4

Relationships: Creating authenticity on social media

I am something of a suspicious character in Alto Hospicio. To begin with, I visibly stand out. As a very light-skinned person of Polish, German and English ancestry, I simply look very different from most of the residents of Alto Hospicio, whose ancestry is some combination of Spanish, Aymara, Quechua, Mapuche, Afro-Caribbean and Chinese. During my first week in Alto Hospicio a woman stopped me as we passed on the street near the commercial centre of the city. ‘You look North American!’ she stated matter-of-factly, then walked away without waiting for a response.

Beyond the simple surprise that my physical appearance evokes at times, I am untrustworthy as a single woman. As I began to develop relationships with people in Alto Hospicio they were often confounded that I had no male partner or children. Even though many people leave family behind in other countries or regions of Chile when migrating to the area, they usually move with at least one family member. The fact that I lived alone aroused suspicion. As my conversations with new acquaintances developed they would often quiz me on my social relations, as if searching for a relationship with someone in the community that might give me some legitimacy.

I of course found this frustrating – not only because as an anthropologist my job depends on developing relationships with people in the community, but also because I knew I would be living in Alto Hospicio for 15 months and I desperately hoped to make friends. Yet without some sort of evident social relationship, people were wary of befriending me.

After frustrating attempts to make friends in person, I joined a Facebook group called ‘Everything Going On – Alto Hospicio’. I wrote a public message:
Hello, I’m an anthropologist studying social media in Alto Hospicio. If anyone would like to participate in my study, or even offer advice to a newcomer in Alto Hospicio, please write me a message or respond in the comments.

Miguel, the administrator for the group, quickly sent me a friend request and offered to help. He connected me to other Hospiceños on Facebook and regularly sent me announcements for events. After two months of online communication, he invited me to see a film with his group of friends. I happily accepted, eventually becoming a regular part of the group. Miguel later told me that when he first saw my post on the Facebook group site, he was suspicious of it. He clicked on my Facebook profile and thought, ‘What is a gringa like this doing in Alto Hospicio?’ His curiosity prevailed, however, and he engaged me in conversation.

I was nervous about meeting you [in person] the first time, because I didn’t know what to expect. I was pretty sure you were a real person, but I was not sure. I thought maybe you weren’t real. Maybe it was a fake profile. But then I saw you walking toward me and I just remember being really relieved.

Because I did not fit into the assumptions about who lives in Alto Hospicio, I experienced social barriers at first. While most other individuals there have extensive social networks, those outside of their social circles still often regard them as objects of suspicion. As in my case, social media at times provides ways to confirm a person’s authenticity. For more recent migrants to Alto Hospicio, social media may be an important inroad to getting a foothold in the community. Similarly absence from social media, particularly among the most impoverished Hospiceños, acts as yet another barrier to their integration in social life. All of this is true because in Alto Hospicio, as in many other contexts, the relationships that individuals maintain with other members of the community are precisely what make them part of that community. And the visibility of these relationships, whether in daily life or on social media, is essential. Without visible ties one remains an outsider.

The visibility of relationships on social media – primarily Facebook – functions as a mode of authentication in which community members recognise each other as similar to themselves, trustworthy and legitimately part of the community. In essence relationships are central to the notions of belonging that allow individuals to identify themselves...
and others as good local citizens. In making visible different forms of relationships, Hospicenños highlight family and friendship, in effect solidifying and expanding these relationships. By performing these relationships visibly through social media, Hospicenños both claim belonging and publicly negotiate what it means to perform as ‘good citizens’ online.

**Suspicion, authenticity and visibility**

Suspicion was a common theme in Alto Hospicio. Padre Mateo, a local Catholic priest, explained his perspective to me. I had gone to meet him at his small home in Autoconstrucción, one of the poorer neighbourhoods. As he served me tea I explained my project about social media. He thought for a moment, then responded, ‘Well, I suppose it’s good people are being social, even if it is online anyway. People don’t talk to their neighbours here. There’s no trust.’

Most people use their smartphones while in the home or at work. It is rare to see someone using their phone while walking down the street or sitting in a plaza. Even in restaurants and in shops, people seldom look down at their phones. This is equally true when travelling on public transport. The bus ride from Alto Hospicio to central Iquique takes about 45 minutes, which always seems to me the perfect time to catch up on social media. However, most other passengers listen to music, fall asleep, eat snacks or talk to their companions rather than using their phones.

One day in the central market I talked with a group of vendors about smartphones. I asked specifically why so few people use them in public spaces, and they responded that people are always afraid someone will snatch their phone. ‘Sometimes right out of your hands,’ said a woman who sells jackets on her stall. ‘Oh, the pickpockets are all around in Alto Hospicio,’ added her friend, who sells children’s school supplies. ‘I think close to 75 per cent of people have something stolen from them every year.’ This saleswoman’s estimation is inaccurate according to official crime reports, yet there is a widely held perception that one is never safe from pickpockets in Alto Hospicio. At least once a week I see a friend post on Facebook that they have been assaulted and had a mobile phone stolen. Even Padre Mateo mentioned this to me, lamenting how much more common petty theft is in Alto Hospicio than in other Chilean communities where he has worked. However true or untrue, this perception certainly has a profound effect on local discourses and behaviour.

