

**Harry Potter and the Curious Tourist: An Anthropological Assessment on
The Wizarding World of Harry Potter Theme Park**

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“They make a fuss about Hogsmeade, but I assure you, Harry, it’s not all it’s cracked up to be. All right, the sweetshop’s rather good, and Zonko’s Joke Shop’s frankly dangerous, and yes, the Shrieking Shack is always worth a visit, but really, Harry... apart from that, you’re not missing anything.”

-Percy Weasley, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*

For decades, the *Harry Potter* series has provided its global readers and cinema viewers with essential personal escapes through the imaginaries found within its printed form or on-screen milieu; demonstrating the series is more than just a handful of books or a visual narrative, it’s a way of life. J. K. Rowling’s hit series, which includes seven novels and eight feature films, chronicles a young boy’s new and unique life in the wizarding world, all while supplying fans with an excess of breathtaking optics, roller coaster storylines, and a fantastical world, unlike anything we live throughout our conventional Muggle reality. Yet, in June of 2010, J. K. Rowling and Universal Orlando, Florida joined forces and debuted the first *Harry Potter* dedicated theme park of its kind, The Wizarding World of Harry Potter - Hogsmeade. This whimsical land suddenly became the globe’s most sought after *Harry Potter* tourist destination, showcasing the very best of the series with real-world attainable access to Hogwarts. Moreover, the theme park instantly gave *Harry Potter* fans and curious tourists alike the chance to live their wildest wizarding dreams by allowing the opportunity for one to enjoy life as a wizard, even if it’s merely for the hours of Universal Orlando’s daily operations. This modern availability for a *Harry Potter* lived experience took flight like a Hippogriff and catapulted the *Harry Potter* series into a contemporary-sphere dually created for tourism and the fantasies which have surrounded the series since its inception. Conversely, what do the lives and legacies of the characters and imagined places within the *Harry Potter* series show scholars on a broader fan-based traveling

scale, and how does a fictional series become a tourist destination when the only historical background fans have is by virtue of the world J. K. Rowling constructed? By navigating these pivotal questions on the duplexity of fiction versus holiday-maker, *Harry Potter* enthusiasts have the ability to extract such cultural knowledge and comprehend said thematics more fluently within this new-age boom of tourism surrounding the series and the intrigue that naturally follows suit. Thus, this unique wonder creates a new meaning for the phrase “tourist destination,” bonding *Harry Potter's* magical realm to the physical world. Because of this phenomenon, global *Harry Potter* fans now have access to what was once considered a fantasy within one’s mind, to a lived-fantasy in the flesh.

To illustrate one’s personal views on tourism and bulk such ideals together is a near-impossible task when one considers what a tourist destination’s foundation simply is. In the same way one may regard a relaxing, unplugged oceanside vacation, another’s traveling fantasy may exist in a densely populated city where innumerable cultural experiences lie at their fingertips. Neither answer nor personal reasoning is incorrect, however, as authors Salazar and Graburn of *Tourism Imaginaries* (2014) contest, these multi-faceted forms of foundational tourism stem from one’s curiosity surrounding, “Archaeological sites, museums and monuments, to hotels, media, and cultural productions,” giving way to countless touristic pleasures one may indulge in (p. 2). With specific regard to The Wizarding World of Harry Potter - Hogsmeade, this destination could be considered the first large-scale *Harry Potter* museum or monument, alongside the hefty forms of media and cultural productions Universal Orlando artfully constructed. Although Salazar and Graburn focus heavily on the social and economic forms of marginalized people and places within their book, their brief discussion on theme parks as

“institutionalized bearers of imaginaries,” creates a fascinating argument in favor of The Wizarding World of Harry Potter - Hogsmeade as a “guidebook,” or “exploration” of an imagined location (p. 13).

According to the *Orlando Sentinel*, attendance records shattered Universal Orlando’s projections within the first three months of The Wizarding World of Harry Potter - Hogsmeade’s opening date. Author Jason Garcia (2010) of “Wizarding World of Harry Potter Powers Universal Orlando to Record Results” shares the theme park boasted, “the highest quarterly attendance Universal has reported since Universal Studios Florida opened in 1990,” (para 2). Moreover, Universal Orlando saw a record-breaking 62 percent revenue tick, “Fueled by ticket sales and enormous demand for Potter-themed merchandise,” including, “mugs of butterbeer, magic wands, and Hogwarts school robes,” (para 3). Indeed, The Wizarding World of Harry Potter - Hogsmeade and the imaginaries that accompany the series propelled J. K. Rowling’s fantasy realm into a full-blown tourist destination; nourishing the minds and hearts of *Harry Potter* enthusiasts while simultaneously fattening the pockets of Universal Studios. Although this popular tourist spectacle emerged through these institutionalized barriers of imagination, such notions did not stop *Harry Potter* fans from obliging to the establishment of power and immersing themselves in the first Potter-sphere of its kind. Hence, proving the extreme loyalty of the fan-base and their willingness to situate themselves through such organized terms for a day-in-the-life of a wizard is stronger than your average theme park wanderer.

