



## Raising the dead: on brands that go bump in the night

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**Raising the Dead:  
On Brands That Go Bump in the Night**

Stephen Brown\*  
Department of Management, Leadership and Marketing  
Ulster University Business School  
Ulster University  
Jordanstown  
Co. Antrim  
BT37 0QB

Anthony Patterson  
Lancaster University Management School  
Lancaster University  
Bailrigg  
Lancaster  
LA1 4YX

Rachel Ashman  
University of Liverpool Management School  
University of Liverpool  
Chatham Street  
Liverpool  
L69 7ZH

\*Contact Author

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### *Abstract*

Many brands have been obliterated by the ‘death of the high street’ and many more have had near-death experiences. This paper applies Derrida’s ‘hauntology’ to Hollister, a high-flying fashion brand that fell from grace. Although it remains in the land of the living, selling impossible dreams of So-Cal’s beachside lifestyle, Hollister is a ghost of its former self. An interpretive empirical investigation reveals that the brand’s hauntology comprises four phantomic components: *mortality*, *anxiety*, *liminality* and *retroactivity*. A spectral ‘model’ of bump-in-the-night brands also makes its presence felt.

### *Contribution*

At a time when the spectre of pandemic is stalking retail branding, this paper considers Jacques Derrida’s (1994, p.37) incongruous, possibly prescient, claim that ‘the future belongs to ghosts’. With the aid of interpretive empirical research, it adapts the late literary theorist’s phantom concept, ‘hauntology’, to a world-renowned retail chain that, despite a near-death experience, refuses to give up the ghost. And although the findings don’t confirm Derrida’s (1994, p.48) contention that ‘the dead can often be more powerful than the living’, they show how the spectral side of branding gives ghosts a chance to shine.

Keywords: Ghost Brands; Hauntology; Hollister; Introspection; Literary Criticism

## **Raising the Dead: On Brands That Go Bump in the Night**

*Speak to the spectre.*

—Derrida (1994, 11)

Retail branding, some say, is experiencing an extinction event (Chambers, 2018; *Economist*, 2020; Naylor, 2019). Recent years have witnessed the demise of Mothercare, Maplin, Karen Millen, Bon Marche and many, many more. The monsters of the digital marketplace, Amazilla especially; iniquitous property taxes, which militate against physical store portfolios; and the rapid rise of the experience economy, where consumers do more things but buy less stuff, are squeezing the lifeforce from bricks-and-mortar businesses (Agnew, 2018; Hellen, 2018; Thomas, 2018). According to Pilkington's (2019) autopsy report, ghost malls are proliferating, dead high streets abound and numerous near dear departed retail brands, including Debenhams, Monsoon, Neiman Marcus and Brooks Brothers, are either on life support or having their last rights read as we write.

Alarming though they are, such apocalyptic predictions lack an historical perspective. Extinction events have been part and parcel of retail branding for aeons. Every disruptive retailing innovation since the emergence of department stores – mail order, supermarkets, chain stores, shopping malls, category killers, deep discounters, pound shops, e-commerce, etc. – has been accompanied by blood-curdling accounts of the unconscionable culprits and ominous predictions of the cataclysm to come. The many and varied conceptualisations of retail change, most notably the 'wheel of retailing' theory (Hollander, 1960), are predicated on this very premise (Brown, 1991).

An additional twist in the tale is intellectual property. Ever since the company acts of the 1860s, brands have been regarded, in law, as living things (Vaidhyanathan, 2017). But whereas patents and copyrights have limited lifespans, trademarked brands are all-but immortal. The doors of Beale's or Barneys legendary department stores may have closed for ever and their display windows may have been boarded over until new tenants are found, but the names, logos, liveries and analogous commercial indicia not only live on but can be bought and sold and exhumed and reincarnated in perpetuity. Indeed, one of the most notable characteristics of 21<sup>st</sup> century branding has been the revival and rerelease of seemingly dead-and-buried brands, be it deceased designer labels like Moyant (Dion & Mazzalovo, 2016), mouldering mobile phones like Motorola's RAZR (Miles, 2020), rest-in-peace motor car marques like Alfa Romeo's Giulia (Cantone, et al., 2018) or pushing-up-daisies devices like the Polaroid camera and Sony Walkman (Brown, 2018). Can gone-but-not-forgotten online brands like Bebo, Myspace and Friends Reunited be far away?

The prospect of exhumation, admittedly, is scant comfort to those workers whose livelihoods are adversely affected by the passing of Poundworld, Carphone Warehouse, Toys R Us and so on. But the possibility of resurrection suggests that the brand pandemic narrative is incomplete. Although marketing and consumer research is not short of studies of death and dying (see Dobscha, 2016) – everything from the earning capacity of dead celebrities (D'Rozario & Bryant, 2013) to the growing popularity of natural burials (Balonier, et al., 2019) – the phantom army of undead brands demands additional academic attention.

### **Conceptual Context**

'The future,' according to the late, great deconstructionist, Jacques Derrida (1994, 37), 'belongs to ghosts'. This prediction may or may not withstand close scrutiny, however

spectres' possession of the past is incontestable. Ghosts, ghouls, shades, spooks, spirits, apparitions, revenants, wraiths, fetches, familiars, manes and more have been haunting humankind since time immemorial (Morton, 2015). Their comings and goings are recorded in some of the earliest works of literature including the Epic of *Gilgamesh*, Homer's *Odyssey* and the Old Testament, and their presence remains apparent in many spheres of 21<sup>st</sup> century popular culture such as television shows (*Most Haunted*), computer games (*Call of Duty: Ghosts*), theme park rides (Derren Brown's Ghost Train) and social media platforms like Facebook, where profiles of the 'digital dead' will eventually overtake those of the living (O'Neill, 2016).

Scholarship too is amply stocked with spectral speculation. According to Buse and Stott's (1999) review of the literature, both Freud and Jung regarded ghosts as manifestations of primitive belief systems, as did Martin Heidegger and Theodor Adorno, who dismissed djinn et al. as the 'metaphysic of dunces'. Yet they also note that Engels, Ruskin, Saussure and Lévi-Strauss among others were not only prepared to participate in seances but that Karl Marx himself, whose most famous line involved a spectre stalking Europe, had a weakness for White Ladies. As did Walter Benjamin, who lived in a succession of haunted houses as a child and posited that Parisian shopping arcades are phantom palaces where abandoned commodities are interred in the ossuary of consumer society.

