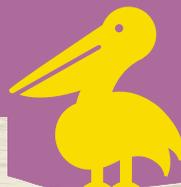
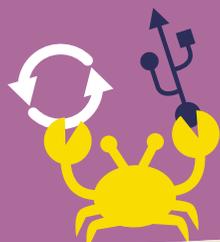
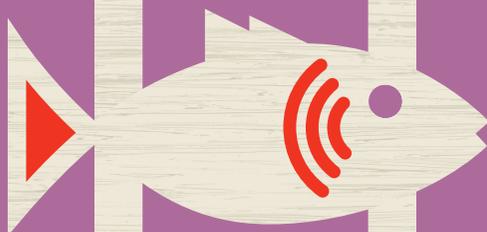


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# Social Media in Trinidad

*Values and Visibility*

Jolynna Sinanan

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'Anti-stush. Dem call we anti-stush.  
Cuz we does wake de party, dem say we from de bush...  
...Just for that they callin we savage. Just for that they callin we  
savage.'

–Bunji Garlin, *Savage*

('Anti-'stush'. They call us anti-'stush'.  
Because we wake the party. They say we're from the bush...  
...Just for that they call us savage. Just for that they call us savage.')



## Introduction to the series Why We Post

This book is one of a series of 11 titles. Nine are monographs devoted to specific field sites (including this one) in Brazil, Chile, China, England, India, Italy, Trinidad and Turkey – these have been published in 2016–17. The series also includes a comparative book about all our findings, *How the World Changed Social Media*, published to accompany this title, and a book which contrasts the visuals that people post on Facebook in the English field site with those on our Trinidadian field site, *Visualising Facebook*.

When we tell people that we have written nine monographs about social media around the world, all using the same chapter headings (apart from Chapter 5), they are concerned about potential repetition. However, if you decide to read several of these books (and we very much hope you do) you will see that this device has been helpful in showing the precise opposite. Each book is as individual and distinct as if it were on an entirely different topic.

This is perhaps our single most important finding. Most studies of the internet and social media are based on research methods that assume we can generalise across different groups. We look at tweets in one place and write about ‘Twitter’. We conduct tests about social media and friendship in one population, and then write on this topic as if friendship means the same thing for all populations. By presenting nine books with the same chapter headings, you can judge for yourselves what kinds of generalisations are, or are not, possible.

Our intention is not to evaluate social media either positively or negatively. The purpose is educational, providing detailed evidence of what social media has become in each place and the local consequences, including local evaluations.

Each book is based on 15 months of research during which mostly the anthropologists lived, worked, and interacted with people, always in the local language. Yet they differ from the dominant tradition of writing social science books. Firstly they do not engage with the academic

literatures on social media. It would be highly repetitive to have the same discussions in all nine books. Instead discussions of these literatures are to be found in our comparative book, *How the World Changed Social Media*. Secondly these monographs are not comparative, which again is the primary function of this other volume. Thirdly, given the immense interest in social media from the general public, we have tried to write in an accessible and open style. This means we have adopted a mode more common in historical writing of keeping all citations and the discussion of all wider academic issues to endnotes.

We hope you enjoy the results and that you will also read our comparative book – and perhaps one or two of the other monographs – in addition to this one.

## Acknowledgements

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This book is dedicated to my family: Bernie, Roy, Fiachra, Scotty and Chloe, and about a quarter of ‘El Mirador’.



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## Introduction and field site: a town that could be anywhere

The initial aim of this book is to provide an in-depth account of uses of social media in Trinidad. Yet this aim is perhaps secondary to another one – that of making a case for how social media in Trinidad contributes further to understanding what it means to be seen in contemporary society. Social media heightens the fields of visibility between the individual self and wider society. As a consequence there is a general anxiety of what appearance, and being judged on appearance, imply about what it means to be human. This in turn raises the question of whether increased visibility has made people more superficial, or whether we are somehow less ‘authentic’ as a result of social media.

These queries will be unpacked and explored through the following ethnography, based in a small town that I have here anonymised as ‘El Mirador’. The findings in this volume would not be applicable to all Trinidadians and certainly not Trinbagonions (people from the islands of Trinidad and Tobago). They pertain primarily to the people whom I encountered in El Mirador, a town that might look like any other in Trinidad. El Mirador is always busy: from the early hours of the morning into the late hours of night, residents of El Mirador are always hustling and bustling, trying to sell or buy something or to accomplish some task. Yet El Mirador is also more diverse than other towns in Trinidad. It is not unusual to see on the same street a large, recently renovated home next to a small brick structure with a corrugated iron roof. El Mirador is a service hub for surrounding areas, but many Trinidadians who live in large cities would consider it ‘the bush’. As one young man from El Mirador joked, ‘a lot of my friends think you jump in a Land Rover and take a safari and then you’ll arrive. It’s not like that. We have cars’.

El Mirador is a place that some people look down on and others look up to. It is in a rural area, but it is the nearest thing to a town in that region. For people in the surrounding villages, it is the place they go to for fashionable stores, restaurants, grocery shopping and government services. There are some whose lives revolve around a small-town existence and others for whom El Mirador represents satellite living for more urban work; the latter thus orientate their social lives towards Trinidad's larger cities. El Mirador epitomises the aspirations of modern life, for people who live in rural areas far from metropolitan centres in Trinidad and the world over. But for those living in the town itself, El Mirador is the country – a quiet, 'rural' area where nothing much happens. Fashionable shopping for them lies in the mall, 45 minutes away, and a night out involves going to the capital city, Port of Spain, an hour and a half's drive (or closer to three hours during peak traffic) from El Mirador.

This ambiguous position of El Mirador, poised between urban and rural, is also expressed in people's hopes and fears. On the one hand, the town's inhabitants want to remain 'traditional' in the face of a world that is moving too fast and changing to such an extent that they feel unable to keep up with it. The gap between how their grandparents lived and how their parents live is sizeable, but the gap between how parents and children now live is larger still. As such, local perspectives reflect what is becoming a global anxiety about a new world – one terribly different from that experienced by previous generations and in which culture and tradition are not as important as they once were. At the same time people in El Mirador want to be distinctly modern and to keep up with dominant trends and changes in lifestyle and technology. They want to be seen as up-to-date and to embrace the opportunities that a future-oriented outlook brings. They want to be more cosmopolitan and more worldly. Yet El Mirador is simultaneously characteristic of Trinidad as a whole insofar as self-presentation is concerned. In fact, self-presentation may be regarded as even more important in El Mirador than in many other parts of the island, as social relations in a small town are more intense.

## Meet the people

This volume builds on the idea that El Mirador is a place 'in between', exploring how a sense of identity based on place is expressed through what residents do with social media. Having lived in the town for

15 months across three years, it seems the best way I can convey some of the bigger conclusions from this research is through the stories of individuals. A large component of this research was constituted by surveys completed by 200 participants; these asked all sorts of questions, designed to begin to uncover patterns and normativities. Yet at the same time anthropology attempts to keep a human perspective. It must therefore be emphasised that the research was informed and made possible only by spending time with real people, through becoming immersed in their lives. The aim of this research is to convey what social media means to individuals who the reader can imagine and hope to understand. Bearing this in mind, we will now meet two of these individuals from El Mirador, Trevor and Sasha.

Trevor has lived in the small 'rural town' for his entire life. Now aged around 60, he still sports the same hairstyle he had at 20, when the Rastafarian movement was at its peak. Since Trevor is of East Indian descent, he does not adopt the typical full dreadlocks, but his grey and white beard hangs long and his hair is piled on top of his head in a top-knot. He drives a worn out brown jeep with a driver's seat and not much else, and works as a farmer, renting small sections of land and cultivating a local leafy plant called *dasheen* (a distant relative of spinach), which he sells in the local market.

Growing up in newly independent Trinidad, Trevor wanted to enroll in university and study sociology, but his parents did not have the resources to commit to his studying full time as a young adult of working age. Trevor has since not only encouraged his own children to pursue education, but has also embraced his personal circumstances, continuing to read and watch documentaries. He does not mix with others in the town who have more professional jobs, instead disappearing for a day or two every so often to lime<sup>1</sup> with his farmer friends who live near the coast. When he is at family events, he debates with his nieces and nephews about current affairs and the contemporary state of politics. But when the debate becomes too heated, he will joke, 'What do I know about it, I am just a farmer, I know about vegetable and ting!'<sup>2</sup> Similarly, when relatives from London visit, he teases his young niece about how 'English English' she is. 'Not "pardon me",' he corrects her mockingly, 'we pronounce it "ehhhh?'" Among relatives of the next generation who have grown up in very different circumstances from Trevor and who embrace being internationally oriented and cosmopolitan, Trevor exaggerates his persona as a simple Trinidadian farmer. By playing with as well as appropriating the stereotype, he also expresses something of the more egalitarian aspect in Trinidadian social values – that of refusing to

be defined by hierarchy and institutions. Through Trevor I encountered other networks in El Mirador whose sense of identity includes a deep regard for country life and for whom being a ‘country person’ is made most visible through daily practices and associations.

When I arrived in El Mirador and began telling people that I was there to work on a book about the town, Trevor was one of the first to volunteer to help. He offered to introduce me to locals and show me around ‘to get all the information’ I would need. In the event this involved driving me past the squatters and temporary housing on the town’s outskirts and up the coast to the fishing villages. The winding roads surrounding the town in all directions took us hours to cover in one day, and I wondered why he was showing me such remote places when I was supposed to be looking at social media in El Mirador itself. The houses in these villages did not look like they had any internet infrastructure and there were no internet cafés. What could I learn about social media out here? ‘What you need to understand about El Mirador is that most of the people you would see in El Mirador, walking and ting, they not from El Mirador,’ he explained. ‘They come here to work, to shop, maybe a little lime, but they don’t live here. This town is the city for them, they come here to do everything they have to do.’ When I asked him if such people used Facebook, his response was clear. ‘Nah! They not into Facebook and all dat. These people, they like a more simpler life.’

After closing his *dasheen* stall in the market one Saturday, at around 11 am, Trevor went to his mother’s house. He set his mobile – a basic Nokia, as battered as his jeep – on the dining table and changed into overalls. He then spent the next two hours in the yard cutting and neatening up the grass. When he came back, he looked at his phone and commented that he had four missed calls. ‘If it’s important, they’ll call back,’ he said, before taking a shower. After this he lay down on the sofa and turned on the 40-inch smart TV; he then went into the online movie repository platform Netflix and selected a 1970s Western. His phone started to alert that it was nearly out of battery, but he did not check it. Trevor then fell asleep and the phone rang a further two times. He stirred as if he had heard it, but again did not get up to check it or answer. When he was ready to leave, a few hours later, he looked at the missed calls and saw that they were from a friend, his wife and a brother, but he still did not call anyone back.

Trevor provides a typical example of what could be called ‘digital resistance’, in which the refusal to use more communications technology, join social media platforms or own a smartphone is a conscious decision. Refusing to follow suit with even one’s closest circles when

they start using these media does not reflect a lack of means. Rather, digital resistance is more about the refusal to adopt technologies that facilitate further communication and interaction because people sense that their lives are already socially saturated. Digital resisters feel they experience ample sociality in their lived relationships; they already have enough expectations, obligations and negotiations with which to contend. The reason they do not 'keep up with the times' or 'get on board' with new communications media is that they would have to negotiate and strategise yet another social arena. They thus tend to have an instinctively conservative response, regarding these new tools and platforms as more mediated than the face-to-face relationships they have been brought up with.

Sasha, meanwhile, owns a cheerfully decorated salon in the middle of El Mirador's busy main street. She is in her mid-thirties and works with her mother Rose and a couple of girls who come in several days a week. Sasha is always fully made-up at work, with very neat, arched eyebrows, colourful eye shadow and a splash of lipstick. She says that Trinidadian women love make-up and colour, because 'it can do so much for a person, it can lift your mood or just show what mood you're in, make you look more interesting – it can just bring out the real you'. Her thoughts on social media are similar – and she should know, having been on different platforms since the time that HiFive was popular, around 2006. Later she used MySpace, but is now on WhatsApp, Skype, Instagram and Facebook; the last is currently the dominant social media platform in Trinidad. Sasha's primary use for Skype is communicating with her best friend, who has lived in New York for the past decade. Before Skype was available they would use phone cards until the credit ran out, often getting cut off when they still had a lot left to say. With Skype, which eliminates the issue of cost, they can talk to each other for hours – and what is more, can show each other what is going on in their lives. Sasha will walk around with her laptop and show her friend this or that new thing she has bought or what she is doing with her house. When they have something serious to discuss, Sasha makes full use of her webcam's visual potential, emphasising a point with hand gesticulations or a stern look to underline how serious her advice is.

Facebook allows Sasha to express a range of experiences and emotions. She often starts the day by sharing a picture or cartoon with a cute or sentimental image, such as teddy bears or puppies, bearing a caption of 'Good Morning!' or 'Have a blessed day!' When in a good mood, she will sometimes share a selfie or photo Rose has taken of her in the salon there and then. Sasha frequently updates her status with 'feeling bored',

'feeling happy' or 'feeling blessed'. When someone has annoyed her, she might post, 'don't you just hate it when...' and indirectly complain about what the person has done. She often shows photos of clients' hair, makeup or nails, though these images are mainly now on Instagram. Using the filters and borders built into Instagram, Sasha can remix and frame her creations before putting them on display.

Sasha is very much the opposite of Trevor in terms of her attitude to social media, even though she has just as much face-to-face social contact as he does. When her salon is quiet, she has more time to browse posts and experiment with different platforms on her tablet and BlackBerry. This is not so much because she wants to be more socially connected to keep up with what her friends are doing, although she does admit to 'macoing', the Trinidadian word for looking into other people's business. Sasha does not see macoing as malicious or for spreading stories; she has herself been the victim of gossip too many times and refuses to become embroiled in other people's issues. Macoing is rather something she does out of boredom, now that her phone and Facebook allow her to maco from a safe distance. For Sasha, certain forms of social media facilitate certain forms of expression, whether these be a few words announcing how she is feeling today or adding filters and frames to a photo of nail art, making her work look more vivid and colourful than the original photo.

If Trevor is an example of a person who embraces egalitarianism and freedom, and whose digital resistance is a rejection of technology to mediate social relations, Sasha is an example of someone who expresses values she sees as important through social media. Macoing, or having one's business scrutinised, can often engender another, equally significant, Trinidadian social idiom: bacchanal. As will be explored in later chapters, bacchanal implies scandal and disorder, yet it also has the potential to uncover the truth of a situation. Both macoing and bacchanal are ways of keeping tabs on people. When someone acts in a socially transgressive way, the consequence of deviating from the norm is to be subjected to gossip and judgement. These values of egalitarianism and bacchanal are also celebrated through Carnival, but come into play principally in everyday life. As such, they are expressed in people's attitudes toward social media.

If Trevor represents the human face of concern about a loss of culture and tradition in El Mirador, Sasha reflects the side of the town that takes up new technologies with the greatest ease and speed as soon as they become affordable. Yet Trevor does not think of himself as particularly conservative, nor does he consider his digital resistance as some kind of political gesture. Similarly Sasha has no specific notion of 'the

modern', nor does she feel she has gained some kind of status through being at the vanguard of these new technologies.

The reason for Trevor and Sasha's contrasting reactions to the rise of social media is, more simply, the way in which it happens to impinge on their personal experiences of sociality. Both Trevor and Sasha are highly sociable. However, for Trevor – and countless others like him in El Mirador – social media represents increased social mediation, structuring social interaction in a more complex form. Small-town life is already saturated with demands to be social. There are big families, obligations and expectations that one should act a certain way, do things for people or be here or there to fulfil some kind of request. Conversations are mainly passed along through the grapevine, as the people involved in an issue, such as a family illness, are rarely together in a big group to discuss the matter at the time. Social media therefore seems likely to exacerbate the potential for information to be relayed inaccurately, with an important element omitted and another aspect exaggerated; as such a sustained effort is required to pin down the facts of a matter through different friends and family.

One key difference between Trevor and Sasha is that the former works alone, farming *dasheen* in the countryside. By contrast, socialising is for Sasha, as for most people who work in hairdressing or beauty parlours, what makes her successful in her work; there is no separation between work and sociality. A gender distinction also comes into play. As women are often the ones who accept both the burdens and pleasures of constant social communication, one more layer or medium can be a blessing. By contrast Trevor shows his masculinity through resistance – a taciturn, laid-back refusal to get too involved in chitchat. He does not need or want any more of this, and is in a position to reject these pressures. Trinidadian culture, and the culture of El Mirador specifically, are constituted by a myriad of individuals: each possesses their particular character, but also holds multiple positions in local society. Consequently there is ample possibility for individuals to express the whole spectrum of El Mirador's response to new social media.

## Visibility: a key to understanding Trinidad

One of the most striking features in reviewing scholarly literature on Trinidad is how often 'visibility' appears.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in conversations with Caribbean scholars, 'visibility' is frequently used to refer to a distinctive aspect of Trinidadian social life; its meaning is thus well understood and

seems to need no further explanation. On this foundation, this book introduces the term ‘social visibility’, with the idea underpinning each chapter. Here I define social visibility not as simply making the self more visible, but as simultaneously drawing attention to social norms around creating visibility. For example, the common critique of the selfie shows that it is easy to take the idea of self-expression to an extreme by making oneself too visible in a socially inappropriate way – that is, by demanding much more attention than is normally acceptable. Social visibility thereby highlights the process through which norms develop around the appropriate way to create visibility and what precise degrees of visibility are seen as acceptable. Because it is inextricable from normativity, social visibility in Trinidad is an important aspect of being seen as a ‘correct’ person, one who embodies the everyday views and values deemed ‘right’ and appropriate.

Social visibility is characteristic of an anthropological perspective concerned with the origins and maintenance of social norms – what in anthropology is called the normative – as opposed to the focus on individual drives found in much of psychology. One anxiety frequently expressed in journalistic accounts is that social media is leading to the loss of a true or authentic self.<sup>4</sup> For the Melanesians who were studied by anthropologists such as Strathern, power lay in making oneself visible to others in the correct manner.<sup>5</sup> An individual failure to look good, for example, would therefore make not just the self, but the group that individual represented look weak. As such, the work involved in making aspects of oneself more visible becomes interlinked with power, affecting a person’s capacity to act in the world. A general problem in considering the importance of appearance is that the concept is in and of itself subject to denigration, as exposed by terms such as superficiality.

One of the main dilemmas relating to social media is that individuals have the means to portray themselves in multiple ways. This ability to craft or curate one’s image destabilises the idea that a person has a consistent core: a ‘truthful’ or ‘real’ self. Yet in societies such as Trinidad, the notion that a person has multiple dimensions or identities has always been acknowledged; it is accepted and expressed in the idea of Carnival as masquerade. This in turn has led scholars to examine how a concern for myriad forms of identity emerged out of specific features in Trinidad’s history.

Understanding the dynamics of Carnival is particularly relevant here. Across its historical transformations, from pre-emancipation resistance to post-independence nationalism and contemporary revelry, scholars have recognised that the festival of Carnival speaks to how people understand themselves through visibility. Here, visibility entails

performance: being seen and being on stage. Although it is clearly a form of masquerade based on costume, the prevailing local conception of Carnival is as a forum – a place to which the individual comes ideally to ‘play yuhself’ or ‘free up’, whether one is seen as ‘oneself’ or as wearing a mask.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, Riggio contends that multiplicity and contradictory intentions are characteristic of Carnival.<sup>7</sup> In previous years costumes symbolised tradition or figures recognisable to Trinidadian society; the sense of freedom and resistance was thus linked to overturning social roles, with lower classes subverting their place through performance. As such, masking or masquerading were used both to conceal and to display identity. Despite the fact that contemporary Carnival looks quite different, many of these class dimensions have remained.

As each chapter in this volume illustrates, social visibility in Trinidad is inextricable from Carnival logic, one that is played out in the use of social media and Facebook in particular. Burton uses the term ‘the Carnival Complex’ to describe the different aspects of everyday Trinidadian cultural and social life that come together to form ‘a nexus of particular intensity’ during the festival period.<sup>8</sup> Seen from the perspective of this study, however, social visibility is not always expressed through participation in Carnival. Given the festival’s dominant role in Trinidadian society, it is also possible for some people in El Mirador to refuse to participate at all in Carnival revelry, making a very conspicuous and very visible statement of their values.

The present-day population of Trinidad has its origins in slavery and indentureship. Initially, as a result, individual identities in the country were entirely imposed by these institutions.<sup>9</sup> Externally at least, a person was supposed to be obedient, deferential and ‘truthful’ based on their role of servitude. Yet, as Riggio contends, this ‘truth’ seen on the surface functioned as a mask, ‘disguising and hiding the personality underneath’.<sup>10</sup> Today, although individuals are categorised in terms of their belonging to a particular class or ethnic group (or both), they also negotiate, resist and subvert these positionings in how they present themselves to others. Forms of expression, for example, extend to consumer goods, through which individuals can craft their own external appearance rather than have it imposed by institutions. However, as a consequence of this, people can now also be judged on the basis of how creatively they construct an external self, building upon Trinidad’s traditions of Carnival and a cultivation of public performance. It is subsequently appearance that is looked to on each and every occasion as a means of judging a person’s true identity:<sup>11</sup> appearance in Trinidad is valued because appearance speaks to a truth of a person.

## Norms of visibility

The rise of social media has itself contributed to a focus on the significance of visual appearances, since a key transformation flowing from the recent ubiquity of social media is that images are now an equally important means of communication as text.<sup>12</sup> As is evidenced by the 750 million photos that are exchanged each day on the platform Snapchat, pictures can be a conversation in themselves. The fact that visual forms of communication now also abound on social media means that groups sharing such images, symbols or emojis evolve shared understandings of what they mean in a given context, as was traditionally the case with language.

The norms of visibility, and of what was regarded as acceptable to post on social media, varied considerably between the field sites in our project. The findings detailed in this volume about social visibility in Trinidad are perhaps illuminated most strikingly through contrast with the way in which social visibility emerges in two other volumes, *Social Media in Southern Italy* and *Social Media in Northern Chile*. Both these texts describe a clear relationship between social visibility and normativity – that is, the normal or correct way of behaving and viewing the world.<sup>13</sup> Nicolescu argues that social media did not at all transform the lives of people in his field site in Grano in Southeast Italy; here social media was simply used in a way that replicated existing traditions and forms of sociality. As Nicolescu concluded, the people of Grano wished to be seen online in a manner that was consistent with how they presented themselves offline. As a result profiles and timelines on Facebook were carefully curated, with individuals highly selective about what they posted and which images they shared and tagged; others chose to post infrequently. Expressing individual views or opinions which differed from these norms was generally not acceptable. Nicolescu explores in further detail how the relationship between conformity and individuality is expressed in aesthetics, drawing on correlating examples of curating the home, public appearances and women's cultivation of beauty. In each these domains, Facebook was used as an extension of space in which to showcase a crafting of aesthetic forms and an adherence to a certain style. Nicolescu concludes that these displays on social media relate to higher values and ideals, as residents of Grano were constantly doing their utmost to prove they were 'good' citizens by showing their shared values, including a shared sense of Italian style. Where it is the responsibility of the citizen to perform stylishness, visibility as being seen by others is thereby deeply intertwined with visuality as displaying images of oneself to others.

By stark contrast, Haynes found in Northern Chile an obligation to remain systematically un-stylish in order to show a sense of contentment within the local community. In 2014 Haynes returned from her first round of field work in Alto Hospicio and described her field site as one of ‘the most boring places’ she had ever visited. All the buildings looked the same and people predominantly dressed the same, in understated jeans and T-shirts. Her initial observations became the basis for one of the most extraordinary insights on the use of social media: that it could be used to show an aesthetic of ordinariness. One of the dominant genres of selfies posted to Instagram by residents there was what she deemed the ‘footie’. Here the individual taking the photo shows just how natural, relaxed and unpretentious they are by photographing themselves on the sofa, not even feeling the need to adjust their posture for appearance. The people of Alto Hospicio saw themselves and their community as marginal, especially as compared to the cosmopolitanism of Santiago, and their place-based identity overrode any other form of marginal identity, such as gender or indigeneity.<sup>14</sup> Hospeceños perform social scripts – unspoken but well understood rules that appear through seemingly natural, mundane acts. They ‘perform’ normativity, and as a result further entrench ideas of community by reproducing their normativities over social media, highlighting a collective sense of marginality rather than emphasising any kind of individual distinction. Viewed together, the findings of Haynes and Nicolescu demonstrate how conforming to and displaying normativity through social media serve as visual extensions of good citizenship, subject to social judgements. They thus reiterate Bharadwaj’s argument that what is made socially visible is also an object of social control and management.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, social visibility in Trinidad is linked to ideas of citizenship – in this case, citizenship of a decolonised and plural society, within a country that has undergone rapid economic change in a short space of time. There is a historical legacy in the country, where governing the self stems from a sustained colonial management of society. More recently, however, rapid economic change has also ushered in an increased array of choices around the kinds of identities individuals aspire to create for themselves. Tensions in this realm are ever-present in the field site of El Mirador, where place-based citizenship also means being poised ‘in between’ an urban centre and a village. As this volume will demonstrate, the results here differ enormously from the field sites of both Southern Italy and Northern Chile.

