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What kind of home is the shared home? The social-transactional spectrum in platform-mediated homemaking among strangers

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ABSTRACT

Housing unaffordability and online platforms have turned shared housing into a mainstream housing strategy, even among strangers and those sharing by necessity not choice. Planning and policy, however, have not kept up with the evolving landscape. Current discourse often ignores the social dimension of shared housing, yet it is one of its defining features. Here, we examine how shared rental listers envision homemaking and domesticity through analysis of thousands of rental listings in Los Angeles, asking whether shared arrangements are primarily transactional or oriented towards building social home environments. Using human-assisted machine learning informed by qualitative coding, we categorise listings as transactional or social, then analyse subsamples through thematic content analysis. We find that less than one-third of listings signal social sharing environments; most emphasise transactional arrangements. We argue that this spectrum spans radically different visions of 'home'. While social listings embrace the unavoidable social dimension of shared living and treat homemaking as a collective household project, transactional listings essentially aim to recreate private living, fashioning the shared home through boundary setting and relegating homemaking to individual co-tenants. Uncovering this spectrum of homemaking practices helps policy-makers understand shared housing's unique affordances and constraints and craft more-effective policy.

KEYWORDS: Shared housing; rental market; homemaking; machine learning; mixed methods

Introduction

Sharing has become a mainstream housing strategy, with more people renting rooms in shared units or even sharing the room itself. This trend spans demographic groups and occurs in cities worldwide (Druta et al., 2021; Heath et al., 2018; Ronald et al., 2024). While in the Global South

crowding into tight spaces has long been a central strategy to afford housing in growing cities (Harten, 2024; Harten et al., 2021), in the Global North, this shift has been driven by factors such as the flexibilization of work, prolonged education, demographic shifts, housing shortages, and—in particular—the rise of online platforms (Arundel & Ronald, 2016; Gurran et al., 2024a; Maalsen, 2020; Parkinson et al., 2021).

Online platforms help listers broadcast, target, and signal, enabling people to create shared households even with strangers. While some share housing by choice, including with friends and family, many now share out of necessity (Gurran et al., 2024b; Harten & Boeing, 2024). Unlike other housing strategies, however, shared housing is relational in a distinct way. Because co-tenants necessarily affect one another, shared renting entails a social dimension that is inescapable, yet often difficult to manage, especially among individuals unfamiliar with one another (Goodall & Stone, 2025; Nasreen & Ruming, 2021, 2022). How do shared renters organise shared living in such conditions? For planners and policymakers grappling with how to respond to the shared housing trend, answering this question is crucial, especially for those who do not value the social aspects of shared renting but depend on its cost saving benefits.

In this paper, we propose harvesting the language of online shared rental listings for clues on how shared renters envision homemaking among strangers. Through homemaking, people transform housing from shelter into a resource for flourishing (Blunt & Dowling, 2022). Homemaking is central to understanding what shared housing means for its tenants, yet it remains under-theorized in the literature and largely absent from policy discourse. Planning scholarship and practice contending with the expanding role of shared housing has largely focused on technical liveability standards, the legal grey areas most shared housing operates in, and the vulnerabilities these generate for tenants (Gurran et al., 2022, 2024a, 2024b; Parkinson et al., 2021). The social dynamics within shared households on the other hand have received far less attention, yet they are one of shared housing's defining features. Given the socio-spatial complexity of sharing a home with strangers, what constraints or affordances does shared renting offer for homemaking, and in turn, for shared tenants' abilities to experience their housing as a home?

We contribute to filling this gap by examining the descriptive texts of online shared rental listings in Los Angeles, California, posted on Craigslist between June 2020 and March 2021. We ask: are shared rentals (by choice or by necessity) mostly transactional arrangements or do sharers strive to build social home environments? How do shared housing renters envision homemaking and domesticity amongst strangers? Drawing on thousands of online listings advertising shared housing opportunities to find new co-tenants, we develop a human-assisted machine learning algorithm informed by exploratory qualitative coding and the literature to categorise listings into those focused on transactional shared living and those striving to create sociality. To further unpack listing texts for descriptions of 'home',

we then take a subsample from each group and analyse it qualitatively *via* thematic content coding.

We find that less than one third of online listings signal a social sharing environment; most focus on transactional arrangements. Social listings signal a flat hierarchy and sociospatial sharing by employing conversational tones and rich descriptions of the home environment through emotive adjectives, hopes for joint activities or shared lifestyles, and full person descriptions. Conversely, transactional listings establish social and physical distance with a clear, vertical hierarchy communicated through formal language and rules and restrictions that describe the home by setting boundaries. While transactional arrangements essentially aim to recreate the experience of private renting where homemaking is regarded as a private matter relegated to the individual, social listings embrace the unavoidable social dimension and portray homemaking as a collective endeavour, negotiated at the matching stage.

Re-theorizing shared housing through the lens of homemaking unveils its lived, social dimensions too often overlooked in policy discourses concerned with safety, suitability, and affordability. Our research positions shared housing as a critical policy challenge: to develop effective interventions, planners and policymakers must consider homes, not just housing—even, and perhaps especially, within shared settings forged by necessity. Highlighting a gap between policy discourse and how shared renters actually propose to manage homemaking constraints and opportunities, we generate initial recommendations for how policymakers might meaningfully engage with shared housing in its entirety.

The rest of this paper is organised as follows. In the next section, we summarise the literature on homemaking, shared housing, and how online platforms have impacted this housing submarket. Then we discuss our methods. Next, we present our findings on shared rental listers' social and transactional cues. Finally, we discuss the implications of these findings for housing theory and policymaking.

Background

Online platforms and the shared housing search

Online platforms have fundamentally transformed rental markets and proven invaluable for housing research. Rental housing has historically been difficult to study, but a growing literature now leverages online listings as data sources (e.g., Boeing & Waddell, 2017; Kamruzzaman et al., 2025). This includes quantitative market analyses but increasingly also quasi-qualitative studies which treat 'text as data' (Grimmer et al., 2022) and leverage computational methods to analyse the descriptive texts of online listings for deeper insights (e.g., Harten et al., 2021; Maalsen & Gurran, 2022; Meers, 2024).

