

## DIGITAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN ALTO HOSPICIO: THE EXPRESSION OF NORMATIVITY IN VISUAL MATERIALS

Nell Haynes

### THE GLOBAL SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACT STUDY

This project is part of the Global Social Media Impact Study, a collaboration between 9 anthropologists in 8 countries, to compare the use of social media among people living outside of cosmopolitan global centers. Each anthropologist spent 15 months in the field researching how people incorporate social media in their daily lives using ethnographic methods, surveys, and ethnographic videos.

### ALTO HOSPICIO

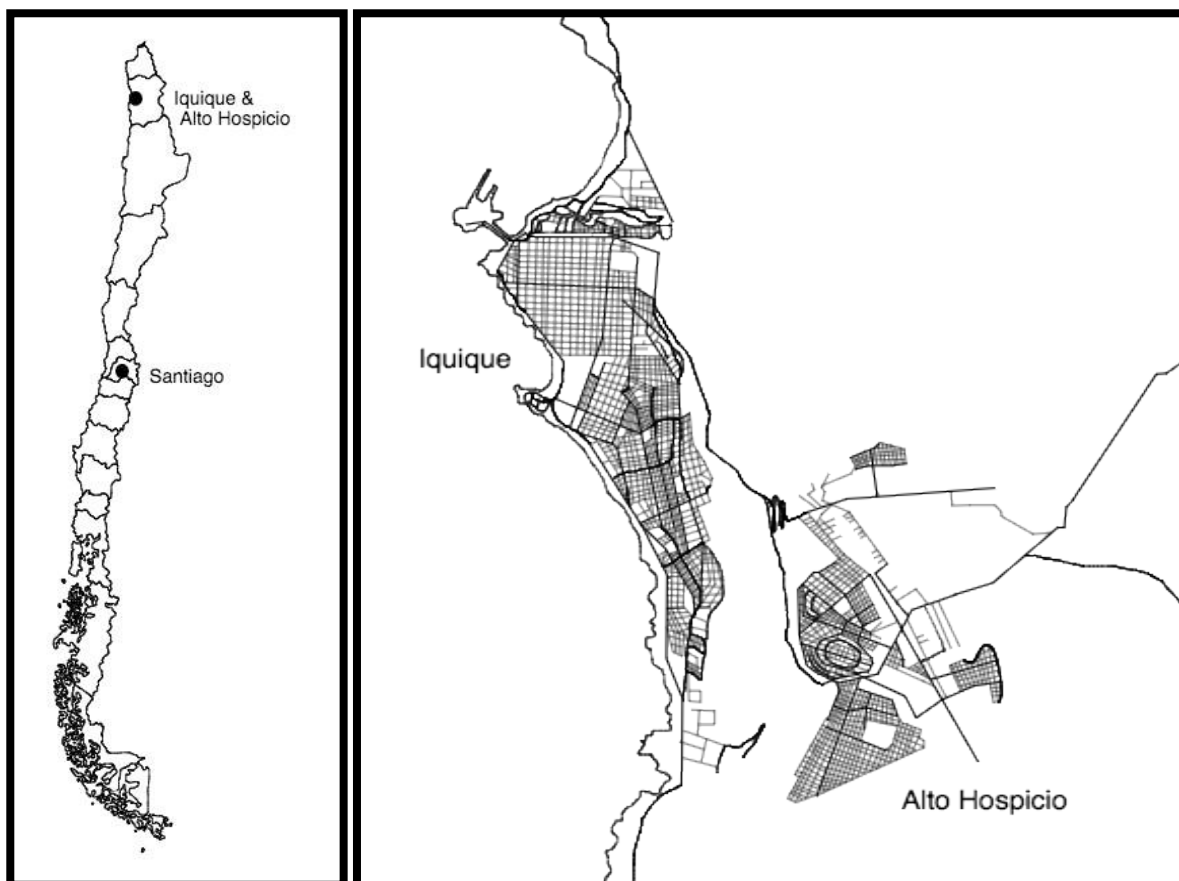
Alto Hospicio is a city of 100,000 people in the Great North of Chile. It rests atop a large sand dune overlooking Iquique and the Pacific Ocean. Alto Hospicio has a reputation for being a dangerous and inhospitable city. In April of 2014 the Index of Quality of Urban Life [Índice de Calidad de Vida Urbana] ranked Alto Hospicio as the worst city in Chile, taking into account business climate, work outlook, cultural conditions, transportation and connectivity, health, environment, and housing.



