, using Google Meet in 1 interview session for each participant. To ensure the accuracy of the data, the entire interview process was documented in the form of audio recordings and stored for further analysis (Harahap, [2020](#)).

The interview data were manually transcribed by the researcher. Before conducting the interviews, a briefing was conducted for the interviewers to equalize their understanding of the interview guidelines, ethical approaches, and techniques for building rapport with participants. The researcher also maintained research ethics by ensuring the anonymity of participants by not including their real names and disguising other personal identity information in data reporting.

The data that has been collected is then analyzed using the *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (IPA) approach based on the steps developed by Neal et al., (2015). The analysis process began with data transcription, converting interview recordings into written form. Subsequently, in-depth data analysis was conducted to identify emerging patterns. The next stage involved theme identification, where primary themes from the collected data were formulated. These themes were then interconnected to examine relationships between emerging concepts. Following the identification of these relationships, the researcher interpreted the analytical findings to uncover the underlying meaning of the research results. The final stage was results reporting, where research findings were systematically and comprehensively organized into a formal report (Alaslan, 2022). The entire analysis process was conducted manually without utilizing qualitative data analysis software.

Results

The respondents in this study were two adolescents, aged 19 years. The demographic description of participants who meet the characteristics in this study can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2.

Overview of Research Subjects

No.	Initials	Age	Gender	Domicile
1	FA	19 Years	Female	Yogyakarta
2	BE	19 Years	Female	Yogyakarta

Table 2 shows an overview of the research subjects, which consisted of two 19-year-old adolescents who are female and live in Yogyakarta. This information provides an initial demographic context that may influence the subject's perspective and perception of the topic under study. The similarity in age and domicile allows similar patterns of meaning to emerge due to the possibility of being exposed to relatively similar cultural backgrounds and social environments.

The results of this study show that the perceptions of ghosts were complex and influenced by various factors, namely cultural factors, religion, social narratives, social media, and individual experiences. These findings were derived from six key themes identified in the analysis of interview transcript data, as presented in Table 3.

Table 3.

Six Themes of Teenagers' Ghost Perception Based on IPA Analysis Results

No.	Theme	Theme coverage
1	Perception in general and the presence of ghosts	1. Invisible creatures. 2. Invisible creatures with variations. 3. 2-dimensional concept. 4. Ghostly form. 5. The origin of the spirits of the dead. 6. The nature of ghosts.
2	Source of ghost narratives	1. Perception from other people's stories. 2. The influence of other people's stories. 3. Influence of childhood stories (local culture influence). 4. Religious origins and cultural narratives. 5. Believe through the testimonies of others. 6. Belief in haunted place narratives. 7. Cultural influence beliefs. 8. Trust from social media.
3	The impact of ghost narratives on individuals	1. Friends' stories influence behavior. 2. No personal experience. 3. Intuitive experience of ghosts. 4. Interested in ghost stories because they are full of plot twists. 5. Interested in telling ghost stories because not everyone can see ghosts.
4	Assessment of the story and the presence of ghosts	1. Ghost stories are for information only. 2. Ghosts are not always negative. 3. Association of ghosts with negativity. 4. Skepticism about the Direct Influence of ghosts.
5	Conditions that influence belief in ghosts	1. Trust relies on the narrative of the story. 2. Trust depends on the level of confidence in the narrative.
6	Media's role in ghost perception	1. Media influence on ghost trust.

These six themes, after in-depth analysis, are obtained from consistent patterns of meaning from both participants reflecting their subjective experiences in understanding the concept of ghosts. The interpretation of each theme is explained as follows:

Theme 1: Perception in general and the existence of ghosts

Adolescents had diverse perceptions of ghosts, due to the intangible nature of these supernatural entities, leading to varied interpretations, with each individual forming their own understanding based on personal and cultural influences. Generally, they conceptualized ghosts

as invisible beings that exist in multiple forms, inhabited dimensions separated from humans, possess distinct characteristics, and were associated with the spirits of the deceased.

In the first subject, FA stated that ghosts were invisible beings undetectable to humans. FA explained that ghosts could not easily manifest themselves physically, as in FA's understanding, humans and ghosts existed in separate dimensions.