Using online listings to study shared renting is a particularly fitting approach because the rise of shared renting is intimately tied to the spread

of online platforms. For one, platforms have changed how housing information is distributed and accessed—a disruption particularly significant for shared housing as online platforms' broadcasting functionality makes niche offerings more viable, facilitating even the most idiosyncratic of matches. This feature is crucial to shared renting where people must match not only on unit but also on personal characteristics (Harten & Boeing, 2024). Platforms are at the centre of brokering these complex matches, helping to popularise shared renting as a housing strategy even for those to whom the unavoidable social dimension of sharing a living space does not appeal (Gurran et al., 2024a, 2024b; Nasreen & Ruming, 2022). Secondly, platforms facilitate a type of communication that is removed but unconstrained. The digital format, as compared to traditional print media advertising, does not impose word limits. For shared housing in particular, US courts have ruled that fair housing laws that restrict what can and cannot be said in listing texts do not apply to people sharing a single living space (U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, 2012). Consequently, as listers employ listing text as communication objects to attract the largest number of relevant applicants, the online format also allows listers to freely describe not just the house but the home (Harten et al., 2026).

Housing as home

Homemaking is the process of turning housing into 'home'. As feminist and critical geographers have long established, rather than merely existing as a place or entity, a home is actively created. It is through embodied engagement with material objects and people that inhabitants generate social meaning, which in turn transforms mere dwellings into meaningful domestic spaces (Blunt & Dowling, 2022; Dowling & Mee, 2007; Easthope, 2004, 2014; Mallett, 2004).

Through homemaking, people experience their housing not just as shelter but as a resource that allows them to thrive. Much of the scholarship on the relationship between housing and home identifies achieving ontological security—the ability to 'feel at home,' to experience one's housing as a secure base and a consistent social and material environment—as central to this transformation (Padgett, 2007; Easthope, 2004). Beyond ontological security, housing becomes home when it is a place to care for oneself and others—that is, when a home facilitates the nurturing activities essential to physical and emotional wellbeing (Power, 2019; Power & Mee, 2020). In addition, a home fosters autonomy when it enables individuals and households to exercise control over their living environment. Research consistently demonstrates that greater dwelling control positively correlates with enhanced feelings of security, home attachment, and overall wellbeing (Easthope, 2014; Easthope et al., 2015; Hoolachan et al., 2017). Finally, housing becomes home when it functions as a space for expressing and developing personal identity: people residing in dwellings that positively reflect their sense of self develop stronger feelings of home within those spaces (Clark & Kearns, 2012; Gorman-Murray, 2008).

Making home in shared housing

Traditionally, scholarship on home and homemaking has focused on heterosexual nuclear families and homeownership (Blunt & Dowling, 2022; Easthope, 2004; Mallett, 2004). The massive expansion of private renting in traditional homeowner societies, however, has prompted scholars to question these assumed relationships (Bate, 2018, 2021; Easthope, 2014; Soaita, 2024). Discarding the default association with homeownership, this emerging line of scholarship highlights the disempowering effects of policymaking that affirms landlord-tenant power imbalances as well as the ways in which the landlord-tenant relationships can stifle homemaking by limiting resident agency, creating psychological burdens, or imposing undue restrictions on behaviours within rented homes (Bate 2021; Lister, 2004, 2006; Soaita & McKee, 2019). Within this constrained environment, however, people still make home. As Marcoux (2001) shows, for instance, possessions assume heightened importance as tools for creating homes that support self-actualisation and autonomy, particularly for frequent mover-renters.

As people engage with housing choices and the life course in more flexible ways, scholarship on homemaking outside of heteronormative structures, too, has blossomed. The very idea of what constitutes a household is increasingly being questioned, given rising complexity and fluidity in household forms (Buzar et al., 2005; Nethercote, 2019). There is, for instance, a growing literature on how single people create new forms of home (Druta et al., 2021; Green & McCarthy, 2015; Piekut, 2024; Wilkinson, 2014). In addition, efforts to 'queer home' conceptualise home as a resource to nurture social relationships and life worlds beyond the resident household (Gorman-Murray, 2007, 2008, 2012).

This reframing of homemaking is especially engaged in shared renting. Market-mediated shared renting typically involves homesharing among strangers and, because of the demographic they tend to house, are often perennially in flux with multiple sharers passing through (Heath et al., 2018). Shared renting thus breaks with theoretical understandings of homemaking as gradual and long-term and confronts notions of home as stable and private with the flexibility of shared tenancies and the serendipity of co-tenant matching (Druta & Ronald, 2021; Nasreen & Ruming, 2021). In addition, no matter the sharing modality, whether sharing by choice or necessity, all shared renting is necessarily relational: co-tenants affect each other (Goodall & Stone, 2025). Shared rentals thus require the managing of the relational processes of home, the balancing between communality and privacy, between connection and disconnection. While such calibrations are essential to homemaking in most constellations, including among family members and couples, homemaking in shared rentals can draw on fewer cultural scripts about its parameters and must consider more moving parts (Heath et al., 2018; Maalsen & Gurran, 2022). Finally, peer-organised shared renting most often happens in spaces that are not designed for this purpose, adding to the challenge

of negotiating the allocation of spaces and uses within shared accommodations (Nasreen & Ruming, 2021).

The scholarship that comes closest to expounding homemaking in shared rentals aims to characterise it by identifying the benefits and risks of shared renting in terms of financial-legal, and social dimensions.

