Why We Feel Someone's There: Pattern Perception and Sensed Presence

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Abstract

This study investigates "sensed presence" (FP), the feeling that someone unseen is nearby, in the context of everyday Indian environments. We examine associations between self-reported environmental stressors and agency detection biases (the tendency to perceive intentional agents or threatening presences in unclear situations). We use anomalistic psychology to explain how normal cognitive and physiological processes may relate to these experiences under conditions like darkness, isolation, and ambient noise, without assuming paranormal causes.

Using a non-experimental correlational design with 80-120 Indian undergraduate and postgraduate students, we will test whether self-reported environmental stress (darkness, isolation, ambient stressors commonly experienced in Indian households such as power cuts) is associated with increased reports of sensed presence, and whether agency detection bias (measured through pattern detection tasks, acknowledging these measure general pattern perception rather than threat-specific detection) moderates this relationship.

Brief Rationale

We are interested in paranormal stories and "haunted" experiences, but psychology has few studies examining the associations between environmental conditions and sensed presence experiences in ordinary people, especially in everyday settings like power cuts, empty corridors, or being alone at night. Most research focuses on folklore or extreme clinical cases. The middle ground (normal students in India, normal homes, common stressors like power outages) is underexplored.

This study examines whether environmental stress (darkness, isolation, ambient noise) and the tendency to detect threatening or intentional agents in unclear stimuli are associated with "ghost-like" feelings. Our focus is the horror and threat-perception aspect of sensed presence (the feeling that something potentially malevolent is watching or following you) rather than general pattern perception in neutral stimuli.

Introduction

Sensed presence (FP) is the feeling of an unseen, sentient being nearby, especially in situations involving stress, darkness, or isolation. Historically, people attributed these experiences to paranormal phenomena like ghosts or spirits. Anomalistic psychology offers an alternative explanation rooted in normal cognitive and physiological processes.

Environmental stressors like darkness, infrasound (ultra-low frequency sound below conscious hearing), and isolation can disrupt normal sensory processing. When the brain receives unclear or limited sensory input, it tries to fill gaps by generating internal signals. This can lead to perceiving a presence that doesn't objectively exist.

For example, consider a common experience in Indian households: walking through a dark corridor late at night after a power cut, or being alone on an empty terrace at dusk. Many people report feeling like someone is standing behind them or watching from the shadows, even when they logically know they are alone. This happens in familiar, everyday environments when sensory input is limited, not just in traditionally "haunted" places.

A key factor is **hyperactive agency detection**, the tendency to perceive intentional agents, particularly threatening ones, in unclear stimuli. This differs from general apophenia (pattern perception in randomness). While apophenia can produce pareidolia (seeing faces in clouds), agency detection specifically involves attributing intentionality, sentience, and often malevolent intent to environmental cues (Reed & Wall, 2017). We measure this through apophenia tasks while acknowledging that sensed presence experiences specifically involve social-agentic interpretations rather than abstract patterns. For instance, people may interpret random noises as footsteps or see shadows as human figures when experiencing heightened arousal in unclear contexts.

Understanding how normal brains produce these "haunted" sensations has implications for environmental and cognitive psychology. It can help explain similar phenomena in anxiety disorders and psychosis, bridging perceptual distortions under stress and clinical hallucinations without resorting to paranormal explanations.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three domains:

1. Agency Detection and Threat Perception

Humans possess hyperactive agency detection mechanisms (HADD), an evolved tendency to perceive intentional agents, particularly potential threats, even with minimal evidence. This cognitive bias likely evolved because the cost of missing a real predator or threat far exceeds the cost of false alarms. Under uncertainty or stress, this tendency intensifies, leading people to misattribute agency and intentionality to unclear stimuli. In the Indian context, this might mean interpreting curtain rustling during a storm as entity movement, or hearing voices in running

water. While we measure this through apophenia-related tasks, we acknowledge that sensed presence specifically involves detecting threatening or sentient agents rather than abstract patterns. Our interpretation focuses on this agentic dimension.

2. Environmental Psychology

Environmental factors like darkness, isolation, and ambient stressors can affect emotional states and perceptual processes. Darkness and stress are associated with increased self-reported physiological arousal and anxiety, potentially influencing the brain to compensate for sensory gaps (Nenadalová et al., 2015). In India, where power outages are common and joint families often mean spending time alone in large, dark homes, these conditions create natural settings for such experiences. Note: Claims about Indian environmental contexts are based on observation and cultural familiarity rather than systematic anthropological research. This is a limitation we acknowledge.

