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Digital Placemaking in the High Desert:
Airbnb's and Perception of Desert Communities
in Joshua Tree, CA

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Urban and Regional Planning

by

Marcos Ramses Magana

2024

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Digital Placemaking in the High Desert:
Airbnb's and Perception of Desert Communities
in Joshua Tree, CA

by

Marcos Ramses Magana

Master of Urban and Regional Planning

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Amada Armenta, Chair

This thesis investigates the transformative impact of Airbnb on Joshua Tree, a rapidly evolving tourist hotspot known for its unique desert landscape and cultural allure. With a focus on digital placemaking, the study explores how Airbnb listings shape and redefine the socio-cultural and environmental dynamics of the area. Employing a novel qualitative content analysis of Airbnb descriptions, this research identifies four dominant themes: 'Escaping the City', 'Arts, Aesthetics, & Design', 'The Physical Desert', and 'The Imagined and Mythicized Desert'. These themes reveal how Airbnb hosts leverage cultural and natural elements to craft compelling narratives that attract visitors seeking tranquility, adventure, and connection with nature. The findings highlight a significant shift in Joshua Tree's identity, driven by the commodification of its landscape and the influx of amenity migrants and transient tourists through Airbnb hosts'

carefully curated descriptions. This transformation raises concerns about gentrification, displacement, and the preservation of local community identity. The study also underscores the role of digital narratives in influencing visitor perceptions and behaviors, contributing to the broader discourse on how digital platforms affect localities beyond traditional economic impacts. By bridging the analysis of cultural narratives, tourism dynamics, and community impacts, this thesis provides a comprehensive understanding of Airbnb's role in reshaping Joshua Tree, and advocates instead for digital placemaking practices that preserve community values and environmental integrity. This thesis also calls for further exploration into the nuanced effects of digital platforms on local communities and natural landscapes, emphasizing the need for interdisciplinary research that uncovers deeper processes that may be taking place in Joshua Tree and beyond. Ultimately, this study contributes to the fields of environmental studies, urban planning, sociology, and tourism studies, offering valuable insights into the complex interplay between digital platforms and the lived experiences of unique destinations like Joshua Tree.

The thesis of Marcos Ramses Magana is approved.

Alesia Montgomery

Elizabeth C. Koslov

Amada Armenta, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2024

Dedication

To my family, my inspiring partner Jazmyne, and the beautiful desert that raised me.

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Introduction

Joshua Tree, a small unincorporated community in the rural yet captivating high desert region of California, has increasingly become a sought-after tourist destination, renowned for its awe-inspiring desert landscapes and unique cultural appeal. In recent years, this allure has been significantly amplified by the proliferation of Airbnb listings, transforming Joshua Tree into a prime location for short-term rentals due to its high profitability, rivaling prominent tourist locations such as Hawaii and Florida. Unsurprisingly, this rapid transformation has brought pressing challenges, such as rising housing costs, gentrification, and changes to the social fabric. Tied to these challenges, the core issue addressed in this thesis is the complex interplay between the burgeoning presence of Airbnb listings and the socio-cultural perceptions of Joshua Tree and its unique desert environment. As Airbnb reshapes the way people experience this region, it influences not only economic aspects but also cultural and perceptual dimensions, making it crucial to have a comprehensive understanding of these impacts. Therefore, this study provides significant findings by uncovering broader trends in how digital platforms influence and redefine local communities, their environments, and identities, particularly in popular tourist destinations such as Joshua Tree.

Specifically, this study seeks to answer several key research questions including, how do Airbnb listings in Joshua Tree portray and commodify the natural and cultural landscape of the area, what narratives and themes are most commonly used in Airbnb descriptions to attract visitors, and how does the digital marketing of Airbnb listings potentially influence visitors' perceptions and experiences of Joshua Tree. These questions are important because they help to uncover the less visible, yet significant cultural and social transformations driven by digital platforms like Airbnb. By analyzing the content of Airbnb postings, this research aims to reveal

how digital narratives shape visitor experiences and local identities, contributing to broader discussions on the commodification of nature and the impacts of tourism on the perceptions of desert environments and its communities.

This study is novel in its approach, employing a qualitative content analysis to delve into the narratives and aesthetics of Airbnb listings in Joshua Tree. Unlike traditional Airbnb research, which often focuses on economic impacts such as rent gap theory, displacement, or housing affordability, this research explores the cultural and perceptual dimensions of Airbnb's influence. By analyzing the content of Airbnb descriptions, this research uncovers how digital narratives contribute to reshaping Joshua Tree's identity and influencing visitor perceptions. Through this detailed examination of Airbnb listings, the study identifies four dominant themes in play here: 'Escaping the City', 'Arts, Aesthetics, & Design', 'The Physical Desert', and 'The Imagined and Mythicized Desert'. These themes reveal how Airbnb hosts capitalize on cultural and natural elements to craft appealing narratives that attract visitors seeking escape, adventure, and a connection with nature. This thematic analysis highlights the dual role of Airbnb as both a facilitator of economic growth and a driver of cultural and social transformation.

In addition to digital placemaking, this thesis engages with several other key research areas, including gentrification, amenity migration, cultural narratives of nature, and the tourism impact on local communities. The study explores how the influx of tourists and new residents driven by Airbnb goes beyond affecting property values and the displacement of long-term residents by transforming the socio-economic, cultural, and environmental landscape of Joshua Tree. By analyzing how Airbnb listings romanticize and commodify the desert landscape, this study contributes to understanding how cultural perceptions of nature are constructed and marketed and in turn impact people's interaction with the environment. Furthermore, this study

sheds light on how increased tourism driven by platforms like Airbnb can lead to tensions between economic benefits and the preservation of community identity and cohesion.

The importance of this research lies in its ability to highlight the subtler, yet profound, impacts of digital placemaking. For the purposes of this study, digital placemaking refers to the use of digital media to create and enhance emotional and symbolic attachments to places, influencing how individuals and communities perceive, interact with, and experience their environments (Bush et al., 2020; Haleboua & Polson, 2021). Therefore, as Airbnb continues to shape the tourism landscape of Joshua Tree, understanding these dynamics becomes crucial for understanding how visitors engage with its desert environment and longstanding community. Furthermore, this research contributes to the broader discourse on digital placemaking by showcasing how platforms like Airbnb can transcend traditional economic impacts to influence cultural and social dimensions, underscoring the need for a more nuanced understanding of how digital platforms affect localities, calling for research that provides further insight into the potential benefits or disadvantages of increased tourism for the preservation of community values and accessibility.

In summary, this thesis addresses a critical gap in existing research by providing a qualitative analysis of Airbnb's role in shaping Joshua Tree's cultural and social landscape, moving beyond traditional economic analyses to explore the narratives that define visitor experiences and local identities. This study not only enhances the understanding of digital placemaking but also offers insights into the potential impacts of tourism that perpetuate certain cultural ideas around escaping to natural places like Joshua Tree and similar destinations, and through this commodifying its natural environment and further driving ideas about deserts disconnected from their ecological and social context. Therefore, by focusing on the narratives

crafted through Airbnb, this research highlights the power of digital platforms in defining how places are perceived and experienced, advocating for a balanced approach that honors the true essence of these unique environments. Given the multifaceted nature of this study, it is crucial to set a strong foundation and understanding of the multiple study areas engaged throughout.

Literature Review

This literature review engages with a multitude of study areas and disciplines that this thesis will directly draw from and add to, including the complex dynamics of the human-nature dichotomy, specifically exploring how this conceptual divide influences our relationship with the environment across various contexts and how this is currently manifesting itself within the specific case of Airbnb's in Joshua Tree, CA. The analysis of this literature area is anchored by William Cronon's seminal analysis, which contrasts the untouched wilderness with human-modified landscapes, though pointing out the largely theoretical application of this work without considering how it may manifest itself within specific contexts. Given this, the review then expands to scrutinize the portrayal and commodification of nature in ecotourism, as highlighted in Trčková's work to expand on Cronon's work, tying this line of inquiry further to amenity migration, where the quest for authentic nature experiences catalyzes socio-economic and cultural transformations in rural and natural areas, which is intricately linked to various forms of gentrification. All of which are undoubtedly important in understanding this novel examination of Airbnb's in the high desert of California.

Moreover, the review engages with placemaking and place branding literature, drawing out the differences and similarities between the two to illustrate how spaces like that of Joshua Tree, CA are imbued with meaning and marketed, particularly in the context of digital platforms like Airbnb, which redefine people's spatial experiences and perceptions of nature within

specific contexts. Also, given the desert environment being an integral characteristic of Airbnb's in Joshua Tree, CA, special attention is given to literature engaging conceptually with desert landscapes that directly challenge stereotypical portrayals of deserts and instead advocate for a deeper appreciation of their ecological and cultural richness, as emphasized in studies on "Saharanism" and nature-based tourism.

This literature is crucial for understanding the digital marketing of Airbnb listings in Joshua Tree because it highlights the ways in which these platforms capitalize on and reshape perceptions of nature and place. By analyzing these listings, this thesis aims to uncover how digital placemaking practices influence socio-economic and cultural transformations in the region. My content analysis of these postings will contribute to these literature areas by providing empirical evidence of how digital narratives and commodification strategies manifest in a specific, rapidly evolving short term rental market. Therefore, by engaging with distinct literature areas, not only does this literature review provide a strong foundation for the intervention presented in this thesis, but it will also bridge these diverse study areas and disciplines through the novel quantitative analysis of Airbnb listing descriptions in California's high desert. This approach offers nuanced insights into the interplay between human perceptions, economic activities, and the natural world, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the abovementioned literature areas. Therefore, the analysis of the literature begins with the examination of the human-nature dichotomy.

Human-Nature Dichotomy

The concept of the human-nature dichotomy is essential for understanding how Airbnb listings in Joshua Tree leverage longstanding cultural narratives to attract visitors. In their seminal works, "Nature's Metropolis" and "Uncommon Ground," Cronon critically examines

perspectives on the human-nature dichotomy prevalent in Western society's viewing of their relationships to nature. Specifically, Cronon defines the human-nature dichotomy, which they call the human-natural or urban-rural dichotomies, as a conceptual divide separating humans from the natural world (Cronon, 1992, 1996a, 1996b). In this worldview, humanity and nature are fundamentally distinct, and humans are often perceived as outside of, superior to, or detached from nature. Cronon explains this divide contrasts the idealized concept of wilderness—or untouched nature—with urban environments, arguing that ‘wilderness’ is often depicted as an untouched, pristine place separate from human influence and is essentially a cultural construct, not an objective reality. Cronon also explains that this concept of wilderness has evolved over time, shifting from a place of danger and desolation to one idealized as a refuge from modern life and a symbol of purity. This shift, particularly evident in American culture, aligns with “romanticism” and “frontier mythology,” portraying wilderness as a sacred space for experiencing the sublime and reconnecting with a more authentic, simple existence.

Furthermore, Cronon suggests that the dichotomy between wilderness and urban areas is oversimplified and problematic, reinforcing a dualistic view where nature is perceived as pure and cities as corrupt (Cronon, 1996a). Specifically, Cronon explains that wilderness is often depicted as the only place left with unspoiled nature, a sanctuary from the "polluted sea of urban-industrial modernity." This perspective suggests that true nature must be remote, vast, and devoid of human influence, embodying a romanticized ideal that starkly contrasts with cities' perceived artificiality and moral contamination. Urban environments, therefore, are implicitly characterized as the antithesis of wilderness, seen as places of human excess, environmental degradation, and a detachment from the authentic experiences that supposedly only wilderness can provide. The city ultimately represents the culmination of human civilization that has lost its

connection to the natural world. Cronon critiques this binary, arguing that it oversimplifies the relationship between humans and the environment and overlooks that nature exists everywhere, not just in remote wilderness areas, emphasizing that even urban and suburban landscapes contain elements of the natural world, and that people can experience and interact with nature in these environments (Cronon, 1996a). Cronon ends their discussion by stating that this dichotomy is problematic because it marginalizes human-influenced landscapes and cultures, oversimplifies environmental issues, and can lead to an elitist perspective where only vast natural areas are valued as true wilderness. These relationships and sentiments towards the human-nature divide and wilderness uncovered by Cronon are instrumental to understanding how Airbnb listings in Joshua Tree, CA utilize these longstanding ideas to appeal to urban-dwellers looking to escape the perceived perils of the city. However, Cronon's work is mainly historical and conceptual, but other areas of literature have shown how this dichotomy manifests itself in contemporary scenarios which provides further context for this thesis.

An article by Trčková analyzes how nature and the human-nature relationship manifests itself and is represented in ecotourism advertisements, revealing that these advertisements often portray nature in empowering ways while reinforcing the human-nature dichotomy (Trčková, 2016). The study finds that ecotourism ads frequently depict nature as an agent in constructive processes, attributing nature with roles that suggest activity and agency, such as being providers, creators, and entities that thrive. Trčková explains that nature is also celebrated in these ads as aesthetically pleasing and is often portrayed with supernatural qualities, making it an object of admiration and wonder for tourists. However, Trčková states that these advertisements reinforce a dichotomy between humans and nature by portraying natural environments as remote, pure,

and untouched wildernesses, distinct from human civilization. This portrayal suggests that nature is "the Other," separate from human experience.

Additionally, Trčková finds that when the ads highlight interactions between tourists and nature, they typically cast humans as the actors and nature as the passive recipient of human actions rather than depicting a reciprocal relationship (Trčková, 2016). The study ultimately finds that though ecotourism advertisements employ strategies that perpetuate a separation between humans and nature, which builds on Cronon's critical examination of the human-nature dichotomy, with their analysis of ecotourism advertisements offering a contemporary perspective on how this dichotomy is maintained and marketed today.

While Cronon explains the historical and conceptual evolution of wilderness as a cultural construct, contrasting it with urban environments, Trčková delves into the strategies employed in ecotourism to portray nature as an otherworldly, untouched entity separate from human influence. Trčková's findings resonate with Cronon's argument that wilderness is idealized as a pristine sanctuary, distinct from corrupted urban spaces (Trčková, 2016). As stated by the study, in ecotourism, nature is frequently depicted as a spectacle, artwork, otherworldly, paradise, and untouched, reinforcing its status as something to be admired from a distance, not a living, interconnected ecosystem. This portrayal aligns with the problematic dichotomy Cronon identifies, where nature is perceived as pure and cities as corrupt. Trčková's analysis reveals that even in attempts to promote environmental consciousness through ecotourism, the underlying narrative often sustains the divide between humans and nature, treating the former as mere observers or visitors in the latter's domain. This study therefore provides a contemporary real-world manifestation of Cronon's ideas about human nature dichotomy and how it is specifically used to market to potential visitors. Despite this, the study is broad in its application of this

conceptual divide by not focusing on a particular kind of tourism or place to visit, which is exactly what this thesis aims to do by examining Joshua Tree, CA Airbnb's and their surrounding desert environment.

The human-nature dichotomy is thus a crucial framework for analyzing how Airbnb listings in Joshua Tree market the desert environment as an idealized, untouched escape from urban life. By leveraging these cultural constructs, Airbnb hosts can attract urban visitors seeking a connection with a perceived authentic, pristine nature, further influencing the socio-cultural landscape of Joshua Tree. Moreover, Trčková's study also highlights the commodification of nature in ecotourism, where the uniqueness and fame of natural sites are emphasized, mirroring the romanticized, frontier mythology perspective Cronon discusses which they believe can lead to a superficial engagement with nature by focusing on nature's aesthetic and extraordinary qualities rather than understanding and preserving its intrinsic ecological values, making this an important literature area to explore to better understand and conceptualize how Airbnb's in the CA high desert are commodifying the surrounding desert environment (Trčková, 2016).

Commodification of Nature

Scholars concerned with the commodification of nature have explored the nuanced ways in which natural resources, landscapes, animals, and even cultural practices associated with nature are commercialized and transformed into commodities within various contexts. This section is particularly relevant because the commodification of nature is a central theme in how Airbnb listings in Joshua Tree market their properties. Setting a foundation for our understanding of this topic, in their paper, Mrozowski explores the interconnections between European colonization, the rise of capitalism, and the commodification of nature, particularly focusing on how abstract conceptualizations of space contributed to this process (Mrozowski, 1999).

Mrozowski argues that the transformation of nature into a commodity is intertwined with European colonization and the expansion of capitalism, both facilitated by the development of abstract space, where land and natural resources were measured, categorized, and traded as commodities. Mrozowski ultimately defines the commodification of nature as the process where nature's use values and exchange values are assigned, turning it into an abstract space that can be measured, sold, and controlled (Mrozowski, 1999).

This process is exemplified by how land was transformed into a commodity, where its value could be quantified and exchanged, irrespective of its natural characteristics. The paper emphasizes that the commodification of nature is not merely about transforming physical items like clay into pottery or wood into buildings but also about abstracting nature into measurable and sellable units, with this form of abstraction being a core aspect of Western cultural thought (Mrozowski, 1999). Mrozowski ultimately suggests that these practices were underpinned by a dualist perspective, which views nature and society as separate realms, justifying the domination, commodification, and exchange of natural entities. Through Mrozowski's work, we can see a direct tie between the commodification of nature and the human-nature dichotomy, building the necessary bridge for this study's intervention on how Airbnb's in Joshua Tree are operationalizing these concepts within their listing descriptions. Similarly, the earlier discussion about the real-world implications of using a human-nature dichotomy can also be extended to the commodification of nature. Specifically, the commodification of nature is evident in how Airbnb listings in Joshua Tree market their properties by emphasizing natural elements and unique desert features, transforming the landscape into a desirable, consumable product for tourists.

Similarly, a study by Russell and Ankenman (1996) explores ecotourism in Indonesian Borneo and examines the role of tourists photographing orangutans and consuming nature as a

souvenir, particularly how these actions contribute to the commodification of nature, important to connect how this may also be taking place in Joshua Tree. Russell and Ankenman highlight how photography transforms natural elements and animals, in this case, orangutans, into collectibles or commodities for tourists. The authors argue that this transformation affects how tourists perceive nature and the animals they encounter, often reducing complex ecological and social contexts to simplistic, stereotyped images (Russell & Ankenman, 1996). Specifically, the paper explains that tourists use photography to create a record of their experiences, capturing images of orangutans to "collect" them. The authors explain that these photographic practices can contribute to a superficial engagement with nature, focusing on obtaining the perfect picture rather than understanding the deeper ecological and cultural contexts.

The article suggests that this behavior can lead to a disconnection from the true essence of the places and beings photographed, turning them into mere items of consumption or aesthetic appreciation (Russell & Ankenman, 1996). As a result, the authors ultimately understand the commodification of nature in the context of ecotourism as the process by which natural elements and wildlife, specifically orangutans in this case, are transformed into objects of consumption or collectibles through the act of photography. The authors suggest that photography in ecotourism contributes to this commodification by encouraging tourists to seek and capture idealized, stereotyped images of wildlife, which are then used as proof of their experiences or as souvenirs, reducing complex natural beings and environments to simple, consumable images. Though not directly related to photography, Airbnb's and the tourists they attract participate in similar processes through their consumption of the desert environment through their idealized stays.

A similar investigation by Münster and Münster (2012) discusses the commodification of nature in Wayanad, Kerala, in the context of tourism, conservation, and agriculture and explains

the commodification of nature as a process where natural landscapes, wildlife, and cultural heritage are transformed into consumable products for tourism turning nature into a marketable asset, an important process necessary to understand what is being done by Airbnb's in Joshua Tree. The authors argue that in tourism, the commodification of nature is evident as Wayanad's forests, wildlife, and tribal cultures are marketed as attractions for domestic tourists, creating a landscape meant only for tourist consumption (Münster & Münster, 2012).