Even when I first posted a message on the ‘Everything Going On – Alto Hospicio’ Facebook page, the responses revealed the ways in which
residents conceptualise danger in the city. Several people told me to be careful, posting advice about which blocks were dangerous to walk alone (even during the day) or which neighbourhoods were filled with drug dealers and flaites. Others offered warnings such as ‘never go into anyone’s house’, ‘don’t eat or drink anything anyone gives you’ or ‘only use regulated radio taxis. The ones you hail might rob you’.

Many people are constantly worried about having things stolen from their cars – even such seemingly valueless items as half-full plastic water bottles – as well as having the car itself stolen. Car security
systems are so ubiquitous in Alto Hospicio that one must learn quickly to sleep through the beeping and honking of car alarms. Jhony, a member of the Red Foxes Motor Club, was especially worried about having his Jeep stolen by Bolivians. 'It’s 4-wheel drive, so if they steal it they can just drive it over the border, in the middle of the desert to avoid check points, and then it’s gone,’ he explained to me.

Local suspicion was also heavily influenced by the still recounted story of the ‘Psychopath of Alto Hospicio’, who kidnapped, raped and murdered 14 young women in 1999 and 2000, throwing their bodies into an abandoned well in the desert. When their parents reported the teenagers missing, the police force refused to investigate. Because the girls were from very poor families, the police believed they had more likely run away to become prostitutes or joined the narco-trafficking trade as ‘mules’ in Peru. Using the stigmas of illegal activity associated with poverty, the police shirked their responsibility to investigate and the disappearances continued. Even when families of the young women tried to involve investigators at the national level, the investigative police force ignored their requests. Only after the final potential victim escaped from her assailant did law enforcement officers begin to search for a suspect. When police eventually caught ‘the Psychopath’ they discovered that he was a relatively recent migrant from the central region of Chile: a newcomer who had few connections in the community.

What was especially significant about both stories was that the suspicious character was an outsider. These discourses relied on stereotypes of distrust. Bolivians are likely to steal cars; newcomers may potentially kidnap children. The residents of Alto Hospicio, still a place with a sizeable migrant population, are often suspicious of those they do not know. The suspicion that I aroused when I first arrived in Alto Hospicio was simply another example of how locals view unknown individuals as untrustworthy and possibly dangerous until they have a better sense of who they are, their motives and, most importantly, their connections in the community.

The ways in which individuals describe their social media use reflects this mentality. Strangers are not to be trusted. Yet mutual friends have the ability to transform someone from a stranger into a potential friend. When Miguel made ‘friend suggestions’ on Facebook so that I could add his friends to my account, few people declined my request. However, when I requested people without mutual friends I was almost always rejected.

Older Hospiceños in particular are quite suspicious of fake profiles and criminals searching for victims online. While many teen users
create fake profiles to play pranks on friends, older Hospiceños stigmatise these types of profiles. They are particularly suspicious of online relationships, often retelling stories they have heard about con-artists using fake profiles to lure unsuspecting individuals into relationships in order to scam them. Rodrigo and Gabriel, two middle-aged men who work at the port in Iquique, had a conversation about social media one afternoon as they paused to eat lunch in the company dining facility. ‘There are lots of people, they speak beautifully, but when they are in person they change their way of being. There are criminals like that. Rapists and extortionists. They look for victims online. That’s why this technology is no good,’ Rodrigo warned.

The truth was that, in all of my interviews and surveys, I did not meet anyone who had been taken advantage of online. The only example of online dishonesty I encountered came from Jhony. He explained to me how he had once developed a romantic relationship online with a Brazilian woman whom he later discovered had lied to him; she had sent him pictures of another woman that she had taken from a website. However, even this level of subterfuge actually seems to be a rare experience among Hospiceños. Yet suspicion and discourses of danger online proliferate. This suspicion is one reason that the authenticity of others online becomes a primary concern for Hospiceños.

‘Authenticity’ is a term, much like normativity, that can be defined in various ways, depending on its context and the aims of the person using the word. The concept of authenticity does not indicate an ‘inherent essence’, but is relational; it relies on contrast with what individuals in the context consider false or deceptive. Authenticity can be established by the ways in which people represent themselves through various communication methods, including spoken and written language, self-styling and the visual modes of representation I discussed in Chapter 3.