Simultaneously Carnival has its own legacy as a popular festival that allowed people a sense of freedom in opposition to their historical repression. It also enabled the emergence of the self-cultivated

individual as a means of combatting oppressive tools of institutional conformity. A stark contrast is thus apparent with the cases of Italy, where people promote a collective style in their identification with Italians as 'stylish', and Chile, where they promote an informal conformity to oppose the pretensions of the elite. In Trinidad, it is conformity itself that is opposed, through valorising individual difference in the creation of personal style. As a result, anxieties surrounding the use of social media in Trinidad differ from many other sites. There is far less anxiety around the loss of a true or authentic self in Trinidad than in the US or in the UK, for instance, and the posting of several selfies is not necessarily seen to reflect narcissism or self-centeredness. In the tradition of Carnival, the cultivation of individualised appearance is valued as an appropriate crafting of the self, rather than being perceived as a form of superficiality that detracts from a person's truth. Yet because the idea of individual style is itself a social value, this provides an example of social visibility equivalent to the conformist tendencies of Italy or Chile. As we shall see, however, cultivating individual style in El Mirador is also tied to identification with, and membership of, certain social groups.

## Social media through ethnography in El Mirador

The reason for choosing El Mirador as a field site relates to my overall decision to study social media in Trinidad. In the 1960s my father emigrated to the UK from Trinidad, and I had never spent time in the country. Most of his extended family has remained in Trinidad, including a dispersed range of relatives living in El Mirador. Aside from my family connections, which would naturally ease the transition to life in the town, El Mirador also functions as a sample of wider Trinidad. The population is evenly mixed, comprising 35 per cent of ex-enslaved African descent, 35 per cent of ex-indentured East Indian descent and 30 per cent of mixed or Chinese background (descendants both of Chinese migrants from the 1800s and of 'new wave' Chinese migrants from the 1990s–2000s).

However, income levels in the El Mirador region are among the lowest in Trinidad. The town encompasses various economic statuses, from squatters on its outskirts to families who have owned businesses for at least two generations, and a middle class in between. There are also issues of class and ethnic identity specific to El Mirador, where a substantial number of people are mixed Indo-Afro Trinidadians.<sup>16</sup> Although Trinidad generally has a large mixed population, this could be seen as particularly high in El Mirador.

The field work for this book was carried out over 15 months across three years. My first three months' research in 2011–12 were spent specifically looking at uses of webcams, with social media discussed in more general terms.<sup>17</sup> For six months in 2012–13, and again in 2014, I then focused on social media and everyday life. As in the other nine projects in *Why We Post*, an unexceptional place like El Mirador was deliberately chosen: we did not wish to be guided in our research by the sensationalist stories around social media that dominate popular journalism. Rather, we wanted to see what ordinary people were doing with social media in their everyday lives. Since our intention was to avoid focusing on pristine rural communities or advanced metropolitan regions in favour of places that faced in both directions, we chose large villages or small towns. And as has already become apparent through reference to Trevor and Sasha, a small town of no distinct importance can reflect a wide range of attitudes and experiences in terms of the uses and consequences of social media.

As an ethnographer, it is especially important to spend an entire calendar year in a country such as Trinidad, which alters remarkably from season to season. It is a very different place at Carnival, in high summer, at Christmas and at Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights.<sup>18</sup> There are also different rhythms of life, for instance around work or school holidays. Seasonal patterns too can affect how people work and socialise, for example between the heat of summer and the rainy season (Figs 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3).



**Figs. 1.1** Enjoying a cook-up with the extended family



**Figs. 1.2** 'Liming' at the beach



**Figs. 1.3** Making costumes for Carnival

Reaching the level of intimate knowledge of individuals that is required by ethnography takes a significant amount of time and versatility. During my visits to El Mirador I lived with five different families and in an apartment on my own. I conducted 120 semi-formal interviews, including 30 people interviewed across three years; an in-depth household survey of 100 people; another 100 short questionnaires on uses of social media; a street survey of 100 people on uses of webcams; and a street survey of 50 people on political opinions shared on Facebook. In addition to this extensive gathering of mainly quantitative data, I spent many hours in the homes of close family. Overall I spoke to at least 500 different people in El Mirador about their uses of social media.

Perhaps the most important research tool in an ethnography of social media is being on social media itself, observing and interacting with users of various platforms. This seems a natural progression from the ethnographer's traditional task of simply making friends; moreover, if one gets to know the same people online and offline, it offers an advantage over more formal 'internet' or 'social media' studies.<sup>19</sup> Overall I accumulated 267 Facebook friends and chatted with 38 people on WhatsApp. I initially met all of my Facebook friends face-to-face and more than half became offline friends with whom I would spend time at weekends or after writing and conducting interviews with others. Aside from my extended family, of all the individuals I encountered for this research, I got to know around 60 very well – that is, I visited their homes or met their families, went out socially, spent time at their workplaces or met their colleagues and engaged with them through their vocational interests. These key people informed the qualitative data in my research and I remain immensely grateful to them. With regard to research ethics, all were made aware that they were participants in the research and, as agreed, I have protected their identity by presenting their stories anonymously, such that none can be traced to a recognisable individual.

Generally, as anthropologists writing ethnographic books devoted to our understanding of other people, we try to minimise reference to ourselves. In this text, however, it is necessary to draw in personal matters a little because, unlike in the other *Why We Post* studies, my entire introduction to the town that became my field work site was through family connections. My own family members are already embedded in their individual relationships. Among them are people they like and get along with, as well as those who may not want to spend a great deal of time with them or, by extension, with me. In an effort to compensate for these dynamics, I would often walk around the town on my own and just ask to interview people who may have time then and there, such as shopkeepers and assistants. Some of these in turn gave me an 'in' to visiting and spending more time with other people in the shops they worked in. Through this strategy I managed to speak to shop owners and assistants; hairdressers, nail technicians and beauticians; government workers, who would graciously spend their lunch hour with me and allow me to come back to their offices; restaurant owners and waiting staff; internet café operators and mobile phone salespeople. If I talked with people who worked in small businesses, I could also often speak to their relatives and friends who would spend time in the shop throughout the day. These more informal and unstructured introductions gave

me invaluable insights into people's daily practices, rhythms and routines. Other relationships that started with survey questionnaires also afforded wider and more general coverage of the field site.

Underpinning this research, however, was the ongoing imperative of extracting myself from a mesh of personal and familial relationships. Yet simultaneously these relationships also enabled me to empathise with the experience of people living in a small town. For them, as for me, family inevitably represents both a support in and constraint on everyday life, as whatever one does in Trinidad tends to somehow trickle back to one's family. This ultimately saturates one's relationship to absolutely everything else in a way that can be difficult to convey to people who live in places such as Australia, where I live, or the UK, where family tends to have a much more limited role in an individual's life. When it came to experiences of social media, it was therefore vital to understand both the positive aspects of so many people's concern for family and their negative feelings of claustrophobia. Understanding life in El Mirador through being embedded in extended family relationships also contributed to my understanding more broadly of life in small towns. Here sociality is more intense than in urban areas, as most people tend to know one another (or at least to know of each other's social networks or families by reputation).

At the same time, my own mixed appearance (of Indo-Trinidadian and Chinese heritage), Australian accent and Western education tended to appeal more to middle-class Indo-Trinidadians who identified some sense of shared circumstances and shared aspirations. Many of these were young women, and consequently my first research participants and friends were mostly women. Meeting young male informants was initially problematic for a period because, after sharing my phone number and befriending them on Facebook, some would become intrusive. On the other hand, this was a common and to some extent anticipated dynamic which enabled me to empathise with people's experiences in the town on another level.

I was extremely fortunate to work with two very different research assistants in 2013 and 2014. The first was a young woman from El Mirador who introduced me to the friends and family she grew up with – relationships which then snowballed into friendships of my own. The second was a young Masters student from the UK with Grenadian heritage who wanted to spend some time in the region. His main task was to shoot our short films for the project, but he also made several friends of his own that I would otherwise not have been able to meet. I maintained those relationships after he left for the UK.

## A walking tour of a Trinidadian town

Trinidad is bounded by the Caribbean Sea to the north and the Atlantic Ocean to the east (Fig. 1.4). The country lies just 11 km (approximately 7 miles) from northeastern Venezuela and has a total land area of 4,828 square km (approximately 2,000 square miles). The annual climate is tropical; a wet season of monsoon rains between June and December (with a short dry spell in September and October) is followed by a dry season from January to May. The total population is just over one million people, with 69 per cent living in urban areas.<sup>20</sup>

Trinidad, along with Tobago, was first claimed by the Spanish in 1498 and was later governed by British, French and Dutch colonisers. Ruled by the Spanish government until 1797, but settled mostly by French planters, invited by the Spanish, the two islands were united into a single British colony in 1888. Trinidad was established relatively late as part of the plantation system. Prior to 1776 there were few enslaved Africans on the island and the population was mostly made up of indigenous groups.<sup>21</sup> By 1797, when the British conquered the island, there were 10,000 enslaved Africans, which by 1802 had doubled to a slave population of approximately 20,000. In 1807, when the slave trade was abolished, the British colony with its plantation owners faced a dramatic shortage of labour. On 1 August 1838 full freedom was granted to the enslaved Africans. They



**Fig. 1.4** Map showing location of Trinidad and Tobago

quickly moved away from the plantations and began to settle villages such as Belmont and Laventille (now part of Port of Spain), as well as Arouca in the northeast of the country. Around this time San Fernando, the second largest city in Trinidad, also grew in population as a number of ex-slaves settled there. In response to the shortage of labour, indentured East Indians were brought to the island from 1845, arriving mostly from the provinces of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. By the early twentieth century the newly liberated African slave population and ex-indentured Indians were living in a colony of mixed language, custom and religion. The latent cultural antagonism between these two populations during the colonial administration persists today. It has in fact become central to modern politics, where the two main parties are generally associated with the ex-African and ex-Indian populations respectively.<sup>22</sup>

After the First World War the demands for greater self-government increased. Elections in 1956 saw the formation of the People's National Movement (PNM) led by Dr Eric Williams. Trinidad and Tobago gained national independence from Britain on 31 August 1962 and Williams became the first prime minister, a position he held until his death in 1981. Trinidad has also had some history of political resistance. Before independence the Hosay riots in 1884 saw Muslims claim their rights publicly to celebrate this religious festival, despite being officially prohibited by the British administration. In the Canboulay riots of the same year descendants of ex-enslaved Africans protested against prohibitions on celebrating Carnival. Later a series of worker strikes were mobilised during the labour riots of 1937, and in 1970 the Black Power movement fought to improve the economic conditions of the poor and working classes within the newly independent nation.<sup>23</sup>

Today the country is ruled by the People's National Movement (PNM), with Dr Keith Rowley elected to office in 2015 as the eighth prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago. During my field work the country was led by a coalition consisting of the People's Partnership, made up of the United National Congress (UNC), the Congress of the People (COP), the Tobago Organisation of the People (TOP) and the National Joint Action Committee; Kamla Persad-Bissessar served as Prime Minister and leader of the UNC. Since she assumed office in 2010 the country has seen a drop in serious and violent crime; it had peaked in preceding years, leading to the declaration of a State of Emergency in November 2011 (when I arrived to carry out field work). Fear of violence was therefore a constant theme during my field work of that period. The State of Emergency brought with it an active curfew in most parts of the country as well as an increased police presence. Under Persad-Bissessar

there was also widespread infrastructural development across the country, including the construction of a major highway in the far south and an increase in direct foreign investment. Simultaneously accusations of corruption, nepotism, mismanagement and racism have been levelled at the UNC government, as well as at its predecessors.<sup>24</sup>

There is a substantial amount of poverty in Trinidad, mostly in rural areas and in slums and temporary settlements around Port of Spain. As a result of its oil industry, however, Trinidad is largely a lower-middle class country. The average income per year is USD \$15,000 and the current exchange rate is TT \$6 (Trinidadian dollars) to USD \$1. Petrol costs an average 45c (US) per litre and long-life milk costs around USD \$1.10 per litre. If one decides to eat out, a meal of roti with beef, chicken or goat curry costs around USD \$3–4, while meals in chain restaurants are USD \$10 on average. Tap water is drinkable and education and health-care are largely provided by the state, although private health services are also available.

A number of religions are practised in Trinidad, including Hinduism (around 30 per cent) and Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Pentecostal and Evangelical churches (around 37 per cent). Other religious groups on the island include Muslims, Spiritual Baptists and Seventh Day Adventists. There is an ecumenical sharing of religious holidays as people of all religions celebrate Christmas, Eid-ul-Fitr (the Muslim festival that marks the end of the fasting period of Ramadan) and Diwali. A proportion of the population dedicates up to a month to Carnival and the lead-up party season. In addition to these diverse religious public holidays Indian Arrival Day, Labour Day, Emancipation Day and Independence Day are nationally celebrated holidays.

One thread that appears across the chapters of this book is the importance of family and religious life. Christmas in Trinidad is more than an event commemorating the birth of Christ; it is also a time of the year oriented toward the family and the home, a period of renewal of tradition and establishing roots. Among Hindus and Muslims commemorative prayers throughout the year are held in the home (Fig. 1.5). For Hindus in particular these prayers (*pujas*) are large events. Extended family and friends come to the home throughout the day from early in the morning, requiring a large amount of cooking and preparation to be done beforehand. Even small *pujas* are ceremonious: families dress in traditional Indian attire and a series of prayers led by a pundit lasts from one to four hours. Normally the family will all eat together in the home afterwards, as the hosting family breaks their fast, which they would have carried out in spiritual preparation for the prayers.



**Fig. 1.5** Attending a *puja* (Hindu prayers)

El Mirador is a semi-urban town in an area made up of agricultural and fishing villages. The region consists of the town itself and 43 other villages, with a total population estimated at 75,000; the population of the town proper is around 18,000.<sup>25</sup> Taking the squatters who have migrated to the town's surrounds over the past decade into account, the entire population of El Mirador is around 25,000. There is a main hospital, with a reputation as being one of the best in the country, as well as eight primary schools and six high schools. Two among the latter are Hindu schools, two are Catholic and one is Seventh Day Adventist, yet to attend any given school a student need not follow its particular faith. In 2013 a vocational college opened in the town, part of a government initiative to enable students in the region to pursue higher education if they do not have the means to attend the larger universities further away.

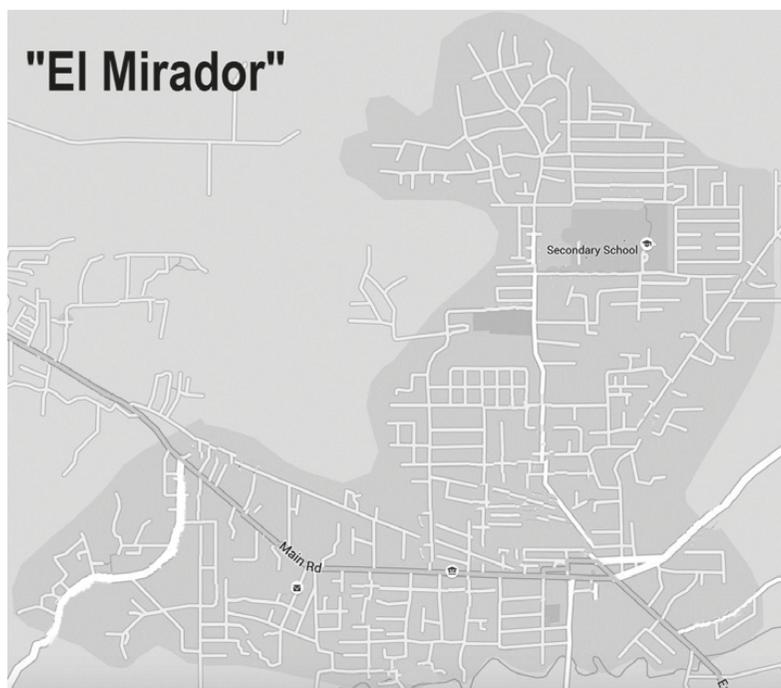
The original inhabitants of El Mirador were indigenous peoples who were eradicated by the 1770s. The town saw very little development before the 1800s, as the colonial administration perceived it to be too far from Port of Spain. A railway was extended to the region in 1896, a time that saw a growth in cocoa farming and brought the first businesses to the region. The next period of rapid growth came with the establishment of a US military base in the 1940s; it was situated at the end of the highway connecting the region to the rest of the country. At that time, migrants went to work nearer to the base for American dollars, and were reluctant to return to cocoa farming afterwards.

The railway was officially closed in the 1970s, yet the next 30 years saw the population grow from 5,000 to 18,000. The highway provided

an accessible route to the rest of the country and, during the years following the railway closure, a number of people migrated to the area. They were able to buy a substantial piece of land, and to open up small businesses in the town. Few buildings remain in El Mirador that reflect these periods of growth, however, with most of the current construction appearing in the 1980s.<sup>26</sup>

Today the busiest places in the town are areas of transit (Fig. 1.6) and El Mirador has a reputation for being a place that people merely pass through. Around half of the town's population works outside El Mirador and villagers tend to use the town as an interchange. It is a hub, and the daily rhythms of urban life reflect its transient character. There are several taxi stands, all located at the connection points along the main road to other villages or towns. People can wait up to half an hour for a taxi or maxi (a mini-van that carries between 12 and 20 passengers for long trips) or an hour for a public bus (Fig. 1.7).

The average family size per household in El Mirador is four people, but, as discussed in Chapter 4, families are more than the nuclear



**Fig. 1.6** Map of El Mirador proper



**Fig. 1.7** A maxi (public mini-bus) approaching the centre of the town

unit. It is also quite common for people to live in a household with other extended family – for example, a wife’s parents or even a husband’s brother, his wife and their children. Sometimes this more extended family lives together for a short period, such as in the case of recently married couples, who may still live with one set of parents. Large families might live together over years, such as when an adult unmarried woman has children and lives with her parents or her sibling’s family. Trinidadian families are generally large, with members of the generation now over the age of 50 typically coming from families of around five children. The extended family is still central to Trinidadian kinship, even though family size has reduced in recent generations to an average of two or three children owing to changes in occupations and lifestyle.<sup>27</sup>

However, discussing family in terms of households and the particular inhabitants of a single domicile is in a way misleading: the extended family is not especially bound by, or consistent with, the home itself. On the one hand, it is quite common for siblings to build houses or buy homes that are close to their common relatives, so that an area may have many households belonging to the same family, with cousins constantly in and out of each other’s homes. On the other hand, especially for Afro-Trinidadian families with lower incomes, it was and continues to be common for the ‘baby-father’ to live separately from the ‘baby-mother’, and for children with young biological mothers to be brought up by older, more settled relatives such as the mother’s own parents.<sup>28</sup> In such cases the ‘nuclear family’ is spread across three or more different households.

The accompanying sense of fictive kin, in which many other people are thought of as ‘aunties’ and ‘uncles’ and a very large number living in the same vicinity are regarded at least as ‘sort-of’ family, is considered in greater depth in Chapter 4.

## A place ‘in between’

On the streets of El Mirador, subtle visual clues distinguish residents of the town from villagers. The former usually keep to themselves in a nonchalant kind of way. They sit with earphones plugged in or tap away on mobile phones; students read over their notes. In comparison villagers look more conscious of themselves and their surroundings. Despite waiting for long periods of time, their posture will not change – they do not look quite as relaxed. When villagers come into El Mirador to shop or run errands, they tend either to overdress, sporting ironed clothes, shirts and closed-toed shoes, or underdress in loose jeans, a baggy T-shirt and flip-flops (‘slippers’). There is less middle ground in the form of the neat-casual attire that residents of El Mirador wear: fitted, branded T-shirts and fitted jeans; an embellished pair of slippers or simple flats for women and runners or loafers for men.

Yet the self-consciousness of villagers in El Mirador is paralleled in that experienced by residents of El Mirador when they go to ‘town’ – namely, to Port of Spain. A trip into town requires a whole different manner of preparation from going out in El Mirador, whether it be during the night or day. Clothes are selected with far greater care, with a preference for branded and more expensive pieces. Women do their full hair and make-up while men are clean-shaven with neatly pressed trousers and shirts (or sometimes an ironed T-shirt). When they are in El Mirador villagers are careful not to speak too loudly, nor to draw much attention to themselves at taxi stands. Similarly, residents of El Mirador visiting Port of Spain will not speak with great volume or engage in much conversation in American chain restaurants, and will try not to attract too much attention in the bars of the capital’s fashionable Arapita Avenue (‘de Avenue’). Fitting in is extremely important in a society as self-conscious about class as Trinidad, where conforming to the norms of a specific place and looking like you belong there are accomplishments to which most aspire.

This became most apparent when I was staying in a household with three young adults, aged between 17 and 25. Whenever we went to a mall in the centre of the country, such as in the town of Chaguanas, they

did not feel the need to 'dress up' particularly; they were quite happy to go after work or school, in whatever they were wearing. Yet when they went to West Mall, known for being the most upmarket in the country, all three took extra care with what they were wearing.

The ethos within El Mirador is quite different. In the town, people do not dress up as much, not wishing to give the impression that they are trying to be 'better' than others. There is a language around class that manifests in everyday conversations, expressed in the idioms 'stush' and 'ghetto'. These terms describe taste in clothes and public behaviour, especially at celebrations and pre-Carnival parties called fetes; such language is reserved for those one knows well, however, and people would not describe strangers on the street with these words. 'Stush' suggests that a person has money, as well as better and more selective taste. Yet it also implies that the person possessing these assets considers themselves superior: they have a sense of arrogance about their privilege. 'Ghetto' suggests the opposite. To describe someone as 'ghetto' suggests that they have cheap, tacky and flamboyant taste and/or are loud, brash and crude, without pretending to be anything else. 'Ghetto' in particular has pejorative racial connotations; the word is used offensively to describe lower-income Afro-Trinidadians. However, those who are labelled as 'ghetto' sometimes resist this positioning, consciously playing up the stereotype to make others uncomfortable. Often 'stush' and 'ghetto' are used lightly and not as direct insults, though both terms carry a moral judgement about behaviours that are seen as driven by class and upbringing.

Trinidad's education system is free, but there remains a hierarchy and competitiveness between schools which select students according to their grades. Indeed, which secondary school one attends is perhaps the single biggest marker of class position in Trinidad. Most especially there is a split between several highly selective and prestigious secondary schools, from which many pupils gain full scholarships to US universities due to their exceptional standards of teaching, and the majority of ordinary secondary schools that meet no such expectations. Consequently, although parents do not have to pay fees, many will fund additional tuition after school to help their children achieve the grades to get into better schools. This in turn creates a discrepancy between parents who can afford extra lessons and those who cannot.

University in Trinidad is also free. A number of students from El Mirador attend the University of the West Indies (UWI), which is around an hour's journey away, towards Port of Spain. Many students who grew up in El Mirador have never attended school in the town; from a

young age they become used to catching the bus to an urban area or having their parents drop them off. Some are educated at schools up to two hours away; they then go on to attend UWI and obtain a job in the city. The homes and families of such students may technically be in El Mirador, but their lives are largely disconnected from the town. Even those who have not been educated in El Mirador can find it difficult to get a good job outside the town, however, often opting instead for training programmes with government offices there or in the region. Such government training schemes generally offer security, decent pay and the option to join the organisation on a permanent basis afterwards. As a result many trainees opt to stay in the public sector in roles unrelated to their field of study.

For those who like the quiet and relaxed paced of country life, a government job is ideal. It enables employees to plan financially for their futures, does not entail peak hour commutes of up to four hours a day and still offers the means to enjoy city life on a night out. Most of the jobs in the town itself are based in government offices, banks, schools and shops. As it is a regional centre, El Mirador has a high proportion of public servants working for bodies such as the Health Authority or regional administration, as well as other public offices. Other people also come to El Mirador to work in small businesses. Many thus commute to the town for work alone, and feel no particular connection to the place (Fig. 1.8). Yet others live in El Mirador itself, but spend their working lives in



**Fig. 1.8** Weekday morning on the main road, where traffic is often at a standstill and needs to be directed by a police officer

villages or at units such as the Water and Sewage Authority (WASA), whose offices and facilities are situated regionally.

The town has a few chain takeaway restaurants, such as Kentucky Fried Chicken and Subway, as well as chain clothing and department stores, making it the main shopping and eating-out hub for the villages as well as a service hub. The people who work in these stores are either from the town or from surrounding villages. Smaller shops for clothes, stationery, internet services, mobile phones, hardware and car parts are owned, managed and staffed by families from El Mirador. The town has seven Chinese restaurants, five owned and staffed by ‘new wave’ migrants (those arriving after the 1990s) and two by descendants from Chinese migrants of the 1870s. Small, Chinese-owned supermarkets have also sprung up in recent years, posing competition for larger supermarkets. There are a few house-front shops off the main road, on residential streets, which serve as milk bars for the areas. People from all income groups find these convenient when they need a few items only, rather than going to the town centre. It is also not unusual to see a mix of housing belonging to families of different incomes on the same street (Figs 1.9 and 1.10).



**Fig. 1.9** A middle-class home next to a lower-income board house with a corrugated iron roof (to the left)



**Fig. 1.10** A house from a low-income area

Among the main weekend activities in El Mirador are visiting relatives or friends in other parts of the country, going to the beach or mall or enjoying a night out in the ‘town’ (Port of Spain), ‘central’ (Chaguanas) or ‘south’ (San Fernando). Because families and groups of friends often venture to destinations over an hour away, weekend rhythms, as much as weekday rhythms, are characterised by the movement of people. The following chapters will explore in greater detail this transient town character and the ways in which individuals express a sense of place-based citizenship.

## Chapter outline

Chapter 2 of this volume explores the broad theme of uses of different media. It includes a discussion of the most common social media platforms in El Mirador and an overview of the media landscape in Trinidad’s recent history. It shows how one form of media relates to another – for example, the introduction of cable television in relation to Trinidad’s national media stations. Modes of communication and the ways in which people related to each other prior to the internet and social media are also examined in this chapter. Madianou and Miller’s concept of polymedia is particularly useful here, as it allows us to look at the contexts and content of media used in personal relationships.<sup>29</sup>

The subject of visual postings is addressed at length in another text, co-written for this series, *Visualising Facebook: A comparative*

*perspective*. That book compares visual postings (mostly images and memes) between Daniel Miller's 'The Glades' field site in England and El Mirador. However, for consistency with the other volumes in the *Why We Post* series, which are all essentially uniform in structure with each chapter covering parallel themes across the sites, Chapter 3 of this text demonstrates how images are used to show individuality and group membership, chiefly through comparing images posted on Instagram and Facebook. The chapter illustrates how the idea of social visibility poses a problem for the individual, whose experiences relate to context and are embedded in the structures of family and other institutions.