"Alto Hospicio ranked last in Quality of Urban Life"

Hospiceños (residents of Alto Hospicio) consider the city to be marginal and disenfranchised. They usually understand their position within the country as one of exploitation with the resources of the north—such as copper, and earlier nitrate—developed by large businesses that benefit international entrepreneurs, those in Santiago, and the government of Chile, but not the people or communities of the north.

Yet, those resources provide a grand quantity of work in the north and are the reason that Alto Hospicio continues to grow. The area was uninhabited for the most part until the 1950s when people began to establish a few agricultural lands there. But with the growth of importation and mining in the 1980s and 1990s, Iquique—with geographic space constraints—could no longer support more inhabitants, and new migrants along with inhabitants of “undesirable” neighborhoods were sent to the newly forming neighborhoods of Alto Hospicio. In 1992, Alto Hospicio had 9,000 residents, but by 2013 the population was almost 100,000. In addition to people moving from Iquique, many Southern Chileans, people from Santiago, as well as Bolivian, Peruvians, and Colombians arrived in Alto Hospicio in large numbers.



Maps based on figures licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 license.

## NORMATIVITY

Though Alto Hospicio has 100,000 residents and continues growing, it feels like a small city that just keeps sprawling. The commercial center of the city is small, taking up about 3 blocks, housing the municipal government, a cultural center, 5 banks, 2 pharmacies, 2 supermarkets, and a whole street of barber shops. The central plaza takes up half a city block and boasts almost the only grass and trees in the city, as well as playground equipment for children. The only large businesses outside of the center are 3 more supermarkets and a home improvement store owned by Home Depot. All of the restaurants are family owned, and until the final month of my fieldwork the city had only one bar. There are no department stores, movie theater, or other type of entertainment business. In all of the neighborhoods outside of the center, the only businesses are family owned corner stores.



View of the center of Alto Hospicio from the hill of La Tortuga neighborhood

The landscape of Alto Hospicio is not only covered in a thin layer of sandy dust, but is homogenous in other ways. And while residents have their individual differences, they belong to the scene. Almost all of the houses look like Lego blocks stacked two high and people's clothing is very casual consisting of shorts of blue jeans and t-shirts, usually bought used from the local Agro-market. But normativity extends beyond aesthetics. Individuals' ambitions almost never overcome the normal. The majority of young people expect to finish high school, maybe study for a technical degree, look for a job, look for a partner, and have children. They may think about leaving their parents'

homes, but there is no rush and it is common to encounter couples with growing children still living with their parents/in-laws. They look forward to buying a car or a nice video game system, and they relax by watching cable tv on a large screen television in the evenings while chatting with friends on a Samsung smart phone. Few speak of moving to another city or even to Iquique. Most consider themselves to be in the bottom half of Chileans economically, but not in the bottom quarter. They see themselves as disadvantaged, but not necessarily poor, and with simple expectations for a comfortable life. But to exceed this expectations or present oneself as such invites gossip, judgment, and suspicion from neighbors. People with large houses are suspected of being narc-traffickers, while others are thought to be foolish for spending too much on clothing, jewelry, or unnecessary furniture. In essence, there is strong pressure to conform to a normativity based in being unassuming.



“Lego block” homes in Alto Hospicio



Used clothing for sale in the Agro-market

Not all Hospiceños would have said that they hoped to fit in to the normative standards of the city. Instead, they followed the norms implicitly (Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* 1977, p 29). Their knowledge of local social norms was built up through experience, rather than explicitly taught, and those behaviors seemed natural. Those learned behaviors, naturalized through repetition, became mental schemata of common sense (Bourdieu, *Structures and the Habitus*, 2006). These unwritten but well known rules for social behavior made up what might be considered “social scripts” (Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 1982, p 122), which most people, reproduced in the way they presented themselves in every-day life (Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 1959). While Hospiceños expressed individual preferences, styles and opinions, they situated themselves within the normativity of Alto Hospicio.

