



SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCES OF SITTERS IN PUBLIC PHYSICAL MEDIUMSHIP SÉANCES

BY HELANÉ WAHBEH, JULIETTE GALLO, OTEJA LIGHTEART, & SARAH RODRIGUES

ABSTRACT

Physical mediumship, often described as communication between the spiritual and physical realms, has been recorded throughout US history and worldwide. Typically conducted in darkness, these séances involve the invocation of a spirit in physical form, and may produce extraordinary apparent phenomena, including materialization, ectoplasm, direct voice mediumship, and apports. For participants, such events can be both memorable and deeply personal, often transforming their lives. This qualitative study examines the experiences of individuals attending public séances, focusing on observed phenomena, interpretations, and broader meaning-making. Participants were recruited following séance attendance, yielding in-depth interview data from twenty-one individuals describing experiences across multiple séance events conducted between February and July 2024. Semi-structured interviews provided additional depth, capturing physical, emotional, and cognitive impacts. Qualitative analysis identified fifteen themes within three overarching categories: 'A. Nature of the experience,' 'B. Structure and context of the séance,' and 'C. Mediumship mechanics and interpretation.' These findings indicate that sitter reports reflect a dynamic interplay between expectation, interpretation, and observation. Although the authenticity of reported events cannot be established, physical mediumship séances appear capable of eliciting profound meaning, emotional impact, and personal transformation, while simultaneously prompting doubt and critical reflection.

INTRODUCTION

Physical mediumship refers to a purported form of spirit communication involving observable physical phenomena, such as levitation, telekinesis, audible spirit voices, materializations, ectoplasm, and apports (Braude, 1996). Ectoplasm is typically described as a semi-physical substance that emanates from the medium's body and is manipulated by spirits to produce effects (Nahm, 2016), while apports refer to objects that appear unexpectedly in the séance room, sometimes seemingly emerging from the medium's body or from thin air, and are interpreted as evidence of spirit intervention (Nahm, 2019; von Ludwiger & Nahm, 2016). Materializations, in turn, involve the apparent formation of physical forms such as hands, faces, or full figures, often associated with ectoplasmic emissions (Nahm, 2023). These phenomena are typically

reported in dim or dark séance rooms under ritualized environmental and procedural conditions (de Oliveira Maraldi, 2023; Nahm, 2014; Vandersande, 2008). Unlike mental mediumship, which involves internal impressions (e.g., thoughts, images, or emotions), physical mediumship is characterized by collective, tangible manifestations that can, in principle, be directly perceived by all sitters present (Nahm, 2019; Richet, 1923/2024).

Historical research focus: evidence and fraud

Interest in physical mediumship surged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when it became a central focus of early psychical research. Prominent investigators such as Sir William Crookes (1889; Crookes et al., 1885), Frederic Myers (1903/1961), and Charles Richet (1923/2024) conducted hundreds of sittings with renowned mediums under increasingly controlled conditions, aiming to assess whether these phenomena could be attributed to non-ordinary causes. Some of the most extensively documented cases included Daniel Dunglas Home, whose séances in full light reportedly produced levitations, object movements, and partial materializations (Crookes, 1889; Fontana, 2005; Katz, 2023; Lamont, 2005), and Eusapia Palladino, whose phenomena prompted extensive cross-European investigations (Alvarado, 2014; Katz, 2023). Other well-documented examples include Minnie Rose Harrison, whose trumpet movements, materializations, and apports were well documented (Vandersande, 2008, pp. 121–137).

Yet even in these cases, tensions between evidence and credibility persisted. While some investigators endorsed mediums' abilities, critics noted weaknesses such as dim lighting, loose restraints, and restricted opportunities for verification (Hall, 1963; Lamont, 2004). Allegations of fraud, sometimes substantiated, undermined the credibility of the field. By the mid-20th century, scientific interest had waned, partly due to the difficulty of replicating phenomena under rigorous experimental control (Braude, 2003, 2014; Nahm, 2014). Importantly, historical and modern accounts alike reveal that fraud and authenticity may not be mutually exclusive. Some mediums may have produced striking phenomena under certain conditions, while also resorting to trickery at other times (Braude, 2014, 2016; Nahm, 2016, 2018). The possibility of 'mixed mediumship' complicates categorical judgments of authenticity, reflecting the nuanced historical reality.

In addition, accounts of fraud in physical mediumship encompass both deliberate deception and the possibility of unconscious enactment, expectancy effects, or dissociative processes on the part of mediums and participants. Contemporary discussions emphasize that such mechanisms need not be mutually exclusive and may coexist within the same séance context, further complicating efforts to disentangle intentional misconduct from psychologically mediated effects (Silva et al., 2023). From a sitter perspective, this ambiguity was reflected in interviews that simultaneously expressed

trust, doubt, and uncertainty, rather than definitive judgments about authenticity.

Contemporary practice and ongoing challenges

Today, physical mediumship continues in private, long-term development groups such as home circles (e.g., Stewart Alexander; Kean, 2018) and in public séances conducted by traveling mediums (Hunter, 2013; Katz, 2023). One of the most widely publicized late 20th-century examples was the Scole Experimental Group in England (1993–1998), whose séances were attended by researchers and lay sitters alike and generated considerable discussion regarding both the richness of reported phenomena and the methodological challenges of evaluation (Katz, 2023; Keen, 2001; Keen et al., 1999).

Concerns have also been raised regarding the potential psychological and emotional harms that may arise when sitters later come to believe that a séance was deceptive, particularly for individuals attending while grieving the loss of a loved one. Ethical analyses of contemporary mediumship practice identify bereaved sitters as a vulnerable population, and caution that insufficient attention to grief sensitivity and consumer protection may result in psychological–emotional harm (Zemel & Wahbeh, 2025). Related discussions of fraud and credibility in public séance contexts further underscore the ethical seriousness of deception in emotionally charged settings, even when empirical adjudication remains contested (Nahm, 2016).

Public demonstrations today often prohibit the use of intrusive observation and recording equipment, which limits opportunities for independent empirical verification (Nahm, 2016). Modern research has been further complicated by high-profile cases of alleged fraud, highlighting enduring concerns about credibility (Braude, 2016; Nahm, 2016). The conditions of most séances, including complete or near-complete darkness, reliance on subjective witness testimony, and restricted access to the medium, continue to pose substantial methodological challenges for researchers (Braude, 2016; Nahm, 2014, 2016, 2018).

Given this context, the literature has remained disproportionately focused on authenticity and fraud detection, with relatively little systematic attention paid to the subjective experiences of séance attendees themselves. Historical reports sometimes mention sitters' emotional reactions or meaning-making, but these were rarely primary research objectives (de Oliveira Maraldi, 2023). Contemporary research similarly grapples with the challenge of balancing participant experience with empirical verification.