The concept of polymedia is further employed in Chapter 4, where the focus falls on family and other relationships. Anthropology evolved from the study of societies in which the principle mode of social organisation was kinship; social media is accordingly explored here in relation to different kinds of familial relationships (including between couples and between parents and children) and how transnational families navigate these. Home and family have specific meanings in Trinidad, and in this chapter we see that there exist relationship ideals (for instance what it means to be a good mother, brother, partner or friend) as well as actual relationships. Like individuals, relationships differ enormously. So how media comes to constitute relationships depends on these different experiences. Just as we now have an increased array of choices in relation to media for communication, so the potential for social and moral judgement around these choices also increases.

In Chapter 5 I return to the analysis of Carnival introduced earlier to propose that the logics of visibility most clearly expressed in the festival resonate in Trinidad throughout the rest of the year. The chapter moves beyond the individual and family to examine wider groups of association and identification. It argues that specific groups of Trinidadians in El Mirador perceive themselves as either very global or very local. Those who consider themselves to be more locally-oriented provide examples of digital resistance, including a resistance to expanding relationships beyond their immediate community. Yet, as I show here, this serves to enhance rather than detract from the idea of social visibility.

In Chapter 6 these insights on visibility are extended to political engagement. For most people who identify with El Mirador, the preferable stance is to remain explicitly non-activist. This contrasts with a popular assumption that access to social media will lead to the use of political platforms for activists – for example, that Twitter helped to bring about pro-democracy upheavals such as those seen in the so-called 'Arab Spring'.<sup>30</sup> Chapter 6 presents a case study of a hunger strike that was

carried out as a protest against the construction of a section of a highway. I consider how this national issue appeared on social media and how people in El Mirador responded to it, with two findings emerging from observing the hunger strike play out. Firstly, although people speak openly about politics and political issues in everyday conversations, there is a general disillusionment with the idea that one can influence politics and be an agent of political change. Secondly, to express political opinions visibly on platforms such as Facebook carries social consequences for individuals among peers, indicating why many choose to avoid such activity. The chapter also acknowledges that even though people in a small rural town are not politically active online, their everyday values, for example, moralising and humour, are evident in their posts and comments. Finally, Chapter 7 summarises the primary conclusions of this book and discusses how the findings in Trinidad relate to those from other comparator field sites in the series.

One of the key ideas referred to throughout this chapter is that the simple conception of a town as a place in which people live is misleading. Space means different things to different people: some live there, but their sense of themselves lies elsewhere. Some do not live there, but their orientation is to the town. This dynamic provides a clue for approaching the study of social media. In such research, the temptation might be to start with a fixed space constituted by the town and then claim that social media represents a repudiation of geography in favour of a placeless online world. However, there actually exists far more continuity across the way people relate to their online spaces and offline spaces. In both cases they often ignore the apparent ‘affordances’ of physical and virtual space to create their own networks and orientations, the real key to which is their own social perspective.<sup>31</sup> A person might be entirely incorporated in the family with little chance to escape – something that may be true offline, but is even more so online. Some may have autonomy both online and offline – or, equally, autonomy in one realm and not in the other. In the contrast between Trevor and Sasha outlined above, we saw from the outset that some people reject social media as subversion of or resistance to the dilemmas of sociality. Others, meanwhile, whose lives seem saturated by sociality, crave it all the more through social media. While this chapter has provided a setting, the true ‘geography’ that we need in order to understand the relationship between life offline and online is a social geography.

## 2

# The social media landscape: new media and 'old' media

One starting point from which to gain insights into the transformations represented by new media is a consideration of the use and consequences of older media. Take, for example, the television, where programmes that dominate household viewing in Trinidad are typically the six-o'clock news and the show following it, *Crime Watch*. The television is a constant presence in many homes, with watching a programme and discussing it around dinner time a key component of evening sociality.<sup>1</sup> By the end of the field work, some homes also had smart televisions in addition to cable. For the last ten years, even the less well-off households have had cable television, as for most of Trinidad's population, ownership of a television and a basic mobile phone is readily accessible, including among lower-income groups who may not own a car and who live in basic housing.

The main reason for this is not low cost, but the fact that individuals live in extended networks of family and friends. Although they might not be able to buy the newest televisions or phones themselves, they are likely to have relatives who can and who pass goods such as televisions and phones on to them. The possession of a television in itself implies sharing, but so too does the experience of watching the news and programmes such as *Crime Watch*. Most people have a preference for watching well known programmes so that there is more to talk and to share opinions about. Viewing television is thus not a passive activity, but one appropriated to feed the social demands of family and wider networks. The engagement generates a stronger sense of being collective, which is the setting for understanding social media in turn.

Following this trajectory, this chapter examines what social media represents in the town of El Mirador by looking at the historical precedence for what social media might be for Trinidadians more generally.

The use of communications and social media is best understood when contextualised by wider, 'offline' themes reflected in Trinidadian face-to-face relations. Accordingly, this chapter will introduce the local idioms of 'maco' and 'bacchanal' to show how these understandings extend to more traditional forms of mass media, such as news coverage and television soap operas, as well as how the logic of these idioms is continued through the use of social media. In El Mirador, people do not simply talk about the programmes they regularly view: they also use them to affirm the key values and practices of Trinidadian society. The issue of access also relates to the idea of 'polymedia' – a term coined by Madianou and Miller, which will become important in this chapter as well as in understanding social relationships in Chapter 4.<sup>2</sup> Here polymedia is used to describe the relationship of social media to the wider ecology of more 'mass' or mainstream media and its recent history in Trinidad. As is discussed further in Chapter 4 in relation to the development of new media and the introduction of platforms such as Skype, Facebook and WhatsApp, as issues of cost and access have decreased, social and moral judgements as to choices of communication platform have increased.

This present chapter, as well as Chapter 3, sketches some background for Trinidadian society, in particular detailing how the intersections of ethnicity, class and gender have expressed themselves in social media. Class, for example, has manifested through commercial uses of Facebook, where pages for business try to brand themselves for young, more affluent and urban-oriented patrons. On this theme, the chapter concludes with a discussion of social divisions in El Mirador. For although Trinidad is a resource-rich country with initiatives such as 'one laptop per child', the digital divide in this region remains one of information rather than infrastructure.

## Mainstream media in Trinidad

Trinidadian household television, cable networks and now the rise of Netflix with smart televisions reflect the intersection of media influences from the US, Latin America and Bollywood. In the 1980s and 1990s Trinidad could be described more as a cultural receiver than cultural producer, with US media dominating its television screens.<sup>3</sup> McFarlane-Alvarez describes the media landscape of the last decade as one in which films and television programmes from the US outnumbered local media productions broadcast on local screens. At the time of her study in 2004,

Trinidad had 19 cinemas with 30 screens, 70 cable channels and only three local channels.<sup>4</sup> There is still no notable film industry and the number of locally produced television programmes is limited (most are news-related or panel discussions).<sup>5</sup>

Just as audiences will watch the same shows at the time they are broadcast on commercial television for discussion afterwards, going to the cinema in Trinidad is an equally social experience. Outside of Port of Spain, the cinema is still a relatively cheap pastime at around TT \$20 (USD \$3.30) per ticket, and the decision to go is based more on wanting to socialise in a group, rather than wanting to watch a particular film. Once in the cinema commentary, cheering, speaking on the phone and reacting to on-screen activity are all entirely acceptable; they are indeed encouraged as part of the collective experience of enjoying a film. For example, during a screening of a film in the supernatural horror franchise *Paranormal Activity*, a scene in which a young girl was investigating a strange noise elicited shouts of 'Nah boy, you let she go see what dat noise is? Yuh real big man!' and 'I ain't goin' to see what dat is! Nah, if I goin', I taking a cutlass<sup>6</sup> wit meh!' The performative banter and humour that are part of everyday interaction also become a key element of the cinema experience, where much of the enjoyment is derived from competitive commentary by audience members, especially young men who are with their girlfriends or friends.

Relative to its limited production of film and television shows, Trinidad has an immense advertising industry. Television and cinema adverts are accompanied by a plethora of billboards along the country's main highways depicting local celebrities, models and pop stars. Advertising, unlike programming, is local in representation, even if adverts are selling international products.<sup>7</sup> McFarlane-Alvarez calls advertising in Trinidad 'microcinema', as it employs the conventional process of filmmaking with production, writing, shooting and editing. And although advertising is outside of the mainstream entertainment industry, it makes locally produced cultural patterns visible. Moreover, as McFarlane-Alvarez notes, for a population of 1.3 million people, there are some 60 registered advertising companies, 20 of which provide full advertising services (including filming commercials).<sup>8</sup>

The locality that is portrayed in advertising is often one that is seen as distinctly Trinidadian, featuring recognisably local landscapes.<sup>9</sup> Audiences also relate to adverts in terms of their potential for bacchanal – the local term for a particularly Trinidadian-inflected version of gossip and scandal. In a study of advertising, Miller gives the example of an on-screen family sitting down to dinner. In bacchanal, viewers would

typically dispute the ethnicity of the children in relation to the appearance of the parents, implicitly questioning the paternity of the children.<sup>10</sup> Such instances highlight how advertising draws on themes and appropriates norms and social idioms that are well-known within Trinidadian culture. Bacchanal has always been a prominent theme in mainstream media produced in Trinidad, appearing anywhere from street quarrels to advertising, and its significance helps to explain the wide appeal of soap operas in the country.<sup>11</sup>

During the final months of field work in 2014, the most popular soap operas were not so much daytime soaps as higher-production primetime dramas such as *Devious Maids* and *Scandal*. Women could be heard talking about these programmes in the local grocery shop, and posts about episodes equally appeared on Facebook as users commented on the latest instalment or a particular character (Fig. 2.1). These primetime dramas evoke a highly specific sense of Trinidadian culture, including the use of bacchanal in their storylines. They fill the later time slot of 8.30 pm, whereas the most popular viewing time is around 6 pm with the nightly news and real-life crime shows.

Trinidad's very recent history has been characterised by an increase in crime rates, mostly murder, banditry and kidnappings. There has always been a social consciousness around crime, but the sharp rise in violent gang and drug-related incidents, which produced record high murder rates of 550 in 2008, 508 in 2009 and 480 in 2010 respectively, resulted in government action in the form of a State of Emergency, declared between August 2011 and December 2011.<sup>12</sup> Everyday crime is reported heavily in the media, with evidence captured by CCTV, security cameras and smartphones testifying to a 'truth' that Trinidad is a dangerous place. Across the duration of field research (2011–14), videos captured on smartphones circulated on Facebook showing fights in secondary schools. Individuals commented on whether or not they knew the families and the films inflamed moral debates around bullying (discussed further in Chapter 5). Distinct from primetime television shows that are scripted, acted and produced, programmes such as *Crime Watch* (whose format is a compilation of real-life crime caught on CCTV and other surveillance devices) have gained popularity.

As well as crime and other instances that provoke moral discussion, issues that appear in newspaper headlines relating to politics are often discussed in terms of bacchanal. The vocabulary of bacchanal and scandal relates to a larger theme of spectacle and visibility in Trinidadian public life, and resonates with its media history. In recent decades print media publications with titles such as 'The Bomb', 'The



**Fig. 2.1** Commentary on the television show *Scandal* posted to Facebook

Heat' and 'The Punch' have emerged, combining semi-pornographic images of women with tabloid news stories taken from international media. As Trinidadian news programmes and papers already regularly report violent crime, the type of news and images circulated online can be regarded as a more graphic extension of the sensationalism typical of such print or television media.

Yet as more homes acquire multiple devices with internet connectivity, the choices of forms of entertainment have also increased. Media consumption in the home has been transformed by digital devices and high-quality broadband, both of which impact upon the way the family watches television. As has been observed of trends elsewhere, having WiFi, laptops and tablets in the home has altered distinctly how parents and children spend time together (or do not).<sup>13</sup> The imposition of specific television shows by commercial programming meant that families previously had little choice in what they watched together, or at what time. Smart televisions and Netflix, by contrast, offer the possibility for different family members to watch what they choose on different devices, so the television in the common space no longer poses a source of conflict or disagreement. It may thus appear that watching television has become a more individualistic experience. However, multiple devices have also become incorporated into the shared experience of how the family watches television, as illustrated by the following account.

The Alleyne household is a warm, loud and energetic one. Most evenings there are no fewer than seven people at home: the parents, their four children, Mrs Alleyne's sister and her three year-old daughter,

as well as the partners of the two eldest children, now in their twenties and thirties. Briana is the second youngest child, now in her final year of high school. She attends one of the schools in El Mirador and so is the first to arrive home in the afternoon. The family had subscribed to Netflix a year earlier and Briana enjoyed being able to watch any film she wanted after school. She started watching complete seasons of programmes when she saw that Netflix screened whole series, always wanting to continue a show she had started viewing until the end.

The most significant example of this was *Breaking Bad*. Briana had missed the entire series when it had peaked in its popularity as it was never aired regularly on Trinidadian television; although many of her friends had downloaded and discussed it, she had never seen a single episode. After the hype around the show's finale had cooled and conversations about its ending faded, Briana decided to watch the series from the beginning after school. She started with one or two episodes when her brother and sisters arrived home before dinner. After a season, she began watching more after her family went to bed and she could sleep in the lounge room. Her brother Nathan started teasing her, claiming she was addicted to the show; every time he wanted to watch something after finishing his homework around 11 pm, Briana was still watching *Breaking Bad*. He began to sit with her and quiz her about the plot line. At first Nathan was just trying to annoy his sister, but then he too became engrossed, posing genuine questions about the characters and events. Briana kept telling him to be quiet, so Nathan established his own routine of watching the show from the beginning, on his own laptop in bed after finishing his homework. He caught up with Briana in just over a week and the two of them started quarrelling with their older sister Josie and her boyfriend when they wanted to watch *Breaking Bad* for hours after dinner. The central characters of Walter White and Jesse began to filter their way into Briana and Nathan's conversations. They quoted one-liners from the show and shared in-jokes. Josie and her boyfriend started to feel excluded, so they too watched the first episode and continued with the series on Josie's laptop in her bedroom.

Briana and Nathan decided that the fair thing to do was to stop watching the show until the others had caught up. Two weeks later the siblings had all reached the same point and watched the remainder together, viewing it continuously for hours into the night. Their mother, Rachel, a nurse and shift worker, came in to investigate why 'these children all quiet quiet in the TV room all of a sudden'. Netflix had also begun to transform her own leisure hours; after finishing work, all she wanted

to do was 'go on her bed' and watch *Desperate Housewives* on her laptop. When her husband came home, they would watch a film together.

When Rachel saw her children watching *Breaking Bad*, she would stand in the doorway and ask them questions. 'What is Tuco doing now? Has Gus come in? What happened to Jesse's girlfriend?' Shouts of 'MUMMY!! Go away! Don' say anything!' would ensue, followed by numerous 'steups', a noise Trinidadians make by sucking through their teeth to express disdain or disapproval. As much as Rachel enjoyed teasing the kids, she eventually returned to her room to watch her own show, while Briana observed mockingly of her conservative Pentecostal mother, 'you know Mummy does watch *Breaking Bad*', followed by 'steups'.

Having Netflix and WiFi allowed the Alleynes to spend more time together amid lives that were becoming increasingly separated by routines of study and work. Although they initially watched shows according to their own time schedules and personal genre preferences, they ended up watching television in much the same way as they had prior to these new media – that is, viewing the same show, together and at the same time, so as to be able to share conversations about it. In effect, television itself became a prominent form of social media.

## Some (numerical) media figures and the social media landscape

The household questionnaires that were conducted as part of field work concentrated on four areas of the town that were ranked from levels one to four (lowest to highest) in terms of income. The intention was that 25 per cent of respondents would reflect each of these income categories, at least approximately. The figures that follow are from the results of these initial questionnaires (described in the Appendix).

In terms of connectivity, there are now fewer houses in the area with landline connections; the decline in landlines has also resulted in an increase in household broadband connections. For instance, among 100 participants, 56 per cent stated that they did not own a landline connection, the most common reason being that these non-owners had moved recently (in the last five years) and, since they already owned a mobile phone, did not see the need to install a landline as well. Sixty-seven per cent of respondents reported that they subscribed to an internet connection at home, which seems to correspond to having a higher income (see tables at the end of the volume). Of those surveyed, 52 per cent

did not own a household desktop computer, 36 per cent confirmed they owned one and 12 per cent stated that they had two or more. By contrast, 23 per cent of respondents said that they did not have a laptop in the home, 35 per cent said that they had only one and 42 per cent said that they had two or more. The figures for laptop ownership are strongly influenced by the state-sponsored 'one-laptop-per-child' initiative, in which children attending primary and secondary schools are provided with laptops to take home. For many adults who had never been confident with their own computer literacy, the 'one-laptop-per-child' programme gave them their first access to a digital device in the home.

For households without landlines or broadband connections in Trinidad, affordable mobile phone contracts or pay-as-you-go plans are the main source of internet connection. Here the questionnaire generally reflected a much higher level of investment in mobile phones. Twelve per cent of those surveyed had between one and two phones in their household, with 68 per cent reporting that they owned between three and six and 20 per cent responding that they had a total of six. Indeed, the number of phones in a household often exceeded the number of people.

In terms of social media usage, the dominant platform throughout the duration of this three-year study was Facebook. Most participants who own a smartphone or use the internet regularly for work or leisure have also created a Facebook account. Although there were fewer regular users by the end of field work in 2014 as compared to 2012 most had retained their account, even if they claimed they no longer checked it as often. Parents in the over-45 age bracket had been introduced to Facebook by their teenage or young adult children. The parents used Facebook primarily to keep in touch with relatives living abroad, as most Trinidadians, irrespective of background or income, would know at least one or two distant relatives overseas, the most common destinations being the UK, US and Canada.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the research, only one user of social media over the age of 60 was involved in the study and she proved to be an exceptional case in several respects. Aged 80, she regularly used Skype and Facebook and confidently researched her interests on Google throughout the day. More generally, adults over the age of 40 had been quite slow to copy younger users and adopt social media; most created a Facebook account only around 2012.

While Facebook is used extensively, this is not the case for Instagram. Twitter is also far less common in El Mirador.<sup>15</sup> The next chapter examines the strong class dimension of social media usage,

whereby those who from more middle class backgrounds tended to use Instagram as well as Facebook and those from the lower middle classes used only Facebook. There was also a tendency to post individual interests on Instagram and more group-oriented content on Facebook. At the beginning of field work in late 2011 BBM (BlackBerry Messenger) was the most popular instant messaging platform, partly because BlackBerry at the time was the most popular smartphone, by far the least expensive option for those who wanted access to web browsing through WiFi. By the end of 2012 both BBM use and BlackBerry ownership were in decline, the Samsung Galaxy providing a powerful rival, compared to the still less affordable iPhone. At that time, too, WhatsApp was replacing BBM as the instant messaging platform of choice. WhatsApp had copied most of the attractive features of BBM, but was not restricted to a particular brand of phone. By the end of field work in 2014 WhatsApp had become popular throughout Trinidad, a development discussed in more depth in Chapter 4.

One of the main reasons given by respondents for not using Twitter was its limited messaging size of 140 characters per post. Yet also, although it is called a social network, Twitter was introduced primarily as a means of access to news and interest-based information, making it appear less 'social'. Information shared on Twitter therefore seemed socially decontextualised. Rather than focusing on who passed on the information, which in El Mirador is an important factor in giving credibility to information, the emphasis is on the information itself. Twitter represents the antithesis of what people in a small town such as El Mirador view as the proper way for information to be disseminated, namely through its social context. Only those who had developed a more abstract relationship to information embraced Twitter, one example being Tahlia, a university graduate who had returned home from living on campus to work in a government office. As she noted in relation to her reasons for leaving Facebook in preference for Twitter:

Everyone is on [Facebook]. Anyone can add you and see all your business and you see what they doing and so much of it is nothing anyway. You need a bit more for Twitter. You need to find some interesting news or follow people who are in the know and you can retweet them. You need to be a bit clever. Also, I control who can follow me, I don't want 50,000 followers on Twitter. I think I have about 70 followers, I know some people but never met others. I follow them as well and they just tweet about things I'm interested in. Nothing about their personal lives and all that.

What appeals to Tahlia is the wider dissemination of content, where her main agenda is looking at what she finds interesting, regardless of who posted it. Her focus is on information and efficiency, rather than the spread of gossip and opinions. By contrast Sasha, who we encountered in Chapter 1, tried almost every social media platform as each gained popularity. However, she stopped using Twitter only a couple of months after joining. As she explained:

I find Twitter boring. First, there's hardly no one on it, everyone's on Facebook. So I share pictures and update my status and there's not as many people to see it, I don't know if they like it, what's the point? And then all these people who you don't know can follow you. And they posting things and I know nothing about them. I have around 2,000 friends on Facebook, I have chatted to almost everyone, I like their status or their pictures, I know something about them.

Those such as Sasha, who in this respect would be quite typical of El Mirador, may well share some content around national issues or local news on Facebook, but it is never far removed from the world view of the person sharing it. As such, the tight-knit nature of community life 'offline' in a small town is replicated 'online' through the visibility of community on Facebook. (However, by the end of the field work, Facebook was also in decline, possibly due to its being rather too well socialised, as we shall see.)

With regard to other channels of communication, email is rarely used; it remains very much a work or study medium that individuals speak of using infrequently. Even in schools, where students' main channel for contacting teachers is email, it remains second or third in rank as compared to Facebook and Skype. One teacher described how students feel more comfortable with the informality of Facebook and Skype. If they are experiencing some problems with understanding content from a class, they prefer to ask in dialect over social media rather than having to formulate questions in proper English for a more formal medium such as email. Increasingly common among work peers is WhatsApp, which has replaced email for quick questions that need a prompt reply. Colleagues are aware that their peers carry their phones on them at all times and will respond to the audio alert of the message. Generally Trinidadians do not regard being able to contact their work peers through various media as any kind of intrusion, nor does the choice of medium seem significant in itself. The exceptions are those who work in

professional roles and complain when they feel they are being contacted frequently, either by a work colleague, friend or acquaintance, for no particular reason – or most obviously, out of boredom. There were also fewer than five research participants who owned a LinkedIn profile and used it regularly.

Prior to email, letter writing was a popular pastime among Trinidadians, especially writing to friends and family overseas. If people were not avid letter writers, then correspondence would be reserved for special occasions, such as Christmas. For the generation now aged 45 and above, the exchange of greeting cards was significant for commemorating special events, as well as for acknowledging significant relationships. Among this same age group, having pen-pals had been quite common. With an increased use of the internet, greeting cards migrated to e-cards and now on Facebook, we see a genre of post which also replicates the greeting card, as is discussed in the next chapter.

## What people do on Facebook

Since 2009 Facebook usage has become more common in Trinidad, with 96 per cent of respondents to our questionnaires having created their profile between 2009 and 2012. Before Facebook, the most commonly used social media platforms were HiFive and, to a lesser extent, MySpace. MSN was used extensively for chatting, as was ICQ before that, but these platforms were not intended for functions such as circulating images. The questionnaire results afforded insights into the frequency of posting, sharing, liking and commenting, and it was concluded that there are two extremes – those who make considerable use of Facebook and those who do very little. For example, in terms of postings per day, 21 per cent of respondents said that they post (which consists of liking, sharing or commenting: in effect, any interaction beyond browsing) less than ten times a day, while 57 per cent post more than 60 times a day. This leaves only 21 per cent of people posting with a frequency that could be called the middle ground. With respect to posting images taken with a phone or camera (as opposed to posting a meme or image that was created or modified by someone else), 81 per cent of people surveyed said they post less than ten photos per month.

A similar frequency occurs with posting a status, where 20 per cent said they rarely post a worded status, if ever, and 50 per cent post fewer than ten status updates per month. In terms of commenting there

are similar extremes, with 38 per cent commenting less than 10 times a month and 39 per cent of respondents commenting more than 60 times a month. Only nine per cent of respondents comment between 11 and 60 times per month. 'Liking' is the most popular activity, with 49 per cent of people surveyed 'liking' posts or photos from others more than 60 times a month. Sharing is the least popular activity, with 47 per cent saying that they shared content less than ten times a month.

In terms of the primary Facebook activities – posting, commenting, sharing and liking – what emerges can be described as a spectrum of visibility. The relative few who post regularly are more inclined to post a status update or share images of themselves, with photos emphasising personal style or lifestyle and more revealing posts sharing feelings or thoughts. Commenting, as a direct interaction with what someone else has posted, is much more popular. However, the most popular form of interaction on Facebook is the gentle acknowledgement and benign participation of 'liking' others' posts. Facebook activity as a spectrum of visibility, that is posting, commenting, sharing and liking, also relates to the idea of social visibility introduced in Chapter 1. Individuals consciously bring to the fore some aspects of themselves for display, while obscuring others. The result is that some individuals appear eye-catching or attention-grabbing, while others simply remain a passive presence.

## Facebook and its cultural 'fit' with Trinidad

Facebook has remained the dominant social media platform in Trinidad because of its resonance with more 'traditional' forms of communication. Image sharing affordances make Facebook a highly visual medium which accords with Trinidadians' shared understanding of the forms and implications of visibility (a theme which is the focus of Chapter 5). Carnival, for example, is the highlight of the cultural calendar, characterised by revellers' ability to 'free up' and 'play themselves' – albeit in costume and in designated spaces at that time of year alone. What people choose to make visible and its consequences form a kind of visual language in which Trinidadians are entirely fluent. Facebook in turn reproduces (at least) two notable local social phenomena around social life and visibility: *macoing* and *bacchanal*.