Social media provided an ideal medium for these types of self-expression, because they made them visible to other Hospiceños. While individuals did not necessarily consciously think of these acts as presentations, they were actively making choices about how they wanted to present themselves. In essence, social media provided a stage for performing the self. Because social media provided a semi-public stage for these performances of the self, they also helped to establish and redefine what was normative.

## SOCIAL MEDIA

Like most people in the world today, Hospiceños are connected to social media which express the hastening spread of people, consumer products, and ideas within the contemporary world. Whereas individuals were once bound physically to their location, and figuratively to traditional social groups such as the family, local organizations, and workplace colleagues, social media provide access to forms of communication that stretch well beyond these once-constraining factors. As such individuals may refashion their self-expressions and imagine new possibilities for their lives through a practice of fantasy, (Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 1996, p 54) often centered on cosmopolitanism. This does not necessarily diminish differences but allows for a proliferation of ways of imagining (Schein, “Of Cargo and Satellites” 1999, p 361).

Yet, Hospiceños did not use social media to perform in new ways, incorporating distinct aesthetic styles or imagining new possibilities for their lives. Instead their posting on social media reflected the normativity in which they lived their daily lives. I will use the examples of social media photography and memes here to illustrate this point. Further, because normativity is at times invisible, particularly when taking an emic view, I use comparisons with other fieldsites in the Global Social Media Impact Study as well as social media users in Iquique and Santiago so that the normativity evident in social media posts by Hospiceños stands in stark relief.

## PHOTOS

Typical selfies in Alto Hospicio, even for young people, are usually taken in their home or a friend's, at work, or during a brief outing to Iquique or the centre of Alto Hospicio, and do not give the sense of much glamour.



Two typical selfies of young Hospiceños

While both of these examples are clearly posed and the subjects hoped to look their best, it is clear that the amount of effort and staging put into the photos is minimal. The man on the left is posed on a street corner on a typical neighborhood street in Alto Hospicio. He turns to look at the camera, and flashes a “peace sign”. The woman is clearly wearing makeup and has positioned her hair so that it appears in the frame of the photo, yet the camera dominates the image. Neither show off especially nice clothing in the photos. Neither chose a background that was particularly noteworthy.

Others selfies take on a more playful and casual look. These photos tend to humorously talk back to the well-known stereotype of the selfie as narcissistic. Such photos are popular among Hospiceños, perhaps precisely because expending energy (whether mental or physical) to compose a good-looking photo is simply not within the common repertoire. Yet such a manner of being informal and spontaneous is just as standardized as the formal poses with which they contrasted.



Young Hospiceños take a selfie with goofy faces

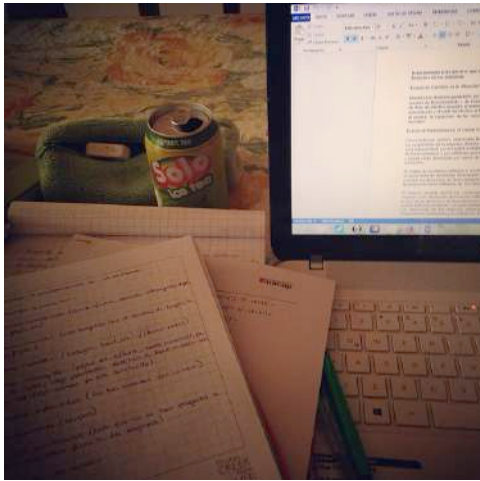
Another popular way individuals talk back to the formality of the posed selfie is the footie photo, or “footie.” These photographers are almost always in a lounging position while watching television or playing a video game. Not only does this give the viewer a sense of the mundane life that they wished to capture, but also of the fact it simply is not necessary to pose. The “footie” is so casual that the photographer doesn’t even have to move from their resting position to pose. The picture can be taken with minimal movement by simply angling the smart phone, already in hand, and snapping a photo without even pausing the television show or video game.