For Hospiceños, social media is a space for representing themselves authentically – as they are in daily life. This does not necessarily mean that they divulge their deepest secrets in order to be genuinely themselves, but rather that they employ certain tactics to distinguish between realness and artifice. I am not suggesting that on social media all Hospiceños always tell the truth, nor that they never engage with notions of fantasy nor express themselves outside of the bounds of local normativity. Rather, performing a sense of authenticity as a Hospiceño is the mode of social media use that predominates. In visual terms this means curating profiles that corresponded to local expectations of visuality, for example photographs recognisably taken in Alto Hospicio and Iquique, sharing memes and almost always commenting with humour.
Following such norms serves to mark an individual as belonging, but for Hospiceños demonstrating relationships is an even more direct way to present themselves as familiar rather than strange. In many contexts friending strangers may lead to increased status, and is at times central to the reasons why people use social media. In Alto Hospicio, however, evaluating someone as a stranger is likely to result in social exclusion – refusal of friending, deletion or at least ignoring the ‘non-authentic’ user. Strangers are objects of suspicion: only those who may be authenticated through some aspect of their online profiles are to be trusted enough to accept friendship or interact.

Authenticity relies heavily on the visibility of relationships with others in the community, and social media is central to the ways that Hospiceños make these relationships visible. As Pappacharissi suggests, Facebook is ‘the architectural equivalent of a glass house’. Knowing that social media postings can be seen by members of the community, users perform their social ties to and for others. However, these performances of authenticity are not simply a product of social media; anthropologists have documented the importance of visibility in relationships long before the internet, or even computers, were invented. Social media does not revolutionise these relationships; its importance lies in providing a new medium in which labelling and visibility can occur. Particularly in the context of suspicion related to the community’s marginalised position, social media is key to the ways in which authenticity is produced, as part of creating a sense of belonging and broader concepts of citizenship.

**Family relationships on social media**

In Alto Hospicio social life is centred on private spaces such as the home. Rather than meeting friends at the local bar on a Friday night, Hospiceños invite a few people over to their houses. They celebrate important events with an *asado* barbeque with the extended family at home rather than an elaborate meal in a restaurant. Hospiceños watch important football matches in the kitchen, drinking cans of Escudo beer with family and friends. Even marriages are often quiet family affairs rather than large community celebrations.

This intimacy of events means that often Facebook is one of the most publicly visible ways in which people interact, particularly for non-school age children. Relationships, whether between family members, romantic partners or friends, remain out of the public eye. For this
reason it is often important to demonstrate these relationships actively on social media.

The family is usually the most important institution in Hospiceños’ lives. A majority of families have three or four generations living together, often encompassing one or both parents, their adult children, their significant others and young grandchildren all in the same modest house. Families eat meals together and combine financial resources. They are generally all expected to help with the physical and emotional labour of the group, whether that involves caring for children or helping out with home construction projects. Families watch films together, go on outings to the beach or events in Iquique and simply pass time chatting after meals. Parents and children are usually emotionally close, and there seems to be little resentment towards parents other than the usual teen complaints of not being allowed to stay out late or do recreational activities before finishing schoolwork. While some parents and grandparents feel that social media has become a barrier to the types of intimacy that families once shared, most proudly embrace social media as a way to connect further with their families and to express familial love.

On average, survey respondents said that about 30 per cent of their Facebook friends were family members. Almost everyone under the age of 50 had at least one parent as a friend on Facebook, and 80 per cent of respondents were friends with their brothers and sisters. Of course, being Facebook friends does not necessarily constitute meaningful interaction. Yet by looking at the actual Facebook timelines of family members, it is clear that most do interact frequently. Mothers and fathers both post copious amounts of pictures of their children (and grandparents of their grandchildren), often using these images as their profile and cover photos on Facebook. Children in their twenties and thirties post photographs and messages on their mothers’ timelines, and tag their parents in photos, memes and shared bits of text.

Facebook allows users to elect ‘family members’ among their friends, and for Hospiceños this often was a way of demonstrating not only familial ties, but close friendships as well. In general the line between close friendship and familial relation is often blurred, a situation reflected on social media. The category of ‘family’, both on social media and in daily life, includes not only several generations of sanguine relatives (those related through blood), but also individuals or other families of ‘fictive kin’ who have been close for a long time. Most people choose to list their parents, siblings and children as family members on the information page of their Facebook account, but it is clear that these lists also include brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts and uncles.
who do not share any formal kinship ties. A young man’s best friends will often be listed as brothers. The younger sister of a good friend could be listed as a cousin. And god-parents or other family friends of older generations are listed as aunts and uncles. These lists, of course, reflect the titles that Hospiceños use face to face, particularly for tías and tíos [aunts and uncles], showing the importance of the family as the primary organising unit of social life. Extending these fictive kin designations to social media, however, also serves to make these relationships more visible. Listing someone as a family member, as well as visible interactions such as posting on their timeline, signal the strength of the relationship to a wider audience.

In Alto Hospicio many children (of all ages) feel that it is important to show affection by explicitly thanking their mothers on Facebook. In doing so, they not only engage with their mother, but also perform for a wider audience the role of being a good child. They post photographs of the family doing activities together, such as celebrating a birthday, cooking meals together or simply spending time at home. The reverence a mother receives from her child serves as a form of authenticating the child as a respectful and respectable person.