On the empirical plain, meanwhile, Underwood (1996) has put forward a ten-category typology of ghostly forms including elementals, poltergeists, companion animals and haunted inanimate objects. Davies' (2007) database demonstrates that revenants are most often found in buildings, under bridges, down mines, near graveyards, beside buried treasure or battlefields, close to places of murder or executions and at liminal locations like crossroads

and docklands. Taking a macro-scale approach, Clarke (2012) contends that phantoms are not only a universal phenomenon, reported throughout all five continents – south-east Asia is particularly populous – but that the incidence of spectral sightings waxes and wanes in intensity. Ghosts especially abound in the aftermath of wars, plagues, famines and similar epochs of human immiseration, though their nature and characteristics tend to differ on each occasion.

Apparitions also provide powerful conceptual metaphors for academic purposes (Shaw, 2018). Perhaps the most impactful of these is Jacques Derrida's (1994, p.120) spooky pseudoscience of 'hauntology'. Published in the mid-1990s, as a rejoinder to Francis Fukuyama's infamous assertion that history had ended, communism had collapsed and western capitalism had won the Cold War, *Spectres of Marx* caused consternation in critical circles. At a time when Marx's legacy was at its lowest ebb, *Spectres* comprised the arch deconstructionist's first engagement with Marxist thought, something he had avoided up to that point. Taking the *Communist Manifesto*'s opening line as its point of departure, Derrida prophesied that western capitalism would continue to be stalked by Marx's spectres and hauntology will supersede ontology as an existential cynosure.

Metaphorically, the power of Derrida's ghostly presences inheres in in-betweenness. Hovering betwixt existence and non-existence, absence and presence, visibility and invisibility, nature and culture, use-value and exchange-value, ghosts are liminal things that dissolve binary oppositions and overturn the linear model of time that shapes the western worldview. Neither fully present nor absent, neither living nor dead, Derrida's *revenants* blur the boundary between past and present. They invoke the strange temporality of haunting whereby ghosts function as a signifier of slippages between then and now, pre- and post-,

hitherto and whither. Part legacy, part prophecy, the spectre ‘begins by coming back’ (p.11). That is to say, spirits depart from the past and arrive in the present, often as portents of things to come (Shaw, 2018). They involve a dual movement of return and inauguration, much like the revived and rereleased brands mentioned above (Brown, 2018).

Although Derrida’s act of exhumation was denounced by high priests of critical theory (Sprinker, 1999), hauntology has been embraced by the laity. Spectral studies are making their presence felt in manifold fields of popular culture including painting, photography, literature, television, film, fashion and music, where ‘hauntology’ is a widely recognised subgenre (Fisher, 2014). It includes bands like Burial, Boards of Canada and those associated with the Ghost Box label whose recordings evoke ‘old-timey and elegiac atmospheres’ (Reynolds, 2011, p.331). Complete with surface crackles, aural wear-and-tear and subliminal sonic ghost effects, they ‘sound as if heard from a bathroom at a house party in an empty shopping mall’ (Davies, 2018, p.16). Spooky.

### **Brand Strand**

Branding, Holt (2004) claims, is an important part of popular culture. It is an even more important part, arguably, of consumer and marketing research both, where the relationships between brands and their consumers – be they beneficial or antagonistic – have generated a great deal of academic interest and an enormous corpus of published research (Keller, 2020). Yet it is fair to say that, with several commendable exceptions (Anderson, et al., 2017; Chronis, 2008; Hackley & Hackley, 2015), marketing and consumer researchers remain reluctant hauntologists. This disinclination, no doubt, is due to all sorts of disparate factors, not least Derrida’s (1994, p.74) contrarian contention that his ‘onto-theo-archeo-teleology’ it is a ‘concept without concept’ (Wolfreys, 2001, p.x). However, the semantic affinity of

‘hauntology’ and ‘nostalgia’ can’t be ignored. Considered synonymous by some critical thinkers and commentators (Fisher, 2014; Gallix, 2011; Reynolds, 2011), the former term has been overshadowed by the latter. As a recent bibliometric analysis reveals, more than one thousand papers on consumer nostalgia and retro branding have been published since the mid-1990s (Denny, 2018). Those on hauntology, by contrast, barely reach double figures.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the nature of nostalgia has changed (Brown, 2018). Once characterised by bittersweet sentimentality, mournful retrospection and woebegone moping around, nostalgia is nowadays regarded as healthful, as wholesome, as a Very Good Thing. Thanks to the endeavours of the Southampton School of social psychology in particular, nostalgia is now part of the wellbeing industry (Adams, 2014). Far from being a negative state of mind, as was once widely believed, nostalgia repairs mood, lifts spirits, spurs creativity and serves as a vital reminder that life is worth living.

Nostalgia, in other words, has been rebranded (Routledge, 2016). The dark side of nostalgia, the scary side, the unsettling side, the side that Johannes Hofer singled out in his inaugural study – where he attributed the condition to ‘animal spirits’ and noted that its principal symptoms included a lifeless countenance and sufferers’ eerie ability to see ghosts (Anspach, 1934) – increasingly inheres in the shadow term hauntology. As Reynolds (2011) makes clear, hauntology stirs up funereal feelings and is possessed by spectres of futures that never come to pass. For Whyman (2019), hauntology not only captures the character of contemporary society, where consumers ‘spend their time fantasising of other times’ (Morrison 2012, p.9), but is ‘perhaps the most important political-philosophical concept we have right now’. Although he doesn’t attempt to operationalise the idea, his contention

indicates that the eldritch interstices of retail branding and consumer behaviour, as made manifest in the haunted house of Hollister, are worth exploring and exorcising.

### **Empirical Exemplar**

Narratives are imperatives for managers. Storytelling is a crucial tool of the branding business. According to Tom Peters (2013), ‘a brand is a story, period!’. According to Barbara Stern (2006), ‘a brand is a product or service with a story attached’. According to Legorburu and McColl’s (2014) marketing manifesto, ‘storyscaping’ is the key connection between increasingly demanding consumers and increasingly experiential brands. According to Cayla and Arnould (2013), stories provide opportunities for market learning.