“Footies”

Teens and young adults were those who most often posted several pictures a day, usually of mundane items like new gym shoes, breakfast, their freshly washed car, “selfies” while at school or work, and photo collages made with another app. These photos gave a sense of the everyday monotony of life. Photo taking and posting often seem to be strategies for passing time while bored, and indeed the photos often

included hashtags such as #bored #aburrido or #fome. A few photos even expressed the ultimate boredom: waiting in line while running errands.



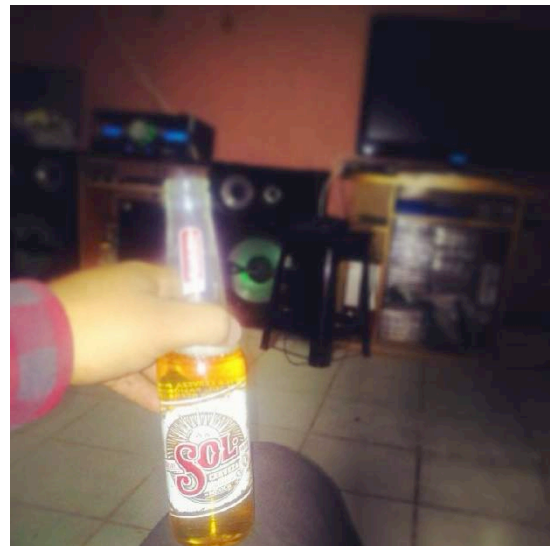
Work photos



"Waiting in line to pay my bill #instabored #instafome"

Even when pictures depicted items or events considered to be “fun” or part of “enjoying life” photos were taken with minimal effort and staging. People did not appear to pay much attention to their appearances, aside from the now almost universally understood symbolic modes of demonstrating “a good time”—tongues out, burlesqued smiles, and hand signs. They did not arrange their clothing or their bodies in particular ways other than to make sure their faces were visible and fit within the frame. And often, people did not even appear in the photograph. Simply depicting the food or drink served as

symbolic of a good time, so that the human enjoyment was implied through the material objects.



Photos depicting Hospiceños enjoying life

Each of the pictures I have shown here were first posted to Instagram, which in many places is often associated with overt curation of images. The Instagram app was developed in order to visually enhance photos, allowing users to crop them into squares and choose “filters” which change the contrast, color tone, saturation, and focus of the photos. What results is often something that looks like an over- or under-exposed Polaroid picture. For many users worldwide, this is the appeal of Instagram—turning the ordinary into the beautiful. It allows for the curation of a set of photos that displays the artistic sensibilities of the user, the beautiful places they have visited, their stylized selfies, and their clever eye for finding interesting compositions among life’s ordinary moments. For contrast I display here two Instagram photos by users from Santiago, which both present subjects that are widely considered “beautiful” subjects for art, (Dutton, Aesthetic Universals, 2002) as well as use filters to enhance their appearance.



Instagram photos from a user in Santiago

The use of Instagram by many individuals in Santiago also reflects Daniel Miller's findings in an English village of how people use Instagram. Miller writes that in contrast to Facebook, Instagram reflects a more explicit concentration on result of photography rather than the action of taking a picture. The measure of a good Instagram photo was not the most impressive subjects, but rather photographers and viewers alike expressed a preference for "the best crafted images" which combined both the photographer's eye for an interesting subject, and their skillful use of composition and filters for an aesthetically pleasing final product.

The Instagram photos here from Alto Hospicio contrasted to these ideals in almost every possible way. They did not feature subjects such as artistic works, well-presented restaurant food, beautifully decorated spaces, or stylish fashion. Yet, the contrasts were apparent even when Instagram users from Santiago portrayed the "mundane" subjects of feet, work, their breakfast at home, or the neighborhood. Rather than the picture simply portraying the mundane subject, these users often composed the photos and used filters to give them an artistic feel in an effort to elevate the mundane.