On the economic transaction side, the promise of affordability through cost-sharing is perhaps *the* driving appeal of shared renting. Beyond immediate savings, primarily rent, but also on utilities and other household expenses, resource pooling may also protect shared housing tenants against displacement in gentrifying neighbourhoods (Harten & Boeing, 2024; Hwang & Shrimali, 2023). However, this financial interdependence creates corresponding vulnerabilities. Co-tenants may face liability for others' damages, shared responsibility for lease violations, and credit consequences when co-tenant behaviours trigger evictions or insurance claims (Goodall & Stone, 2025). Economic vulnerabilities are often compounded by legal uncertainties stemming from the informal nature of shared rental arrangements and the opportunities for exploitation they create (Gurran et al., 2024a, 2024b). Shared housing relationships are diverse—including equal co-tenants, head tenants, occupants without contracts, and resident landlord-owners—but only some exist within clear legal frameworks (Alam et al., 2022; Harten & Boeing, 2024; Maalsen, 2020). Ill-defined rights and responsibilities together with associated power differentials turn these regulatory grey zones into tenant vulnerabilities that vary with context.

Physically occupying and sharing limited, enclosed space also necessarily implies a social dimension—for better or for worse. The nature of sharing (i.e., giving up space and privacy in exchange for lower rents and better access) can threaten housing as a source of ontological security, a space for care and agency (Nasreen & Ruming, 2021). Not only are shared rentals inherently less private than whole unit rentals, the unavoidable co-presence of unrelated individuals also introduces the potential for conflict—especially when there are differences in daily routines or preferences around hygiene, clutter or noise. Where shared unit tenants experience antisocial behaviours or even crimes, such as theft and violence, committed by their co-tenants, shared renting may even threaten a basic sense of safety (Rugg et al., 2011). Conflicts or the risk thereof may in turn create an atmosphere of hostility and anxiety, with negative implications for co-tenants' mental wellbeing (Green & McCarthy, 2015).

At the same time, shared renting offers access to companionship and emotional intimacy outside familial relationships, a particularly valuable feature given the growing trend towards social isolation (Heath et al., 2018). Shared rentals open up spaces for new ways of caring and relating to others. The 'instant social life' (Heath, 2004) promised by shared housing includes friendships, the expansion of social networks, and community-building opportunities facilitated by typically larger shared units that can accommodate gatherings and social events (McNamara & Connell, 2007). In addition, for newcomers, shared rentals may serve as

an acculturation resource, providing cultural knowledge and support networks essential for navigating new cities or even countries (Clark et al., 2018).

The shared home thus emerges between the risks and benefits of financial, spatial, and social interdependence through negotiations of how to handle them within the shared household. In this paper, we propose that homemaking strategies within shared housing exist on a sociality spectrum between two poles: one oriented towards sharing as an economic transaction, the other towards its social dimension. As one moves along this spectrum, the homemaking focus shifts from the primarily transactional to the primarily relational. The transactional pole mirrors the kind of economic exchange characteristic of a standard rental arrangement, without the expectation of deeper social investment, but with lower rent in exchange for shared space and reduced privacy. The social pole, by contrast, reflects a more relational or familial orientation, in which household members strive to build community and share domesticity as an end in itself. The former is low in trust and reciprocity and distant in character; the latter is high in both, and expressly sociable. This characterisation expands one proposed by Bricocoli and Sabatinelli (2016), who distinguish between 'cold' and 'warm' sharing, and recent work by Saygi (2025) who examines the parameters of transactional homesharing. We further propose that in practice, homesharers favour these two dimensions unequally: some emphasise sharing as an economic transaction, whereas others foreground the interpersonal relationship and an explicitly shared domesticity. In turn, these different emphases, we contend, give rise to fundamentally different homemaking practices, each with its own affordances and constraints within the shared rental home.

Methods

In this paper, we mine the descriptive texts of shared rental listings to examine how listers articulate their visions of homemaking. We ask: How do listers express their expectations for domestic life and co-tenant relationships in the descriptive texts of shared rental listings? Online listings are the first point of contact between existing and prospective co-tenants.¹ From the lister's perspective, they are a tool to manage the housing search, a means to attracting the largest pool of relevant applicants. Without limitations on content, we hypothesise that listing descriptions contain deliberate language cues designed to signal to desired applicants. Given the affordability crisis in which shared renting has been recently popularised (including in Los Angeles [Angst et al., 2025]), listers can reasonably assume that demand overhang allows them considerable selectivity among large applicant pools. This dynamic should further increase the likelihood that listers articulate detailed contours of their envisioned home environments, making these listings particularly rich sources for understanding contemporary homemaking in shared rentals.

Data collection

We answer this question through the analysis of rental housing listings posted on Craigslist in Los Angeles County from June 2020 through March 2021. Lore et al. (2024) collected and cleaned 124,332 listings which include both prepopulated fields such as rent or number of bedrooms as well as freeform text in which the lister is free to include any additional information about the unit or rental arrangement. On Craigslist, the unit can be listed under 'apts/housing', which are typically whole units for rent of any size or number of bedrooms, or 'rooms/shared', which are typically rooms or beds in a shared unit with potentially existing tenants. In this paper, we focus only on the 48,035 listings for rooms in shared units and in particular on their freeform descriptive texts.

Analysis

Through an exploratory reading of the freeform descriptive text in the shared unit listings, we discovered that the language style was heterogeneous, but that listing texts could be roughly grouped into those that approached shared renting as an economic transaction and those emphasising interpersonal sociality and shared domesticity.

We use semantic axis projection, which maps language to a numerical scale between two conceptual poles (An et al. 2018) to classify the descriptive text of each shared unit listing along a spectrum from transactional to social. Semantic axis projection is best known for its application in sentiment analysis where it is used to identify sentiment in text on a spectrum from negative to positive (Ahmad et al., 2017). Here, analogously, we use it to understand where every listing in our data set falls along the range from transactional to social.

