Social Media in Northern Chile

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In Alto Hospicio there is a homogeneity that pervades the visual landscape. People, each with their individual differences, still fit neatly into the setting. Their T-shirts and jeans, often purchased used from the Agro market, are rarely meant to attract attention. There are few big buildings and very little advertising. Houses all seem to look the same, like giant Lego blocks stacked one or two high on each narrow street. One street looks just like the next, with a row of houses flanked by corner shops; the cars that pass by the main plaza seem to be all of the same few makes and models. Even looking at the Facebook pages and Instagram feeds of Hospiceños, it is hard to distinguish one from another.

The repetition of architecture, inconspicuous corner shops, run of the mill clothing styles and even stray dogs lounging in the plazas seems to reject the existence of anything out of the ordinary. Even on social media, normativity calls no attention to itself. There is something so normative about all of these aesthetic aspects in Alto Hospicio that they seem to reject difference passively. Indeed, normativity often seems to be the absence of doing anything different or special. Yet Alto Hospicio provides an example of the ways in which doing something ordinary is no less active than doing something extraordinary. It is a choice, though at times an unconscious one, that manifests in various ways, many of which are visual. Such normativity is closely connected to a sense of being a good local citizen, of fitting in and accepting marginality as part of belonging in the community.

Aesthetics may seem to be something wholly divorced from notions of citizenship. However, aesthetics are a key mode through which citizenship may be expressed or contested. Understanding this normative aesthetic as actively (though at times unconsciously) created
allows us to see the ways in which it also produces a certain form of citizenship. Aesthetics are grounds on which dominant (often capitalist) ideologies are reproduced\(^1\) or contested.\(^2\) In looking at visual elements of Hospiceños’ social media, it becomes clear precisely how aesthetics becomes a key way in which individuals present themselves as ‘good’ marginalised citizens, reworking dominant ideals and promoting their own sense of collective normativity.

### Instagramming the uninteresting

The aesthetic normativity of social media in Alto Hospicio is particularly apparent in visual representations of the self, often considered the sites at which performance and identification are most evident on social media. Typical selfies\(^3\) in Alto Hospicio, even for young people, are usually taken at work, in their own home or that of a friend, or during a brief outing to the centre of Alto Hospicio or Iquique. These photographers rarely seem to aim at conveying a sense of glamour.

While both of the examples of selfies in Figs 3.1 and 3.2 are clearly posed, and we might assume the subjects hope to look their best, it is clear that the amount of effort and staging put into the photographs is minimal. The man in Fig. 3.1 is posed on a street corner on a typical neighbourhood street in Alto Hospicio. He turns to look at the camera and flashes a ‘peace sign’ – perhaps a now-universal worldwide casual pose for photos. The woman in the photograph in Fig. 3.2 has positioned her hair so that it appears in the frame of the photo, yet she chooses a background of a blank wall. Neither individual shows off particularly nice clothing in the photographs, nor does either choose an especially noteworthy background. Perhaps most revealing, however, is the fact that when these Hospiceños uploaded their selfies both photos received several ‘likes’ and comments focusing on the subject being good-looking, using the words ‘guapo’ [handsome], ‘hermosa’ [beautiful], ‘te ves bien’ [you look good] and ‘preciosa’ [pretty].

Pictures in which the subject intends to present a ‘good-looking’ pose, like those below, are one common form of selfies that Hospiceños upload to social media, but plenty of other pictures portray a more playful and casual look. These photographs tend to talk back humorously to the well-known stereotype of the selfie as narcissistic. In essence, when the subjects of the photos know that they might not pass as ‘good-looking’ because they are not well-dressed or posed, they reject this framing by ‘pulling a face’. Such photos are popular among Hospiceños, both
Figs. 3.1 and 3.2  Two typical selfies of young Hospicieños
young and old, perhaps precisely because expending energy (whether mental or physical) to compose a good-looking photo is simply not within the common repertoire. Yet such a manner of being informal and spontaneous is just as standardised as the formal poses with which they contrast.