"Mundane" items as subjects of Instagram accounts from Santiago and Iquique photos

My point here is not that photographers in Santiago or the English village were qualitatively better than those in Alto Hospicio, but that their aims were different. Users in Santiago more closely followed common ideals of curation while Instagram and Facebook users in Alto Hospicio presented visual materials that corresponded more closely to an unedited view of daily life. Indeed, these pictures seemed perfectly normal, “natural,” and well placed on social media. These were pictures of normal life. It was clear that these photographs on social media were consistent with the way Hospiceños saw offline life. In homes, clothing, and these photographs Hospiceños privileged an aesthetic that corresponded to the normativity of their everyday lives. Yet when contrasted with users in other places, it was clear that these photographs were not unedited. They were styled in a meaningful aesthetic, rather than an absence of aesthetic. Hospiceños, in their material goods and social media were curating a particular unassuming aesthetic.

Even in Northeast Brazil, Spyer gives the example of a young man who borrowed from friends an expensive smartphone and brand name clothing to take a selfie that he then posted on his Facebook page. For this young man, consciously presenting himself with recognizably stylish (and somewhat high priced) clothing, as well as taking the selfie in a mirror so that the top of the line smart phone was visible were conscious acts carried out to present a certain kind of lifestyle.

This young man’s brand conscious social media presentation, as well as the importance of aesthetics in Instagram photos from England and Santiago reflect the curation of a certain “lifestyle” aesthetic. Hospiceños aimed at an entirely different mode of presentation. In Alto Hospicio, the selfie was neither in service of a consciously crafted lifestyle, nor reserved for only the most “beautiful” human specimens. Instead, selfies, like most other forms of social media photographs, simply provided a view into individuals’ daily lives. Yet to say that they were without aesthetics misinterprets the photographers’ intentions. These photographs were precise examples of the aesthetic that corresponded to the particular form of normativity that was most prevalent in Alto Hospicio. Looking at other forms of posting on Instagram and Facebook reveal exactly how.

## MEMES

While most residents considered Alto Hospicio to be a marginal place, many families are actually of quite comfortable means—they have several wage earners to support the family and are able to afford such luxuries as the latest electronics, private vehicles, at least one mobile phone for each family member, and can spend extra earnings on entertainment activities. Yet they would have considered it distasteful to present themselves as wealthy. Instead, solidarity in the sense of being economically disadvantaged allowed them to perpetuate the social scripts of normativity to which they were accustomed. They simply saw nothing wrong with highlighting certain kinds of economic problems while most people felt it was inappropriate to use social media to show off wealth that strayed from the norm.



Meme featuring Tony Stark, *Ironman* Character.

Hospiceños quite readily admitted to their material shortcomings, often approaching the subject in a joking manner. It was not unusual to see public notices on Facebook that announced “Friends, I will not have internet for the next two weeks. If you need me call my sister’s mobile phone or come see me at work.” But even more often, Hospiceños used memes to express their inability to pay.

But being without money had wider implications for social media. As Eduardo explained, “Social media are very different if you have money. For instance, now, when I’m poor I have two options. Before my Internet is shut off [from my mobile phone] I can say to the world that I’m poor and hope that someone will invite me out and buy me a drink. If I’m poor without Internet I’m just disconnected and have to find something else for entertainment. But when I have money, I go out, I go to parties, I take pictures and put them online. I can be like Tony Stark rich, eccentric, and post pictures that prove it all on Facebook.” He then showed me this meme saying, “That just pretty much sums it up. Sometimes you have money, sometimes you don’t.”

Rather than being stigmatized, these lapses in Internet access fit seamlessly into other forms of expressing a disadvantaged economic and social class. Poverty was even its own genre of humour on social media. When the iPhone 6 became available many popular memes circulated reflecting on its unobtainability. One joke lamented the feeling of the new iPhone bend while in the front pocket, only to remember that it was not an iPhone but a Pop Tart. Another expressed excitement “I am so happy the iPhone 6 has come out! Now I can afford to buy an iPhone 4 second hand!”