Despite methodological controversies, séances continue to attract participants, both first-time attendees and seasoned sitters. Many report motivations that extend beyond questions of proof, including spiritual development, personal healing, and the search for meaning (Katz, 2023). These observations suggest that the persistence of physical mediumship cannot be

explained solely by claims of evidence but also by the powerful experiential and emotional significance it holds for participants. This persistent appeal raises a compelling question: What motivates individuals to participate in contexts that are both experientially profound and epistemically fraught? Addressing this question requires a shift from studying only the veracity of the phenomena to examining the lived experiences of those who witness them.

Limited modern research on sitter experiences

In recent years, a small but growing number of qualitative studies have explored subjective experiences related to mediumship. For example, Beischel et al. (2017) analyzed mediums' self-reports of their mediumistic and psychic experiences. Roxburgh and Roe (2011, 2013) also evaluated the mediumistic process and various self-report measures of psychological well-being in spiritualist mental mediums. Drinkwater et al. (2022) used reflexive thematic analysis to examine how individuals with self-ascribed paranormal abilities interpret their unusual experiences. In addition, Bauder (2019) conducted a survey-based study of séance attendees in German-speaking contexts, examining motivations, expectations, and subjective interpretations of physical mediumship experiences. These studies demonstrate the feasibility and value of applying rigorous qualitative methods to anomalous experiences, yet none of them focuses on the perspective of sitters in contemporary physical mediumship settings. However, with the exception of Bauder's work, prior research has largely focused on mediums themselves or on individuals reporting anomalous experiences, rather than on in-depth narrative accounts from sitters attending contemporary public physical mediumship séances.

The present study

Building on this body of work, the present study offers an in-depth qualitative investigation of sitter narratives drawn from contemporary public physical mediumship séances. Whereas Bauder (2019) employed a survey-based approach to characterize sitter perspectives, the current study focuses on extended semi-structured interviews, allowing for a more detailed examination of how attendees describe, interpret, and make meaning of their séance experiences over time. By examining how attendees describe and interpret their experiences, this work addresses a critical gap in the literature, shifting the emphasis from the verification of phenomena to the meaning-making processes of those who witness them. Consistent with prior research, the study does not attempt to adjudicate the objective authenticity of reported phenomena; instead, it centers on participants' subjective experiences and interpretations within specific social, cultural, and ritual contexts.

This study employs a qualitative design centered on semi-structured interviews to examine sitter experiences at public physical mediumship séances. Survey data were used to support recruitment and contextualize interviews but

were not analyzed as outcomes. The study addresses the following research questions:

- (1) What phenomena do sitters perceive through the five senses?
- (2) How do these experiences shape emotional and cognitive responses?
- (3) What role do belief and skepticism play in interpretation?

By centering first-person narratives and the interpretive frameworks activated in ambiguous, emotionally intense contexts, this study sheds light not only on physical mediumship itself but also on broader human responses to anomalous phenomena and how belief, perception, and emotional resonance may coalesce in these unusual experiences.

METHODS

This mixed-methods study investigated the experiences of attendees at public physical mediumship séances held between February 10, 2024, and July 11, 2024. Data were collected between February 10, 2024, and August 13, 2024. All study activities were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS; IORG#0003743), and informed consent was obtained from all participants. A detailed description of all study procedures, survey instruments, and interview protocols is available in the Supplemental Materials (Figshare <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31837552>). A summary of the methods is provided below.

Participants and recruitment

Adult volunteers were recruited through multiple methods, such as IONS newsletters, the IONS network, and word of mouth, but primarily through séance organizers and physical mediums. Inclusion criteria included adult volunteers who attended a physical mediumship séance, had understood and signed the research consent form, and had the technological means to complete the survey on a smartphone, tablet, or computer. Exclusion criteria included children aged seventeen years or younger, and those who did not understand the research consent form, or who could not complete the survey. Eligible participants completed a brief online survey after attending a séance that served to document basic contextual information and to identify individuals willing to be contacted for an in-depth qualitative interview. From this recruitment process, a subset of participants agreed to take part in semi-structured interviews, which form the primary dataset for the present qualitative analyses. Participants received no direct compensation but were eligible for entry into a \$250 raffle as compensation for their time.

Study setting

The events attended by participants varied in format, and included traditional physical mediumship séances as well as ceremonial healing gatherings drawing on Lakota spiritual traditions. Physical mediumship séances typically involve

groups of participants seated with a medium in dim or darkened conditions while purported phenomena such as raps, voices, movements of objects, or other manifestations occur. In contrast, the Lakota healing ceremonies described by participants were conducted as communal ritual gatherings focused on prayer, healing intentions, and spiritual communication within an Indigenous ceremonial framework. Attendance at these events generally involved fees charged by organizers, consistent with the common practice of public séance events.

Study procedures

Following each séance, participants were directed to a SurveyMonkey link to review and agree to a consent form and complete an approximately fifteen-minute survey (see Supplemental Materials for the full survey, <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31837552>). The survey documented prior experience with mediumship, general belief and skepticism, perceived authenticity of the medium, and salient phenomena observed during the séance. Open-text items allowed participants to note experiences they found particularly meaningful and to provide contextual detail. Survey responses were used to support recruitment and to inform subsequent qualitative interviews rather than for inferential analysis. Follow-up interviews explored these experiences in greater depth using a semi-structured format.

If participants opted in for an interview, they received a phone call or email from research staff to schedule an interview at a convenient time. Each online Zoom interview was recorded and lasted approximately fifteen to one hundred and fifty minutes, depending on their availability, the amount of detail they shared, and if the interviewee was describing multiple séances. The semi-structured interview process was designed to explore participants' experiences in physical mediumship séances in greater depth. Interview questions were informed by participants' survey responses but were not limited to them, allowing them to further describe their séance experiences. This semi-structured format allowed a natural flow of conversation, guided by the rapport between the interviewer and the participant. Because the aim of this study was to examine how individuals who attend physical mediumship séances interpret their experiences, the sample should be understood as representing an experiential community of séance participants rather than a population intended to represent broader public attitudes toward mediumship.

Qualitative analyses

Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and data entered into an Excel spreadsheet with the following columns, organized by interview questions: 'Environment,' 'Number of sitters,' 'Sight,' 'Hearing,' 'Touch,' 'Taste,' 'Smell,' 'Sixth sense,' 'Healing,' 'Other,' 'Field of expertise,' and 'Commentary.'

Interview transcripts constituted the primary analytic dataset, and were analyzed using an inductive qualitative approach. The dataset was imported into Dedoose (v.10.0.34, SocioCultural Research Consultants, Los Angeles, CA) for qualitative coding. In the initial round, three researchers independently reviewed and open coded the transcripts without restrictions on the number or type of codes applied. Coders noted emerging ideas, phenomena, and contextual details in person, ensuring that the full range of experiences was captured. The research team then met to review and discuss the preliminary code lists, identifying overlaps and redundancies.

