3

**Visual postings: lights on, lights off**

Our use and understanding of images in anthropology has been changing.¹ It began with the anthropologist owning the camera and choosing what to record, evolved to cases of cameras being distributed so that informants could also contribute to what to show and finally reached the present situation, in which inexpensive camera phones are ubiquitously used in low-income settlements such as Balduíno. This is significant because now photographing and sharing this material are no longer part of an experiment that depends on the intermediation of the researcher. The images you will see in this chapter, apart from Fig. 3.8, were all initially chosen by locals and shown on their social media channels, responding to individual and social necessities and the interests of communicating and cultivating relationships. Yet given how widespread visual communication is on social media, it is surprising how little of this content appears in research about the internet.² The purpose of this chapter is therefore to move beyond talking about images and actually show some of the visual postings that people of Balduíno circulate online.

Photographs have been considered ‘exchange objects’³ ever since the early days of anthropology. Being the official photographer of various weddings and children’s birthday parties in Balduíno provided valuable opportunities for me to participate in these social events. A school trip in which I accompanied a group of students spontaneously evolved into a long photography session as, during a break, children and teenagers queued up to try posing for portraits. For locals, photography was also one of the reasons to purchase smartphones – even before they began using mobiles to access the internet. From children to older adults, they use phones to carry and exchange files: music, video clips and photographs. Special kiosks in Balduíno charge customers to transfer these large databases to new phones, or to edit images and print them for different occasions. People
commonly use their phones to show photos as part of online conversations, to illustrate the subjects being discussed.

It is not, however, the intention of this chapter to contribute to the vast body of work produced in the last few decades about visual anthropology, anthropology and photography and anthropology and film. Firstly, this is not a conventional piece that addresses issues of memory, representation, affect, presence and history, often dialoguing with seminal work such as Barthes, Sontag and Benjamin. The content examined ahead does not include just photographs, but also different types of digitally produced images. Furthermore, while anthropologists have made relevant contributions to the debate about digital photography, the focus here is not on the consequences of visual content on social media. Instead the analysis will prioritise the comparison of the genres that emerge from the postings and the interpretations that locals provide about this material.

Images and videos are particularly useful as a form of communication to a population with low literacy rates, but this must not be seen as the only reason for the intensive use of online visual material in Balduino. Locals have traditionally depended on oral communication to create and maintain relationships, but exchanging visual files is now becoming an important part of social relations. Personal photos take the place of written descriptions in exchanges about residents’ everyday lives and experiences. Sharing videos and memes simplifies the act of expressing opinion or commenting on events. Not being able to read or write no longer prevents a person from participating in ‘small talk’ with peers online; simply by sharing an image or video they can joke and show moral values in relation to themes such as politics and religion. In addition, the ability to be online is in itself a state that carries prestige, especially to the less literate, and this is also a motivation to use visual content on social media. Since the computer is commonly associated with modernity and progress, the person who manages to use it is invested with these same attributes, and is consequently perceived as having better formal education.

It was actually the exercise of contrasting the images exchanged on Facebook timelines and on direct chats (Fig. 3.1) that provided the initial insight to analyse social media in Balduino through the concepts of ‘lights on’ and ‘lights off’. The logic of hiding or overly exposing information presented in Chapter 2 becomes more evident when we see the types of images that locals post and share. These visual metaphors help to distinguish the social relations and tensions happening in the settlement. Consequently the two main sections of the chapter separate the visual content exchanged openly from that sent directly to individuals or small groups.
As Chapter 2 explains, ‘lights on’ refers to online spaces that are constantly being scrutinised and monitored collectively. Online posts of this kind are thus generally meant to be seen by neighbours they see on the streets. Actually, the fact that an audience exists in a ‘lights-on’ situation affects the way in which Facebook is used. Not unlike living rooms with windows facing the streets, Facebook timelines become a way of displaying moral values. Hence ‘lights on’ postings work as a form of stage on which socioeconomic improvement is presented. Alternatively the ‘lights off’ online domain is an arena for gossip as well as for politically incorrect and yet highly popular content, mainly related to sex, violence and humour. Finally, between these two opposing domains is a shadowed space on social media which mixes elements of both: exposing hidden tensions, but doing so anonymously. The most common case is indirects (indiretas), which are so popular that there are Facebook pages dedicated to producing memes for this purpose.