To start, based on reading a random sample of 150 listings, two researchers independently create a set of keywords and phrases which most represent each pole, referred to in the literature as polarity lexicons (Choi & Cardie 2009). In sentiment analysis, poles are defined through established dictionaries, while here we create our own (Ahmad et al., 2017). The initial set of keywords and phrases is refined iteratively, through discussion until consensus is reached (Adu, 2019). Then, each of the keywords and phrases are transformed into numerical vectors *via* a sentence transformer model, which turns sentences and short phrases into a 384-dimensional vector, representing its context and relationship to other sentences². This model is pretrained and built on over one billion sentence pairs which allows it to learn how sentences are semantically linked to each other (Devika et al. 2021). When the short phrases and keywords are embedded in this space, they exist geometrically proximate to other phrases from the same pole. We then calculate the centroid, or average location, for each pole in this space. The vector that runs between them becomes the transactional-social axis—our reference against which we

measure all listings. Each listing is embedded into the same space, and its cosine similarity, or distance between the location of the listing in this space and one anchor pole, is used to generate a score between zero and one, where lower scores represent listings 'closer' to the transactional pole. Conversely, higher values represent listings most similar to the social phrases at the other end of the spectrum, i.e., the social pole.

The final step is to determine a threshold score defining the break between listings tending towards transactional or social. Towards this end, two researchers independently hand label a new random set of 500 listings as either transactional or social according to the iteratively defined codebook, leaving ambiguous cases unlabelled. Again, labelling is discussed until consensus is reached. We use the hand labels to estimate the underlying distribution of categories. The distribution of scores in the hand labelled set is applied to the scores for all listings using class mass normalisation (Zhu et al. 2003). Class mass normalisation takes in prior information about known distribution of categories, in this case from the hand labels, and the mass of the scores, in this case the sum of scores from zero through the score of each listing, and determines whether a given listing belongs to the transactional, unclassified, or social classification. We refine classification by being conservative about listings that could not be reliably classified as either social or transactional. Towards this end, we designate listings as 'unclassified' if their score falls within three standard deviations from the in-group mean of the original 'unclassified' category. Ensuring that borderline cases are designated 'unclassified' improves confidence in the classifications of 'social' versus 'transactional'. To validate the classification process, we pull a representative sample of 100 listings and find 94% agreement between this method and human categorisation. Of the 6 disagreements, 5 of the listings were labelled 'social', but were actually professionally managed co-living spaces that use casual language and conversational tone as a marketing strategy.

Finally, we conduct in-depth qualitative reading of a representative sample of 100 listings: Half of the listings are classified as transactional and half as social. In establishing codes for this analysis, we rely on inductive exploration through iterative coding cycles only guided by the question of homemaking practices (Adu, 2019). Next, based on this second iteratively defined codebook, two researchers working independently code the 100 listings and resolve disagreement through discussion. In a final step, we generated themes through comparing and contrasting coding patterns and differences in language across listings from both categories (Adu, 2019). We also label each listing in the sample according to the likely lister type—landlord, tenant, unknown—based on language cues. We identify landlord listings by language indicating ownership (e.g., 'I am considerate to my renter') or property management (e.g., 'leasing agent'), tenant listings by language indicating co-living (e.g., 'we are the roommates'), and label listings unknown, which cannot definitively be categorised (e.g., only describing amenities or location).

Findings

We find that most shared unit listings focus on transactional arrangements; the majority (56%) of listings are more transactional in focus and only 28% are decidedly social ([Figure 1](#)). An additional 16% are difficult to categorise and are left unclassified. Social listings are mostly (78%) listed by current tenants or left ambiguous (22%). The lister of transactional listings is often unknown (48%) or a tenant (34%). Few (16%) transactional listings are posted by a landlord.

Qualitative analysis further unpacks how listings of each type describe the shared home. The core distinction centres on the articulation of power dynamics and hierarchy: Listings labelled as transactional tend to communicate a vertical power distribution between lister and prospective co-tenant, emphasising making the shared home through social and physical distance. Listings labelled as social on the other hand, tend to signal flat hierarchies and shared authority. These listings tend to embrace the social and spatial realities of home-sharing as opportunities to be nurtured rather than a relationship to be managed. Below we describe how these divergent visions of domesticity manifest across three central themes: (1) language and tone, (2) authority and power, and (3) home environment. [Tables 1](#) (transactional listings) and [2](#) (social listings) present examples drawn from our data set that illustrate these points.

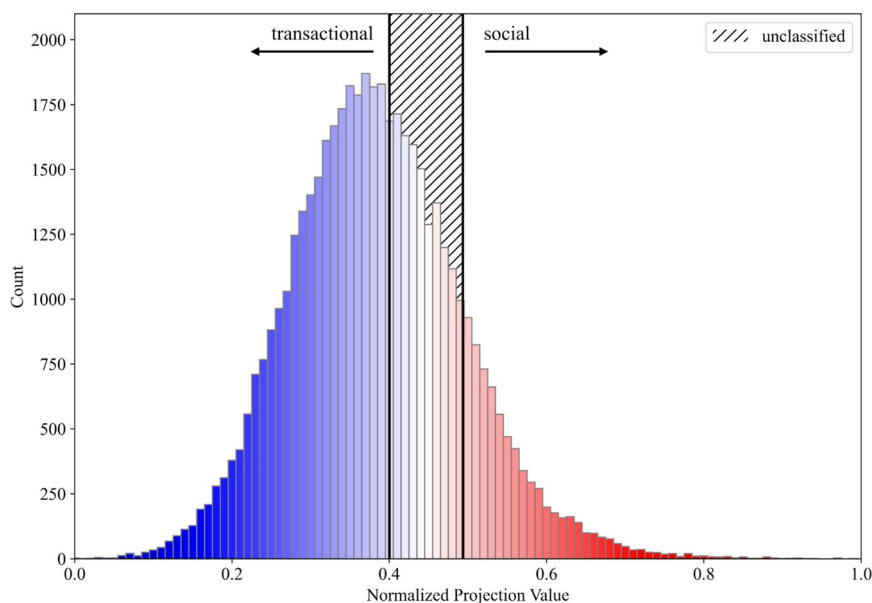


Figure 1. Distribution of transactional-social axis scores ranging from 0 (most transactional, dark blue) to 1 (most social, dark red) where each bin represents an increment of 0.01. The hatched area inside the vertical lines represents scores that are unclassified.