"Ghosts are creatures that exist, but... For them to show themselves is difficult. That is, it's not easy for ghosts to show their form, like in movies. For example, suddenly on top of a tree, or in the middle of the darkness he is there, like that. It's not like that, because based on what I've learned, if for example humans and demons are two different dimensions" (FA).

The second subject, BE, perceived that ghosts were invisible creatures. Some were good and some were evil. According to BE, there were many kinds of ghosts, and one of them was a genie. And according to BE, ghosts were creatures that disturb humans.

"I think ghosts are like invisible creatures. Some are good and some are bad. And what's the name. There are many types of ghosts. Like genie is also one of them. Like that. And so on. Ghosts can also be explained as something that disturbs us" (BE).

BE conceptualized ghosts as spirits of deceased individuals who no longer existed in the physical world. According to BE, these entities could appear and disappear suddenly and possessed the ability to pass through solid objects. When imagining ghosts, BE described them as having frightening facial features that differed from living humans, typically appearing with pale complexions. Furthermore, BE believed ghosts were created from fire and possessed supernatural powers, considering them manifestations of ancestral spirits. Although BE reported never having visually encountered a ghost, she maintained a firm belief in their existence. BE explained this belief through three categories of human experience: some people can see but not feel ghosts, others can feel but not see them, while a third group can perceive them both ways. BE identified themselves as belonging to the second category - unable to see but capable of sensing ghostly presences.

Theme 2: Source of narration about ghosts

Perceptions of ghosts were profoundly influenced by various socio-cultural factors, including stories transmitted through interpersonal networks, local folklore, religious teachings, social media narratives, and legends surrounding purportedly haunted locations. Among these influences, digital media platforms, particularly podcasts, YouTube, and TikTok, played a pivotal role in shaping adolescents' conceptualizations of supernatural entities. The dynamic and visually compelling nature of social media storytelling made ghost narratives particularly vivid and memorable, thereby significantly impacting how teenagers perceived these phenomena. However, the study revealed notable variations in how adolescents processed these narratives.

While some readily accepted the portrayals of ghosts presented through media channels, others demonstrated marked skepticism toward specific supernatural claims. For instance, certain participants critically questioned the logical validity of stories alleging ghost-induced accidents in particular locales. This reflects the diverse responses of teenagers in responding to narratives about ghosts, ranging from unquestioning acceptance to critical and questioning attitudes.

According to FA, the perception of ghosts was strongly influenced by social narratives, because FA thought that many people only knew ghosts from stories, and did not see them directly. FA said that ghosts were the spirits of the dead who had not calmed down, but she further admitted that it only came from people's stories.

"I only know it from people's stories, I don't see it directly. So every time someone tells me they saw the devil, people are like, seriously, how can you see it? Because not everyone can see it" (FA).

In contrast to her personal beliefs, FA acknowledged that ghosts, like humans, were also God's creations. While FA placed greater trust in accounts of mystical places than in stories from individuals claiming to have seen ghosts, she sometimes accepted the existence of supernatural beings due to the sheer volume of ghost narratives she had encountered from others—even though the veracity of these stories remained unverified.

FA further explained that she had encountered stories about a Balinese cultural prohibition restricting menstruating women from visiting certain locations, as they were believed to disturb local spirits. While she acknowledged these narratives, FA admitted that as a Javanese individual, she did not personally believe it. However, she noted that many Balinese people and even some non-Balinese who reported similar experiences considered these accounts to be genuine. This demonstrated FA's awareness of varying cultural interpretations of supernatural phenomena. Regarding visual representations, FA described imagining ghosts as resembling the "pocong" figure, a perception shaped by childhood exposure to stories about white-shrouded ghosts.

Subject BE stated that she believed in the existence of ghosts, maintaining that all human sins resulted from demonic temptation and that the devil served as the source of worldly problems. BE's conviction about supernatural entities strengthened through witnessing numerous cases of spirit possession and trance states within her community.

"I also believe why ghosts exist because all the sins we commit are also included in what is called the seduction of the devil so it's like yes they are the source of the problem besides us, yes they are also somehow believing that because there are also some people who are possessed or trance or what are all those things, yes because it comes from that". (BE).