The images presented in this chapter are the ones that appear more regularly on locals’ social media. Most of these files come from public-facing Facebook postings from the same 30 informants. For the purpose of sample control, the collection of this material took place in a defined period during field work in the second half of 2013, aligning with the work
of the ‘Why We Post’ team of researchers. The users I chose to be part of this case study represent the demographics of Balduíno in terms of age, education, religious preference and socioeconomic level. The most recent 20 posts that included a visual element on their Facebook timelines were then classified by keywords in order to identify recurring themes. Next I applied an adapted version of the same methodology to collect and classify content that circulates through WhatsApp. The different themes present in each section emerged from identifying the most frequently recurrent visual content in circulation, both in the open and privately. The initial process of recording the sample of images enabled me to see beyond my preconceived ideas to include content that did not initially catch my attention.

As Torresan explains, synthesising MacDougall’s analysis, ‘[Images] may not contain the whole story, they may not tell everything, but the specific index/icon quality of cinematographic images provides us with a form of understanding ethnographic realities that is sensorial, direct, and immediate, while also imaginative and suggestive of wider arguments’. Therefore the expected outcome of this chapter is the ‘recording of an engagement with a different culture’. It evolved from the content shared on social media, my mediation and the ethnographic engagement of locals, who discussed with me the visual content and its circulation in the settlement.

‘Lights off’

This is where sensitive interactions take place. It is there we learn what people are interested in, regardless of whether the subject is dangerous or morally or legally problematic. Simply by considering the time invested in this type of online ‘face to face’ direct contact, we can see that WhatsApp and Facebook chat are clearly more desired and useful domains of social relations than is public-facing social media. Young users may post on their Facebook timelines two or three times a day and follow what their contacts are doing there, but they will then remain connected for more hours exchanging direct messages.

‘Lights-off’ conversations include lots of text as it allows for more secretive and ‘quiet’ exchanges. If a person is typing, she or he can discuss any subject even if they are physically close to other people. The new possibility of making communication encrypted or invisible – discussed in Chapter 2 and again in Chapter 5 – helps to make reading and writing desirable practices. Together with long, almost endless chains of dialogue, however, the inhabitants of Balduíno also use social
media directly to exchange files containing audio, images and short video clips. This activity then evokes topics of conversation, which produces more circulation of files.

One way of classifying the visual files shared in the ‘lights-off’ sphere is based on their source: material originally made in Balduíno is usually more sensitive as it relates to people and families known locally, so the circulation of this type of content is more controlled. One of the few cases related to violence that I saw circulating on (public-facing) Facebook timelines was a police sketch of a rapist at large in the region. However, he was an outsider, unknown in the settlement; as Chapter 6 explains, it is rare for local acts of crime to be shared openly. In general locally sensitive content generates more interest – for example, a photo of accident victims in the settlement – but the circulation will happen mostly through direct, one-to-one exchanges that are sent only to more trusted relatives and peers. They present the very problematic material with extra caution: these files are either played on the person’s own mobile (to avoid sharing the file) or forwarded using Bluetooth, so that those sharing the content cannot be detected. On the other hand, more visually disturbing content is less carefully handled, simply because it does not involve people from the settlement. These less sensitive exchanges demand less caution, so they take place through broadcast WhatsApp messages or inside WhatsApp groups.

In short, the main element that defines how a file is shared – with a greater or lesser degree of care – is less the type of the content, but rather its relation with people from Balduíno. A horrible video clip of a teenager being bullied, undressed and beaten is thus generally seen and forwarded more broadly, just like a porn file or a humorous image meme: the event happened elsewhere and the people shown are strangers. However, material of a less disturbing nature that relates to someone from Balduíno – such as the photo of a place where an accident happened – will receive special attention and be circulated inside more selected social ties.

The following case describes the context in which some photos of locals circulate in the settlement. One day I was talking to Roberto, a young evangelical Christian, about WhatsApp use, and also about the violence that often happens in or near the settlement. According to local accounts (I have no official figures) on more violent weeks two or more murdered bodies may be found in the settlement. Locals tend to react to the situation not with fear or stress, but usually by demonstrating curiosity about the deceased; they will go out of their way and change regular routes to look at the body and gossip about what happened – and now, thanks to digital cameras on mobile phones, take photos and share the story, together with the visual aid. Roberto had just received from his brother a photo of a local
killed earlier that week. He learned from his brother that the dead man was a bully who recently had come from Salvador and was living in a recent squatting area. According to shared rumours about the episode, this man was killed because ‘he was causing trouble and his turmoil would eventually make the police come in’. The rumours circulating also mention that a woman pretended to want to have sex with him so that others could attack him naked, and consequently unarmed. Roberto added that he does not keep this type of file; after he has finished showing and discussing the case he erases it from his phone. In so doing he seeks to keep his distance from any possible consequences that the crime could produce. Outside trusted circles he will deny that he has seen or heard about the murder.