Few brands have been storied more successfully than Hollister. A stalwart of the apparel market, with approximately 500 stores in 25 countries, Hollister’s backstory is a thing of beauty. Its founder, John Hollister, grew up during America’s Gilded Age and enjoyed an idyllic childhood in the millionaires’ playground of Rhode Island. There, he learned to swim and sail and surf and, stultified by the strict social conventions that then prevailed, yearned to flee the nest and see the world. A pioneer of the hippie trail that many happy wanderers subsequently trod, John travelled throughout the then ‘mysterious east’ and eventually washed up on the west coast of the United States, where he acquired a ramshackle beach shack and earned a crust selling surfing equipment on So-Cal’s golden shores. His business benefitted from the surfing boom of the Roaring Twenties and, in the fullness of time, it was passed on to his son, John Junior, who benefitted in turn from the fun-fun-fun of the Surf City scene during the Beach Boys-bedazzled 1960s. Junior’s budding brand grew incrementally, organically, authentically until it exploded into popular consciousness in the early 2000s, when its sun-sea-surf-So-Cal lifestyle struck a chord with teenagers everywhere.

Although tarred to some extent by the brush of Orientalism, John Hollister's story is a commercial version of the *bildungsroman*, a long-established literary genre of youthful misadventure and eventual maturation (Abrams, 1993). Not a word of it is true, however. Headquartered in Columbus, Ohio, Hollister (aka HCo) was founded in the year 2000, as a young adult-orientated subsidiary of Abercrombie & Fitch. The brainchild of Mike Jeffries, the brand's yarn was woven throughout the physical fabric of the retail store, from its beach shack-like exterior, through the echoes of John Hollister's globetrotting – strategically placed suitcases, potted palm trees, etc. – to a vast video installation streaming surfing scenes from the pier at Huntington Beach, CA.

As if that weren't enough, Jeffries injected a nostalgic element as well. Despite its millennial birthdate, the brand-new brand purports to date from 1922, when John Hollister reached journey's end. The store interiors comprised a stage-set of crystal chandeliers, overstuffed sofas, antique longboards, threadbare carpets and Californian flags, which conveyed a vaguely retro vibe. On top of that, its eye-candy employees, in their laid-back flip-flops and bright red board shorts, looked like auditionees for *Baywatch*, an iconic 1980s television series famed for its muscular lifeguards, beautiful sunbathers and surfer dude So-Cal setting.

Nothing if not eye-catching, Hollister took off like its seagull-in-flight logo, spread its wings across consumer society, became *the* brand for fashion-conscious teenagers worldwide and gleefully alienated innumerable adults, many of whom were exasperated by the brand's wilfully inky store interiors, egregiously overpriced products, deliberately dilatory customer service – long lines at practically every touchpoint – and unconscionable images of bodily

perfection, both in-store and on billboards, that unsettled impressionable adolescents from Stockholm to Shanghai (Moon, 2010).

Perhaps inevitably, Hollister's hubris begat nemesis, which came in the form of cut-price fast fashion competitors like H&M and Zara; ever-advancing hordes of me-too copycats such as American Eagle and Aeropostale; the rapid rise of online apparel retailing, à la Asos, which HCo arrogantly eschewed; and, a sudden shattering decline in shopper sympathy, loyalty, admiration (Loeb, 2017). The latter was triggered by a series of ill-considered comments from the CEO, who announced that ugly, plus sized or otherwise unattractive customers weren't welcome in his stores. When coupled with the company's infamous employment policy – only good lookers need apply – and its discrimination against those with physical disabilities, the once rad brand was swept aside by a wave of activist customer antipathy. Stores were boycotted, like-for-like sales plummeted, and Mike Jeffries was shown the door of his benighted beach shack.

Come 2015, HCo was a dead brand walking. But rather than give it a decent burial, the necromancers at A&F's head office revived their moribund brand. The iconic beach hut exteriors were removed; the pitch-black interiors were brightened up; the heavily perfumed atmospherics were pared back; the blaring background music was turned down a tad; the infuriatingly slim-fit ranges of clothing were extended to XL sizes and above; and the label's signature icons, supersized seagull logo and Brobdingnagian brand name in block letters, were exchanged for downsized versions of the same.

Although eighty stores were sacrificed on the altar of resurrection, the new look and better-late-than-never online presence slowly turned things around (Loeb, 2017). Sales picked up

and stabilized and, unlike many rival retail chains, Hollister keeps on keeping on. And while it may yet fall victim to the Coronavirus-induced brandbionic plague (Fraser, 2020), HCo still stands on the surfboard of apparel retailing, hanging tough if not hanging ten.

### **Mane Method**

The Society for Psychical Research (SPR) was established in 1882. Committed to rigorous, scientific research of matters hauntological, SPR is still in existence today, as is its American offshoot. They have been joined by innumerable amateur ghostbusters armed with the latest spectre-identifying software and well-thumbed copies of *Ghost Hunting for Dummies* (Bagans, 2019). Studies also show that, even in the most spook-sceptical societies of the western world, approximately forty percent of the population believe in the existence of ghosts, some thirty percent of whom claim to have had a spectral encounter of one kind or another (Morton, 2015).

Sceptics, of course, have put forward many rational explanations of such encounters, everything from incipient senile dementia and carbon monoxide poisoning to hypnogogic sleep patterns and the accidental ingestion of psychotropic plants like deadly nightshade. One of the most intriguing of these hypothesisises pertains to introspection. Davies (2007) contends that there is a connection between the incidence of ghostly visitations and the existential anxieties – financial concerns, family matters, job security, etc. – that assail many people in the wee small hours. Worries beget wraiths, as it were.

Regardless of the veracity of Davies' hypothesis, it cannot fail to strike a chord with marketing and consumer researchers. As Patterson (2010), Shankar (2000) and several others report, introspection has been something of an academic worrywart. Pioneered by Stephen J.

Gould (1991), who employed introspection to better understand his personal spiritual experiences, it was dismissed at the time as ‘unscientific’. Scholars like Morris Holbrook (1995), Christopher Hackley (2020) and Markus Wohlfeil (2018), however, have since done much to establish the credentials of Subjective Personal Introspection. Ditto more than a few anthropologically-inclined consumer researchers, who prefer to employ the term ‘autoethnography’. Autoethnography, indeed, has been embraced by many academic disciplines, sociology, politics and geography among them. So much so, that some 300 books on the subject are currently available on Amazon. As Hackley (2020, p.170) observes, ‘autoethnography liberates the critical voice and mobilises minority viewpoints, hence acting as an important corrective and antidote to prevailing scientific ideologies’.