Like the posts discussed in the previous chapter, memes are an easy way in which children can connect with their mothers. Many acknowledge the sacrifices mothers made for their children. One meme of simple pink and black text on a white background declares: ‘My mother . . . traded her beautiful figure for a huge belly; traded her purse for a diaper bag; traded her calm nights for long sleeplessness; traded her makeup for big circles under her eyes. I believe that the perfect woman exists and she’s called Mom.’ Sometimes mothers respond with a similar meme almost word for word (See Fig. 4.2).

While mothers and their adult children share these kinds of memes, parents of younger children perform parental satisfaction on social media by documenting their children’s growth in photographs and status updates. And while clearly these posts express sincere affection, they serve a dual purpose of marking life stages related to normativity and senses of good citizenship in Alto Hospicio. Young people here often become parents in their late teens or early twenties, and social media use reflects this timing of life stages. Hospiceños comment that it is very unusual for young people to reach 25 without having had a child. Twenty-four-year-old Nicole often complained that her own parents and her boyfriend Martin’s parents pressured them to get married and have children quickly. When I asked Martin about this he told me, ‘Well, people usually have children when they’re
13 here! No, the usual age is 20. By 25 the train has left the station, at 30 it must be that you’re really professional. By 35 you’re getting really worried. Well, at least that’s what people say!’ My survey results seemed to confirm these expectations. Of people between the ages of 30 and 39, 100 per cent of men and 86 per cent of women had at least one child.

Expecting a baby is an important life stage in Alto Hospicio – but also serves to perform to Facebook and other social media audiences the act of entering into adult life, settling down and accepting responsibilities. Even when people speak about stereotypical flaites, they note that often after having children they settle down to become a ‘family man’. Performing the role of parent on Facebook communicates a certain level of maturity. Both expectant fathers and mothers anticipate their baby’s birth by posting pictures of material goods associated with a baby,
sonograms, monthly updates of the size of the future mother’s belly and even humorous memes and cartoons relating to children.

In many countries pictures of expecting parents on social media anticipate the arrival of a new member of the family with much love and excitement. They express a period of time that carries with it a social significance. The pictures are not so much about the precise subject of the photograph – just how big the belly may be or the exact shape of the foetus in the sonogram – but what they represent: less the enjoyment of pregnancy than the excitement of preparing for a future child. In Alto Hospicio these photographs also communicate to the public their social positioning as parents (or soon-to-be parents), again with the aim of legitimating their status as trustworthy or not subject to suspicion.

As children are born and grow up, both mothers and fathers continue to post photographs of them. Often, as noted above, they include their children in their own profile pictures or cover images on Facebook. Young girls are often referred to as ‘mis princesas’ [my princesses] and young boys as ‘mis gordos’ [my fatties], always with a sense of pride. Indeed, in many families in Alto Hospicio a sense that young children can do no wrong exists in tension with the value placed on being ‘bien educado’ [well educated]. Rather than applying specifically to formal education, being ‘well educated’ is better demonstrated through good manners, using the formal ‘usted’ [you] instead of informal ‘tú’ when speaking with adults and in general using good grammar. While minor threats are often given, such as ‘no television while eating the meal if you won’t finish your dish’, these are usually empty, and children who come to appreciate this often ignore them. Yet young children are without a doubt expected to behave well outside of the home: They are expected to thank adults for meals or gifts and to play quietly in public. Children are valued as gifts, but their conduct, even when they have become adults, reflects on their parents. On social media mothers create posts expressing pride that their children are ‘good kids’ who respect and love their parents, while children express pride that their parents are a part of their lives. Such representations reflect positively on parents as capable of raising good children and thus portray them as good citizens themselves.

Portraying oneself in a positive light on social media is especially important in Alto Hospicio because the small number of public spaces limits the visibility of relationships. Both parents and adult children are able to represent their identification with a family-based lifestyle, and thus further authenticate themselves in the valued social scripts common in
Figs. 4.3 and 4.4  Photographs of pregnancy
Alto Hospicio, through social media posts that demonstrate their familial connections clearly. Visible family connections work to strip away suspicion, as there is an underlying assumption that parents are more trustworthy than individuals without children. Similarly, portraying oneself as a devoted child, a devoted parent or a parent who has raised well-educated and respectful children reinforces perceptions of individuals as valued community members and ‘good citizens’. And while all families have their own quarrels and internal family secrets, in Alto Hospicio the
emphasis on family online truly seems to reflect the closeness and importance of family in daily life and behind closed doors.15

**Social media sites of visibility**

The centrality of private spaces to social life in Alto Hospicio means that in addition to familial relationships, romantic relationships and friendships also gain visibility most prominently on social media. Padre Mateo explained to me that formal marriage is somewhat uncommon. Young people often remain unmarried because they perceive that tax benefits and government assistance to buy a home are actually accessed more easily when single. However, it is common for couples to cohabitate, even if in the home of one of their parents, and to have children together. While these arrangements are certainly public, at times changing their Facebook status from ‘pololo/a’ [boyfriend/girlfriend] to ‘novio/a’ [fiancé(e)] or ‘esposo/a’ [husband/wife] may be the most public expression of commitment.16 For example, when 22-year-old Giovanna became hospitalised a week before her planned marriage to Cristobal, they cancelled the wedding ceremony. More than two years later they still have not rescheduled, and their Facebook relationship statuses remain ‘engaged’. For Giovanna and Cristobal, formal marriage is not as important as community recognition of their relationship. After having a child together and both moving in with Cristobal’s parents, there is little question about the seriousness of the relationship. With the visibility of other aspects of their relationship, formal marriage is simply unnecessary.