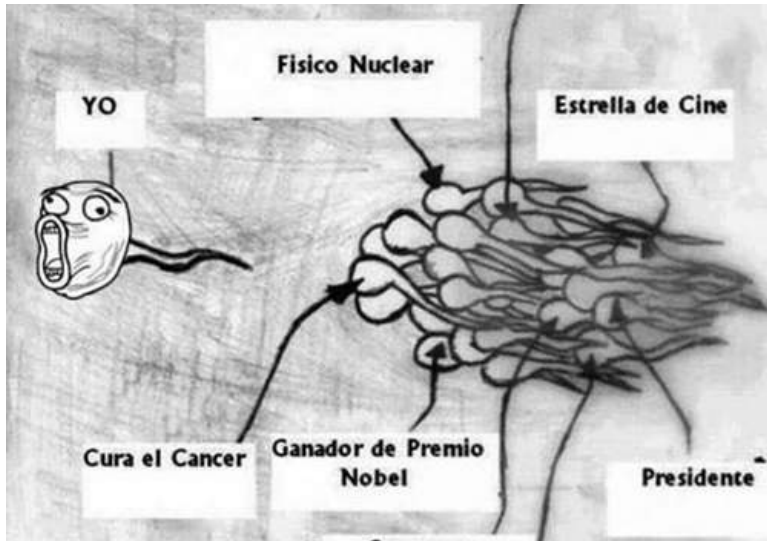


"It's great that the iPhone 6 is coming out. With that the iPhone 5 will go down in price and I can buy an iPhone 4"

I felt my iPhone 6 bend in my pocket!! Then I realized it was just a Poptart and I don't have an iPhone 6.



Another common genre of meme shared on Facebook was success or a luxury lifestyle framed through humorous exaggeration. One such example was the meme picturing Tony Stark, in which payday was presented as a moment of luxury in an otherwise meager existence. By contrasting themselves to representations of success in a humorous context, Hospiceños actively aligned themselves with normativity through self-deprecation.



Line 1: Me, Nuclear Physicist, Movie Star  
 Line 2: Cure for cancer, Nobel prize winner, president



Expected  
 Reality



“Being ugly and poor has its advantages, when they fall in love with you, they do it from the heart.”

This second meme in particular highlights positive aspects of normativity, and devalues that which is usually idealized. Acceptance or even pride in a mundane life was especially apparent from a certain style of meme that overwhelmed Facebook in October of 2014. These “Rana René” (Kermit the Frog, in English) memes expressed a sense of abandoned aspirations. In these memes, the frog expressed desire for something—a better physique, nicer material goods, a better family- or love-life—but concluded that it is unlikely to happen, and that “se me pasa,” “I get over it.”



"Sometimes I want to quit working. Then I remember that I don't have anyone to support me, and I get over it."



Sometimes I think about fixing my motor. Then I remember that I only have enough to change the oil and I get over it.



Sometimes I have the urge to break my diet. Then I remember that I never started and I get over it.

Education is another theme that emerges in posts where Hospiceños identify with limited ambition. Most young people in Alto Hospicio finish high school (*colegio*), and many begin studies at local universities but only a few finish. Many studied for technical degrees while others eschewed advanced education and went directly into the workforce, so that they could begin contributing to the family income or support their

own new families immediately. These expectations endowed university education with a sense of distinction (Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 1984) that was equally admired and seen as superfluous. Because this treatment of education was common and reflected the limited ambitions of Hospiceño normativity, it became excellent fodder for humor on social media.



Here lies my desire to study

Humorous memes were important to Hospiceños because joking represented a safe, and obviously popular way for people to express their comfort with the normative lives they had chosen. Rather than expressing disappointment or regret that they had not aspired to more, they reaffirmed to themselves and those like them that their choice to remain within the bounds of normativity were acceptable or valuable as well. These jokes also allowed individuals to articulate desires to go beyond the norm, many of which were not easily obtainable, while simultaneously assuring others that they realized it was not obtainable, acceptable, or valued, thus reinforcing the normativity whether they felt constrained or comforted by it.

