Social Media in Northern Chile

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Published by University College London

Haynes, Nell.
Social Media in Northern Chile: Posting the Extraordinarily Ordinary.
University College London, 2016.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/81841.

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Conclusion: The extraordinary ordinariness of Alto Hospicio

‘q wn’

Three letters representing two words: ‘que weon’. Of course weon is one of those Chilean Spanish words which everyone understands, but which is not quite translatable. It may be used for greeting a good friend, or talking about an enemy – or even shouted when the national team scores a seemingly impossible goal. Twenty-three-year-old Tomás used this word to introduce a meme on his Facebook wall.

This meme, illustrated in Fig. 7.1, makes clear the ways in which everyday behaviours are performances. Included within these behaviours is social media use, where people perform in order to identify the self as a particular kind of person, claim certain kinds of affiliation and place oneself within the world. This meme acknowledges that many people create meaning through a mixture of bodily expression, purchasing particular symbolically laden brands and social media usage, but the density of symbols used within the text evokes exaggeration and sarcasm. The imagined character who writes this text is ridiculous. Tomás acknowledges this ridiculousness by using the word ‘weon’, in this instance meaning something like ‘what a jackass’.

Using ‘weon’, Tomás distinguishes himself from this straw character who might write such a post on social media. Hospiceños usually strive toward an unassuming aesthetic associated with marginality, but this meme describes conspicuous aesthetics and behaviours associated with consumption and cosmopolitanism. Only a cosmopolitan Other would be so insincere as to construct such an image in conscious opposition to normative aesthetics, social identifications and attitudes. And though maybe Tomás and most Hospiceños would say that the types of
Fig. 7.1  Meme about hipsters. Translation: ‘Take the vodka and marijuana and let’s go get expansions (ear stretchers), while you tell me that you’re bisexual and you publish it on ask.fm. If you want, let’s go buy nutella, dressed in Vans (brand shoes), short shorts and flowered or plaid blouses. And don’t forget to take your Nikon camera to take pictures of ourselves in the bathroom of Starbucks. You can do your hair like Skrillex (American electronic music producer) or you put in a lot of highlights while you upload your photo to Instagram and we argue about if a (traditional) moustache or infinity (overly stylised moustache) is better, and you also show me your Tumblr and publish on Facebook that society is bullshit, that you’re bipolar and that you’re fucking depressed.’
Performance described by the text are overt and excessive, the meme also reminds us of the ways in which social media usage is always a performance, even when the idea of conscious presentation is antithetical to the prevailing form of normativity. Indeed, the performances described in this meme are the antithesis of Hospiceños’ normativity, in which the trick is to perform normativity on social media while seeming not to perform anything at all.

Social media ethnography in Alto Hospicio

Traditional ethnographies often focus on particular groups within the community in order to make visible broader local cultural expectations and norms. A group such as La Escuelita or the Red Foxes Motor Club might have provided such a focus for an ethnography of Alto Hospicio. By studying social media, however, the same cultural expectations and norms become clear on a larger scale. Because Hospiceños use social media precisely to negotiate these norms, it is an excellent window for understanding a Hospiceño world view: what is expected and what is not; what questions may be asked and which may not; who is allowed to question, or even to make their opinions heard, and who is not; and how individuals not only behave and interact within this worldview, but also how they understand their individual place within (or outside of) it.

Social media also reveals some of the ways in which social life is changing, in both Alto Hospicio and Chile’s Great North in general, as a result of new communication technologies. In such a frontier space, often conceptualised by both those who live there and those in the cosmopolitan metropole as a hinterland, advances in communications technology do change daily life. Social media allows people to stay in better contact with family members who are absent, whether as a result of the mining industry or international migration. Social media provides ample forms of entertainment and is even used to organise activities such as dates and group outings.

However, social media has not changed everything. It is popular to praise the opportunities social media provides for bridging socio-economic divides or empowering populations politically. Yet Hospiceños, who are comparatively marginalised in both respects, do not see these new advantages as major uses of social media. Whether new media truly has the potential to reduce global or national inequalities is a question that must be left to other populations. In Alto Hospicio social media
remains an extension of the normative social life of the city, rather than a different realm in which new aspirations may be achieved.