Theme 3: The impact of ghost narratives on individuals

Even without direct supernatural experiences, participants reported that ghost stories significantly impacted their behaviors, eliciting fear, confusion, or specific anticipatory responses. Interesting stories or narratives can also create a special attraction for individuals to listen to or tell ghost stories.

A particularly illustrative case emerged from FA's recollections of dormitory life. She reported a collective belief among residents that unexplained closet knocking would occur if students remained awake past midnight. This shared narrative produced measurable behavioral changes, with FA consciously adjusting her sleep schedule to avoid the anticipated phenomenon. FA said that the factor that often made ghost stories interesting and scary was the unexpected element or "*plot twist*", like in horror movies. According to her, the main factor that made people enjoy hearing ghost stories is the uncertainty about the storyline.

"For example, most often if for example we sleep until above 12 o'clock at night, there is a friend of mine who told me in the morning at breakfast that she said that last night she slept until 12 o'clock, then she said that in the cupboard there were knocks like this. I don't know if I believed it or not, but it triggered me to not sleep at night" (FA).

BE's experience with ghost-related beliefs emerged when friends repeatedly claimed her behavior, such as skipping prayers, neglecting worship, and general lethargy, were caused by a ghost or demonic influence. Her friends insisted an unseen entity was whispering distractions, encouraging BE to avoid studying and religious practices. While BE acknowledged occasionally succumbing to these temptations, the accusations left her deeply conflicted. She wrestled with whether to accept her friends' supernatural explanations or dismiss them, constantly reevaluating their claims against her own understanding of spiritual matters.

"My friend told me that I don't know why I'm lazy to pray, lazy to worship, lazy of all kinds and everything, the point is he said like that. He said that actually I am like this because I am influenced by ghosts or satan" (BE).

Theme 4: Assessment of ghost stories and existence

The results of the assessment of ghosts varied from neutral to negative. On one hand, ghost stories are perceived as just information without any meaning, and that ghosts were not always negative. On the other hand, they associated ghosts with bad behavior or influence on humans. But, interestingly, questions regarding certain ghost phenomena aroused, showing *skepticism*, such as ghosts that were thought to cause accidents in an area. They question the logic behind the story.

FA considered that ghosts were good creatures of God, and it was different with the devil. FA believed that demons are evil because they deceive humans. In addition, based on FA's experience, she said that she had heard a story about someone who saw a ghost in the bathroom,

but the story was incomplete and ended without further explanation. FA said that the story showed vagueness. Like a strange sounding voice but not followed by further events, which made her hesitant to fully believe the story. She said that if something was indeed seen, there should have been more obvious actions, such as sounds or movements that lead to something scary.

However, the stories she heard only ended up with limited information, so FA preferred to accept the stories as mere information, without feeling the need to fully believe them. FA also mentioned that many people could misinterpret ordinary occurrences, such as moving cloths and ascribe them to ghosts, simply because of the frightening atmosphere. FA emphasized that although she believed that ghosts existed, she still doubted that people could actually see them clearly, as FA considered that it was very difficult for ghosts to show themselves.

"So if it's a ghost, I believe there is a ghost. But if people see ghosts, I don't believe it. Because it was hard to show. And I don't think that ghosts can show themselves" (FA).

Meanwhile, regarding the character of ghosts, subject BE said that ghosts were often evil. This was due to the effects and factors of the ghost's bad deeds that affected her. So BE felt that ghosts were evil. BE even felt that the bad things she had gotten so far were due to the trickery of ghosts.

"But the problem is why do I say bad? Because I really believe that what I'm doing is bad. And I feel like this ghost, this devil, is evil to me, so sometimes the bad things that I have gotten so far in my life are because of that, because of the trickery of ghosts" (BE).

Theme 5: Conditions that influence belief in ghosts

The belief in ghost stories was strongly influenced by how the ghost story was conveyed. The belief was determined by convincing *narratives*. *Narratives* that were delivered logically and convincingly were more likely to be believed than stories that were less clear to understand. In addition, they also believed in the existence of ghosts more if they felt it themselves.