3. Altered States of Consciousness

Stress and sensory deprivation can alter normal awareness, making people more susceptible to unusual perceptual experiences. Some research suggests associations between sensory deprivation and sensations of presence (French et al., 2008). While earlier work explored electromagnetic field effects (Persinger, 2003), these findings have faced replication challenges and remain controversial. We focus on the psychological mechanisms of agency detection under unclear sensory conditions rather than specific neurophysiological theories.

Research Question

Are extreme environmental conditions (darkness, isolation, ambient stressors) associated with increased reports of Sensed Presence (FP), and is this relationship moderated by pre-existing levels of agency detection bias (measured through apophenia tasks)?

Literature Review

Existing research provides evidence for relationships between environmental stressors, cognitive biases, and sensed presence experiences.

Sensory Deprivation and Perceptual Ambiguity

French et al. (2008) explored environmental manipulations in their "Haunt" project, attempting to create conditions for anomalous experiences through electromagnetic fields and infrasound.

While earlier work by Persinger (2003) proposed electromagnetic mechanisms for sensed presence, these findings remain debated and have faced replication difficulties. We focus on the more reliably demonstrated relationship between sensory ambiguity, stress, and unusual perceptual experiences rather than specific electromagnetic theories.

Environmental Stress and Fear

Nenadalová et al. (2015) showed that darkness and stress intensify fear by forcing the brain to generate internal signals to fill sensory voids. Their research indicates that environmental ambiguity combined with physiological arousal creates conditions for unusual perceptual experiences.

Agency Detection Bias and Cognitive Over-Interpretation

Reed & Wall (2017) and Kapur (2003) established associations between apophenia and psychosis-proneness. When heightened arousal combines with environmental ambiguity, people with high agency detection bias are more likely to overinterpret neutral stimuli as meaningful or threatening. Kapur's framework of psychosis as "aberrant salience" suggests that the brain assigns excessive importance to irrelevant stimuli under certain conditions. Importantly, sensed presence specifically involves detecting *agentic* threats—entities with intentions—rather than abstract patterns, though both may stem from related cognitive mechanisms.

Individual Differences

Erdélyi et al. (2023) found that people with high temporal lobe sensitivity or psychosis-proneness are more susceptible to misinterpretations in unclear environments. This suggests that sensed presence arises from an interaction between heightened arousal, environmental ambiguity, and pre-existing cognitive biases.

Summary and Limitations

The literature suggests associations where sensed presence experiences may emerge when environmental stressors disrupt normal sensory processing, and cognitive biases like hyperactive agency detection amplify the tendency to interpret unclear stimuli as evidence of an external intentional agent.

Limitations: Our review does not distinguish between subtypes of sensed presence (agency presence vs. companion presence vs. observing presence), which may have different cognitive drivers. Additionally, sensed presence can occur without environmental stress (e.g., meditation, grief hallucinations, hypnagogic states), representing boundary conditions our model does not currently address.

Hypotheses

Based on the reviewed literature, we propose:

H1: Participants who report higher levels of environmental stress exposure (darkness, isolation, ambient stressors) will report higher self-reported physiological arousal markers (e.g., heart racing, chills) and greater fear, demonstrating an association between environmental conditions and subjective stress responses.

H2: The association between environmental stress exposure and reports of sensed presence will be significantly stronger for individuals with higher levels of agency detection bias (measured through apophenia tasks), indicating a moderating relationship.

H3: Higher self-reported environmental stress exposure will be associated with more false pattern detections on cognitive tasks (specifically, a visual ambiguous figure detection task using Mooney Faces or similar stimuli, scored by the number of faces or agents detected in ambiguous images), suggesting that environmental stress correlates with increased pattern detection sensitivity. We acknowledge this measures general pattern detection rather than agency-specific attribution, representing a construct limitation.

Methodology

Research Design

This study uses a **non-experimental correlational design**. Rather than experimentally manipulating environmental conditions (which would raise ethical concerns), we will measure naturally occurring associations between environmental stress exposure, agency detection bias, and sensed presence experiences through self-report measures.

Important limitation: This design cannot establish causal direction or rule out third-variable confounds (e.g., individuals high in schizotypy may self-select into both reporting isolation and experiencing sensed presence). All hypotheses test associations, not causal effects.