Though some of the material circulating through ‘lights-off’ channels is disturbing and often illegal, large amounts of it is not. Ranging from very disturbing content to that which is better termed ‘politically incorrect’, this material reveals the subjects currently attracting the attention of this population. The relevance of a certain file, or a certain type of file, is evident through how broadly shared it may become. For instance, the tension that WhatsApp is bringing to local families has been captured on various videos. These are made elsewhere in the country, but were intensively shared in Balduíno during the months in which WhatsApp was becoming popular. Many videos I received are of teenagers recording an adult parent or relative complaining about how social media has stolen young people’s attention away from them.21 Through clips and images shared on social media, Brazilians of lower socioeconomic background can participate in conversations connecting people living across the country. These group conversations happen through the exchange of files, which is also a special type of ethnographic evidence: one made by and for this population.22

**What I do not show**

The more common topics shared through ‘lights off’ conversations are sex, violence, bizarre things, humour, religion, dance and what I have labelled ‘representations of the popular domain’. Politics is also important, but only during months leading up to elections. However, not all the content that I collected can be published in this book. Many clips have explicit sexual content or scenes of violence that are deeply disturbing, and it is sufficient to give a written overview of them.

Sex and pornography represented perhaps the most popular subject of files in circulation in the settlement, and this theme relates to the general interest locals have for cases of extramarital affairs – more about
this in Chapter 4. Sex clips and images are not exclusively or even predominantly shared by men, as one might expect. Many of the sex videos I received were actually sent by female informants; often the reason for sharing was not the personal enjoyment of watching the scenes, but of learning tricks that could be tried with a partner – such as how to perform a certain sexual position or how to do erotic massages. One of the amateur files shows informatively the process in which a clitoris is cosmetically pierced. Other recordings are pornographic in nature but not intended to produce sexual excitement; instead they work as idioms representing certain ideas or views, and occasionally stimulating conversations on certain topics. Among the most common types of video shared by adult females during some months were those featuring painful anal penetration or transsexuals with attractive feminine features and (surprisingly, in the narrative of the videos) large penises. These two recurrent types of content hinged on the topic of machismo and of how men in the region create problems for women. Gender roles are changing as women become less dependent on men’s money and protection, and this dialogue among female adults is reflected through these exchanges.

The content of ‘lights off’ channels also includes material bearing strong similarities to freak shows on travelling circuses from the past and present.23 Bizarre things and humour are perhaps the two elements that combine to interconnect all the different types of files circulating among emergent WhatsApp users. The purely bizarre include videos of self-mutilation, sadomasochism, sex with animals and (very graphic) medical recordings of surgeries (for instance haemorrhoids or penis enlargement). The content viewed as humorously bizarre depicts people defecating on the street, a female dwarf stripping and dancing naked, a deformed man with a large penis ‘playing with himself’ by a river and people with various forms of physical anomalies.

**What I have shown here**

Somewhat similar or thematically near to the videos labelled as ‘bizarre things’ are those I grouped as ‘representations of the popular domain’. These files display people that embody visions about backwardness, particularly to teens and young people (Figs 3.2–3.3). In a way this category complements the selfies posted on public-facing social media – an antithesis to displaying one’s own beauty and aspirations. Predominantly amateur videos made using smartphones, these show mostly older people displaying signs of physical degradation, especially a lack of frontal teeth, and often drunkenness. These subjects know they are being recorded
Figs 3.2–3.6 Screenshots from amateur video clips circulated in Balduino among low-income viewers
Figs 3.2–3.6  Continued
and tend to participate in the video willingly, perhaps ignorant of how the recording is made for others to ridicule them. However, what is considered laughable is not only the display of elements perceived as ugly and decadent, but also a spontaneity, an openness about sexuality (for instance old people talking, singing about or performing sex), a sense of humour (even in relation to his or her own degradation) and a sense of enjoyment of life. Hence the popularity of these videos may also indicate how the people watching may be not just laughing at them but also with them. In so doing they are both negating but also identifying with these expressions of backwardness.

Dancing, sometimes involving children, could be viewed as a sub-category among the representations of the popular domain. However, I have separated them here due to the high quantity of videos on this topic (Figs 3.4–3.6).