Nicole and Martin have been a couple since high school; when I met them the relationship had lasted about six years. In 2013 both still lived with their respective parents and siblings, though they spent most nights together. Martin’s mother was quite critical of this arrangement and often chastised them, saying that they should not be spending the night before making a decision to get married. ‘That’s why we always stay at my house,’ Nicole told me. Eventually Martin’s mother began to wear them down; one evening in August, when they invited me for a dinner of home-made pizza, they told me they had started discussing marriage. Just a week later I saw Nicole’s post on Facebook: ‘Without signing a document, without giving a previous announcement and without vows, we have made a promise.’ She uploaded a picture of the two wedding bands the couple had bought.

The two then began looking for an apartment, eventually finding one in the same complex as Nicole’s family. They adopted a dog together
and bought a car within the next year. They had a small ‘housewarming party’ in their apartment, with plenty of snacks and mixed rum and coke drinks, but that was the only official celebration of their new life together. Facebook was the most public announcement of their new commitment.

The importance of visibility is perhaps best illustrated by the moments in which its absence creates a rift. Iliana and Guillermo, both in their thirties, had been dating for a year and had become quite serious, moving in together in their own apartment only a few months after

Fig. 4.6 The picture of rings that Nicole and Martin posted on their Facebook pages
they began the relationship. However, for their one-year anniversary, Guillermo was working at the mine, so they celebrated with a long video conversation using Skype. Around 11pm Guillermo told Iliana that he loved her and hung up in order to shower before his early bedtime. Iliana then decided to write a special message about him on her Facebook wall.

‘One year ago my life changed. I have smiled, laughed, and spent so many wonderful days hand in hand with the person I love. Thank you for changing everything, honey.’ Still early in the evening, she hoped Guillermo would see it and write a comment with a sweet message for her before going to sleep. Hours later, however, he had not even ‘liked’ the message.

I kept seeing our mutual friends like it and comment on it, and I kept thinking, why hasn’t he? Did he fall asleep so early? So I waited until the next day and he still hadn’t even liked my message! I had to wait until he got off work at 8:00 at night to talk to him again, and I felt a little silly but I asked him about it. He told me ‘Oh, I didn’t know it was about me.’ I thought – how could it not be about you? Who else am I holding hands with? Who else do I call ‘honey’? So maybe it was silly, but I erased it and wrote a new message that said ‘It’s so sad when you write something from the heart and the person it is meant for doesn’t understand.’ Within two minutes he commented ‘If you tag the person they will know.’ I thought that was so stupid! Obviously, it’s about you, but you want me to tag you anyway. Fine.

Iliana went on to tell me that since this incident she has tried to tag him in more posts, but it does not always occur to her naturally. She recounted another incident that occurred a few weeks after their anniversary.

I told him I was going to a party with some friends, and he asked if my ex would be there. I said yes, but that he has a new girlfriend too. I asked if he would feel more comfortable if I told my ex explicitly that I was in love with my new boyfriend, and he said, ‘Well, maybe if you put it on Facebook. And tag me.’

Clearly Guillermo abides by the ‘Facebook official’ rule, often espoused by friends of new couples, those who get engaged or even those announcing a pregnancy. Nothing counts as ‘official’ until it is entered into the public record, as evidenced by its announcement on Facebook.
Other couples seem to express their relationship more naturally on Facebook. Nicole and Martin, for example, regularly post pictures of themselves together, sometimes in matching clothing, other times kissing for the camera. Almost daily they post messages on each other’s walls expressing something along the lines of ‘I love you, my little piggy’

Fig. 4.7 This cartoon, shared by Giovanna while planning her wedding, illustrates the ‘Facebook official’ mentality: ‘I now declare you husband and wife. You may now update your Facebook statuses.’
or ‘Just a few hours without the love of my life and I miss you’. Not only does using common nicknames such as ‘chanchi’ [little piggy] communicate a sense of intimacy directly to the other person, but the use of these terms of endearment also performs the intimacy of the relationship for a broader audience of social media users, serving to authenticate the relationship further in a public fashion.

The story of Carlita and Alex (and his ex) demonstrates the other side of public visibility – a case in which unwanted visibility caused tension and jealousy. Alex and Carlita had been dating for several months when Carlita told me she was upset that Alex still kept in close contact with his ex-partner. She told me she trusted Alex, but was suspicious of his ex because she wrote to him ‘too much’ on social media.