Together, these works illustrate the multifaceted aspects of the commodification of nature, showing how it permeates different levels of interaction with nature and underscores the complexity of the commodification process and its profound implications for environmental engagement. The commodification of nature is particularly relevant to this study because it highlights how Airbnb listings in Joshua Tree use natural elements as key selling points, transforming the environment into a marketable asset that attracts tourists and amenity migrants alike.

Despite these compelling findings, these studies do not explore the implications of this usage and marketing of both the human-nature dichotomy and the commodification of nature in the specific communities in which they are located, requiring a deeper analysis of how the marketing of nature through the human-nature dichotomy can potentially drive people to visit a particular place and the effect this could potentially have on it, which is what this thesis is aiming to answer. However, by looking at other literature areas like amenity migration, we can see that researchers have begun to uncover how nature is perceived as a highly sought-after experience worth migrating towards, particularly for those in the city, though it is largely concerned with permanent migration rather than a more transient one.

Amenity Migration, Gentrification, and Airbnb's

Understanding the dynamics of amenity migration, gentrification, and the role of Airbnb is crucial for analyzing how digital platforms reshape socio-cultural, economic, and the environmental landscapes in places like Joshua Tree. The migration of urban residents to rural settings in pursuit of 'nature' is not a contemporary phenomenon. The relationship between urban and rural communities, often perceived as more rooted in 'nature,' has deep historical roots and provides a rich context for understanding current discourses and attitudes around nature-led amenity migration. This understanding is important for this thesis as it provides valuable insights into the transformations occurring in Joshua Tree.

In "The Country and The City," Raymond Williams delves into what contemporary scholars now call amenity-led migrations in cultural and historical contexts. Williams explains how the countryside has been romantically portrayed as a place of 'old, human, and natural ways,' in stark contrast to the city, which symbolizes 'progress, modernization, and development' (Williams, 1975). Williams's early analysis of this phenomenon highlights the complex interplay of social relationships and bourgeois values in sustaining the appeal of rural life, framing it as a stronghold of authenticity and simplicity against the backdrop of urban complexity and artificiality, a common perception still seen within Airbnb's descriptions in Joshua Tree.

Similarly, Nick Osbaldiston's book, "Seeking Authenticity in Place, Culture, and the Self," points to Williams's work and others, discussing how this pattern took shape during the early industrialization period in Europe. Osbaldiston explains that the Bourgeoisie in the 19th century began escaping urban environments for more idyllic, natural settings (Osbaldiston, 2012). This escapism was characterized as an escape from what was perceived as the dirty, disease-ridden, and sometimes immoral city to the countryside, which was perceived as offering

simplicity, charm, and cleanliness. Specifically, Osbaldiston emphasizes that this shift by the rich in the relationship between urban and rural environments was not just about finding a serene and aesthetically pleasing environment but also a status-seeking exercise, demonstrating affluence by distancing themselves from the urban masses and indulging in the purity and perceived authenticity of rural life (Osbaldiston, 2012). Therefore, this geographical shift represented a pursuit of an idealized, unspoiled space that the urban environment could no longer offer, and their movement to 'pristine' landscapes reflected their class-based habits and preferences, symbolizing a physical and social distance from the metropolis and its associated immorality. Similar sentiments can be seen in Airbnb's listing descriptions for Joshua Tree.

In a more contemporary context, Osbaldiston defines amenity migration as the process where individuals move to regions with desirable environmental or cultural features, often rural, coastal, or mountain communities, to seek a richer subjective experience than what urban environments offer. Osbaldiston explains this migration is similarly driven by the search for authenticity in natural landscapes, cultural heritage, and community life, contrasting with the perceived inauthenticity of urban settings (Osbaldiston, 2011). Specifically, Osbaldiston observes how narratives and myths contribute to the perception of certain places as authentic, making nature a crucial factor in amenity migration, emphasizing that the environmental allure of a location is a significant driver for individuals moving from urban areas to more rural or natural settings. The concept of "authentic nature" is central to this discussion, where the natural environment is idealized as pristine, untouched, and offering a stark contrast to urban environments. This idealization includes descriptions of landscapes as "breathtakingly beautiful," "rugged," "pristine," and providing "endless opportunities for relaxation, meditation, and nature-

based pursuits," all of which are extremely like the portrayal of Joshua Tree and its environments within Airbnb listing descriptions (Osbaldiston, 2011).

Such portrayals suggest that authentic nature offers an escape from the perceived artificiality and stress of city life, promoting a sense of tranquility and connection to the natural world that is absent in urban settings. This notion of nature plays a vital role in attracting amenity migrants, who are drawn to living in a place where they can engage with a natural environment perceived as genuine and unspoiled. The narrative that these natural areas provide a more authentic, fulfilling, and spiritually enriching experience is a key factor in motivating people to relocate in search of this idealized lifestyle closer to nature, which directly links people's transient migration to Joshua Tree for its natural appeal. However, Osbaldiston discusses the challenges of maintaining this authenticity as amenity migration grows in certain places, highlighting issues like rapid population growth and development that can threaten the authentic character of these destinations, pointing out that the perceived authenticity of a place can be undermined by such developments, leading to a loss of the unique qualities that attracted urban migrants in the first place, all of which can be seen happening with Joshua Tree (Osbaldiston, 2011, 2012). This amenity-led migration, driven by a desire for a connection with nature, has profound socio-economic implications for these destination communities with natural amenities, as explored in recent scholarly works investigating gateway communities. These implications are important to discuss and understand to show why a deeper understanding of these phenomena is important given the serious effects they can have on a community like Joshua Tree.

Additionally, In their study, Stoker et al. address the unique developmental challenges confronting Western gateway communities in the United States. Stoker defines gateway communities as small towns and cities with a population ranging from 150 to 25,000 people,

located within 10 miles of major natural amenities such as national parks, national monuments, national forests, state parks, scenic rivers, lakes, and other notable natural features while also being more than 15 miles away from a census-designated urbanized area by road (Stoker et al., 2021). This definition distinguishes gateway communities from other rural areas by emphasizing their proximity to significant natural attractions and relative distance from major urban centers, emphasizing their role as entry points or gateways to these natural amenities. These descriptions perfectly describe Joshua Tree. Furthermore, their findings suggest that housing affordability, heightened living costs, population growth, and increased tourism are central challenges these communities face, straining the infrastructure and social cohesion of these small, rural locales (Stoker et al., 2021). Adding a more nuanced perspective on how the gateway community's social cohesion is affected, Ulrich-Schad finds that community dynamics are significantly influenced by increased amenity migration. The influx of newcomers drawn to the town's natural and cultural offerings often sparks tension between members of the community who are characterized as either 'changers,' who advocate for the development and modernization of these small towns, or 'keepers,' who strive to preserve the community's traditional character and lifestyle (Ulrich-Schad, 2018). This split within gateway communities captures the complex conflict within amenity migration, where small towns must balance enhancing economic vitality and maintaining the authenticity and integrity of the community – a conflict currently manifesting within Joshua Tree and instrumental for understanding the importance of this study to further analyze the mechanisms leading to it.

Moreover, Jennifer Sherman's study, "Not Allowed to Inherit My Kingdom," offers a compelling look into how amenity migration can exacerbate social inequality in these rural western communities, all of which apply to the case of Joshua Tree. Specifically, Sherman finds

that rural towns that may have once relied on extractive industries have now pivoted towards attracting affluent migrants through amenity-based tourism. While beneficial in some respects, this shift predominantly fosters low-wage, insecure jobs in the service sector, contributing to growing the socio-economic disparities already present in these small communities (Sherman, 2018). This transformation outlined by Sherman underscores the complex implications of amenity migration, where urban dwellers' search for authenticity and connection to nature leads to the displacement and marginalization of others. These studies collectively underscore the complexity of amenity migration.

Additionally, a study by Rumore et al. on gateway communities finds that the recent COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated amenity migration, with remote workers moving from urban to rural areas, exacerbating issues like longer commutes, higher transportation costs, and impacts on infrastructure, equity, and quality of life in these rural areas (Rumore et al., 2023). Therefore, while individuals migrate in pursuit of authentic, nature-integrated lifestyles, their arrival often instigates socio-economic and cultural shifts that jeopardize the authenticity they seek. However, largely missing from this discussion on nature-led amenity migration is the gentrification of these areas, another integral concept necessary to understand the complex processes taking place in Joshua Tree. Studies like Sherman's do briefly state that introducing wealthy newcomers triggers gentrification, displacing long-standing, lower-income residents and altering the rural community's social fabric. This linkage between amenity migration and gentrification is crucial for understanding how these processes unfold in Joshua Tree.

Gentrification, particularly in rural contexts, is closely tied to amenity migration. Rural gentrification occurs when wealthier individuals from urban or suburban backgrounds move to rural areas, often attracted by the natural environment, heritage, or a perceived simpler way of

life. This process is outlined in William's book, discussed earlier, where wealthy city elites purchase country homes to escape the city (Williams, 1975). However, as articles by Phillips and more recently by Bryson & Wyckoff outline, what makes rural gentrification unique from other forms is the importance of nature-based amenities to the process, creating a direct link between gentrification and nature-led amenity migration literature which is pertinent to understanding these phenomena within Joshua Tree (Bryson & Wyckoff, 2010; Phillips, 1993).

In their article, Phillips examines rural gentrification, contrasting it with urban gentrification, and finds a common root in both phenomena, where middle-class individuals displace working-class populations. However, the article critiques this simplistic view, suggesting that rural gentrification involves more complex motivations, like individuals seeking rural areas to pursue a specific lifestyle that aligns with their values or preferences, such as a desire for a closer connection to nature, community life, or a perceived higher quality of life away from urban centers (Phillips, 1993). Bryson & Wyckoff expand on these potential motivations behind rural gentrification by exploring the phenomenon in the American West, where communities characterized by a natural amenities-based economy attract retirees and hi-tech workers with scenic and recreational offerings. The transformation of these rural communities suggests that environmental amenities like trails, views, and forest lands are now key natural resources driving rural gentrification, all of which are important characteristics to Joshua Tree (Bryson & Wyckoff, 2010). Bryson & Wyckoff state that rural gentrification is further driven by the commodification of natural landscapes, transforming them into environmental amenities that attract capital and new residents, directly linking this to prior sections of this literature review. The article emphasizes nature's importance in shaping rural communities' trajectories, illustrating how cultural and economic forces interact with the

physical environment to influence investment, development, and social change patterns, which other authors explore further.

In the case of Jackson, Wyoming, explored by Nelson & Hines, rural gentrification is exemplified by transforming agricultural lands into residential and recreational spaces catering to new affluent residents. This transformation capitalizes on the "rent gap" – the difference between the current use value of the land (agriculture) and its potential value if converted to residential use, which is a common process discussed and attributed to the cause of gentrification across various communities within the literature (Nelson & Hines, 2018). Nelson and Hines outline that this transition is driven by global economic pressures and a shift in local demographics, where the attractiveness of natural amenities plays a central role in attracting new residents, thereby altering the community's social and economic fabric. Similarly, Sherman's study in Paradise Valley, Washington, provides a poignant example of how rural gentrification impacts housing security and exacerbates social inequality. Sherman finds that the influx of affluent newcomers increases housing costs, displacing vulnerable residents and intensifying the community's socioeconomic disparities, all of which can be observed within Joshua Tree (Sherman, 2023).

Additionally, tourism gentrification, another mutation of gentrification driven by tourism in an area attractive to tourists, explains how communities are gradually transformed to cater to the needs and tastes of visitors that threaten existing residents' ability to stay in the area. Though, this form of gentrification does not rely on people permanently moving to these places. A study by Gotham demonstrates how this process unfolds using New Orleans' French Quarter (Gotham, 2005). Gotham defines tourism gentrification as transforming a middle-class neighborhood into an affluent and exclusive enclave characterized by a surge in corporate entertainment and tourism venues. Gotham argues that tourism gentrification manifests broader urban and

economic shifts, where the drive for tourist dollars and corporate interests reshapes urban spaces, altering their social, cultural, and economic fabric, processes that can be seen within Joshua Tree (Gotham, 2005). Similarly, scholars like Cocola-Gant have encouraged scholars to consider tourism gentrification outside the urban context, important when considering the rural nature of this study's study area (Cocola-Gant, 2018).

Cocola-Gant argues that tourism gentrification, where the influx of tourists and tourism development leads to the displacement of residents and businesses, transforms neighborhoods' character and affordability. Relevant to this paper given its specific geographical characteristics is that their study highlights that this phenomenon is not limited to cities but also impacts rural and coastal areas, primarily driven by their proximity to natural settings (Cocola-Gant, 2018). The article emphasizes three types of displacement caused by tourism gentrification: residential, commercial, and place-based, all of which can be observed within Joshua Tree. Residential displacement arises as property values and rents increase, making it difficult for original residents to afford their homes. Commercial displacement occurs when local businesses are replaced by tourist-oriented establishments, altering the neighborhood's service landscape. Place-based displacement refers to the loss of community character and the alienation of long-standing residents as their neighborhoods become more tourist-centric (Cocola-Gant, 2018). Gotham's study of New Orleans' French Quarter and Cocola-Gant's exploration of tourism gentrification highlight how tourism development can catalyze gentrification, transforming neighborhoods to cater to tourists' needs at the expense of local residents, and it is not a transformation limited to urban areas but extends to rural and coastal regions, where, as we have seen, the proximity to natural amenities drives these processes.

Airbnb plays a significant role in facilitating these processes of amenity migration and gentrification. In their study, Cocola-Gant and Gago examine the impact of short-term rental platforms like Airbnb on the residential real estate market and local communities, revealing that Airbnb contributes to the financialization of housing, turning homes into investment assets rather than places for residents to live (Cocola-Gant & Gago, 2021). Airbnb facilitates amenity migration by providing a platform for transient visitors to experience and potentially migrate to rural areas like Joshua Tree. The article's findings indicate that most Airbnb listings in their study area of Lisbon are not shared homes, but entire apartments owned by investors and landlords who profit from short-term rentals, displacing long-term residents (Cocola-Gant & Gago, 2021). Through these findings, the authors argue that Airbnb facilitates a form of "buy-to-let gentrification," where investors purchase properties to rent out on short-term rental platforms, leading to direct and indirect displacement of residents. Direct displacement occurs when tenants are forced to move out as apartments are converted into short-term rentals, while indirect displacement results from the general transformation of the neighborhood due to the influx of tourists, escalating property prices, and the changing local service landscape. Specifically, the case study presented here demonstrates a significant shift in the neighborhood's character, transitioning from a residential area to a tourist-centric one, largely driven by real estate investment catering to tourists rather than long-term residents, leading to a loss of community and social injustice among remaining residents, which as we will see, is the current situation in which Joshua Tree finds itself (Cocola-Gant & Gago, 2021). Ultimately, the authors suggest that Airbnb's role in housing financialization and gentrification contradicts the "sharing economy" promoted by the platform.

Similarly, using data analytics to trace the correlation between Airbnb listings and gentrification patterns in Dublin, Rabiei-Dastjerdi, McArdle, & Hyne show that neighborhoods with a high density of Airbnb listings often undergo significant transformations, pointing towards a causal relationship where Airbnb acts as a catalyst for gentrification, reconfiguring neighborhoods and altering their socio-economic fabric (Rabiei-Dastjerdi et al., 2022). As a result, Wachsmuth and Weisler find Airbnb creates "rent gaps" in culturally attractive neighborhoods when looking at New York City. Their research explains how Airbnb's model not only diverts housing from long-term residents to tourists but also prompts a redistribution of economic activities, influencing the broader urban economy and potentially exacerbating housing affordability issues (Wachsmuth & Weisler, 2018). Transitioning to a more rural context, Domènech and Zoğal explore Airbnb's impact in Andorra's mountainous regions with their analysis suggesting that Airbnb listings tend to cluster in areas with established tourism attractions, implying that the platform's presence is strategically aligned with maximizing profitability, potentially at the expense of traditional lodging establishments and long-term housing stability, which shows why so many Airbnb's have decided to center around Joshua Tree as the national park is nearby (Domènech & Zoğal, 2020).

In synthesizing these studies, it becomes evident that Airbnb's role extends beyond accommodating tourists; it is a transformative force in real estate and community dynamics, all of which can be observed within Joshua Tree. The platform facilitates amenity migration by enabling short-term stays that often lead to longer-term relocations, thereby contributing to both rural and tourism gentrification. This examination lays the groundwork for further exploration into the specific impacts and mechanisms through which Airbnb influences gentrification in

diverse settings, particularly in regions where nature-led amenity migration is prominent such as the case of Joshua Tree.

Placemaking and Place Branding

The literature on placemaking and place branding provides a comprehensive exploration of how places are imbued with meaning and transformed into branded entities, affecting the lived experiences of their inhabitants and visitors as is currently happening in Joshua Tree. The discourse on placemaking and place branding is rich and multifaceted, encompassing a variety of perspectives that collectively deepen the understanding of how spaces are crafted and perceived and provide a unique lens through which the complex interplay between individuals, communities, environments, and technologies in shaping places like Joshua Tree can be examined.

In their article, Friedmann defines "place" as a small, three-dimensional space cherished by its inhabitants. This definition emphasizes residents' subjective and emotional connection with their environment, highlighting that a place is not just a physical location but also a space imbued with meaning and value by those who live there (Friedmann, 2005, 2010). According to Friedmann, place-making is the collaborative process of creating such meaningful urban spaces. It involves the engagement of local residents and planners in shaping their neighborhoods, ensuring that these spaces reflect the community's needs, desires, and values. Ultimately, Friedmann states that place-making is about enhancing a place's social and cultural dimensions, making it more livable and cherished by its inhabitants.

Similarly, Pierce et al. introduce the concept of "relational place-making," which expands the understanding of place beyond a mere location to include the dynamic, networked interactions that define it. They argue that place-making is inherently political, shaped by social

relationships and power dynamics that connect people within a shared geographical context (Pierce et al., 2011). By analyzing forest resource conflicts in Bolivia and a health center's expansion in Athens, USA, they demonstrate how relational place-making can provide new insights into political contestation and the ongoing negotiation of place meanings. Ultimately, the authors understand place-making as the set of social, political, and material processes through which people iteratively create and recreate the experienced geographies in which they live. Additionally, recent studies have begun uncovering the role nature plays in placemaking.

In their study, Bush et al. underscore the critical role of nature in placemaking, advocating for designs that foster human and ecological well-being. They highlight how natural elements influence the sense of place, which refers to the emotional and symbolic attachments people develop with specific locations (Bush et al., 2020). This connection to place is crucial for placemaking, as it enhances the meaning and value of spaces for individuals and communities. Despite these compelling findings from a more traditional way of understanding placemaking, other forms, such as digital placemaking, may be more appropriate for this thesis given its specific analysis on Airbnb's in Joshua Tree. Digital placemaking is particularly relevant here as it shows how digital media practices, like Airbnb listings, foster attachments to place, influencing how individuals and communities perceive and interact with their environments.

In their study, Halegoua and Polson explain the concept of "digital placemaking," which refers to using digital media to create a sense of place for oneself and/or others. The authors discuss how digital media practices can foster attachments to place, influencing how individuals and communities perceive and interact with their environments (Halegoua & Polson, 2021). They explore various dimensions of digital placemaking across different domains, noting its potential to highlight and exacerbate social inequities. They also emphasize that digital

placemaking is multifaceted and impacts various aspects of society and the individual experience of a place. Expanding on similar themes, Richards presents a compelling framework for comparing placemaking to place branding.