Further, the visual elements of these types of humor reinforced normativity by relying on recirculated images that were almost by definition accessible to everyone. The memes did not express originality of the individuals who posted them, but they were expressions of creativity in that by aggregating various humorous memes on certain topics, social media users curated funny Facebook walls, Instagram feeds, Whatsapp groups, and Tumblr feeds. This meant that even when memes expressed desires that seemingly went beyond the norm, they were still tied to some sort of collective desire, as the product of someone else's making. Images then, both worked as short hand, and as a further normalizing aspect of social media usage.

## CONCLUSION: ACTUALLY EXISTING NORMATIVITIES

Overall, both the content of what was expressed by Hospiceños on social media and the specific forms through which it was expressed adhere to strict yet unwritten social rules of normativity. While memes often worked to express these constraints, articulating them in humorous ways in order to provide “gentle suggestions” rather than outright commandments for these social rules, original photos present visual representations of the normative daily life as an example to be followed. These constraints became even more apparent when placed in contrast to the social scripts prevalent in other contexts.

In many ways, the Global Social Media Impact Study in South China is similar to Alto Hospicio. The major industry is manufacturing, and tens of thousands of factory workers have migrated from other regions of the country. Similar to Hospiceños, many residents report the work opportunities attracted them to the city, but they do not particularly envision the city as their ideal home. Given these parallels between the two sites, one might expect their social media usage to reflect similar sorts of normativity. Indeed, I began thinking about the possibility of these parallels upon seeing a photo of one of the factory workers that to me appeared incredibly similar to an Instagram photo a young man in Alto Hospicio had recently posted.

Both photos portray a young man wearing a hard hat and coveralls in his workplace, surrounded by heavy machinery. Yet there is a profound qualitative difference between the two. The photo of the Hospiceño was a selfie, and he deemed it worthy of posting on his Instagram feed. By contrast, the Chinese photo was taken by an anthropologist, and was not posted by her informant online. Instead of images from his daily life, his social media profile was filled with “cool and modern” photos that represented the type of life he hopes to project to his social media audience: cool cars, attractive women, popular music, and nice clothing.