Additional evidence of introspection’s utility is found in the nostalgia literature. Hofer’s inaugural study of the phenomenon relied on the autobiographical reflections of three key informants (Ansbach, 1934) and self-reports of one kind or another have been part of the research process ever since. By its very nature, nostalgia is reliant on recall, reminiscence, memory, and the corpus of academic research, from Davis’ (1979) celebrated study of yearning for yesterday to the Southampton School’s focus on the sweet rather than the bitter side of nostalgia (Adams, 2014), is predicated upon introspective accounts of past activities and experiences.

The principal advantage of the introspective method, according to retromarketing researchers, is that it permits informants to ponder ‘then and now’ (Hartmann & Brunk, 2019). It is closely related, furthermore, to the primordial principles of storytelling (Holbrook, 1995) and is thus ideally suited to studying storied brands. In the present case, our introspectors comprise a group of 92 young people who were familiar with the old, beach hut-fronted

apparel brand prior to its 2015 makeover. They were encouraged to return to the 'new and improved' Hollister store then write an autobiographical essay on their reactions, reflections and recollections in relation to the earlier retail offer. In keeping with introspective research convention, which is 'entirely open-ended in its design' (Patterson, et al., 2008, p.32), very few specific instructions were issued beforehand. Informants were simply required to visit the Hollister store, write introspective accounts of their present and past experiences and, following Holbrook, urged to make their essays as imaginative, as creative, as lyrical as possible.

Clearly, our informants weren't acting under their own volition. They were required to visit Hollister, like it or not. And while this precondition may be criticised methodologically, it is no different from the situation that prevails in many 'experimental' studies, where undergraduates must complete questionnaire surveys in return for course credit. Many real-world shopping trips, moreover, are undertaken under duress, not least those where eager parents demand that their reluctant children accompany them to Sainsbury's, Superdrug, Sofology and so forth.

Volition notwithstanding, 41% of our 'purposeful sample' identify as female, ages range from 19 to 44 and, although the majority of the informants are Irish, the views of English, Scottish, French, German, Austrian and American students also feature. As per Patterson et al (2008), all of our informants are undergraduates, albeit 10% either work for, or were previously employed by, prominent retail brands. Another 10% purport to have been Hollister employees in the past or approached with an offer of employment.

Commendably creative, the reflective essays range from 1315 to 2538 words, with an overall average of 1882. This equates to approximately 750 pages of double-spaced text, which compares well with consumer narratives derived from depth interviews or netnographic data mining. The essays were analysed in accordance with the ‘close reading’ principles of literary criticism, as formulated by the New Critics of the mid-twentieth century and adapted to marketing and consumer research by Barbara Stern (1989), who explains the nuts and bolts of the iterative, inspect-interpret-reinspect-reinterpret method in considerable and commendable detail.

### **Fetching Findings**

Whatever else is said about Jacques Derrida, and much has indeed been said (Sprinker, 1999), he was a literary critic at heart not a critical theorist. He was a post-structuralist provocateur, who’d much rather deconstruct than construct ideas, concepts, theories or all-encompassing philosophical frameworks. In keeping with Derrida’s (1994) ethos, our aim is not to develop a model of brand hauntology or spectral consumption. But to commune with the thematic presences that appear to lurk in our dataset. And while this ambition might run counter to CCT convention, it is in accordance with literary conventions where ambiguity, nebulosity and the ghosts of great writers past still hover (Miller, 1995).

The findings to follow, in effect, are spectres of the spectre of scholarship, chain-rattling revenants of consumer research and retro branding. Literary gremlins in the CCT machine, they materialise in four fetching manifestations: *mortality*, *anxiety*, *liminality* and *retroactivity*.

## *Mortality*

As Clarke's (2013) natural history reveals, ghosts come in many shapes and forms, which vary from place to place, country to country and time to time. There is one thing, though, that they all share: mortality (Morton, 2015). Ghosts are the spirits, the souls, the shadows of the dead, the deceased, the dear departed. And although apparitions are people for the most part, phantom animals, objects and brands are not unknown. Hollister is a case in point. For many of our informants, HCo is a dead brand. Or as near to dead as makes no difference. Either way, it is a place – and a product range – they wouldn't be seen dead in. For Daniel 'the renovated store can only be described by one word, DEAD.' According to Conor, a former fanboy, it is 'dying out'. And Claire simply 'died inside' on entering the store she once adored.

This mortality metaphor, although common, is used in a number of different ways. More than a few are referring to their belief that the brand has already expired or stands on the brink of oblivion. Alison, for instance, is fairly sure that 'the whole Hollister brand has died off'. Adam asks 'Do people still wear Hollister? How is that place still open?' Several, conversely, are very well aware that the brand remains in the land of the living. But it is dead to them. It's no longer part of their choice set. It has been 'ghosted' in much the same way as contact is cut off with ex-friends on social media. Aidan, once an aficionado, departs the revamped store empty-handed, 'shocked' by how far it has fallen. Former fan Aine hides her HCo purchase in a Primark carrier bag, the ultimate indignity.

Set against this, numerous essayists are referring to the retail outlet itself, which was devoid of customers on the day or days they visited. Although they are speaking comparatively – relative to the glory years when Hollister was heaving with eager shoppers and long lines of

seagull logo lovers queued outside – the perceived emptiness of the ‘dead’ store is ‘eerie’ and ‘unsettling’. It is a ‘coffin’, a ‘catacomb’, a ‘graveyard’, a ‘hellhole’, a ‘yawning abyss’, a ‘derelict wasteland’, a ‘place of haunting memories’. Jill’s personification of the retail store is typical:

I decided last week to check up on the old superstar and as I approached a new aura hung about the place. The type of aura where you feel you shouldn’t stare, but you do. There she stood, in the shadow of her former glory. I know it’s not living, but it’s almost as if the store hangs its head in sorrow. It’s like the darkness that once filled the inside has made its way out front. Now karma has got a hold and is tightly wrapping her arms around Hollister, squeezing out her spirit.