A few times she would call, and I could tell he felt like he had to keep the conversation short, because he knew I was watching and listening. But she would also click ‘like’ for every picture he put on
Facebook. She would comment and call him ‘sweetie’. And I could see she was sending him voice messages on WhatsApp all the time. I mean, I couldn’t say anything really, but it annoyed me. I just thought, this woman that I don’t even know, she’s disrespecting me, right in front of me. But if I say anything I’m the crazy jealous girlfriend. But lately she hasn’t written anything, so it’s getting better.

For Carlita, part of the insult was that some of these messages were public. While phone calls and WhatsApp messages were private, she would also comment in affectionate ways on Facebook. It was this other woman’s presumption that it was acceptable to acknowledge publicly lingering affection that was the most offensive to Carlita.

For Carlita, like most Hospiceños, the visibility of relationships is what legitimises them within the community. In fact, making relationships visible on social media not only communicates something to the public of social media, it sometimes also has the ability to transform a more insecure type of relationship into an enduring one. In Carlita’s case, the visibility of Alex’s ex posting publicly gave an apparent precariousness to her relationship. Guillermo, on the other hand, hoped to solidify his relationship with Iliana through public posting, leaving no doubt in anyone’s mind (particularly her ex-boyfriend’s) that they were together. For Nicole and Martin, meanwhile, announcing their commitment on Facebook served the role of a public wedding. In each of these cases visibility served not only to authenticate the relationship, but also to confirm that these relationships fit into the kinds of social scripts that seem natural within the community.

Performing relationships in absence

While performing relationships online is important for almost all families and couples, social media becomes even more important in relationships that must endure physical distance. Given the importance of mining in the area, and the shifts, often a week in length, that mining employees work, there are many people (mostly men) who spend extended periods away from home. In these situations it is particularly important for people to maintain romantic or family relationships through social media. Direct communication, through Facebook messenger, WhatsApp and even Skype, are important for maintaining a personal level of connection during times of absence. Yet beyond personal communication of
updates on family life and daily expressions of love, the act of missing a person is important to perform publicly on Facebook as well.

This often manifests in a genre of posts that publicly state that one person is missing another. Many miners post a daily tally of number of days on their shift and days remaining, together with a mention of what they miss, such as ‘Today 5/7 – two more days until I see my honey and little munchkins’. Equally their partners, and at times their friends, siblings or parents, post their desire to see the absent family member again. Many memes express this as well, being shared among miners and their families. One week when Guillermo left for the mine Iliana tagged him in a meme expressing her feelings about the upcoming week. ‘How I’m going to miss you my fatty . . . I hope the days pass quickly to be close to you. Have a great shift my love #ILoveYouToInfinity.’

Similarly when friendships become harder to maintain in person, they often shift to social media. When women in Alto Hospicio enter their twenties and thirties they often have young children, which means they are relatively house-bound, at least to an extent that many complain about their inability to get out more often. Yet at this age they are

![Meme shared among female friends. Translation: ‘Me!!! I’m crazy, difficult to understand, cold, loud and sometimes intolerant, and much more. But if you don’t accept the worst of my character, surely you don’t deserve the best of me. Unfortunately, not all women will copy this on their walls because they think they’re angels. Let’s see how many of my crazy friends will share it.’](image-url)
still more socially aligned with female friends. These younger women often post photo montages from months or even years past, depicting activities with friends, for instance a night out, cooking dinner together or going to the cinema. They tag their friends and write messages such as ‘I have known my best friends for so long. They are always there for me, and they know I always have their backs. Thanks ladies!’ Others share memes expressing similar sentiment such as the one above (Fig. 4.9).

When 32-year-old Nina shared this particular meme, she accompanied it with the comment ‘That’s how we are!’ and tagged seven of her female friends. Each of the tagged friends, as well as a few other women who knew the group, commented on the status with lighthearted agreement. This visibility among friends served to cement the group, and to express pride in the similarities of each other’s personalities.

In many ways the visibility of friendship and even romantic relationships online creates some obligations based on assumptions of reciprocity. Hospicenos feel that it is important to reciprocate visibility in a relationship, whether a friendship or a romantic association, in order to maintain good relations. If a friend takes the initiative publicly to acknowledge the friendship online by posting a meme or photograph, writing on a friend’s wall or tagging friends in a post, they usually expect that those with whom they engage will equally acknowledge the relationship publicly. Different levels of obligation and visibility exist. In casual friendships, for instance, a mere ‘like’ of a status is sufficient, whereas for closer friends tagging, posting further memes or engaging in conversation in comments is expected.

Friendships between male peers involve their own types of reciprocal obligations, usually based around mocking humour rather than more frank expressions of solidarity. While it is rare for men to tag groups of friends in a single post that explicitly highlights their friendship, men do tag their friends or share links on their Facebook walls pertaining to their particular interests. These are usually accompanied by a sarcastic comment, which invites the recipient as well as mutual friends to continue commenting with sarcasm or other types of offensive but witty banter.