The principal investigator consolidated the codes, merging redundant entries and clarifying definitions. This revised codebook was reviewed in a subsequent team meeting, during which consensus definitions were finalized. Using the finalized codebook, the interview records were divided among the coding team. For each record, one researcher conducted the initial recoding, and a second researcher reviewed the assigned codes for accuracy and completeness. Any discrepancies were discussed among the team until consensus was reached, ensuring consistency and reliability in the final coded dataset. Coding emphasized both sensory categories (aligned with interview prompts) and thematic dimensions arising from the data.

In addition to the formal coding process, the research team conducted a collaborative thematic synthesis to identify broader experiential patterns that extended beyond the sensory structure of the interview guide. Through iterative team discussions, fifteen overarching themes were developed, encompassing domains such as belief versus skepticism, emotional impact, and the influence of séance settings. These higher-order themes were then mapped onto the final codebook for cross-reference (see Supplemental Materials, Table 1, <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31837552>).

RESULTS

Sample derivation

One hundred and sixty-six respondents consented to the study and began the survey. Of those, twenty did not enter any other information. An additional seventy-seven did not list a physical medium, séance location, and/or séance date, or the séance date was prior to February 2024 ($n = 10$). Records from past séances were excluded, due to the likelihood of poor recall of distant events. Nine other respondents did not include any information about their séance experience. We received sixty completed surveys from thirty-nine unique individuals. Ten participants completed more than one survey representing different séances (i.e., five completed two surveys, four completed three surveys, and one completed nine surveys). From this group, twenty-one participants consented to and completed in-depth semi-structured interviews, and constitute the analytic sample for the qualitative findings reported here. Survey

data were used to support recruitment and to provide contextual information for interviews, and are not presented as analytic results. The demographic characteristics of the twenty-one interview participants are summarized in Table 1.

The findings presented here are derived from semi-structured interviews with twenty-one participants who attended public physical mediumship

TABLE 1.

Participant characteristics (n = 21)

Measure		Value	
		<i>n</i> or mean	% or <i>SD</i>
Gender	Female	17	81.0%
	Male	4	19.0%
Age		61.4	13.5
Racial identification	Native American	1	4.8%
	Latin American	1	4.8%
	European	19	90.5%
Education years		18.2	4.5
Country	UK	1	4.8%
	Canada	3	14.3%
	USA	17	81.0%
Why did you decide to come to this physical mediumship event?	Develop spiritually	15	71.4%
	Expand my consciousness	17	81.0%
	Experience it first hand	17	81.0%
	Curiosity	13	61.9%
	Connect with a loved one	11	52.4%
	Evidence of life after death	11	52.4%
	Someone else convinced me to come	1	4.8%
Past experience	Have you ever attended a physical mediumship séance before? (Yes)	18	85.7%
	Approximately how many physical mediumship séances have you attended?		
	1–5	3	16.7%
	6–10	4	22.2%
	>10	11	61.1%

Note: The table summarizes the characteristics of participants who completed semi-structured interviews. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to missing data or multiple selections.

séances during the study period. Interviews focused on participants' subjective experiences, interpretations, and emotional responses to séance phenomena. Analyses emphasized recurring experiential patterns rather than frequency estimates or comparisons across events or mediums. The results below are organized thematically, drawing on participants' narratives to illustrate the range and depth of reported experiences.

Interview sample

Twenty-one séance attendees participated in semi-structured interviews describing their experiences across multiple séances. Many of the interviews described sittings with the same physical medium on different dates, and in some cases on consecutive days as part of multi-day events. Accordingly, the interview corpus reflects recurring experiential contexts rather than a set of independent observational units. This structure is consistent with the study's qualitative aim of identifying shared experiential patterns rather than estimating prevalence or making comparisons across mediums or events. Thematic convergence across interviews was interpreted as reflecting either repeated experiences reported by the same participants or shared features of séance settings and practices, rather than as evidence of frequency or generalizability.

Qualitative analysis

Analysis identified three overarching thematic categories: 'A. Nature of the experience,' 'B. Structure and context of the séance,' and 'C. Mediumship mechanics and interpretation,' encompassing fifteen distinct themes. These themes emerged through inductive coding and were aligned with the structured codebook (see Supplemental Materials, Table 1, <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31837552>), capturing the nuances of sitter perceptions and interpretations. Together, they reflect not only the sensory and evidential elements of the séances but also the emotional, interpersonal, and contextual factors that shaped participants' experiences. A description of each theme, along with representative quotes, is provided below, followed by the participant number and séance number (e.g., P14 is participant 14, and S12 is séance 12).

A. Nature of the experience

1. Belief vs skepticism vs fraud. Participants ranged from deeply moved believers to cautious observers and skeptics. On the belief side of the spectrum, a first-time sitter, who grew up in a different country, reported:

We have not very good feeling if someone is touching you too close, touching your hand or something. The first thing I thought, when someone was trying to do something to the ring finger of my left hand, was, "Oh my God! They're going to steal my rings ..." but when I saw the palm of the hand, and it was not trying to get something off my finger, I was not nervous about it or anything. I thought, okay. ...

[the materialized entity put an extra ring on her finger]. I said thank you. There was definitely a change in my attitude from fear to this was nice. (P02, S01)

An experienced sitter shared, “It was right up there with some of the best phenomena, healing and spiritual experiences that I’ve ever experienced or witnessed” (P14, S22). Others described the séance as providing compelling personal evidence of spirit communication: “I felt a full materialized hand on my hand and it was at that point that I felt an impression of somebody. I thought it was my husband. ... The love that I felt when that hand came around mine, it was him” (P05, S15). A Spiritualist medium and teacher reported:

It was interesting. I had not seen that kind of séance before ... she [circle leader] had two different lights [flashlights]. Sometimes she used a white light and sometimes she used a red light. When there was ectoplasm, I was surprised she did white light because everything I’ve ever read said white light isn’t good for ectoplasm. (P17, S24)

At the same time, healthy skepticism was expressed. Another sitter shared her insight:

My husband was completely speechless. The next day he was like, “I can’t believe it, I don’t even know what to say.” Normally he says, “This was impossible, this could have been faked, this was fishing line ...” and this time it was [not] like [that]. You know it can be scary for people, even when they’re believers, when it’s so unexplainable. I think it really freaks people out and it’s exciting because they think, “Wow, it’s really, really true,” but I think it scares people too. So he didn’t even really want to talk about it all night. (P18, S21)

Fraud (i.e., deliberate, conscious cheating) was alleged by one participant, where fraud was claimed to occur throughout two séances with the same medium:

The tent lifted a little bit, zipper was closed. There was what we were told was supposed to be ectoplasm. This was in red light. I saw fabric and it had seams from a sewing machine. I was asking myself “If this is ectoplasm, why does it have stitches?” It was not convincing at all ... it was moving in ways that were very non-intelligent from what I’ve been told about ectoplasm. (P03, S13)

Together, these accounts reveal a continuum of interpretation, from reverent conviction to critical doubt, highlighting how personal, cultural, and experiential factors shape the meaning participants ascribe to séance phenomena.