'Maco' ('to maco' and 'macoing') is the colloquial term for poking into somebody else's business, usually without permission. Through formal and informal discussion and observation, it became clear that one of the primary uses for Facebook is *macoing*. Informants spoke

about macoing in relation to Facebook with a sense of humour and light-heartedness. Yet the consequences for the person who is the subject of macoing can be less frivolous, often extending to stress and anxiety.<sup>16</sup> Informants talked most openly about macoing friends or people they know quite well and with whom they spend a lot of time. Checking friends' profile pages was viewed as the most harmless form of macoing, as the person would see what the other had been doing and later bring up the activities reflected in their posts as a topic of conversation, in a light and humorous way. Macoing ex-partners and their new partners was also very common: for example, seeing if they are happy or not, what the new partner is like and criticising what they are wearing or their hairstyles. The other most common function of macoing resonates with what has been written more generally about the psychological consequences of Facebook: users look at the pages of those they see as rivals or competitors, for example, an old school mate or work colleague, or somebody who they might have known in the past, but currently do not know very well at all.<sup>17</sup> When asked about this type of macoing in the form of the question 'Do you have a Facebook nemesis?', or somebody who they maco a little too much, respondents would at first laugh and deny it. Yet when pressed a little further, some respondents (mostly women) would reveal that yes, there is someone on Facebook of whom they are little jealous. The types of posts that aroused jealousy were mostly along the theme of 'the grass is always greener' – namely, images of upmarket places visited in Trinidad, images of holidays or life abroad, outfits and generally glamorous lifestyles.

The potential for such content to evoke envy is the exact reason why it is shared and indeed, most respondents admitted to posting for the same reason. Cultivating looks and appearance is important and many would therefore never countenance posting a photo of themselves looking scruffy and unkempt, a finding which echoes Nicolescu's observations in *Social Media in Southeast Italy*.<sup>18</sup> Through this emphasis on macoing, Facebook becomes an extension of an already existing theme in Trinidadian social life. The more frustrating consequences of macoing, meanwhile, relate to family members and family surveillance and will be discussed in depth in Chapter 4.

As was noted earlier, the local idiom 'bacchanal' for Trinidadians connotes confusion and scandal. Yet simultaneously bacchanal also has the potential to uncover truth. Facebook and, more recently, WhatsApp are spoken about as having the capacity to both provoke and facilitate bacchanal through textual conversation and the circulation of images. This perhaps emerges most often in the arena of personal relationships,

where a status update or image might cause a controversy which then unfolds outside of Facebook. This potential for bacchanal is typified in the story of Sharon and Nikesh.

Sharon is 34 and has two daughters. She went out to Port of Spain for an evening with her friends, while her husband Nikesh invited some friends over to lime. Most of his friends at the time of research were young fathers like himself, as Nikesh only married Sharon two years earlier and was still getting used to juggling work, his own family and, now, his in-laws. Sharon was a former Carnival Queen who had been accustomed to enter the competition every year. A group of volunteers in one of El Mirador's masquerade camps would make her costume (and those of all the others) for that year's carnival. She no longer enters the competition, but has remained friends with the same masqueraders: they still like dancing and 'getting on bad' (having a good time), so every few months they go into the city for a night out. Nikesh likes to lime and drink, but is not really keen on dancing, preferring to stay in with his 'partners' (friends) to 'drink a beer and play PlayStation'. That night he recounted to his friends how he had found his mother-in-law particularly overbearing during the week. As he told the boys about it, a few of them exchanged similar stories about their in-laws; how they could be critical or controlling and were always poking into their business. Having had a few beers by this point, Nikesh picked up his phone and posted a Facebook status: 'I gettin rel (real) sick of this shit an one day ppl gonna hear it'. From one perspective, the update seemed rather vague – no one could really know what he was talking about, beyond the fact that he seemed annoyed about something. Yet the message did appear to be indirectly aimed at someone (a kind of status update that forms a whole distinct genre in Trinidad, as discussed in Chapter 4). On the other hand Sharon, who was on the way home from town at 2 am, checked Facebook and knew exactly what Nikesh was referring to. She called him straight away and asked him to remove the update, hearing the guys in the background and knowing immediately from Nikesh's voice that he had had quite a few drinks. 'I'll deal wit yuh when I come back,' she told him and hung up the phone.

When she arrived home an hour later, the boys had left and Nikesh had calmed down, so she asked him again to remove the update, explaining that, 'I know yuh vex, but dis gonna make a whole mess if everybody seeing it'. Although the discussion between Sharon and Nikesh did not occur online, by posting the update Nikesh had revealed the extent of his frustration with his in-laws. Both Sharon and Nikesh's friends saw the status update at 2 am, but members of their extended family only

checked Facebook after they woke up the next morning and so remained blissfully unaware of Nikesh's grievances.

Posting on Facebook runs the risk of the user becoming the subject of bacchanal – the most common form of which is a man being photographed with a woman who is not his partner. The image itself on Facebook will not usually elicit controversial comments from peers. Rather, the confrontations and arguments typically occur offline and the photo is later removed. Jordan, a university student in his early twenties, noted the hazards around Facebook's potential to cause bacchanal:

People started posting statuses about other people, but in an indirect way. So that's what you call bacchanal, which is caused because of the pictures. Facebook plays a major role in this, the bacchanal was only noticeable to people in the group before Facebook, but now, because of Facebook, everybody knows, which makes the whole thing more embarrassing for some people. They call it 'Macobook' or 'Fasbook', that's why people like me, I tend to limit how much people can see on my profile, I don't put up big wall posts or statuses, pictures are taken of me a lot but if I don't like a certain picture of me, I'll just tell my friend to take down the picture. I wouldn't say that I limit my Facebook because of that, I limit my interactions with certain people so that they don't affect my Facebook. If it's a situation where somebody is causing bacchanal on my Facebook, I either remove them or totally ignore them. There are some Trinidadian people who love bacchanal, we love to party and we love bacchanal, that's a fact, ask anybody.

Yet, in relation to public issues, newsworthy stories or politics, much of the bacchanal that follows does play out online, a theme which is the focus of Chapter 6. Throughout the field work, there were at least four instances of videos going viral and making the national news. One example was of a fight between a group of girls that occurred after school and another was of a mother giving her daughter 'licks' (a form of corporal punishment using a belt to strike a child). Both videos were widely circulated and commented upon. Their appeal lay in the shocking nature of the images: they were a spectacle, but also provoked moralising discussions about children. The videos attracted thousands of shares and hundreds of comments, which in turn incited moral debates around such issues as the way children are raised 'nowadays' and the importance of religion in home life, alongside broader racial commentary. Commentators on Facebook are easily identifiable, using their

real names and open privacy settings, suggesting that individuals are quite comfortable about posting opinions on a public issue. Similarly when a political scandal makes national headlines, whether it is the Prime Minister taking her nephew to the World Cup in Brazil or a sex scandal featuring a former member of parliament, Facebook users are quick to respond with moral commentary, or in the case of politics, with humour.<sup>19</sup>

Over the course of field work, there appeared to be a decline in the use of Facebook to post photos, share status updates or leave comments. Although Trinidadians tend to post more images on Facebook than the English, for example, public posting generally declined between 2012 and 2014.<sup>20</sup> The most common reason for this less frequent posting, coupled with an increased uptake of WhatsApp (among owners of a smartphone), was precisely that using Facebook left people too open to becoming the subject of *macoing* or *bacchanal*. Even where there is no immediate misunderstanding around a post, the conversation that it generates commonly results in some unrelated but unpleasant truth being revealed, if not believed.

It is not surprising, then, that understanding *macoing* and *bacchanal* is central to appreciating the local meaning of Facebook and its various appropriations in Trinidad.<sup>21</sup> Locating Facebook within discussions of *macoing* and *bacchanal* also appears to explain its initial popularity. Yet at the same time it is possible to see in this very alignment and cultural resonance the causes of Facebook's more recent decline in this country. Where everyone recognises *bacchanal* as a constitutive aspect of being Trinidadian, it also reflects a relationship with the past and the traditional character of 'Trini' society.<sup>22</sup> *Bacchanal* inevitably has the potential to cause harm and so people have always been ambivalent about it – enjoying it when it is at other people's expense, but less sanguine when the subjects of it themselves. For those now trying to advance toward what they see as a more modern Trinidad, one more closely resembling other metropolitan countries, the capacity of Facebook to promote *bacchanal* may well be something they initially welcomed and enjoyed, but over time may have also come to regret.

Facebook's cultural fit with Trinidad neatly encapsulates the idea of social visibility, showing the process whereby norms around visibility come to be established. The effect of *bacchanal* as a social mechanism for keeping others in check is to deter people from putting themselves 'out there' or too much in the public view. Images are interpreted as testifying to a truth, but, since truth is malleable, they can often be misinterpreted to suit somebody else's agenda. For these reasons many tend

to avoid posting very personal updates or images that can be misread, though there are exceptions to this when a post is intended to send an explicit message to a person or a group of people. What individuals choose to reveal of themselves will be subject to the scrutiny of others. Similarly, however, social and moral judgements are made concerning which platforms individuals use for communication. The theory of poly-media therefore becomes particularly relevant at this point.

## Polymedia

Throughout the field work a number of anxieties were expressed, mostly by parents, that interaction between ‘people nowadays’ is becoming less meaningful because of new media. For example, Laetitia, a woman in her fifties, lamented in relation to her teenage son:

I feel sorry for these children, the times is so different, yuh can't go out all hours of the night walk back, yuh jus' go to school an' come home, go to school an' come home. So they jus' textin' all the time and chatting, they don't get to spend time together anymore.

Behind the idea of polymedia lies a prior assumption that expresses the anthropological roots of the concept. Anthropology recognises that all communications between people are and must be mediated – either through technologies or norms of appropriate conduct, such as how an employee would speak to his or her boss or an aunt to her nephew.<sup>23</sup> The mediation that takes place through communications media simply adds another layer on to these already mediated relationships.<sup>24</sup> Uses of different media forms are influenced by a number of factors, including features of the media itself, the content of the conversation and the relationship between the parties. WhatsApp allows you to send text and voice messages, for instance, while Skype allows you to video call a person and simultaneously type a message to them. Yet the choice of platform would depend on the relationship and the topic of conversation.

The opening volume of this series, *How the World Changed Social Media*, discusses how each subsequent book employs a concept of polymedia in relation to the field site. Polymedia recognises that, with a relative decline in concern for cost and access, individuals are instead judged according to their choices between different media. The consequences of this choice have the effect of resocialising

media, where media is expressive of social relationships as well as the ecology of different communications technologies. The emergence of polymedia therefore depends on shifts in access, affordability and literacy.<sup>25</sup> In El Mirador mobile phone plans (monthly or prepaid) and access to WiFi are sufficiently affordable to be ubiquitous. Cost is even less of an issue with WiFi hotspots, and the increase of WiFi access has also made the cost of texting through mobile phone plans far more competitive.

Many also choose to use a certain platform based on their previous media experiences. Although email is predominantly used for work in El Mirador, those who used email regularly outside of a work context likened emailing to sending letters. As one young woman, whose best friend had moved to New York, recounted:

I definitely use long emails, like the friend who is not here, at least the most juicy communication that is take place between us, is in long email. Even jus' recently she tell meh, I have a drama to tell you. I tell her on Facebook, I am waiting I'm impatient, and she tell meh and she send meh a long email in part 1 and part 2 and everything in detail in the entire scenario, like we would not do that on Facebook just for some reason in email it's easier. It's like keeping letters, to me that is a nice thing, to keep these things documented and to look back on it.

In contrast an older woman, a stay-at-home mother who never used email regularly, described how she used Skype to communicate with a childhood friend who has lived overseas for some time:

She is living there now, she is married and has a family there now. Before I used to write a lot of letters, before this came in. I love to write. So I find when webcam came in or whatever, before I would write and write but then computers came in with technology and then I say ok, although I love to type, I'm not a big expert you know, sometimes I'm talking to you through Skype or whatever, and I talk, sometimes you talk and you may not understand, so I'll send messages.

These brief examples illustrate how the use of email or Skype has been compared to the experience of writing letters, and how specific relationships have shaped the usage of both. Also relevant here is the fact that prior to 'polymedia' there was no clear term to capture how one media

could be embedded in another or how multiple technologies converge in a single device. Cameras are now integrated into most phones, and the texting function within the web calling program Skype means that one can interchange between talking, texting and sending images in the same conversation.

As discussed further in Chapter 4, polymedia emphasises how individuals are judged according to their choices of digital technology for maintaining relationships: each technology finds its place not only in relation to another, but also within the context of relationships.<sup>26</sup> Families are inherently structured around relationships, but choice, including that of which media to communicate with, is also an extended expression of care and concern insofar as it aims to preserve relationships. While social media as it relates to personal relationships is a relatively complex interaction, commercial uses of social media in El Mirador are far more straightforward.

## Commercial uses of social media

El Mirador has a relatively small online presence. Thousands of residents have individual profiles on Facebook, but pages for town affiliations, groups and businesses are rare. There are several pages for El Mirador's local high schools and alumni, but fewer for its handful of clubs such as Rotaract (an offshoot of Rotary International). Some owners of small businesses have used Facebook (and to a lesser extent Instagram and LinkedIn) to promote their businesses by creating a page dedicated to the business or changing their own cover photo to the company's logo. Young bar owners who try to market their business to a more media-savvy crowd update their online events and news regularly, for example, in the same way that large bars, restaurants and venues market themselves in Port of Spain.

In other parts of the country, Facebook has been one of the more effective means of attracting business through direct marketing. Among the leisure and entertainment industries large chain cinemas, such as the IMAX in an upmarket area of Port of Spain, regularly display their film session times on Facebook. Nightclubs advertise promotions, where prospective patrons can Facebook message or call promoters on their personal mobile phones to reserve tickets. Restaurants and bars frequently update their pages with drink specials for Fridays and Saturdays, where patrons can likewise send inbox messages to RSVP. Similarly, chain clothing shops will post photos of new clothes and specials on Facebook,

where customers can reserve their pieces to be picked up later. In more metropolitan Trinidad it would now be quite unusual for Facebook not to play a prominent role in any given commercial venture.

Yet the same social media marketing strategies have not been so successful in El Mirador. There are virtually no pages advertising local businesses, aside from a couple of bars whose young owners have invested large sums in refurbishing to attract a younger, more fashionable crowd and who have themselves worked for other ventures in Port of Spain. The reasons behind the lack of success in marketing local businesses via social media may relate to the concepts introduced in the preceding chapter, namely digital resistance. For example, 'D' Corner is the most successful bar for young people in El Mirador. It is located at the end of the high street, away from the centre of the town, but on Friday and Saturday nights the crowd spills outside the bar/nightclub venue on to the street. Here young men can be found drinking, smoking and talking to young women who have invested considerable effort in their hair, make-up and outfits. The busiest night is the last Friday of the month, when patrons have received their monthly pay. Throughout the year, promotional models from the town representing the local brewery and branded alcoholic drink companies distribute flyers at 'D' Corner for theme nights at other bars and clubs in the area, also sharing promotional images on their personal Facebook profiles. The crowd at 'D' Corner commutes from the surrounding villages as well as the town proper, though there is nothing particularly unique about the venue. Despite this there are only two posts on the bar's Facebook page, set up on 26 December 2013; the last dates from 27 December 2013 and only 166 people have 'liked' the page.

An interesting comparison may be made with another popular local bar, Margharitaville. This bar closed at the end of 2013 and reopened four months later with its premises fully renovated; it now boasts an extended outdoor area and dance floor, comfortable lounges and free WiFi. Yet it draws a much smaller crowd and has not retained the momentum it had prior to renovation, even though its Facebook page has 877 'likes' and the venue posts updates frequently with promotions, theme nights and drink specials. Indeed, since Margharitaville revamped its image clientele numbers have actually dropped, with the bulk apparently migrating to 'D' Corner.

By trying to emulate the popular style of bar found in Port of Spain, Margharitaville seems to have deterred its patrons: they do not identify with the urban, cosmopolitan ambience and prefer the less pretentious feel of a country town bar. Those in El Mirador who would normally

be attracted by ambience, fashionable décor and WiFi are more inclined to opt for a night out in Port of Spain, rather than a night in a Port of Spain-styled bar in El Mirador. At least eight other business owners said that they had tried marketing their business on Facebook, but gave up after a short time as they saw it was not enhancing their business. As the centre of El Mirador spans a short distance, the length of the high street can be walked in 20 minutes; in contrast to the urban hubs of Port of Spain or San Fernando, one does not need to travel for 45 minutes or more from other parts of the country to reach its night spots. Advertising on Facebook is perhaps therefore more relevant to patrons who have to cover longer distances, since information in El Mirador is passed just as quickly by word of mouth as through Facebook promotion. The leisure and entertainment habits of residents of the town and surrounding villages are fairly regular, with the same groups frequenting the same places, again making the promotion of new offers on social media somewhat irrelevant.

Although few businesses in El Mirador regularly maintained a commercial Facebook page, a number of participants acknowledged the importance of Facebook pages for commerce. One woman whose friend ran a local catering business commented that ‘Everybody got to have a page, otherwise your business don’t exist. Another friend is always telling me to go to her page and like it. But I know what business she has, why should I like the page on Facebook? Everybody knows what she selling’. Facebook provides visual evidence that businesses are successful if they have attracted several ‘likes’, and it is often these ‘likes’ that count most for prospective patrons – not the regularly posted news or updates. But simultaneously, as in the case of Margharitaville, a business that appears to be successful on Facebook may rather represent a performance of success, not actually reflected in its commercial results.

Even more surprisingly, technology-oriented businesses such as mobile phone stores, internet cafés and computer repairs and sales also generally opt out of social media advertising. One internet café owner attributed his refusal to maintain a business page to the low level of computer literacy in the region. As he explained, ‘most people only use the internet for Facebook and for games. It’s more important to be connected on Facebook than to do research on Google. Most of the clients here [at the internet café] might do a little homework for school or if they take an evening course but other than that, the social network (like Facebook) is more important than getting information’.

## El Mirador and the digital inclusion debate

The above comments reflect the ongoing debate in El Mirador around digital divides and the lack of computer literacy. Even though there are several WiFi hotspots around the town, and programmes such as 'one laptop per child' have increased internet usage among its population, most prefer to use the internet to cultivate social networks through platforms such as Facebook, rather than to seek information or conduct research. The statistical data and formal and informal discussions with participants which informed the findings of this field work may have important implications for policy making. For example, policy around the role of technology in building social networks and social capital often emphasises the circulation of knowledge and information toward a better use of resources for economic opportunities.<sup>27</sup>

Field work conducted in Trinidad by Sheba Mohammid, who is also involved in the Why We Post project, provides another important source of data on the impact of social media in education – in particular, on online education and the role of informal learning through platforms such as YouTube. Mohammid led the team which developed the first online learning network in the Caribbean, [knowledge.tt](http://knowledge.tt),<sup>28</sup> integrating learning materials into an e-learning hub that can be easily accessed by the general public. Her passions and expertise around online education evoked a number of conversations about why there seems to be a knowledge gap in El Mirador. Here the segment of the population with higher incomes uses the internet for accessing knowledge and information, whereas those with lower incomes are less inclined to.<sup>29</sup> The existing research and related arguments around developing effective online education tools for Trinidad and Tobago suggested that the town of El Mirador was among those places where broader national strategies would either not apply or would be unlikely to work.

Evidence for this could be found in the manner in which the internet generally appears to be used among young people in the town. For example, students in private or prestigious schools, whose parents are able to send them to after-school classes, are more likely to use internet resources for research and school assignments, as well as for entertainment and social media. Many of these students have parents with a high level of computer literacy, who use digital media as part of their own professional and vocational lives.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, in less affluent schools where some teachers are confident in computer literacy but others are not, there is less focus on students developing online research

skills. Here students primarily use their laptops for accessing social media and entertainment. These trends in computer literacy are also generally reflective of class differences in the town itself: those from more middle-class backgrounds espouse more middle-class values around the internet as a tool and resource for furthering education and existing skills. In contrast people with lower incomes or non-professional jobs are less inclined to want to increase their computer literacy.

Three participants specialising in areas of formal and informal education reiterated the divide in El Mirador in terms of using the internet for education and circulating knowledge and information. The first, Sherene, is a primary school teacher; she has over 25 years of experience working in schools in the area and is also the former principal of a small primary school on the outskirts of the town. Kumar is the owner of an internet café whose business also incorporates computer courses, laptop repairs and sales, while Valerie is the director of a local NGO specialising in school holiday programmes and after-school and weekend classes in digital literacy and effective job seeking. Sherene explained that:

There is a sort of gap, between parents and teachers in what they think about computers for learning, which flows on to the students. The children who come from homes where the parents and maybe older brothers and sisters who use the internet for study, they see this behavior regularly and they copy it. If children only see the computer used for Facebook and music videos and YouTube, they think it's just for entertainment, like the television.

Similarly, Kumar noted that the main reason the majority of his customers first come into the internet café is to ask how to set up an email account and then how to join Facebook. They later become regular customers who mainly use their internet time for chatting. His second largest market is gamers, most of whom have internet access at home and are computer literate, but choose to visit the internet café for the sociality it provides, where they can physically game among peers. The smallest clientele base for Kumar is high school, vocational and adult students who come into the café to use internet-based resources for their studies. Requests for printing are extremely frequent, but requesting internet time to research assignments is less common. This may be due to students having internet connectivity in their homes, though the majority of patrons (apart from gamers) in Kumar's venue do not subscribe to household access. He explained that the café is one of the main digital centres in the region – as is apparent from how busy it is daily,

with most of the 40 computers occupied during peak hours – and that the vast majority of requests are for Facebook and YouTube access, rather than general information.

Another perspective is given by Valerie, who co-founded a resource centre with the owner of another computer repairs shop. They now receive modest sponsorship from the Trinidadian government and various international NGOs that specialise in ICT4D (internet communications technologies for development). They run regular classes after school, teaching high school students how to use Microsoft Office applications and the internet for research. Due to the external sponsorship, these classes cost very little compared to private after-school classes that complement formal studies, and so the participants are predominantly from lower-income households surrounding El Mirador. Valerie observed that:

Most of the kids that come to lessons have a laptop but don't really use it for school work. Also, the laptops are shared with the rest of the family. They might take it to a relative's house and use their internet access for Skype or Facebook other things, so it's not like the laptop belongs to the child alone. They also don't really see the use of the internet. I mean, I use it for everything and I teach my kids that it's a tool but not all kids comes from homes with the same mindset. It's really hard to change that. The kids grow up with all sorts of influences from the parents and they turn out the same.

Although Valerie's perspective also reflects a moral value around education and the home, her comments, alongside those of Sherene and Kumar, reinforce the view that the digital divide in El Mirador is related to perceptions of the value of the internet for education, rather than an access or infrastructural divide.<sup>31</sup> These participants and others, particularly parents, frequently connected the value of building information networks with the need for learning and training. These views endorsed initiatives such as 'one laptop per child', while observing that such projects must also emphasise developing and valuing computer literacy.

## Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the dynamics around social and mainstream media as the main tools for exploring social visibility in Trinidad throughout the rest of the volume. The data outlined above

serves as a snapshot of local internet and communications infrastructure, though this chapter also explores how existing social relations prior to digital media have now extended into digital usage – for example, local idioms such as ‘maco’ and ‘bacchanal’ can be equally applied in describing uses of social media.

With regard to non-commercial uses of Facebook, ‘maco’ and ‘bacchanal’ reflect the primacy of social visibility as a way of keeping people in check, where expressing or documenting oneself controversially results in public scrutiny and gossip. Visuality in the form of posting images or status updates attests to a certain truth in a given situation, yet that truth is also disputable and can become subject to speculation. On Facebook, truth is a construction. Individuals invest considerable effort in curating their profile with posts and photos because, as noted earlier, for Trinidadians a person’s identity is evidenced visually through the labour they undertake in creating themselves.<sup>32</sup> But visuality as truth also operates in other ways, as seen in the example of commercial uses of Facebook. For businesses that have been operating in the town for several years, a Facebook page does not necessarily assist in increasing business. Similarly, a new business which has attracted a number of ‘likes’ may not be as successful as an older one, even though its Facebook page seems to provide evidence of a thriving concern.

The issue of divides is a complex one in El Mirador, making the concept of polymedia especially useful in this context. In relation to cost and infrastructure, there is a clear increase in the proportion of the local population owning several digital devices and possessing a broadband connection in the home. The town has several WiFi hotspots and initiatives such as ‘one laptop per child’ have resulted in households having access to at least one computer. The contribution of this book is therefore to reveal how issues which today seem pertinent are not so much related to concrete infrastructure as to the social dimensions of ‘networks’. As increasing access and accessibility for more peripheral populations worldwide becomes ever more central to the agenda of policy makers, ‘building networks’ becomes relevant to debates around digital divides.<sup>33</sup> A context-based study of social media also illustrates how the more recent shift from debates around digital divides to digital inclusion emphasises types of usage, rather than the availability of access.<sup>34</sup>

This chapter builds on the concept of ‘digital resistance’, a term that was introduced in Chapter 1 and will gain further traction in Chapter 5, alongside arguments concerned with the social logic of visibility in Trinidadian society. Like other non-Western societies, Trinidad is a place where relationships, and regular acknowledgement of those

relationships, are central to social cohesion. It is still a country where saying 'good morning' or 'good day' after boarding a bus or taking a seat in the waiting area of the bank is important. Information is not simply regarded as useful facts; it is deeply entwined in the logics and values of the people who circulate it.

