

Sports, Fashion, and the Color Yellow

A Study of Self Expression in Peru

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### INTRODUCTION

Whether we know it or not, self expression is all around us and at the forefront of our daily lives. In modern America, self expression is so prominent and diverse considering all of our different social and cultural groups. If you pay attention you can see people of all religions with fish bumper stickers on their cars and some wearing cross jewelry, social justice groups being loud and proud by marching in LGBT+ pride parades and participating in Black Lives Matter protests, and even at sporting events when professional football players and passionate fans kneel during the national anthem. Individuals living in America have the opportunity to be their authentic selves, even with the barriers of racial, gender, and class differences.

I chose to research the different modes of self expression between the touristy coastal town of Huanchaco, Peru and the more traditional mountain town of Julcan. I wanted to explore deeper into something so seemingly mundane and see if there are underlying reasons for the way people express themselves. Starting this project, my original research question was “do modes of self expression differ between males and females in the towns of Huanchaco and Julcan?”. After about a week in the field however, I decided to change my research question to “what are the different modes of self expression in Huanchaco and Julcan, and how do they compare and contrast between the two towns?”. Although, I did decide to add how both gender and class

effects the ways in which people choose to and are allowed to express themselves as sub focuses of my research.

## BACKGROUND/SITE DESCRIPTION

We spent a majority of our 4 week ethnographic field school in the beautiful coastal town of Huanchaco. Huanchaco is a place rich with a unique culture and a history all its own, inhabited by an estimated population of about 66,600 people in 2015.

<sup>1</sup> Walking around town you'll see a dozen or more hostels that cater to the large amount of tourists, both national and international. With the ancient Chimu civilization of Chan Chan just down the road, bustling festivals complete with handmade gifts and standing fireworks (which the locals call *castillos*), and world class surfing right across the road, it's no wonder Huanchaco is such an attraction. Thanks to the tourism industry and geographic location, Huanchaco seems to be more modern and well off economically than other communities I have seen in Peru, such as the district of Julcan.

Julcan is a poor district nestled in the beautiful green mountains. Its capital city, also called Julcan, sits at an elevation of about 11,000 feet. Being off the beaten path from all major tourist attractions, the entire district welcomes less than 100 tourists annually. Compared to Huanchaco's one dozen hostels and even more hotels, Julcan only has two hostels. Without a large income from tourism, Julcan makes most of its money from agriculture and is actually known as the potato capital of Peru. The people that call this place home are much more traditional and religious compared to those in

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Brinkhoff, "America," Île-de-France (France): Departments, Major Cities & Communes - Population Statistics, Maps, Charts, Weather and Web Information, August 10, 2015, , accessed July 12, 2018, <https://www.citypopulation.de/Peru-Agglo.html?cityid=23027>.

Huanchaco.

## METHODS

I started off my research with a simple free list exercise to create a list of how a few local Peruvians expressed themselves. After completing the free lists, I relied quite heavily on both unobtrusive observation and participant observation in various public locations around Huanchaco and Julcan. I also gathered some additional information from informal conversations with my fellow classmates and researchers which helped to fill in a few gaps in my research. Observing gave me a lot of information and helped me scratch the surface of how people express themselves, but these informal conversations helped uncover the reasons why.

### Free Listing

I decided to start my research on self expression by conducting a free list exercise. I chose to do this simply because my idea of self expression, as a young woman from the United States, could have possibly been the polar opposite of a local Peruvian resident's idea of self expression. My original free list question was "what are the ways you express yourself?", which, utilizing Google Translate, led me to ask "cuales son las formas en que te expresas". I walked around town and asked three different vendors- two middle aged women and one young man- though all of them gave me a confused look and asked for me to elaborate. I then started listing ways in which one might express themselves; *musica*/music, *bailar*/to dance, *joyeria*/jewelry, etc. My free

list exercise resulted in three separate lists of those people's hobbies and what they like to do, which fits perfectly into the category of self expression. The informants listed activities such as cooking, making jewelry, playing with their children, cooking, and even reading. I then added on what I considered to be self expression (street art, soccer, singing, etc), to create a diverse list of the different modes of self expression.

### Unobtrusive & Participant Observation

A large majority of my research was carried out through unobtrusive observation. My unobtrusive observations included walks around both Huanchaco and Julcan to take note of house colors, photographing street art, going to markets to analyze the jewelry and other items being sold, observing in a kitchen, and watching soccer games. I found the unobtrusive observations to be quite fun, it allowed me to carry out my research in my day to day routine, taking time to snap pictures and make mental notes of events to write about them later. I found it was best to write my observation down later, especially in Julcan. As soon as I would sit down and start writing I would be surrounded by multiple kids asking questions, the occasional teenage boy asking for a selfie, and could feel the stares of the adults sitting around me.