The ways in which individuals talk back to the formality of the posed selfie are abundant. One inventive way popular among young Hospiceños is the foot photo, or ‘footie’. These photographers are almost always in a lounging position while watching television or playing a video game, giving the viewer a sense of the mundane life that the photographer wishes to capture. The ‘footie’ is so casual that the photographer does not even have to move from a resting position to pose. The picture can be taken with minimal movement simply by angling the smartphone, already in hand, and snapping a photo without even pausing the television show or video game. It is the ultimate post portraying relaxation.

Fig. 3.3 Two young Hospiceños take a selfie with silly faces
Figs. 3.4 and 3.5  ‘Footies’
Figs. 3.6 and 3.7  Work photographs
Teens and young adults are those who most often post several pictures a day, usually of mundane items such as new gym shoes, breakfast, their freshly washed car, ‘selfies’ taken at school or work and photo collages made with another app. These images give a sense of the monotony of everyday life. Taking and posting photographs often seem to be strategies for passing time while bored; indeed the photos themselves often include hashtags such as #bored, #aburrido or #fome. Young people pass time by photographing their workspaces (whether at their job or school), snapping pictures of their surroundings while relaxing at home (often watching television or listening to music) and taking selfies in sites around Alto Hospicio. Some photos even express the ultimate boredom: waiting in a queue while running errands. Figure 3.8 depicts the queue to pay bills at the Movistar mobile phone company.

These mundane photos suggest that the very purpose of photography for these young people in Alto Hospicio is not the same as for previous generations. There are few Hospicenos who do not possess a mobile phone with a camera or a separate digital camera. Cameras, film and the developing process were once relatively expensive, giving
photographs an aura of significance. But the ease with which Hospiceños now take endless digital photos evidences a changing relationship with the medium. The purpose of the photograph was previously to record the experience, whereas now, for many people, the photograph serves to enhance the experience. Often young people snap photos with no intention of displaying them in their homes or on social media. And, given the low quality of many that Hospiceños post, it seems that image quality, composition and subject are not so much the point of the exercise: rather the meaning is in the action. Photography is a way to pass the time, while posting the image on social media also opens up the possibility of discussion and praise from peers. Such discussions further help to ease periods of boredom. The photograph then works to pass time in a double sense – first in the instant of taking the picture and second in the time (hopefully) spent discussing the picture itself, along with whatever conversations might emerge on social media in the comments section or in private messages as a result of the photograph.

Of course Hospiceños also consider it important to capture entertaining moments with photography, and even use the act to frame an event as ‘fun’. They commonly post photographs that feature the moments of life meant to be enjoyed, often consisting of food, drink and friends. These photographs work to frame moments – many of which are relatively mundane – as worthy of documentation and thus fun, special or noteworthy.

Again these pictures are taken with minimal effort and staging, suggesting that in Alto Hospicio the product of photography has become less consequential as the act becomes more important. People do not appear to pay much attention to their appearances, aside from the now almost universally understood symbolic modes of demonstrating ‘a good time’ – tongues out, burlesqued smiles and hand signs. They do not arrange their clothing or their bodies in particular ways, other than to make sure their faces are visible and fit within the frame. People often do not even appear in the photograph. Simply depicting the food or drink serves to symbolise a good time, allowing the human enjoyment to be implied through the material objects.

It is also worth noting that each of the pictures shown here were first posted to Instagram, associated in many places with overt curation of images. Curation here is used similarly to in an art museum, where different aesthetic objects are placed in relation to one another to create a narrative or simply an ambiance. Media coverage of Instagram usually focuses on the application’s affordances for visually enhancing photos, allowing users to crop them into squares and choose ‘filters’
Figs. 3.9 and 3.10  Photographs of food
which change the contrast, colour tone, saturation and focus of the photos. What results is often something that looks like an over- or under-exposed Polaroid picture.

For many users worldwide, this is the appeal of Instagram – turning the ordinary into the nostalgically beautiful. It allows for the curation of a set of photographs that displays the artistic sensibilities of the user, the beautiful places they have visited, their stylised selfies and their clever eye for finding interesting compositions among the ordinary moments of life. For contrast I display here (Figs 3.13 and 3.14) two Instagram photos by users from Santiago. Both present subjects that are widely considered ‘beautiful’ for art’ and use filters to enhance their appearance.