In their article, Richards provides a compelling discussion comparing place branding and placemaking. Specifically, place branding is defined as the use of events by cities primarily to enhance their image and stimulate economic benefits, aiming to position a city in a way that attracts tourists, investments, and residents by creating a distinctive and appealing image or brand (Richards, 2017). This approach is often focused on the external perceptions of a place and is about marketing a city's unique attributes to a broader audience. Conversely, placemaking is presented as a more holistic and integrated approach that goes beyond image and economic impacts. Placemaking, therefore, focuses on creating spaces that promote people's health, happiness, and well-being, aiming to foster stronger community bonds, enhance social cohesion, and improve the lived experience of a place by considering a city's physical, social, and cultural aspects, making it a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to urban development (Richards, 2017). The article ultimately defines the relationship between place branding and placemaking as 'evolutionary.' While place branding focuses on the external image and attracting outsiders, placemaking builds on this by emphasizing the quality and experience of the place for both locals and visitors. Placemaking uses the foundation laid by place branding to engage deeper with the community and enhance the intrinsic qualities of a place, making it more livable and cohesive. Essentially, while place branding can be seen as a subset of placemaking, placemaking represents a broader, more integrated approach to enhancing a city's appeal and livability (Richards, 2017). Continuing to expand the relationship between placemaking and place branding, Falahatkar and Aminzadeh investigate how the sense of place influences city

branding, focusing on Sanandaj, Iran which leverages its surrounding natural landscapes, like what may be happening with Airbnb's in Joshua Tree.

In their study, Falahatkar and Aminzadeh focus on Sanandaj, Iran, known for its distinctive natural landscape of hills that significantly influences its urban structure and identity, creating an overarching tie to the many other literature areas covered so far. Specifically, the study highlights that while natural landscapes like these are crucial in defining a city's identity and can potentially be leveraged in city branding, the emotional connection and perceptions of the city's residents and visitors, described as the sense of place, are equally vital in forming a city's image and brand (Falahatkar & Aminzadeh, 2020). The study emphasizes that successful city branding must consider not only the physical attributes of a city but also the social, cultural, and emotional connections people have with it. By aligning the city's identity, branding objectives, and the needs and perceptions of its inhabitants and visitors, a more resonant and effective city brand can be established. This theme of using nature, specifically wilderness, is further explored in a study by McGaurr, Tranter, and Lester based in Australia's Tasmania region which further allows the positioning of this research within a broader understanding of these concepts as linked to one another.

McGaurr et al. analyze the use of wilderness in place branding, discussing the tension between marketing a place's natural beauty and preserving its ecological and cultural integrity. The study illustrates the complexities of leveraging nature in branding efforts, considering the impacts on local identities and conservation (McGaurr et al., 2015). The authors outline how governments and industries employ place branding to create a coherent, attractive image of a location, encompassing tourism, trade, and investment opportunities. In Tasmania's case, the government and tourism industry collaborated to promote the region's natural beauty and

wilderness as part of its brand identity, emphasizing Tasmania as a natural, pristine, and unique environment (McGaurr et al., 2015). However, the article highlights the complexities and potential contradictions inherent in using nature and wilderness in place branding.

While branding aims to attract tourists and investors by promoting an idealized image of a place, it can also lead to the commodification of nature, where wilderness is marketed as a product for consumption. This process can depoliticize and routinize the concept of wilderness, stripping it of its historical and ecological significance and reducing it to a mere marketing tool (McGaurr et al., 2015). As a result, recent studies that engage both topics have criticized the use of place branding as a marketing tool. In their article, Reynolds emphasizes that place branding should reflect and support the actual place and its people rather than just serving as a marketing tool (L. Reynolds, 2021). By aligning place branding with placemaking and policymaking, there's an opportunity to enact real change that benefits a place's economic, social, cultural, and environmental aspects, arguing that place branding can contribute significantly to sustainable development when integrated with placemaking and policymaking (L. Reynolds, 2021). Though currently missing from this discussion around placemaking and place branding is the role platforms like Airbnb play, such as in the case for this thesis in Joshua Tree.

In their study, Törnberg explores how platforms like Airbnb influence urban spaces and local cultures through "platform placemaking," described as how Airbnb uses user data to reshape urban spatial imaginaries to align with its interests, often leading to the alienation of long-term residents. The paper explains that this process transforms urban neighborhoods into spaces optimized for short-term rentals and tourism, affecting permanent residents' sense of belonging and community (Törnberg, 2022). Specifically, "platform placemaking" explains how platforms mobilize users to shape spatial imaginaries, turning urban areas into commodities for

consumption. The paper analyzes Airbnb's role in this process, highlighting how the platform's user-generated content (reviews, descriptions) helps construct a narrative that markets neighborhoods as authentic, cosmopolitan experiences for tourists (Törnberg, 2022). This marketing often romanticizes and commodifies aspects of local life and culture, contributing to urban transformation that values short-term visitors over long-term residents. The article goes on to introduce the concept of "Airbnbification" to encapsulate the transformative effects of Airbnb on urban neighborhoods. This phenomenon is characterized by the transition of residential areas into spaces that predominantly cater to tourists rather than long-term inhabitants, all of which are processes necessary for understanding the deeper inquiry into how Airbnb's have contributed to these phenomena.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that Airbnb promotes a consumer-centric view of urban spaces, where neighborhoods are valued for their tourism potential rather than their livability for residents. This leads to cultural and symbolic displacement, where places' original character and social identity are altered, causing long-term residents to feel disconnected from their own communities (Törnberg, 2022). Therefore, platform placemaking and Airbnbification encapsulate a range of transformations within urban neighborhoods triggered by the rise of short-term rental platforms. These changes encompass shifts in community dynamics, cultural identity, and the perception and utilization of urban spaces, ultimately redefining the essence of neighborhoods and impacting long-term residents' well-being and sense of belonging. Despite this literature area's incredible importance for understanding the multitude of processes happening in Joshua Tree, it largely focuses on an urban context and does not explore the potential implications that this could have both on rural places and those characterized by a

desert environment specifically. To best explain what is happening in Joshua Tree, it is important to engage with long held perceptions, conceptualizations and beliefs about desert environments.

Desert Conceptualizations

In a seminar featuring El Guabli & Henni, they discuss deserts, particularly focusing on a concept El Guabli terms "Saharanism." This concept critiques the conventional understanding of deserts as lifeless or barren spaces, suggesting instead that they are vibrant ecosystems rich in various forms of life and human activity (El Guabli & Henni, 2022). El Guabli argues that deserts are often misunderstood due to colonialist and developmental perspectives that view them merely as spaces to be exploited or transformed. Furthermore, Kripa, Marullo, and Mueller's conversation with El Guabli delves deeper into the methodological approach toward understanding deserts, advocating for "desert-thinking" to challenge and reshape the dominant narratives that have historically marginalized desert environments (Kripa et al., 2023).

Additionally, in a series of essays, El Guabli, further reiterates these points while also providing insights that offer a paradigm shift in how we engage with and conceptualize deserts, highlighting their intrinsic value and the importance of incorporating indigenous knowledge and perspectives in desert studies, though the way in which Airbnb's manifest this in Joshua Tree makes these assumptions more complicated (El Guabli, 2022, 2023). Similar portrayals of deserts, though more complicated, are observed within tourist perceptions when visiting these places, and becomes evident when examining Airbnb's in Joshua Tree.

Gutberlet's study on nature-based tourism in Oman's Sharqiyah Sands explores how nature-based tourism in deserts influences tourists' experiences and perceptions, emphasizing the spiritual and aesthetic values embedded in these landscapes. The study highlights the concept of Cultural Ecosystem Services (CES) and their interplay with geopolitical imaginaries in shaping

tourists' experiences (Gutberlet, 2022). It delves into the distinct experiences of German-speaking groups and cruise tourists, examining how their encounters with the desert landscape facilitate a sense of transformation, belonging, and spiritual connection. The research reveals that tourists romanticize the desert as a space for solitude, adventure, and self-transformation, influenced by preconceived notions and media portrayals. Their findings suggest that group tourists seek a deeper, more authentic engagement with the desert, valuing silence, natural beauty, and the opportunity for self-reflection (Gutberlet, 2022). In contrast, cruise tourists often experience the desert more superficially, focusing on adventure and entertainment. The findings underscore the importance of understanding and managing the interplay between human experiences and ecosystem services in desert landscapes to promote sustainable tourism practices that respect and preserve these environments' intrinsic values. Collectively, these studies illuminate the intricate layers of meaning, value, and significance attributed to deserts which deeply informs this studies investigation into how Airbnb descriptions in Joshua Tree conceptualize deserts to imbue them with meaning and market them to potential tourists, directly tying this to the other literature areas discussed prior. Ultimately, these studies advocate for a holistic understanding transcending the stereotypical portrayals of deserts as desolate or exploitable territories, where our specific examination of Joshua Tree makes these relationships more complex.

Situating Thesis: Gaps in Literature

The comprehensive exploration of the human-nature dichotomy, commodification of nature, amenity migration, gentrification and Airbnb's role, placemaking, place branding, and desert perspectives within this literature review unveils these concepts' multifaceted and interwoven nature, laying the foundation for the critical bridging and expansion of these concepts

through this master's thesis which it aims to achieve. Specifically, this thesis aims to critically analyze and provide empirical evidence on how these dynamics manifest in the context of Joshua Tree, CA. By focusing on Airbnb listing descriptions, this research bridges the existing gaps in understanding how digital platforms influence socio-cultural and economic landscapes in rural, nature-centric areas.

While Cronon's critique of the human-nature dichotomy, augmented by Trčková's analysis of ecotourism advertisements, highlights the persistent conceptual separation between humans and the natural world, a divide further entrenched by the commodification of nature as explored by Mrozowski and others, these literature areas leave considerable gaps to explore these phenomena within specific contexts, like that of Joshua Tree, CA. Additionally, the role other larger processes like specific conceptualizations of particular geographies, such as deserts, and their relationship to broader topics like placemaking and place branding are underexplored. As a result, this thesis addresses these gaps by investigating how cultural perspectives of deserts are employed to attract transient amenity migrants, thereby characterizing a phenomenon termed transient gentrification

Linking these literature areas to the discussion of desert perspectives, where El Guabli's concept of "Saharanism" and subsequent studies challenge the traditional perspective of deserts as barren, advocating for a nuanced appreciation of these landscapes, this master's thesis aims to extend conversations of the operationalization of the concept of nature to include how cultural perspectives of deserts are employed to attract transient amenity migrants. This phenomenon can be better characterized as transient gentrification, which borrows from the ideas of rural and tourism gentrification and amenity migration, with the important distinction being that the 'gentry' in these areas is not permanent and is rather transient in character. Unlike tourists, who

typically visit for short-term leisure and recreation, transient gentrifiers may stay for extended periods, often seeking temporary relocation to capitalize on the unique amenities and lifestyle offered by the area. They may work remotely or take extended breaks from urban life, thereby embedding themselves more deeply into the local culture and economy than traditional tourists. Therefore, this research provides valuable insights into how Airbnb listings operationalize these concepts to transform the socio-economic and cultural landscape of Joshua Tree and add valuable insights into the literature on the commodification of nature and desert perspectives, explicitly linking the two.

Furthermore, amenity migration explains how individuals' pursuit of 'authentic' nature experiences drives significant socioeconomic and cultural shifts in rural and natural areas, as detailed in the works of Williams, Osbaldiston, Stoker, and others. However, they fail to fully explain the mechanisms driving this migration and its transient nature. By examining the specific role of Airbnb in facilitating these dynamics, this thesis contributes a nuanced understanding of these mechanisms and their implications for communities like Joshua Tree. Additionally, gentrification, particularly in rural contexts, is a critical issue tied to amenity migration. The influx of wealthier individuals into previously marginalized areas catalyzes profound changes, often at the expense of long-standing communities. The interconnectedness of Airbnb's platform with gentrification reveals a new dimension of community transformation, where short-term rental dynamics alter the fabric of urban and rural settings, as explored by Cocola-Gant and others. Despite these connections, Airbnb research lacks understanding as to how the presence of these short-term rentals not only affects visitors' perceptions of these specific places, but also of their surrounding environments. This thesis addresses this gap by providing empirical evidence on the influence of Airbnb on Joshua Tree's cultural and social landscape.

Similarly, placemaking and place branding offer insightful perspectives on the conscious creation and marketing of spaces, emphasizing the importance of authenticity, community engagement, and the preservation of the intrinsic values of a place. The studies by Friedmann, Pierce, Martin, Murphy, and others underline the need for a balanced approach that respects both the physical and the sociocultural dimensions of spaces, though they lack a direct connection to how digital platforms like Airbnb can influence these processes. As a result, this research integrates these perspectives, demonstrating how digital placemaking through Airbnb listings shapes visitor perceptions and experiences, ultimately redefining community identity and socio-economic structures in Joshua Tree. By focusing on the narratives crafted through Airbnb, this research highlights the power of digital platforms in defining how places are perceived and experienced. The empirical analysis of Airbnb listings in Joshua Tree will reveal how digital narratives and commodification strategies manifest in a specific, rapidly evolving market, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic and cultural transformations driven by digital platforms. This thesis not only enhances the understanding of digital placemaking but also provides practical insights into the impacts of tourism that perpetuate certain cultural ideas about escaping to natural places, commodifying the natural environment, and influencing local communities.

Despite these connections made within this literature, it has yet to explicitly make a connection between platforms like Airbnb and their role in essentially placemaking and place branding rural communities perceived to be rooted in nature by appealing to urban dwellers' preconceptions of nature, specifically deserts, pointing towards this complex relationship as one of the many mechanisms which drive transient gentrification. Therefore, this thesis aims to

bridge these gaps between the various engaged literature areas while simultaneously adding individual contributions.

This literature review underscores the critical need for an integrated approach to understanding and addressing the intricate relationship between humans and nature, uncovering the need to reconsider the prevailing paradigms that shape our interactions with the natural world and instead look toward strategies that promote a deeper connection with the environment. The insights garnered from this review pave the foundation for the in-depth analysis of Airbnb listing descriptions in the high desert of California, specifically in the community of Joshua Tree, that this thesis will explore, which will ultimately explore the practical implications of these theories on this specific community. Though before we begin our analysis, we must give an in-depth contextual analysis of Joshua Tree and the High Desert.

Context

Joshua Tree, a small unincorporated community of about 7,400 residents roughly a 2.5-hour drive southeast of Los Angeles, has a rich history as a small mining and ranching town (San Bernardino County, 2019). The construction and expansion of the Twentynine Palms Highway, or State Route 62, led to the community's significant growth due to improved access to the area (Dilsaver, 2016). People worldwide have recognized the area because of its proximity to Joshua Tree National Park. However, to understand the current situation of Airbnb-linked gentrification, it is important to understand how both Joshua Tree and Joshua Tree National Park came to be. Specifically, a thorough historical and social context for the incredible rise of the area as a tourist hotspot and the explosion of Airbnb is crucial for understanding the subsequent analysis, as Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) is heavily context-specific, as mentioned by various researchers (Bengtsson, 2016; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Kohlbacher, 2006; Krippendorff, 2018;

Mayring, 2000; Schreier, 2012). Though Joshua Tree and its respective national park are loved by many in Southern California and beyond, its preservation has been a constant battle, with many instances of people seeking to extract as much as possible from what many called an empty wasteland.

Joshua Tree National Park

For most of its modern history, Joshua Tree and the high desert of Southern California were seen as places of extraction, where miners and ranchers flocked to in hopes of finding riches within what many dubbed a ‘desolate wasteland,’ (Dilsaver, 2016). However, it was not until the 1930s that access to the desert surrounding Joshua Tree became more accessible to visitors by creating a portion of what is now State Route 62, which now stretches from the I-10 freeway at Whitewater, CA, to State Route 95 in Parker, AZ. Many early visitors during this time coveted the desert for its “qualities of solitude and sublimity,” which is a sentiment very much shared by visitors today (Dilsaver, 2016). This newfound fascination with the desert, coupled with trends in conservation at the time, which sought to preserve every type of unique ecosystem present in the US, paved the way for what is now Joshua Tree National Park. In 1933, through widespread support for establishing a National Park in the desert region encompassing Joshua Tree, the US government assessed over 1,000,000 acres of the desert for a proposed national monument, stretching from the high desert to the low desert near the Salton Sea (Dilsaver, 2016). Supporters included activist and conservationist Minerva Hamilton Hoyt and architect and city planner Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. In a recommendation to establish a park in the area a few years prior, Olmsted Jr. emphasized that desert areas possess a distinctive and subtle charm, largely due to their spaciousness, solitude, and escape from human control and manipulation, which is becoming increasingly valuable as human activities dominate more of the earth. As a

result, we can see that even early on in its history, the area surrounding what is now Joshua Tree National Park was commonly seen as a place to escape places that were “dominated by man’s activities,” like large metropolitan areas (Dilsaver, 2016).

Though the originally proposed area for a national monument was expansive, it was quickly cut down to closer to its current size, with the government officially approving a national monument of 825,000 acres in 1936 after heavy opposition from miners seeking to preserve their rights for the extraction of precious minerals from the desert (Dilsaver, 2016). A few years later, in 1950, the national monument again decreased in size by 267,000 acres. Despite this, many of the same supporters of this elimination of protected areas did not take advantage of the new areas opened back up for extraction. By the 1980s, most mining operations ceased in this area of the Desert, leaving many wondering what to do with the resulting pits and how to revive the area's economy (Dilsaver, 2016).

To continue capitalizing on the perceptions of the desert, The Kaiser Company proposed a large landfill in its old mines at Eagle Mountain but was unsuccessful through strong backlash from community members and conservation efforts (Dilsaver, 2016). To permanently close off a portion of the desert from continual extraction and destruction, the California Desert Protection Act passed in 1994, officially creating the Joshua Tree National Park and expanding its size to what it is today of 795,000 acres. However, this has not stopped new forms of physical energy extraction from trying to take advantage of the desert, with many solar generation plans attempting to establish themselves in the area (Dilsaver, 2016).

In recent years, great strides have been made in further protecting the desert, with a newly proposed national monument of 700,000 acres, the Chuckwalla National Monument, that is adjacent to Joshua Tree National Park, potentially paving the way for the expansion of the

park. Additionally, the Western Joshua Tree recently received permanent protections to preserve the species considering studies showing its susceptibility to climate change and ongoing environmental destruction in the area through rapid development (Rode, 2023b; Singh, 2023). Despite the significant success in protecting the desert and its unique species from further physical extraction, a less visible form of extraction, that of cultural and economic extraction, has been taking over the desert in the last few years.

The area of Joshua Tree and the high desert is no stranger to visitors. The first year the area received more than 1,000,000 visitors was in 1990. In recent years, the area has exploded in popularity, with the park seeing its most visitors ever in 2021, with more than 3,000,000 visitors – more than double the park’s visitation from years prior to 2014, with trends predicted to keep increasing for the foreseeable future (Albrinck, 2021; Rode, 2023a). This increasing popularity has many community members concerned for the area's environment. During the 2019 government shutdown, visitors flocked to the National Park to ride their off-roading vehicles inside the park's trails, causing the park to sustain considerable damage (Chiu, 2019; Damien, 2023). Additionally, a recent meteor shower, the Perseids Meteor Shower, caused thousands from Southern California to travel to the park in hopes of getting the best view. This mass influx of visitors also left the park with considerable damage. Due to the rapid popularization of the area, visitor demographics to the park have also changed considerably over the last decade.