Subjects FA and BE stated they did not fully believe ghost stories told by friends, with their acceptance depending on the narrator's storytelling credibility. They explained that only particularly convincing accounts would make them believe. While BE reported never having directly encountered a ghost, she acknowledged experiencing perceived supernatural presences. These personal sensory experiences significantly strengthened BE's belief in ghosts compared to secondhand accounts.

"I have to believe it or not, I say it like if I don't believe it, this friend of mine is right, so I'm confused, yes, 50% seems to believe 50% don't believe it. It's 50-50 depending on the context" (BE).

Theme 6: The role of media in ghost perception

The role of *social media*, such as *podcasts*, *Youtube* or *TikTok*, played a major role in shaping and reinforcing adolescents' perceptions of ghosts. Through *social media*, ghost narratives became more vivid, believable and convincing. However, not all participants were like this, some were *skeptical* of certain claims, for example in subject FA, she saw on *TikTok* that there was a ghost who was thought to have caused a human accident. FA questioned the logic behind the story, showing that although the media plays a big role, beliefs were not taken at face value and depend on an individual's rational evaluation.

“There is a story on TikTok that ghosts cause people's accidents, what's the logic? Ghosts are in a different dimension from us, they can't show themselves, I don't believe that story” (FA).

However, subject BE often heard ghost stories through *YouTube* podcasts. BE believed more if it was through this *social media* because BE could see and hear the story directly and was more convincing. According to her, many of these stories are interesting and made her believe.

“For podcasts like that, I believe in listening to podcasts like that. I don't know why I just believe it. I believe it because, maybe I saw it myself, like I heard it too from podcasts, YouTube, the story is interesting, so it makes us believe it” (BE).

Discussion

This study revealed that adolescents' perceptions of ghosts were complex constructs shaped equally by cognitive processes and social influences. These perceptions did not emerge in isolation but developed through an ongoing integration of cultural traditions, religious teachings, and collective storytelling within their communities. Within the framework of social constructivism theory, perceptions of supernatural beings are not born from direct experience, but the result of symbolic internalization through stories spread in society. The diversity of perspectives on the nature of ghosts reflects the interpretative flexibility of adolescents towards supernatural symbols in their culture, as stated by Putri & Widiyanto (2024) that adolescents form mystical perceptions through narratives that circulate socially and culturally, and these narratives are internalized as part of personal understanding.

The perception of ghosts in adolescents was also influenced by social narratives. In a sociocultural perspective, social narratives had a major influence in shaping adolescents' mental schema towards the concept of ghosts. Stories that were emotionally and contextually relevant were more easily accepted and internalized. This process reinforced the idea that the meaning of ghosts was intersubjective and influenced by the social environment.

According to Berger and Luckman (in Dharma, 2018), social reality is the result of social construction formed through social interaction and internalization of norms and narratives that

recur in society. This confirms that individual perceptions, including mystical perceptions such as ghosts, are formed through the process of socialization and cultural narratives that exist in their social environment.

The study's findings demonstrated that ghost narratives not only shaped perceptions but also directly influenced adolescents' daily behaviors and decision-making processes. Narratives embedding specific cultural values or implicit threats frequently prompted behavioral adaptations, particularly in response to socio-cultural expectations. This shows that ghost stories function as an unconscious means of social regulation. Variations in adolescents' attitudes towards ghost stories are closely related to their critical thinking skills and stage of cognitive development.

According to Jean Piaget's cognitive development theory, adolescents are in the formal operational stage, where they begin to be able to think abstractly, and question illogical information. At this stage, Ibda (2015) states that basen on the theory, individuals can consider possibilities and evaluate information critically. They no longer accept information raw, but rather begin to question things that are considered illogical, including mystical stories such as ghosts. *"In the formal operational stage, individuals begin to be able to think abstractly, make hypotheses, and think logically deductively. They can consider possibilities and evaluate information critically."*

This finding aligns with developmental psychology research showing that adolescents acquire the capacity for abstract thought and hypothetical reasoning, so they tend to judge stories based on narrative consistency, supporting evidence, and relevance to personal experience (Kompasiana, 2024). Thus, the critical thinking skills developed during adolescence play an important role in shaping their attitudes towards socially circulated ghost stories.