*My observation has been interrupted multiple times so far. By kids and adults standing in front of me, just staring. People crouching around me to see what I'm writing. A young man who wanted a picture with me, and a young mother who handed me her baby and snapped a picture...As I am writing four kids are huddled around me. Looking*

*over my shoulder and sniffing in my ear as they try to see what I'm writing. They're very curious and have no personal bubble. (Fieldnotes, 24 June 2018)*

Figure 1: A Young Mother Taking a Photo of Her Baby and I

Photo Taken by Luc Meyer

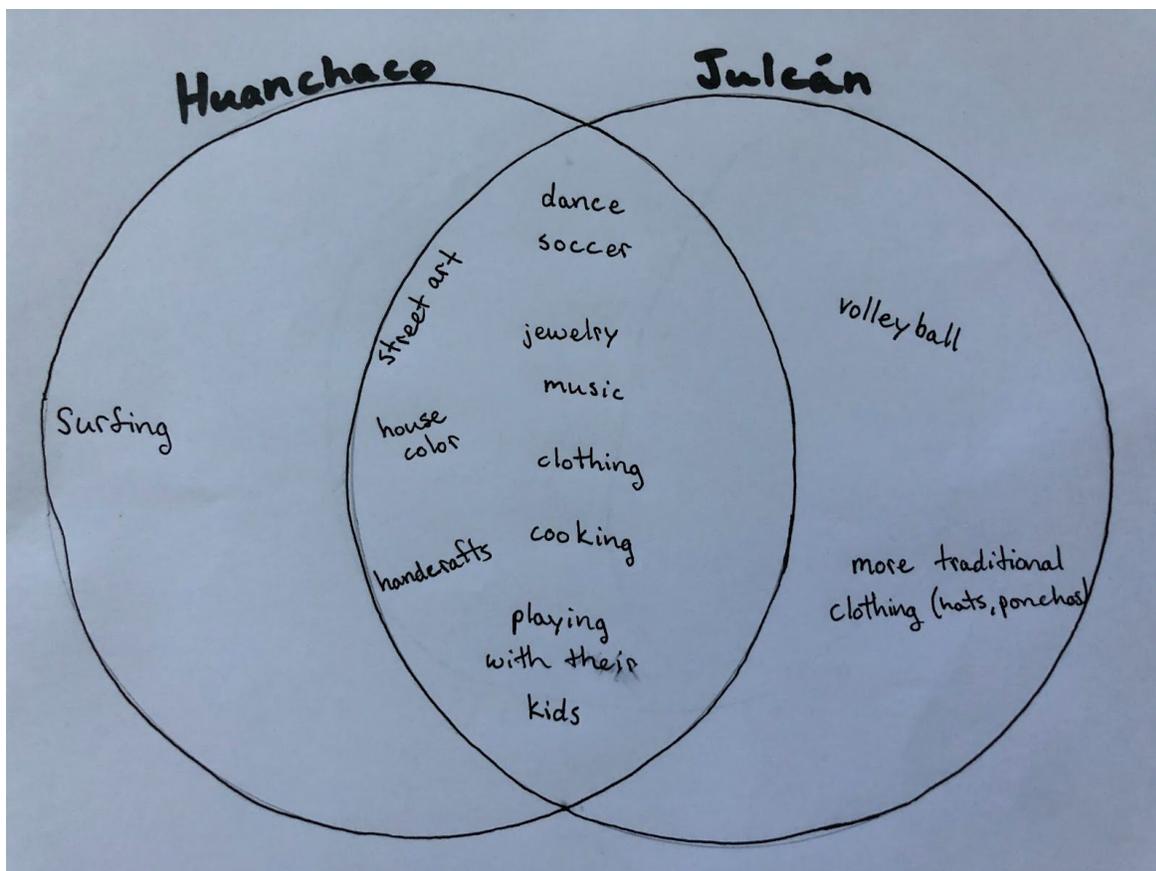


While most of my research was completed through unobtrusive observation, I also conducted research through some participant observation, as well. In Huanchaco, I took a surfing lesson and I participated in a 5v5 soccer game against local Peruvian boys. In Julcan I interacted with lots of little kids and even played volleyball with a group of young girls. Some could argue that me buying jewelry and blankets from the local markets could also be a form of participant observation.