Table 1. Example listings, labelled as transactional.

-
- 1 Room for rent plus private bath full access to the den and kitchen.
 - 2 Room for rent in private home second story corner bedroom quiet safe neighbourhood in Canoga Park. near Topanga Cyn. and Lanark Park. Convenient location near freeways shopping Warner Centre Topanga and Fallbrook malls CSUN Pierce College. Includes kitchen access washer dryer ample street parking. Looking for a quiet respectable stable Male tenant non smoker including 420 no pets couples or others.
 - 3 Furnished bedroom with bathroom. Private entrance and street parking with no restricted days. Close to Zelzah and Plummer St. Full laundry use included. NO KITCHEN access. But microwave, dish washing sink, cabinet and mini fridge is provided. Fully furnished including bed, night stand, and study table/ desk with office chair. No smoking (of any type), no drinking or drug use. We are not 420 friendly. No overnight visitors. Must be a responsible, respectful, and a clean person. Female preferred and must be a current College student. Utilities and WiFi included. Enrolment and income verification required. Tenant to pay \$40 for credit check. Parent co-signer accepted. Please e-mail for showings and/or questions.
 - 4 Private Room for rent. Private entry with private deck. Clean and modern. Looking for quiet and respectful person for this room. 14×12 room plus private bathroom. Hardwood floor. Private 11×5 foot deck. Comes with an electric cook-top and conventional oven. We prefer A SINGLE PERSON for this room. Utilities included if they are not overused. Street parking. Please DO NOT DISTURB Current tenants. No pets no section 8.
 - 5 Looking for One FEMALE roommate ONLY: a considerate, clean, professional who is currently employed.
Brand New Remodelled -Located at N. Alhambra, One furnished room available for rent. New flooring, paint, bathrooms. Excellent location near by Main Street and Garfield Ave. Convenient transportation and dining and shopping. 10min walking distance to supermarkets, park, banks, restaurants, LA Fitness gym, cinema, library, etc. Rent are including :All Utilities/washer/dryer/high speed internet and simple furniture such as bed, and closets.
NO PETS/ No Smoking/No illegal Drug/No overnight guest after midnight.
Kitchen privilege only with microwave and cabinets. Prefer No cooking or LIGHT cooking couple times a week.
 - Central AC and heater
 - Free high speed internet
 - Street parking available with municipal overnight (\$60 per year)
 - washer and dryer
 - New laminate wood flooring through entire house; Tile in bathrooms and kitchen
 - Queen size bed
 - 6 Beautiful building near Caltech a professional couple is offering a furnished bedroom w full bath walk in closet futon bed large desk three bookcases ove seat mini fridge microwave available now. This perfect location near transportation restaurants and stores is immaculately clean very private and quiet. Tenants do not interact in any common areas this room is on the second floor of the large apt the other tenants are primarily on the third floor. A laundry room is on the same floor. An elevator is available for tenant use. This is a no smoking property. No overnight guests. This is NOT an apt share it is one private room and private bath with no kitchen access. A mini fridge and microwave oven are in the room. Parking on the street is available with permit. No pets are allowed in the entire apt. A background check is required by the building management. Rent is \$900 month with first and last month s rent required at move in. Electricity is paid for. Please send a text to Sandy and tell her who you are what you do and what you are looking for. She will respond quickly and set up a viewing. This suite is especially well suited to people who want a very private economical and comfortable living arrangement within walking distance of their work.
-

Language and tone

A writer's tone can reveal intention and give context beyond the words' explicit meanings (Levinson, 1983). Our analysis reveals stark differences

in how listers of transactional and social listings communicate with prospective co-tenants.

We find that listings labelled as transactional are overwhelmingly written using formal language and neutral tone. In our qualitative coding, we identified neutral tone in 40 out of 50 (or 80%) transactional listings. These listings adopt a matter-of-fact style that conveys formality, as illustrated in [Table 1](#). This impression is reinforced by several linguistic characteristics: a focus on describing mostly unit attributes (examples 1,2,5), referring to prospective co-tenants simply as ‘tenants’ (examples 2,3,4,6) and describing co-tenants resume-style by listing desirable or undesirable attributes with minimal elaboration (examples 2,3,5). In the few instances transactional listings adopt a more conversational tone, those listings feature adjective-heavy descriptions of the unit and location (and little about co-tenants or the sharing arrangement), appearing to leverage a casual, informal style as a marketing strategy.

By contrast, most social listings (39 out of 50, or 78%) are written with a conversational tone. As the examples in [Table 2](#) demonstrate, listings labelled as social tend to embrace informal communication through abundant descriptive adjectives (examples 1,3,4,5), lots of personal pronouns (examples 1,2,4,5), as well as casual elements such as slang and pop culture references (examples 2,3,4,5). Notably, social listings sometimes maintain neutral or formal tone when describing the practical aspects of shared renting like unit features and logistics, but shift to engaging, sociable language (labelled separately) when discussing co-tenants and sharing arrangements, revealing their intent to prioritise the social dimensions of home-sharing.

Authority and power

In addition to the social distance implied by their formal language and neutral tone, transactional listings commonly employ specific features that establish the lister’s decision-making authority. A central signal of this type is the prevalence of furnished rooms in this category (examples 3,6, [Table 1](#)). This setup manufactures hierarchy through two mechanisms. First, furnished rooms limit co-tenants’ ability to personalise their living space, fully exercise spatial agency and establish ownership. Instead, by intentionally setting the home up as a liminal living space, furnished rooms signal that the lister maintains control over the physical environment in the shared home. Second, the convenience of such a move-in-ready arrangement also facilitates quick tenant turnover, reducing friction for both parties and reinforcing the signal of temporary occupancy over long-term home-making on equal footing. Social listings, by contrast, rarely advertise furnished rooms.