For both men and women, friends demand attention offline and online. I witnessed or was told about quarrels due to neglect among both female and male friends. One member of the Red Foxes Motor Club was chastised by the whole group following his absence from several outings after starting to date a new girlfriend. ‘It was fine when the group bothered me about it, but later my best friend wouldn’t return my calls.'
I thought he was being a child, but he was really upset that I hadn’t seen him in weeks,’ he explained.

Other friends use social media subtly to express their disappointment in friends they perceive to be less than loyal. One woman told me that one of her best friends had recently become Facebook friends with her ex-boyfriend’s new girlfriend.

I was a little hurt. She was supposed to be my friend. I know she still sees my ex sometimes because they were friends even before we started dating. But it seemed funny she added this new girl. The next time I saw a meme about friendship, I made a point to share it and tag her. Not only to remind her how close we are, but also to show that girl, maybe she had my ex-boyfriend, but my girlfriends stay with me!

For groups of friends, interactions such as tagging, commenting and particularly joking through Facebook both strengthen the friendship, especially in times of absence, and also make visible these friendships – and thus how the friends are positioned in the community. Even when individuals are not able to see their romantic partner or friend in person, the relationship can be maintained and made visible for purposes of authenticity through interactions on social media. This suggests that Hospiceños experience anxiety, jealousy and expectation, as well as comfort and trust in friendships, in much the same ways online as they do offline. For them online interaction is not just a pale reflection or a less authentic means of expressing relationships as compared to face-to-face interaction. Their emotional involvement demonstrates that there is little value in trying to separate offline and online aspects of their relationships; they are intertwined, and interactions in one mode develop from their interactions in the other.

**Building trust on social media**

While connections to family and romantic partners are important for gaining authenticity within the community, the visibility of these relationships is particularly important when meeting new people. The visibility of other relationships can alleviate suspicion, particularly in new romantic situations. After Jhony described to me the online romance he had with the Brazilian woman, he told me that now he only pursues
women whom he meets through mutual friends, though this includes using Facebook. ‘It’s much better meeting a friend of a friend, because you know who they are. They are nearby and have the same interests. And you know they are real.’

Though he said he would not admit it to his friends, he continues to search for love online.

My friends do it too, even though they won’t admit it. Before it was Badoo. Now people use Facebook, and that’s almost as good as real life because you can find out so much about the person. If they don’t have many friends you get suspicious. But if you have friends in common there’s no reason to worry.

Thirty per cent of survey respondents said that they had dated someone they met online, but almost none used applications or websites specifically designed for that purpose. Miguel, who also told me he occasionally uses social media to meet women, further explained.

People don’t trust things like dating websites, or something like Tinder. You don’t know who the person is. You can’t see their friends, or really a profile on the application. But people trust Facebook. If you’re looking at someone on Facebook, you can see your mutual friends, and you can see where they are from and maybe their hobbies. So you get a sense of the person, who they really are. You know they’re not fake.

These young men feel that Facebook offers a much fuller representation of the person, and seeing an expanded profile allows the viewer to ‘authenticate’ the person by seeing their social network – their family, friends, colleagues and acquaintances. To encounter a mutual friend or acquaintance in the person’s friend list reduces suspicion of artifice and increases confidence that the person is authentic – both ‘real’ in the sense that they are not using a fake profile, as well as similar in the sense that they are located in the same social sphere. On the other hand a short list of friends unknown to the user indicates a level of artifice to the profile, signalling that perhaps the person is not to be trusted.

At times social media not only makes visible social networks, but also facilitates their expansion. More important than writing statuses, or even than posting photographs, memes, videos or links to websites of interest, relationships are fostered through the commenting in which people engage. It is not unusual to find a single sentence status update
that has more than 20 comments by Hospiceños. Many comments are positive and supportive. When a young woman posts a new profile picture, it usually receives comments from all of her close friends and relatives expressing essentially the same thing: ‘Oh daughter/niece/friend/cousin, you look so pretty and happy!’ When someone expresses a complaint, for example neighbours playing music too loudly, comments usually range from ‘How annoying!’ to ‘Do you want to borrow my big speakers so you can show them your music is better?’ These comments generally serve a function of staying in contact and supporting friends and family, simply by reminding them that their Facebook friends are paying attention and care about them.

Others comment in humorous and mocking ways – particularly male friends, as I mentioned above. Alvaro, when returning to Alto Hospicio from visiting family in Santiago, wrote a one-word status message: ‘Travelling.’ The first comment was purely informational, asking ‘From where to where?’ and Alvaro responded with an equally simple answer ‘Santiago – Alto Hospicio’. But from there the conversation diverged.

Alvaro’s cousin: Did they inject you to travel?
Alvaro: I know asking will have negative consequences, but no. What kind of injections?
Alvaro’s cousin: Haha, all the animals when they travel, they have injections to sleep. Be careful, the fines are steep for animals that don’t get injected. Good luck on your trip!