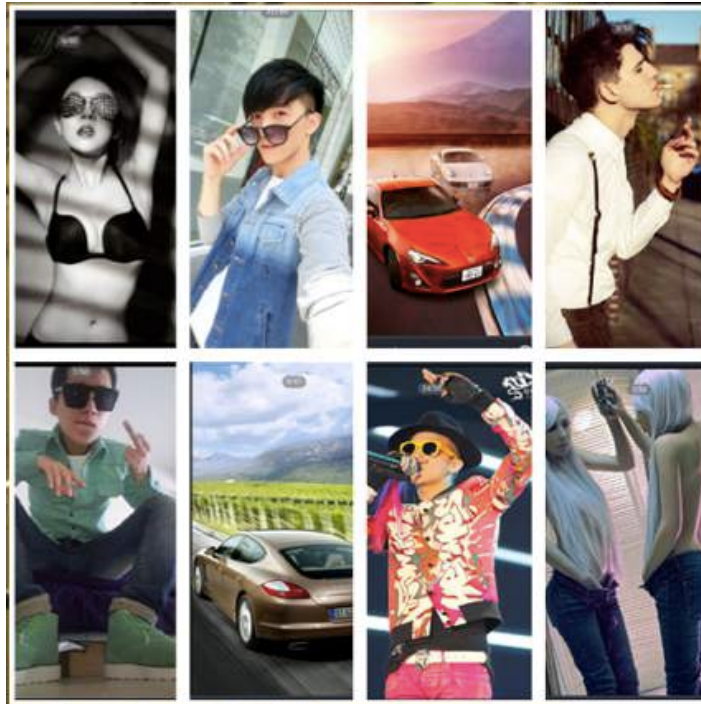


Chinese factory worker

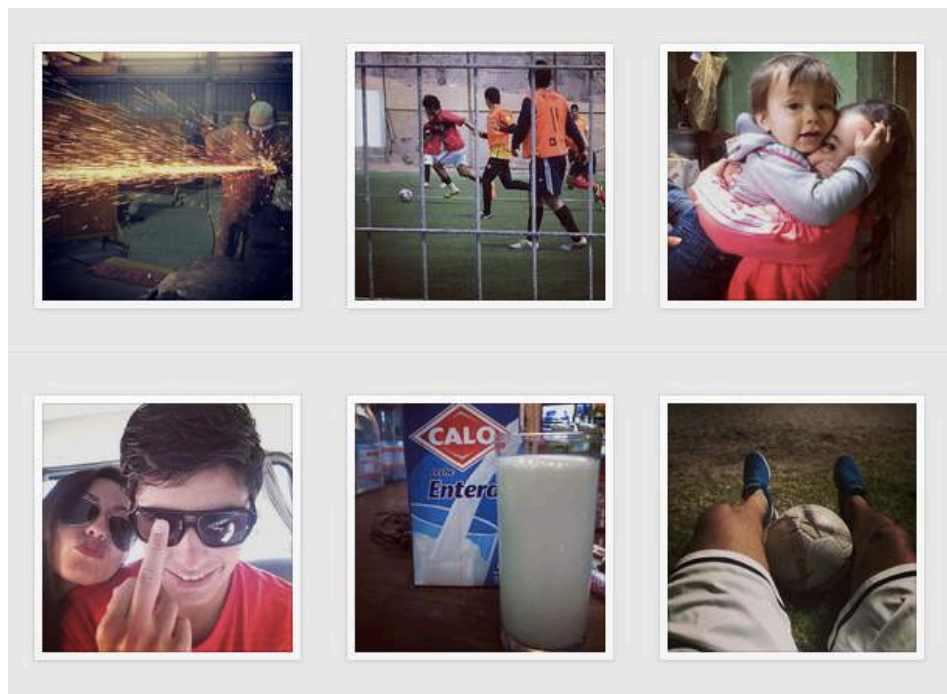


Hospiceño miner

There was a sense that this factory worker was actively curating a styled representation of himself while the young miner from Alto Hospicio simply presents his daily life. A selection of his Instagram feed includes a photo from work (welding), a football game, his two daughters, a goofy selfie with his girlfriend, a glass of milk, and a “footie” with a football.



Images from Chinese factory worker's QQ social network page



Images from Hospiceño miner's Instagram account

While both sets of images would be considered “normative” in their respective contexts, the conception of normativity in Alto Hospicio eschewed the ambition, fantasy, and concentration on aesthetic style exhibited in South China, and instead focused on the banality of daily life. Rather than social media representing aspirations for an imagined future that correspond to images presented in television, magazines, or even lifestyles blogs, Hospiceños represented themselves online much as they did in their daily life. With clothing, homes, and public spaces that were unassuming, it was no surprise that the aesthetics of normativity visible on the streets of Alto Hospicio were also visible on the walls of Hospiceños’ Facebook accounts. . In that sense, social media is an extension of daily life, rather than a contrast.

*This paper was given at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Antropología on 7 May 2015 in Santiago de Chile.*

*Many thanks to Daniel Miller, Jair Correa Garamuño, and Jorge Castro Gárete for their help with the development of this paper.*

## REFERENCES

Arjun Appadurai. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. trans. by Richard Nice. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. trans. Richard Nice (New York: Routledge. 1984).

Pierre Bourdieu, “Structures and the Habitus,” in *Anthropology in Theory: Issues in Epistemology* eds. Henrietta L. Moore and Todd Sanders (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006).

Denis Dutton, “Aesthetic Universals” in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, eds Berys Gaut and Dominic Mclver Lopes (New York: Routledge, 2002).

Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1959).

Louisa Schein. “Of Cargo and Satellites: Imagined Cosmopolitanism,” *Postcolonial Studies* 2 no. 3(1999): 345-375.

Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982).