'Networking', for example, does not necessarily imply expanding one's own networks, but rather maintaining and positively acknowledging them, a concept which also relates to an urban-rural divide. In El Mirador networks mean family, friends and community, built on a sense of shared values, while networks from Port of Spain or other big cities are viewed as based on work and interests. These urban-based networks are determined more by the individual. For rural people who live in close proximity to one another and whose networks overlap with others', forming relationships simply for the sake of sharing resources, skills or information is viewed as taking advantage where it does not also entail extending the care, concern and acknowledgement that comes with being part of a 'community'.

Because maintaining networks and acknowledging relationships are so important, individuals must also decide which communications media they use, taking into account their relationship to the other party and the content they wish to convey. The norms of conduct and expectations around choosing the appropriate media for the correct purpose are still becoming established. What might be acceptable for one person may not be for another, for example, having phones on the table at a dinner with friends. Accordingly, the common theme throughout this chapter has been to highlight social context and polymedia as the factors which determine the fate of respective social media and their uses. These were the factors behind Facebook's flourishing in the town as well as its current decline, and which also explain why Instagram and Twitter have not been embraced significantly. So too, these factors can shed light on the relative lack of importance around social media in commerce and the problems of establishing internet-based free education in the area. Overall one might have expected that the intense sociality of a small town such as El Mirador would have been fertile ground for the intense sociality of social media. Yet the results have been much more nuanced. The reasons why social media initially takes off are often the same reasons why there has been a collective resistance or reluctance to embrace it, in the face of these potential social transformations.

The chapter has also emphasised the importance of sociality to Trinidadian life. Whether it is a film in the cinema, a television programme or a photo posted by an individual, the media product is simply

regarded as more enjoyable when part of a shared experience. A useful analogy can here be found in 'soca' (from soul calypso), the most popular genre of music played in Trinidad, from public fetes to private parties. Fast in tempo, high in energy and featuring a call and response style that is easy for listeners to grasp, soca gains the most momentum before Carnival, when new songs are released for the season. Guilbaut explains that the sense of dancing and movement soca invites is intended to heighten a sense of togetherness, likening the experience to Appadurai's 'community of sentiment', where people imagine and feel things together.<sup>35</sup> Sentiment and being together are very much part of Trinidadian values, in which 'people live good together'.<sup>36</sup> There is thus a constant tension between the desire to assert oneself as an individual, but also to remain included in group relationships. The entanglements and potential ambivalence of social media very much reflect the conflict between these basic values, as we shall see in the next chapter.

### 3

## Visual postings: showing individuality and remaining part of a group

One Friday night Cassandra was waiting for her friend Vanessa, Vanessa's sister and their cousin to pick her up for a night out in Port of Spain. They were heading for The Avenue, the most popular street in the city for bars, restaurants and nightclubs. Cassandra's family live in a wealthier part of El Mirador, and she and her brother have office jobs near the University of the West Indies. Although her brother does have more freedom in terms of going out, Cassandra's parents are by no means restrictive towards her. Recently Cassandra has considered herself to be more dedicated to Hinduism than her parents – notably since she met her boyfriend, who is very active in his family's temple.

That night Cassandra was wearing tight black jeans, a brightly coloured, asymmetrical top that partially revealed her midriff and expertly applied make-up, which she had learned from watching YouTube videos and reading beauty blogs. She had straightened her long hair so it hung lower down her back than usual. The girls were late as always and Cassandra was excited to leave. She took a few selfies, chose the best one, added a filter that brought out the plum shade of her lipstick and posted it to Facebook and Instagram. On Facebook Cassandra's selfie appeared after five or six photos of her cousin's birthday barbeque which she had posted the week before. These photos showed aunts, uncles, grandparents and grand-aunts and uncles, alongside dozens of cousins. The photos she had posted before the barbeque were of a *puja* at the temple she and her boyfriend attend. On Instagram her selfie appeared next to two others taken earlier in the week, which showed her outfits for work, and a photo of some presents that a friend had brought back for her from Florida. Although she posts several of her photos to both platforms, Cassandra's Facebook profile shows the other people in her life – her friends and family – more than on Instagram, where she posts

more selfies, pictures of things she has bought or been given and places to which she has travelled. The images posted to Facebook give more of a sense of Cassandra's social life and relationships, while Instagram shows more of her lifestyle and personal taste.

Drawing on these distinctions, this chapter compares the visual material posted to two platforms: Facebook and Instagram. Visual postings include images taken by the individuals posting them as well as those taken, appropriated and modified by others, for example memes. Unlike the other books in this series, which devote one chapter to presenting visual postings in the field site, this book has the opportunity to explore in greater depth some of the themes that have emerged from observing visual postings. This is due to having co-authored with Daniel Miller another separate volume, *Visualising Facebook: A Comparative Perspective*, specifically dedicated to comparing visual posts in Trinidad and England. In that text we present an analysis of visual posts across different age groups, from images of young children to posts by the middle-aged. The book's aim is to see, quite directly, whether photos posted to social media can constitute an ethnographic study in themselves. The ethnographic context became clearer when contrasting images from the Trinidadian site of El Mirador with those posted in the English field site of The Glades, where cultivating the middle ground of domestic suburban life is considered important. In El Mirador there is a sense of dualism in the simultaneous and equal attachments to tradition, religious values, family and community life on the one hand, and to freeing up and having a good time on the other.

It has always been true that people have multiple roles and that they often occupy these roles simultaneously. Roger Munro, for example, works in a men's clothing store in the mall. Throughout the day he is a sharply dressed salesman, but he is also Anika's father, Sheryl's partner, Eric's second son and Jaqueline's older brother's son. As is the case with Cassandra, Roger's multiple roles have an impact on the visual images of him posted to Facebook; he appears in a suit at a work function, and in a sweater and short pants (shorts) while at home on PlayStation with his friends or when taking his children to the beach. In accounting for these shifts, this chapter therefore focuses on social media from the perspective of the individual and his or her manifold roles in the context of multiple relationships.

The other main theme of this chapter is further development in approaches to social visibility in Trinidad. It will show that these are in some ways distinct from the results of our field studies in sites such as Grano in *Social Media in Southeast Italy* and Alto Hospicio in *Social*

*Media in Northern Chile*, despite there also being clear emphasis upon social visibility in these places.

The difference, however, is that in the societies studied by Nicolescu and Haynes social visibility is expressed relatively through conformity as opposed to through individual distinction. By contrast, in Trinidad, there is more of a general emphasis on the individual, even though the individual is always embedded in wider groups. In Italy, for example, style is largely conformist. Nicolescu explains that when women craft their appearance, most do not choose the style themselves; instead they emulate styles set by others, according to advice from hairdressers and beauticians. In Trinidad, on the other hand, style is based on the creativity of the individual. When it comes to crafting style and appearance, and to the ways in which people adorn and accessorise themselves, style here is largely a form of self-expression. Yet since this compulsion towards individual distinction is itself a strong social and normative pressure, Trinidad can be regarded as just as exemplary of social visibility – that is, to appear in an appropriate way – as these other two field sites.

However, the individual's experience also relates to the context in which they find themselves. So in discussion of normative structures that promote, constrain or influence the modes of self-expression, these often refer to family, class, gender and ethnicity. In *Visualising Facebook* it is clear how each of these social parameters is reflected in distinct genres of visual posting.

As explained below, it is for this reason that Instagram is used far less in El Mirador.<sup>1</sup> One of the defining features of Instagram is an emphasis on crafting aesthetically appealing, unique, clever or quirky images. The concern with posting photos that reflect good or skilled photography and interesting content centres around attracting 'likes' and followers globally from strangers, as well as locally from those in familiar networks. The bulk of those from El Mirador who post on Instagram regularly are young adults from middle-class backgrounds who are connected to interests and possibilities beyond what they experience day-to-day in their town. They have access to wider and more diverse content to photograph and post, conforming to the lifestyle and aesthetic genres that appeal on Instagram. Those from the town who post on Instagram thus have a more global outlook, one shared with the groups discussed in Chapter 5. The fact that far fewer people in El Mirador are on Instagram than Facebook reflects the status of the town as a place 'in between'. Ordinary working people in the town have fewer grounds for identifying with the global outlook they associate with Instagram – still a relatively

foreign innovation when compared to Facebook, which is viewed as being more 'Trini'. The more embedded people are in structured relationships such as family and the more their lives are spent predominantly in the town, the more they emphasise Facebook. Meanwhile, those who relate to others through shared interests and a more globally influenced lifestyle favour Instagram.

## Group-based relationships and images posted to Facebook

As is discussed in this chapter and developed further in the following one, 'family' in Trinidad is a collective noun. For several individuals family does not refer only to the nuclear family; it rather means being embedded within large, extended family networks and having to navigate numerous relationships. Digital media impacts upon these extremely complicated relationships and, from the point of view of the individual, makes life simultaneously easier and more difficult. The response of one young woman to a question on the survey conducted at the end of field work neatly encapsulates the tensions that may exist around social media in navigating these relationships. The question 'Does using social media make you happier?' was followed by the options 'happier', 'no difference' and 'unhappier'. This participant noted that she wanted to respond: 'It makes me happier and unhappier at the same time, so it's definitely not "no difference".' Although she was able to use social media to express certain views and interests, she was always conscious that these posts were seen by many in her different networks, including family members who would disagree with her perspective.

Unlike some theorisations which argue that Facebook facilitates more ego-centred networking<sup>2</sup> as opposed to emphasising traditional groups, in Trinidad and in El Mirador in particular a person could be Facebook friends with the same number of relatives as they could actual friends. Being friends on Facebook with just as many close and distant relatives as friends made through school, work or personal interests reflects the social dynamics observed in a small town. Here community life on social media is another forum in which everybody knows (or at least knows of) everybody else, and social relations are thus intensified. The result is that people carefully curate their Facebook profile to accord with the persona and reputation by which they wish to be known. A young man might see himself as a limer and project a 'gangsta' image

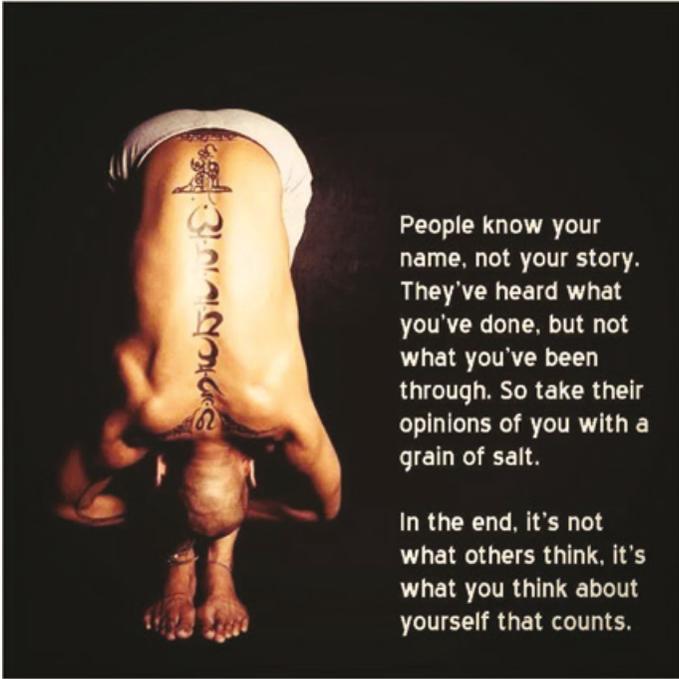
of himself, or a professional woman might seek to construct an image consistent with her vocation. Yet for most people, although they may cultivate an image of someone with individual tastes, aspirations and lifestyle, belonging to a group and upholding the values of family orientation are seen as equally important.

These dual values pose a tension for some living in a small town such as El Mirador. When sitting with people in their homes after work or at weekends, topics around family and gossip typically arise. When people talk about their friends or certain relatives, it is incredibly common to hear them say 'I don't care what they think' or 'she can say what she likes' or 'keep talking'. These sentiments of not caring what others think or of not listening to gossip are also posted to Facebook as moral memes (Figs 3.1a and 3.1b).

However, the individuals who post such messages *do* care what other people think, of course: they express feelings of hurt at being neglected or dismissed, and mostly they value relationships in which they are not taken for granted. There is also a contradiction in postings around not caring what others think or say, or being the subject of gossip, when in fact gossip, macoing and bacchanal are enjoyed as aspects of Trinidadian social life. (The idea of politics and political engagement as being subsumed by scandal and gossip is the focus of Chapter 6, for instance.)

For others, social media has assisted in sorting out some of this messiness. Cassandra is quite typical of young people who use several visual platforms such as Facebook and Instagram: she can maintain good relationships on one platform and express herself visually and more freely on the other. Older people tend to use Facebook only, and often their postings reflect family life as well as how they adhere to shared values, through both family photos and memes. One example is Deborah, who assists her daughter in running a clothes shop on the high street. The most common images she posts to Facebook are family photos with her daughter and grandson and memes such as 'Good Morning', 'Have a blessed day' or others that include religious sentiments reflecting her Christian beliefs or moral ideals around relationships (Figs 3.2a and 3.2b).

Yet Deborah is also a typical example of how showing individual style is equally important. Although in her mid-sixties, she also posts photos of herself at fetes which she attends with her daughter and family friends, as well as other parties where she has dressed for the occasion, or when she has recently coloured her hair or had her nails done (Figs 3.3a and 3.3b).



Figs. 3.1a, b Moral memes around relationships

UL



Sending you and yours  
lots of God's precious  
Blessings.

Have a Blessed  
Sunday.



UL



Figs. 3.2a, b Typical examples of memes with greetings posted by Deborah



**Figs. 3.3a, b** Further examples of images that Deborah has posted to Facebook: (a) getting her nails done; (b) having her hair coloured

Although Deborah is quite open in face-to-face conversation about expressing her opinion or giving commentary on what she has heard about others, she never posts updates on Facebook that she would consider too personal. Just as some people are reluctant to voice their political opinions on social media, Deborah simply would not post an update that would draw unwanted attention to herself. Self-expression is important to an extent, but acknowledging the values of others and co-existing with them peacefully is more so. Such awareness is given a

high priority in small towns such as El Mirador, where large, extended families are part of everyday life.

The most recent Trinidadian census data indicates that families have an average of two or three children, which is lower than the average of five children for the generation now aged above 50.<sup>3</sup> Families tend to live in the same area, unless a few relatives move to other parts of the country or migrate completely. Relatives are the first port of call for leisure and also for assistance with everyday tasks or larger projects, for instance renovating the home. In addition to the time relatives regularly spend together, several occasions throughout the year are celebrated by exchanging gifts and cards to acknowledge social relationships, such as graduation, Easter, Valentine's Day and, of course, Christmas.

From early December a number of posts appear which document the lead up to Christmas Day itself. These include memes with greetings, as well as recognisable pop culture references such as the 'Keep Calm' meme or Minions with Christmas paraphernalia. There are also a number of related events over this period, for example Christmas work parties, shopping with friends and family and visiting the country's more upmarket malls to see the decorations, all of which are photographed and posted to Facebook. More relatives visit the home at this time of year, and so many families will first clean thoroughly, repaint and hang new curtains before putting up the tree and decorating their houses. As the festival that celebrates family and family traditions, Christmas reinforces how Trinidadians are largely constituted by family relationships, including extended family. Christmas-themed posts with family members thus become more numerous throughout December (Figs 3.4a, 3.4b and 3.5).

Prior to social media, relatives bought Christmas and other cards for occasions from shops; they then exchanged them in person or posted them to each other. Around a decade ago cards purchased from shops were complemented by e-cards, a trend which has declined today.<sup>4</sup> To celebrate events and holidays, it is instead increasingly common to post photos that have been modified with decorative features, borders, text and filters to fit the theme, or photos that have been arranged to make a collage (Figs 3.6 and 3.7).

Posting decorated images is also common among new parents, especially following the birth of a baby and at significant ages, such as three months or one year. Photos of babies with different cousins, aunts or uncles are also often shared by parents. These sorts of images reveal how, from birth, children are embedded in wider relationships of



**Figs. 3.4a, b** Christmas images posted to Facebook: (a) a decorated tree; (b) and a mother and daughter posing with their newly dressed tree



Fig. 3.5 A Christmas greeting posted to Facebook



Fig. 3.6 A Valentine's Day collage



**Fig. 3.7** A birthday collage

extended family and community, as well as highlighting the importance of acknowledging them. Posts of the family together appear throughout the year, on both formal and informal occasions. These often commemorate the time spent together, while showing the extent to which everybody enjoyed themselves.

For occasions such as weddings, graduations, anniversaries, work functions and Hindu *pujas*, poses are as formal as the attire (Fig. 3.8). Relatives stand together in groups or in rows, posing with their hands clasped in front of them or by their side and with a neutral expression or only a slight smile. Photos such as these taken at formal occasions appear to replicate the style of portraiture more characteristic of official or bureaucratic documentation. When photos of occasions are posted to Facebook, they show the more serious aspects of the event through formal pictures such as these, but photos of eating, drinking and dancing might follow (Fig. 3.9).



**Fig. 3.8** A family posing for a photo taken at a wedding

For less formal occasions, for example where friends get together, posts of drinks are common to indicate that the group had a good time. Drinks with more aesthetic appeal, such as cocktails or shots of liqueur, are shown alone or arranged with the bar visible in the background, while more popular brands of beer are shown as groups of empty bottles. As in wider global trends, photos of food appear frequently. Some images display the dish only, especially if it is from a restaurant, but photos of cooking and eating dishes unique to Trinidad, or of people eating together in groups, are equally popular (Figs 3.10 and 3.11). Food and eating reflect socialising; they are also an important aspect of liming.

A couple of decades ago, the popular image of liming as a social activity mostly involved men together on the street or in another



**Fig. 3.9** Teenagers dancing on their graduation night



**Fig. 3.10** Friends eating in a restaurant



**Fig. 3.11** Trinidadian dishes prepared at home

publicly visible space, talking performatively and drinking. At the time of field work, liming was used as a much more general term for getting together, though it has always been considered more than just hanging out. Part of what makes a lime is the spirit of spontaneity and inclusivity. A lime might begin at one person's house, then move on to another's, before the group might relocate somewhere else altogether. For young people in El Mirador such as Cassandra and her friends, it was more popular to lime in Port of Spain. As well as posting images of food and drinks, young people out for a lime might post photos of their outfits or take group photos together. In bars or nightclubs, however, fewer people want to take photos of themselves – or to be seen taking photos of themselves. Social media photography businesses have increased in the last few years, and fill a notable gap in the industry. Professional photographers are hired by the venue to take photos of patrons (Fig. 3.12). They use very basic editing to enhance the images, then post them to their own website before sharing them on Facebook. The point is not to sell images, as people rarely want print copies, but rather to share digital images and tag themselves and their friends. Several photographs are taken and posted by photographers, some featuring individuals posing alone in their outfits and others groups posing together (Fig. 3.13). Social media photographers



**Fig. 3.12** An example of social media photography

are seen at every pre-Carnival fete (Fig. 3.14), but they are also hired throughout the year, especially on Friday and Saturday nights at more up-market clubs.

As well as going out in friendship groups, entire families or some relatives might lime together; these events tend to be lower-key events and are usually based within a home. However, liming and other forms of public socialising are not seen as something only young people enjoy. Parents will often lime with their friends and, in observing images posted of women in particular, seem to make an effort to ensure that motherhood is not seen to be disrupting their public image. New mothers might post images of themselves out with others or in going-out clothes as much as they did prior to having children, as well as posting the types of photos with their babies and relatives noted earlier. As with being photographed in an outfit by a social media photographer, the 'going out' types of images are seen as important for showing individual



Fig. 3.13 Friends at a fete

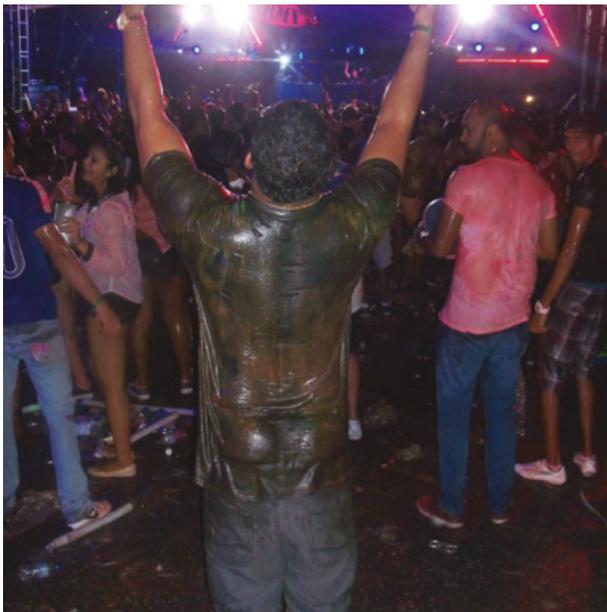


Fig. 3.14 A pre-Carnival fete



**Fig. 3.15** An opening of a theme night at a night club

lifestyle aspirations. However, the location also serves as a backdrop to reflect liming and having a good time (Fig. 3.15).

As opposed to public places, when homes appear in the background of photos they function as both the context for relationships and as a reflection of personal taste. Individuals might pose by themselves or in groups showing outfits in the living room, bedroom or front of the house. The inside or exterior of the house is clearly visible where the home is the setting of wider family relationships. Yet the home is also a site for expressing individual taste and identity. Where the décor of the bedroom, living room or garden features are clearly intended to be shown in the photo, the home's appearance is also an extension of the individual. As with accessorising outfits or decorating and maintaining

homes, a similar effort is invested in cars. These are generally kept clean and shiny, though others – especially cars belonging to younger men – appear to have had more expense devoted to modifying their appearance with new colours, adornments and accessories. On Facebook young men and women might post photos posing with cars, and more young men post images of entire cars or features of cars alone (Figs 3.16 and 3.17). There are several instances of groups of men or women posing together with cars, dressed in their outfits before liming (Fig. 3.18). However, these trends are more common among young people and young parents, and the emphasis on showing cars as emblematic of lifestyle reduces with age.

Although several genres of image appear on Facebook, the most striking common features are the importance of acknowledging relationships and the emphasis on style. Individuality is shown through poses of the body, hairstyles, make-up, outfits and shoes – even when people are photographed in groups. Posts of families are either very formal, for example at specific occasions, or informal, taken within the home. And although people would not take pictures of themselves at their most casual at home, some attention is always paid to appropriate clothing: men, for example, would not appear ‘bare back’ (without a shirt). However, Facebook continues to be viewed as the more social platform, where maintaining relationships and social norms is prevalent.



**Fig. 3.16** Image of a car posted by a young man



**Fig. 3.17** Image showing friends posing with a car, posted by a young man



**Fig. 3.18** A group of women posing with a car before going out

Rather than using images to display an idealised or improved version of themselves, individuals also indicate their multiple roles and identification with different groups. On Facebook this takes the form of showing family relationships and community orientation. As well as living in a small town where preserving good relationships and maintaining ideals around living peacefully in a community are important, depictions of group orientation often relate to the communities created in Trinidad through structural relations and the social divisions perpetuated historically, through colonialism.<sup>5</sup> Today the structural categories of gender, class and ethnicity intersect in complex ways. Trinidadians have developed a number of strategies for showing that they belong to different categories of ethnicity (and also religion), and these are worn and shown on the body.<sup>6</sup> In examining visual postings on social media, we also see how these categories are expressed visually. There are several forms of differentiated identity that are made visible through Facebook postings. This section provided some brief examples of personal relationships to immediate and extended families. Yet social structures also create various sets of affinity that people negotiate, including class, ethnicity and gender. The next section gives a brief background to class and ethnic relations in Trinidad with reference to a study of social media in El Mirador, illustrated through examples of visual posts. By contrast, the discussion of Instagram posts that follows explores how relationships of structure are subsumed by aesthetic and creative expression around taste and lifestyle that reflect global orientations.

## Structures of ethnicity and class

As much as the context of family and other group relationships appear in images posted to Facebook, so do the cultural frames of class and ethnicity. It can further be argued that social media has become an important means for negotiating and contesting class positioning and ethnic stereotyping. As is explored later in this chapter, images can indicate identifying with a class higher than one's own, while some aspects of stereotyping around Indo-Trinidadians and Afro-Trinidadians are also apparent between the respective groups. Visual posts are therefore not merely a means of self-expression, but also a way to show creatively and playfully how people accept or reject their structural positioning within the society.

Trinidadian society pre- and post-independence has been described by scholars as divided, antagonistic and exclusionary along the lines

of ethnicity and class.<sup>7</sup> Historically colonial powers modernised the country and established a social order based on a hierarchy of ethnicity, class, property and labour; those of European backgrounds owned and administered land while enslaved Africans and their descendants and, later, indentured East Indians provided labour. One result of this colonial past is that economic developments were, and continue to be, divided along ethnic lines, reflected in the country's party politics today. Malik describes Trinidadian society as characterised by an absence of universally acceptable cultural values; instead certain norms, as inherited from the colonial system, are considered desirable by all (for example, authority and justice).<sup>8</sup> The co-existence of different ethnic groups and their particular values has been likened to *callaloo*, a Trinidadian dish in which different vegetables are blended and served together.<sup>9</sup> Following emancipation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ex-enslaved Africans pursued middle-class aspirations through achieving educational and cultural status. They subsequently entered professional and civil service vocations, as they lacked the economic means to acquire property. Up until the 1950s ex-indentured East Indians remained in more rural parts of the country, such as the south, and sought wealth through acquiring land.<sup>10</sup> This has been one of the main reasons attributed to the exclusion of the East Indian population from public life, government and decision-making during the early years of independence.