Just as social media does not automatically bridge economic or political divides, individuals do not always use social media to seek new ways of connecting in the world, nor to find means of self-expression not available in the local context. In Alto Hospicio the kinds of identifications that are made visible on social media correspond to community values and the very social scripts which often guide behaviour. Certainly there are some young people (and perhaps older ones as well) who reach across divides – whether geographical or ideological – to encounter new ways of viewing the world, new possibilities or new aspirations as a result of their connection on social media. However, the overwhelming normativity of social media in Alto Hospicio makes it clear that using social media to reject prevailing forms of normativity is a result of the desires of individuals rather than inherent aspects of the media. Social media may facilitate newfound freedom for some – but there is every reason to believe that if social media was not available these individuals would seek this sort of freedom through other channels. Social media tends to reinforce ways of identifying that are highlighted in other arenas of social life (for instance family connections, regional affiliation and humour) and to erase those that are less important to the community (including indigeneity, overt politicisation or non-normative gender and sexuality identifications). Social media in Alto Hospicio is not a space for the proliferation of identifications. Indeed, even Hospiceños’ use of aesthetics and visuality online illustrate that, even when a whole world of possibility is available, the visibility of interactions and the public nature of how community gatekeepers moderate others may transform social media into a conservative force.

The power of social media as a conservative force relies on its accessibility to a wide audience, in part because the necessary technology is reasonably affordable as a result of the tax-free import zone. Even in a place such as Alto Hospicio, smartphones and internet access are not considered luxury goods; they are practically necessary possessions for all but the poorest residents, even when refrigerators or stoves are not always deemed essential. Such electronic items are not associated with an extravagant lifestyle, but rather are indispensable for communication. Thus social media and its associated technology have quickly and almost seamlessly been subsumed within the unassuming normativity that dominates social life in Alto Hospicio.
Social media and social context

The central argument of this book is that, for residents of Alto Hospicio, social media acts as an arena in which normative modes of citizenship are not only performed, but also reinforced as important social values. Hospiceños use social media to express solidarity, test authenticity, maintain normativity, perform identifications and challenge conceptions of what true ‘Chileanness’ is, all from a marginalised position within the nation. Each of these aims of social media usage demonstrates the ways in which Hospiceños’ online lives are inflected with expressing citizenship in relation to local, regional, national and global levels. The residents of Alto Hospicio position their own legal status, rights, public participation and sense of belonging precisely in the ways they perform marginalised identifications on social media.

In the first chapter of this book I provide a brief history of the processes (and violent acts) through which the Pinochet regime introduced a neoliberal economic model to Chile. These economic policies, carried forward by post-dictatorship democratic governments as well, have no doubt been instrumental in positioning Chile among the nations that benefit from a rapid and ideally free movement of material resources, people and ideas in the current global economic system. Chile receives immigrants seeking to perform manual labour and is a major exporter of natural resources, both major contributing factors to Chile’s place among the world’s strongest economies. The majority of Alto Hospicio’s residents are caught up in this movement of people and resources, whether as immigrants, workers in importation and exportation or in mining the very resources whose exportation sustains the whole country’s economy. Most Hospiceños also have the resources to participate in other types of global exchange using the internet to download music, read articles, watch films or interact with others. Yet within the nation and the world capitalist economic system, Hospiceños remain marginalised.

The marginalised position of Hospiceños has been produced through historical economic conditions, beginning with the War of the Pacific and nitrate mining and continuing to the violence and neoliberal economic shocks of the Pinochet regime. Though the northern region provides economic stability to the entire nation, it remains exploited and politically peripheral; the city of Alto Hospicio itself represents the most extreme case of these two conditions. The stigmas of poverty, crime and inhospitableness associated with Alto Hospicio have created conditions
of suspicion that always already influence social life, including its enactment on social media.

These realities of social life in Alto Hospicio inform a situation in which individuals are more comfortable using social media to solidify local identifications than to imagine new possibilities of global connections. Hospiceños connect to the world through social media, but their aims are not new relationships, wider identifications, broadened self-understanding, proliferation of aesthetic styles or imagined new life possibilities. Rather their social media usage almost always corresponds to performing solidarity within their marginalised community. The peripheral location of Alto Hospicio within the nation serves as a context for the ways in which Hospiceños curate self-representations, identify core self-concepts and test one another’s authenticity. In doing so, they imagine their marginalisation to be the quality that makes them authentically Chilean. Being working class and politically disenfranchised marks true cultural Chileanness, thus reversing the logic of centre and periphery.