A demographic survey of Joshua Tree National Park visitors shows that visitors have become whiter, younger, and more educated over the past decade (National Park Service, 2020). Nearly half of all visitors come from within California, primarily Southern California. Visitors from Los Angeles County account for nearly 30% of the total, which isn't surprising as Joshua Tree National Park is the nearest national park accessible by land travel for most of Southern

California. The survey also indicates that more people are choosing to stay overnight in areas around the park, increasing from 33.7% to 46.5% and averaging about three nights during their trip. Given the current visitor trends, the area potentially accommodates more than 1.5 million people seeking multiple-night accommodation in the surrounding area every year. These intriguing and unsettling processes in these high desert communities have warranted longtime residents' concerns about rapid change in the community (Dailymail, 2018; LAist, 2017; C. Reynolds, 2022). Though locals are worried about visitors that may be new to the area not respecting its environment and degrading it, many are also worried about the damage they may be doing to the housing and accessibility of the community to long-time residents, with many claiming the area's popularity among elites, celebrities, and overall more affluent people from metropolitan areas driving many to visit the area in recent years, leading to rising housing and social issues.

Early Joshua Tree

Joshua Tree is no stranger to capturing mainstream media and pop culture's imagination. Most famously, U2's "The Joshua Tree" album solidified desert communities as a place of rejuvenation, escape, and where artists could find inspiration (Baldwin, 2023; Scharkey, 2017). Though people from cities across Southern California have always visited the desert, the level to which it has been happening over recent years is unprecedented, with longtime residents of the area attributing this to the area's popularity among elites and celebrities over the last few decades. As mentioned, this rise in popularity is evident in the number of visitors to the area, increasing from 1.4 million in 2011 to over 3 million by 2021. Celebrities like Paul McCartney, Jared Leto, Jason Momoa, Beyoncé, Jay-Z, Miley Cyrus, and others have substantially popularized the area through their social media presence and public appearances (Meares, 2021).

Many attribute the area's draw of such individuals from urban backgrounds to its naturally charming landscapes and the sense of freedom it offers. People seeking a change from the fast-paced city life claim to find a place to reinvent themselves in Joshua Tree.

The increasing glamorization and influx of tourists from cities like Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, New York, and beyond, fueled by social media and events like the nearby Coachella Valley Music Festival, have created a disconnect between community members and visitors (Booth, 2022; Hely, 2019; Scharkey, 2017). The community's portrayal as a trendy ecotourism spot contrasts sharply with the realities faced by its permanent residents. As a result, many residents feel like they must educate new visitors to the area not only about the delicate desert ecosystem but also about the potential distortions created by social media. The challenges for Joshua Tree, now, are balancing and preserving its unique character while managing tourism and development pressures.

Long-time residents of high desert communities like Joshua Tree have long acknowledged the constant changes in their neighborhoods and have always been vocal in their opposition to it. An early case of community members fighting against perceived threats to the community was organizing efforts against a Dollar General store, which many believed was a sign of gentrification arriving in the area, fearing it would disrupt the unique character that Joshua Tree developed over its history (Kelman, 2015; Nazaryan, 2016). Happening over a decade ago, this conflict reflects the current deeper debate about maintaining the community's identity amidst evolving and shifting economic and cultural landscapes.

The Dollar General store proposal, first brought to the community's attention in 2012, was met with mixed reactions (Kelman, 2014, 2015). While some residents saw the benefits of the convenience and affordability the store would bring, especially for low-income families,

others worried about its impact on the area's distinct personality of locally owned shops and viewed it as a sign of encroaching gentrification. The store's development, approved by the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors in January 2013, sparked a strong community response, including a Facebook group, "NO Dollar General in Joshua Tree," which garnered over 1,100 members and remains active. Despite strong opposition from the community, the store was ultimately built and is currently in operation. Community members perceived this struggle in Joshua Tree as part of a broader pattern of gentrification observed across various regions at the time, with a resident observing that gentrification in the desert mirrors patterns seen in places like East Los Angeles. This situation in Joshua Tree represents the tension between preserving local culture and accommodating economic development amid rising tourism in the area.

Community members also drew comparisons to nearby Palm Springs, another desert city coveted for its trendy atmosphere, with some claiming the transformation of Palm Springs from a faded mid-century oasis to now revived with modern establishments illustrates the ripple effect of such changes (Nazaryan, 2016; C. Reynolds, 2022). As Palm Springs regains popularity, residents speculated about the next "cool" destination once Palm Springs is declared "over" by people looking for the next trendy spot, highlighting the cyclical nature of gentrification, where once overlooked areas become coveted, leading to a shift in their cultural and economic landscapes. Amidst these shifts, Joshua Tree finds itself at a crossroads, grappling with the challenge of balancing growth and preservation. However, it seems like Joshua Tree has become the 'cool' new place in recent years, leaving many residents worried about their and the desert's future.

Joshua Tree, remembered by locals as a quiet desert community with a small population of permanent residents, along with nearby Pioneertown and other surrounding desert areas, has

become a hotspot for real estate (Beckett, 2022; Hwang, 2022; Parvini, 2021). Many residents attribute the significant increase to be largely driven by affluent professionals from Los Angeles and other metropolitan areas, who are believed to be drawn to the area because of its simplicity and potential for Airbnb revenue. According to local residents, land prices have skyrocketed, increasing six to seven times their original value in the last few years (Lozano, 2021). Therefore, many residents say the area is witnessing a phenomenon where properties sell for inflated amounts, often due to unsolicited offers from eager buyers looking to claim a piece of the desert for themselves, which many believe has led to the explosion of the vacation rental market in the area.

Joshua Tree Now: Short-Term Rentals

According to a longtime real estate agent in the area, a significant uptick in affluent clients led to a spike in property prices that have become unaffordable for many locals. Although the short-term rental market in the early 2010s and prior was small and had little impact in the community, locals note that around 2015, the market in the area started to boom (Estrada, 2023; Murphy, 2022; Rode, 2022a, 2022b). This boom coincides with the increasing popularity of the nearby Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival and Airbnb's sedimentation in the 'sharing economy,' reaching record-breaking active users and listings (Hely, 2019; Scharkey, 2017; Thomas, 2022). In stark contrast to the scarcity of hotels in the area, vacation rentals have become a characteristic feature of Joshua Tree. Demand for unique properties, especially those featuring favorable characteristics like boulders, privacy, and scenic views, has dramatically increased their market value and often attracts multiple offers, leading to escalating prices.

This incredible increase in demand has led to a staggering increase in property values. Between 2015 and 2016, prices in the area increased by more than 30%, and the availability of

homes for local residents became half of what it was (Dailymail, 2018; LAist, 2017; Scharkey, 2018). Additionally, properties with desirable characteristics for Airbnb rentals can have a markup of up to 50% over similar properties with less distinctive features. The unprecedented growth in tourism and demand in the housing market has put Joshua Tree and other desert communities in the spotlight for investors looking to make large returns on their investments. From June 2016 to June 2017, Airbnb listings surged by 48%, increasing to over 300 listings. This surge in short-term rentals has reshaped the community, with long-time residents like Mike Wilson, a general contractor in the area for almost 20 years, observing that in 2018, clients from as far as San Diego and San Francisco were purchasing second homes solely for rental purposes, with some of these properties generating significant incomes, with one of Wilson's clients at the time reportedly earning \$20,000 a month from two rental properties they own (Lozano, 2021).

Per Zillow data, Joshua Tree has seen considerable increases in its real estate and housing market prices over the last year or so, with many believing it to be spurred by the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Data show that the three ZIP codes with the largest increases in real estate values during the pandemic were all in the high desert area (Ferré, 2022; Hwang, 2022; Karlamangla, 2022; Parvini, 2021; Sahagun, 2020b). Landers, Joshua Tree, and Twentynine Palms have seen unprecedented rises in property values, with Landers leading at an 84% increase, followed by Joshua Tree with 69% and Twentynine Palms with 63%. This dramatic shift contrasts starkly with what values were in the past, where the market was dominated by homes valued at or below \$100,000. Now, the region is witnessing properties selling for nearly \$2 million, a testament to this once-remote area's changing economic and social landscape. Many residents claim the pandemic has further transformed the area, turning a once-hidden market into a highly competitive one where locals are easily priced out by more affluent professionals from

metropolitan areas. As a result, Joshua Tree and its surrounding areas are rapidly being perceived by locals as an extension of Los Angeles' urban sprawl.

At the height of the pandemic, the desire to flee California's dense urban centers drove city-to-rural migration, with people moving to isolated high desert communities to seek refuge from potential public unrest and a safer environment away from the virus, enabled by remote work; an urgency ordinance passed by San Bernardino County supports these claims, noting that the COVID-19 pandemic led to a dramatic increase in tourism, new short-term residential rental listings, and occupancy rates in the mountain and desert regions, accompanied by community concerns about STR guests' behavior, including noise, parties, disruptive events, overoccupancy, parking problems, and safety issues (Estrada, 2023; Rode, 2022a, 2022b; Whitehead, 2018).

Rental market trends in the area also reflect this shift, with potential renters from urban areas at the height of the pandemic emphasizing the need for social distancing and the ability to work remotely, which shows that this is not just a short-term trend (Pruitt, 2021; Sahagun, 2020b). Rather, it could indicate a deeper, more permanent shift in lifestyle preferences, as exemplified by families also relocating to the area to enjoy what they perceive as a quieter, less stressful environment. Real estate agents in the area also confirm that the migration to the high desert is driven by the search for affordable housing and larger plots of land, with the pandemic-induced shift towards remote work making relocating to more isolated communities feasible for many. The pandemic has undoubtedly transformed Joshua Tree's real estate market and altered the social fabric and lifestyle of the high desert communities. The influx of new players in the region, driven by the search for more space, cleaner air, the possibility of remote work, and profitable investment, has led to significant changes in the area's dynamics, from housing prices to its overall demographics.

For most of its recent history, Joshua Tree has been made up of a predominantly low-income white population, followed by Hispanics, who, as of 2021, comprised less than a quarter of the total residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021, U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Though the demographic makeup has remained virtually the same since the 2010 census, the 2020 census reported a 12.5% drop in the population from 2010, with a corresponding increase of 33.6% in vacant units, largely due to their use as short-term rentals. As mentioned, the demand for short-term rentals has soared, with Joshua Tree becoming one of the fastest-growing markets in California and the United States. Between 2019 and 2021, the demand for these rentals increased by 54%. As of October 2023, more than 1,400 entire-home Airbnb short-term rentals exist in Joshua Tree alone, exceeding 3,000 when accounting for all high desert communities in the area.

Similarly, third-party Airbnb data scraper Air DNA's 2022 report lists Joshua Tree as one of the top 10 most profitable places to operate an Airbnb within the United States (Air DNA, 2023). Not only has this rapid transformation taken many longtime residents by surprise but also short-term rental veterans in the area, with many claiming that neighborhoods where they were once the only rental, almost the entire neighborhood is now made up of them (Ferré, 2022). In fact, the market has become so saturated that many rental owners have begun purchasing adjacent undeveloped lots to maintain an atmosphere that many visitors to the area seek in a rental, such as that of open space and solitude (Sahagun, 2018). This immense growth has presented longtime residents with significant challenges and is now causing friction between themselves and the transient population visiting the area for only a few days. Therefore, increases in property prices and the influx of wealthier buyers are pushing lower-income residents out of the market, leaving many with mixed feelings about the future (Beckett, 2022; LAist, 2017).

Community Reactions

The influx of new residents, visitors, and businesses into Joshua Tree and surrounding high desert communities is causing deep-seated tensions and significant changes within the local community (Lozano, 2021). Long-time residents who have cherished desert communities' tranquility and unique character are now facing significant challenges as the area becomes a hotspot for tourists and new settlers. This shift has led many longtime residents to notice increased noise, parties, and parking problems, to name a few, which are increasingly common and fuel concerns about preserving the area's distinct personality. Local opinions on these changes vary widely (Meares, 2021; San Bernardino County, 2023; Scharkey, 2017, 2018). While some residents appreciate the economic growth and new opportunities these changes bring, others are wary of the rapid transformation and commercialization, particularly with the rise of short-term rentals. This trend is seen as a move away from the traditional values of the community, shifting towards profit-driven motives rather than the desire for a peaceful retreat. Local real estate agents highlight the growing friction among residents, signaling a significant shift in the community's dynamics.

The proliferation of Airbnb and VRBO rentals, where properties are commonly cross listed, has not only altered the housing landscape but also impacted the availability of affordable housing for most low-income community members. With the rise of the tourist market, young people and new workers migrating to the area, who may lack the necessary resources to buy or rent a home, are finding it increasingly difficult to find long-term housing options (Scharkey, 2018). As mentioned, this situation is worsened by the influx of outside investors and new residents who convert properties into short-term rentals, reducing long-term residency options. As residents have pointed out, the disappearance of affordable rental options is another critical

aspect of this transformation (Sahagun, 2018). Properties that were once inexpensive rentals are now mostly converted into Airbnb accommodations. The influx of new money and outside investors is changing Joshua Tree from once a low-cost trip for a weekend to a weeklong resort destination for affluent tourists and families looking to spend big money, leading to increased traffic, noise, and other disturbances (Sahagun, 2020a).

The impact of short-term rentals on the community is profound, as noted by residents. It is not just the scarcity of rental units but also their skyrocketing prices, making them unaffordable for many longtime residents (Rode, 2022a). This situation creates a challenging environment for lower-income residents and those employed in the area. Property managers in the region have started witnessing unprecedented evictions from owners selling their properties, leading to what a community member called a "musical housing" scenario, where families struggle to find new homes in an increasingly tight and expensive market (Rode, 2022a). Residents who have taken work in the short-term rental cleaning business illustrate the struggle in balancing economic benefits with the loss of community essence, with many left in dismay at the transformation of their neighborhoods, where transient renters replace long-term residents, eroding the sense of community and familiarity. The influx of tourists is also a major concern, with locals expressing frustration with the behavior of vacationers who often disrupt the peace with loud music and leave trash behind. This behavior contrasts with the quiet, wildlife-rich desert life long-time residents once enjoyed.

Locals compare the current situation of the high desert to other vacationing hotspots like Tulum, Mexico, where rapid tourism growth led to overwhelmed infrastructure and a loss of local character (C. Reynolds, 2022). Stories of residents having to downsize significantly, compromising on living conditions to find affordable housing, and moving into more precarious

housing are becoming more common. The decrease in housing and the surge in rental prices make it increasingly unaffordable for many locals. A sight that is becoming increasingly familiar in the high desert is the stark contrast between rising home prices and the influx of luxury cars alongside local vehicles with "Go back to L.A." stickers symbolizing the growing divide between newcomers and the established community (Lozano, 2021). Many longtime residents who have watched family members and friends leave due to unaffordability and, as a result, have lost crucial social networks, underscoring the personal impact of these changes (Beckett, 2022).

The transformation happening in the high desert is not just economic; it is also about communities like Joshua Tree losing their unique identity, with many expressing that those city-dwellers visiting or moving to the area turned it into the very place they were trying to get away from. As community members point out, the characteristics that once attracted people to Joshua Tree, what many believed were the funky vibes, quietness, and clear night skies, are now overshadowed by the housing and tourist boom as well as the influx of homogeneous rental properties that all have the same look and feel that shows what many see as being a "desert getaway." This change reshapes the physical and cultural landscape, eroding the close-knit community bonds that have long defined the area (Beckett, 2022). Therefore, the influx of tourists and short-term rentals into Joshua Tree, among other factors, represents a complex and multi-faceted issue profoundly impacting the community's social fabric, the housing market, and local culture. The tensions arising from this shift reflect deeper concerns about preserving the unique character of the desert communities amidst rapid growth and change.

Addressing Short-Term Rentals

Local governments in the high desert areas, including Joshua Tree, Yucca Valley, and Twentynine Palms, have implemented measures to address the challenges brought by the growth

of short-term rentals (STRs) and secondary vacation homes (Estrada, 2023; Karlamangla, 2022; Rode, 2022a, 2022b; Whitehead, 2018). This growth, driven by the region's unique appeal and the rise of platforms like Airbnb, has led to increased tax revenues but also significant community and environmental issues. Hosts in the county earned more than \$55 million in 2017 alone from STRs. To manage these challenges, the Yucca Valley town council voted to tighten rental restrictions, capping short-term rentals at 10% of the town's single-family housing units. Similarly, Twentynine Palms set their cap at 500 units, about 8.6% of the city's single-family housing stock (Rode, 2022a). These regulatory approaches aim to balance economic growth with maintaining the quality of life for residents.

In unincorporated areas like Joshua Tree, regulating short-term rentals falls under the jurisdiction of the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors. Approximately 36% of housing units in unincorporated Joshua Tree are permitted as short-term rentals, based on 3,745 total housing units (Rode, 2022a). However, discrepancies between county records and third-party data suggest many unlicensed rentals operate in the area, exacerbating community disruptions and environmental issues. For example, third-party Airbnb data scraper Air DNA reported about 1,400 rentals, while the county reported 1,227 permitted rentals (Air DNA, 2023). Early reports suggested upwards of 800 unlicensed rental properties in Joshua Tree alone, which has led to community disruptions, environmental issues, and a housing shortage for local residents (Rode, 2022b). In response to community concerns, the county supervisors have approved several amendments to existing STR ordinances, including limits on the number of rentals per parcel and occupancy limits based on unit size (Rode, 2022b). For instance, only one rental is allowed on parcels under 2 acres, and two are allowed on parcels over 2 acres, with occupancy limits of 4

guests for one-bedroom or studio-sized units, allowing two additional guests for every additional room up to a maximum of 12 guests.

The rise of the STR market has led to significant community backlash. In 2019, the county received only eight complaints related to short-term rentals, which grew to 439 in 2020, 362 in 2021, and reached an all-time high of 543 in 2022, underscoring the growing tensions between residents and tourists (Rode, 2022b). These complaints often involve noise, parties, parking problems, and other disruptions, highlighting the community's struggle to maintain its character amidst the influx of visitors. Despite these regulatory efforts, many residents believe that the measures are insufficient to address the rapid changes brought by the growth of short-term rentals. The ongoing tension between preserving community identity and managing economic growth remains a significant challenge for Joshua Tree and its surrounding areas.

Throughout their long history and relationship with metropolitan centers like Los Angeles, the cultural, economic, and environmental landscapes of high desert communities like Joshua Tree have shifted dramatically. The current 'gold rush' of Airbnb's in the area is a testament to this. Despite the recent explosion of interest in high desert communities, it seems like a saturation, or stabilization point, has been reached in the area, something many residents have hoped for (Rode, 2022a). A recent study of Airbnb in unincorporated regions released by San Bernardino County states that the short-term rental market in the county is now showing a downward trend. However, the same report still indicates Joshua Tree as one of the communities in the county currently the most affected by short-term rentals. Therefore, given these alarming trends, through an in-depth qualitative analysis of listing descriptions of Airbnb's in Joshua Tree, we can begin to uncover what underlying effects their presence and marketing have had on the

growing interest in the area, specifically through their use of the operationalization of the human nature dichotomy, art and aesthetics, and desert perceptions.

Methods

As a part of this paper, I conduct a qualitative content analysis of Airbnb data as my main intervention. Specifically, I analyze individual listing descriptions for various Airbnb properties around Joshua Tree, focusing on the 50 most reviewed listings as of October 2023. This selection was made using the third-party Airbnb data scraper AirDNA, which, as of October 2023, allowed users to look at individual listings for specific geographical regions sorted by review count, cost, and profitability. The sort option was used to manually identify the 50 listings in Joshua Tree with the most reviews and most expensive per night cost. Once sorted, the name of the rental property was placed into a search engine, which then returned the appropriate listing page for it on the Airbnb website. Once on the listings page on the Airbnb website, all data was collected manually. Additionally, to address any ethical concerns, given the public nature of Airbnb listings and the ease of anyone accessing the same exact data used in this paper, there are no related ethical issues with the method used to collect the data for this paper.