After independence the People's National Party was founded by the soon-to-be first Prime Minister, Eric Williams. It was based on an ethos of anti-colonialism and the eradication of Trinidad's colonial heritage and its legacy within institutions of power. During the 1950s and 1960s the Afro-Trinidadian middle class rose to power, seeking to build a new nation in which Trinidadian identity was based primarily on a Creole or Afro-Trinidadian sense of identity. Several scholars have noted that the complexities and antagonisms within Trinidad as a plural society have more to do with a sense of Indo-Trinidadian nationalism and Afro-Trinidadian nationalism, perpetuated by politics and ideologies at the national level, than with actual differences between groups when they co-exist in places such as El Mirador.<sup>11</sup> As is examined in Chapter 6, genuine engagement with party politics over social media is generally avoided. The exceptions are individuals who are known to advocate certain political parties in the town or those whose family have been long-time supporters of a party, in which case images such as these taken during campaigning are more common (Figs 3.19 and 3.20).



**Fig. 3.19** Photo taken at a PNM (People's National Movement) political campaign event

In relation to contemporary Trinidad, Yelvington argues that 'ethnicity permeates all of the society's social, cultural and political institutions and practices because ethnicity is implicated in the power struggles of everyday life'.<sup>12</sup> In another volume he explains how Trinidadians also see and relate to one another as 'having' a class, gender and ethnicity.<sup>13</sup> Mohammed describes that people make these forms of group identification visible to others through the way they dress and speak, what they cook and eat, where they live and how they build their houses.<sup>14</sup> Trinidadian identity, therefore, involves a dual process of firstly contextualising oneself and others within certain groups and institutional structures and secondly making visible to others in wider society (to varying degrees) the kinds of identity markers that Mohammed describes.

In the first chapter I established that Trinidad has historically had a culture of multiple selves. What was visible on a given person's outside



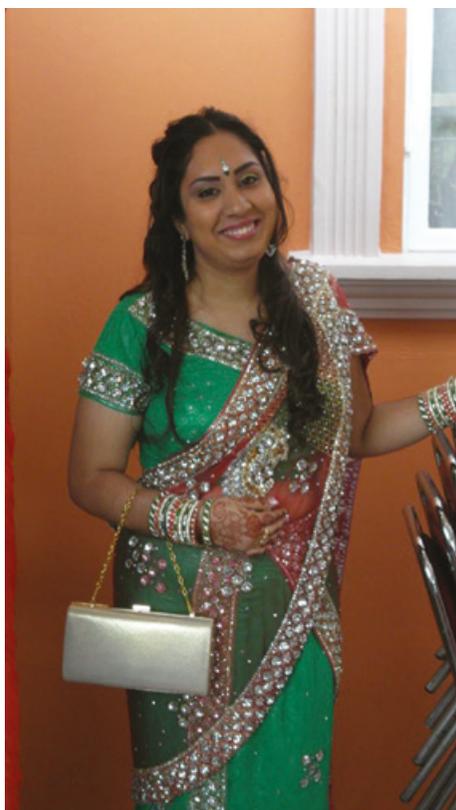
**Fig. 3.20** Photo showing a group of friends at a PNM political campaign event

was largely attributed to being positioned by categories of class and ethnicity. One way to counter such positioning is through projecting a face which becomes a mask, hiding the person beneath.<sup>15</sup> Khan further explains that the society consists predominantly of two very different cultural groups, brought together to co-exist alongside one another. What has resulted is a circumstance in which each group has learned some of 'the ways' of the other group, while rejecting others. As a consequence, Trinidadians 'develop a collection of masks or personalities and don whichever mask is suitable for each occasion'.<sup>16</sup>

Divisions between ethnic groups also occurred geographically, as the north of the country was predominantly urban and Afro-Trinidadian, while the south was more rural and Indo-Trinidadian. El Mirador – and, by extension, the way in which ethnicity and class are portrayed on social media by its residents – is perhaps something of an anomaly in Trinidad,

as the town is more diverse than elsewhere in the country. In El Mirador more families are of mixed heritage, and there are higher instances of people of very different levels of income living side by side in the same street or neighbourhood. Images posted on social media suggest that El Mirador may have more diverse displays of identification with different ethnic groups, as well as more diverse social backgrounds.

One example of this is the way in which East Indian cultural heritage is made most visible through clothing worn for religious holidays and events such as Diwali, weddings or *pujas* (Hindu prayers). Men and women of different ages enjoy shopping for new outfits and taking photos before leaving their homes and during the event. However, in El Mirador, extended families often include mixed Indo-Afro nuclear families, and there would normally be at least a few relatives of another ethnic background in attendance. As well as those of East Indian background, it is fairly common to see individuals of mixed heritage or Afro-Trinidadians wearing Indian cultural clothing (Figs 3.21 and 3.22).



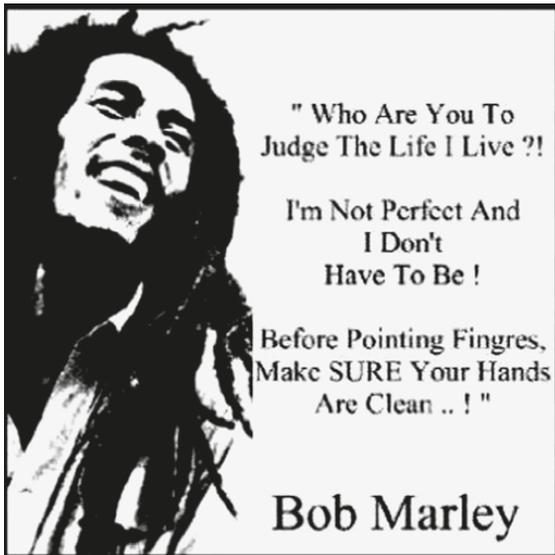
**Fig. 3.21** A guest dressed for a Hindu wedding



**Fig. 3.22** Photo of friends at a Hindu wedding

On the other hand, Afro-centrism is embraced when manifested through Rastafarian culture, with Bob Marley featuring in posts on T-shirts, tourist sites, song quotes and other images (Figs 3.23a, 3.23b and 3.23c). Rastafarian culture as embodied by the Marley icon is celebrated by both Afro-Trinidadians and Indo-Trinidadians.

Some posts reflecting individual style make explicit claims of ethnic heritage, such as images of 'African' hair and hairstyles. Yet others avoid such positioning altogether by posting more international influences around lifestyle, consumption and trips abroad (seen more in images posted to Instagram and discussed in the section below). Despite the ethnic distinctions that have characterised Trinidadian society, there has also been a long history of peaceful co-existence<sup>17</sup> – dynamics which are particularly evident on Facebook. Different ethnic groups are also comfortable posting images that connote cultures outside of their own. Co-existing with good relationships is perhaps most apparent in the use of humour, which is generally an important social mechanism in Trinidad (as discussed in Chapter 6). However, specifically in relation to social media, humorous visual posts also reflect how Kevin Birth establishes stereotypes as a means for interpreting social relationships.<sup>18</sup> Young Indo-Trinidadian, Afro-Trinidadian and mixed-background men, for example, will commonly refer to each other in banter as 'dawg' or 'nigga' (Figs 3.24 and 3.25).<sup>19</sup> These terms, associated with the 'gangsta' image discussed below, are used playfully between friends and are not



**Figs. 3.23a–c** Images of Bob Marley: (a) photo taken at a Bob Marley tourist site; (b) a meme posted to a timeline; (c) wearing a Bob Marley T-shirt



**Figs. 3.23a–c** Continued

generally considered offensive (although some people do use them in a deliberate and derogatory way).

Young men who portray themselves through the ‘gangsta’ image also post images of money, memes about making money and images of themselves posing in expensive, labelled outfits or holding high-end alcohol brands. So too they see themselves as identifying with the intersections of race, class and gender that typically characterise US hip-hop culture.<sup>20</sup> Similar to other social groups in El Mirador, these young men have often known each other from a young age; they may have attended the same schools or be related through extended family. In a given group of *liming partners* (friends), several are probably cousins or second cousins, and come from a range of economic backgrounds. When posting images on Facebook they often tag each other if they are out together, thereby acknowledging their shared friendship group.

In images, class is conveyed through the location of photos, with those from peripheral areas (such as the town) taking photos in the



**Figs. 3.24, 3.25** Memes appropriating ethnic stereotyping posted by young men

surrounding area, at the beach or on trips to recognisable places in Port of Spain. For those from a more middle-class background, photos also include trips abroad – a higher household income is indicated by holidays to destinations that are further away.

Historically class relations in Trinidad have been heavily entwined with race relations.<sup>21</sup> The ways to make wealth and status visible include overt forms of achievement in education, embracing British and North American culture and acquiring branded or recognisably expensive material goods for the home and/or oneself.<sup>22</sup> For these reasons, as regards Facebook, people are able to create an impression that they are from a higher class than is actually the case. Similar to findings in Spyer's field site in *Social Media in Northeast Brazil*, those from lower income groups can post photos taken in more up-market places or with cars, in resorts (if they are attending a fete) and with regular new outfits, suggesting their association with more affluent lifestyles (Figs 3.26a and 3.26b).

Today, however, the sense of class is increasingly linked to the idea of cosmopolitanism – for example, through travel to more remote destinations. Instagram therefore provides a contrast to Facebook, both in how the platform is used and in the demographic groups using it. While those who use Instagram also use Facebook and post the same images to both platforms, there is also a marked difference both in the content they post and in when they post to the respective platforms. Instagram also reflects a distinction whereby young people in particular use the platform to manage their images, cultivating individual style and showing their tastes, lifestyle practices and aspirations.<sup>23</sup> In addition, the fact that Instagram is attracting more young, middle-class people also indicates the complexities of class in Trinidad. Here the features of the platform enable users not only to post images associated with lifestyle, but also to convey a sense of aesthetics through modifying images.

## **Instagram: showing individual lifestyles and tastes**

Although Instagram is widely used in Trinidad, it tends to be patronised more by middle-class young people who live in metropolitan areas rather than in El Mirador (with some exceptions). The number of close informants using Instagram regularly is fewer than ten, and all have social lives that are based in the town, as well as connections to more urban centres. Some young people in El Mirador who owned smartphones



**Fig. 3.26a, b** Photos showing lifestyles of apparent affluence: (a) a day trip to a beach near Port of Spain; (b) posing with a car in a new outfit

other than BlackBerries did start using Instagram, but after a while their usage declined as they did not gain the kind of momentum in attracting followers as they did attracting friends on Facebook.

Once established, the ubiquity of Facebook became its main attraction; Instagram in turn may be of interest to those who wish to distinguish themselves from the majority. For example, the most popular type of usage in the town is by young men who run bars, aiming to attract people they perceive to be 'like them' – namely, those who 'want a nice place to hang out with a bit more class and not like the local rum shops'. Two young men in particular use Facebook and Instagram to promote their newly renovated bars by photographing well-dressed patrons and posting the photos to the bars' profiles.

Middle-class young adults (most of whom hold university degrees) post images around lifestyle, consumption and travel on Instagram. The visual affordances of filters and borders are used to glamorise their chosen subjects. By contrast, the images most circulated on Facebook concern friends and family, but almost every timeline will contain humorous or moralising memes that the profile owner has posted themselves or is tagged in. The visual markers that indicate a clear class element in Instagram are those images that tend to show individuals in up-market or fashionable places, on holidays, or displaying things they have bought or received (especially branded goods), for example jewellery, food and drinks (Figs 3.27a, 3.27b, 3.27c and 3.27d). Cuisine and beverages are also photographed for the location in which they are being consumed, as well as for their aesthetic attributes.

Whereas Facebook shows different aspects of one's life and relationships, Instagram is used primarily to portray lifestyle and individual aspirations. Of the 267 participants for the study who became Facebook friends with the research profile created for the field work, only 61 also use Instagram. Although Instagram was used far less at that time in El Mirador than Facebook and WhatsApp, it was still more popular than Twitter. Facebook invites reciprocal viewing, as being connected as friends means that both parties can see the posts of the other (unless they have changed their security settings). Instagram, like Twitter, invites more one-sided 'following'. While Twitter was perceived as less social because of its emphasis on information (regardless of the individual who posted it), Instagram perhaps has greater resonance for Trinidadians because of its highly visual nature. In more urban areas Instagram is more popular, and some businesses have added it to their social media marketing to display images of products. Individuals also craft and display images of goods similar to Facebook



**Figs. 3.27a–d** Typical lifestyle images posted to Instagram: (a) a holiday resort; (b) paragliding on holiday; (c) a new designer watch; (d) a cheese platter



Figs. 3.27a-d Continued

collages, and embellishments are also popular on Instagram (Figs 3.28 and 3.29).

Dave is an example of someone who differentiates content he posts to Instagram and Facebook, and whose Facebook use now is declining in favour of Instagram. Dave grew up in El Mirador but now lives on the outskirts of Port of Spain, where he works in a shop that sells imported designer clothes as well as pieces by local designers. He designs and makes dresses himself, and has always been keen on fashion. More recently he has used Facebook less frequently because he only likes to post photos of outfits – his own and other fashion he finds inspiring (Figs 3.30a, 3.30b and 3.30c). On Instagram he can follow and be followed by people who have similar interests, rather than being under the gaze of people who have known him his entire life and who might criticise him for being too visible about his concern with fashion.

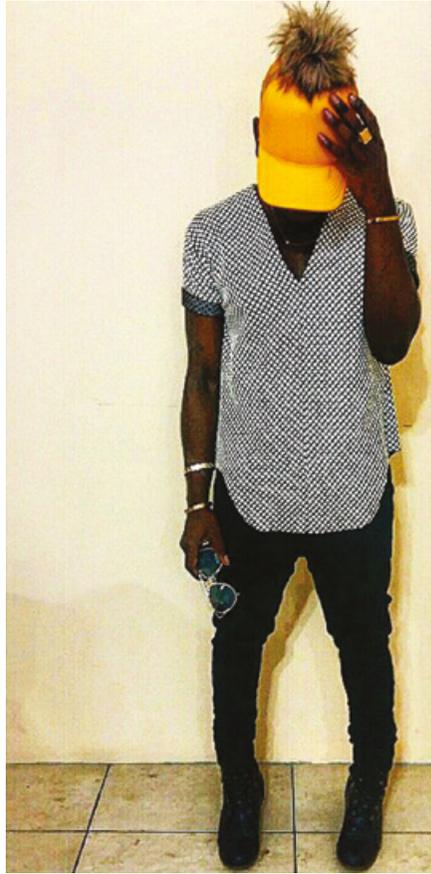


**Fig. 3.28** A collage from a cinema outing to see the film *Iron Man*

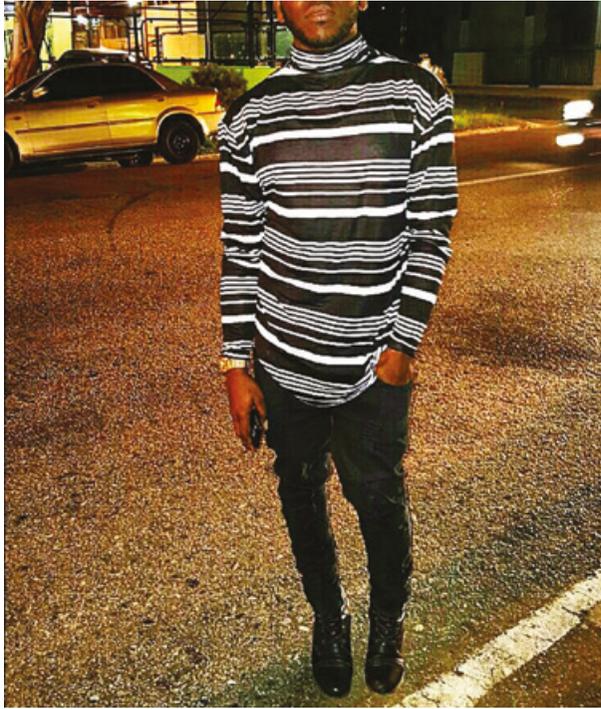


**Fig. 3.29** A collage of an avocado

Although many Trinidadians in the town like to maintain a sense of style regardless of age, those who are more interested in fashion and global trends seem more likely to use Instagram more regularly. Over the last couple of years 3G and WiFi broadband have become more readily available in homes; with them has come a new trend among university-educated, young professional women in their early twenties, from a range of ethnic backgrounds. As well as posting images around friends and family, and experimenting with hair, make-up and outfits, they also post images that show more ‘global’ influences (Figs 3.31a, 3.31b and 3.31c). The relationship with the wider world is explored in more depth in Chapter 5, where global aspirations are associated with distinct groups in the town. Here global influences are shown through images of different foods and dishes from American chains and other restaurants in malls or Port of Spain – as shared on Facebook, but to a greater extent on Instagram.



**Figs. 3.30a–c** Images posted by Dave to Instagram showing (a) fashion; (b) new branded goods; (c) new outfits



**Figs. 3.30a–c** Continued

The young women who post around a more urban lifestyle actively follow fashion blogs. They subscribe to their YouTube channels, following them on social media and experimenting with the styles they have observed from bloggers in the US, UK and Asia (particularly Singapore). The fashion and lifestyle bloggers and make-up and style gurus they follow present a contrast to the image of the ‘all-American girl’ that became popular in Trinidad with Hannah Montana. The social media microcelebrities these young women follow also have their own sense of ‘glocality’ – global images are appropriated in multiple local sites and are therefore women that these participants feel they can relate to.<sup>24</sup> Popular social media style icons are from countries with similar histories and cultures to Trinidad – that is, places with multiple ethnic backgrounds, a colonial past and a growing middle class. Several of the bloggers are the same age as their followers (in their early to late twenties) and generally their blogs emphasise beauty, consumption and lifestyle. Very few of the bloggers young women follow describe or give advice about romantic or sexual relationships; instead they post about being close to one’s family and values with which young Trinidadian women can identify.



**Figs. 3.31a–c** Images posted to Instagram showing global influences: (a) food from Port of Spain; (b) and (c) holidays in the US



**Figs. 3.31a–c** Continued

Posts by young women on Instagram reflect the interests, and to an extent the aesthetics, of the images posted by lifestyle bloggers, while also emphasising a lifestyle associated with travel and mobility. Most residents in El Mirador are able to take a holiday in their sister island of Tobago at least once in their lifetime, so images of Tobago as well as beaches and natural leisure spots around Trinidad are common on Facebook. However, for young people who use Instagram, alongside Tobago appear images from trips to other Caribbean countries, such as St Lucia or Granada, or visits to the US, Canada or the UK. These photos are usually posted to both Instagram and Facebook (Figs 3.32a, 3.32b and 3.32c). On the latter, however, the images might show the person in front of landmarks or scenery, while those on Instagram might focus more upon the food and other features of the destination, taken in close-up and modified with filters.

Family photos do appear on Instagram, especially if they are taken on holidays abroad, but less often compared to Facebook. Family relationships are also rarely the main concern of images on Instagram; instead, photos of families together might show outfits, such as at a Hindu wedding, or the food and décor at a party or other event. Friends often post and tag photos together on outings or at restaurants, bars and parties. Similar to Facebook, photos are not posted at fetes as people would rather photos were taken of them rather than taking their own. Posting



**Figs. 3.32a–c** Images posted to Instagram showing a trip to Cuba



**Figs. 3.32a–c** Continued

a ‘good’ photo is also important to young people, even where they might take photos of objects in the town or less elaborate meals or local dishes (Figs 3.33a, 3.33b, 3.33c and 3.33d). The subjects of photographs are often arranged, and the image is modified with a filter to make the scene look more appealing.

Across the period of field work Instagram declined in popularity among those who did not have networks of friends, colleagues or classmates from university outside of the town. For those who had more numerous and wider urban networks, Instagram was used to show some similarity in taste and choices of venues to go out to that of other young people living in more urban parts of the country. Some posted just as many images of hairstyles, make-up or outfits on Instagram and Facebook, while others posted more on Instagram with hashtags to attract ‘likes’ from strangers with similar interests or aesthetics.



**Figs. 3.33a–d** Images taken in El Mirador of popular fast food, a simple meal cooked at home and a bowl of the Trinidadian dish ‘cow heel soup’



**Figs. 3.33a–d** Continued

Because fewer networks of extended family and friends are on Instagram, some young people might be more playful with photos than they would be on Facebook.<sup>25</sup> As described in each chapter of this book, although crafting self-image and social visibility are important to people living in El Mirador, so is retaining a sense of normativity. For example, wearing a fashionable, well put-together outfit, with carefully done hair and colourful make-up, is acceptable for a Friday night out. The extremes in terms of visibility increase towards Carnival time, where wearing a more revealing outfit with short pants (very short shorts) is considered acceptable for women. However, the same short pants would attract comments if worn when grocery shopping on the main street, even when the weather is extremely hot. So although it is more likely for Trinidadians to create a sense of style that is eye-catching – or to ‘put themselves out there’ – in contrast with other field sites in the study, there are still normative rules for acceptable kinds of visibility. (Political discussion is another such example, as discussed in Chapter 6.) Individuals who feel that they do not align with these norms may post more images on Instagram, as the audience of peers is far smaller than on Facebook.

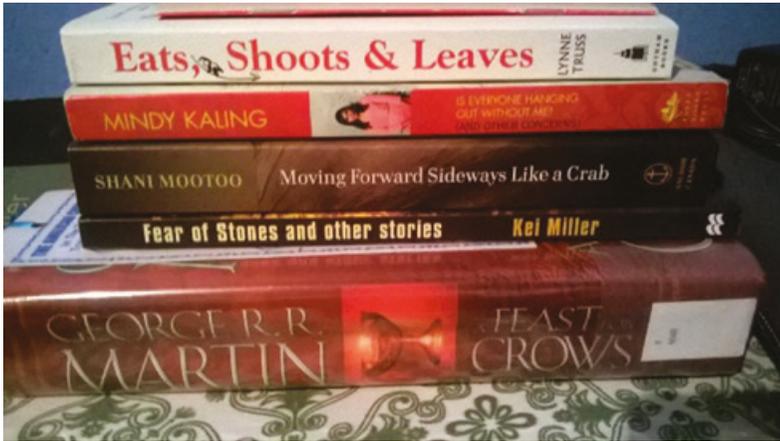
Glenn, for example, is 23 years old and fluent in Spanish, having returned from Bogota where he was teaching English for the past year. Although he has several close friends in El Mirador, he has found it difficult to return to social life in the town. He is not enthusiastic about going to any of the local bars or hangouts, apart from one new one that was opened by a family friend and which has a renovated section that resembles a café, with free WiFi. When Glenn does go out, he prefers to go out in the city. He has started to post less on Facebook because

some family members and friends that he grew up with but no longer considers close started to comment (in person) about his posts. As he explained, ‘They don’t really get my humour, they think I’m saying something serious when I’m just messing around’. Glenn’s current close group of friends had become more involved in environmental awareness activities while he was away, organising beach clean-ups and promoting recycling. These sorts of activities are not the kind many people in El Mirador would be familiar with, so his friends already stand apart in terms of the usual interests of young people in the town. Glenn posts photos of some of their activities, and when he is not spending time with them he is at home, mostly reading (Figs 3.34a, 3.34b and 3.34c).

Glenn does not quite fit the typical interests of young men in El Mirador, for example cars. Generally material interests are perceived as being an extension of a person; once a person has portrayed themselves as having certain interests, they are part of a certain group, becoming categorised and treated accordingly. A young man such as Glenn, who is more interested in books and environmental concerns, having lived in Colombia, therefore has experiences and interests to which most of his family and friends could not relate. Instagram becomes a space where



**Figs. 3.34a–c** Images posted to Instagram by Glenn: (a) a Hogwarts from *Harry Potter* keychain ordered online; (b) assorted novels showing literary taste; (c) an ornament in the shape of a hatching turtle



**Figs. 3.34a–c** Continued

he can express himself to his networks of choice: friends with whom he shares common interests and who he finds like-minded.

In direct contrast to Glenn is the example of Avi, whose relatability and popularity among several different groups in the town are integral to his business's success. Avi invested in an upstairs bar in the centre of town and renovated it to resemble the aesthetic of bars on The Avenue. He employed some of the friends he grew up with as barmen and security personnel. The busiest nights are Thursday to Saturday, when he invites local DJs and holds theme nights, especially on Saturdays.

Avi paid careful attention to developing the appearance and atmosphere of the bar. At the entrance hangs a backdrop where patrons can take photos; on busy nights Avi hires a social media photographer. There are two billiard tables and a dance floor, as well as a sitting area and smoking area, so the bar is larger than most in the town. Avi was inspired by the idea that there are a lot of young people in El Mirador who have the disposable income to go out and do not want the rum shops or the 'old time' types of places liked by previous generations. The young people of El Mirador are also at least an hour from Port of Spain, however, and driving late at night is still dangerous. Most young people in El Mirador know of at least one other person who has been in a serious car accident. So Avi wanted to 'bring a bit of town to our side'.

As the owner of the bar, Avi also has to personify the type of patrons he wants to attract. He is always well dressed with pressed shirts, a gold chain, some rings (but not too much 'bling'), nice trousers and pointed black leather shoes. He has a reputation to uphold – a wealthy man, he is perceived as having class – but he is also a limer who drinks with the boys, is popular with women and enjoys having a good time. Avi posts the same photos to Facebook as Instagram, often featuring nights out at the bar. He posts some selfies in outfits for going out and also shows expensive branded goods, such as watches and sunglasses that he has been given or has bought for himself (Figs 3.35a, 3.35b and 3.35c). Avi also has a young son, and often posts photos of him or the two of them together. On the one hand, Avi wants to show that he is a caring and loving father; on the other, that he is cool and likes to enjoy himself. While both are not mutually exclusive in Trinidad, it may be more stressful for men to navigate these simultaneous roles. Men who pride themselves on having a reputation and credibility within street culture are also perceived as callous and irresponsible. By posting images of different facets of his life to Facebook and Instagram, Avi portrays himself as family-oriented as well as in possession of wealth, popularity and reputation.