The ‘home-as-service’ mode of shared renting extends to utility arrangements. Transactional listings frequently advertise bills as ‘included’, positioning prospective co-tenants to simply slip into a fully prepared setup

where everything is ‘provided’ (example 3, [Table 1](#)). However, this convenience comes with surrendered control—as the provider, the lister, retains authority and sets all terms. [Table 1](#), example 4 illustrates this dynamic: ‘Utilities included if they are not overused,’ where the lister maintains discretionary power over usage definitions.

By contrast, social listings typically establish that responsibilities will be shared (examples 3,4,5, [Table 2](#)). Whether addressing cleaning, electricity or internet bills, and in rarer cases household products, cleaning services, or cooking, social listings describe these as duties that all co-tenants are expected to participate in. Listers signal for personal and group accountability. Consider the following representative examples:

We are all sort of default messy, but make an effort not to be gross & would appreciate someone who is the same way. The roommates split the cost of utilities, internet and twice a month cleaning service. (example 3, [Table 2](#))

Looking for someone who is: [...] clean...yes we all take trash out (example 4, [Table 2](#))

The articulation of house rules reveals a similar dichotomy. Transactional listings communicate rules top-down as non-negotiable prohibitions, often expressed through a succession of short, two-word commands: ‘NO PETS/ No Smoking/No illegal Drug/No overnight guest after midnight’ (example 5, [Table 1](#), capital letters in original). This no-nonsense linguistic style reinforces vertical hierarchy.

Social listings on the other hand, often present house rules as negotiable: ‘I would prefer someone who doesn’t have an animal but not totally out of the question’ (example 1, [Table 2](#)). While these listings may include firm exclusions such as ‘NO live in boyfriends/gfs’ (example 4, [Table 2](#)), they more commonly express flexible expectations: ‘Looking for someone who is: chilllllll happy busy clean’ (example 4, [Table 2](#)). Rather than defining behaviour purely through negatives, these listings seek to establish general behavioural norms. Describing expected behaviours in the shared home in this way suggests room to negotiate specific details collaboratively.

Home environment

In transactional listings, the shared home environment is described through setting physical and social boundaries—demarcations on where the prospective co-tenant can expect to have access to and what the limits are on allowable behaviour, as determined unilaterally by the lister (see also previous section). We notice frequent restrictions on the use of kitchens (e.g., example 3, [Table 1](#)) and sometimes common areas (e.g., example 6, [Table 1](#)). Even when listings specify what co-tenants have access to—such as ‘full access to the den and kitchen’ (example 1, [Table 1](#)) or ‘Full laundry use included’ (example 3, [Table 1](#))—these detailed permissions serve to

Table 2. Example listings, labelled as social.

- 1 Beautiful bedroom located in amazing neighbourhood not too far from West Hollywood and Beverly Hills. Just looking for a down-to-earth roommate to take over my old roommate's portion of the lease. Little bit about me I'm more of an introvert like to keep to myself very covid conscience due to my profession. All are welcome I just ask that you are pet friendly as I do have a cat. I would prefer someone who doesn't have an animal but not totally out of the question. If you have any questions about the room please feel free to message me anytime. I look forward to meeting you! Thanks! Nick
- 2 Hi there We are looking for a roommate to fill one of the rooms in a new house in Echo Park centrally located with a yard garden side deck and additional deck overlooking the city. Comes with a garage parking spot. I am a 32yr old female attorney my roommate is 25 and works in film production. I have a dog a half lab half other who is quirky and very friendly with people I m also happy to provide pictures of him. We re both hoping to find someone who is up fo occasionally grilling hanging out in the yard etc. and someone who we all around get along with. Outside of work my roommate enjoys outdoorsey activity trying out new food and exploring the neighbourhood. I also enjoy the outdoors running basketball mostly watching and hiking with my dog. Let us know if you re interested or if you have any questions
- 3 Room for rent in downtown Los Angeles's Arts District. The room is open for move in 3/1, but could be flexible on dates for the right person.
Private room in a built-out artist loft space. The unit is large and open, with beautiful exposed brick and raw wood. Our unit is on the top floor of the building with two skylights and lots of natural light. There is also central AC in the unit. We built the rooms ourselves -- they're small & not super soundproof, but provide visual privacy.
You would be living with three roommates:
Alex – 33 yrs old. easy going. computer programmer. science enthusiast. writer. works from home and spends most of his home time gaming & watching "good shows". Huge fan of "The Wire" but has yet to watch "Mad Men" in it's entirety.
Me (Justin) – 33, Works for an environmental non-profit. Travels a lot for work. Is very serious about rollerblading and can rap the entirety of Wu-Tang's "Triumph" without any help from Rap Genius.
James – 32, moved to LA in November from Texas. He works from home as a computer modeller in structural engineering. On weekends hes usually out at the beach surfing. Typically an early riser and daily gym goer. Chill, quiet and mostly keeps to himself but also social at times. Cooks a mean rotisserie chicken.
I'm looking to rent our room to someone who is easy going and comfortable living in a group environment with shared spaces. The common area is large, but the room is relatively compact at 12ft x 10ft -- plenty of space for a bed and clothes rack, but not for too much furniture. We are all sort of default messy, but make an effort not to be gross & would appreciate someone who is the same way. The roommates split the cost of utilities, internet and twice a month cleaning service. Move-in is first month's rent + equivalent as a security deposit (\$950 rent + \$950 deposit = \$1900). Please message if you want more information or would like to schedule a visit. Please include links to social media and/or any relevant info about yourself.
- 4 These pictures don't do the place justice. Beautiful, relaxing house surrounded by trees with private garden, yard for outdoor entertaining, updated kitchen, great wood floors throughout. Lots of attic storage room. bike, surfboard storage plenty. Big Private bedroom with very nice size closet.
I have a very well behaved cat that has never peed or done anything bad in house, doesn't shed. someone who isn't allergic and hopefully gets that she's adorable and wants to be buddies!
Please no more pets, she'll freak.
Looking for someone who is:
chilllllll
happy
busy
clean....yes we all take trash out
respectful
emotionally intelligent/mature (a plus, lol)
NO live in boyfriends/gfs.
I am: all those things I just listed. 33 female, I have a 9-5, but I also have a 6-9. and an in between side hustle. love to have a few friends over for dinner drinks 1or 2 nights out of the week, or maybe not at all. that's about it. I don't do hard drugs. I love wine, the rest is history.
Text me if you're seriously interested. let's exchange instagram accounts or fb.
Utilities are not included. internet is \$25/month, electricity (most expensive) is paid every two months can be high if heater or AC is going all the time, but shouldn't be more than \$70