Dancing may generally be seen as a way of expressing one’s sensuality and sexuality, with the dances recorded here often being representations of sex acts. Even the dancers who are alone perform sexual movements. Again, this specific material produces an ambiguous perception. On the one hand there is the quality and exuberance of all dances; children and adults both exhibit physical co-ordination, energy, intensity and creativity. Nor is it uncommon for the recording of these videos to happen at home, with parents and relatives laughing appreciatively at the display and at the child’s skill in emulating the adult world.

It is important to keep in mind how the images analysed so far are contrasted to the following material, which circulates openly on Facebook. While the primary focus of attention there is beauty and the accomplishment or future aspirations for the self, WhatsApp exchanges and Facebook chat conversations more often display ‘ugliness’ and the present-day reality of nearby or culturally similar others. ‘Lights on’ carries the benign and tame aspects of one’s own aspiring middle-class life; through ‘lights off’ we see the types of experiences more commonly associated with the poverty of Latin America. ‘Lights off’ is not only sad and fearful – it can be, and often is, related to enjoyment and humour – but it is constantly somewhat dark in its essence.

‘Lights on’

This batch of images bears some resemblance to how photography existed in the settlement before digital cameras and social media. The
oldest types of photographic content that I saw inside people’s houses were portraits of parents, grandparents and other family members, depicted in ways that have been analysed as visual records of roles and relationships. These existing early images relate to ‘lights on’ in the sense of appearing to represent the highest moral conventions regarding respect for family and family hierarchies. They are rare, however, given the absence until recently of businesses related to photography in the settlement, the general economic limitations of most families and the fact that these images often record special occasions such as formal marriages, which are still not common practices among many locals.

As demands for formal employment increased in the area, ID-size photos became part of the process of official registration required by government bureaucracy in order to provide ID cards, employment registration documents and others. More recently, as money began to circulate more widely within low-income families and improved transport links facilitated visits to Salvador, some locals acquired pre-digital, inexpensive ‘point and shoot’ cameras. Their photos recorded mostly special occasions such as family trips or celebrations, as well as the family’s children as they grew up. Most of this material is kept in picture albums or boxes stored in closets or drawers and looked after by adults. Especially in evangelical Christian families’ homes, some of these photos are now being framed. They represent family bonds and also aspiration, expressed through clothing, background (referring to travelling), the forms of posing seen in magazines (for instance, a groom holding a bride in the air with the ocean in the background) and, more recently, selfie-like shots displaying affection among close relatives and friends. Today many of these framed photos that decorate people’s homes were originally taken with camera phones and printed locally. This has become such an important aspect of people’s lives that this relatively small, relatively poor settlement has a local business providing printing and framing services.

Such recordings of the modern and prosperous self often occur through continuously sharing large quantities of images taken in private settings. These are meant to reach not those closely related, but often people outside of one’s immediate social circles.

**Self-portraits, beauty and consumption**

It is not the (great) quantity of images shown that makes the timelines of people in Balduíno particular in relation to those of Brazilians of different
socioeconomic backgrounds. What is interesting is the time invested in making these photos, and the particular elements in the picture that are either brought forth or erased.

Teenagers especially make great efforts to show neatness, for example, by constantly using spell checkers before posting content publicly and by avoiding capturing scenes associated with poverty. Misspelling words – a subject discussed in Chapter 5 – indicates that the person’s family is ‘backward’ for not understanding the value of education or not having the means to send their children to school. Young people in particular can be very ashamed of having adult relatives who do not value education. On social media this translates also into monitoring one’s social media notifications to erase any misspelled or misplaced comments left by older relatives. Similarly the view of unfinished brick walls (Fig. 3.7), arguably Balduíno’s most recurrent visual background, is meticulously erased from photos – simply by consciously choosing not to take a photo showing this type of background. This particular image suggests that the family is struggling and unable to have a ‘proper’ house with finished plaster walls. Photos are thus purposely taken with neutral backgrounds such as inside painted walls.

Hair is often straightened and shows a fringe

In the following examples, displaying beauty means focusing on the hair (Figs 3.8–3.9). This is important for women in Balduíno as most
people there have African ancestry.\textsuperscript{31} Given that the settlement was the colonial epicentre of the slave trade, straightening the hair\textsuperscript{32} is generally perceived as corresponding to cleanliness and progress. This is not just a matter of taste, as informants reported that the better-paying administrative jobs are not available to women who have ‘Afro’ hairstyles.

Figs 3.8–3.9  Selfies showing straightened hair
Selfies often display symbols of upward mobility such as clothing and accessories.

Another key element to note is the use of this genre of photos to display one’s prosperity through consumption. In the cases of selfies taken by women, the clothing must be new and the subject should wear makeup, accessories and other items (Figs 3.10–3.11). These are highly posed and crafted photos. Many young people take these photos in front of the mirror, enabling them to display their smartphones in the image.