In examples from Instagram, individual lifestyle and aspirations as related to class appear in two ways. Firstly, class is projected in the sense of having more disposable income and the ability to access a wider range of tastes and lifestyles. Secondly, there are indicators of class in relation to aesthetics, where individuals show that they can make images of the mundane clever, crafty or interesting. Instead of posting images of nature and scenery, for example, which everybody can appreciate as being beautiful, they might post everyday items, arranged and modified, where certain people have to 'get it' to appreciate the image.<sup>26</sup> However, being too crafty or clever can also have repercussions.



**Figs. 3.35a–c** Images posted to Instagram by Avi: (a) a children’s party; (b) a new pair of Prada sunglasses; (c) wads of cash in \$TT and \$USD



**Figs. 3.35a–c** Continued

In Chapter 2 I described how an important part of Trinidadian social life is the heightening of a sense of togetherness and enjoying a community of sentiment, where people imagine and feel things together. The convention around images posted to Facebook, and the meanings and intentions behind posting them, are easily understood by others. For example, it is more common that when photos of babies are taken, rather than having an artistic photo-shoot of the newborn, or showing aspects of the newborn such as a stylistic focus on feet or hands, they will be portrayed with family members. On special occasions, the image of the baby might include borders of hearts to indicate love, or Christmas imagery if the photo is intended to be circulated to loved ones as a card would have been previously. These kinds of visual symbols are more easily understood; they reinforce the baby's position, embedded in a group of social relations, rather than emphasising him or her as an individual through creative aesthetics. Even those from the town who consider themselves artistic rarely post artistic images or images of their artwork.

One of the reasons behind this is that being too creative or unique with crafting photos can come across as wanting to stand apart from the crowd too much, thereby risking being viewed as pretentious by others. These kinds of unfavourable attention or inappropriately individualistic forms of social visibility are explored further throughout the

volume and are one of the key explanations for the lack of overt political engagement given in Chapter 6.

On the other hand, one of the intentions behind using Instagram is to attract followers from outside a person's networks. It is therefore a more appealing platform if one is being clever with images or posting more creative photography. But those whose lives mostly revolve around time spent in the town tend to leave Instagram, as they have less content to post around lifestyle themes. Since the end of the period of field work, Instagram has boomed in Trinidad. However, my evidence suggests that the boom in usage is confined largely to urban areas, reflecting the divides explored in Chapter 1 and the narrative of El Mirador as a place 'in between'. A smaller proportion of the population in the town are oriented toward more cosmopolitan and urban lifestyles, and are consequently more likely to post regularly on Instagram.

## Conclusion

This chapter began by arguing that the images people post on social media platforms show their multiple roles in day-to-day life. The reasons for posting multiple images do not relate simply to showing off or portraying an idealised version of oneself, as popular criticisms suggest. Posting images of different aspects of oneself also shows identification with the different groups to which one belongs.

On Facebook, this takes the form of showing family relationships and group orientation. Where individuality is shown, it is through personal style. Images on Facebook also display identification with certain groups, determined by structures based on ethnicity and class. Social positioning based on institutions is not only visible on Facebook through dress and styling, but can also be treated humorously and playfully through memes and appropriations of stereotypes from popular culture.

On Instagram, by contrast, individuality is shown through posting images around lifestyle and aspirations, where people identify with interests and vocations of others from outside of the town. Middle-class youth tend to gravitate towards Instagram as a way of showing upward mobility through participation in a certain lifestyle, their incomes allowing them to visit particular places and consume particular goods, without appearing conceited to those in their extended networks. Part of the reason why Instagram has not attracted the same popularity in El Mirador as in other parts of Trinidad is that the significant number of young people who do use the platform do not have the kind of consumer-based lifestyle to document and aestheticise in the way that Instagram trends

require in order to attract 'likes' and followers. The types of visual posts that populate Facebook – for example, moral memes that are discussed in Chapter 6 – do not conform to the aesthetic norms popular with those who have large numbers of followers on Instagram. When people do not have as many lifestyle events, trips or outings or as many new branded goods to show, they tend to mainly use Facebook, where sharing visual posts instead contributes largely to maintaining good relationships.

The obvious, yet erroneous, way to interpret the material presented in this chapter would be to conclude that Facebook is a strong example of social visibility because it appears more conformist and less individualised, while Instagram is more individualistic and reflective of self-expression. However, the norms of trends on Instagram and the affordances of the platform in terms of modifying images also compel conformity and a normativity of aesthetics. The young women who post images around beauty and lifestyle, for example, also emulate styles from images seen on international blogs and reposted on Instagram. Members of Instagram are invited to express themselves creatively as individuals by posting unique or interesting images. Yet overwhelmingly the images and genres that appear there are also conformist, adhering to prescribed aesthetics through a set selection of filters, borders and other modifications. The images that attract the most followers and 'likes' by participants from El Mirador are posted by those who promote certain kinds of wordly and consumer-based lifestyles.

Both Facebook and Instagram are distinctly Trinidadian in these respects. Uses of Facebook have more continuity with traditionally 'Trinidadian' values of showing conformity, of belonging to, adhering to the norms of and respecting certain groups, while showing individuality through styling. Images on Facebook meanwhile are expected to convey individuality through conformist ideals in the same way that Carnival does – that is, where people can be individuals, but in clearly defined spaces. Instagram thereby reflects the continuity in Trinidadian class consciousness as one that is outward-looking and aspires to internationalism. The clever, crafted and artistic images that are posted to Instagram are specifically intended to attract the gaze of those from outside Trinidad who have more global interests – thereby seeking social visibility of a more cosmopolitan kind.

There are normativities and social visibility interlinked with categories of ethnicity, class and gender, but there are also normativities that are bound to Facebook and Instagram. If social media can be a place in which we live, Facebook is indeed a Trinidadian place. Instagram instead attempts to move beyond what social visibility implies in a small town, and so reflects social media as globalisation, not localisation.

## 4

# Relationships: polymedia and the family

This chapter shifts the focus from uses of social media in relation to individual identifications with different groups to its uses in the context of intimate relationships. From childhood, Trinidadians are embedded in wider relationships to their family and community, as was explored in the preceding chapter. Here we saw the importance of continually acknowledging and reinforcing these connections, even in situations where one might want to express oneself as an individual. If there are particular social norms as to how visibility is created, social visibility takes on a new significance in how it simultaneously constitutes the family. The visibility of relationships was important long before digital technologies and social media, serving to legitimise them within a given community.<sup>1</sup> Yet despite the significance of visibility to relationships prior to technology, it may be even more so today, in a contemporary world characterised by relationships of fragmentation and separation.

When social media is used in the context of family and other intimate relationships, it adds a further layer to the visibility of those relationships – both for other family members and for wider community networks. Facebook, WhatsApp and Skype technologies may be means, but maintaining relationships is the end. The differing degrees of privacy afforded by each platform also affect the degree of visibility of the relationships. For example Facebook can show relationships through images, while WhatsApp might resemble more closely how relationships are lived through dyadic and group communication. Visibility also constitutes relationships, showing how normativities as well as ideals around relationships come into being, since normativity has an important role in how family ties operate in practice. Although Trinidad itself is a distinct context for family and kinship, a wider point can be made

around the general role of social media in maintaining relationships and achieving a balance between acknowledging the constraints of family as structure and the creativity and effort invested in good relationships.

Home and family have specific meanings and expectations in Trinidad, which may differ from elsewhere. For example, each home, even a small one or more temporary lower-income housing, has a porch or veranda area – a gallery. This is the immediate space for receiving visitors, whether friends or relatives (or researchers pestering for information: this is where all the project questionnaires with households took place). While privacy is valued, a large part of being social is being visible in a shared space and being able to see others. Friends, relatives or neighbours passing by will at least say ‘hello’, if not drop in, although these scenarios are more common in rural areas such as El Mirador. Family, meanwhile, is more of a collective noun, with the home offering a common space to all family. Residents of El Mirador do have genuine concerns about privacy and security, but these relate chiefly to instances of crime and intrusion. It would still be expected that relatives could arrive without notice and stay for anywhere between ten minutes and ten hours, depending on the occasion (Fig. 4.1).

The relationship to the collective ‘family’ is also a category of relationship in itself. Alongside the range of social media discussed in Chapter 2, for intense family relationships the webcam-based platforms Skype and FaceTime were equally important, particularly to



**Fig. 4.1** An extended family liming in the gallery of a home

family members living abroad in maintaining their ties with relatives in Trinidad. 'Calling home', for example, does not mean calling an individual family member, but rather speaking to the entire family at once. As one woman explains:

Who was living there was my grandma's sister, her daughter, and then her daughter had two kids . . . and then someone's cousin was living there too. [So you Skyped with them too?] All of them, it was never just one of them, if they were all home, they were all on the webcam.

The concept of polymedia<sup>2</sup> is further reified in relation to other transnational relationships, where relatives or partners are overseas for short or extended periods of time.

For the purposes of this chapter, an important node can be discerned linking the shift in perceptions of family, personal relationships, tensions that need to be navigated and the concept of polymedia that was introduced earlier.<sup>3</sup> The following sections detail categories of relationships as experienced in El Mirador, alongside significant findings around how different social media platforms and digital technologies for communications were used, as illustrated through stories. What becomes apparent here is that for the individuals involved, the choice between several platforms of communication depends on the affordances of the platforms, as well as on their relationship to the other person or people with whom they are communicating.

Polymedia becomes relevant not only in the sense of the multiplicity of platforms, but also in relation to the sheer number of different phones people possess – objects which themselves become important factors in the way various media are employed in family relationships.<sup>4</sup> For example, a daughter who sees something in a shop that she thinks could be useful for her mother might use her basic mobile phone to call and describe the object to her. If her mother owns a smartphone, the daughter might use a second phone – perhaps her work-allocated smartphone – to take some photos of the packaging or close-ups of the instructions and send them to her mother over WhatsApp. The convergence of new media in a single device and its effects on how we move through our everyday activities and communicate with families thereby becomes an increasing source of interest in digital anthropology.<sup>5</sup>

As it is considered the primary and most immediate form of family relationship, well into adulthood, the mother–child relationship serves as an ideal starting point for analysis. The category of 'mother' is often

treated as universal in terms of what ideal mothers should be,<sup>6</sup> yet in Trinidadian and wider Caribbean kinship systems the mothering of children is also performed by other female relatives, irrespective of biological relationships.<sup>7</sup>

## Family relationships: mothers

There are a variety of meanings associated with ‘family’ in Trinidad. Many of these arise from the different ethnicities that compose the population, with the legacies of their cultural histories echoed in contemporary family structures. For example, the imperatives of time and reciprocity that exist in large, extended family relationships are important to Indo-Trinidadian families, especially in parts of the country where they constitute the majority of the population.<sup>8</sup> While the extended family is also important to Afro-Trinidadians, there is a greater degree of interchangeability in family roles. Much of the previous research on Trinidadian families falls under studies of the wider Caribbean, although there are notable exceptions.<sup>9</sup> One of the key themes within this research is the difference in structures between Indo-Trinidadian and Afro-Trinidadian families. For Indo-Trinidadians, extended family is as central to daily life as the nuclear family, while absent fathering and strict mothering are generalisable features of Afro-Trinidadian families.<sup>10</sup> In the region of El Mirador families roughly resembling a male-headed, nuclear structure have become more prevalent since the 1970s, as a result of the area’s primary income raising activities of farming and factory work.<sup>11</sup> Today it has been observed that male-headed nuclear families are fairly common, as well as families where the central figure is the mother with children from different fathers. A nuclear family might sometimes live within a single household including step-children, with either parent having a sibling in a single-parent household nearby and both families remaining as close as extended family. Laetitia is one example of this model. She lives with her husband and their three children, just a short walk away from her sister Nicky, who is a single mother.

At the time of research her nephew, Marvin, was getting married within the month. Laetitia’s home was one of the main locations where relatives would congregate to prepare for the event. Marvin’s mother Nicky and the women’s other sisters, as well as a few brothers-in-law, would visit to help prepare decorations, arrange centerpieces and assemble tokens for over 200 guests. For weeks relatives would drop by, staying well into the night chatting while covering chocolate

boxes with ribbons. Some brought a cook-up and others drinks, which they consumed while they worked. Accordingly, as Laetitia's daughter described: 'it might look like it's disorganised and chaos, but that is the fun of weddings. It's being together and the old talk. Especially because it's Marvin, he and Mommy were close since he was small.' Indeed, for Laetitia, it felt as though her own son was getting married, as she noted:

This boy, I was always his favourite aunt. I took care of this little child for years. You know, when he was born, his mom couldn't make milk. And that was just after my baby just passed away so I was still making a lot of milk. I fed him for months, and I think, it didn't help exactly, but being close to that little boy and seeing him grow up now, it gave me some purpose after my own child died. He always said he had two mothers, Nicky and me.

Laetitia's story is not uncommon. In Caribbean families, the woman who gives birth to a child is not necessarily the same woman who rears it, even if either woman has children of her own.<sup>12</sup> For Indo- and Afro-Trinidadian families in a small town, children often spend a substantial amount of time in the homes of relatives. Children of three or four siblings may go to their grandparents' home every day after school throughout their entire primary school years, or nieces and nephews may stay with an aunt and her children during nights in the week if their mother works far from home.

Yet today's Trinidad is also experiencing the influences of global norms on the meanings and ideals of parenting – inflections which can conflict with Caribbean norms.<sup>13</sup> Among the most fraught mother–daughter relationships noted in the research was one in which the mother, now in her early eighties, was one of nine children. She had grown up in a very traditional Muslim household in the centre of the country and married in the late 1940s. She already had four children when her older sister and brother-in-law discovered that they could not have any more children and asked if her next child could live with them as their own. It was not unusual for siblings at that time and in those circumstances to ask such momentous questions of one another, especially in the case of an older sibling making a request of a younger. However, the daughter involved, now in her early fifties, is still unable to come to terms with having grown up with her aunt, uncle and cousins rather than her own parents and siblings. Now a mother and grandmother herself, she remains burdened by the question, 'How could my mother give me away?' As is apparent here, behaviour that was seen as acceptable

within a more traditional kinship order is now judged according to contemporary global norms, producing conflict between the views of different generations.

## Mothering over digital media

If kinship is influenced by behaviour, digital media can also be viewed as impacting behaviour and playing an influential role in maintaining relationships. As is the case around the themes explored in Chapter 2, there is some historical precedence to what social media means in the Trinidadian context, drawing on previous experiences of transnational mothering. Before the ubiquity of social media, when mothers from the Caribbean migrated overseas for work, it was common to send home a barrel containing branded goods to their families, especially in Jamaica, as a way of showing care for their children from afar.<sup>14</sup> The same mothers also phoned their children using calling cards, which became less costly with the rise of mobile phones. Horst's study on the impact of the mobile phone on Jamaican transnational families underscores how increased and more regular communications created a sense of involvement, linking parents' and children's everyday lives.<sup>15</sup> Similarly Olwig highlights the emotional ties maintained by transnational Caribbean families through different types of exchange, such as providing help among family members, face-to-face visits and electronic communication.<sup>16</sup> Social media subsequently appears to extend these modes of exchange between transnational family members.

In the following stories of mothering, Facebook impacts upon the mother-child relationship in varying ways. In the first, family members live in different parts of Trinidad, while the second is an example of parenting over long distances. Vivian, who is introduced in the second story, is also a migrant to El Mirador from mainland China. The question that arises from these differing stories is therefore a more general one: can one truly 'mother' over Facebook or Skype?

### Kym: mothering over Facebook

Kym grew up in Belmont, a suburb in Port of Spain. After university she worked in advertising, where she met her husband, who worked in sales. The couple married and moved to El Mirador, her husband's hometown, where his family still live; here they had three sons and one daughter. Shortly after this daughter was born, several years after their sons, Kym

and her husband divorced. When he returned to Port of Spain she was compelled to make a difficult choice. She decided to 'split up the family' and sent her two eldest sons, then completing their high school studies, to live with her husband. With their father's income and two fewer children for Kym to support, the boys could attend a better school. Kym also explained a further reason:

If they lived here with me, in our neighbourhood, there are a lot of delinquents. Boys their age who don't care about school and aren't doing anything with their lives, just wasting time and getting up to mischief. I didn't want my boys to grow up around that. I wanted them to grow up somewhere they know they're better than that.

Both Kym's sons have two phones: a smartphone and a basic phone for calling and texting their parents (her eldest son gave Kym his BlackBerry when he bought a Samsung Galaxy). They are all on Facebook and the two sons speak to their mother on average once every two days. Most often the boys initiate calling Kym. Sometimes they will share the same call if they are home together, or they will call her on their separate phones. A significant issue soon arose between Kym's second son and his father, who asked him to accompany him to work and train to be a salesperson, instead of completing his final two years of school. The son began a trial period of working with his father on weekends and enjoyed the extra money he was earning. He and Kym had extended conversations about whether he should work full time or stay in school. Caught between a desire to give guidance to her son and a sense of guilt that she was not physically present to support him properly in the decision, Kym felt that she could advise him only so far. In their late evening phone calls, which could last up to an hour, she told her son it would be a better idea to stay in school; if he wanted to work afterwards, he would only have to wait two more years. The next day she went to work and logged onto Facebook (which she keeps open on her laptop throughout the day). She saw her son had updated his status to 'so excited to be back in class next week' and immediately 'liked' it, but waited until the next time they spoke to congratulate him, as she did not want to crowd him.

Facebook is one of the several modes of communication that have become important to Kym's relationship to her sons while living away. She describes it as a means of seeing what is going on in their lives without having to ask them too many questions on the phone, which might give the impression that she is interrogating them. She has also

set her profile to receive notifications from them, which enables her to hear from them throughout the day. As Kym does not see her sons often, she makes sure she can be contacted by phone, text or online as it is not an interruption to her work. She also feels that she can immediately respond or become available, even though she is not physically present.

Kym's circumstances illustrate the consideration that is invested in mothering *in absentia*; it also reveals how over-mothering can potentially extend to platforms such as Facebook. Kym invests a great deal of thought into how to manage her distance and 'virtual' presence as a mother; she seeks to achieve a sense of balance between being able to mother her sons adequately and giving them sufficient choice and freedom in their relationship. In contrast to Kym's story is that of Vivian, a mother living in El Mirador whose infant daughter lives in China with her parents-in-law.

#### Vivian: mothering over Skype

The themes of migration and diaspora among non-Trinidadians also emerged in the field work in El Mirador. Much has been written about the Caribbean diaspora, yet there remains very little about populations who have migrated to Trinidad – most notably the Chinese, as part of the recent trend of emigration in the post-Mao reformation era.<sup>17</sup> 'New' Chinese migrants (*xin yimin*) numbered an estimated 5,000 in Trinidad in 2002.<sup>18</sup> The figures include some arriving as chain migrants, already having family connections in Trinidad. These groups often begin working as employees in another family's business, before establishing businesses of their own.

Vivian and her husband moved to El Mirador with Vivian's uncle in 2010; their daughter Annie was born a few months later. Their move followed on from a trend in chain migration from Guangdong province to El Mirador that had developed over the previous decade. Vivian already had cousins and distant relatives in the southern city of San Fernando and the capital, Port of Spain. Each of these family units runs a Chinese restaurant, of which there are around eight in El Mirador alone; the newest one is run by Vivian's uncle. The story of how he set up the restaurant is not unusual, reflecting well-documented movements of Chinese migration and families who build businesses off the back of loans (both cash and resources) from more established relatives in their host destinations.<sup>19</sup>

Like other *xin yimin* from Guangdong, Vivian's family are relatively wealthy, the beneficiaries of a decade of economic growth in the

province via foreign investment, emigration policies and expansion of trade industries. She holds a post-secondary diploma in business and English, and had a book-keeping job in her hometown before getting married. Once in Trinidad the family's lives became very different, and Vivian decided to send her six-month-old daughter to live with her in-laws in China while she was still young. Vivian's idea was that her daughter would live with her husband's family until her Chinese passport was issued, when Vivian would return to collect her, around a year later.

Their restaurant is open around 11 or 12 hours per day and only closes on Sunday afternoons and evenings. Vivian is the main cashier and her uncle is the only chef. The laptop is always on and Vivian Skypes with her daughter every day. She also chats with her friends and video-calls her in-laws on the Chinese social media platform QQ on her iPhone. Vivian, her husband and her uncle live in a two-bedroom apartment above the restaurant. The rooms appear to be a temporary set-up compared with their homes in Taishan; the apartment has basic furnishing (two mattresses and a wardrobe), plus a simple kitchen and a small television. But they have also installed the latest and most powerful WiFi modem from Trinidad's national telecommunications company, which only recently brought 4G broadband to El Mirador. They each have a laptop, and Vivian has an iPad and iPhone.

The extent to which the family could be described as 'living' in Trinidad is as questionable as the extent to which, for example, Filipino maids in Madianou and Miller's study 'lived' in London. Through social media, the family could spend almost the entire time they were not working or sleeping together with friends and relatives from their countries of origin. Vivian and her family have few Trinidadian friends, although they are friendly enough with customers. Instead their social time is spent in their apartment, playing mah-jong with other relatives; after hours, her uncle only watches Chinese movies on his laptop and Skypes with his daughters and wife in Taishan. For the Zhang family in El Mirador, their non-work lives are largely 'lived' through digital media, communications and entertainment.

This research also provided the opportunity to visit Vivian in her hometown of Taishan in China, where she had been for a month, staying between her in-laws and parents. She had planned to return to Trinidad, taking her daughter Annie with her when she left three months later. The biggest shock to her on returning to Taishan was seeing how different Annie was after being raised by her grandmother, who largely stayed at home and was her sole playmate. Vivian's style of parenting would have been more disciplinarian than that she witnessed from her

mother-in-law, and she was immediately confronted by having to fulfil the multiple expectations of being a mother to Annie again. Although she and her daughter had interacted daily on Skype, the video calls exacerbated their missing one another. This in turn increased the tension when Vivian had to assume a more disciplinarian role in person, rather than simply the 'nice' mother she had been while away.

These two cases reflect the general dynamics established by combining polymedia and family relationships. Much like mobile and land-line phones previously, social media has aided in bridging distances between parents and children who live apart in the same country or abroad.<sup>20</sup> Having multiple platforms for communication now also means that there is less emphasis on overcoming physical distance within relationships and more on the emotional or meaningful aspects of these relationships. For both the mothers discussed above, regular communication results in being more involved in their children's lives and development. The visual affordance of Skype equates to more shared time to spend face to face, while Facebook facilitates a greater sense of a sustained co-presence or being able to check in.

The other common element in Kym and Vivian's stories is that their communications with their children living with relatives elsewhere are structured largely around work commitments. How this work encroaches on family life through new media and how people navigate work and family life is an expanding field of research. In Trinidad, as well as elements of cultural specificity around family relationships, there are also cultural specificities in the connotations of work.<sup>21</sup>

## Fathers and work

The ready availability of 'constant touch', 'perpetual contact' and 'connected relationships' entailed by the mobile phone has intensified forms of connectedness while generating debate and anxiety about the blurred boundaries between being absent and present.<sup>22</sup> More recently, fixed working schedules around which social activities would typically be co-ordinated have been undermined by the trend toward more flexible work hours.<sup>23</sup> Now, family co-ordination instead relies on the ability to synchronise different family members' schedules.

The blurring of boundaries between work time and family life has unique implications in Trinidad. Kevin Birth argues that there are cultural ideas of time; expressions such as 'jus' now' and 'long time' in Trinidad 'allow Trinidadians to manage relationships, organised by different

models of time'. Similarly to Wacjman and Broadbent, Birth explores the effects of ordering time and managing routines on social organisation, explaining that time is not simply about routine, but a way of navigating social relations.<sup>24</sup> Polymedia in El Mirador reflects recent international trends toward converging work and family life. Yet it also enables a higher degree of autonomy and sociality through new forms of media, thereby allowing the integration of the demands of the workplace. Both 'family' and 'work' have cultural specificities in Trinidad, with origins of work in the country, historically based on slavery and indentured labour, impacting heavily on kinship structure, family orientation and work value.<sup>25</sup>

In relation to time, Birth further argues that the history of power and dominance over workers has equally left a legacy for how time is negotiated with managers today, where it is important for workers to express a degree of autonomy in their social activities throughout the day. In El Mirador, for example, individuals who work as cashiers in small shops on the main road are unlikely to be subjected to the presence of the store's owner or manager throughout the day (if they are not themselves the owner). The degree of trust in relation to the management of time for breaks and clocking on or off is fairly similar to other semi-urban hubs around the world. If anything, the availability of new media has alleviated some of the boredom for employees during slower parts of the day, when they can engage in some form of sociality while overseeing the store.

The following two cases highlight how fathers negotiate their work, family relationships and the role that digital media plays in navigating these. The first, Robert, works in the private sector and is required to remain contactable throughout his day in the office. He also travels between other Caribbean islands for work once every couple of weeks, during which he communicates with his family using various configurations of Skype, phone and Facebook to compensate for his absence. By contrast, Allan is an example of digital resistance (a concept discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5). Allan owns a home business; for him, refraining from the use of social media is another means of opting out of the same conventional structures that prescribe regular working hours.