Alongside death, of course, ghosts are nocturnal. They are associated with darkness and the dead of night. And if Hollister is known for anything, it is its lack of in-store lighting. All but four informants specifically mention the store’s inky interior. Many narrate the urban legend about buying a ‘blue’ hoodie that turns out to be green, purple or shocking pink in natural light. Many make the old jokes about needing night-vision goggles, or miners’ lamps or a powerful torch before venturing into HCo’s ‘coal bunker’. Many mention their parents’ despair, not to say bafflement, about the logic behind the lack of illumination, and quite a few infer it’s a sneaky scam that makes price labels hard to read. Matthew likens it to ‘stepping into Aladdin’s cave whilst wearing Ray-Bans’.

Although Hollister’s Ray-Ban years are behind it, a substantial number of Matt’s fellow students conclude that the revamped store’s alleged luminosity is relative rather than absolute. The interior is still pretty gloomy. On the one hand, Niall notes, it’s a place where

‘Hollister seems to have got the message that the Batcave had better lighting than most of their stores and finally decided to do something about it’. On the other hand, Cara complains, it remains ‘a Stygian pit’, a place of ‘dark lighting’, where ‘I’ve never seen so many lights in a shop, yet still find it hard to see’.

And the spectral analogies don’t end there. Hannah refers to the alarming experience of being in an ‘empty shadowy store’ that reminded her of a haunted house. Barry is taken aback by skulking sales assistants who materialise right behind him muttering, ‘Hey, what’s up, dude?’ the Hollister equivalent of ‘Boo!’. Dean maintains that the downsized seagull logo, unattended digital cash registers and the abandonment of its signature olfactory overkill are signifiers of the brand’s dispirited state. A ‘collapsed star’, he contends, it has ‘lost its sparkle’ and is ‘fading away’.

Invisibility, an equally quintessential feature of phantoms, is also evident. Henry says he spent thirty minutes wandering around the shopping mall, looking for the store (even though he’d been there before). Alison reports walking past the premises repeatedly, blithely wondering where the beach shack went (having failed to realise that the brightly-lit glass frontage was in fact Hollister). The lack of a long queue outside, plus the absence of the store’s pungent aroma, which signposted the shop in the past, had bewildered them both. Ironically, the management’s act of improving the visibility within has resulted in increased invisibility without. No less ironic is that HCo’s colourful and radiant website is considered by some to be a pale imitation of the shadowy retail store, even though most informants are digital natives who ordinarily prefer the convenience, choice and competitive prices of on-line emporia:

Entering the website and clicking the 'guys' category, it came over me that not only had the internet watered everything down, it also killed creativity leaving the website feeling like the miserable uncle of the Hollister store, sucking the energy and zest out of it. (Cormac)

Perhaps the most intriguing hauntological evidence, however, is the frequency with which competitor brands are mentioned. Although the introspections are 'about' Hollister, and only Hollister, many other retail organisations make an appearance. No less than 67 spectral brands lurk in the texts, like ghosts at a feast. They range from River Island, Tommy Hilfiger and H&M to New Look, Superdry and Next. Abercrombie and Fitch, HCo's parent brand, unsurprisingly figures prominently, with Primark, Topshop and Jack Wills not far behind. The last of these, Tony remarks, is easier to relate to than a 'far-fetched' brand like Hollister.

Kaelum vehemently disagrees, admittedly, as does Zara. The former tells those who believe the brand is on its deathbed to 'JUST SHUT UP!' The latter states that, in her opinion, Hollister is a 'timeless classic, it will never die off'.

### *Anxiety*

Another thing that spectres share, even mild-mannered ghosts like Caspar, is that they are frightening, fearsome, scary. As Morton (2015, p.179) explains in her history of haunting, 'We are afraid of ghosts because we are afraid of death. Even though they might, on the surface, represent survival after death, we are frustrated because we can't prove it, and frightened because we don't understand it. When we die, will we become a mindless apparition? Will we be remembered by our loved ones? Will we be mourned? Will we move on to some other world?

Hollister is an otherworld, of sorts. It invokes the idyllic vision of sun-drenched, surf-boarding, body-beautiful Southern California, a paradisiacal place that lies beyond the reach of most young people, the beach-bum wannabees of the western world. Yet Hollister is disturbing in its own way. Every single informant, near enough, refers to the fears it induced back in the day. And, despite the brand's inclusivity-signalling makeover, assorted anxieties remain:

Before my recent visit to Hollister I was dreading going back to that store. Within seconds I saw myself as the spotty, chubby twelve-year-old again. Halloween had indeed come early for me, as Hollister's house of horrors drew nearer. I honestly could not have thought of anything worse at the time. (Alexandra)

During my approach to the store I grew anxious – an overwhelming aura possessed my body – I could feel the fear as I arrived at the store front. To my surprise the line was full of people of various ages. I was shocked that people over the age of 15 wear Hollister. (Conan)

For the most part, the fretfulness that Hollister triggers is fairly mild. But customers' disquiet is evident at several stages of their 'Hellister' encounter. There's the apprehension that slowly grows on long journeys to the big city; there's the tummy-tightening anticipation of standing in line before darkening the doors of the beach shack; there's the disturbing thought that they not might not be sufficiently attractive to be allowed inside. Jill asks herself, 'Am I pretty enough?' Kimberly remembers 'never being brave enough to go in unaccompanied'. Kamile considers it akin to 'an American house party which no one invited you to'. Matthew

feels it's the kind of night-clubby place where 'if your name's not on the list, you don't get in'.