## DATA/RESULTS

Below is a venn diagram of some of the different modes of self expression in the towns of Huanchaco and Julcan. As you can see, a majority of the modes of self expression land in the middle, being used in both towns. Although the modes listed in the middle of the venn diagram may be similar, the ways in which people in both towns utilize these modes vary due to different factors: status and class, gender, and whether the community is more traditional or modern/developed.

Figure 2: Venn Diagram of the Modes of Self Expression



Status/Class

To me, the most obvious indicator of how status and class affect self expression was what sport an individual was participating in. Almost anyone from any financial background can play soccer, but not everyone is financially able to surf. Some of those who want to learn cannot afford to buy their own surfboard so they must resort to occasionally borrowing someone else's. With the entry cost of surfing being so expensive, it's only natural that most young people in Peru flock to soccer when it comes time to start playing sports. The entry cost of soccer is next to nothing, all you need is a ball. You can buy a ball on your own or even lower the cost more by buying a ball with friends. However, I found it fascinating that even within this one sport there were dramatic differences regarding status and class between Huanchaco and Julcan. Below is a short excerpt of my field notes from an unobtrusive observation of the local soccer field.

*Three of the ten players are wearing jerseys of professionals. Maybe they wear these as a status symbol, because they want to support or be like their favorite player, or simply because it was a shirt to wear that day... The fields are quite modern and possibly new. They're made of high-quality looking turf, are surrounded by solar powered spotlights and black nets that don't appear to have any holes in them. With everything appearing so modern and high-quality, I find it surprising that the soccer goals are tattered and falling apart... The boys are quite theatrical when they play. Their faces are either very concentrated when they're on the ball or smiling from ear to ear after a good play. I can hear a lot of laughter and yelling in Spanish. Sometimes two boys will barely*

*run into each other and one flops to the ground, wailing dramatically and clutching their leg as if they were actually injured. (Fieldnotes, 7 June 2018)*

Below is a paragraph of my observations of the soccer field in the capital city of Julcan.

*The soccer field isn't a field in the literal sense. It's more of a huge concrete slab, hard to estimate its exact size. On each end of the field is a rusty metal goal, relatively small in size and with no nets. The concrete soccer field is kept very clean but the little bit of grass surrounding the concrete is littered with trash of all kinds... I've only ever seen one official soccer game being played here, even now only a couple of kids are playing, passing a tattered soccer ball between the two of them near the edge of the concrete. The field is near a main road and only a minute walk from the main plaza, therefore I can infer that soccer is an important part of life in Julcan, but I never see any official games or team practices taking place.*

The previous two passages show the differences of soccer and just how much money plays into sports between two different towns. While there were many differences there were also a lot of similarities of the soccer fields in Huanchaco and Julcan. They were both in a very central location, next to a main road and only a minute walk from the main plaza. From the location alone, I can infer that soccer is an

important part of the culture in these towns, which is no surprise since soccer is the country's most popular sport to date.<sup>2</sup>

## Gender

*Just outside of the capital city of Julcan is a place called Los Angeles. This town is home to a talented group of women who claim to make the best cheese in all of Julcan. I'm not sure what the women call themselves in Spanish, but in English it would loosely translate to "Women for Development"... Upon arrival at the farm, the women made sure we felt welcome. All 13 of them shook my hand, gave me a big smile, and said "buenos dias"... When the president of Women for Development was giving us a tour of their farm and cheese making kitchens, she seemed extremely passionate and excited to share a piece of her life and culture with us. During the tour I noticed that all of the women were dressed modestly and protected from the sun, possibly for warmth, as well. They were covered from head to toe in work clothes: sensible athletic shoes, long pants, a shirt with a jacket over it, and a wide brimmed sun hat. Some of the women's clothes were in tatters and mismatching colors, originally coming across like they don't prioritize appearance or express themselves in that way. However, I can infer that the ladies of Women for Development love to express themselves through accessories. Some of them chose to have lace and pink and floral details on their sun hats. Almost all, all but one, of the women wore beautiful earrings. One woman wore shiny silver studs while the rest donned sparkly dangling earrings with jewels that would sway as they worked around the farm. I*

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<sup>2</sup> "Soccer to Surfing: Peru's Sports Favorites," TripSavvy, May 30, 2018, , accessed July 13, 2018, <https://www.tripsavvy.com/sport-in-peru-1619682>.