Rationale for Design Choice

We chose a correlational approach for ethical and practical reasons. Creating genuinely frightening conditions (complete darkness, isolation chambers, controlled stressor exposure) could cause significant psychological distress. The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) ethical guidelines emphasize minimizing psychological harm. Our approach is consistent with previous research on sensed presence (McBrien & Gow, 2021; French et al., 2008), which has primarily relied on self-report methodologies due to the subjective nature of the phenomenon. We acknowledge that this design choice limits our inferential power—we can detect associations but cannot make strong causal claims.

Participants

Sample Size: 80 to 120 participants

Sampling Method: Convenience sampling through online platforms

Demographics: Undergraduate and postgraduate students aged 18 to 30 years, fluent in English

Recruitment Strategy:

We will recruit participants through:

- University email lists and online notice boards
- Social media groups for college students (Instagram, WhatsApp groups)
- Announcements in campus forums and student communities
- Snowball sampling (participants referring peers)

Inclusion Criteria: Willingness to participate voluntarily, ability to complete online questionnaires in English, and access to internet-enabled devices

Exclusion/Self-Exclusion: Participants reporting current mental health distress, clinical anxiety, or trauma-related disorders are encouraged to self-exclude. We will provide a screening question: "Are you currently experiencing mental health challenges or under treatment for any psychological condition? If yes, we encourage you to skip this study."

Sample Limitations: Our sample will be urban, educated, English-speaking students aged 18 to 30, representing a WEIRD-adjacent population (Westernized, Educated, Industrialized, Richer, Democratic). Findings cannot be generalized to rural India, older populations, non-English speakers, or individuals with strong traditional religious frameworks. This is a significant limitation for claims about "ordinary Indian environments."

Implementation Detail:

To ensure adequate sample size, we will oversample slightly (targeting 120 participants) to account for incomplete responses or withdrawals. Based on similar online studies in Indian universities, we anticipate a response rate of approximately 70 to 80%, which should yield at least 80 complete responses.

Measures and Tools

Primary Measure: Sensed Presence Questionnaire (SenPQ)

The primary tool is the Sensed Presence Questionnaire (SenPQ) developed and validated by McBrien & Gow (2021). The SenPQ is a reliable self-report instrument designed to measure the strength and frequency of felt presence experiences.

SenPQ Components:

- **Frequency items:** How often participants experience sensed presence
- **Contextual factors:** Environmental conditions during experiences (darkness, isolation, specific locations)
- **Emotional responses:** Fear, anxiety, or comfort associated with experiences
- **Physiological markers:** Self-reported physical sensations (chills, goosebumps, heart racing)
- **Demographic information:** Age, gender, living situation (hostel, home, alone, with family), sleep patterns

Psychometric Properties:

The SenPQ has demonstrated strong internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.87) and test-retest reliability (r = 0.82). It has been used in cross-cultural studies involving meditation, sleep deprivation, loneliness, and environmental stress.

Supplementary Contextual Questions:

To capture the Indian context, we will add questions such as:

- "How often do you experience power cuts or darkness at home?" (measured on continuous scale: 0 = never, 1 = rarely [few times per year], 2 = occasionally [monthly], 3 = frequently [weekly], 4 = very frequently [multiple times per week])
- "Do you live in a joint family household or alone?" (categorical)
- "Have you ever felt a presence during festivals, religious ceremonies, or while visiting temples/religious sites?"
- "Do you spend time alone on terraces, balconies, or isolated areas of your home?" (frequency scale)
- "Rate your typical sleep quality in the past month" (1-5 scale)
- "Do you live in a single room or shared accommodation?" (categorical)

Environmental Stress Operationalization: Environmental stress will be operationalized as a composite score combining: (1) frequency of exposure to darkness/power cuts, (2) frequency of time spent in isolation, (3) reported ambient noise levels, and (4) sleep disruption frequency. This creates a continuous variable suitable for moderation analysis, though we acknowledge it relies entirely on retrospective self-report, introducing memory bias and common method variance concerns.

Implementation Detail:

The questionnaire will be hosted on Google Forms or Qualtrics (both platforms commonly used and accessible in India). We will ensure mobile compatibility since many students access surveys via smartphones. The estimated completion time is 16 to 25 minutes, which aligns with optimal engagement for online surveys among student populations.