The real torment, though, is reserved for the unsettling interior. The jaw-dropping beauty of the sales associates makes mere mortals feel 'fat and unfit'. The jam-packed, pitch-black premises are difficult to navigate without blundering, embarrassingly, into palm trees, display tables, other people and assorted immovable objects. Assessing the sizing of the available selection of apparel is fraught with difficulty and can precipitate paroxysms of self-loathing, especially when XL is still a size or two too small. The atmospherics of the operation: a 'poison gas' fragrance that 'rips the skin off your body'; booming background music that 'shakes the floor' and 'wakes the dead'; and the cramped conditions of the carceral changing rooms, whose walls close in and mirrors distort, are trepidatious at best and terrifying at worst. The unspeakable horror of queuing up for the cash registers in a long snaking line that winds around the store in a never-ending spiral is like something out of Edgar Allan Poe:

Leaving the store, I had never been so happy to see daylight again. The overall darkness, fumes, pretentious staff and loud children and music was enough for a lifetime and enough to ensure I'll never go back again. Enough is enough. The overall experience involved hipster staff in a dungeon filled with claustrophobic corridors and loud music blaring. As I left the store, a greeter at the door said, 'Thanks guys, catch ya later'. This was enough to guarantee that she will never catch me later. (Conan)

Although such sentiments predate the fall of the house of Hollister, for the most part, they fester in the memories of informants. They not only experienced the HCo horror show at first hand, but the scars they bear shape reactions to the revamp. Being invited to revisit a brand

they'd abandoned, a brand that remains tainted by the ex-CEO's deeply distasteful, body shaming, anti-inclusive, politically incorrect comments, is disturbing for some and offensive for others. Lots of them, Lauren included, cringe at the thought of their former selves who'd fallen for the brand's cheesy charms. What on earth was I thinking? Some, such as Chloe, concede that cosmetic changes have indeed been made – brighter lights, bigger sizes, new-fangled frontage, less intimidating employees – but conclude that these changes are only skin deep. One or two, Christopher among them, are bewildered by their ambivalent reaction. Determined to despise the brand they'd blown off, they discover to their dismay that the new store is quite attractive. So much so, they buy something from a brand they'd forsworn for ever and ever, amen.

Now, walking into Hollister, the store had lost its appeal. I almost felt like I had vertigo. I was a cranky 19-year-old surrounded by eager 'children' (even though they were only a few years younger than myself) running around in circles, talking so loudly, nearly hyperventilating with excitement. I cringed at the thought that it used to be me behaving like that. (Lauren)

Honestly, I couldn't wait to get out of the shop. As much as I was a massive childhood fan of Hollister, I always seem to find myself feeling intimidated and being judged when I go in. (Chloe)

To conclude, I was dreading the visit to Hollister as I have not been there since I was around 15 years old, but to be honest it was not as bad as I thought it was going to be. I ended up buying a shirt and a bottle of SO CAL body spray. It was too captivating not to purchase. (Christopher)

At the same time, quite a few note the fact that HCo's customer profile is changing. An influx of older shoppers, those who erroneously believe the brand is still cool and are determined to get down with the kids, only serves to confirm that it has gone to the great beyond. There's nothing more unnerving for teenagers than old-timers who want to be with it. 'We all know,' Darragh shudders, on seeing his father sport the seagull, 'that once your parents wear something it is immediately not cool'. That said, there's nothing more unnerving for parents than venturing into Hollister in the first place. 'Mum always claimed it was like walking through an underground mine,' Iona admits, 'while my Dad said he would rather walk on an actual landmine than go in there again'.

### ***Liminality***

It has long been acknowledged that location is a crucial component of the retail trade. The same is true of the ghost trade. Although Derrida (1994) doesn't discuss spatial dimensions of spectres, Davies (2007) shows that they are not only territorial but tend to lurk in liminal locations like crossroads and cemeteries. Betwixt and between life and death, phantoms are found on boundaries, by borders, at interfaces.

Liminality, not unlike nostalgia, has latterly attracted a lot of attention from social scientists in general and consumer researchers in particular (Hackley, 2020). Rather than attempt to summarise this compendious corpus, it is sufficient to note that Hollister is a liminal brand. The beach, after all, is 'the archetypal liminal landscape' (Thomassen 2017, p.21) and, ersatz as it is, HCo's signature beach shack, decorative longboards and allegedly live video feed from Surf City, CA, is an artful amalgam of liminal and littoral. The quasi-ritualised consumer behaviour associated with the brand – queuing for what seems like hours outside,

waiting impatiently in line for the changing rooms, finally escaping the store with a look-at-me carrier bag – is no less liminoid. Ditto Hollister's appeal to a specific demographic segment, one that is transitioning from obedient child to wilful adolescent.

Be that as it may, the most striking thing about Hollister's liminality is the sheer amount of it on display. It seems that betwixt-and-between is the brand's *raison d'être*. The stratigraphy of the store is built on multiple layers of liminality. The most overt of these is the brand's basic theme, its Huntington Beach-ness. Numerous informants report that the Hollister experience, in both its pre- and post-refit formulations, transports them to the sunny shores of southern California, the addictively idyllic lifestyle they know and love from Hollywood movies and TV shows:

Once I entered the doors of the store I felt relaxed and comfortable right away. I felt as if I was entering a store in California as the décor and music being played was quite reminiscent of beach life in California, which can be very attractive towards customers, such as myself, as I would see America and California as the best places on earth. (Cormac)

Added to this is the fact that they are being transported to the glorious golden state from a wet and windswept island nation. Whatever else it is, Northern Ireland is so not Southern California. The sheer incongruity of the contrast between replica and reality is baffling to the point of bemusement yet brilliantly effective for all that. Nowhere more so than the staggering sight of semi-naked greeters wearing board shorts and sandals on a chilly day in the depths of winter, while welcoming punters to the pier in a phoney American accent with

all-too-obvious Irish inflections. For many, it's not only betwixt and between but bordering on bonkers:

We queued, and I remember looking at the two guys at the door who were shirtless and only wearing surf shorts and flip-flops in what was a cold March afternoon. I thought to myself, 'Are they right in the head? They must be freezing'. (Daniel)

Walking into the store Sam who was clearly from Belfast greeted me with the fakest American accent ever. I won't say it ruined my experience, but I must admit I would have enjoyed it more if I wasn't told 'the waves were gnarly'. What waves Sam? You live on the Donegall Road not Huntington Beach! (Alexandra)

Albeit contrived, the connection between here and there, home and away, is the essence of HCo's interstitial allure. But the brand boasts all manner of 'miniliminalities', if such terminology is tolerated. There's the fact, Alison says, that the store design straddles the divide between 'Bambu Beach Club and my grandmother's boudoir'. There's the divide, Ceilum claims, between the store's new-and-improved exterior and its same-old-same-old interior, whose basic layout is 'exactly the same as before'. There is also the product range which is rather wider than before, except that it now includes incongruous items like winter woollies and fur-lined parkas. They are better suited, Kamile comments, to the Hindu Kush than Huntington Beach, where T-shirts, shorts and sliders typically suffice. Price points too are neither one thing nor the other. Remembered by Daniel as a very expensive store of 'small price tags with big numbers', the revamped version is replete with sales, special offers and student discounts. Yet the stock still seems overpriced.