For these users Instagram reflects a more explicit concentration on the result of photography rather than the action of taking a picture. In many contexts the measure of a good Instagram photo is not simply its display of a moment in life, but its ability to combine a keen

Fig. 3.11 Photograph of friends
photographer’s eye, interesting composition and skilful use of filters to create an aesthetically pleasing final product.⁸

The Instagram photos here from Alto Hospicio contrast with these ideals in almost every possible way. They do not feature subjects such as artistic works, well-presented restaurant food, beautifully decorated spaces or stylish fashion. Yet the contrasts are apparent even when Instagram users from Santiago portray the ‘mundane’ subjects of feet, work, their breakfast at home or the neighbourhood. Rather than the picture simply portraying the mundane subject, these users often compose the photographs and use filters to give them an artistic feel in an effort to elevate the mundane.

My point here is not that photographers in Santiago are qualitatively better than those in Alto Hospicio, but that their aims are different. For many Instagram users in Santiago, there is a sense that rather than capturing the mundane, Instagram and social media in general should be used to present the extraordinary moments of life: the
Figs. 3.13 and 3.14  Instagram photographs from users in Santiago
Figs. 3.15 and 3.16  ‘Mundane’ items as subjects of Santiago users’ Instagram photographs
beautiful vistas, delicious food and special moments with friends. These users in Santiago follow common ideals of curation more closely, while Instagram and Facebook users in Alto Hospicio present visual materials that corresponded more closely to an unedited view of daily life. In the context of other Hospiceno users doing the same, these pictures seem perfectly normal and 'natural' images to post on social media. These are pictures of 'normal' life.

It is clear that these photographs on social media are consistent with the way Hospicenos see offline life. In homes, clothing and these photographs, Hospicenos privilege an aesthetic that corresponds to the normativity of their everyday existence. Portraying this normativity constitutes its own form of aesthetics. These collections of photographs are not devoid of aesthetics. Rather, along with the spaces and material goods common in Alto Hospicio, they constitute a particular, unassuming aesthetic. Selfies, like most other forms of Hospicenos’ social media photographs, simply provide a view into their daily lives. Yet to say that they are without aesthetics misinterprets the photographers’ intentions. These photographs are precise examples of the aesthetic that corresponds to the particular form of normativity most prevalent in Alto Hospicio. As Hariman suggests, ‘Because the camera records the décor of everyday life, the photographic image is capable of . . . aesthetic mediations of political identity.’ These mundane selfies allow Hospicenos to perform their normativity and, along with other forms of social media postings, to place themselves squarely within the dominant conception of a ‘good citizen’ in the city.

**Daily life and social class on social media**

The representation of daily life in social media photography works as a compliment to the social media presentation of social and economic class. Most Hospicenos present themselves as within the bounds of normative wealth and economic means of the city. And while most residents identify as marginalised, some families are of comfortable means – they have several wage earners to support the family and are able to afford such luxuries as the latest electronics, private vehicles, at least one mobile phone for each family member, and are able to spend extra earnings on entertainment activities. Yet they would consider it distasteful to present themselves as ‘wealthy’ (or what might appear middle class to those in Iquique). Instead, maintaining an appearance of conforming
to Alto Hospicio’s marginalised position on social media allows for perpetuation of the social scripts of normativity.

While in many contexts people often use visual representation to make claims to higher status and wealth, Hospiceños actively choose to emphasise what they have in common with their neighbours and social media contacts. This is not to say that they are insincere about their wealth, but most people feel it is inappropriate to use social media to show off wealth and class position that departs from the norm. Instead, highlighting certain kinds of economic problems with a humorous twist allows them to contribute to collective discourses on the marginality of Alto Hospicio and its residents.

Hospiceños rarely perceive a stigma associated with lapses in their ability to afford certain luxuries – internet access among them. They quite readily admit to their material shortcomings, often approaching the subject in a joking manner. For example Eduardo, a 40-year-old man who had recently lost his job with a mining company, quipped one afternoon, ‘People with money are always connected. Those with less money are only connected sometimes. And those with no money have to look for free Wi-Fi.’ And because free Wi-Fi in Alto Hospicio is difficult to come by, those with ‘no money’ usually remain disconnected.