2. Emotional impact. Participants frequently described powerful emotional responses to the séance, ranging from awe and wonder to a deep sense of healing. For some, the séances evoked profound conviction through intimate encounters: “When the little girl spoke, we were all crying, it was just so beautiful. ... For this child to be talking to her mommy and for the mom to be talking to her daughter in their voices, it was incredible” (P16, S19). Others emphasized the intensity of the apparitions, with one recalling, “The detail

on these apparitions is just stunning and they're way away from the cabinet, like ten feet away, and they're looking around and they're touching everybody. It's just amazing" (P09, S99). Sitters also described a sense of release and transformation: "One person was selected to come forward and hold the materialized hand and that person believed he was holding his mother's hand. For him it was a very emotional event. There were some unresolved issues and he felt they resolved them in that moment" (P05, S15). A self-conscious sitter felt uncomfortable being singled out: "I had a hard time in that (3rd) séance because they [entities] said they wanted to give something special to me. I was like a deer in the headlights, but I try not to think about that" (P19, S21).

3. Healing. Healing, whether emotional or physical, is an integral part of many séances. Some sitters expressed being deeply moved on a personal level and felt they had been healed in some way, such as one recalling a materialized hand making the sign of the cross on her forehead with a scented oil in lighted conditions (P13, S22). Another in the same séance recalled, "While spirit was going around the circle, each person was given an anointing of an oil and each of the oils was a different scent for everybody" (P12, S22). In another séance, a participant described an extraordinary physical experience:

The man was 6'8" or 6'9". He went up to the cabinet for a healing and he felt a hand by his neck and on his head that were much larger than his hands. When his head was leaned back up against the discarnate healer, the discarnate healer was taller than him. He said he felt the top of the spirit's shoulder at the top of the back of his head. This was incredibly unusual for him because he is usually the tallest guy around. ... During the healing, he was having some issues with his neck and his back and he felt warmth and tingling. The pain did not go away completely, but the pain level went from a 7 when it started to a 2 when it was finished. He experienced a significant healing. (P05, S11)

One participant shared, "I feel this spider go over across my cheek, over my nose, and across my other cheek and then just go away. My sinuses were completely cleared. ... I experienced a healing" (P05, S17). In Lakota tradition, Iktomi is a spirit who can present as a spider. A psychologist and mental medium, attending a table-tipping séance, shared:

I had on two shirts, a heavy black corduroy shirt and another outdoor corduroy shirt on top of it. I was getting very hot, trying to get the outer shirt off and I couldn't ... when the lights came on, I saw that the top shirt had been buttoned to the bottom shirt's two buttons ... [My guides] said it was a code. It was done by a spirit named Iktomi, the spider, who is also a trickster. Iktomi is also the healing spirit. I had been struggling with a health issue for several weeks, had even been at the Emergency Room. ... I thought I was just going to have to live with it. The next day I realized it had completely healed. The code about the buttons ... gave me information about the healing and the body. Validation is a huge thing for people and is very personal. (P15, S21)

4. Sensory and subjective phenomena. Participants described a wide range of multisensory experiences that often blended visual, auditory, tactile, and olfactory perceptions with more intuitive impressions. For some, the most compelling moments were those that combined physical sensation with a felt sense of presence or recognition. These layered sensory and intuitive experiences often strengthened participants' interpretations of the séance as genuine spirit contact, even when the phenomena were ambiguous.

Visual impressions were striking, as one sitter recalled: "The ceiling disappeared completely and I was looking at the night sky. ... It was incredible. And then I heard a bird. It was the sound of a raven. The people on either side of me also experienced the room disappearing" (P05, S17). Another sitter shared, "When the trumpets and the hula hoops (because they had glow tape on them) started flying around the room from the ceiling, we were encouraged to verbally cheer and encourage, and thank them [spirit operators]" (P16, S19).

Auditory phenomena were equally compelling: "Immediately you could hear the trumpets moving. The drum was beating, rattles shaking, you could hear the instruments moving around the room. I also heard the voice of [two different entities] speaking through the trumpet. ... They were taking turns" (P03, S01).

Tactile and olfactory impressions were also reported: a sitter, in a prior séance with the same medium, put her hand on the materialized hand coming from the cabinet. A second hand was placed over hers, and she put her other hand over it, "then a third hand came out and there were three hands on mine. I know he [medium] was the only one in the cabinet" (P05, S15).

Also, "[Ectoplasm] smelled musty. It smelled similar to what I've experienced with ectoplasm in other scenarios, but this was warm instead of cool. It smelled like a penny" (P08, S11).

Beyond the five senses, participants sometimes described a 'sixth sense' or intuitive knowing, for instance recognizing a spirit by its energetic quality or the feeling of a familiar touch: "Sense of presence of grandparents on mother's side and other spirit energies in the room" (P20, S11).

5. Apparent phenomenal evidence. Participants described a variety of occurrences they interpreted as tangible evidence of spirit activity, including breezes in sealed rooms, voice phenomena, levitation, ectoplasmic forms, and the sudden appearance of physical objects known as *apports*. A sitter described someone near her being moved, and recalled a previous séance when the same thing happened to her:

I am not a light person and the chairs were metal folding chairs. I was holding onto the people next to me. ... wondering, "do I let their hands go? I'm halfway out of the circle" so I just let their hands go. I don't remember the chair being dragged. I was being moved. I weigh 200 pounds, so for one person to pick me up would be extremely difficult. I was moved into the center of the circle and I was tipped back and then forward, and then they touched me and touched my shoulder, my back, and

my legs. It was like, “Oh my God, this is insane—is it really happening?” I was blown away ... until the day I die, I will remember that. (P12, S22)

Experienced sitters, who attended ten or more séances, gave detailed descriptions of apparent ectoplasmic phenomena:

We saw ectoplasm briefly and were allowed to go [up to cabinet to] see it. The red light shone upon it. Ectoplasm starts out one way and then changes. In this case ... it was no longer dark, but starting to get white in color, changing in appearance and texture. At first, when the cabinet was opened, it was starting to get on the medium's chest, like a fabric perhaps, but when the cabinet opened up the second time it looked like floss, or angel hair. It was starting to glisten, to have some sparkle in it. Like strands or gossamer. It was also starting to go towards the floor then spreading across the floor ... it almost looked like smoke, or steam, as it was changing its form. ... It started to pulse as if it were breathing, pulsing in and out like a heartbeat or something. Like an animated life energy, getting it ready where the spirits may be able to utilize it, so the scientists could utilize it for their experiments. [The spirit control] said there was someone in spirit that wanted to make themselves known to someone in the room and they were going to try to project their image into the ectoplasm. (P15, S21)

Apports were among the most compelling because (1) they were observed appearing in lighted conditions; (2) participants questioned how an object could emerge from the body (e.g., mouth, eyes) without harm, highlighting the tension between what was observed and what seems biologically possible; and (3) their surprising, awe-inducing nature prompted participants to deeply question their assumptions about reality. An engineer recalled:

I saw [the medium] in the red light ... was reaching up and pulling down from the ether and he kept pulling and pulling and then suddenly CRACK this bright blue flash happened and then we heard THUD and there was a gigantic red crystal sitting five feet in front of him ... three inches in diameter. It was incredible. (P08, S09)

Similarly, one sitter marveled, “There were crystals materializing out of [medium's] eyes” (P10, S99). Another reported, “At the end of the séance [the medium] ... stood up, and then the apports came out through his mouth. ... There were coins and small stones. I received a clear faceted crystal about an inch big. ... The apports came out in the white light” (P05, S10). These accounts highlight the powerful evidential value that apports carried for sitters, contrasting their lasting, physical presence with more subjective sensory phenomena, prompting many to reconsider the boundaries of what they believed possible.

6. Reported encounters with nonhuman or disembodied beings. Participants described a range of perceived entities, including guides, loved ones, well-known deceased figures, ascended masters, animals, nature spirits, and extraterrestrials. A sitter reported:

Now he's [medium] got [a new entity] this ET head that they're working on to make it show ... a visual of your dead loved one ... the hair on this head actually did change to a long feminine hair. The face didn't work out, but the head actually did change so, I mean, eventually, they're going to be able to do that. It's fascinating. (P09, S99)

Another sitter relayed, "One of the folks speaking through [medium] said something about ETs helping to create this portal to bring these stones from somewhere on the other side of the galaxy is my understanding" (P10, S99).

Accounts of organized spirit teams. Several sitters described entities with defined roles associated with a given medium. In these accounts, a main control was said to entrance the medium and direct events: "There was a channeled message (trance). [The spirit control] came through and ... spoke sometimes before, sometimes in between phenomena" (P20, S09). Other entities were described as taking on specific tasks, including purported appearances of famous people whose voices were recognized by sitters: "[The medium] was producing a voice box outside of his body and the woman came through to sing. ... Debbie [friend] was told that the woman who sang was Judy Garland ... her role evidently ... is to get that voice box to work" then "[another entity] came through and he is very lighthearted and was bringing through children" (P16, S19).

Perceived repeatability across sittings. Some participants reported that particular manifestations seemed to recur across séances, with occasional additions framed as experimental. One attendee of two consecutive séances noted, "Yes, more or less the same thing" (P03, S15). A physician and epidemiologist shared, "Now everyone can shake a hand from the cabinet and the cabinet is giving you a hug. It's progressed so much" (P09, S99).

Sitters describe rapport forming. Several accounts depict conversational exchanges in which entities address questions, take requests, or acknowledge individuals. "I love how (spirit entity) and the spirit teams always know what we're thinking and answer our questions before we ask them." (P14, S22). Also:

His [medium's] speaker came through and said hello, and everyone responded. ... From there, [the spirit communicator] says, "what's on your list? Who wants to participate or see or experience what?" People. ... shouted out what they were interested in. "I'd like to experience my father's presence," or "I'd like to see some kind of proof of spirit," or "I'd like to see voices coming through the trumpet." ... He says, "Okay, we'll see if we can do that ... okay, on the list, on the list, on the list ..." and I have to say I've never been disappointed. You're going to see some stuff that really is amazing. (P13, S22)

Examples offered as evidential by participants. Some sitters interpreted specific events as personal proof or as indications of agency behind the phenomena:

The edge of the tent lifted up and a foot came out. The medium's feet were visible [zip tied to the chair]. They lifted up the tent [a second time] and there were two feet sitting there and then it went back. A corner was unzipped and a whole leg came out. (P08, S11)

Also:

We had amazing ectoplasm ... the spirits allowed us to draw close and see ectoplasm manifesting through [the medium] and the color changing as well ... [The medium] was leaning forward in deep trance. ... The ectoplasm changed colors and then we could see it retract and go back into the body ... the lights in the room did not change color. (P07, S99)

Attributions of intelligence and intent. In several narratives, sitters inferred purposeful action aimed at providing evidence, facilitating contact with loved ones, or promoting healing:

[The spirit control] said there would be a healing light. It was very bright, like the flash of a strobe, above the cabinet. [The spirit control] asked everybody to look at it, to let it go into your eyes. It was this incredibly bright, white light that should have been very painful to look at, but everybody said no, it did not hurt the eyes at all and there was no afterimage. If we look at the sun and then look away, we still have this afterimage that blinds us, but it did not blind us in any way. (P15, S21)

Accounts also include descriptions of matter through matter. “The hula hoops were linked like a chain at the end of the séance—you couldn’t pull them apart. I had seen them before when they were separated” (P16, S19). From a sitter’s survey:

Someone was called to approach the cabinet, unzip it, and check on the medium. The light was red and low. The participant looked in the cabinet and saw that one of the medium’s legs seemed to disappear. The curtain was closed, then the participant again checked on the medium, and the leg was back.

From the follow-up interview:

[The spirit control] explained that the leg was never gone. It’s just a perception that spirit is able to create that you don’t see, even though it’s still there. At a prior séance with him [medium], at [another location], he had both legs disappear, and a participant went up to the chair, was feeling the chair leg, went up to the hip area and still could not feel the leg. (P05, S15)

B. Structure and context of the séance

7. Collective vs individual experience. Although sitters often described highly personal encounters, these occurred within a shared group setting, and the group dynamic shaped emotional responses. Sitters reacted to each other’s experiences, cheering, crying, or silently holding space, which reinforced a sense of shared journey. One participant recalled how “one by one, everyone in the entire room went up and experienced their loved one” (P11, S13). At times, sitters described simultaneous reactions across the circle: “Everybody was describing their phenomena as it happens and people across the room were describing being touched while I was also being touched” (P14, S22).