In selecting the 50 listings in Joshua Tree, the primary factor for inclusion was the number of reviews a rental had. Though some may argue that prioritizing other factors for the dataset, such as an even geographical distribution or diversity among rental owners, given the objectives for this paper, I believe focusing on rentals that are most popular among visitors, which reviews are a strong indicator of, is appropriate (Kohlbacher, 2006). However, it was also decided to include the top ten most expensive listings in Joshua Tree, not including listings that may have already been selected based on the review count, to diversify listings. However, as

explained later, this had little to no effect as a saturation point was reached before analyzing these listings.

Once data was collected, it was exported to the qualitative data analysis software package Dedoose. The fact that a QDAS was used in this paper is also important to acknowledge because, as Kaefer et al. mentioned, qualitative software packages should not be considered irrelevant to the research methodology (Kaefer et al., 2015). The primary motive behind using a QDAS was to support and make the analysis easier to manage. In the past, I have tried using other methods to do a QCA that did not involve software, making the analysis unnecessarily harder and tedious. Therefore, QDAS only helps to improve the subsequent analysis by helping to organize coding frames and the coded data, which could ultimately enhance the appropriate application of the methodology. Additionally, Dedoose was picked as the QDAS of choice because of its low-cost option offered to students, which is reasonably priced. As stated by Kaefer, qualitative researchers' biggest critique of QDAS within qualitative studies is its expensive cost (Kaefer et al., 2015).

Furthermore, by following Schreier's guidance, I further separated my data into relevant and irrelevant categories to distill my material into the most relevant parts of my research (Schreier, 2012). I classified most of the material as relevant, labeling only the technical and administrative parts of the description as irrelevant. These included discussions of extra fees, details about specific amenities, legal information, etc., which did not pertain to my research. I also made sure to document other important characteristics of these rentals and only consider rentals listed as entire homes. This criterion would likely have a minor impact during data collection, as more than 94% of rentals in this area are entire home rentals, meaning very few listings are omitted entirely from being considered. The additional data collected includes the

nightly rate, hostname, Airbnb ID, rental name, house type, the URL to the listing, and finally relevant pictures to use as visual aids alongside my chosen excerpts for a given listing. If pictures had an attached caption, this is included as well below the picture in italicized quotes. Though this thesis is not a visual QCA that directly analyzes images, I made the decision to include them as I believe them to be inseparable to the listing description, as it is likely when a potential visitor is reading them, they are likely then seeing the pictures alongside with it. Though an in-depth visual QCA was a possibility, due to time constraints I ultimately decided to instead only focus on a textual QCA. Therefore, this inclusion only supports my analysis. Furthermore, this approach in data collection was aimed at capturing the most popular type of Airbnb experience in Joshua Tree, therefore allowing for the subsequent analysis of their listing descriptions. I will now elaborate on my adopted process to ensure a reliable and accurate analysis.

In deciding how to generate and structure my coding frame, the second step in the process, Schreier outlines three approaches: a concept-driven way, which leverages information I already possess; a data-driven way, which allows categories to emerge during data examination; or a combination of the two (Schreier, 2012). I chose the third option for my coding frame. Initially, I constructed a basic coding framework of themes I expected to encounter during my data review. However, as soon as I started coding, I quickly decided to introduce new themes, eliminate some, or consolidate others. While doing this, it was important to ensure all categories and subcategories were mutually exclusive, a task I endeavored to perform as accurately as possible. This task was especially challenging due to the specific nature of my study and the subtle differences between some statements.

After constructing my coding frame, I defined each category by describing the characteristics of that category and by indicating which aspects of the data point to each category

or subcategory. The continuous revising, expanding, and condensing I performed while coding my data was a significant part of my process. This ensured that my coding frame remained consistent, reliable, and accurate, which I will expand on later.

Additionally, I decided to segment the analysis data into workable units of coding. This differs from my unit of analysis, which would be each individual listing description. As outlined by Schreier, there are two ways of deciding my units of coding: using formal criteria or thematic criteria. Formal criteria use embedded structures, like in the case of text data, which could be sentences, words, paragraphs, etc. Thematic criterion is looser and relies on the flow of themes and changes in topic. Formal criteria have the advantage of being unambiguous, while thematic criteria are more ambiguous. Although my data could easily be coded using formal criteria, it became clear that sentences often consisted of multiple themes, which I could not code into a single category/subcategory. Therefore, I did adopt a formal criteria approach, when possible, but I allowed sentences to be divided into themes to ensure no nuances in the data were omitted. As stated by Bengtsson, this could also be referred to as a meaning unit, the smallest unit that can be coded to provide insights into the questions being answered (Bengtsson, 2016).

Furthermore, according to Krippendorff, qualitative content analysis involves systematically and objectively examining written data to identify patterns, themes, or categories (Krippendorff, 2018). Furthermore, Neuendorf states that qualitative content analysis typically requires coding text into predefined categories and quantifying the occurrence of these categories (Neuendorf, 2023). More precisely, in her book *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice*, Margrit Schreier provides a comprehensive approach to qualitative content analysis, which I rigorously followed (Schreier, 2012). Additionally, my methodology in developing my QCA primarily draws from and builds upon the frameworks of human-nature dichotomies developed by Cronon

and many ideas around amenity migration and other literature areas engage with earlier in the literature review, but also heavily draws from existing research into Airbnb's though it diverges in its focus on instead qualitatively analyzing the contents of Airbnb's listing descriptions, adding a new dimension to the study of short-term rentals and the overall effect they are having on placemaking, perceptions of the desert, etc. Also, it is important to note that this study relies on an explication type of QCA. As mentioned by Marying, there are three types of QCA, and explication specifically aims to explain and clarify the materials. Another crucial aspect in developing a QCA is having a relatively high reliability and validity, ensuring the coding frame was developed correctly.

According to Schreier, reliability in QCA is achieved through a consistent coding frame, which can be achieved through coding comparisons between two people or by an individual coding at different points in time (Schreier, 2012). Therefore, to ensure coding reliability, separate rounds of coding were conducted at different points in time on a subset of the data, where then, after the coding, discrepancies were analyzed and resolved, ensuring a consistent application of the coding frame. On the other hand, Schreier states that validity is ultimately more important in QCA than reliability, though it could be harder to achieve depending on the analysis. Validity in QCA refers to how well the categories developed in the coding frame sufficiently represent the ideas/theories trying to be explained in each study. Validity varies widely, but it mostly depends on how a study interprets its content's meaning, whether manifest or latent (Schreier, 2012). A manifest analysis is essentially just describing what is said within the content being analyzed, while latent analysis aims to be more interpretive about the underlying meanings of what is being said. Schreier states that it is easier to maintain validity through a manifest analysis than a latent analysis because the latter approach requires larger

inferential ‘leaps.’ Despite this, validity can be maintained within a latent analysis by providing additional supporting evidence to claims made in the form of statistics, contextual background, and more. Therefore, because this study will rely mostly upon latent analysis, the previous comprehensive context/background section will be heavily referenced, as will additional quotes from residents from various news articles related to the themes explored.

Validity must also be extended to the coding frame used in this paper. Schreier explains four types of validity, including face, content, criterion, and construct, where face and content validity are the only ones that need to be addressed for a QCA (Schreier, 2012). Face validity is used when assessing data-driven coding frames and can be interpreted as low when they have disproportionate frequencies among categories and subcategories and when codes are too abstract. Additionally, when using concept-driven coding frames, content validity should be used to assess validity and can be deemed sufficiently valid through the evaluation of other experts. However, it is usually achieved through ensuring reliability. Despite this, if a coding frame shows signs of ‘low’ validity, it may not be the case that it is actually low, as certain concepts within the materials being coded may be important to the analysis. However, other external factors could also affect reliability and validity. As outlined by Bengtsson, human mistakes like fatigue, interpretation errors, and personal biases can affect validity and reliability (Bengtsson, 2016). Therefore, given these different ways that can be taken to ensure high reliability and validity, certain steps were taken to increase them, such as a pilot phase.

Before an actual QCA, an important step is implementing a pilot phase for the coding frame used on 15 random Airbnb listings in Joshua Tree. Schreier notes that a pilot QCA helps identify any shortcomings of a coding frame, which it did and allowed me to rectify my codes and organization before, during, and after conducting my coding analysis. (Schreier, 2012)

During the pilot phase with the 15 listings, I identified many issues with my original coding frame, such as over-generalizing certain categories or focusing too much on a category/subcategory that ultimately was irrelevant to my analysis. For example, the initial coding frame included categories like “comfort,” “Landmarks,” “Activities,” and other categories that focused specifically on mentions of city/urban areas. However, as I conducted the pilot analysis, these errors ultimately led to a more refined coding frame that better captured specific aspects and new themes like “Branded Amenities,” “Outdoor Activities,” “emptiness,” and “As Refuge” emerged, leading to the evolution and refinement of the coding frame to better reflect the contents of the data for my specific analysis. As mentioned by Kaefer et al., this kind of systematic and flexible approach to data reduction and constant refinement is an aspect that makes QCA a particularly used methodology, allowing for coding frames and interpretations to adapt based on the materials used and questions being analyzed (Kaefer et al., 2015). Therefore, a pilot phase of my analysis allowed me to overcome many methodological challenges, ensuring that the categorization process did not oversimplify the nuances in the listings by continually refining the coding frame and consulting with my advisor for diverse perspectives to preserve these details.

Another important factor when conducting a QCA is ensuring a saturation point is reached, which can differ widely depending on the data being analyzed. However, as mentioned by Schrier, saturation in the dataset is reached once no new themes emerge within the coding frame (Schreier, 2012). Therefore, in this paper, it is believed that data saturation was reached after analyzing about 35-40 listings, as no new themes emerged once this point was reached. Despite this, an additional ten listings were analyzed to ensure comprehensiveness.

Additionally, despite including ten listings outside of the topmost reviewed listings, the major limitation of this study's methodology is its primary focus on the most reviewed listings, which may not represent less popular or newly listed properties. Additionally, my analysis is limited to only the textual data found within the descriptions, excluding textual data found within the title and visual elements of the listings, which can also hold considerable value in uncovering how the desert is perceived by visitors. Additionally, I have also decided to include visual aids using pictures provided by these Airbnb listings to provide important visual context. The main reason behind this is that the role of visual elements in engaging potential visitors to Joshua Tree cannot be understated, as Airbnb listings use high-quality photographs and curated aesthetics to present a stylized version of desert living. These visuals are undoubtedly carefully selected to highlight the natural environment's beauty and the accommodations' unique design.

It is also important to reflect on my positionality in this research type. Being born and raised in the nearby desert communities of the Coachella Valley, I possess certain contextual, cultural, and overall knowledge of these desert areas compared to some that are not from these places, giving me a unique perspective. Additionally, my connection to the high desert communities of Yucca Valley, Joshua Tree, Pioneertown, etc., has dramatically increased over the last six years as I frequently visited the area to see family. Through this increased connection to the area, I witnessed firsthand the changes happening in the community. However, it is also important to recognize that although I could be seen as a researcher from the community, I did not intend to have my findings and reflections represent how all community members feel about the issues explored in this paper. Therefore, these factors position me perfectly as a researcher of the issues explored in this paper, as Bengtsson states that preconceived knowledge and familiarity about the subject being studied are an advantage, though they could also be serious

limitations. (Bengtsson, 2016) Further stated by Bengtsson, it is also important to acknowledge that this deep connection to the area may make me biased toward certain conclusions and cloud my judgment, leading to serious misinterpretations due to my long-standing beliefs on the topics explored. Additionally, as a person with a background in urban planning studies with a long-standing opposition to Airbnb's and gentrification-driven development, my experiences may influence my interpretation of the Airbnb listings analyzed, and I recognize that my familiarity with ideas that are largely anti-short-term rental could bias me towards certain interpretations. Therefore, by acknowledging my positionality in this research, I have taken the appropriate steps to mitigate these biases by attempting to be as objective as possible throughout my research development.

This methodological approach directly supports my research objective to understand how Airbnb hosts in Joshua Tree are shaping and redefining the socio-cultural and environmental dynamics of the area through the operationalization of the human-nature dichotomy and capitalizing from long held perceptions of desert environments, effectively placemaking the desert through their marketing strategies. My research will contribute to academic knowledge and discussions on the intersections of gentrification, tourism, urban escapism, amenity migration, place-making, the commodification of nature, and the relationship between metropolitan areas and their rural counterparts, engaging in discussions around several different areas of literature, which all inadequately explain the processes occurring in the High Desert and similar communities.

Results

Table 1 Summary of Themes

<p>Theme 1: 'Escaping' the City</p>	<p>This theme emphasizes the contrast between urban environments and the tranquil natural settings of Joshua Tree. It draws on the idea of city dwellers seeking short-term rural retreats, balancing the desire for natural experiences with the comforts of urban life.</p>
<p>Theme 2: Arts, Aesthetics & Design</p>	<p>This theme illustrates how Airbnb listings in Joshua Tree utilize art, aesthetics, and design to appeal to visitors seeking unique cultural experiences, thereby crafting and redefining Joshua Tree's cultural and environmental identity. This approach showcases the area's natural beauty through curated artistic and design elements and risks prioritizing visitor experiences over local realities, contributing to a commodified and potentially distorted perception of Joshua Tree.</p>
<p>Theme 3: The Physical Desert</p>	<p>This theme refers to the marketing of Joshua Tree's desert landscape as a desirable commodity, including its flora, fauna, and unique physical characteristics. It encapsulates the transformation of natural elements and desert nature experiences into marketable assets that appeal to visitors seeking a distinct contrast from urban environments, highlighting the strategic packaging of natural beauty for commercial gain.</p>

<p>Theme 4: The Imagined and Mythicized Desert</p>	<p>This theme captures the marketing of Joshua Tree's desert environment as a space imbued with magic, inspiration, and otherworldliness, appealing to cultural and mystical perceptions of deserts. It reflects the transformation of the desert's natural beauty and unique qualities into enchanting experiences, promising visitors a profound, almost magical connection with nature that transcends the physical landscape.</p>
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The coding analysis extracted four key themes from the Airbnb descriptions analyzed. These themes include ‘Escaping’ the City, Arts, Aesthetics, & Design, The Physical Desert, and The Imagined and Mythicized Desert. By extrapolating from the various categories and subcategories developed through the software-assisted qualitative content analysis, the above-mentioned themes capture the main content and narratives woven into the property descriptions relevant to the research question for this paper. This form of thematic breakdown will help understand how Airbnb hosts in Joshua Tree position their listing descriptions to capitalize off the natural environment of Joshua Tree, its proximity and integration of urban amenities, and more.

Theme 1: ‘Escaping’ the City

This theme highlights a prevalent contrast across many of the Airbnb descriptions analyzed, emphasizing the stark differences between human-made environments like cities and the natural settings that characterize high desert communities like Joshua Tree while striking a balance with guests who seek rustic, natural experiences without foregoing the comforts of urban life. This heavily draws on Cronon's ideas of city dwellers seeking rural hinterlands for only

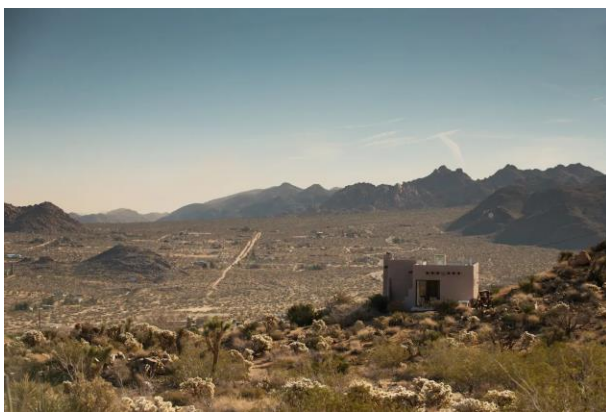
short periods of time, seeking to stay between what they perceive as the ‘wild and urban,’ as to experience ‘nature through escaping city and urban environments but not entirely letting go of the luxuries they can find in the city. Below are various excerpts that highlight this theme.

The following two excerpts are from different listings, one named the “Joshua Tree Adobe House,” which at the time of data collection costs 196 per night and holds a total of 509 reviews, and the other named “Dome in the Desert in Joshua Tree” costing 132 per night with 976 reviews. The hosts write:

Worlds away from crowds and traffic this lovely house is set on dirt roads in the **hushed wilderness** of Joshua Tree Highlands on 2.5 acres, and is a quick 2 miles to Joshua Tree National Park.

We welcome you to the Dome in the Desert! We created this space as **a personal escape from our busy city lives** and a place to re-energize in solace under the desert sky. Please explore our pictures and the description below, but feel free to contact us with additional comments and questions.

Figure 1 Image of “Joshua Tree Adobe House”



“That’s our house with National park in the distance,”

The above excerpts depict Joshua Tree and high desert communities as a serene escape from urban life, depicting tranquility and isolation. The descriptions emphasize a retreat into nature, highlighting the properties' secluded locations and their close proximity to Joshua Tree National Park. This theme likely resonates with urban dwellers seeking a break from their routine lives, offering a peaceful haven surrounded by nature's quiet ambiance, which aligns with long-lasting perceptions that outsiders have held over recent decades.

Furthermore, another description was pulled from a listing called “Villa Kuro - A Serene and Minimal Hideaway,” which costs 469 per night with 413 reviews. The hosts write:

Villa Kuro is intended for slow living, **providing an escape from the noise and stress of urban life.** The home sits at the end of a very small and peaceful residential neighborhood in south Joshua Tree. It’s great for those seeking a still quiet, but not completely isolated location from civilization.

Figure 2 Image of “Villa Kuro - A Serene and Minimal Hideaway”



“Villa Kuro sits at the end of a very small (only a handful of homes) residential neighborhood. Though we have next door neighbors, the property still feels private and is very quiet and peaceful.”

This description describes the concept of 'slow living,' illustrating the desire for simplicity and peace away from urban chaos that tourists to the area may hold. This listing

appeals to those who wish to disconnect from their fast-paced lives and enjoy a tranquil environment without completely isolating themselves from civilization.

The following excerpt is taken from a listing called “Scenic Cabin Getaway Stargaze Hot Tub Ebike 2 Acre” and costs 166 per night with 502 reviews. The hosts write:

Enjoy the **tranquility of nature** while being only **a few minutes away from downtown** attractions in this beautiful vacation home.

Figure 3 Image of “Scenic Cabin Getaway Stargaze Hot Tub Ebike 2 Acre”



“Captivating desert oasis with stunning city lights views, captured from above in this mesmerizing drone shot. Your tranquil escape awaits in this scenic Airbnb property.”

The above descriptions highlight the balance between an authentic nature experience and the modern amenities visitors seek. The rustic charm of the properties is complemented by their proximity to urban attractions, offering a blend of outdoor adventure and convenient access to city comforts.

Furthermore, another example from Airbnb is called “Private, peaceful cabin in North Joshua Tree,” which costs 146 per night and has a total of 508 reviews. The hosts write:

Our cabin is a lovingly restored, 416 sq ft. original homesteader built in 1959 on 5 private acres bordered by unoccupied private and public land. Accessible by 4 miles dirt roads

and located in the **rural and remote** area of north Joshua Tree, CA. Bright, inviting, and equipped with everything you need for a **happy break from urban distractions**. Perfect for star-gazing, unwinding, and enjoying the natural desert landscape.

Figure 4 Image of “Private, peaceful cabin in North Joshua Tree”



This listing's description illustrates a balance held by Airbnb's in Joshua Tree through its unique rustic character and secluded yet equipped setting. The property's location, described as being around unoccupied land, allows guests to immerse themselves in nature while enjoying modern amenities, catering to those who seek solitude without sacrificing comfort.