Political economy and history deeply impact the ways in which Hospiceños understand their place within the nation, and indeed how they imagine their own local community. They contrast the homogeneity, solidarity and ordinariness of Alto Hospicio with the cosmopolitanism and political power they associate with the Chilean government and residents of more central metropolitan areas, specifically the national capital of Santiago. At the same time Hospiceños reproduce discourses of solidarity in connection to proletariat populations, even across a somewhat contested border with Peru. By contrasting their own lived experiences with those of populations more central to the nation, they strengthen their own communal sense of affiliation; Hospiceños believe themselves to be the true Chilean citizens in contrast to the imagined cosmopolitan Others. With these local investments in normativity in mind, it is then clear how social media becomes a mechanism for resisting larger issues and institutions of power – all while normativity remains a point of solidarity rather than a repressive force.

**Neoliberalism, marginality and social media**

This book takes on the subject of normativity in a neoliberal era – a time in which many assume notions of solidarity have been replaced with desires to distinguish the self from others on any possible level. While
the ‘freeing’ of capital in some places also liberates individuals from traditional social structures such as the family, connects self-expression to consumption and encourages fantasy and aspiration as personal modes of imagining, almost the exact opposite results emerge in Alto Hospicio. Such consequences reveal that the individualism we often take as a natural outcome of neoliberalism is not always intrinsic to these sorts of economic policies. It is just one of the possible results, always dependent on context, that neoliberal ideologies may produce.¹

Neoliberal economics beget a whole proliferation of cultural forms, which are always context dependent. For Hospiceños, being unassuming in one’s aesthetics, life goals and even social media use marks one as belonging. Others – cosmopolitans, capitalists and politicians – generally are understood to hold more power, but Hospiceños discursively distance them as excessive, superficial and at times corrupt (particularly in the case of the last). In doing so they highlight their own similarity within the community, asserting their marginality through solidarity.

This marginality is closely associated with identification as workers. Rather than consumption it is labour, both in the home and outside for wages, that provides a foundation among Hospiceños for core self-understanding and representation. The socio-economic position of most Hospiceños becomes a source of solidarity, not just within the local community but also cutting across borders. As a result working-class or proletariat-based normativity, rather than forms of distinction, are important cultural tropes.

Political economy, particularly the dominant industries in the area, do not affect individuals’ sense of pride and self-identifications. However, they do impact more broadly upon the very ways in which normative understandings of familial relationships and gendered identifications are represented, performed, taught and usually taken up without resistance online. The family is strengthened as the centre of social life, as well as providing a trusted anchor in the seemingly endless possibilities of internet-based relationships.

Many more individual expressions of self rely on these social scripts about productive activity, which is highly gendered – from acceptable forms of creativity to discussions about sex. While men usually identify as family providers and express pride in the sacrifices they make in order to labour as wage earners for their families, women most often identify as the caretakers of family, expressing their own labour as that of emotion work. These marked divisions between men’s and women’s work often reinforce forms of normative gender identifications as well as notions of family. Even when lived realities differ from the
norm, expressions of gendered self-understanding on social media serve to reinforce assumptions about gender rather than challenge them. Hospiceños both place importance on the visual representation of family connections on social media and use assumptions about naturalised gender differences as a base for gender-related humour. Through these proliferations of normativity, heterosexual familial structures become essential to Hospiceños’ modes of performing and to the regulation of others’ performances on social media.

The unassuming aesthetic

While neoliberal economic systems often produce a proliferation of consumer goods and advertising which expands aesthetic possibilities – often even compelling individuals to see aesthetics as central to ways of performing the self – Alto Hospicio has remained outside this formation. First glancing at both public and private spaces in Alto Hospicio, the prevailing form of normativity seems to have effectively erased any sense of aesthetics. Clothing styles, home architecture and decoration, construction of public space and indeed the curation of aesthetics on social media rarely stray from an entirely utilitarian appearance. In spite of the vast options of visual representations available on social media, aesthetics on Hospiceños’ Facebook, Instagram and Tumblr pages largely correspond to the types of unassuming aesthetics they curate in their daily lives. This is apparent in the styles of selfies, footies and other sorts of Instagram photographs that Hospiceños upload, as well as in their sarcastic memes, such as that shared by Tomas above.