There is one area, though, where in-betweenness is debarred: the beauty of HCo's employees. They may be called 'brand representatives' rather than 'models' nowadays, but the sales personnel remain outstanding specimens of human pulchritude, 9s and 10s more often than not. At the same time, their intimidating attractiveness is counterbalanced by much warmer and more welcoming standards of customer care than many remember from the aloof and indifferent days, when Mike Jeffries looked down on fat chicks, ugly guys and the differently abled:

It no longer felt to me that you had to be a supermodel to be employed by Hollister and it felt to me that the staff were much more approachable and happy to help. One of the workers introduced herself as Orla and told us that if we needed help with anything to just ask, which from my memory was not a feature of the old Hollister.

(Damien)

Whether such para-polarities formally qualify as 'liminal' depends on the precise definition that's adopted. Still, there is something entirely apt about the ambivalence in the data. More than a dozen informants are in two minds about the makeover and not only find themselves unable to say if they like it or not, but can't quite decide why they feel the way they do:

It wasn't that special to me. Maybe it's just not my style. Maybe I just don't like the logos. Maybe it's too expensive. I don't know what it is about Hollister but I just don't like it that much. The brand is really neutral for me. I don't have bad feelings, though I wouldn't say I'd never want to buy anything there. (Laura)

Hollister wasn't as bright and lively as I first thought, it wasn't really dull either...It didn't come across as a Californian summery sort of vibe, I don't know what sort of vibe I got from it...I didn't feel at home within the store but I also didn't feel out of place...I didn't want to leave but yet again I did as Nandos was calling my name...When leaving the store empty-handed, I felt good, even though I didn't purchase anything. (Thomas).

### ***Retroactivity***

Published in the mid-1990s, *Spectres of Marx* maintains that the past will always be present in phantomic form. Derided at the time, Derrida's contentions coincided with the nostalgia boom that detonated in the final decade of the millennium (Naughton & Vlasic, 1998). And when he declaimed that 'The spectral rumour now resonates, invades everything...and the spirit of nostalgia cross all borders' (p.135), he wasn't far wrong.

One of the most striking things about the introspective accounts is the prevalence of nostalgia. Going shopping at Christmas, that most sentimental of seasons, figures prominently. Although the n-word doesn't always feature, closely associated terms like 'recollect', 'remember', 'reverie', 'evocative', 'déjà vu', 'carry back', 'bring back' and 'bittersweet', are all over the shop, as are familiar expressions such as 'happy memories', 'good old days', 'thing of the past' and 'like it was yesterday'. More than a few, furthermore, aren't far short of poetic. Kamile refers to an 'armchair of reminiscence'. Niall recalls the 'magical land of mummy and daddy's wallet'. Ellen feels she's possessed by her twelve-year-old self, 'Somebody call a priest because we need an exorcism FAST!'

Coming up to Belfast all the way from Enniskillen solely for Hollister was a regular pre-Christmas tradition for me and my mummy. I wasn't interested in any other shop. I just wanted to spend hours in Hollister... On my recent visit all of the memories came flooding back as soon as I stepped inside the door. It was like I was fifteen all over again. Everything about the store, the smell, the clothes, the images, it was all so familiar. I loved the feeling of being back. (Chelsea)

The barrage of teenage memories triggered by the brand – eight essays include old photographs of the author wearing Hollister – is rich and varied. Hannah, for example, has nothing but happy memories of the brand she loved so well, and cheerfully confesses to keeping a worn-out hoodie as a memento. Barry, by contrast, returns to 'Ollies' hoping to get a hit of happy days of youthful yore, only to discover a dark night of the soul in the renovated store:

Back in 2011, I lived for this upcoming brand. As long as the seagull was present on the clothing, regardless of the price or quality, I HAD to have it... [But] the older I became, the more my obsession with Hollister began to subside... So last week I took a trip to the city... Upon arrival at the store, I felt the air of nostalgia hit me, so many memories came flooding back. AND I LOVED IT. (Hannah)

Hollister, Hollister, Hollister, where have you gone? My journey back to Hollister was quite sad. The place where I spent most of youthful Saturdays has changed forever. An era has ended. I'm heartbroken. I don't think I'll be back anytime soon unless they revert back to their old ways, maybe when I have my own kids. (Barry)

No less noteworthy are olfactory factors. Although consumer nostalgia is fomented by a host of in-store fixtures and fittings, such as the vintage longboards on display, the scuffed and battered suitcases, the old wooden display tables, the pre-aged throwback outfits and even the way the clothes are folded, it is smell more than anything else catapults them back to the HCo they know. The faintest whiff of the brand's signature fragrance is like a time tunnel to the past. And although the aroma is much less pungent than before, when stores were doused with the stuff, it remains for Rebecca 'an old friend to my nostrils, associated with happy Hollister times in my early teens'.

The 'nosenography' of nostalgia is an intriguing issue (Canniford, et al., 2018), but more intriguing still is that our informants are young people, with a modal age of nineteen. Ever since the pioneering research of Holbrook & Schindler (1989), nostalgia has been regarded as an old folks' emotion, something that's associated with age and ageing. Young people are more inclined to look forward rather than back, to forge ahead and seize the future. However, the bulk of our informants feels otherwise. And while this could be construed as early-onset nostalgia or explained by the n-word's semantic fluidity, it is more likely to reflect the fact that they are children of the nostalgia boom. They were born at the turn of the millennium. They've been surrounded by retro from the get-go. They not only grew up with the Hollister brand, most are roughly the same age. Their teenage angst coincided with HCo's. They've matured and moved on since. They're old friends – BFFs in quite a few cases – who've gone their separate ways.