The following excerpt is from a listing called “Mojave Moon Ranch - A Luxury Oasis in the Desert,” which costs 850 per night and has 114 reviews. The hosts write:

Although you'll feel like you've traveled to another world, The Mojave Moon Ranch is **centrally located in Joshua Tree**. It is 15 minutes from the main visitors entrance to the park as well as to popular restaurants, **shops and grocery stores**. It is 25 minutes from the popular Pappy & Harriet's in Pioneertown and 45 minutes from Palm Springs. It is a 2 1/2 hour drive from Los Angeles but for a **quicker escape from the city** or from a desert festival, there is also a helipad on the property.

Figure 5 Image of “Mojave Moon Ranch - A Luxury Oasis in the Desert”



“The Mojave Moon Ranch is your own private oasis complete with a private mountain to hike.”

This excerpt from the above-mentioned listing serves as a prime example within the 'Escaping the City' theme, illustrating the balance city dwellers seek between the solitude of nature and the convenience of urban luxuries. Despite its secluded desert setting, offering a tranquil retreat from bustling city life, the listing remains conveniently located near Joshua Tree's attractions. It even features a helipad for those seeking a quick escape from urban centers like Los Angeles. This juxtaposition underscores a nuanced desire among urbanites: to immerse themselves in the serene beauty of the desert without altogether forgoing the comforts and luxuries they are accustomed to. Mojave Moon Ranch thus embodies the modern quest for an escape that harmonizes the rustic allure of nature with the opulence and ease of urban living, catering to those who wish to experience the tranquility of the desert alongside the accessibility of city-like amenities.

The excerpt below was taken from an Airbnb listing called “Moon Camp: A Unique Joshua Tree Experience,” priced at 148 per night with 718 reviews. The hosts write:

This home is a unique rustic, **glamping experience** on steroids. If you are expecting the Ritz-Carlton, this property may not be for you.

While Moon Camp may feel miles away (it is on a short stretch of groomed dirt road), it is **conveniently close to most anything you might need**. A Yucca Valley shopping center complete with Walmart, Home Depot, fast food restaurants, and other vendors is located just a 5 minute drive away. Additionally, you can hike or drive directly into the Covington Flats (an area of the national park), which is about 5 miles past Moon Camp up La Contenta Road.

Figure 6 Image of “Moon Camp: A Unique Joshua Tree Experience”



“Sunrises and sunsets are always epic at Moon Camp”

The listing description from this host further emphasizes this balance by mentioning nearby urban facilities, indicating that guests can enjoy a sense of isolation while being a short drive from urban conveniences. However, this seclusion is usually related to the nature surrounding visitors, leading to the next theme.

This theme amalgamates the concepts of the Human-Nature Dichotomy and Between the Wild and Urban proposed by Cronon, emphasizing the dichotomous appeal of Airbnb locations like Joshua Tree for urban city dwellers, underscoring the pursuit of visitors to the area for tranquility and simplicity sought in natural settings, while still maintaining a comfortable proximity to urban amenities.

Airbnb descriptions such as those from the “Joshua Tree Adobe House,” “Dome in the Desert in Joshua Tree,” and “Villa Kuro” highlight this theme effectively. These listings portray

a serene escape into the wilderness, offering a retreat from the bustling city life yet not entirely disconnecting guests from civilization. These descriptions emphasize 'slow living'—a deliberate choice to unwind in the calm of nature, away from urban stress, while still enjoying certain modern comforts.

Similarly, listings like “Moon Camp: A Unique Joshua Tree Experience,” “Scenic Cabin Getaway Stargaze Hot Tub Ebike 2 Acre,” and a “Private, peaceful cabin in North Joshua Tree” reinforce this theme. They showcase a delicate balance between a rustic, authentic nature experience and the accessibility of urban conveniences, offering an immersion into the natural landscape, complemented by modern amenities and proximity to city attractions, where rustic charm and seclusion are counterbalanced by nearby shopping centers and urban facilities, catering to those who seek solitude in nature without foregoing the comforts of modern life.

This theme reflects a desire among city dwellers for a temporary retreat into nature—a pursuit of peace and simplicity in natural settings, balanced with the reassurance of urban amenities nearby. It’s a modern interpretation of the yearning seen through different parts of history, from the bourgeoisie in Europe seeking escape from a sin-filled city to pristine rural farmland for a harmonious coexistence between the wild and the urban, between solitude and convenience, between nature's tranquility and the amenities offered by city life.

Theme 2: Art, Aesthetics, & Design

The following theme explores how Airbnb listings in Joshua Tree use art, aesthetics, and designs of their stays to attract visitors seeking a rich cultural economy, shaping and distorting perceptions of the area to actively craft and redefine its cultural and environmental identity through their digital presence which favors visitors over local residents.

The following excerpt is from a listing called “j t v i l l a g e r” which costs 175 per night with 572 reviews. The hosts write:

JT Villager is a fully **re-imagined original 1947 dwelling** inspired by its **natural landscape**. Each detail of our home has been **carefully curated fusing old and new and our design choices have been inspired by either found and vernacular objects**.

Figure 7 Image of “j t v i l l a g e r”



This excerpt from the listing mentioned above exemplifies a trend toward romanticizing and commodifying the rustic and historical aspects of Joshua Tree for visitor consumption. By fusing old and new and drawing inspiration from the natural landscape, this listing presents an idealized version of desert living that may contribute to a superficial engagement with the area's true cultural and environmental complexities. This curated experience, while aesthetically appealing, risks overshadowing the genuine challenges and narratives of local residents, suggesting a selective portrayal that serves visitor fantasies over community realities.

The following excerpt is from a listing named “The Shack Attack in Joshua Tree,” which costs \$141 per night and has 580 reviews. The hosts write:

As you enter the space, you are greeted by **custom-made wall art and in-floor planter that embraces the outdoors within**.

The Shack Attack **features a carefully curated selection of vinyl** to complete your remote desert experience **including the best works from artists such as Jon Coltrane, Nina Simone, Nancy and Lee, Roy Orbison, Charles Bradley and more.**

Figure 8 Image of “The Shack Attack in Joshua Tree”



This excerpt from the above-mentioned listing shows how the incorporation of custom-made wall art and an in-floor planter, alongside a curated selection of iconic vinyl records, serves more than just an aesthetic purpose; it crafts a narrative that deeply immerses visitors in a cultural experience that is both tactile and auditory. This listing demonstrates a strategic use of art and music to create a unique sensory environment that distinguishes it from other accommodations. However, this deliberate curation risks prioritizing a constructed experience tailored to visitor expectations over a genuine engagement with the local community and landscape. Focusing on a nostalgic and somewhat idealized presentation of culture through design and music, “The Shack Attack” redefines Joshua Tree’s identity as a place where visitors can experience a commodified version of desert authenticity, potentially overshadowing the area’s natural and cultural complexities.

The following excerpt is from a listing named “Villa Kuro - A Serene and Minimal Hideaway,” which costs \$469 per night and has 413 reviews. The hosts write:

Inspired by its desert surroundings and the Japanese philosophy of **wabi-sabi (finding beauty in imperfection)**, many elements of the home utilized **hand-built techniques and the use of natural and reclaimed materials to bring out the subtleties in texture and light**. Large sliding glass doors in all the living areas and bedrooms provide a connection to the outdoors at every turn. Furnished with a mix of **new and antique** finds collected through the years, the **pared-back décor and neutral color palette** provide the ideal setting for you to recharge.

Figure 9 Image of “Villa Kuro - A Serene and Minimal Hideaway”



“We welcome you to sit, breathe deeply and listen to the sounds of nature in this space.”

This excerpt from the above-mentioned listing integrates the Japanese philosophy of wabi-sabi, celebrating the beauty in imperfection with the desert's natural landscape. This approach not only showcases a unique aesthetic sensibility but also promotes a form of engagement with the environment that is introspective and serene. However, this stylized presentation may also contribute to a selective understanding of the desert, potentially neglecting the harsh realities of its environment and the challenges its inhabitants face.

The following excerpt is from a listing named “Cabin Cabin Cabin in Joshua Tree,” which costs \$110 per night and has a total of 857 reviews. The hosts write:

Welcome to Cabin Cabin Cabin. We created this space to embrace the thoughts and **feelings of a bygone era** represented by the original homestead cabins of Joshua Tree.

The **interior and exterior of the cabin has been completely renovated** from top to bottom. The space **features modern desert bohemian furniture** and details along with **many hand-made artifacts, art, and accessories.**

Figure 10 Image of “Cabin Cabin Cabin in Joshua Tree”



This excerpt from the above-mentioned listing emphasizes the transformation of a traditional homestead cabin into a “modern desert bohemian” retreat, exemplifying the theme’s focus on utilizing art, aesthetics, and design to attract visitors. By blending the rustic charm of the original cabins with contemporary design elements and hand-made artifacts, this listing offers an aesthetically pleasing and culturally rich experience that resonates with visitors seeking a unique stay. This approach appeals to those looking for visual moments worth sharing on social media platforms and crafts a specific narrative around Joshua Tree’s cultural identity, which appeals to a visitor’s quest for authenticity and aesthetic pleasure. However, this crafted

experience raises questions about the sustainability of such practices and their impact on the local community, suggesting that the prioritization of visitor experiences through design may contribute to a commodified and potentially skewed representation of Joshua Tree's true character.

The following excerpt is from a listing named “Marmol Radziner's Modernist Cabin - Joshua Tree,” which costs \$305 per night and has 549 reviews. The hosts write:

This exquisite cabin was designed by one of the leading **modernist architects** of our time, Ron Radziner, and is the ideal locale for a romantic escape or solo retreat.

Modernist Cabin is on 5 acres surrounded by boulders, adjacent to Joshua Tree National Park. It seamlessly **combines luxury w/ mid-century design** and has been featured on the cover of the LA Times Home Section and **in many books and magazines**. A stay here is **like staying inside the park**, with unparalleled 360 degree desert vistas.

Figure 11 Image of “Marmol Radziner's Modernist Cabin - Joshua Tree”



“Modernist Cabin”

This excerpt from the above-mentioned listing highlights its design by a renowned architect and exemplifies the trend of leveraging architectural prestige to attract an elite visitor demographic. While offering a unique aesthetic experience, this approach contributes to an exclusive, commodified vision of Joshua Tree that may not be accessible or relevant to the

broader community. It underscores a preference for design over substance, potentially sidelining the environmental and social realities of the region in favor of architectural acclaim.

The following excerpt is from a listing named “Mid-century cool. Families, Couples, Groups,” which costs \$158 per night and has 525 reviews. The hosts write:

The entire house has been lovingly updated with **a clean modern style while preserving aspects of the houses' 1950's vintage. Furnished with vintage modern furniture and artwork made by local artists.**

Figure 12 Image of “Mid-century cool. Families, Couples, Groups”



“Open-plan living room with beautiful exposed beam vaulted ceilings and kitchen with loads of natural light through picture windows. Spectacular views over downtown to the mountains.”

This excerpt from the above-mentioned listing emphasizes the preservation of the stay's original 1950s vintage home, modern updates, and the inclusion of local art, blending Joshua Tree’s cultural heritage through its design. This listing leverages the appeal of mid-century aesthetics to create a space that potentially offers visitors a unique style that connects the past and present, allowing them to explore Joshua Tree's history and contemporary art scene. While this creates an attractive setting for visitors, it also illustrates how using design and art can actively shape perceptions of Joshua Tree, promoting an image that aligns with visitor desires for

aesthetic and cultural experiences. This selective portrayal, however, risks simplifying the area's identity to fit a marketable image, potentially overlooking the broader implications of such commodification on the environment and local residents.

Lastly, the following excerpts are from a listing named “Mojave Moon Ranch - A Luxury Oasis in the Desert,” which costs \$850 per night and has 114 reviews. The hosts write:

Owned by **designer** Morgan Brown, this property has been **meticulously remodeled to provide a luxurious and sophisticated escape while preserving all the charm and rustic beauty the desert has to offer. Be prepared to see why it has been both the subject and backdrop for magazines and major campaigns.** Come find out why this gem of the desert stands apart from the rest.

We now have an exciting new addition to the ranch. We have just completed our new **sculpture/installation** collaboration by owner/designer Morgan Brown and global artist Daniel Popper. Her name is “Transmission”. Standing at almost **30ft tall she is a magnificent jaw dropping addition to the ranch and desert** - and the talk of the town. She reminds us all to transmute peace, love, and unity.

Figure 13 Image of “Mojave Moon Ranch - A Luxury Oasis in the Desert”



The excerpts from the above-mentioned listing highlight a significant sculpture/installation collaboration at Mojave Moon Ranch, which exemplifies how art and design create distinctive, immersive experiences that differentiate one listing from another. This installation serves as a visual and conceptual draw and a symbol of the listing's commitment to providing an extraordinary and memorable stay. While this enhances the property's appeal, it also reflects a broader trend of using art for branding and commodification, potentially overshadowing the natural and cultural heritage of Joshua Tree with imported artistic endeavors. The excerpts also illustrate the transformation of Joshua Tree into a backdrop for high-end, exclusive retreats. This not only raises concerns about the accessibility of Joshua Tree's natural beauty for broader audiences but also signifies a shift in the area's identity towards a luxury commodity. The property's use as a subject for magazines and campaigns further embeds this commodification, potentially alienating local communities and contributing to gentrification pressures.

The above listings contribute to the "Art, Aesthetics, & Design" theme by showcasing a broad spectrum of interpretations and integrations of these elements into the Airbnb experience in Joshua Tree. From the historic preservation and rustic simplicity of "Cabin Cabin Cabin" to the luxurious and design-forward approaches of "Mojave Moon Ranch" and "Villa Kuro," these listings illustrate the diverse ways in which aesthetics and design are employed to enhance the visitor experience. Through its unique narrative, each listing adds a layer to Joshua Tree's identity, painting it as a destination where art and design intersect with nature in profound and varied ways. Additionally, the excerpts showcase a variety of ways in which aesthetics are prioritized to create unique and appealing visitor experiences. Through careful curation and design, these spaces offer an idealized vision of Joshua Tree that aligns with visitor expectations

of beauty, tranquility, and exclusivity. However, this focus on aesthetics also raises critical concerns regarding the commodification of local culture and landscapes, the potential displacement of local residents due to rising property values, and the sustainability of such practices in an environmentally sensitive area.

This theme underscores how Airbnb hosts in Joshua Tree leverage the unique intersection of art, aesthetics, and design and actively reshape the area's identity, transforming it from a rugged desert landscape into a curated destination marketed towards tourism. While these efforts have undoubtedly contributed to the region's economic vitality, they also risk alienating local communities and prioritizing the desires of visitors over the needs and well-being of the natural environment and those who call it home. The emphasis on art, aesthetics, and design not only alters the perception of Joshua Tree but also influences the physical and social fabric of the area, leading to a complex interplay between economic benefits and cultural and social costs to create compelling narratives that attract visitors to the area. Through carefully curated spaces that blend the rustic charm of the desert with modern design principles, these hosts are not merely offering a place to stay; they are inviting guests into a carefully constructed experience that redefines Joshua Tree's cultural and environmental identity. This use of art, aesthetics, and design in these Airbnb listings is compelling for discussions around digital placemaking, where the digital representation of spaces contributes significantly to the perception and value of physical locations.

Overall, the emphasis on art, aesthetics, and design by Airbnb hosts in Joshua Tree not only enhances the attractiveness of the area to potential visitors but also actively participates in the ongoing redefinition of its cultural and environmental identity, revealing a tension between the creation of aesthetically pleasing visitor experiences and the broader implications of such

practices. While these listings offer a window into the creative potential of integrating art, design, and natural beauty, they also highlight the challenges of ensuring that tourism development is sustainable, respectful, and inclusive. This theme invites further reflection on how destinations like Joshua Tree can navigate the fine line between showcasing their unique attributes and preserving their essence against increasing tourism and commercialization. As Joshua Tree continues evolving under the influence of digital placemaking through platforms like Airbnb, the insights derived from this theme suggest a need for ongoing dialogue and action toward balancing aesthetic appeal with practices that honor the community and the environment. As these listings prioritize visitor experiences, often encapsulating an idealized version of Joshua Tree, they may contribute to a form of cultural commodification that overlooks the needs and narratives of local residents. The "Art, Aesthetics, & Design" theme thus serves as a critical lens through which to examine the transformative power of digital platforms in shaping the perceptions and realities of unique places like Joshua Tree.

Theme 3: The Physical Desert

Another prevalent theme within the Airbnb descriptions analyzed is the “The Physical Desert.” This theme involves commodifying the physical nature of Joshua Tree's desert environment, including flora, fauna, and physical features, through capitalizing on the distinct difference between the environment, like a city to the desert.

The following excerpts are taken from three listings, the first being from “Desert Garden House Six Minutes From Park Entrance,” priced at 86 per night with 516 reviews; the second is called “Spirit Wind | Architecture + Views + National Park” priced at 288 a night with 760 reviews, and the third called “Villa Kuro - A Serene and Minimal Hideaway” priced at 469 per night with 413 reviews. The hosts write:

Just a six minute drive to the Joshua Tree National Park entrance. In a quiet, sparsely populated area **where wildlife and natural flora are abundant**, all you hear are the birds.

LIFE. Get your wild on! Hang with Spirit Wind's **abundant bunnies, quail, dove, roadrunner and owls**. Explore the property's **many Joshua trees, cholla and beavertail cactus, and other native plants**. Then at night listen for the **coyotes'** moonlight rustle and howl.

With multiple outdoor living areas, including a covered patio for outdoor dining, and a private 600 square foot rock and cactus garden courtyard, there's no shortage of space for lounging around. We're lucky to get **an abundance of flora and fauna** by the boulders so you're likely to **spot jackrabbits, quails, roadrunners and other wildlife** on a daily basis. Really feel a connection to nature by showering outdoors under the open desert sky, relaxing in the salt water hot tub after a long hike, or enjoying the firepit with loved ones on a starry night.

Figure 14 Image of “Villa Kuro - A Serene and Minimal Hideaway”



“Villa Kuro is rich in wild vegetation”

The excerpt from the first listing emphasizes the abundance of “wildlife and natural flora” in a "quiet, sparsely populated area" and markets the experience of a serene escape into nature, where the sounds of birds replace urban noise. This listing taps into the desire for peaceful retreats close to natural attractions, positioning the physical desert as a restorative backdrop for visitors. Additionally, the excerpt from the listing named "Spirit Wind" markets the desert wildlife and plant life as main attractions, inviting guests to interact with the natural environment directly. By listing specific animals and plants guests might encounter, this listing transforms the desert ecosystem into an interactive exhibit, enhancing the property's appeal. The mention of listening to coyotes at night further romanticizes the desert experience, offering guests a place to stay and an immersive natural adventure. Lastly, the excerpt from the listing named “Villa Kuro” emphasizes its integration with the desert environment through outdoor living spaces and the promise of daily wildlife sightings. The listing commodifies the desert's flora and fauna as part of the living experience, offering guests unique interactions with nature.

The following excerpt is from a listing named “Cloud Canyon, spacious secluded oasis w/pool,” with a nightly cost of \$492 and a total of 117 reviews. The hosts write:

Surrounded by 1,200 acres of an **untouched forest of Joshua Trees**, and set within an over ten acre estate, this magnificent newly appointed home boasts views from every angle of ancient, magical trees and boundless mountain ranges. It’s an off-grid, private oasis with everything you desire.