Figs 3.10–3.13  Selfies displaying a smartphone, a tablet computer and two scenes from a local gym
Many of these selfies are also taken at gyms (Figs 3.12–3.13) – both because the gym represents the type of consumption related to upward social mobility\(^\text{34}\) and also because gyms have large-scale mirrors. These allow photos to be taken of the whole body, displaying together items such as tennis shoes, watches and smartphones.

The expectation of receiving complimentary comments and likes

Attracting attention through likes and comments is an important part of being online. These portraits are shared under the expectation of capturing attention, which is manifested through short comments saying how pretty the person looks (Figs 3.14–3.15).

These same types of selfies, which previously were displayed on the subject’s Facebook timeline, are now also shared regularly in WhatsApp groups.
Adults too use photography to show prosperity (Figs. 3.16–3.17), which is also related to showing certain types of clothing. However, their portraits often reveal their inexperience with photographing and being photographed (though this tends to improve over time as they practice using social media). Instead of selfies, the photo is more often taken by another person while the subjects pose formally, as one would see in old family photos or images taken for ID cards. From my perspective the results are less aesthetically accomplished than those of the younger people in the settlement, but the preoccupation with finding neutral backgrounds is recurrent.

The opposite of cool

The social pressures to show neatness also appear clearly when this aspiration to beauty and perfection is denied. Take the story of Patrícia, a 13-year-old girl who lives with her parents and three sisters, aged 11 to 17. Each of the sisters has a distinct personality; Patrícia
is the adventurous, outgoing teen who loves going out with friends and dreams of becoming a professional dancer to work with bands playing Pagodão and other local music genres. She also has a mischevious streak, on one occasion taking a photo of her older sister Sara asleep on the sofa and posting it on Facebook. The photo was as uncool as a teenager in Balduíno could imagine: hair, makeup, type of clothing and angle for posing – everything was missing or wrong. Sara woke up later to find her Facebook profile filled with messages from friends, relatives and even people she did not know making fun of her. A few days later Sara saw a chance to get her revenge and took a similar photo of Patrícia. Instead of publishing it immediately, however, she decided first to torment her sister by showing her the photo. The prospect of
appearing publicly in such a humiliating situation provoked a loud dispute between the sisters and their mother intervened, ordering Sara to erase the file.

**Displaying enjoyment**

If we follow also what adults post, we can see how this desire to look attractive and prosperous blends together. A topic that illustrates this well is the sharing of images that display enjoyment. Such photos suggest that one has the money to consume beyond mere survival. However, sharing photos displaying celebration also relates to a tension in the locality about the meaning of wealth. These images add to ongoing local disputes about what is more important in life: gaining money through work or preserving one’s autonomy by resisting formal employment.

This tension is more explicit between migrants/evangelical Christians and natives/non-evangelical Christians. However, it also relates to opposing perspectives between young people who prefer formal employment and adults who resist formal work structures as something that enslaves the person. The perception is that prosperity can only be achieved in exchange for a discipline of work that has great impacts on family life and what is seen as personal freedom. More recent migrants arrive to fulfil the work demands of tourist resorts that are open around the year. Working there provides advantages, such as having a steady wage and becoming eligible for government unemployment benefits. However, it also imposes high costs on the effort of raising families, with children and other relatives being left behind during working hours and days. Hotel demands peak in the summer (during school holidays), and are also higher on weekends and holidays. Those working in this industry, especially women, have to get used to being away from their homes, and to cope with complaints and pressure from partners and older relatives, who often believe they should stick to traditional roles, caring for the home and children. Displaying enjoyment is a recurrent way that locals use to address this issue on social media.

**Swimming pools, sandy beaches and alcohol**

In terms of showing enjoyment through prosperity, one of the most popular locations for taking photos is the swimming pool (Figs 3.18–3.19).
Figs 3.18–3.19  Photos showing people having fun at the swimming pool
There are no public or private pools in Balduíno (they are abundant in affluent properties across the road), so spending time at one displays one’s social connections as much as it expresses an interest in achieving upward mobility. Visiting pools often results from friendships with housekeepers, or in some cases with bosses or former bosses who are the owners of these country houses. Although it is implicit that the person in the photo does not own the pool, the photos challenge the stereotypical image of the worker as submissive, unpretentious and poor.

Drinking alcohol (Figs 3.20–3.21) does not just show a desire to enjoy life, but also marks the person as not being an evangelical Christian, thus avoiding the negative connotations of this.37

The beach is associated with tourism and with the activities of tourists, so photos at the beach (Figs 3.22–3.23) also indicate an aspiration for upward social mobility.