Yet it is not so much the functionality of items that defines aesthetics in Alto Hospicio, rather a sense of presentation of being inconspicuous and unassuming. When young people want to snap a picture, simply capturing their feet lounging in front of the television set will do. If an individual wants to relate a sentiment – expressing pride, sharing philosophical outlooks or even commenting on politics – a humorous meme works without individual nuance or heightened risk of negative feedback. Yet this seeming lack of aesthetics in Alto Hospicio is indeed a consciously curated form. Hospiceños, particularly those whose families are relatively well off because of involvement in the mining industry, have the option to purchase the latest fashions and add balconies, landscaping or other forms of adornment to their homes. Perhaps even more easily, young people could put on their finest clothing and arrange their bedroom to take a highly stylised selfie, or could curate collections of
beautiful scenes on Instagram. Instead they choose to represent themselves aesthetically on social media within the bounds of normative unassuming aesthetics. By making this conscious choice, Hospiceños develop their unassuming styles as a particular aesthetic, rather than a lack thereof.

This aesthetic in many ways refuses class distinction. While the economy is dominated by prosperous mining and importation industries, the people of Alto Hospicio are by and large the manual labourers rather than owners of these resources. Both the history of labour movement solidarity as well as current experiences of the production process (at times characterised by workers as exploitation) lead to a refusal of class distinction – despite the fact that these workers earn reasonably good salaries and at a basic level are capable of purchasing goods or acquiring other sorts of cultural and social capital that could very well be used in creating distinctions. The conditions of Alto Hospicio demonstrate the overgeneralisation inherent in assumptions that modern capitalism inevitably generates incessant aspirations for greater material wealth or the proliferation of consumption-based class distinction.

**Networks, normativity and boundaries**

The global and semi-public nature of social media also provides for expansive social fields, in which connections across all kinds of social and geographic boundaries become possible. Yet Hospiceños prefer to connect with people they know, using as a guide the visibility of their social networks inherent in certain forms of social media. Just as I aroused suspicion at first when trying to connect with Hospiceños online, residents of Alto Hospicio tend to be wary of newcomers until their connections within the community become visible. Hospiceños’ choices of which social media to use for various purposes often rely in part on the visibility of social networks provided by the platform. New relationships become validated through connections to existing relationships with family, long-term friends, neighbours and work-mates. The fact that young Hospiceños prefer using Facebook as a dating site, rather than applications such as Tinder or Grindr, makes their preference for visible relationships clear. Equally, the practice of making new friends through commenting on mutual acquaintances’ Facebook posts demonstrates how visible social connections do the work of authenticating individuals as trustworthy, and thus worthy of time and communication. These communications strategies are indeed quite logical within
the context of historical and political economic processes that have fed discourses of suspicion in Alto Hospicio.

The visibility of networks and communications on social media also makes it an ideal place for performing the boundaries of the expected and expanding the traditional mechanisms of ‘keeping people in their place’, such as through gossip and indirect language. Social media allows users to prick the bubbles of pretension that they see while maintaining distance from direct confrontation – which would indeed be antithetical to the solidarity which Hospiceños also value.

To act within normativity is to be sensitive to the possibility of diverging from it. As a result it pervades almost all aspects of life for Hospiceños – what they eat, what they wear, what they talk about and how they dream of the future. Individuals express their own personal preferences, styles and ambitions, but the range in which those self-expressions fall is much more limited than might have been expected, particularly given the size of the city and the numbers of migrants from various cultural backgrounds. Those who are not sensitive to this type of divergence are challenged for their boundary crossing on social media at times, by those who feel a stronger interest in maintaining boundaries. Those who challenge in this way, either consciously or unconsciously, highlight the normative ways in which they expect others to express themselves. Social media, as a semi-public space, becomes an ideal stage on which normativity is both reproduced and redefined through these sanctions.

Alto Hospicio, then, helps to explain a core component of social media itself. These shared and group-focused media are an ideal conduit for normativity – but this is also a property of social media that allows it to be taken up easily, without disrupting daily life. Within a very short time social media has become taken for granted and integrated into quotidian forms of communication and presentation of the self in everyday life. Indeed, normativity may explain both what is extraordinary about Alto Hospicio as well as what is ordinary about social media. Social media is an ideal technology for establishing and extending normativity to the rest of social life. In turn it is also subject to the pressures of normativity, so that everyone knows what should and should not be posted, where the limits of obscenity are and in what ways politics may be approached without raising eyebrows.