The findings also showed that belief in the existence of ghosts was strongly influenced by how the story was told and by personal experience. Narratives that were plausible, convincing, reasonable, and accompanied by visual images or videos tended to be more accepted than those that lacked evidence and were ambiguous. Belief in ghost stories was the result of an evaluation of the narrative's credibility and the affective experience that accompanied it. Individuals tended to believe narratives that had logical coherence, visual evidence, and congruence with their previous experiences. Therefore, narratives supported by visualizations or real experiences were more likely to be believed. Human minds are open and imaginative, often drawn to envisioning a world free from pain and suffering, where lost loved ones remain present, and meaning is shaped through a pattern-seeking nature (Cowdell, 2011).

In addition, social media played a major role in shaping and reinforcing adolescents' perceptions of ghosts. Through platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and podcasts, ghost narratives were presented in more vivid and engaging ways, making it easier for teenagers to believe in them

and influencing how they perceived immaterial phenomena. As explained by Muslimah & Nurliah (2022) that horror shows on YouTube have cognitive, affective, and cognitive effects on their audiences, suggesting that horror content on social media can influence adolescents' perceptions and attitudes towards the mystical.

Although they did not immediately believe what was on social media, participants admitted that digital media provided narratives with visual and audio power that amplified the suggestive effect. However, adolescents also showed a selective process in receiving information from the media. While the findings in this study provided a rich picture of adolescents' perceptions of ghosts, it was important to note that there were only two participants. This is in accordance with the IPA approach, which emphasizes the depth of exploration of individual experiences rather than generalizations. Nevertheless, this limited number of participants remains an important note that limits the extension of the interpretation of the results to a wider population.

This study is in line with several previous findings that discuss the influence of culture on people's perceptions of ghosts. Muktaf (2008) states that local cultural narratives, such as movies about ghosts, ghost myths from local communities, then the myth becomes a legend that is passed down to the next generation, have an important role in shaping people's perceptions. This is consistent with the findings of this study, where social narratives about haunted places or childhood stories create strong images about the form and nature of ghosts. Therefore, in the research Muktaf (2008) said that ghosts that depart from traditional myths will be more convincing if the *setting* uses traditional *settings* as well.

This study found that social narratives such as haunted places or childhood stories created strong mental images of the appearance and nature of ghosts, reflecting the influence of culture on people's perceptions of ghosts. This study aligned the findings of Muktaf (2008) which revealed that local cultural narratives, such as ghost films, ghost myths from local communities, and legends passed down through generations, played a significant role in shaping public perception. However, in his study, he argued that ghosts rooted in traditional myths would appear more convincing when presented within a traditional setting. He further stated that the majority of people liked watching Indonesian horror films because they were more "scary". This view reflected a form of symbolic connection between ghosts and traditional myths. What had been continuously discussed within the community eventually evolved into legendary stories that were later represented in films. Ghosts developed from traditional myths, to some extent, influenced viewers' perceptions of ghosts in the real world. Media can influence adolescents' perceptions to understand ghosts (Astleitner et al., 2023). Different communities will have different local wisdom, according to the cultural background that surrounds them Sartini (2009).

The findings of this study offered a new contribution to understanding how adolescents constructed perceptions of ghosts through a combination of personal experiences, social narratives, and digital media. It demonstrated that adolescents were not passive recipients but active agents who filtered, questioned, and reconstructed ghost narratives based on their social contexts and reasoning. The findings also revealed a balance between belief and skepticism among adolescents: while they could accept narratives about haunted places, they continued to question supernatural claims that lacked rational justification. This dimension enriched the understanding of the dynamics of adolescents' critical thinking within the context of popular culture.

This study found that adolescents regarded digital media as a primary source of engaging and credible ghost narratives. They actively interpreted the content they consumed, attributing significance to narratives that were visually compelling and culturally familiar. Moreover, participants acknowledged social narratives about haunted places, although they did not always associate these places with direct supernatural causes, such as accidents. Importantly, adolescents also displayed a degree of skepticism, particularly toward illogical or exaggerated metaphysical claims. This critical stance suggested that their belief systems were not shaped solely by passive consumption, but through an evaluative process influenced by personal and cultural reasoning.