Because of these constraints, it is also not unusual to see public notices on Facebook that announce ‘Friends, I will not have internet for the next two weeks. If you need me call my sister’s mobile phone or come see me at work’. A smartphone plan or pre-paid credit is often the only internet access for many Hospiceños. Connections in Alto Hospicio in general are tenuous, depending on the strength of mobile signals (notoriously slow in Alto Hospicio), neighbours paying their own bills or friends’ willingness to pass on credit.

Yet being without money has wider implications for social media. As Eduardo explained:

Social media are very different if you have money. For instance, now when I’m poor I have two options. Before my internet is shut off [from my mobile phone] I can say to the world that I’m poor and hope that someone I have invited out before will invite me out and buy me a drink. If I’m poor without internet I’m just disconnected and have to find something else for entertainment. But when I have money I go out, I go to parties, I take pictures and put them online. I can be like Tony Stark [from the Iron Man movie franchise] – rich, eccentric and post pictures that prove it all on Facebook.
He then showed me the meme he had posted previously featuring Tony Stark; it represented the character’s wealth and lifestyle, labelled ‘payday’, in contrast with a photograph of an impoverished-looking man crouching, labelled ‘the rest of the month’. ‘That just pretty much sums it up. Sometimes you have money, sometimes you don’t,’ Eduardo said with a sigh.

Rather than being stigmatised, these lapses in internet access fit seamlessly into other forms of expressing identification with a marginalised economic and social class. Poverty is even its own genre of humour on social media. When the iPhone 6 became available many Hospiceños circulated popular memes reflecting on its unobtainability. One joke lamented the feeling of the new iPhone bend while in the front

Fig. 3.17  Meme featuring Tony Stark, Iron Man character
Line 1: ‘Payday’ Line 2: ‘The rest of the month’
pocket, only to remember that it is not an iPhone but a Pop Tart. Another expressed excitement: ‘I am so happy the iPhone 6 has come out! Now I can afford to buy an iPhone 4 second-hand!’

iPhones, like Xboxes, are often used as symbols of luxury goods in a way that large-screen televisions, cars and cameras are not. This humour works because Hospiceños have a common understanding that iPhones are out of reach, as well as a shared experience of some form of feeling poor. Thus through this shared form of self-mockery, they build a sense of belonging in the community which takes as its base the normative experience of being marginalised.

Those who pushed the boundaries of class presentation on social media at times became a topic of gossip. Much as Vicky resented her ostentatious neighbours, other women complained about their acquaintances who showed off too much of their wealth on Facebook. Lilia, a mother of five in her fifties, told me:

I have known plenty of people that are always talking about how poor they are. But then on Facebook I see they have a new car, they went on a trip, they buy accessories. Personally, these people bother me. Facebook tells the truth. They’re stingy, they don’t want to share.

For Lilia, social media works as a window that allows her to check up on neighbours and acquaintances in an effort to patrol the boundaries of normativity.

The joys of mediocrity

Hospiceños usually represent their wealth as normative on Facebook, but performing normativity extends beyond their current economic situation to the ways they present their aspirations (or lack thereof). A common genre of meme shared on Facebook represents success or a luxury lifestyle framed through humorous exaggeration. The meme picturing Tony Stark provides one example of this exaggeration, in which payday is presented as a moment of luxury in an otherwise meagre existence. Through this and other funny memes Hospiceños contrast themselves with representations of success, thereby actively aligning themselves with normativity.

One funny example of this style uses self-deprecation to position the individual as mediocre. The meme, which Jhony and Miguel originally found on Jaidefinichon, then shared on Facebook, features several sperm racing for an egg. The meme presents the self, even before
conception, as the disappointing result of almost random chance. Of all the possible sperm with extraordinary potential for brilliance, good looks and leadership qualities, the one that succeeds is mediocre. This form of humorous exaggeration places the self in contrast to greatness, claiming solidarity with the average individuals of Alto Hospicio. The frame of humour indicates a joking acceptance of such fate.