8. Repeated attendance and experience. Participants' responses often reflected their level of familiarity with physical mediumship. First-time sitters described a mix of apprehension and wonder, such as one participant who heard a first-timer sharing, "I'm a little scared. ... Oh my God, it's a hug. I'm getting a hug. I don't know who it's from, but I'm getting a hug" (P05, S23). In contrast, more seasoned attendees drew comparisons across multiple séances and mediums, noting consistencies and differences. A sitter described being at séances with different mediums and at different locations a year and a half ago: "When [the spirit] comes in, she has a very different distinctive voice. ... The spirit that is identified with that same name has the same voice regardless of which medium she is coming in with and in both [séance] locations" (P05, S15). Others described the impact of attending multiple sittings on themselves or their companions, as one sitter recalled, she and her husband also attended a table-tipping séance with the medium the next evening, which she said was extraordinary. Her husband, a big skeptic, was "blown away by it and still talking about it" (P18, S21). These contrasts illustrate how expectations and interpretations shifted with repeated attendance and experience.

9. Set and setting. Lighting, seating arrangements, and the physical environment influenced participants' perceptions. Pitch blackness was common, interspersed with red or blue light. As one sitter noted:

Everything that was potentially causing light was blacked out. ... I was the one manipulating the light when spirit told me to. The only light that was on was a little light strip of blue light or red light or white light [not a single bulb—tiny lights]. When [the spirit] told me, I would turn the light on and the color that they asked me to. (P12, S22)

Seating arrangements and proximity to the medium also shaped experiences. Being close to the cabinet or in a position where physical contact with spirit forms occurred was often described as more impactful than sitting at the far edge of the circle: "Everyone was in a circle for the séance. You couldn't see anything. Everyone's knees were touching so you have an idea of where everyone is in the room" (P18, S21). Others recalled less comfortable settings: "There were way too many people in the room ... probably 30. There were three rows in the back, two on the side. It was a very tiny room. You were crammed in your seat, trying not to move" (P09, S99).

Attendees often assisted in setting up or inspecting the space, which some felt added credibility to the proceedings. One participant explained:

The room was searched. The cabinet was searched. [The medium] was searched. I personally tied [the medium] with zip ties to the chair. Me and one other person. I did one side and the other person did the other side. We clipped the ends and later matched them up and they were the same ones. (P08, S11)

Another reported, "At the entrance to the séance room we were patted down, scanned, just like going through TSA [airport security]" (P16, S19).

Music played a significant role in shaping mood and facilitating the medium's trance state. For some, it was unsettling, as one sitter explained:

The first piece of music that he uses to get into trance is one that works very well for him, but for most of the sitters, myself included, the music is a little disturbing ... then it goes into upbeat music that most people know. As soon as that started, things started happening in the room. (P05, S10)

And another sitter explained: “[The medium] has music so we sing along with the music and I was circle leader. If I feel the energy dropping, then I will ask everybody to do ‘‘OMs’’, to do ‘Row, Row, Row Your Boat,’ ‘Frere Jacques,’ any of these songs” (P11, S13). These accounts highlight how atmosphere and environmental details were integral to the interpretation and impact of the séance.

10. Types of séances. Participants attended varied formats, including traditional physical mediumship, Lakota healing ceremonies, and table-tipping sessions. Each had its own rhythm, tools, and atmosphere. Some sessions took the form of table-tipping circles, where energy and movement built communally: “When the table lifted off the ground, all four legs lifted and it went straight up and straight down. ... It went high enough that you had to put your hands above your head” (P21, S21). Others described Lakota healing ceremonies, which contrasted sharply with European séance traditions: “We all held hands in the circle. ... There was a rug in the center, an altar with rattles, drums, bones, feathers, bowls ... [The medium] was drumming and chanting with his wife beside him. ... It was one of the most incredible experiences” (P05, S17). In both table-tipping séances and Lakota healing ceremonies, the medium is fully conscious and an active participant in the phenomena being produced.

11. Props and tools. Alongside phenomena such as ectoplasm and materializations, séances often featured physical props that were intended to be used in ways participants interpreted as spirit interaction. Drums and tambourines were common: “The drum ... was in the cabinet, came out and hovered over our heads. Apparently, a drumstick came out with it and was pounding on the drum, which is very rare to happen. Usually it's fingers” (P15, S21) and

The harmonica was played in the back of the room ... the cabinet was on the other side ... playing [along with] the song. It's not just random sounds. ... The tambourine was also playing along to the beat of the music. The tambourine was on one side and the harmonica was on the other side. ... That lasted for an entire song, so probably three minutes. (P05, S10)

In some cases, luminous tape was used to enhance visibility, and luminous plaques or balls were used to demonstrate materialization. A sitter recalled, “A hand shape was seen moving across the plaque, a pretty well-formed hand.

The hand actually slid the plaque across the floor, between someone's feet." (P15, S20). A nurse observed:

Throughout the séance, we would see little glow in the dark balls on the floor. [A materialized] spirit would pick them up and hold them ... and then he would walk around the circle ... you could see [the] spirit's hand and part of an arm. ... The skin looked like what you would see on a dolphin – very smooth. They were showing it palm up ... I didn't see hand prints or finger prints or lines at all. It was very smooth and white. (P12, S22)

These accounts highlight how props and tools, whether instruments or luminous objects, became central in both enabling and evidencing spirit interaction.

12. Role of the cabinet/tent. The cabinet or tent was a central and often personified feature of the séance, serving as both the locus of phenomena and a source of speculation. Cabinet structures varied widely, ranging from simple fabric enclosures with zippers to more elaborate constructions. Some were partially open or lacked a roof or floor, while others were built from PVC piping with an open top or a base cut away. Sitters frequently remarked on the unusual mechanics of the enclosure, as one explained:

The zippers on those tents—when it zips, they zip [close] at the bottom. ... In the case of the hand coming out, it unzips [opens] from the top. ... It opens, but they don't do it like one of us. It's like it separates and then it closes again. (P11, S13)

The cabinet itself could become animated, with participants reporting that "[The] spirit can lift it up and spin it around. You can see [the medium's] feet zip tied to the chair, never moving even though the tent is spinning" (P14, S22). A more skeptical sitter said, "This is the hard thing, because we don't see inside the tent" (P03, S13). The cabinet was used by all the mediums who produced partial or full materialization. In the table-tipping séances, the medium was out of the cabinet and participating at the table. The cabinet was in the room and contained props: "A tambourine came out of the cabinet from across the room. You could hear the tambourine shaking and scraping the ceiling above us as it came across the room. Then it fell onto the table" (P15, S21). In the Lakota healing ceremony, there was no cabinet.