Aside from the imagined themes becoming a true reality once one graces the front gates of The Wizarding World of Harry Potter - Hogsmeade, the historical and cultural experiences surrounding the individual nearly launches them straight into the pages of their favorite book, or

right into a freeze-frame of one of the films. This enhanced version of the tourist landscape is framed as a form of “play,” according to Graburn’s (1983) research on *The Anthropology of Tourism* (p. 11). Graburn contests this form of tourism and its “structured breaks from ordinary life” identify the tourist through “re-creation, the renewal of life,” (pg. 11). Arguably, most *Harry Potter* fans who visit the theme park are highly intrigued by the authenticity one’s provided to live like a wizard within the confines of Universal Orlando; simultaneously thrilled for the chance to shatter our habitual way of Muggle life and recreate the wizarding world for their own advantage. Granted, this wizarding experience is quite the opposite of Graburn’s ideals of “modern ritual,” travel (where the tourist purposely journeys to “get away from *it all*”) however, this *Harry Potter* destination is a place where tourists go to *get to know it all* — a separate form of travel; one heavily based on fascination and historical familiarity (p. 11-12). Because of this yearning sensation to “know it all,” the historical and cultural trajectories of the wizarding world dually inform the tourist and heighten their experience within the enclosure of Universal’s depiction of Hogwarts and Hogsmeade.

While all tourists that enter the theme park may not be as well versed in the Potter-sphere as other visitors, this tourist destination gives vacationers the ability to live and play through the imaginaries once thought *only* to be via the written forms through the novels or the visual media contexts on-screen. Graburn quotes Smith (1977:2) in his article as stating a tourist as a “leisured person who voluntarily visits a place away from home for the purpose of experiencing a change,” (p. 11). While the transformation both authors allude to may be based upon older forms of ritualization, this new-age structure of fantasy tourism amongst the wizarding world is a fan’s

way of experiencing change — by extracting a cerebral illusory and placing such imaginations into our worldly landscape.

In a like manner, tourist escapism through distinct forms of expression alters how a traveler experiences the destination surrounding them. Whereas The Wizarding World of Harry Potter - Hogsmeade may not be one's quintessential version of a fantasy vacation, the innumerable forms of expression one may experience while visiting any global theme park may indeed be their version of a lived fantasy brought to life. By way of contrast, Universal Studios' largest competitor within the theme park and movie landscape is The Walt Disney Company; Universal Orlando being closely compared to Disney World, Orlando through recent scholarship on theme parks and their rightful place within our popular lived culture. Author Florian Freitag (2017), of *"Like Walking into a Movie": Intermedial Relations between Theme Parks and Movies*, contests theme parks are more than just "bounded commercial leisure space" that offer a multitude of "rides, restaurants, shops, and shows," which are perfectly curated for the theme of the space one may visit (p. 705). Although vacationers are sucked into each theme and what it represents both historically and sentimentally, Freitag assures such "systematic analysis" between theme parks and movies dually offers "a clearer sense of the medial status of theme parks [and] also contributes to the current debate about the constructedness of media and media borders" within the park itself (p. 705).

Due to this distinctive marriage between media and theme parks, attractions become more than just an eye-catching moment; they infuse the traveler with new core senses such as music, theatre, film, and numerous forms of architecture. Both Orlando theme parks offer the traveler an abundance of opportunities to live through the media borders provided to them