In many instances humour is key both to testing and maintaining the boundaries of acceptability. Humour ranges from funny status messages and sarcastic comments to ridiculous forms of exaggeration and visual puns exemplified by memes. When someone acts unacceptably,
humour provides a means of chastising such activity without causing shame. But humour also marks the space as informal, and often works to strengthen, reaffirm or even begin new friendships. This type of playfulness allows for commentary on social structure without direct articulation, and acts as a barrier to accountability for sincere forms of social commentary. Humorous memes are used to test the boundaries of the appropriate and possible in a safe way, and thus are integral to notions of normativity. In fact humour may be the key to the ways in which individuals view normativity as desirable rather than repressive.

Humour also reinforces Hospiceños’ sense that social media is an authentic form of interacting with friends and acquaintances. Much of the humour on their social media pages works through interaction in comments. Hospiceños even respond to memes by posting corresponding memes in the comment area afforded by Facebook. As Sherzer contends, humour may be used as a test of local knowledge, and when successful constitutes a collective achievement.3

In Alto Hospicio the implicit decision not to flaunt wealth and material goods, build striking houses nor express individual personality in self style work all work in order to serve community cohesion. There is little impulse to inspire jealousy. Instead Hospiceños exert effort to maintain a status quo which is obtainable by everyone. Yet this norm requires that individuals define the boundaries of normativity as a public project. These boundaries become clear in gossip, and in resistance to those who appear to cross them. As such, social media becomes integral to maintaining normativity. While the production of normativity is an important aspect of daily social life on the street, in civic society and in personal conversations with neighbours, the project is furthered and made more visible when Hospiceños use social media to perform ‘sameness’.

Performing social scripts

Throughout this book I use the concept of social scripts to explain the ways in which normativity makes some behaviours seem ‘natural’ and expected, while other behaviours are construed as weird, out of place or inappropriate. The idea of social scripts draws on the notion that people are always performing; though they may improvise, basic cultural narratives serve as a platform for these performances. Interaction on social media makes clear the ways in which these scripts are not pre-existing, but are constantly constructed by those acting within them. Not all Hospiceños always live within the bounds of what the larger group
might consider appropriate – but it is these very ruptures in naturalised assumptions that make the assumptions visible. Examples of these ruptures demonstrate how those who hold more stake in maintaining normativity often actively reassert the prevailing social norms when they are challenged.

The idea of social scripts also acknowledges the importance of the audience in interaction. Both actors and audiences constantly interpret and redefine the social scripts in the context of their specific history and political economy. Everyday performances on social media tell stories of self-understanding and affiliation, both to the self and others, creating the ‘socially real’ through the telling. As Dwight Conquergood contends, performance does not necessarily begin with experience, but performance often realises the experience.

Above all, the idea that social media platforms are a stage for performing social scripts to an audience reminds us that social media is indeed ‘social’. The interactive nature of social media is key to the popularity of certain platforms and applications as opposed to others. Because Hospiceños conceive of Twitter as unidirectional, they consider it boring. Conversely Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram provide ample opportunity for ‘liking’, commenting, conversing and engaging in other forms of interaction (such as posting a link or photograph on a friend’s Facebook wall); they are consequently ingrained in daily communications. But more deeply, the interactive nature of social media is important because it provides a platform on which social scripts are not only acted out, but also actively negotiated. So while normativity does structure much of Hospiceños’ daily lives, this is not a unidirectional process. Like all forms of hegemony, normativity is negotiated by individuals within a larger structure. The social scripts certainly exist, and they do provide an outline for social life in Alto Hospicio, but many Hospiceños value their ability to improvise as well.