C. Mediumship mechanics and interpretation

13. Trance process. Participants consistently described a patterned process by which mediums entered trance and spirit communicators emerged. The trance process included ritualized music chosen by the medium to support the transition. Once the medium was in trance, sitters perceived other personalities speaking. One participant explained:

[The medium] brought through an entity ... [that] gave a beautiful talk. ... A different voice came through the medium as [the spirit control]. I'm familiar with

this because I have attended his [medium's] online presentations before and have heard this entity speak, so I knew who the entity was as soon as he started speaking. (P16, S19)

Deep trance was observed when ectoplasm was being produced:

We had amazing ectoplasm ... the tent was unzipped towards the end of the session ... the spirits allowed us to draw close and see ectoplasm manifesting through [the medium] and the color changing as well. ... I think the majority was coming from his mouth and perhaps his nose ... [The medium] was leaning forward in deep trance. (P07, S99)

The medium's body was also used to assist with the phenomena being presented:

[The medium] was standing and [two sitters] were on his sides holding his arms and he had ectoplasm come out of his mouth. They had the red light on so this was visible and it started off here like a few inches below his chin ... and eventually touched the ground. ... Then he took either side of the ectoplasm, like pulled it out on the sides, so you could see there was a transparent sheet-like material. It was wild. It was very wild. ... It was semi-transparent, it was neon green, and there is a smell associated with it ... and that was interesting ... it was a musty smell ... a cool, musty smell. (P08, S09)

Deep trance was also associated with the production of apports: "I've seen him lean forward and stones start falling out from under the eye and you can hear them falling down to the floor" (P20, S09).

Spirit 'controls' often acted as masters of ceremonies, guiding the flow of the séance and orchestrating sitter participation. "[The spirit control] will ask the person who was controlling the music to stop the music and start it. [The spirit control] tells them what to do" (P11, S13). Also, "I got the apport IN the séance. [The spirit control] asked me to come up and sit or kneel. I kneeled and he asked me to feel [the medium's] hands, to see if there was anything in [the medium's] hands. There was light, I could see ... [The spirit control] then told me to cup my hands" (P19, S21).

14. Ectoplasm vs materialization. Participants frequently described seeing ectoplasm emerging, in its raw form, from the medium's body in striking and sometimes unsettling ways. A first-time sitter only recalled: "Then ectoplasm ... started out like a beard coming down [the medium's] chest and it was much more than I expected. It looked like a white cloudy beard" (P21, S25). Another sitter explained,

By the time he [medium] was finished, his whole body was covered in ectoplasm, like a blanket all the way to the floor. I saw it moving down slowly and then (later) it dissolved very quickly. You could see it moving. The quantity and fluidity were astonishing! I remember the looseness and the fragility of it, you could almost see through it, transparent. At one point we saw a face in it. [The spirit control] asked us to come up and look at it, all of us, three at a time. Starting at his left, at 1 o'clock, in

the ectoplasm there was a circular area, about the size of a baseball, the face [in it] was the size of a tennis ball [three dimensional]. He had a black beard and mustache, very dark hair, a Middle Eastern type face. No one recognized the face. (P19, S21)

Unique sounds were also described by sitters:

It [ectoplasm] kind of sounded like bubbles in water, like [makes slurping sound]. That was in the darkness and then also in the red light when he [medium] already had the ectoplasm coming out and as it was building and going down you heard more of that sound. (P08, S09)

Alongside these reports, participants also described apparent materializations, where full or partial figures seemed to appear. Many of the quotes in previous sections highlight these types of experiences.

15. Voice phenomena. Sitters frequently described hearing voices during séances, though their sources were not always clear. Some emphasized independent voices moving through the room:

A disembodied entity was speaking to people. That entity went around the room speaking to people. It was an independent voice, not from the medium [trance speaking], not through a trumpet. Most of the time it was a male voice with a European accent, possibly German or Austrian. All got to ask a question. (P01, S01)

Others recounted the use of instruments, as in one participant's experience:

There was speaking coming through the trumpet. ... The trumpet was right between us. It was so close ... that I could hear a low, very gravelly voice saying, "it's okay, she's with us, we have her, she's safe, she's with us." ... It was very moving. (P13, S22)

Some descriptions referred to ectoplasmic mechanisms said to produce voice. One sitter recalled,

I ... sometimes saw ectoplasm flowing from mouth, sometimes a veil over face of the medium with transfiguration, other times a thin cord coming from the mouth and connected to an ectoplasmic 'voicebox' near the neck of the medium, when independent direct voice [in the air] was being produced. (P06, S02)

Yet, even in detailed observations, attribution was not always straightforward. As one participant noted, "I remember the high pitched voices that came when [the medium] was talking to [their] team. When [the medium] went into the cabinet, there were voices. They weren't [his]. I think they were [his] team's that [the medium was] channeling" (P21, S25).

Summary

The sitters described experiences shaped by their beliefs, emotions, sensory impressions, and the social and physical structure of the séance across the interviews. Participant accounts illustrate how they interpreted a diverse range of ambiguous and often striking events through a combination

of personal meaning-making and the ritual context of contemporary physical mediumship.

DISCUSSION

This study explored participants' self-reported perceptions and experiences of physical mediumship séances, providing a multifaceted picture of contemporary sitter accounts. The aim was not to validate the objective reality of any reported phenomena, but to document the range, nature, and subjective impact of these experiences in public séance contexts. In doing so, the findings contribute to the small but growing body of work addressing why individuals attend séances and how they interpret the events they witness.

Participants

The sample was composed predominantly of women (over 80%), with an average age in the early sixties; most were highly educated and based in the USA. This demographic profile is broadly consistent with surveys of individuals engaged in spiritualist and other anomalous experience communities (e.g., Beischel et al., 2017; Castro et al., 2014). The predominance of prior séance experience (over 85% had attended before) also indicates that the sample reflects a community of sitters who are familiar with mediumship practice, which may shape both expectations and interpretations of phenomena.

Interpretation of findings

A wide variety of phenomena were reported, encompassing sensory experiences (e.g., lights, sounds, tactile sensations, breezes in sealed rooms), perceived spirit communications, healing experiences, and the appearance of apports. Interview themes also underscored the importance of context. Sitters described the collective atmosphere of the séance, where responses were often shaped by the visible reactions of others and by ritual elements, such as music, lighting, and the arrangement of the circle. Proximity also mattered: those close to the cabinet often described more impactful encounters, while others seated further away expressed frustration at limited access. Certain phenomena, particularly apports, were described by some sitters as especially compelling, partly due to their tangible and lasting nature, and in some cases because they were witnessed in well-lit conditions. Some sitters interpreted the phenomena with skepticism, noting aspects that seemed methodical, staged, or inconsistent with their expectations of genuine spirit communication.