through the construction of the park itself. Despite the fact Universal Orlando and Orlando's Disney World may be each other's sole neighboring competitor, each tourist destination offers the wanderer an interactive space oriented around such expert craftsmanship and marketing schemes to keep visitors of all ages and cultural backgrounds interested for long periods of time. Some visitors may purposely travel to either theme park for specific reasons, such as *Harry Potter* or Disney's famed Mickey Mouse, while others may tag along for a day filled with rides, food, and shopping. Salazar and Graburn believe these multiple forms of tourist imaginaries are "the tourist's need for escape from the here and now, to a more authentic life 'elsewhere,' in other places, other peoples' lives," (p. 9). There's no denying the umpteen amount of themes both Universal Orlando and Walt Disney World Orlando offer the tourist can indeed be a form of escaping elsewhere; to a fantastical land with few worldly worries and many psychological highs to quench the tourist's thirst for more. As for The Wizarding World of Harry Potter - Hogsmeade, this exclusive Western Hemisphere theme park and multimedia haven extend such a life elsewhere; a life once thought to be unobtainable for all (unless you were lucky enough to receive your Hogwarts letter in the mail)!

Moreover, this contemporary theme park vacation also has the ability to give the tourist a way to continue to live through the theme well past the experience itself. This phenomenon can be achieved through the performance via material goods or souvenirs purchased within park grounds; also known as material culture. Swanson (2004) discusses this cultural occurrence in the *Journal of Vacation Marketing* where she argues the power behind souvenirs and their memorable tangibility can, "Hold on to a piece of the extraordinary to remind them of the experience," (p. 364). With regard to Universal Orlando's *Harry Potter* theme park, a majority of

the fun comes from obtaining a souvenir butterbeer cup from The Three Broomsticks, tooth-decaying delicacies from Honeydukes, and every *Harry Potter* fans favorite — a chosen wand from Ollivanders. These eccentric *Harry Potter* themed tourist experiences, “allow individuals to move from the normal, ordinary state to the sacred,” (Swanson, p. 364) all while bestowing the visitor with a highly curated memento. Furthermore, the uniqueness every *Harry Potter* souvenir holds can be viewed as a mantlepiece or as a tactical mode for further ritualized play. For example, one visitor may keep their Ollivanders wand in its original box as a showcase souvenir, while another may use the object for a more transformative experience through the various structures of *Harry Potter* performance (often referred to as ‘cosplay’).

Swanson and Timothy (2011) argue this form of souvenir performance, or a “metonymic of events,” may differ when a tourist exploring the same space leaves with various gifts which “reflect their experiences based largely on their own identity in relation to the destination, as well as their depth of knowledge about the place,” (p. 490-492). The *Harry Potter* theme park souvenir, which can only be purchased at The Wizarding World of Harry Potter - Hogsmeade, is a piece crafted specifically for the *Harry Potter* enthusiast. No product is mundane or overlooked. Every item is wrapped in a riddle of *Harry Potter*, hyper-focused for a specific milieu, objective, and buyer. The business behind theme parks and their ability to engage the audience at every twist and turn is a modern-day marketing marvel that continues to appease the tourist and business tycoons behind the veil. Although the material items themselves do not necessarily make a tourist destination a ‘destination,’ items as such aid the process by means of giving the tourist more than just an unforgettable interaction within the boundaries of the park, it

permits them exposure to The Wizarding World of Harry Potter long after they depart from the grounds.

Thus, how does a landscape become a tourist destination? Is it the point of disembarkation itself, the historical and cultural norms allocated between others, or the material goods bought and shared connecting the establishments of power and the visiting tourist? While all of these factors are pivotal aspects throughout the traveler industry, such ideals are meaningless if the tourist's intrigue and motivation are lacking in respect to a certain destination. The personal and cultural demand to live through a fantasy, akin to The Wizarding World of Harry Potter - Hogsmeade, is made through a collective willingness to experience the unexpected; to live like a wizard for a day. Although others may become consumed with the gifts and glitz of a space, the destination itself cannot offer such an experience without contextual background knowledge and a sheer willingness on the traveler's end to absorb one's self into the extraordinary. Regardless of where the wanderer's destination is around our globe, a true tourist destination relies solely on the traveler and their readiness to open their eyes to unique cultural, historical, and personal perspectives. Only then can a traveler bring their loyalty to a space; an allegiance that is necessary for a destination to attract and keep such lure. Without these vital features, there is no destination, there is no tourist, and there's no meaning to the space or experience to be held. Admittedly, The Wizarding World of Harry Potter - Hogsmeade may not be everyone's go-to destination, but the space within the grounds of Universal Orlando is one where the magic waits for us all; where the wizarding world becomes the truth. Because of this cultural phenomenon, the space has unlimited value to grow its roots and become a forever fixture throughout the business of tourism — something Dumbledore would absolutely approve!

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