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Jurassic Park's Impact on Paleontological Tourism: A Conceptual Analysis of Media and Public Perception

Abstract

This research note examines the influence of Jurassic Park on paleontological tourism and public perceptions, drawing on Cultivation Theory and Cultural Studies. The film's depiction of de-extinct dinosaurs has fueled public fascination while raising ethical concerns about the commodification of nature. This research note examines how the film has shaped niche tourism and public engagement with paleontological sites, blurring the lines between science and entertainment, and offering insights into societal debates on scientific progress and human intervention. This further enhances our understanding of how media influences niche tourism and public attitudes toward science.

Keywords: paleontological tourism, cultivation theory, cultural studies, media influences

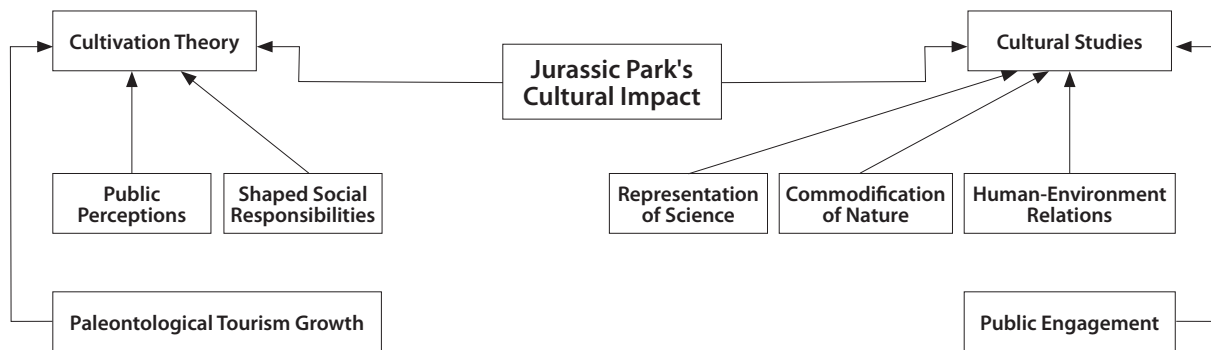
1. Introduction

Paleontological tourism, a niche travel sector focused on fossils and prehistoric discoveries, has experienced significant growth in recent decades, primarily driven by popular media. Jurassic Park (1993) played a pivotal role in sparking global interest in dinosaurs and palaeontology, thereby reinforcing its enduring place in cultural discourse (Holland, 2023). While studies have examined its scientific and cultural impacts (Briggs & Kelber-Kaye, 2000; Lacy, 2001), more analysis is needed to understand its influence on paleontological tourism.

More broadly, tourism studies point to a shift toward niche tourism, where travellers seek meaningful, personalised experiences, including cultural and heritage tourism (Afrić Rakitovac & Urošević, 2023; Hoogendoorn, 2021; Yilmaz, G., & Kumar Dixit, 2023), which emphasises authentic engagement with history and art (Li & Cai, 2012; Voigt et al., 2011; Kim et al., 2019; Timothy, 2020). Numerous factors could be attributed to this shift. For instance, Cohen (2010) notes the role of improved transportation and access, while Inkson and Minnaert (2022) discussed how niche tourism, particularly cultural heritage, tends to fulfil personal and emotional needs that conventional mass tourism often overlooks. These changes help emphasise how modern travellers now seek identity-focused tourism, drawn to unique experiences that resonate with their self-expression and values. Media exposure has also played a crucial role in shaping tourist motivations. Films and media representations, as demonstrated by Schofield (1996) and Riley et al. (1998), can inspire travel to destinations portrayed on screen. Kim and Richardson (2003) further illustrate how movies shape public perceptions, motivating viewers to visit locations they see in films. This phenomenon, termed media-induced tourism, helps to demonstrate how motion pictures can influence niche tourism behaviours by cultivating interest in specific destinations or activities.

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Figure 1
Conceptual framework



Nevertheless, one key example is the rise of paleontological tourism, a niche form of travel focused on exploring fossils and prehistoric landscapes (Cayla, 2020). As a blend of nature-based and educational tourism, it provides a unique context for examining how media, particularly films such as Jurassic Park, have cultivated public fascination with prehistoric life. By dramatising palaeontology through exciting depictions of de-extinct dinosaurs, Jurassic Park has contributed towards public interest in paleontological sites and experiences. As such, this research note will discuss Jurassic Park's influence through the lens of Cultivation Theory and Cultural Studies, examining how the film shapes public perceptions of science and tourism. Such frameworks help clarify how the film has promoted engagement with paleontological tourism while raising ethical concerns about the commercialisation of nature and the boundaries of scientific advancements.

2. Theoretical analysis

Cultivation theory, seminal in media and communication studies (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), contends that repeated media exposure shapes audience beliefs. According to Calzo and Ward (2009), this process occurs through mainstreaming, where consistent media portrayals create common perceptions among viewers and resonance, reinforcing existing beliefs by aligning media content with individuals' values (Judson et al., 2012). Jurassic Park's persistent global exposure has helped shape public perceptions of palaeontology and genetic engineering, mainstreaming the idea that the de-extinction of dinosaurs through biotechnology is feasible and potentially imminent. This representation of science distorts public understanding by framing such pursuits as adventurous endeavours rather than scientific fields. Such portrayals can influence public interest in experiencing palaeontology firsthand, as suggested by the connection between media-induced tourism and tourist behaviours (Kim & Richardson, 2003).