Figs 3.20–3.21 Photos showing friends enjoying a drink together
Consuming food

Food indicates both enjoyment of life and prosperity. Meat is particularly symbolic of wealth, as non-jerked beef (i.e. beef that has not been dried and salted) was rarely consumed in this region in the past due to its high cost. Barbecuing, a practice associated with Brazil’s more economically developed southern regions, is often accompanied by loud music – allowing both sound and smell to ‘broadcast’ the event through the neighbourhood. Barbecues actually represent one of the practices common to evangelical Christians and non-evangelicals, and both groups commonly post about them on social media. Notice how the

Figs 3.22–3.23 Photos showing people enjoying themselves at a tourist site
poses in the picture (Fig. 3.24) freeze the moment when everyone is engaging with the food.

Evangelical Christians and young people in general also display the consumption of fast food products, which tie them to the modern urban world (Fig. 3.25). The images show that he or she is able to afford to go to fast food restaurants and to order these products as paying customers. Similarly families post photos of children’s birthday parties, particularly displaying very colourful sweets and commercial bottled refreshments (Fig. 3.26). These items also symbolise modernity and celebrate new possibilities of consumption, until recently not available to Balduíno residents.

Displaying bonds

The topic of enjoyment is also related to the enjoyment of being with people. Since Brazilians are generally perceived to be – and perceive themselves as being – intensely sociable, it is not surprising that social occasions also emerge as a major theme to post about on Facebook (Fig. 3.27).
Figs 3.25 and 3.26  Photos showing fast food being eaten in a shopping mall and food at a child’s birthday party

Fig. 3.27  A photo showing the bonds between family members
Peer relations

As Chapter 2 has demonstrated, local types of peer bonds are about risk taking, adventure and fun. The images below (Figs 3.28–3.29) suggest this kind of relationship being portrayed with reference to a ‘ghetto’ ethos, related to more evident sexuality, a hip-hop aesthetic and ‘gangster’ lifestyle. Branded clothing is key as it represents not just that the person is dressing up, but that he or she can afford to spend beyond survival to dress up. Locals explain that the point of wearing these fashionable items is to display one’s association with criminality; the brands worn can only be purchased by somebody whose income is not merely the pay received by a (typically low-wage) manual worker.

Together with the ostentatious hip-hop style, Christianity is also displayed through fashion and practices. Through evangelical Christianity the idea of ‘friendship’ is being shown as a new genre of relationship, which appears in memes such as in Fig. 3.30. The image – of a male and female hugging – is contrary to traditional local assumptions about gender having to exist in separate domains. This position is backed by
evangelical Christian values, which promote the building of companionship between husband and wife, and more broadly among the members of each church.

While non-evangelical groups avoid bringing males and females together in photos, evangelical youth are less submissive to gender separations (Fig. 3.31). They prefer to display, as a sign of modernity and ‘civilised values’, that men and women can have relationships that are not necessarily romantic or sexual.
Couples, romance and marriage

As we move from the informal display of people enjoying themselves to the more formal display of ‘couples’ per se, we also approach a very specific arena of ideal life, arising from religious rather than secular roots.

Not many couples share photos of themselves together, and those that do tend to be evangelical Christians. One of the ways in which they display their devotion to God is by portraying their fidelity within marriage. One may express this by uploading wedding pictures. These formal celebrations, for the costs they imply and for being a practice more associated with wealthier sectors of society, are also displaying aspirations and prosperity (Fig. 3.32). Young unmarried couples who show themselves online (Fig. 3.33) do so following a path promoted by Christian churches and also associated with modernity.

The presence of evangelical Christian churches influences the general perception about what families are and how family members are expected to behave. Fathers, who are traditionally less directly involved in raising children, appear and display themselves on social media. A man will demonstrate intimacy, as well as modernity, in the contact with his children and partner, emulating the structure of nuclear families (Fig. 3.34). Even non-evangelical couples feel the pressure to use these celebrations to present themselves as modern and prosperous. Such values are represented by the abundance of food in evidence, and also by the vibrant colours of the sweets and decoration.

Fig. 3.32  A photo celebrating the bonds of marriage
The way these new notions of friendship and partnership appear on social media also points to the value of using visual content that informants themselves create and choose to display to examine changes in the norms of relationships in a society.

**Displaying faith**

Evangelical Christians display their faith through a rigorous dress code.