Figure 15 Image of “Cloud Canyon, spacious secluded oasis w/pool”



This excerpt from the above mentioned listing offers an example of commodification through exclusivity and seclusion, set against the backdrop of an untouched Joshua Tree forest. By highlighting the vastness of the surrounding nature and the property's off-grid status, this listing promises a private and unique experience. It commodifies the desert's untouched beauty as a luxury, positioning the property as a rare opportunity to enjoy solitude and a natural spectacle.

The following excerpt is from a listing named “Marmol Radziner's Modernist Cabin - Joshua Tree,” which costs \$305 per night and has 549 reviews. The hosts write:

Diverse forms of plant life are found everywhere, but none as unique or prevalent as the park’s namesake: **the Joshua tree**, standing majestically across the vast topography.

Figure 16 Image of “Marmol Radziner's Modernist Cabin - Joshua Tree”



“Joshua trees”

This excerpt from the above mentioned listing highlights the Joshua tree's iconic status within the desert landscape, marketing the property's integration with the unique environment that surrounds it. By focusing on the diverse plant life and the prevalence of the Joshua tree, the listing commodifies the desert's iconic plant life as a key feature of the guest experience. This approach taps into the aesthetic and symbolic value of the Joshua tree, aligning the property with the unique identity of the Joshua Tree area and making it a prime selling point for potential visitors.

The following excerpts are from two listings, the first named “Moon Camp: A Unique Joshua Tree Experience,” which costs \$148 per night and has a total of 718 reviews, and the second named “The Joshua Tree House,” which costs \$291 per night and has a total of 813 reviews. The hosts write:

Moon Camp is a truly unique desert retreat. The home is modern, airy and **surrounded by Joshua Trees.**

Moon Camp is a truly one-of-a-kind, property. Surrounded by beautiful mountains and a **Joshua tree filled landscape** for as far as the eye can see, the property is a perfect home base for a trip to the park or just as a place to decompress.

Figure 17 Image of “Moon Camp: A Unique Joshua Tree Experience”



This excerpt from the above mentioned listing commodifies its setting by emphasizing the property's placement amid a landscape filled with Joshua trees. The listing promises a unique retreat that blends contemporary living with the natural world, marketing the desert environment as an integral part of the property's appeal. This listing presents the desert as a backdrop and a central feature of the guest experience, promising a blend of modern comfort and natural beauty.

The following excerpt is from a listing named “The Joshua Tree House,” which costs \$291 per night and has 813 reviews. The hosts write:

Welcome to the Joshua Tree House! This hacienda was built in 1949. **With over 100 Joshua Trees on the property**, the views from the house are magical. If you're up for it, sunrise on the front porch is incredible. We estimate that some of the larger Joshua Trees on the property are as old as our country!

Figure 18 Image of “The Joshua Tree House”



“Sunset views (the property has over 100 Joshua Trees on it!)”

This excerpt from the above mentioned listing uses its historical significance and the abundance of Joshua trees on the property to commodify its connection to the desert landscape. Marketing the property with magical views and ancient trees appeals to guests looking for an

authentic and deeply rooted desert experience. The mention of sunrise views and the property's age links the guest experience to the desert's perceived timeless beauty and historical depth.

The following excerpt is from a listing named “Scenic Cabin Getaway Stargaze Hot Tub Ebike 2 Acre,” which costs \$166 per night and has 502 reviews. The hosts write:

There is **wildlife** here. You might see **quails, roadrunners, our resident desert tortoise, coyotes and other animals**. It’s just a part of life here.

Figure 19 Image of “Scenic Cabin Getaway Stargaze Hot Tub Ebike 2 Acre”



“Our special friendly turtle visitors. There is plenty of wildlife to see. If she visits, please offer her water.”

This excerpt from the above mentioned listing emphasizes the interaction with wildlife, modifying the desert's natural inhabitants as part of the accommodation's appeal. By highlighting the presence of quails, roadrunners, desert tortoises, and coyotes, it sells the idea of an intimate encounter with desert life.

The following excerpt is from a listing named “The Cabin at Windy Gap,” which costs \$136 per night and has 570 reviews. The hosts write:

Although the California desert is generally a dry environment, heavier rainy seasons may bring about more abundant than usual **wildlife**. This includes cute little native inhabitants

such as **humming birds, quail, road runners, jack rabbits, and cotton tail bunnies...**
as well as...**coyotes, insects, spiders, lizards, snakes, and moths.**

Figure 20 Image of “The Cabin at Windy Gap”



This excerpt from the above mentioned listing focuses on the wildlife's seasonal abundance and the desert's dynamic ecosystem. It commodifies the natural environment by presenting it as ever-changing and vibrant, especially after the rainy season. The listing's mention of a variety of animals and the possibility of encountering them adds an element of excitement and unpredictability to the stay, marketing the cabin as a place for discovery and connection with the less-seen aspects of desert wildlife.

The following excerpts are from a listing named “Vintage Desert Farmhouse. Cowboy Pool & Spa,” which costs \$161 per night and has 564 reviews. The hosts write:

Watch the sunset from the cozy sunroom or sunrise from bed. Have your coffee/cocktail with **all of the wildlife** right beyond the patio.

The farmhouse is located in the rural desert with sweeping gorgeous views of the mountains of Joshua Tree National Park to the south. Just far enough from town to feel like you are away from the hustle and bustle but close enough if you need to run a quick errand. We get **coyotes, roadrunners, falcons, hummingbirds, bunnies, jackrabbits,**

quail, owls, several species of lizards visit us. There is endless **wildlife** at the home.

Quietly peak out the bedroom window in the morning. You never know who might be drinking from our pond.

Figure 21 Image of “Vintage Desert Farmhouse. Cowboy Pool & Spa”



“The outside cactus garden. We have a variety of different species and love our desert flora.”

This excerpt from the above-mentioned listing emphasizes the intimate and personal experiences possible during the stay through the mention of enjoying a coffee or cocktail with the wildlife right beyond the patio, which adds a layer of interaction with nature, suggesting a seamless blend of indoor comfort and outdoor beauty. This creates an image of a peaceful retreat where guests can enjoy life's simple pleasures against a stunning natural backdrop, making the experience a commodity. Additionally, the detailed mention of wildlife (coyotes, roadrunners, falcons, hummingbirds, bunnies, jackrabbits, quail, owls, and several species of lizards) commodifies the property's rich ecosystem, positioning it as a place where nature's diversity is just outside the window. This highlights the opportunity for close encounters with various animals and suggests a living environment that is in harmony with the surrounding natural world, and by extension a tourist economy and tourists themselves that feel in harmony. The imagery of never knowing “who might be drinking from the pond” in the morning adds an element of

surprise and delight to the guest experience, selling the notion of an ever-changing and interactive natural display.

The following excerpt is from a listing named “Unique desert view getaway under the stars,” which costs \$88 per night and has 569 reviews. The hosts write:

You will witness **wild animals** in their native habitat. The **cottontail rabbits, cactus wrens, lizards, desert tortoises, jackrabbits, coyotes, owls and roadrunners** that make the desert their home are here, making a visit to The studio at Helios House all the more special.

Figure 22 Image of “Unique desert view getaway under the stars”



“My family of ground nesting owls. The little ones are out of the nest. Mum and Dad are keeping an eye out for snakes, coyotes, bobcats, ravens and the humans having a BBQ whilst teaching the little nippers the art of flying.”

This excerpt from the above-mentioned listing focuses on witnessing wild animals in their native habitat, directly commodifying the desert's fauna as a special feature of the stay. By listing specific animal's guests might see, the property highlights its integration with the natural environment and markets the experience of being close to nature. This listing appeals to guests' desire for authentic wildlife experiences, promising a stay that brings them face-to-face with the desert's natural inhabitants.

Lastly, the following excerpt is from a listing named “MOON MOUNTAIN CABIN: Private hilltop and hot tub.,” which costs \$176 per night and has 673 reviews. The hosts write: CREATURES - Our land is filled with creatures. We see **lizards, families of quail, desert tortoises, hawks, ravens, roadrunners, and jackrabbits**. We also keep an eye out for **coyotes, rattlesnakes, and scorpions** and you should too.

Figure 23 Image of “MOON MOUNTAIN CABIN: Private hilltop and hot tub.”



“This gentleman lives on our hill. If you see him please give him lots of space.”

This excerpt from the listing mentioned above markets its secluded hilltop location and the presence of diverse wildlife as unique selling points. Emphasizing the variety of creatures seen on the land and the caution to keep an eye out for more elusive animals like coyotes and rattlesnakes commodifies the thrill of coexisting with desert wildlife. The listing sells an adventurous and immersive experience, offering privacy, panoramic views, and the excitement of encountering wildlife, all framed as integral to the authentic desert experience.

The excerpts from the Airbnb listings meticulously detailed above serve not only as a testament to the "The Physical Desert" theme but also as a vibrant illustration of the intricate ways in which the physical setting of Joshua Tree is transformed into a marketable asset, meticulously packaged and presented as a key element of the visitor experience by Airbnb hosts,

transforming the desert's inherent qualities into valuable commodities. Therefore, the above listings contribute to the theme by using different aspects of the Joshua Tree desert—from iconic landscapes and wildlife to its tranquil and secluded environment—as selling points. This analysis shows how the physical desert is repackaged into various desirable experiences, reflecting broader trends in how natural beauty is marketed in the digital age.

Overall, this nuanced commodification underscores a complex dialogue between preserving what visitors perceive as natural beauty and its consumption. While it brings invaluable attention and appreciation to Joshua Tree's unique desert landscape, it raises critical questions about sustainability and the ethical dimensions of marketing nature. The phenomenon reflects a broader cultural and economic trend where the natural world becomes a backdrop for human experiences, meticulously curated and sold. This commodification not only shapes perceptions of Joshua Tree but also influences the broader discourse on how natural spaces are valued, experienced, and ultimately conserved in the face of growing tourism.

Additionally, while sharing similarities with the theme of 'Escaping' the City, this theme carves out its distinct narrative by focusing instead on commercializing physical desert features. Unlike the simple desire for a retreat from urban life, the commodification of the physical desert delves deeper into the transformation of natural landscapes into consumed experiences. Each listing, from the "Scenic Cabin Getaway" to the "MOON MOUNTAIN CABIN," demonstrates a unique interpretation of Joshua Tree's appeal and demonstrates how the physical desert becomes a canvas for crafting unique narratives that attract visitors, showcasing how its landscapes and lifestyle are commodified. This commodification not only caters to the escapism sought by urban dwellers but also reflects a more profound engagement with the landscape, where the desert's silence, vastness, and beauty are experienced, deeply felt, and lived. Through this lens, Joshua

Tree's desert becomes more than a destination; it becomes a carefully crafted narrative, a commodity that offers an authentic experience of immersion in the natural world. Therefore, this warrants a deeper reflection on our relationship with nature in the age of commodification through digital placemaking.

Theme 4: The Imagined and Mythicized Desert

Another prominent theme across listings was the prolific mention of the proximity and number of opportunities for visitors to these Airbnb's to have "magical" non-physical experiences in the desert, which often involved their engagement with natural amenities that could be perceived to be specific to Joshua Tree, such as stars in a night sky. This theme directly attempts to capture cultural perceptions of deserts, reflecting how nature is presented as a valuable aspect of the Airbnb experience, specifically exploring the romanticized and often mystical perceptions of desert environments in Airbnb listings through borrowing from concepts like Saharanisms and the imaginations of desert landscapes seen in literature, focusing on how these landscapes are imbued with a sense of magic, inspiration, and otherworldliness in the minds of potential visitors. Below are excerpts from various listings which portray this theme.

The following excerpt is from a listing called "Dome in the Desert in Joshua Tree" with a nightly cost of \$132 and 976 reviews. The hosts write:

Whether you stay with us or at one of the other amazing spaces on Airbnb, we hope you experience the **near-magical nature** of the desert and all the sensations that come with this wonderful place we call Joshua Tree.

Figure 24 Image of “Dome in the Desert in Joshua Tree”



This excerpt from the above-mentioned listing emphasizes the desert's transformative power, suggesting that the natural environment of Joshua Tree can offer near-magical experiences. It invites guests to immerse themselves in the desert's unique sensations, framing Joshua Tree as a place of wonder and enchantment. This portrayal taps into cultural and literary imaginings of deserts as spaces of mystery and profound beauty, promising a connection with the extraordinary.

The following excerpt is from a listing called “Moon Ranch at Joshua Tree,” with a nightly cost of \$136 and a total of 652 reviews. The hosts write:

This is the perfect space to spend time outside, reflect, and relax in one of the most beautiful places in California, and one of the **most magical places on earth.**

Figure 25 Image of “Moon Ranch at Joshua Tree”



“Another view of the yard at sunset. Magical!”

This excerpt from the above-mentioned listing further illustrates the theme by explicitly calling Joshua Tree one of the "most magical places on earth." It positions the space as ideal for reflection and relaxation, leveraging the natural beauty and tranquility of the desert to promise a physically and spiritually rejuvenating escape. This description reinforces the mythicized view of the desert as a place where visitors can engage with a landscape that is not just seen but deeply felt.

The following excerpt is from a listing named “Vintage Desert Farmhouse. Cowboy Pool & Spa,” with a nightly cost of \$161 and a total of 564 reviews. The hosts write:

Enjoy the **magical energy** that the Vintage Desert Farmhouse provides. This is a place to escape the noise, be creative and reflective. The home is just 10 minutes from the Joshua Tree village.

Figure 26 Image of “Vintage Desert Farmhouse. Cowboy Pool & Spa”



“Stargaze in bed... Our favorite!”

This excerpt from the above-mentioned listing underscores the magical energy associated with the property, suggesting that the desert setting contributes to a creative and reflective escape. The mention of escaping noise and fostering creativity implies that the desert's allure lies

in its physical attributes and its ability to inspire and transform those who experience it, albeit a very individualized notion of transformation, further mythicizing the desert environment.

The following excerpt is from a listing named “Joshua Tree 1954 Homestead Cabin”, which costs \$157 per night and has 1213 reviews. The hosts write:

Relax, reset, and soak up the sun and fresh air. Grill on the Weber, grab the yoga mats and strike your best downward dog and enjoy a shower outdoors. Soak in the hot tub after a long hike and enjoy a bonfire **on cool desert evenings while gazing at the stars**. You will find plenty of outdoor seating including a hammock, chase lounges, and a table and chairs for outdoor dining after you prepare food on the Weber grill.

Figure 27 Image of “Joshua Tree 1954 Homestead Cabin”



“Only the rear yard is fenced. The rest of the 5 acres is wide open.”

This excerpt from the above-mentioned listing highlights the integration of outdoor activities with the desert landscape, from yoga and outdoor showers to stargazing from a hot tub. This listing commodifies the desert's natural elements as components of a holistic wellness experience, blending physical engagement with the environment with the promise of spiritual and emotional renewal under the vast desert sky.

The following two excerpts are from a listing named “Cloud Canyon, spacious secluded oasis w/pool,” which costs \$492 per night and has 117 reviews. The hosts write:

Make yourself at home enjoying a private hike, **serene sunrise & sunset views**, **magnificent views of the Milky Way**, a swim in the heated pool or a dip in the jacuzzi.

Outdoor firepit for **otherworldly stargazing adventures**

Figure 28 Image of “Cloud Canyon, spacious secluded oasis w/pool”



This excerpt from the above-mentioned listing promises private hikes, serene views, and magnificent stargazing opportunities, emphasizing the secluded oasis's ability to offer otherworldly experiences. The mention of a heated pool, jacuzzi, and outdoor firepit for stargazing adventures commodifies the desert's night sky, presenting it as a canvas for profound connections with the cosmos, enhancing the mythic appeal of the desert.

The following excerpt is from a listing named “The Shack Attack in Joshua Tree,” priced at 141 per night with 580 reviews. The hosts write:

Whether you stay with us or at one of the other amazing spaces in the desert, we hope that you fully immerse yourself in **the many wonders of the high desert** of Joshua Tree.

Figure 29 Image of “The Shack Attack in Joshua Tree”



The excerpt from the above-mentioned listing encourages full immersion in the high desert's wonders, subtly suggesting that Joshua Tree's environment offers unique, perhaps magical, experiences not found elsewhere. Like the others, this listing taps into the desert's romanticized image as a place of beauty and mystery.

The following excerpt is from a listing named “Hot Tub, SAUNA, star shower, modern, clean”, which costs \$109 per night and has 790 reviews. The hosts write:

Newly upgraded, the casita is a stylish, cozy free-standing one bedroom house, 100 feet from the main house, on a 4.3 acre property, ten minutes from the Joshua Tree National Park, and five minutes from the center of town. It offers privacy that feels like you're on your own property, hammock, grill, outdoor shower and bath, **a sky full of more stars than you'll know what to do with** an infrared sauna and hot tub! Fully appointed kitchen and bathroom inside as well.

Figure 30 Image of “Hot Tub, SAUNA, star shower, modern, clean”



This excerpt from the above-mentioned listing offers a blend of modern amenities with the natural beauty of the desert, promising privacy, and an overwhelming abundance of stars. Including an outdoor shower, bath, and amenities like a hammock and grill alongside the promise of a sky full of stars commodifies the desert night as a luxurious retreat from the ordinary, enhancing the mythic perception of Joshua Tree.

Lastly, the following two excerpts are from two listings, the first named “Mod@the Park House~HOT TUB, fire pit-Modern Oasis,” which costs \$215 per night and has a total of 551 reviews, and the second named “Marmol Radziner's Modernist Cabin - Joshua Tree,” which costs \$305 per night and has a total of 549 reviews. The hosts write:

Nestled on a corner at the edge of Joshua Tree National Park, and directly above hiking trails. Step out the front door and begin your short hike to the **mystic Coyote Hole Canyon**, a JT spot known for its ancient petroglyphs and seasonal waterfalls.

Joshua Tree National Park: **800,000 acres of mystical beauty** - Joshua Tree National Park is one of the world’s most incredible natural desert treasures.

Figure 31 Image of “Mod@the Park House~HOT TUB, fire pit-Modern Oasis”



The excerpts from the abovementioned listings highlight the mystical aspects of their proximity to Joshua Tree National Park. They offer direct access to natural wonders, including ancient petroglyphs and “natural desert treasures,” framing the desert as a museum of mystical beauty and historical depth.

Each of the above excerpts contributes to the theme of "The Imagined and Mythicized Desert" by portraying Joshua Tree as a place where the natural environment transcends its physical attributes to offer magical, mystical, and profoundly transformative experiences. This commodification reflects a cultural fascination with the desert that imbues it as a space of otherworldliness and inspiration, promising potential visitors an escape into a landscape imbued with magic, mystery, and the promise of personal renewal.

Additionally, it is important to note that this theme is distinctly different from Theme 2, the "The Physical Desert," by emphasizing the experiential and emotional aspects of the desert rather than the tangible qualities of the landscape and its ecosystem. While the "The Physical Desert" focuses on the marketable aspects of Joshua Tree's physical environment—such as its unique flora, fauna, and geological features—the "The Imagined and Mythicized Desert" delves into how the desert experience is imbued with cultural, emotional, and mystical qualities. This latter theme taps into the symbolic and narrative dimensions of the desert, exploring how it is

represented as a place of magic, inspiration, and transformation in the collective imagination. Specifically, the distinction lies in the marketing approach: the physical commodification sells the desert as a place to see and explore, offering direct interactions with nature's beauty and challenges. In contrast, the imagined commodification sells an experience transcending the physical, promising visitors access to a geography of wonder, creativity, and spiritual renewal often associated with the desert. This theme explores the desert as a concept and an experience, perceived as rich with potential for personal growth, introspection, and even transcendence, beyond the immediate sensory engagements with the landscape.