In this regard, it is important to recall that Hollister is a 'replicant' brand (Brown, 2019). That is, a completely new product or service, *à la* Bailey's Irish Cream or Benefit Cosmetics, which comes complete with a counterfeit heritage. It wasn't founded in 1922, like its posters,

website and clothing labels claim. Its backstory about John Hollister's proto-hippie-trail trek is a barefaced work of fiction. Yet the ye-olde beach shack, the echoic interior design, the retro look of its product range and so forth impart a patina of yesteryear that connected with past-partial children of our retroactive epoch:

As I stroll through the shop, fully absorbed in my surroundings, I almost stumble into a young boy and his mother. I am suddenly struck by déjà vu. I reminisce on my childhood. That young boy was me five years ago. The excitement in that innocent face made me love Hollister again. It reminded me how unique they once were and how special they are to many of their customers. I felt reassured. I felt like part of the family again. I finally felt home. (Aodhan)

Home or not, Aodhan's inadvertent echo of Hofer's original study is striking in itself. More striking still is the outpouring of nostalgia that the shopping trips precipitated. Hollister, after all, is an inauthentic brand with spray-on heritage, a retro retail store that held informants in thrall only five years beforehand. It's not as if decades had passed since HCo played a big part in their lives. This temporal gap, however, is less significant chronologically than it is psychologically. There is a vast developmental gulf between twelve-year-old schoolchildren and nineteen-year-old university students. Informants, perhaps, aren't so much pining for a past-themed retro store as ruing their lost innocence, missing the largesse of mum and dad, yearning for bosom-buddies who've gone to a better place. 'The brand,' Jamie states, 'is trying to move forward, but part of it is trying desperately to hold onto the past'. HCo isn't the only one.

## **Demonic Discussion**

We write these words at a time of lockdown, when shops are shuttered, malls are closed and both consumer behaviour and retail branding are ghosts of their former selves. Hollister, arguably, was a harbinger of this horror show, a haunted house before haunted houses became ubiquitous. Like consumer society, the demon seagull soared high, far and wide for a while, but it has since fallen from grace. Although it hasn't yet hit the rugged rocks of failure, the death spiral of shopping malls and high streets, which began before the pandemic took off, bodes ill for the brand. The latter-day deflation of the retro-branding bubble is no less disconcerting. As HCo is one of the most iconic brands of our nostalgic age, it might go the same way as the VW Beetle, Fiat 500, Orla Kiely, Laura Ashley and Victoria's Secret, all of which have lost altitude or come to a sticky end.

Yet even if Hollister transitions from figurative to factual ghost, its spectre will continue to stalk Generation Z. It is indelibly etched into their memories of adolescence, part of the process of personal development. 'Hollister,' Laura eloquently observes, 'really did give a sense of belonging when I was younger. Yes that sounds ridiculous and obviously now that I am all grown up and more *mature*, I realise that identity does not come from a logo or brand. But when you are thirteen it kind of does'. Once part of essayists' extended self, it is now a reminder of their 'exorcised self', an identity that was tried on for size and, after finding that it didn't fit, set aside for something less monstrous.

Monsters, it goes without saying, figure prominently in the accounts. Dracula, Frankenstein, King Kong, the Abominable Snowman and flesh-eating Zombies are referred to, as are evil seagulls, demonic possessions and Mike Jeffries' separated-at-birth twin brother, Sloth from *The Goonies*. This suggests that there is considerable scope for future research on the

monstrous side of marketing management. Apart from abundant death-related articles, there is a growing literature on zombie brands, vampire brands, Frankenbrands, graveyard brands, doppelgänger brands and sales from the crypt more generally (see McNally, 2012; Walker, 2008). It may be a while before Phantom is added to marketing's list of ancillary Ps – or Revenant to Gummesson's 30Rs – but the opportunities for further teralogical scholarship are considerable.

The genealogy of ghosts is worth digging up as well. And not merely with regard to pioneering marketing scholarship, such as Kotler's (1967) reliance on spectral figures of speech, Sherry's (2005) striking Spirit House metaphor for branding or Hirschman's (2000) analyses of phantom-filled films including *Ghost*, *Ghostbusters* and *The Exorcist*. There's the genealogy of the ghost business itself (Morton, 2015). Apparitions have been adroitly marketed money-spinners for centuries, be it the Cock Lane Ghost of 1772, an early publicity stunt, the table-rapping Fox sisters of 1848, who were put on show by P.T. Barnum, the 'scientific' inter-war investigations of Borley Rectory by Harry Price, a canny commercial traveller by trade, or the dark rides, escape rooms, haunted city tours and unsinkable ghost ships like the *Titanic* that keep resurfacing into consumers' cultural consciousness (Brown, McDonagh & Shultz, 2013). At a time when more people believe in ghosts than in God (Rickman, 2014), raising the dead is a praiseworthy pursuit (Dobscha, 2016).

But where, some readers may yet be wondering, is our integrative model of brands that go bump in the night? Where's the theoretical tombstone, the undead Venn diagram, the fetching flow chart that academic convention demands? One answer is that a concrete model is inappropriate, because ghosts are inherently intangible things. A second answer is that Derrida's (1994) hauntology is less a formal model than a loose analogy, a 'hall of mirrors'

(p.135), a ‘ghost of ghosts’ (p.138), the ‘hidden figure of all figures’ (p.120). A third answer – the truthful answer – is that this paper *does* include an illustrative model. But it is an invisible model, one that only the discerning can see. Lurking between the lines, it comprises a spectral Hollister seagull, whose head, tail, left-wing and right-wing are labelled *mortality*, *anxiety*, *liminality* and *retroactivity* respectively.

For those unable to see our chimerical seagull, it remains necessary to note that phantoms are polysemous, amorphous, vaporous. Alluded to at the beginning of our fetching findings, there is growing recognition that brands, like ghosts, are ambiguous things (Keller, 2020). From its flagrantly fictional backstory to its present living-dead presence, Hollister is a marvellous, monstrous, mysterious retail store. A yestergänger of sorts, it is the haunted mansion of marketing management, a runaway ghost train for the nostalgia-nurtured generation.

### **Cryptic Conclusion**

A spectre is stalking shopping, the spectre of brandslaughter. Innumerable retail chains in France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Australia, South Africa and the United States of America, have gone to the great brand beyond (Pilkington, 2019). Many more are on their deathbeds or, like once imperious Hollister, haunt the empty halls of shopping malls wailing ‘Welcome to the Pier’ or something equally egregious. This paper has sought to rattle the chains of conventional CCT scholarship in the belief that literary rather than literal consumer research offers a better, if unsettling, way forward. More specifically, it explored the hauntology of Hollister, an undead brand that refuses to go gently into that good night. For now.

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