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

-
- 5 My roommate is moving out of our super adorable 2 bedroom/ 1 bathroom apartment in NoHo and I am looking for someone to move in March 6. Move in date is flexible. This is a month to month agreement. Rent would be \$968/person, utilities are not included in rent. At most you are looking at 1100/month (this number is rounded up). Credit score must be above 650. The apartment is very spacious and gets incredible natural light. The room up for rent is the bigger of the two rooms. There is also one parking space included with the apartment (no extra charge) but there is also plenty of street parking. A little bit about me, I am a 24 year old young professional pursuing a career in PR. I am a taurus, an empath, an advocate and an INFJ. I moved to California in 2019 and have been in love ever since. I am super friendly and would like to have a relationship with the person I am living with. We don't have to be best friends by any means but I am always looking for someone to watch the latest Netflix show, indulge in a Harry Potter Marathon or just chat about day to day happenings. I love art, music, reading, playing card/board games, exploring and going to the beach. Currently, I am unemployed due to the pandemic but have a secure financial situation and I am actively job hunting like a mad woman. I am the kind of person that pays rent the day we get the statement. Looking for a respectful, kind, responsible and communicative roommate. I am hoping to find someone that picks up after themselves, pays bills on time, has a consistent job or has great financial support. I am not into drama so keep the vibes good and positive. I am open to having people come and see the apartment. I can also answer any questions you might have I am very easy to get a hold of.
-

further highlight the lister's ultimate authority over space allocation. This pattern of boundary-setting reinforces the message that the parameters of homemaking are set entirely at the lister's discretion, positioning them as the authority over domestic arrangements.

Privacy is another prominent theme throughout transactional listings (examples 1,2,3,4,6, [Table 1](#)). In the short 13 sentences of example 4, [Table 1](#), the word 'private' is used five times. In addition, the listing declares 'Please DO NOT DISTURB Current tenants'. Similarly, example 6, [Table 1](#) announces 'This is NOT an apt share it is one private room and private bath with no kitchen access'. Across the 50 transactional listings we coded, 35 (70%) explicitly reference privacy. Rarely anything in these listings suggests joint activities or sociality in the shared household. Instead, these listings signal that co-tenants can expect to live largely separate lives—or at least that is the intended vision from the lister's point of view.

We find this compartmentalised cohabitation mode further reflected in the way transactional listings tend to prioritise unit specifications, location details, and logistical information over interpersonal elements. Our qualitative coding revealed twice as many listings that were either extremely short or focused on apartment descriptions only in the transactional category as compared to the social category. People are either not featured at all or they are reduced to demographic categories or requirement checklists. Example 2, [Table 1](#) exemplifies this pattern: rather than portraying a multidimensional person, the sole reference to people consists of a series of tenant requirements: 'Looking for a quiet respectable stable Male tenant non-smoker including 420 no pets couples or others'.

Social listings take the opposite approach. The home environment is typically described with emotive adjectives (26 out of 50 listings coded). Example 3, Table 2 illustrates this: ‘The unit is large and open, with beautiful exposed brick and raw wood. Our unit is on the top floor of the building with two skylights and lots of natural light’.

In addition, social listings foreground interpersonal relationships and the people who will comprise the shared household. Just like the examples in Table 2, we find that most social listings dedicate only a fraction of the listing text to describing the location, unit, and room for rent. Instead, the majority of content usually focuses on current and prospective co-tenants alongside visions for the sharing arrangement. Crucially, people feature as whole persons. Consider for instance how in examples 2 through 5, the listing text reveals not only basic information such as profession, age, gender, but also details about hobbies and character traits of the existing co-tenants. Similarly, prospective tenants are described through behavioural expectations rather than merely listing requirements.

This emphasis on relationality stands in stark contrast to transactional listings, as social category listers commonly express hopes for joint activities and the development of meaningful connections. Consider these representative excerpts:

We re both hoping to find someone who is up fo occasionally grilling hanging out in the yard etc. and someone who we all around get along with. (example 2, Table 2)

We don't have to be best friends by any means but I am always looking for someone to watch the latest Netflix show, indulge in a Harry Potter Marathon or just chat about day to day happenings. (example 5, Table 2)

Privacy assumes a notably diminished role in social listings compared to their transactional counterparts. Among the 50 social listings we coded, only 13 (26%) referenced privacy. When privacy does appear, it functions more as clarification—precisely because most listing content describes what will be shared and how. These privacy mentions often highlight specific amenities such as private bathrooms or balconies rather than emphasising boundaries between co-tenants.

Discussion

Rising unaffordability has sparked debate among scholars and practitioners about the role of shared housing in contemporary urban life. Is it merely a coping mechanism, or does it represent a desirable bottom-up affordability strategy—a resourceful response to constrained housing options that offers benefits beyond cost savings? Central to this question is how co-tenants themselves experience and interpret shared housing.