These findings were in line with those of (Astleitner et al., [2023](#)), who identified YouTube as a key platform for representing ghosts as cultural symbols that served both educational and entertainment purposes. In addition, Nawir *et al.* ([2020](#)) highlighted how communities construct narratives about haunted places to manage uncertainty or perceived threats—an aspect similarly reflected in the adolescents' acknowledgment of such stories in this study. However, while previous research has primarily focused on belief and cultural continuity, the present study brought to light the critical and skeptical dimension of adolescent reasoning, offering a more layered understanding of how ghost narratives are received and interpreted.

A key contribution of present study is its attention to adolescent skepticism, that adolescents critically evaluated certain ghost narratives, particularly those that lacked logical explanation, such as the idea that ghosts cause accidents. This suggests that adolescents are not passive recipients of cultural or digital narratives, but rather active interpreters who balance belief with critical reflection. This is consistent with the finding of Nasrullah ([2018](#)) that although the belief in ghosts is still strong in society, there is a tendency among teenagers to criticize and rationalize these mystical stories. In his study, *"the existence of ghosts in the human imagination is due to the existence of common sense and myths that continue to develop"*. This shows that some teenagers are starting to adopt a rational approach in responding to mystical stories. This critical perspective shows that views on supernatural phenomena in the digital era are more

individualized and influenced by rational considerations, which has previously been less discussed in the literature.

This study highlights that digital media serve dual roles: they both reinforce belief in ghosts through compelling stories and help deconstruct supernatural beliefs. This reflects a significant shift in how the younger generation understands and values metaphysical phenomena compared to earlier generations. Together, these changes suggest evolving perceptions of ghosts. While earlier research emphasized the strong influence of collective cultural and religious narratives (Kono, [2019](#)), present studies show that digital media not only replace but also enrich these narratives by enabling critical thinking and freer experiences. The interaction between digital media and local culture creates new dynamics in adolescents' understanding of metaphysical phenomena (Nisa et al, [2023](#)).

The strength of this study lies in the qualitative approach that allows for an in-depth exploration of adolescents' subjective perceptions of ghosts. Using interviews and narrative analysis, this study successfully explored the dynamics of adolescents' experiences, beliefs, and ways of thinking in a contextualized manner. However, this study has limitations in that the number of participants is small and culturally homogeneous, so the results cannot be widely generalized. In addition, the use of personal narratives and experiences as data sources also presents high subjectivity. Therefore, further research with a more demographically diverse range of participants and cultural backgrounds may provide a broader and more comprehensive understanding of adolescents' perceptions of ghosts.

This study has important implications for education and adolescent psychological well-being. The findings that show how adolescents respond to and interpret supernatural stories can be used as a reference in designing learning materials that encourage reflective thinking skills and the ability to sort out information, especially in the context of popular culture and digital media. In addition, the results of this study can also be used to design mentoring activities that help adolescents understand their feelings when hearing or seeing mystical stories. However, due to the small number of participants in this study (only two participants), it is important to emphasize that this study is exploratory in nature and not intended to produce generalizations. The findings provide an in-depth preliminary picture of adolescents' subjective perceptions of ghosts, and can serve as a foundation for further research with a broader scope.

Conclusion

This study shows that adolescent's perception of ghosts is a phenomenon influenced by various factors, such as local culture, religion, personal experience, as well as exposure to social media and digital narratives. Adolescents form their views through a combination of traditional

stories they have heard since childhood, spiritual beliefs, and popular content on platforms such as TikTok and YouTube. However, not all adolescents accepted these narratives in their entirety; some responded with a critical attitude and questioned the logic behind the ghost stories they encountered. This finding reflects that adolescents are not only passive recipients of information, but are also able to select and evaluate narratives based on their cognitive development. Understanding this perception formation process is important in the context of developmental psychology and education, especially to assist adolescents in managing emotions, imagination, and critical thinking towards metaphysical phenomena in the digital era.

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