Additional Measures (Addressing Construct Validity)

While our primary focus is agency detection as measured through apophenia-related items, we acknowledge that several alternative mechanisms could account for sensed presence experiences. Due to survey length constraints, we cannot include comprehensive batteries for all potential confounds, but we will add brief screening items for:

- Loneliness (single-item: "How often do you feel lonely?" 1-5 scale)
- Trait anxiety (two items from GAD-2)
- Sleep deprivation ("How many hours do you typically sleep per night?")
- Paranormal belief ("To what extent do you believe in ghosts, spirits, or supernatural entities?" 1-5 scale)
- Religiosity ("How important is religion/spirituality in your daily life?" 1-5 scale)

These will be included as exploratory covariates and acknowledged limitations rather than central theoretical constructs.

Procedure

The study will follow this protocol:

Step 1: Informed Consent

Participants will first encounter a digital consent form explaining:

- Study purpose and research questions
- What participation involves (completing an online questionnaire)
- Time commitment (approximately 20 minutes)
- Voluntary nature and right to withdraw
- Anonymity and data protection measures
- Contact information for researchers and institutional ethics committee

Participants must actively check a box stating "I have read and understood the above information and consent to participate" before proceeding.

Step 2: Demographic and Contextual Questions

Participants will answer:

- Basic demographics (age, gender, academic level)
- Living situation (hostel, home with family, paying guest accommodation)
- Environmental exposure questions ("How often do you stay alone at night?" "Do you feel comfortable in darkness or silence?" "Have you experienced prolonged power cuts?" "Do you live near construction sites, highways, or areas with low-frequency ambient noise?")

Step 3: Sensed Presence Questionnaire (SenPQ)

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Fu5BH_fXYa4Oi7ctb5NdFkCerEjnIG9Z/view?usp=drive_link

Participants complete the full SenPQ, which includes:

- Items about frequency and intensity of sensed presence experiences (noting that the SenPQ does not distinguish between subtypes such as agency presence, companion presence, and observing presence, a limitation we acknowledge)
- Contextual questions about when and where these occur
- Emotional and self-reported physiological response items (e.g., "I felt my heart racing," "I experienced chills", these are subjective correlates, not objective physiological measurements such as heart rate or electrodermal activity)
- Items assessing apophenic tendency and a brief cognitive task using Mooney Faces (ambiguous black-and-white images) where participants indicate how many faces/figures they detect. Scoring: total number of detections in 10 ambiguous images, with images selected to have 0-2 actual faces. Higher scores indicate greater pattern detection. Expected effect size for stress × detection association: r = .25-.35 based on similar cognitive bias research.

Step 4: Debrief and Resources

Upon completion, participants will see a debrief message explaining:

- That sensed presence experiences are normal psychological phenomena
- The scientific explanation for these experiences
- Reassurance that such experiences do not indicate mental illness or paranormal activity
- Resources for mental health support (college counseling services, helpline numbers such as Vandrevala Foundation Helpline: 1860-2662-345, NIMHANS Helpline: 080-46110007)

Step 5: Data Security

All responses are collected anonymously. No IP addresses, email addresses, or identifying information will be recorded. Data will be stored on password-protected devices and analyzed using anonymized ID codes.

Implementation Detail:

To maximize response quality, we will implement attention checks (e.g., "Please select 'Agree' for this item to show you are reading carefully"). We will also randomize the order of some question blocks to reduce order effects. Incomplete responses will be automatically excluded during data export.

Ethical Considerations

Voluntary Participation: All participation is voluntary, with no course credit, monetary incentive, or other benefit that might compromise free choice. Participants are informed they may withdraw at any time.

Anonymous Data Collection: No identifying information will be collected. The survey platform will be configured to disable IP address collection.

Right to Withdraw: Participants may close the survey at any time without completing it. Once submitted, because responses are anonymous, participants cannot request data deletion (as we cannot identify their specific responses).

Psychological Safety: The debrief provides reassurance and normalizes sensed presence experiences. We avoid any language suggesting paranormal or supernatural interpretations that might increase anxiety.

Self-Exclusion Protocol: Clear screening questions allow individuals with mental health concerns to self-exclude before encountering any study materials.

Low-Risk Design: By using retrospective self-report rather than experimental manipulation, we avoid exposing participants to actual fear-inducing conditions.

Institutional Approval: This study will be submitted to the institutional ethics committee for approval before data collection begins, in accordance with ICMR guidelines.

Implementation Detail: We will maintain a research log documenting any participant concerns or questions. If participants contact us with distress related to the study content, we will provide mental health resource information and document the incident for ethics committee review.

Data Analysis Plan

Statistical Approach:

1. Descriptive Statistics: We will first compute means, standard deviations, and distributions for all variables including sensed presence frequency, environmental stress exposure, and apophenic tendency scores.