This study explores the visions of ‘home’ articulated in online shared rental listings, which function as key entry points into shared living arrangements, particularly the growing trend of sharing among strangers rather

than friends and kin. Our findings reveal two distinct approaches to home-making within shared rentals. On the one hand, transactional listings tend to promote a 'home-light' model: a limited form of homemaking that frames the creation of home as an individual endeavour, even within a communal setting. Listers advertising this model prioritise privacy, control, and autonomy by setting strict physical and social boundaries—attempts to recreate private living within shared environments. From the perspective of prospective co-tenants, this arrangement often entails a power imbalance. Listers, who control material resources and set the terms of engagement, limit the agency of co-tenants and constrain their ability to establish ontological security, express identity, or care for themselves and others.

At the other end of the spectrum, the social model embraces the unavoidable relational aspects of sharing. These listers seek to turn shared rentals into spaces of collective homemaking by advertising sociality, shared responsibilities, and hopes for mutual care. Instead of treating privacy as a resource to be maximised, they incorporate the inherent lack of privacy into their vision of home, emphasising interpersonal connection and shared domesticity. These listings portray both lister and prospective co-tenant as equal participants in shaping the shared household, with room to negotiate roles and norms. Importantly, unlike the transactional model that regards homemaking as a private venture to be figured out individually by new co-tenants after they move in, social listings see homemaking as a household project to be negotiated at the matching stage. Whereas these social listings may help co-tenants form households (with all their attendant benefits), the transactional listings suggest a lesser emphasis on selecting on personal characteristics, which in turn has implications for how shared rentals may relate to discrimination and segregation.

Planners and policymakers should recognise shared housing among strangers as a distinct and expanding form of urban living. While shared housing has traditionally occurred mostly among family or friends—where people are selected before the space—contemporary shared housing among strangers reverses this process, selecting housing before or simultaneously with people. Breaking with taken-for-granted assumptions about households and homes, shared renting accommodates a variety of in-home relationships that have remained under-theorized but are a defining feature of this emerging housing and household modality. Furthermore, because it can occur across nearly any housing type, shared renting offers a potential tool for disrupting exclusionary zoning and increasing housing supply without major infrastructure overhauls. As such it could help mitigate spatial segregation by providing new housing options that expand access to opportunity-rich neighbourhoods and so-called 'rental deserts'.

However, the promise of sharing comes with several challenges. As planning and policy have historically been dismissive of sharing, regarding it as merely a transitional strategy confined to narrow demographics, the policy environment is misaligned with the evolving reality of sharing and shared renters' unique needs. Our findings reveal the scope and multiplicity of

shared renting and the different housing experiences it generates. From this, we argue that shared housing is a policy challenge: Policymakers must keep up with this changing environment—especially since sharing has arisen out of policy failure (e.g., exclusionary zoning) and holds the promise to address it. Policymakers should develop regulatory frameworks specifically tailored to shared renting as a distinct tenure, building on existing recognition of its unique characteristics, such as the US Courts of Appeals (2012) decision regarding shared living advertisements. We propose addressing at least three key areas: living standards, power dynamics, and tenant protections.

First, regulators should establish minimum standards that shared renters can reasonably expect. Beyond traditional requirements like room sizes and occupancy limits that govern whole-unit rentals and may need to be adapted, our research shows that shared housing regulations should also guarantee access to essential facilities including cooking and bathing amenities. Such standards would acknowledge that shared renters often face restricted access to common areas that would be available in independent rentals.

Second, current arrangements allow sitting co-tenants to unilaterally determine household terms, creating power dynamics to the potential detriment of new co-tenants. Policymakers could enhance transparency and accountability by developing standardised lease templates that clearly outline expectations for key issues such as cost-sharing arrangements, household responsibilities, furniture use and lease termination procedures. Such template leases could help reduce ambiguity and protect incoming tenants from arbitrary rule changes, potentially making shared renting open and viable for more people.

Third, existing tenant protection frameworks largely fail to address shared housing's unique vulnerabilities. A 'co-tenants bill of rights' could fill critical gaps where traditional tenant protections prove inadequate. Such protections must reflect shared housing's inherently relational nature while addressing its specific risk profile, including for instance financial interdependence. Notably, many issues typically prioritised by policymakers—hygiene standards, space usage, and household norms—are already being negotiated organically through listing advertisements regardless of whether the lister also acts as a landlord or not, suggesting that effective regulation should build upon rather than replace these existing tenant-driven mechanisms.

Finally, this work represents an initial step towards understanding the full spectrum of lived experiences in shared rental homes and how sharing creates new constraints and opportunities for homemaking. However, our text analysis captures only the initial conditions articulated by listers rather than the actual lived arrangements that develop over time. While these advertised visions likely shape early shared housing experiences, particularly given demand imbalances that empower listers, the eventual household dynamics may evolve from these starting points—and depend on legal-contractual relations within the shared household. Hence, future research should explore homemaking among strangers through longer-term qualitative or ethnographic research designs. Such studies would

provide crucial insights into whether transactional and social visions persist or transform as co-tenants negotiate daily life together.

Our analysis faces additional data limitations that future work should address. Platform-specific biases may skew our findings, as different rental platforms attract distinct user populations with varying expectations. Geographic and temporal constraints also limit generalisability. In particular, our focus on Los Angeles during 2020–2021 occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, when heightened health concerns as well as policy interventions such as a temporary ban on no-fault evictions may have pushed arrangements towards more transactional modes to minimise interpersonal contact. Expanding this research agenda to other cities and time periods, particularly with distance from pandemic conditions, would help determine whether our findings reflect broader patterns or context-specific responses. Comparative work could further reveal how different housing markets, cultural contexts, and external conditions shape the balance between transactional and social approaches to shared living. Our work positions shared housing as an urgent policy challenge and demonstrates why policymakers must approach it holistically, across the social-transactional spectrum.

Notes

1. Based on the literature, we expect most listers to be co-tenants but some shared units could be listed by owner-occupiers or landlords. We address this in the findings.
2. Among the many pre-trained models available, we chose the “all-MiniLM-L6-v2” model available at <https://huggingface.co/sentence-transformers/all-MiniLM-L6-v2>.

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