It is precisely because of the centrality of community that social media is important to Hospiceños and takes the specific forms that it does. Social media, rather than alienating individuals from their neighbours, families, or friends, creates new inroads to interaction in Alto Hospicio, at times even fostering the creation of new social relationships. There is no reason to believe these relationships are any less sincere or any more mediated than relationships that begin or develop any other way. Hospiceños use social media to seek out people with mutual interests, similar backgrounds and human networks in common; in so doing they simply supplement their social lives, rather than replace them or make them less authentic.
Performing the ordinary in an extraordinary place

These social networks are important to the community because of the unique set of existing circumstances and neoliberal ideologies that structure the space of Alto Hospicio. The absence of both state intervention and large private businesses often leaves the residents to their own devices. Within this context social networks and community become important resources, and thus identifications with sameness rather than difference are important to highlight. Discourses of normativity may repress, erase or obscure some forms of identification, but they serve to provide community cohesion, often seen as necessary for individuals who feel marginalised within broader structures. While some Hospiceños say that the range of expression in Alto Hospicio makes life boring, none outwardly convey that they feel personally repressed or unable to express their individuality. Instead the bounding of expression happens at an unconscious level in which the range of ‘natural’ options is circumscribed through social scripts. Individuals do not therefore experience a loss of options; rather they simply do not consider certain options in the first place.

Normativity is closely connected to notions of citizenship, and particularly strands of citizenship that highlight belonging. By remaining within the bounds of expected and naturalised ways of performing, interacting and expressing the self, Hospiceños communicate that they are ‘good citizens’. They abide by the prevailing social scripts rather than challenging them, and overall contribute to a cohesive community. But this normativity is also closely connected to the ways in which Hospiceños conceive of citizenship in relation to the nation-state. Maintaining local normativity allows Hospiceños to conceive of their marginality in contrast to the imagined excesses and cosmopolitanism of sites more physically and figuratively central to the nation. By maintaining unassuming aesthetics, close community ties, traditional family forms and a focus on the local, Hospiceños represent themselves as the real Chilean citizens – marginalised by government and business interests and peripheral to political participation, legal status and rights, but nonetheless those who truly belong.

In identifying as marginalised citizens, individuals highlight their modes of self-understanding that correspond to Hospiceño normativity. However, when certain aspects of the self are highlighted, others are erased, obscured or left unmentioned. Work and family are both usually highlighted, and often used to place the self within broader social worlds. While men often take pride in providing for their families, adult
women take pride in caring for them. Non-heteronormative relationships are downplayed at times in favour of identification with one’s natal family. Other connections within the community are also highlighted, whether through affiliations such as neighbourhood, childhood friendship, extended family or through more formal organisations, including community groups or municipal government. While highlighting local community is almost always an important way of performing citizenship associated with belonging, Hospicenos’ attitudes toward nationalism are more complex. In the context of politics, regionalism and localism are highlighted over the national. Yet when associated with cultural forms such as food, sport or heritage, they identify closely and enthusiastically with being Chilean.

With such identifications Hospicenos attempt to reverse understandings of centre and periphery, representing themselves as the true Chileans; conversely those in the cosmopolitan centres of the nation are positioned as inauthentic. This conception of citizenship is closely associated with social and economic class – areas almost always highlighted by Hospicenos in claiming solidarity with working-class and non-cosmopolitan lifestyles. At times this even leads to cross-border identifications in which perceptions of common class and proletarian ideals supersede national identification. Similarly differences in race and, particularly, indigeneity are often erased in order to highlight a broader sense of marginality in which most Hospicenos can claim a part, rather than compartmentalising or hierarchising forms of disadvantage.

Overall these forms of highlighting and erasure create a strong sense of solidarity among most Hospicenos, frequently directed against such structures as the state, neoliberal capitalism or notions of cosmopolitan Otherness. However, these tactics also tend to erase forms of difference that otherwise could be important to peoples’ self-understanding: for example identification as an indigenous person, sexual or gender non-normativity or life aspirations that include goals associated with cosmopolitanism or other ‘alternative’ lifestyles. These erasures are not only reflected in individuals’ posts on social media; they are also actively maintained through sanctioning certain kinds of posting through negative feedback. Thus the discursive structures of social media not only express forms of normativity in Alto Hospicio; they are key to mobilising and maintaining them.

In essence, social media is what users make it. In Alto Hospicio, where normativity and solidarity are important social values, social media is oriented towards those aims. New media circulate old stories,
and are both the products and producers of the social scripts to which its users are subject. Hospiceños reproduce their normativities through social media even without realising it. They highlight their marginalised citizenship and erase forms of distinction, creating their own particular community identification in the process.