In addition to shaping perceptions of science, Cultural Studies provides a framework for critiquing the representation of nature, science, and society (Nelson et al., 2013) in Jurassic Park. This interdisciplinary approach reveals how the film constructs problematic narratives about scientific ethics and the commodification of nature. For example, the portrayal of palaeontology as a thrill-seeking adventure diminishes the effort and precise nature of the field. Furthermore, the film's depiction of de-extinct dinosaurs as a theme park attraction raises ethical questions about the exploitation of wildlife for entertainment, a theme tied to the broader commodification of nature. The film's use of spectacle and the tourist gaze (Corbin, 2014) reinforces this idea by immersing audiences in a world where entertainment blurs with scientific reality, reflecting societal tendencies to treat nature as a resource for human amusement.

Through the application of Cultural Studies, this research note can further explore how Jurassic Park mirrors societal anxieties about unregulated scientific progress and amplifies those concerns. The film reflects cultural

tensions surrounding the limits of scientific capabilities, particularly in its portrayal of genetic exploitation and the potential consequences of interfering with natural systems. Jurassic Park warns about the dangers of unchecked technological advancements through this lens. It also depicts broader societal debates about the ethical boundaries of science, the commercialisation of natural wonders, and the role of entertainment in shaping public understanding of these issues.

3. Evaluation of Jurassic Park's influence

Jurassic Park has sparked public interest in prehistoric life (Scriven, 2019), leading to increased museum visits and the development of palaeontology-themed attractions, including the popular Jurassic Park-themed rides at Universal Studios. As noted by Sunderland (2019), these participatory and multi-sensory experiences provide audiences with an opportunity to immerse themselves in the film's universe, further fuelling fascination with palaeontology.

The marked growth in paleontological tourism coincides with the cultural impact of Jurassic Park, suggesting that the film's portrayal of prehistoric life has contributed to public interest in experiencing paleontological sites firsthand. The film's ability to draw people toward museums, fossil sites, and even theme parks reinforces its role in expanding this specialised niche tourism sector. At the same time, many factors can shape tourism preferences (Edensor, 2000; Hose, 2007; Lojo, 2020; Novotná & Kunc, 2019; Ozer Sari & Nazli, 2019). The cultural phenomenon created by Jurassic Park provides evidence of its substantial influence on paleontological tourism.

However, a deeper analysis using Cultural Studies theory reveals more complex and potentially problematic implications embedded in Jurassic Park's representation of science, nature, and ethics. As Smith (1998) and Stern (2004) noted, the film embodies technocratic hubris, portraying genetic engineering and de-extinction as exciting scientific feats while glossing over the ethical consequences. The film's narrative, which dramatises the disastrous consequences of uncontrolled breeding and human manipulation of ecosystems, reflects societal anxieties about the dangers of unregulated scientific progress. By failing to address the ethical implications of genetic engineering, Jurassic Park raises essential questions about the commodification of nature, transforming the natural world into an entertainment spectacle while neglecting the real-world scientific and environmental challenges it entails. At the same time, Jurassic Park serves as a cautionary tale, subtly reinforcing public concerns about the risks of unrestricted technological interference in natural systems.

4. Discussion and conclusion

This research note has discussed Jurassic Park's lasting influence on paleontological tourism and public perceptions of science, drawing on Cultivation Theory and Cultural Studies. Cultivation Theory demonstrates how the film's global exposure fuels public fascination with palaeontology, while oversimplifying genetic engineering and de-extinction. By depicting these technologies as easily achievable, Jurassic Park tends to distort perceptions, suggesting such scientific advancements are routine rather than complex and ethically challenging. Cultural Studies offer a critical lens for assessing how the film reflects societal concerns about unregulated scientific progress and the commodification of nature. While entertaining, the film presents palaeontology as an adventure, distorting the discipline's realities. Its portrayal of dinosaurs as theme park attractions raises ethical questions about exploiting nature for entertainment, further reflecting societal anxieties about commercialising natural resources (Smith, 1998; Stern, 2004).

Jurassic Park's influence on paleontological tourism aligns with broader niche tourism trends, where travelers seek meaningful, culturally driven experiences. The film's appeal has led to increased visits to museums, paleontological sites, and other attractions. Despite this impact on tourism, the film raises ethical concerns by glorifying genetic manipulation and the recreation of extinct species, furthering assumptions about the

commercialisation of science and the human-nature relationship. Therefore, future research could explore the link between Jurassic Park's exposure and attendance at paleontological museums, assessing how media influences tourist motivations. It could also investigate whether the film's portrayal of nature leads to more exploitative views compared to those who are unexposed to the film. Such studies could provide a unique analysis, particularly regarding the film's role in shaping public perceptions of science and nature (Sharpley, 2000; Lovelock & Lovelock, 2013). Through Cultivation Theory and Cultural Studies, this research note provides an initial framework for understanding how media shapes public perceptions of tourism and science, revealing the interplay between entertainment, culture, and ethics.

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