Another meme declares the advantages of physical mediocrity, claiming, ‘Being ugly and poor has its advantages. When someone falls in love with you, they do it from the heart.’ Again, individuals who post this meme portray themselves as mediocre or even below average in looks and wealth, but highlight the positive side of their situation – the knowledge that their relationships are sincere. At the same time they subtly suggest a correspondence between above average (good looking and rich) individuals and insincerity. They present normativity as a positive characteristic and devalue that which is usually idealised, reinforcing the sorts of social sanctioning created by women such as Vicky and Lilia in their gossip about neighbours and friends who show off too much.

Acceptance or even pride in a mundane life is especially apparent from a certain style of meme that overwhelmed Facebook toward the end of 2014. These Rana René (Kermit the Frog, in English) memes express a sense of abandoned aspirations. In these memes the frog expresses

Fig. 3.18  Meme depicting sperm racing for an egg
Me        Nuclear Physicist    Movie Star
Cure for Cancer  Nobel Prize Winner  President
Fig. 3.19  Rana René meme  
Translation: ‘Sometimes I want to quit working. Later I remember that I don’t have anyone to support me and I get over it’

Fig. 3.20  Rana René meme  
Translation: ‘Sometimes I think about modifying my motor. Later I remember that I only have enough [money] for an oil change and I get over it’
desire for something – a better physique, nicer material goods, a better family or love life—but concludes that it is unlikely to happen and that therefore 'se me pasa' [I get over it].

Similarly, during June and July of 2013 a common form of meme served to contrast the expected or idealised with reality. The example in Fig. 3.22 demonstrates the ‘expected’ image of a man at the beach – one who looks like a model, with a fit body and tanned skin set against a picturesque background. The ‘reality’ shows a man who is out of shape, lighter skinned and on a busy urban beach populated by other people and structures. It does not portray the sort of serene, dreamlike setting of the ‘expected’. In others, the ‘expected’ portrays equally ‘ideal’ settings, people, clothing, parties, architecture or romantic situations. The reality always humorously demonstrates something more mundane, or even disastrous. These memes became so ubiquitous that they were even used as inspiration for advertising Toddy cookies.

Health and body image are often commented upon in posts that demonstrate how normativity is more highly valued than excellence.
Unlike in many contexts where fit bodies are idealised, in Alto Hospicio it is precisely the imperfect body that is widely praised. One common meme suggested, ‘A man without a belly is like a sky without stars’. Overall, discourses alluding to the acceptance of different body shapes manifest in the use of nicknames as well. Many parents or older relatives refer to their children (no matter their age) lovingly as ‘mi gordo/a’ [my little fatty]. Many people also called their siblings, cousins or friends Gorda or Gordo. In a sense, these are reactions to the more general idea promoted by mass media, including global television and movies, national or international magazines and even local celebrities that thin or fit is the most sexy and desirable body shape. Whether consciously or
Fig. 3.23  A Toddy advertisement modelled after the ‘Expected vs. Reality’-style memes

Fig. 3.24  Meme depicting a tombstone inscribed with ‘Here rests my desire to study’
unconsciously, Hospiceños communally valorise a positive body image that acknowledges the ways that most people look – something quite distinct from the forms that mass media implicitly suggests are the most desirable for both men and women.

Education is another theme that emerges in posts where Hospiceños identify with limited ambition. Most young people in Alto Hospicio finish high school (segondaria) and many begin studies at local universities, but only a few complete a university degree. When a young person (or an older adult) finishes university the whole family is very proud, but, given work options in the region, it is also understood as an achievement reserved for only the brightest and most dedicated students. More often people train for technical degrees in electrical, mechanic or other skilled trades related to mining or work at the Zofri dock. Others eschew advanced education and go directly into the workforce, so that they can begin contributing to the family income or support their own young families immediately. These local norms and expectations endow university education with a sense of distinction that many Hospiceños equally admire and see as superfluous. Because this treatment of education is almost universal within the community and reflects the limited ambitions of Hospiceño normativity, it becomes excellent fodder for humour on social media.