2. Correlation Analysis: Pearson correlation coefficients will examine relationships between:

- Environmental stress and sensed presence reports
- Apophenic tendency and sensed presence reports
- Environmental stress and false pattern detection

3. Moderation Analysis: We will use hierarchical multiple regression to test whether apophenic tendency moderates the relationship between environmental stress and sensed presence. This involves:

- Step 1: Enter environmental stress and apophenic tendency as predictors
- Step 2: Add the interaction term (environmental stress × apophenic tendency)
- Significance of the interaction term indicates moderation

4. Subgroup Comparisons: We may conduct additional analyses comparing:

- Students living in hostels versus family homes
- Those with frequent versus infrequent power cut exposure
- Urban versus rural/semi-urban backgrounds

Software: Data will be analyzed using SPSS or JASP (free, open-source alternative), both standard in psychological research.

Implementation Detail: To ensure transparency and reproducibility, we will follow open science practices. Our analysis plan will be documented before data collection. We will report all analyses conducted, including non-significant results, to avoid publication bias. Effect sizes (Cohen's d or r-squared) will be reported alongside p-values to indicate practical significance.

Expected Outcomes

We predict the following outcomes:

Hypothesis 1: Participants who report higher levels of self-reported environmental stress (darkness, isolation, ambient stressors) will also report elevated self-reported physiological arousal markers (heart racing, goosebumps, heightened alertness) and greater subjective fear, demonstrating an association between retrospectively recalled environmental conditions and subjective stress responses.

Hypothesis 2: The association between self-reported environmental stress and reports of sensed presence will be significantly stronger for individuals with higher levels of pattern detection tendency (measured through apophenia tasks). This interaction effect will suggest that pattern detection bias acts as a moderator, with the relationship between environmental stress and felt presence being amplified among those who score higher on pattern detection measures.

Hypothesis 3: Higher self-reported environmental stress will be associated with more pattern detections (including false positives) on cognitive tasks embedded in the questionnaire, suggesting a correlation between recalled environmental stress and pattern detection sensitivity. We acknowledge that this correlational design cannot determine whether environmental stress increases apophenic tendency or whether individuals high in pattern detection are more likely to recall stressful environments.

Conceptual Example with Indian Context

To illustrate the predicted mechanism, consider this scenario common in Indian student life:

A student living in a hostel wakes at 3 AM during a power cut. The backup generator has failed, leaving the building in complete darkness. The usual ambient sounds of traffic and neighbors are absent due to the late hour. The student needs to walk down a long, empty corridor to fetch water from the common area.

As they walk through the darkness, they hear a faint creaking sound (likely the building settling or a door moving in the breeze). The combination of darkness, isolation, and sleep inertia creates heightened stress and arousal. Their brain, receiving minimal sensory input, begins scanning intensively for meaning and potential threats.

If this student has naturally high apophenic tendency, their brain is more likely to connect unrelated elements. The creaking becomes "footsteps following me." A shadow cast by moonlight through a window becomes "a figure standing at the end of the hall." Their heart races, they feel a chill, and they experience the distinct sensation that someone unseen is present.

This represents cognitive over-interpretation under stress, not a supernatural phenomenon. The student's brain is doing exactly what evolution designed it to do: in ambiguous, potentially threatening situations, err on the side of caution by detecting agency even when none exists. This adaptive mechanism, however, can produce subjectively powerful experiences that feel entirely real.

Discussion and Implications

Theoretical Implications

If our predictions are confirmed, the findings will suggest associations where environmental stress exposure correlates with sensed presence experiences, with this relationship moderated by agency detection bias. We emphasize that our correlational design cannot establish that environmental stress "causes" sensed presence, only that these variables covary in predicted patterns. Rather, the brain's meaning-making system, particularly hyperactive agency detection, may operate more intensely under unclear conditions, transforming environmental ambiguity into the perception of a sentient entity. Agency detection bias thus acts as a cognitive lens through which ordinary sensory ambiguity becomes extraordinary subjective experience.

This has potential theoretical implications for predictive coding models of perception. According to these models, the brain constantly generates predictions about incoming sensory information. When sensory input is reduced or unclear (as in darkness or isolation), prediction errors increase. The brain may rely more heavily on top-down processing and prior beliefs to make sense of the environment. Individuals high in agency detection bias may have particularly strong

priors for detecting intentional agents and threats, leading them to "predict" the presence of entities even when bottom-up sensory evidence is minimal.