After this initial exchange, 20 more comments appeared – from Alvaro’s other cousins, friends and even one friend’s mother. All played off the joke that he lacked certain ‘civilised’ attributes and should be treated like an animal while travelling.

This type of mocking language is similar to ritual insults such as ‘joning’ or ‘signifyin’ that linguists discuss for African American Vernacular English (AAVE) speech communities. When successful these language games demonstrate verbal skill (or in the case of Facebook or Twitter written language skill) and social status. The speakers and audience share the understanding that what is being said is open to evaluation for their skill with verbal play. Unlike AAVE ritual insults, however, in the context of Hospiceños on Facebook the ability to make a witty comeback is not necessary. As Alvaro demonstrated in his reply, he understood that it was an insult – ‘I know asking will have negative consequences’ – but this neither detracted from his response nor did it
negate the power of the original insult. Instead the meaning is negotiated and then built upon in further comments, in a group effort that reinforces social ties. Furthermore, these exchanges build on local common knowledge (such as Alvaro’s cousin’s [incorrect] assumption that everyone would know that animals were injected to travel), which highlights the importance of community within these exchanges.\(^{22}\)

It is also noteworthy that these exchanges take place in comments rather than in private messages. Such mockery is aimed not only at the subject of playful insult, but at a wider audience as well, playing on shared cultural knowledge.\(^{23}\) And in Alto Hospicio this humorous form of exchange almost always makes extensive use of Chilean language conventions, in another level of marking authenticity as a member of the language community. The ability for others to add to the joke, or even just respond with ‘hahaha’ creates a common space for people to converse in a playful way. In effect almost all commenting, whether explicitly positive or joking, serves to form cohesion, not just between the post writer and the commenter but among all those who comment. In the case of Alvaro, many of the people who commented did not know each other personally. Yet all played off one another to create a complex running joke among a wider social group.

This type of cohesion has impacts that extend beyond social media as well. Community is created not only by supporting friends, but also in the instances in which friends of friends begin to engage directly with one another. Several people told me that they first ‘met’ a friend by seeing their comments on a mutual friend’s Facebook posts. At times they might jokingly spar or build on one another’s mocking jokes within the space of Facebook comments. As Miguel put it:

> If you have a friend and they write something funny, then you might comment. And then friends of friends – people you don’t know – may see that comment, and then maybe you get into a discussion with that person. Eventually you see that you keep commenting on the same posts, and you’ll become Facebook friends. A few times this has happened to me, and then I end up at a party with that person, and it’s almost like we already are friends. After that we might do activities together, like really become friends.

Creating a semi-public dialogue, visible to friends of friends who often join in these joking exchanges, these individuals become first potential and then sometimes actual friends. In turn becoming Facebook friends leads them to engage in activities face to face, whether sharing
meals, playing sports, going out or any other number of leisure activities. Having more local acquaintances also helped in finding a new job, buying and selling used items online, or even in searching for potential partners.

Authentic citizenship online

Interactions on Facebook actively maintain relationships, communication and social ties in Alto Hospicio. Yet they also build community through creating new relationships. Social media posts serve as visual markers of these relationships, which then authenticate the relationship to others in the community. In a marginalised community, where suspicion often acts as a barrier to senses of citizenship connected to community belonging, this visibility is vital. It provides a way of ensuring an individual's authenticity in order to develop trust.

When I asked Hospicieños to send me ‘selfies’ to include in this book, not a single person sent me a picture alone without prompting. Men sent me photographs of themselves with friends, women with their children or nieces and nephews, and teens with their classmates. The message was clear: individuals see relationships as more definitive of ‘who they are’ than any form of individual self-expression. Even the selfie – often thought of as the ultimate example of self-centred performance on social media – is in Alto Hospicio a way to represent the self as enmeshed in relationships with others. Each person may not consciously decide to make their relationships visible in order to appear as an authentic character on social media, but they do actively judge others on these criteria, perpetuating the social script.

In family relationships (whether sanguine or fictive), romantic partnerships and friendships, Hospicieños publicly perform reciprocal interactions on social media. The importance they place on the visibility of each kind of these relationships online reflects the ways in which connections to other people in Alto Hospicio are a key part of what it means to be part of this community. Because relationships are important to maintaining the prevailing normativity of Alto Hospicio, these social scripts tend to reinforce the discourses of homogeneity that are clear in discussions of race and class (as discussed in Chapter 1), as well as gender (which Chapter 5 will explore). Thus the visibility of relationships online becomes a key component of the normativity of Alto Hospicio – not because there is any inherent connection between relationships and normativity, but because in this context both constitute
a performance of being an integrated member of the community and a ‘good citizen’. Furthermore, as the practice of becoming friends with a mutual acquaintance makes clear, once an individual is authenticated as a member of the community he or she is trusted to be included in new social circles much more readily. In essence, social media acts as a conduit for building and sustaining relationships as a mode of reinforcing local norms, citizenship and the idea of community itself.