*believe that for the Women for Development members wearing the earrings was a way to express their individual personalities and femininity while in a tough career involving consistent physical labor and lots of hard work. (Fieldnotes, 22 June 2018)*

Figure 3: The Women for Development in Front of Their Farmhouse

Photo Taken by Joe Sulik



The Women for Development organization is the perfect example of the relationship between gender and self expression. Here is a group of over a dozen hard working women. Most of their time is spent on the farm by washing clothes, milking cows, and making the best cheese in Julcan. It was great to see a group of busy women in a career of physical labor and dressed in plain work clothes, show a little piece of their personality and express that so openly.

## Traditional v Modern

When it comes to terms of a community being traditional or modern and its influences on self expression, I noticed this factor the most in the way people danced. While in Huanchaco, I went to a hostel with a bar called Frogs Chillhouse Hostel. The demographic at Frogs consisted mostly of young travelers and locals, all mixing together on the dance floor. Everyone danced while holding hands or moving in close proximity with their partner. I also noticed there was a large emphasis on hip movement compared to Julcan.

In Julcan, I danced in the main plaza during one of the festival nights. Only a few brave locals danced with us, the rest stood around us, staring and recording us on their phones. Instead of primarily moving their hips, the people of Julcan tend to focus on smoothly moving their shoulders and their quick footwork. Another popular dance style in Julcan was Peru's national dance; the Marinera. The Marinera dance is believed to have originated in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when the African slaves were brought to Peru and evolved from a popular dance among the slaves called Zamacueca.<sup>3</sup> The Marinera is a traditional partner dance. The man and woman both have a white handkerchief in hand, flirtatiously waving it just out of reach and dancing around the other, but never touching.

I also noticed traditional v modern come into play when it came to clothing and fashion. Huanchaco and Julcan were almost opposites in this category. In Huanchaco I noticed both men and women wearing jewelry, but in the traditional town of Julcan I

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<sup>3</sup> Jesus Ramos, "Dancing the Marinera in Trujillo: Peru's Famous National Dance," Luxury Travel to Peru, Galapagos & Bolivia, December 19, 2016, , accessed July 13, 2018, <https://www.kuodatravel.com/blog/dancing-marinera-trujillo-perus-famous-national-dance/>.

only saw women wearing jewelry. When it comes to clothing, the contrast was even more noticeable. A lot of the clothing in both towns were quite “modern”, similar to what one might wear in the states, but that is where the similarities tend to end. People in Huanchaco, containing a decent amount of surfers and tourists, dressed more casually and showed more skin. I noticed that the average person wore shorts and a short sleeve shirt or tank top. It was winter on the coast so I did see some locals wearing pants and long sleeve shirts, especially those who were working and in uniform.

In Julcan, I only ever saw one person wearing shorts. She was a young girl in the main plaza enjoying the festival on a hot and cloudless day. Since it was festival season I inferred that she wasn't a local, but rather a girl visiting relatives and returning for the festival which is a fairly common occurrence among Peruvians. Julcan fashion was dominated primarily by long pants, long sleeve shirts, and jackets. For the older population of Julcan, I noticed many people wore ponchos to keep warm during the cold mountain nights. During the day I saw many of them wearing the traditional light brown straw hat called the *sombrero de baja*. During the week, the children wore their school uniforms. The younger children were dressed head to toe in yellow and black, the older in light blue and black.

Not only were the young children's school uniforms primarily yellow, but so was the entire school and multiple churches I have seen around Peru. Which made me wonder, what is so special about the color yellow? After some research I found that yellow is a symbolic color when it comes to religion. Yellow is meant to represent light,

hope, and the presence of God.<sup>4</sup> I have never seen more of the color yellow than I have in Julcan and other traditionally religious communities in Peru.

## CONCLUSION

During my observations I noticed that sports were dominated by boys and young men. I only witnessed a few girls playing volleyball once. Do girls not want to play sports like the boys? Or are they simply not able due to gender roles and other expectations? During the end of my research I found myself asking how we could help empower those facing barriers, such as the girls of Peru. Or the lower class of Peru not having an equal opportunity to surf like the upper class do.

The everyday practice of self expression is an essential and unavoidable part of life. We are constantly expressing ourselves with clothing and fashion, body language, and the choices we make. Which is why I believe it is so important for everyone to have the same access to all modes of self expression. No matter your financial background, your gender, or if the community in which you live is traditional or not, everyone should be able to wear clothes that reflect their personalities and participate in activities they are passionate about and much more. When we don't let social constructs and barriers hold people back from being their true selves and living an authentic life, we'll find a much more equal society.

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<sup>4</sup> "The Meaning of Church Colors," The Synoptic Problem: The Literary Relationship of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, , accessed July 13, 2018, <http://www.crivoice.org/symbols/colorsmeaning.html>.