Humorous memes are important to Hospiceños because they allow for play. Yet the jokes are only comfortable for most audience members if they experience the humour as non-threatening to the core values at stake. In the context of normativity in Alto Hospicio, joking is a safe and obviously popular way for people to express their comfort with the normative lives they have chosen. Rather than expressing disappointment or regret that they have not aspired to more, they reaffirm to themselves, and to those like them, that their decision to remain within the bounds of normativity is acceptable or valued within the community.

Humour often revolves around self-deprecation or forms of heightening emotion, only quickly to diffuse the situation. The ‘I get over it’ memes featuring Kermit the Frog work in this way to excite the audience, but then quickly diffuse the expectations. This functions as a form of self-deprecation associated with low income and/or ambition. While the joke would work in any context, the Hospiceños who choose these memes as part of their social media performances communicate that they not only understand the joke, but also see a correspondence with their own feelings and ambitions. Within socially accepted ideals of normativity, joking becomes a perfect way of expressing normativity, even while articulating desires to go beyond the norm. Humour allows
individuals to express desires that are, under the circumstances, probably unobtainable, while simultaneously assuring others that they realise such ambition lies beyond the expected social scripts. This reinforces the sense of normativity, regardless of whether the individual feels constrained or comforted by it.

Furthermore, the visual elements of these types of humour reinforce normativity by relying on recirculated images that are almost by definition accessible to everyone. Memes do not express the originality of the individual who posts them. They are rather expressions of creativity, in that by aggregating various humorous memes on certain topics social media users actively curate funny Facebook walls, Instagram feeds, WhatsApp groups and Tumblr feeds. This means that even when memes express desires that seemingly go beyond the norm, they are still tied to some sort of collective desire, as the product of someone else’s making. Images then both work as shorthand and as a further normalising aspect of social media usage.

**Rethinking normative aesthetics**

The unassuming form of normativity that Hospicenos present online seems at first glance to have little to do with curation. Material culture scholars suggest that individuals create social identities in part through material forms in their homes, workplaces, places of consumption, personal belongings and the styling of their bodies. Social media is just one more place where such self-styling may occur. This ability to display collections of aesthetic forms was never possible in such a public way for the grand majority of people before the internet became ubiquitous. Yet it was often precisely the absence of particularly styled clothing, architecture and photography which characterised the normativity of Alto Hospicio. In expanding our ideas about what curation and aesthetics might entail, we see that the identities and lifestyles Hospicenos presented on Facebook and Instagram are both consciously constructed and corresponded to a certain, communally sanctioned social script. The aesthetic forms presented online bear a visual resemblance to the aesthetics of daily life in Alto Hospicio.

Of course, not everything an individual does – either online or offline – is an act of conscious curation. Yet when social scripts are deeply rooted, acts of curation that correspond to these forms of normativity do emerge unconsciously. Any time individuals represent themselves, they are constructing stories about themselves for others to interpret.
Again this happens both on the street and through social media, yet social media is particularly important because it provides wider access to resources. One does not need to be able to afford a Tommy Hilfiger wardrobe to represent the brand as part of their aesthetic online.

Social media also broadens the audiences for whom individuals can perform, with the possibility of a global public. Yet when Hospiceños do not take advantage of these broadened scopes, it becomes even clearer how deeply rooted the social script of local normativity is. To eschew aesthetics associated with ‘good taste’ because they are out of an individual’s reach is one thing: to do so as a choice is another. Directing one’s self-presentation to others in the same community, in a context where a global audience is possible, again reinforces the importance of local identifications and normativities, rather than positioning the self within a wider sphere. This exploration of Hospiceños and the visual materials that they post on social media then reinforces the notions of unassuming normativity that is visible simply on the streets of Alto Hospicio. In that sense social media is an extension of daily life, rather than a contrast. Hospiceños’ ways of identifying represented therein further work to support community values of interconnection, social support, hard work and distinction from contexts understood as inherently different.

Hospiceños’ conceptions of good citizenship become inscribed in their use of visuals in social media. The aesthetics produced in daily life are reproduced on social media, and there become a claim to authenticity as marginalised subjects. As Geertz notes, art and aesthetics may constitute elaborate mechanisms for ‘defining social relationships, sustaining social rules, and strengthening social values’. And when made public for a wide local audience through social media, aesthetics and visuality become central to their identifications, always intertwined with normativity and citizenship.