Facebook in Balduino reflects the same concerns found offline in the public side of evangelical families. Being an evangelical Christian in the
Figs 3.35–3.36  Photos showing the ties among members of a local church and the congregation singing during a service
settlement is about getting one’s Christianity ‘out of the closet’ – especially considering ‘evangelising’ is a distinguishing feature of this group. For them, the person’s spirituality and morality need to be constantly socially exposed (Figs 3.35–3.36). Clothing is very important in that context as a marker of both socioeconomic distinction and moral evolution (more sober items oppose the exposed sexuality associated with prostitution and infidelity); ‘proper clothing’ shows an embrace of high culture, taste and Christian values (Fig. 3.37). By following a similar dress code evangelical Christians can identify each other both on and offline, and show their faith and commitment to the church.

Evangelical Christians in Balduíno are more concerned with evangelising than with charitable activities. The act of promoting Christianity happens as they share personal testimonies of the works of God in their lives.

Offline we see this practice during church services and as part of everyday life, through informants constantly mentioning and talking about religion. The same process of expressing and making one’s faith visible appears on social media. As well as displaying prosperity and moral elevation, evangelical Christians display their faith on these platforms by sharing moral and religious memes (Figs 3.38–3.40).

It may become easier to perceive social media in its ‘lights on’ mode by considering that all the photos presented in this section expose elements of the users’ personal lives – their homes, relatives, peers, routines, religious practices, etc. – and are posted without content filters to

Fig. 3.37  A photo celebrating romantic bonds between evangelical Christians
be accessible to anybody using the same platforms. The term ‘lights on’ is a broad label to indicate a pattern that interconnects the images in this section. It does not refer to a specific platform, but rather a disposition to use social media to reach a certain audience, often with the motivation of showing off personal and family progress and values. Although this type of posting is more often shown on public-facing Facebook timelines, other spaces such as WhatsApp groups can also serve the same purpose.

Figs 3.38–3.40 Evangelical Christian memes. Translated, these read: ‘Everything that you value so much goes away and finishes. We do not choose to come to the world, but we have the right to choose where we want to spend eternity’ (Fig. 3.38); ‘If you think that today is a day to THANK GOD, share’ (Fig. 3.39); and ‘How many times I attended service like that… There GOD spoke to me, and I left like this!!!’ (Fig. 3.40)
Figs 3.38–3.40  Continued
**Indiretas**

We have so far looked at images that work as advertising of the moral self (‘lights on’) and of images that are exchanged secretly (‘lights off’) because they refer to aspects of life deemed as backward or morally unacceptable. In this context the *indireta* is a hybrid genre and, as Chapter 2 shows, it offers a way for people to negotiate conflicts.

In visual postings *indiretas* also relate to a practice of communication in which people make conflicts public without directly referring to the other person (the adversary) involved in the problem. The fear of revenge is normally what limits the cases of direct confrontation between people with opposing interests. Offline, people’s way of ‘sending an indirect’ (*mandar a indireta*) is to speak out loud about a subject near the person that is being criticised, but without addressing him or her directly.⁴⁰

One typical situation for *indiretas* on social media is that of two women in dispute over a man. Economic prosperity is also a recurrent motivation for gossip. Locals circulate rumours about how the wealth of others is the product of prostitution or crime, which can escalate into an indirect confrontation. As the person displays his or her prosperity through ‘lights on’ postings, others dismiss their achievements through rumours behind their back. The person under attack then writes on social media that the malicious gossip is motivated by jealousy. The common argument is that others are circulating lies as a way to attack his or her accomplishments. The *indireta* thus becomes a way of drawing more attention to the person’s successes.

For locals memes are a popular method of flagging tensions that exist in their lives, both through humour and moralising content and as ways to promote or reinforce social norms.⁴¹ Taken outside of the context of a specific posting, such memes sound like a pessimist kind of popular wisdom, but locals can connect information and interpret the message they really carry.

**Loss of trust**

The loss of trust is usually related to gossiping. It refers to the situation of learning or deducing that someone whom a person considered a friend was spreading rumours or lies about him or her (Figs 3.41–3.44).

Becoming someone’s friend on Facebook raises different expectations. Many complain about people who ‘friended’ them, but then never spoke to them (Fig. 3.45). The memes below address this issue. They also display the
Figs 3.41–3.44 Memes expressing loss of trust. Translated, these read: ‘Be careful with who you TRUST’ (Fig. 3.41); ‘People admire your virtues in silence and judge your vices publicly’ (Fig. 3.42); ‘Let people say bad things about you, as they are fond of criticising who they want to become!’ (Fig. 3.43); and ‘If I wanted to please everyone I would not have a Facebook profile. I would throw a barbecue party’ (Fig. 3.44)
Deixa que falem mal de ti, as pessoas costumam criticar quem elas querem ser!