This thematic distinction underscores a nuanced understanding of how different aspects of the desert are leveraged to attract visitors with varying interests: one grounded in the physical allure of the natural world, and the other in the intangible, almost mystical appeal of the desert as an idea. As such, the "The Imagined and Mythicized Desert" sells not just a location but an idea and a more than physical experience, reflecting a deeper layer of engagement with the desert's cultural and emotional significance. This approach speaks to a desire for experiences that connect us to something larger than ourselves, seeking meaning and wonder in the vastness of the desert, and represents a sophisticated evolution in how natural landscapes are marketed to touristic visitors.

Overall, the exploration of the "The Imagined and Mythicized Desert" theme within Joshua Tree Airbnb listings reveals a sophisticated marketing strategy that transcends the mere promotion of a physical space to stay. By embedding the desert's natural elements within a narrative of magic, mystery, and transformation, these listings offer more than just accommodation; they promise an experience that engages the imagination and spirit of visitors. This strategy not only capitalizes on potential guests' cultural and emotional desires but also

contributes to the mystique and allure of Joshua Tree as a destination. It elevates the desert from a mere geographic location to a place of personal discovery and mystical adventure, inviting guests to partake in an experience that promises to be as transformative as it is memorable.

While enhancing the appeal of Joshua Tree as a tourist destination, this commodification strategy also prompts reflection on the broader implications of such marketing approaches. It raises questions about the sustainability of tourism practices that sell not just a place, but an experience deeply rooted in cultural perceptions and fantasies. As visitors flock to Joshua Tree in search of the mystical experiences promised by these listings, the impact on the local environment and community and the authenticity of the desert experience warrants careful reflection.

Furthermore, this theme's distinct departure from the more tangible "The Physical Desert" underscores the complexity of how nature is presented and sold in the digital age. While the physical theme focuses on the marketable aspects of the desert's landscape and wildlife, the imagined theme delves into the intangible allure of the desert, selling an experience that is felt rather than seen. This duality reflects a broader trend in tourism marketing, where the value of a destination is increasingly measured by its ability to offer unique, emotionally resonant experiences that cater to the desires for escape and enchantment. Therefore, the "The Imagined and Mythicized Desert" theme in Joshua Tree Airbnb listings is a compelling example of how modern tourism intersects with Airbnb's and cultural narratives to create powerful, marketable experiences. These experiences not only draw visitors with the promise of encountering the magical and the mystical but also challenge us to think critically about how we engage with and commodify natural landscapes. As we navigate this intersection, the balance between celebrating the unique cultural perceptions of nature and preserving the integrity of these natural landscapes

becomes increasingly important, guiding the future of sustainable tourism and the stewardship of our natural world.

Discussion

After analyzing the themes from Airbnb listings in Joshua Tree, it is evident that the digital placemaking facilitated by Airbnb significantly shapes the identity and perception of this desert community. However, this process goes beyond simple property rental or marketing, instead, it involves the crafting of narratives that resonate deeply with cultural, aesthetic, and environmental values tied to desert landscapes. Through these listings, hosts in Joshua Tree are not merely offering accommodations but are actively participating in creating and promoting a destination that appeals to contemporary desires for authenticity, connection with nature, and unique experiences. This form of digital placemaking has profound implications for how places are perceived and consumed, influencing visitor expectations and perceptions and impacting the local landscape.

Central to this discussion is how Joshua Tree's Airbnb listings operationalize the human-nature dichotomy. These listings emphasize an escape from urban life to the purity of the desert, tapping into deep-seated cultural yearnings for an unmediated experience with nature. They portray the desert not just as a backdrop but as a central character in a narrative of authenticity and disconnection from perceived urban perils. This narrative aligns with William Cronon's critique of the idealization of wilderness (Cronon, 1996a), suggesting a hybrid space where urban amenities and natural landscapes coexist, given that Airbnb hosts in Joshua Tree curate experiences that blend modern comforts with the rustic allure of the desert, challenging the traditional dichotomy between urban and natural environments and raising questions about the authenticity of the wilderness experience.

Moreover, the digital representation of this dichotomy through Airbnb listings shapes the environmental narrative of Joshua Tree. The platform becomes a stage where hosts highlight aspects of the desert environment that align with contemporary environmental values, such as sustainability and conservation. This selective portrayal influences how potential visitors perceive Joshua Tree, potentially shaping their behaviors and expectations when they visit, and thus impacting the physical environment. The portrayal of the desert as a pure, tranquil escape contrasts sharply with the complexities of living in or visiting such a landscape, echoing Cronon's concerns about the oversimplification of the human-nature relationship (Cronon, 1996a).

The commodification of nature is another critical aspect illuminated by Joshua Tree's Airbnb listings. These listings transform the unique desert landscape into a marketable experience, aligning with Mrozowski's exploration of how natural spaces become commodities (Mrozowski, 1999). In Joshua Tree, the desert's iconic features—such as its Joshua trees, vast open spaces, and star-studded skies—are packaged as desirable attributes of an idealized natural retreat. This process involves not just marketing the physical beauty of the landscape but also selling the emotional and aesthetic experiences associated with being in such an environment. Listings frequently emphasize the tranquility and isolation of the desert as remedies to the perceived chaos of urban life, reflecting a cultural narrative that values nature for its peace and purity (Trčková, 2016).

However, this commodification can create a disconnect between the marketed experience and the on-the-ground reality. The idealized version of nature presented in Airbnb listings may not fully account for the challenges and complexities of desert environments. Additionally, as nature becomes commodified, the land and its resources may become more valuable for their

tourism potential than for other uses, leading to potential conflicts over land use and community priorities. This echoes findings in the literature on the commodification of natural landscapes for tourism, where the emphasis on aesthetic and experiential values can marginalize other ecological and community considerations (Russell & Ankenman, 1996; Münster & Münster, 2012).

The portrayal of Joshua Tree in Airbnb listings also attracts individuals looking to relocate or acquire second homes, driven by the desire for a higher quality of life in a natural setting. This phenomenon, known as amenity migration, is deeply influenced by the romanticized depiction of the desert as a tranquil, aesthetically pleasing escape from urbanization, as discussed by Raymond Williams (Williams, 1975). The digital portrayal of Joshua Tree aligns with these drivers, drawing people seeking the lifestyle and aesthetic appeal of the desert. However, this influx of new residents brings both benefits and challenges. While it can boost the local economy by increasing demand for services and businesses, it also raises property prices and living costs, potentially leading to gentrification.

Gentrification in Joshua Tree is exacerbated by the role of platforms like Airbnb, which facilitate the transition of properties into short-term rentals. This trend reduces the availability of long-term housing and drives up prices, often displacing long-standing residents and altering the socio-economic fabric of the community (Cocola-Gant & Gago, 2021). As wealthier newcomers and tourists are drawn to Joshua Tree by the idyllic desert lifestyle portrayed in Airbnb listings, the community's demographic and economic landscape shifts. This transformation is reflected in the changing landscape of local businesses and amenities, which increasingly cater to the tastes and preferences of a transient, more affluent population (Gotham, 2005).

The arts and aesthetics featured in Airbnb listings are central to this digital placemaking process. These curated visuals and narratives play a significant role in constructing Joshua Tree's identity as a unique destination. Through carefully selected decor, thematic design elements, and narrative storytelling, hosts create an image of Joshua Tree as a place of natural beauty and cultural richness. This aligns with Greg Richards' discussion of place branding, where developing a distinctive and appealing image is key to attracting visitors and new residents (Richards, 2017). However, this aesthetic framing can contribute to the commodification of Joshua Tree's natural and cultural assets, potentially romanticizing and simplifying the realities of desert living.

This romanticization is particularly evident in how Joshua Tree's desert environment is portrayed in Airbnb listings. These narratives tap into longstanding cultural views of deserts as places of solitude, beauty, and spiritual transformation, aligning with the concept of "Saharanism" discussed by El Guabli (El Guabli, 2022). Airbnb hosts leverage these romanticized views to attract visitors seeking an escape from urban life, positioning the desert as a space for reflection and personal discovery. However, such portrayals can lead to a narrow understanding of desert environments, focusing more on their aesthetic and experiential value than their ecological and social complexities. As Joshua Tree becomes increasingly popular through these digital narratives, the impact on local resources and communities grows. The influx of visitors and new residents can strain infrastructure and resources, challenging the sustainability of the very environments that attract them. This aligns with Gutberlet's findings on nature-based tourism in desert regions, where the cultural and spiritual allure of deserts can overshadow the need for sustainable interaction with these fragile ecosystems (Gutberlet, 2022).

Balancing the economic benefits of tourism with the preservation of community integrity and environmental sustainability is crucial.

The exploration of Airbnb listings in Joshua Tree highlights the significant influence of digital platforms on the identity, economy, and social fabric of places. These listings are not just about marketing properties but are part of a broader digital placemaking effort that shapes how people perceive and interact with Joshua Tree. This process underscores the need for a more integrated approach to digital placemaking, one that respects and reflects the complexities of natural landscapes and local communities (Törnberg, 2022). Therefore, Joshua Tree's experience with Airbnb offers valuable insights into how digital narratives and representations influence local communities and natural landscapes. The study underscores the importance of conscientious digital representation that fosters sustainable and inclusive community development. As digital placemaking continues to evolve, it is essential to critically examine its broader implications for local communities, natural environments, and visitor experiences. This approach can help ensure that the qualities that make places like Joshua Tree attractive are preserved and enhanced, not undermined, by their popularity, which will hopefully foster a sustainable, inclusive, and authentic engagements with place.

Conclusion

This thesis explores the intricate ways in which Airbnb listings in Joshua Tree not only reflect but actively shape the cultural and environmental landscape of this unique desert region. Through a detailed qualitative analysis of Airbnb descriptions, four dominant themes were identified: 'Escaping the City', 'Arts, Aesthetics, & Design', 'The Physical Desert', and 'The Imagined and Mythicized Desert'. Each theme reveals significant insights into how digital placemaking practices on platforms like Airbnb contribute to and complicate the human-nature

dichotomy, commodification of nature, amenity migration, gentrification, and desert perspectives and conceptualizations.

The 'Escaping the City' theme highlighted how Airbnb listings frame Joshua Tree as a serene retreat from urban life, offering a juxtaposition of rustic natural experiences and modern comforts. This theme underscores a key aspect of digital placemaking, where the narrative of escape and simplicity attracts urban dwellers seeking a break from city life. This finding is crucial as it demonstrates how digital narratives create a compelling allure for natural destinations, driving increased tourism and shaping visitor expectations and behaviors. The 'Arts, Aesthetics, & Design' theme revealed the strategic use of curated aesthetics and artistic elements by Airbnb hosts to enhance the appeal of their properties, thus contributing to Joshua Tree's unique, though inauthentic, cultural identity. Therefore, hosts in Joshua Tree are not merely offering accommodation but crafting a distinctive experience that integrates the area's natural beauty with cultural richness. This finding is significant as it illustrates how digital platforms can redefine the cultural identity of a place, influencing both visitor perceptions and local cultural dynamics.

The 'Physical Desert' theme focused on how Joshua Tree's natural landscape is commodified, emphasizing the marketing of its unique flora, fauna, and geological features as desirable aspects of the Airbnb experience. This theme highlights the transformation of natural environments into consumable experiences, raising important questions about our relationship to nature and how we may consume it. The significance of this finding lies in its call for a balanced approach that respects and preserves the intrinsic value of natural landscapes while not reducing it to a consumable abstract product that loses its complexity. The 'Imagined and Mythicized Desert' theme explored how Airbnb listings infuse Joshua Tree's desert environment with a sense

of magic, inspiration, and otherworldliness, tapping into romanticized perceptions of desert environments. This theme reflects a broader cultural fascination with deserts as spaces of profound beauty and spiritual transformation. This finding is important as it reveals how digital narratives can amplify cultural myths about natural spaces, shaping visitors' expectations and their interactions with the environment.

Overall, these findings are pivotal as they underscore the powerful role of digital platforms like Airbnb in shaping the identity, perception, and experience of natural destinations such as Joshua Tree. By crafting narratives that blend natural beauty with cultural and aesthetic elements, Airbnb hosts significantly influence how these places are perceived and consumed by visitors. This has profound implications for the sustainability of tourism practices, the preservation of local communities, and the integrity of natural landscapes. Therefore, this thesis contributes to our understanding of how digital placemaking through platforms like Airbnb can transform both the perception and reality of natural destinations. The research highlights the need for careful construction of digital narratives that respect and sustain the authenticity of places like Joshua Tree, calling for a balanced approach to digital placemaking that honors the true spirit of these locations, ensuring that engagement with this space supports both the environment and the community.

As we look to the future of Joshua Tree and similar destinations, it is essential to align digital narratives with sustainable and inclusive practices that preserve the essence of these landscapes. Ensuring that the power of digital platforms in shaping perceptions and interactions with natural spaces is used responsibly will help safeguard these environments and their longstanding communities. This thesis urges a critical examination of how we market and consume natural destinations, advocating for narratives that truly reflect and respect the

complexities of the landscapes and communities they represent. Despite these compelling findings, this thesis leaves various research avenues to expand on the findings presented here.

Future Research Directions

The findings of this thesis open several avenues for further research to deepen our understanding of the processes reshaping Joshua Tree and similar communities. One promising direction is conducting ethnographic studies to capture the nuanced experiences and perspectives of long-term residents, visitors, and Airbnb hosts. Ethnographic research could provide a richer, more detailed understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics at play, offering insights into how different groups navigate and negotiate the changes brought about by increased tourism and Airbnb's digital placemaking. Specifically, research engaging with the local reactions, particularly the sentiment encapsulated by the "Go Back to LA" slogan, could reveal how residents are resisting and redefining their community's identity amidst the influx of tourists and new residents, symbolizing a grassroots effort to reclaim local control over community narratives. Such an approach could be a focal point for studying resistance to gentrification and cultural commodification. Ethnographic work could also explore how these sentiments manifest in daily life, community actions, and local governance, providing a deeper understanding of the socio-political landscape of Joshua Tree.

Additionally, qualitative research focusing on the experiences of marginalized groups, particularly non-white and less affluent populations, could uncover how the proliferation of high-end Airbnb's affects access to Joshua Tree National Park and its surrounding areas. This research could investigate the concept of slow violence, which refers to the gradual and often invisible environmental and social harm inflicted on vulnerable communities. By examining how the commercialization of Joshua Tree's natural beauty contributes to the inaccessibility of these

spaces, researchers could highlight the disparities in who benefits from and who is marginalized by tourism-driven economic models for consuming a commodified natural landscape.

Furthermore, future studies could also delve into the implications of increased Airbnb-driven tourism on the preservation and management of Joshua Tree National Park and the Joshua Tree plant itself. Research could focus on how visitor behaviors influenced by digital narratives affect the park's environment, exploring themes such as environmental degradation, resource strain, neoliberal conservation practices and the area's ability to accommodate growing visitor numbers sustainably. This line of inquiry could include analyzing how policies and management practices are adapting to these challenges and the role of digital platforms in shaping visitor expectations and behaviors. Another area for future research could be the impact of Airbnb and similar platforms on local businesses and the broader economic landscape of Joshua Tree, which could examine how these platforms influence local entrepreneurship, employment patterns, and economic opportunities, considering both the benefits and drawbacks for different community segments. Such research could provide a more comprehensive picture of the economic transformations underway and inform policies aimed at supporting sustainable and inclusive economic development.

Ultimately, an interdisciplinary research approach incorporating perspectives from environmental studies, urban planning, and digital media studies could provide a holistic understanding of the impacts of digital placemaking. Such research could explore the interplay between digital narratives, environmental sustainability, and community well-being, offering a deeper understanding of these phenomena within places like Joshua Tree and beyond. Therefore, future research should aim to build on the findings of this thesis by exploring the deeper socio-cultural, economic, and environmental processes shaping Joshua Tree. By employing

ethnographic methods, examining the experiences of marginalized populations, and analyzing the impacts on local and natural environments, researchers can contribute to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play.

Thus, future research must critically engage with how such transformations can be guided to honor the spirit of unity and respect for nature that installations like “Transmission” aspire to promote. However, while the installation aims to inspire a harmonious relationship with nature, the broader impact of high-end Airbnb’s and increased tourism often transmute Joshua Tree into a version tailored for touristic consumption, potentially at the expense of its environmental integrity and community well-being.

Transmuting the Desert

Figure 32 Image of “Transmission” Art Installation, Captured by Jazmyne Torres on Film



In concluding this research, I decided to personally visit one of the Airbnb sites analyzed through the QCA that has a large outdoor art installation viewable by the public, Mojave Moon Ranch. The location of this Airbnb is deep within Joshua Tree and far removed from the main 62-highway, eventually leading you down a dirt road where you will eventually be met with an imposing concrete statue emerging from the desert landscape. Once you park on the side of the dirt road and make your way up a short thin trail to an unimpressive viewing area for the art

piece, it is impossible not to notice the vast views of seemingly “untouched” desert surrounding you. Aside from the imposing art piece, you are also met with a small bench and plaque, which reads, “Conceived within the minds of owner Morgan Brown and artist Daniel Popper, she stands a majestic 28 ft tall, fully realized, she is “concrete” evidence that we are all divine - that we are all one. May we all transmute love, peace, and unity between ourselves, each other, and mother nature. That is why she is here at The Mojave Moon Ranch - to remind us.”

Based on this description provided by the plaque, while “Transmission” aims to inspire a harmonious relationship with nature, it paradoxically symbolizes the very commodification and alteration of the desert environment for commercial gain. The installation, and others like it, highlight the tension between promoting an idealized version of nature and the actual impacts of increased tourism and development. This dichotomy underscores the need for a critical reassessment of how digital placemaking practices, while promoting unity and connection, may contribute to the very issues they purport to address. “Transmission” stands not just as a piece of art but as a metaphor for the broader implications of Airbnb and tourism in Joshua Tree—highlighting a shift towards a commodified, consumable nature that caters more to visitor fantasies than to the realities of the desert environment or the needs of its residents, epitomizing how Joshua Tree is being reshaped into a version more suited for touristic consumption and an idealized view of nature. The term “transmute,” as used in the context of the installation, implies a transformation that aligns with visitor desires rather than preserving the authentic essence of Joshua Tree.

This transformation is evident in how Airbnb hosts in Joshua Tree leverage the concept of transmutation to market their properties. They craft narratives that promise a unique and transformative experience in the desert, aligning with the installation's message of unity and

connection with nature. However, this marketed transformation often leads to a version of Joshua Tree that prioritizes aesthetic appeal and visitor experience over meaningful engagement with the environment and community well-being. The installation's message of transmuting love, peace, and unity stands in stark contrast to the tangible impacts of Airbnb-driven tourism, which include rising property prices, displacement of long-term residents, and increased pressure on local resources. Rather than fostering a genuine connection with nature, the transformation promoted by Airbnb listings often results in a superficial engagement with the desert environment, tailored to meet the expectations of tourists seeking an idealized desert experience.

Therefore, "Transmission" and the themes it represents underscore a critical challenge: ensuring that Joshua Tree's allure does not lead to its undoing. As digital platforms like Airbnb continue to craft appealing narratives about places like Joshua Tree, it is important that these narratives are constructed with care, respecting the authenticity and sustainability of the natural landscapes and communities they depict. Therefore, this thesis not only contributes to our understanding of these dynamics but also calls for a responsible approach to digital placemaking that honors the true spirit of places like Joshua Tree. Thus, as we contemplate the future of Joshua Tree and similar locations, it is crucial to consider how digital narratives can be aligned with sustainable and inclusive practices that support both the environment and the community. In doing so, we can help ensure that the digital world's power in shaping our perceptions and interactions with natural spaces is a force for good, preserving the essence of these landscapes for future generations instead of an idealized packaged commodity meant to be continuously extracted for economic gain.

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