Qualitative themes highlighted the complex interplay between belief, skepticism, and meaning-making. While most participants expressed strong belief in the possibility of spirit communication, this did not preclude them from noticing or discussing elements that could suggest deception. This mirrors historical tensions within psychical research, where deep conviction and critical scrutiny often coexisted in the same observers (Alvarado, 2014; Lamont,

2005). Across interviews, participants described a broad range of experiences, including emotionally salient encounters, healing events, and multisensory impressions, alongside moments of discomfort or critical appraisal. Elements such as group dynamics, ritual structure, lighting, music, and the medium's trance state all influenced how sitters interpreted what they witnessed. These patterns suggest that séance participation involves an active process of meaning-making in which sensory ambiguity, emotional impact, and communal context interact to shape how attendees understand and evaluate physical mediumship.

Fraud, credibility, and the public séance context

Historical and contemporary investigations into physical mediumship have long grappled with the problem of fraud (e.g., de Oliveira Maraldi, 2023; Nahm, 2016). Consistent with the literature, the reliance on witness testimony in low-light or no-light conditions, the limited opportunity to introduce independent controls, and the reluctance of some mediums to permit recording or intrusive investigation remain substantial barriers to establishing scientific credibility (Braude, 2014; Nahm, 2014, 2016). In the present study, while some sitters expressed unequivocal trust in the medium's authenticity, others recounted experiences that led them to question the genuineness of what they observed. This range of responses aligns with previous documentation in the literature describing both strong personal convictions of authenticity and well-substantiated exposures of fraudulent practice (Braude, 2014, 2016; Nahm, 2018).

Interviews also highlighted the role of what participants referred to as 'spirit controls.' A spirit control is typically described as an intermediary entity that communicates through the medium and coordinates interactions between the medium, other purported spirits, and the audience. In several of the séances described by participants, these communicating voices also appeared to structure the progression of events by directing music, inviting specific sitters to participate, or announcing upcoming phenomena. In this sense, participants often described the control as guiding the sequence and pacing of the séance, shaping how the events unfolded. These structuring roles influenced how sitters interpreted what they experienced, particularly in settings where visibility was limited or non-existent, and participants relied on auditory cues and ritual coordination.

The persistence of physical mediumship despite such controversies suggests that, for many participants, experiential and emotional dimensions outweigh the demand for conclusive proof. Several respondents explicitly noted that even if deception were possible, the personal meaning they derived from the experience made attendance worthwhile. Structured group rituals may themselves have therapeutic effects, independent of the objective reality of the phenomena. Research in anthropology and psychology suggests that collective rituals can

strengthen social cohesion, regulate emotion, and promote meaning-making, which may help explain why participants experience séances as beneficial even amid uncertainty (Hobson et al., 2018).

Public séances, in particular, often involve large groups, variable conditions, and formats that prioritize participant experience over experimental control (Katz, 2023). While most accounts in this study derived from traditional physical mediumship séances, participants also described Lakota healing ceremonies and table-tipping circles. These provided a broader comparative lens, underscoring that physical mediumship was not experienced as a single practice but as one among multiple ritual traditions. Participants' interpretations were also shaped by the ritualized structure of séances, including shared expectations surrounding cabinets, trumpets, darkness, and spirit controls. Anthropological and psychological research suggests that such ritual contexts can scaffold attention, perception, and interpretation, particularly under conditions of sensory ambiguity, thereby shaping how experiences are noticed, evaluated, and remembered (Hobson et al., 2018; Luhrmann et al., 2021). These findings underscore the importance of situating sitter narratives within broader cultural, symbolic, and ritual frameworks when interpreting reported phenomena.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. The study relied on a small number of self-selected participants who were willing to be interviewed, potentially skewing the sample toward individuals with more positive or notable experiences. Because participants were recruited from individuals who had chosen to attend such events, the sample likely reflects a community already interested in or open to physical mediumship, and the findings should therefore be interpreted as descriptive of that experiential group rather than representative of broader public perspectives. In addition, the participants were largely experienced sitters, and prior exposure, expectations, and repeated attendance likely shaped interpretation. Also, because interview material was drawn from overlapping séance events and mediums, some reports reflect repeated conditions rather than fully independent accounts. Many participants attended multiple séances, sometimes with the same medium, which means their accounts are not entirely independent of each other. Also, interviews were conducted at varying intervals following séance attendance, which may have affected memory, emotional framing, or post-event reflection, representing an additional limitation of the study. In addition, several survey responses were incomplete and had to be excluded, which likely reflects some of the logistical challenges of administering surveys in public séance settings and may have limited the size of the recruitment pool for interviews. Because attendance records for the séance events were not systematically available, it was not

possible to determine how many total individuals attended the events or what proportion of attendees were represented among the survey respondents. Finally, the data reflects subjective perceptions in not formally controlled settings; no objective verification of reported events was attempted or possible within the scope of this study.

Relation to prior research

The present findings can be situated alongside the limited prior research on sitter experiences in physical mediumship, most notably the survey-based study by Bauder (2019). Similar to Bauder's results, participants in the current study were predominantly individuals with prior exposure to séances and generally positive orientations toward mediumship, underscoring the challenge of recruiting broadly representative samples in this research domain. The present study extends this work by employing in-depth, semi-structured interviews, allowing for a more detailed examination of how sitters interpret sensory ambiguity, emotional responses, and moments of both conviction and doubt within specific séance contexts. Together, these studies suggest that while sitter samples are often shaped by preexisting interest or belief, qualitative approaches can yield complementary insights into the meaning-making processes that accompany séance participation.

Future directions

Future research could examine how prior belief, skepticism, and repeated attendance shape the interpretation and meaning of séance experiences over time. Mixed-methods designs that integrate physiological or environmental monitoring, where acceptable to mediums and sitters, could help bridge the gap between subjective experience and empirical investigation. Comparative studies of home circles versus public séances may also illuminate how setting and social dynamics influence both the production and perception of phenomena.

CONCLUSION

This study offers a contemporary examination of sitter perspectives on public physical mediumship séances, with detailed narrative accounts. The findings underscore that, regardless of whether phenomena are viewed as anomalous events or as products of expectation and ritual context, séance participation can be deeply meaningful for many attendees. Persistent methodological challenges, including limited visibility and the potential for deception, remain significant considerations; however, they do not diminish participants' interest or engagement. By centering sitter perspectives, this work highlights the experiential, psychological, and social dimensions of séance practices and emphasizes the value of documenting these viewpoints to better understand how physical mediumship is interpreted and sustained in modern settings.

Corresponding author

HELANÉ WAHBEH

*Institute of Noetic Sciences
7250 Redwood Blvd, Suite 208
Novato, CA 94945, USA*

Email: hwahbeh@noetic.org

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3650-4633>

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Portions of this manuscript were prepared with the assistance of OpenAI's ChatGPT, which was used to support drafting, summarization, and editorial refinement of text throughout the project. The authors guided all content generation and are solely responsible for the final versions of all analyses and interpretations.

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