Figs 3.41–3.44   Continued
Fig. 3.45  An ironic meme about the idea that Facebook contacts are really friends. Translated, it reads: 'Hi to you that never said hi to me'

Fig. 3.46  A meme criticising the materialism of evangelical Christians. Translated, it reads: 'Evangelicals always practice the love of others... As long as these others are also evangelicals'
perception that Facebook is not as much for building relationships as it is for people to spy on one another.

Religious differences

These conflicts also happen in the context of religious differences. Evangelical Christians are under constant criticism for being ‘snobs’, for ‘thinking they are better than others’ and for preaching about the spiritual world while accumulating personal wealth (Fig. 3.46).

Within the church tensions can be seen emerging in Facebook postings when issues arise over inappropriate as well as appropriate behaviours. Tensions are generated among young people, especially

Fig. 3.47 A photo illustrating moral criticism of women’s dress. Translated, it reads: ‘Moderation!’
Fig. 3.48 A photo shared by evangelical Christians reflecting the supposed ‘decadent values’ of modern society. Translated, it reads: (above) ‘My God!’; (below) ‘People, the world is lost … 10-year-old girl pregnant. This happened in Bahia. Very sad this situation. Let’s pray for our children’
Fig. 3.49  A photo expressing moral criticism of how partners behave in a relationship. Translated, it reads: ‘God does not destroy a family to create another one’; (longer text): ‘Think about this: to have an affair is to work for the devil’
Fig. 3.50  A photo displaying the supposedly ‘decadent values’ of modern society. Translated, it reads: (above) ‘I agree, and you?’; (on the poster) ‘In Brazil, minors can: steal, kill, harass, sexually assault, burn people, be prostitutes [several other similar offences]; in Brazil minors cannot: work, be physically disciplined or answer for his/her crimes. Wake up Brazil!’
girls, who are criticised for uploading photos on Facebook in which they wear clothes (during the service or in public) not considered acceptable for an evangelical person. One image and accompanying message (Fig. 3.47) criticises girls and young women who dress inappropriately, especially when it comes to going to church. Other images posted by evangelical Christians comment upon the state of moral decline they perceive in their country, often focused upon family breakdown, social and domestic issues and crime (Figs 3.48–3.49). Sometimes generational conflicts are the main target, as in Fig. 3.50.

Conclusion

The first element to stress from this chapter is that people are the centre of attention in the settlement. The regard shown for photographing people – themselves, relatives, neighbours, work colleagues or school peers – echoes the interest in using social media as a tool that helps to maintain the dense sociality of people in Balduíno. The subjects that they want to record visually are not picturesque scenery or the angle of aesthetically attractive objects such as food, a pet or flowers. Especially on ‘lights-on’ social media, their cameras focus almost exclusively on themselves and their close associates. This appears to have been a common practice even before mobile connectivity simplified the act of posting images online.

The main purpose of this chapter has been to offer a framework to analyse the various forms of social exchanges taking place in Balduíno. The analytical tool proposed here separates the visual material that has been collected by contrasting initially two motivations for social media use. Those were labelled ‘lights on’ and ‘lights off’. Another aim has been to show the images they share more frequently through social media interactions.

Looking further at the types of visual content going around the settlement, the difference that emerges immediately relates to intended audiences. Part of the material is shown only to individuals or small groups, and circulates through trusted direct exchanges (‘lights off’). Other images should necessarily be shown openly and publicly, associating the person who posts them with shared moral values, aspiration and prosperity (‘lights on’). Then there is the indireta, a hybrid type that appears both on
Facebook timelines and on WhatsApp exchanges. *Indiretas* usually respond to situations of conflict, scandal or gossip. When it comes to images, memes that express *indiretas* often defend high moral standards and a moral right to prosperity while resenting the loss of trust and solidarity.

Comparing these three types of content helps us to understand the roles these exchanges play in a context of intense social change. Locals are continuously looking back at traditions and contrasting them with the new possibilities now at hand in relation to family, gender, work, religion, sexuality and class. These tensions become more obvious when one considers how the types of images shared change radically as we move from ‘lights off’ to ‘lights on’, which might have given the impression that people belong to either one category or the other. However, it is only by considering how these different types of content represent aspects of the same reality, circulating through the same mobile phones and computers, that we can understand both who these emergent Brazilians are and why social media means so much to them.