Important caveat: Predictive coding provides a plausible theoretical mechanism but remains largely inferential and not directly tested by our self-report methodology. Our data can demonstrate associations but cannot confirm the underlying neural mechanisms proposed by predictive coding frameworks.

Bridging Environmental and Cognitive Psychology

This research bridges the gap between environmental psychology (which examines how external conditions affect behavior and perception) and cognitive psychology (which focuses on internal mental processes). By demonstrating how environmental stressors interact with cognitive biases, we provide an integrative framework for understanding perceptual anomalies.

Most environmental psychology research focuses on how physical spaces affect mood, productivity, or stress levels. Our study extends this by showing how environments can fundamentally alter perception itself. Similarly, cognitive research on biases like apophenia typically uses artificial laboratory stimuli (inkblots, random dot patterns). We demonstrate how these biases operate in real-world environmental contexts.

Clinical and Applied Implications

The findings have several practical applications:

1. Understanding Everyday Experiences

The research helps normalize experiences that many people find frightening or confusing. In India, where belief in supernatural entities remains culturally significant, providing a scientific explanation for sensed presence can reduce distress without invalidating people's subjective experiences. This is particularly important for young adults transitioning to independent living (hostels, paying guest accommodations) who may feel isolated and anxious.

2. Insights into Psychosis and Hallucinations

By revealing associations between agency detection biases, environmental stress, and perceptual anomalies, the study provides potential insight into clinical hallucinations and psychosis. These conditions may emerge from similar mechanisms operating at higher intensity or with reduced reality-testing, though our study does not measure intervening constructs such as reality testing, dopaminergic salience, or cognitive control that bridge non-clinical and clinical experiences. This represents a conceptual gap. Understanding the continuum between normal sensed presence and clinical hallucinations can reduce stigma and improve early intervention.

3. Therapeutic Applications

Mental health professionals can use this understanding to normalize and address stress-based perceptual distortions in clients with anxiety disorders or trauma-related conditions. Psychoeducation about the role of environmental factors and cognitive biases can reduce fear and help clients develop coping strategies. For example:

- Teaching clients that feeling a presence during panic attacks is a normal brain response to hyperarousal
- Using exposure therapy that gradually increases comfort with darkness or isolation
- Cognitive restructuring to challenge interpretations of unclear stimuli

4. Environmental Design

Understanding how environmental factors trigger sensed presence could inform design of student hostels, hospitals, and other institutions. For example, ensuring adequate lighting in corridors, reducing sensory isolation through ambient sound or visual cues, and creating spaces that feel psychologically safe.

5. Scientific Framework for Subjective Experiences

Providing psychological frameworks for understanding sensed presence experiences can help individuals contextualize these phenomena without requiring supernatural explanations. This may be particularly relevant in contexts where such experiences cause distress or confusion.

Broader Significance

This project explores "haunted house" experiences as a window into normal human cognition under stress. What feels anomalous may reflect psychological and physiological processes, the result of an adaptive brain attempting to make sense of unclear information in challenging environments.

The research has implications beyond individual experience. It may help explain why certain environments (old buildings, isolated locations, dark spaces) consistently evoke similar reports across cultures and time periods. These environments may share characteristics that trigger similar cognitive mechanisms, particularly hyperactive agency detection under unclear sensory conditions.

This work also contributes to the growing field of anomalistic psychology, which seeks to explain anomalous experiences through normal psychological processes. By doing so, it validates people's subjective experiences while providing frameworks that may help them understand these phenomena.

Conclusion

This study investigates the psychological correlates of sensed presence, an anomalous human experience that some attribute to paranormal causes. By examining the associations between environmental stressors (darkness, isolation, ambient stress) and cognitive biases (hyperactive agency detection, measured through apophenia tasks), we aim to explore whether these experiences correlate with normal perceptual processes under conditions of stress and ambiguity.

The research contributes to theoretical understanding by integrating environmental and cognitive approaches to perception. It offers potential practical applications for mental health professionals, though our correlational methodology limits strong applied recommendations. By exploring anomalous phenomena through psychological frameworks, we provide an approach that is empirically grounded while respectful of subjective human experience.

Ultimately, this work explores how the human mind, even in its most ordinary functioning, is capable of producing extraordinary experiences. The next time someone feels a presence in a dark room, they may understand it as their brain's threat-detection system operating under unclear conditions, detecting potential agents and attempting to keep them safe in uncertain environments.