Robert has worked for the same insurance firm for the past 20 years and his job has always required him to travel – most frequently to St Lucia and the Bahamas plus, occasionally, Florida. In the last four years much of his work travel has been replaced by Skype meetings, allowing him to stay at home, unless obliged to conduct office visits outside Trinidad for more than two days. While away he Skypes with his wife,

who does not like to be home alone at night. The sense of co-presence in the evening is comforting to her: they will chat or just watch a programme on cable together, unless Robert is working; if so, he will call her before she goes to sleep. He is friends with both his teenage daughters on Facebook, but neither of them post very often. As he explains, 'they are pretty good girls, they are sensible and know not to show too much of themselves. I've seen what some of the other youngsters post, sometimes it's a bit TMI – too much information'. Although Robert does not know how frequently his daughters are on Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp, as long as they are not posting publicly about everything they do, he does not mind. If he is away, he will see them tagged on weekends in an occasional photo with their friends or at the mall. He does not click the 'like' button or comment on the images, but finds it reassuring to speak with his daughters and hear that they went on some outing, then later see confirmation of what they have relayed to him on Facebook. For Robert, seeing photos of his daughters on social media while he is away is a source of reassurance, documenting that they are both well and behaving sensibly.

For Allan, on the other hand, his work and family life are based entirely at home. Though he used to work as a public servant in the local co-operative office, he now has a small welding business at the back of the house, with his main source of income a house-front shop. His ex-wife lives in Florida with their eldest son and daughter, while his youngest son, now in his late thirties, runs the shop with him. The novelty of the small shop is that his ex-wife sends from the US a barrel of sweets and snacks that are less common in Trinidad for their son to sell in the store. Their house is near a local primary school and the main bus station, so they receive a substantial number of customers just before and after school and work hours. Most of the neighbours with whom Allan grew up still live on surrounding streets; they drop by most days, sometimes bringing a beer or some rum. Allan has had a basic mobile phone since they became popular in the late 1990s, but he also keeps a landline, which he predominantly uses to receive calls from his son and daughter living in the US. Although Allan has not installed an internet connection for the house his son has a smartphone, which he uses while supervising the shop. Allan can almost invariably be seen by anyone walking past the house, either in the shop or welding in the yard during the day. In the evenings, the lights or flicker of the television are visible from his lounge room. Because he is mostly at home, he tells people to just 'pass by anytime, no need to call', enjoying the unpredictability of who might stop by, day or night. A few of Allan's friends have the same attitude

to visitors. Since they have family nearby, they prefer the spontaneity and unstructured nature of socialising; as Allan notes, it is 'rel (real) village life'. Even when Allan was working in the office, he finished his day around 2 pm and would come home or go 'to lime with his partners' after work. Now he much prefers the flexibility of working at home – not because he believes he can do more with his time, but quite the reverse. He rather feels that he has a lot more time to take it easy and to enjoy a simple, quiet life.

Allan and Robert are at two extreme ends of the spectrum in relation to working fathers. In El Mirador fathers are primarily economic providers and hold more of a disciplinarian role, though their styles of parenting may differ. They might use social media to negotiate work and family relationships, but post on Facebook more broadly, encompassing matters beyond work and family. Yet, simultaneously, Allan reflects the idea of digital resistance, where lived relationships are conducted face to face. His immediate networks are made up of those who live nearby; not being on social media nor seeking to widen his networks is part of his identity as a 'village person'. For other parents who may have distinct family and work lives, social media contributes to keeping the two separate.

## What parents post

Although Kym (introduced earlier) and her son are Facebook friends, and she can see what he posts, she has changed her privacy settings so that he cannot view her timeline. She recently decided that it was time to move on from her marriage break-up and is trying to meet someone new. If an individual from Trinidad wants to befriend her on Facebook, she will look at their profile, including their likes and interests; if they seem to have similar tastes, she will accept their friend request and chat. Kym has also signed up to the dating websites CaribSingles and Trini Singles. She uses Skype, but the only other social media site she is on is LinkedIn. Looking at her Facebook profile and scrolling through her photos, it becomes apparent that she has two modes: the extremely intimate and the extremely professional. Her cover photo is the sign for her small business, and she has two profile photos: one a professional head shot and the other a cropped image of her midriff in a T-shirt, tied to reveal her stomach.

Kym says she only accepts work contacts on Skype and LinkedIn, and while she has both family and friends on Facebook, she restricts her

privacy settings; few can see conversations on her timeline. One of her oldest friends from high school posts sexual jokes and memes on her wall, which they banter about, but she says she would not want her children to see these posts. Her work allows her to chat throughout the day, so she keeps Facebook open in the background; when she has a break, she checks her dating profiles to see if anyone has left her a message. She chats with one man – another divorcee from Chaguanas, who she says she quite likes – a few days every week. They ‘actually talk about stuff’, for example, asking about one another’s work. As they both have ‘looking for friendship’ checked on their profiles, Kym considers the proper etiquette to be chit-chat. She receives countless messages containing blatantly sexual jokes and advances, but says she does not really reply – not because she finds them offensive, but because she does not know quite what to say. If she actually ends up meeting someone, she wants to get a sense of the person beforehand. As per the discussion thread shown below, Kym logs on to CaribSingles throughout the day to chat with people who have contacted her.

04.02.14

**Andy19:** how are you?

**Kimmy\_Kim:** I’m good, had some rough patches . . . but things are wonderful lately.

**Andy19:** that’s good to hear.

**Kimmy\_Kim:** smile . . . so what have you been up to lately?

**Andy19:** studies on hold

10.02.14

**TriniBess:** why u don’t have a pic on ur profile?

**Kimmy\_Kim:** I took it off the site because I also have a brain

**TriniBess:** ok

**TriniBess:** can you email me ur pic?

**TriniBess:** damn! I wanna make love 2 u!

Although Kym is in her late thirties, she is quite typical of mothers in this study. As compared, for example, to the English field site, women in Trinidad appeared not to be as solely defined by their roles as mothers on Facebook. *Visualising Facebook* presented case studies of women in England, noting how after giving birth their posts on Facebook were predominantly related to their babies, even to the point when the infants became the woman’s profile photo. By contrast, on Facebook Trinidadian women still want to be seen as attractive, glamorous and stylish. Selfies

are posted not only by teenagers, but also by women in their thirties and forties. Their other posts document different aspects of their lives, for instance what they wear to work or how they dressed up for a fete, placed alongside photos of their children and extended families.

Fathers, on the other hand, post more content relating to work and leisure, with fewer postings about their babies and children. The most commonly documented subjects in posts by fathers are work or work-related functions, 'liming' or hanging out and gaming and sports. The exception is among fathers whose children do not live with them. In these cases the absent father posts more images of his children, showing him sharing quality time with them (Fig. 4.2). Social media can thereby contribute to maintaining relationships, but can also affect the degree to which an individual is seen to be a responsible father. For example, a man may appear more responsible or active in the child's life as a baby-father on Facebook than he really is offline.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, where it is not necessarily a father's choice to be absent, Facebook can alleviate some of the associated anxieties by enabling him publicly to document an ideal that he can be seen as living up to.

The above examples of local as well as transnational parenting illustrate how Trinidad, with its large diasporic community, is perhaps



**Fig. 4.2** An image posted to Facebook by a father

more reliant than other locations on social media for maintaining relationships. Likewise the visibility of these relationships, enhanced by social media, is particularly significant to acknowledging them for Trinidadians. As we move beyond the relationships between parents and children to more extended family, we see the impact of social media and choices between modes of communications on relationships based around shared time and interests. Although extended family is central to social life in Trinidad, smaller family units may emerge as closer than others as social media assumes a role in regulating proximity and navigating obligation among members.

If Facebook is more geared toward reproducing or documenting normativity and ideals in family relationships, then WhatsApp is more about the lived experiences of these relationships in practice. This becomes most apparent in the following section, where what begins as a multimedia conversation on WhatsApp through talking and sharing photos, links and songs escalates into a multimedia confrontation as bonding turns to bacchanal.

## A whole polymedia bacchanal

The element of choice as impacting on the structure of kinship is perhaps most evident in relationships between cousins. One cousin might merely be a cousin, especially where a family has migrated, yet another might resemble a best friend. Relationships between cousins can therefore lie anywhere between siblings – where cousins relate to one another as equals and may have shared childhood experiences, for instance staying in the same household after school – and friends, characterised by shared interests and voluntarily spending time together.<sup>27</sup> The story below relates to a month in which a group of cousins were organising a party for their grandmother's seventieth birthday.

The cousins came from across four families living in El Mirador and one cousin now living in London. At first they mostly used Skype and WhatsApp to chat and plan, discussing logistics and sharing ideas about the party. The chats then became more of an exchange of banter and catch-up and finally, as the party date drew near, the conversations became bacchanal. Where Miller discusses online bacchanal in detail in *Tales From Facebook*, this story highlights the uses of different media and how they became interwoven with bacchanal. The party planning scenario also brought to light how choices between different technologies were intertwined with participants' negotiations of feelings and

tensions. Where cousins wanted clearly to convey their views while also respecting others' feelings, for example, they felt compelled to choose the platform they saw as most appropriate for achieving both.

Among the group of cousins, sisters Lisa and Olivia had both recently moved home from Grenada, where they had been studying for two years. As their grandmother's seventieth birthday was approaching, they thought it would be an ideal occasion to bring relatives from all over the country together at her house for a party. The pair thought they and their cousins could plan the party, scheduled for a couple of months ahead. It would be a nice introduction to them moving back home, especially as they had all grown up with their grandparents but had since drifted apart through study and work. The event could reunite them as a family. The other cousins, all in their early twenties at the time, included their cousins Jaden and Amy, who lived down the street from them; Chelsea, who lived next to Jaden and Amy; Ravi and Anita, who lived ten minutes away; and Vanessa, who lived in London with her father. Olivia started a group on WhatsApp and added her cousins. On the first day there were 34 messages, mostly from the young women, with some banter and posts linking to the latest Carnival songs. Vanessa sent a couple of photos of the snow in London that week. On the second day the number of messages in the thread had doubled – again, mostly exchanged by the women. Chelsea and Amy chatted while they were at work. Lisa caught up with the messages and sent a few of her own after she had finished work, and she and Amy chatted with Vanessa late into the night after Vanessa had finished work on London time. Ravi did not really participate in the conversation, but just scrolled through to see if the chat was about any planning at this stage. He had downloaded WhatsApp on his BlackBerry for work and found all the messages from the conversation too distracting, as he also used the app for professional purposes. Every time the phone 'pinged' with a message Ravi thought it would be for work, and so he finally muted the group's notifications. Instead he would just scroll through them quickly at the end of the day, as he felt he did not have the time to join what he saw essentially as a lime over WhatsApp. Meanwhile the young women enjoyed hanging out together online without feeling the need to restrict the conversation to logistics and planning.

After a week, Lisa and Olivia scheduled a Skype meeting for them all to discuss a potential date for the party – particularly important for Vanessa, who planned to fly to Trinidad from London. They brought their tablet to Jaden and Amy's parents' house, where they, along with Chelsea, positioned themselves in front of the tablet and Jaden, Amy,

Ravi and Anita sat in front of Jaden's laptop, all on Skype to Vanessa in London. The parents sat in the gallery chatting, while their children sat inside on Skype. Olivia naturally assumed the role of convenor, outlining that they needed to fix a date, decide who was going to source the cake and decorations, nominate which families were going to be in charge of contributing which dishes, determine the overall budget and choose who would foot the bill for various components of the party.

Lisa then noted that she had looked at some decorating ideas on Pinterest, which they were able to open on their browsers at the same time. She said that all the decorations they had in mind were fairly cheap to make and suggested that maybe it would be nice for them to get together for a weekend and just make them. The meeting seemed to run smoothly, with the parents listening keenly on the topic of budget; although they did not decide immediately who was paying for what, it was clear that the children could not cover the cost of the party themselves and so would need to involve the parents in the planning to some extent. At that time, however, nothing was said openly by the parents about various parties' contributions.

After the Skype meeting the WhatsApp group continued, but with even less focus on the party. Over the next few days activity was mainly chatting at work and sharing videos and photos between Chelsea, Vanessa and Amy. Lisa and Olivia contributed the occasional comment, but were not as active as they had been the week before. After another week had passed, they felt they needed to organise themselves and start planning the party with more focus. They called a face-to-face meeting after work with the parents to decide on the budget. The meeting was held in the grandparents' house between the four families. Eighteen people attended, including all the parents and the cousins' younger siblings who were not involved in the planning.

As with every extended family, there was in this case a backdrop of interpersonal histories and grievances which came into play with talk of the budget – a topic that nobody wanted to discuss in front of everybody else. In an extended family where one member saw another at least once a day, the topic of money could open up an entire set of past issues that it might be difficult to manage alongside everyday co-existence. The atmosphere of the meeting was therefore very different from the previous Skype session. Some of the adult brothers joked and shared performative banter, while a couple of the wives sat in silence. Only when Olivia tried to rein in the conversation to focus properly on the budget did a couple of wives step forward, plainly stating what they were and

were not prepared to pay for. This in turn, provoked an outburst of grievances. Lisa and Olivia were of the view that the party was for the older generation, who may not have that many more big celebrations ahead of them, so cost should not be of primary importance. However, some of the other cousins and parents considered that they had other financial burdens and priorities that had to take precedence over such an extravagant party. Everybody returned home to their respective houses talking about the issues that had arisen and which parties were unable to appreciate others' positions because, as one noted, 'so and so was like *that*'. It seemed that planning the party was degenerating into an outright bacchanal.

The following week saw a further explosion on WhatsApp. Cousins and families had spoken to each other following the meeting, resulting in various views and alliances now showing up in the messages, illustrated in the exchange below:

**AMY**

I see your point that this may be one of the last big parties for Mammy but for us working people it's not so easy, I don't really have the time on the weekend for making things and I'm trying to save up at the moment.

**OLIVIA**

Are you implying that you are the only working person Amy?

**AMY**

I am not saying that I am the only working person I am just saying that I am busy and I have responsibilities and I have less time on my hands.

**OLIVIA**

As a working person, I completely agree with you. I know what it is like to travel on the bus to town for nearly four hours a day getting up at 4 an coming home at 8 in de night, because I don't have a car unlike some other working people.

**VANESSA**

That is classic Olivia, yuh always have to bring up ting that has NOTHING to do with de ISSUE.

**CHELSEA**

Can we please just stick to talking abt de party please. I know all yuh been talking an yuh all vex right now, but dis about yuh gran-mudda. KEEP THE FOCUS.

**OLIVIA**

#keepthefocus

After the exchange Olivia vented her frustrations to Lisa, feeling that she did not want to leave the conversation unresolved. She and Amy had been close as children, having always spent time at their grandparents' house after school, and she felt upset and disappointed that their relationship had soured. She also valued conversation, even heated, unpleasant ones: for her, such directness led to resolution. So she decided to call Amy at home and talk to her. The result was a loud and emotional conversation in which both sides aired their problems. As the far less confrontational party, Amy had preferred to conduct the dialogue over WhatsApp: it allowed her to respond in her own time and space, without having to deal with the immediacy of her cousin's voice. On the other hand, now that her cousin had called her, she did not want to back out of the conversation. She and Olivia thus argued well into the night until Olivia said she wanted to hang up the phone and continue the conversation another time face to face. Both left the discussion feeling angry and with no sense of closure. Planning for the party had reached a hiatus.

Throughout the following month WhatsApp, Skype, phone calls and face-to-face conversations came to play different roles in an interaction that had begun as a set of logistical choices, co-ordinating several people and long distances. Initially WhatsApp was the easiest source of real-time chat, giving a sense of immediacy between the cousins who lived apart – especially for Vanessa and Chelsea, who would exchange photos. Vanessa could send photos of London and Chelsea could send photos of Trini food that Vanessa did not have access to while living overseas. There was a sense that 'home' existed in the readily accessible space of WhatsApp – particularly because, unlike other countries, people in Trinidad do not have strict rules imposed on the use of phones for personal matters while at work.

Skype allowed the family to show their best behaviour and stick to the task of planning. The parents were quiet, conscious of the presence of Vanessa (and her mother) from London, and the meeting's more formal tone allowed the cousins to share images and ideas through other platforms such as Pinterest. On Skype the cousins saw each other's most cooperative sides as the forum enabled them to project the ideal versions of their relationships, leaving grievances and frustrations away from the screen. The meeting at the grandparents' house, by contrast, did not have any such tone. The parents – the brothers and in-laws – were present alongside relatives with whom they did not necessarily get along, but who remained in sight; they could not simply step away from the screen and become invisible. Yet while some unspoken issues could be set aside

on Skype, these erupted into a disagreement over finances during the bigger face-to-face meeting. Among fewer participants, the small rectangular screen of communication via a webcam imposed a structure that enabled the focus to be maintained on a single aspect – the person's presence. Discussion could therefore be circumscribed to talk of how the individual looked, a particular subject or simply general catching up. A group meeting, meanwhile, brought with it tensions and dynamics that flooded the room well beyond the screen.

After the confrontation at the group meeting, the role of WhatsApp changed from that of a medium for discussing logistics and sharing jokes, photos and banter, to a platform where the cousins could air their frustrations in the privacy of their own space. Yet, for something that felt important, a voice call was preferred. Even though it was more confrontational, it was also more intimate; the cousins could vent, shout and cry without the mediation of words and typing. Such an example of dynamics among cousins in their twenties contrasts with what emerges in Chapter 5, where people from their parents' generation do not use a variety of social or digital media to communicate. For the younger group, decisions around polymedia seem normal and using different platforms, even in heightened emotional circumstances, is preferred. However, for an older age group, polymedia is perceived as further complicating relations that are already difficult enough.

Although the configuration of different media was to some extent helpful in planning the party in this instance, it also exacerbated and became intertwined with tensions between the families – even as the cousins tried to strike a balance between being too confrontational and too distant. Polymedia in the context of couples presents a similar dilemma. In the case of the cousins, the combination of physical distance and the immediacy of WhatsApp facilitated the bacchanal as different parties began to express what they really wanted. A similar tension is evident in relation to its use by couples: where Facebook may be too cold, too far and too distant and Skype may be too immediate and too revealing, WhatsApp is just right.

## WhatsApp as a happy medium

Jevorn lives in Jamaica, but completed his studies in Trinidad, where he met Rebecca who was taking the same course. They were acquaintances throughout their studies, but did not really get to know one another until Jevorn's final six months of the programme. After they graduated

Jevorn had to move back to Jamaica to complete an internship in a local hospital the following year. Outgoing and able to get along easily with different sorts of personalities, Jevorn feels comfortable with people who both are louder or quieter than himself. Rebecca, meanwhile, is much quieter. In groups of girlfriends or mixed groups she will listen and only talk more openly when others initiate conversations with her. Because they were always around other people, it was difficult for Jevorn and Rebecca to find out what the other was really like and to spend time alone together.

In El Mirador courting still appears to be 'traditional' in many ways; children live in their parents' home up until adulthood, only moving into their own homes (often nearby) after marriage. Becoming a parent signifies the transition to adulthood; until then, regardless of the age of a child, obedience and docility are values fostered in girls, while independence and life skills are more encouraged among boys.<sup>28</sup> When young men and women begin a romantic relationship they will rarely sleep in one another's homes, and when they go out on 'dates' in their late teens and early twenties they usually go on outings in groups or with other siblings, at least in the beginning. (These are of course the norms and expectations of conduct, but young people get around them.) Accordingly, Jevorn and Rebecca initially accompanied their university friends to the mall or to live music performances in Port of Spain after class, where they were able to have a conversation, but could not really speak in any great depth. It was only when Jevorn went back to his student accommodation and Rebecca to her parents' house, some half an hour from campus, that they really came to know one another through sitting up all hours of the night chatting on Facebook.

They have now been together for two and a half years and Rebecca has since moved to Jamaica, but she recalls the months before Jevorn left Trinidad as some of the best of their relationship. They would chat while watching the same television show or send each other links to articles or videos, which allowed them to discuss various subjects and to get to know one another's views on different issues. After Rebecca's family had gone to sleep, Jevorn would call Rebecca and they would talk into the night. As she explains:

I got to be in the relationship on my own terms, you know? A lot of people think I'm quiet or I think I'm too good and yeah, I do put a wall up, but he has a real sense of humour and it made it easier for me to be funny on Facebook. I could just answer his message and joke and shit talk and not have to worry what does this person

think of me because he couldn't see me. I didn't have to worry about how I was sitting or how I'm coming across or what I look like. We could just spend time together without it being too much.

Once Jevorn moved back to Jamaica and they were separated for a year, he and Rebecca spent less time chatting on Facebook and instead started to use Skype. Initially, they enjoyed the experience – they liked seeing one another and what the other was doing or where they were. When Jevorn's work hours increased, however, Skype became increasingly frustrating. Rebecca had to wait until her brothers and her parents were asleep so she could Skype in the kitchen, where her laptop had the best internet reception, but by then it would be nearly midnight: Jevorn was tired from work and had to get up early. Rebecca started to get irritated when he would fall asleep on the call, sometimes in the middle of a conversation. They reduced their Skype video calls to only a couple of days a week and kept speaking on the phone every night, but found the most comfortable option to be chatting on WhatsApp. Jevorn had his phone on him throughout the day, including when he was on public transport. Rebecca likes to watch television when she comes home from work in the afternoon; she does not want a laptop in front of her after staring at a computer screen for most of the day at work. With WhatsApp on the phone, she found she could lie on the sofa or eat something and still type to Jevorn. Their chats reminded them of those initial days on Facebook, chatting with their laptops. If Jevorn disappeared from the conversation for half an hour or so, Rebecca knew it was because he was busy or something had come up and he would pick the conversation up again when he could.

Jevorn and Rebecca liked seeing each other on Skype even though there was some difficulty with their work hours. However, for another couple, Aaron and Emily, Skype simply did not work. The pair had been in a relationship for three years before Aaron was given a work placement as an engineer in Dubai for six months. The biggest problem was that the time difference exacerbated all the difficulties of distance, preventing them from being in each other's daily lives. As they were at a very different stage in their relationship from Jevorn and Rebecca, Skype came to be associated with expectations of long, deep conversations. They knew each other well and felt they needed to be embedded in each other's routines and everyday contexts. It was difficult to co-ordinate times to talk; when they did, one party was always distracted, it being too early in the morning for Emily and too late at night for Aaron. Aaron became irritated with Emily's being in work mode, having checked her emails

while waiting for him. She became irritated with Aaron for yawning and barely being able to converse because he was tired.

Both therefore said that WhatsApp was essential in that period of their relationship. They did not text much, but instead sent voice clips. Recording voice messages allowed them to carry on a conversation – sometimes for days, sending up to ten minutes of messages, telling stories about people, what they had done or where they had been, because they always knew who or what the other was referring to. Emily had gone to Dubai with Aaron for two weeks when he started the placement, so she had experience of the contexts for his stories and was able to respond. They also exchanged photos of everyday things, such as a meal in a restaurant that one thought the other would (or would not) like, traffic or funny things seen throughout their day. Aaron and Emily preferred the less confrontational communication of WhatsApp, where they did not have to see the other frustrated by a conversation that exacerbated the distance between them. They could also carry on longer and enjoy what they felt was more meaningful conversation in their own time, even if the other person did not receive their message or respond immediately.

Although there was the positive side to being able to draw out a conversation over long periods, this could also be a problem. When the couple had a disagreement, for instance, they would not speak (through sending voice messages) properly for days. A conversation concerning whether Aaron should accept an extension of his contract could have been dealt with in ten minutes face to face: Emily could have asked the questions she wanted relating to the duration of the extension and Aaron could have reassured her that it was better for them financially. Instead he sent her a voice message saying that he had had a meeting with his boss and that he was thinking about extending the contract. Through his tone and wording, it sounded to Emily as though he had already accepted the offer without having consulted her. Because she felt hurt, she sent no voice messages for the next two days. The complete lack of communication made Aaron more upset with her and the situation in general. Emily said that she preferred not to say anything in case she became really angry and expressed something she could not take back – for example, comparing the current situation to past instances where she had felt left out of his decisions. Aaron meanwhile said that even if that was the case, she could at least send some acknowledging communication, even if only ‘I’m fine’ or ‘I’m still mad at you’: not hearing from her at all was far more distracting and difficult. He felt that he was left wondering what was going on in another person’s head, on the other side of the world.

When the pair started talking again, they kept the conversation light-hearted, just filling the other in on their day, so as not to worry them. Eventually, one of them would end up sending an email along the lines of, ‘What I meant was...’ or ‘I was upset because...’ and they would take the time to think carefully about their words before the other read them. Polymedia has its own spectrum, from the most to the least confrontational platforms, and the spectrum differs between individuals and their various relationships. For Aaron and Emily, the least confrontational medium, email, was the easiest for discussing something serious; they found it preferable to letting the heat of emotions come across through voice messages or face to face on Skype.

Taking these perspectives into account to consider kinship as structure and kinship as behaviour, it becomes apparent that family relationships are vested with an acute sense of cultural specificity as well as with large amounts of creative and emotional energy. Miller argues that the way to keep kinship as structure and behaviour in balance is to examine how a given kinship category relates to the idealisation of that category.<sup>29</sup> For example, we have notions of what both mothers and children are supposed to be like, and then we have the actual person, including their history, upbringing, memories and circumstances, who inhabits the category of mother or child. Inevitably there is a discrepancy between the idealised model of the category and the actual person – a discrepancy that can be magnified when digital media comes into play.

Where Facebook visualises the family in terms of documenting and projecting ideals, it is also a more conservative space in which individuals preserve appearances of good family relationships. With the closed group nature of interactions alleviating any pressure to maintain such appearances, WhatsApp then serves as a more private space in which tensions between ideals and practices emerge.

## **‘You does lime online?’**

Friendships, more than family relationships, are cultivated by individuals, based on choices and a mutual desire to spend time together. Our relations with those with whom we voluntarily choose to spend time can also reflect ourselves back to us.<sup>30</sup> The most common form of spending time together among friends in Trinidad is ‘liming’ – a concept introduced in Chapter 1 and to which Facebook contributes in several different ways. In documenting groups of friends or relatives together having a good time, posing in outfits before going out or experiences of food

and drinks, Facebook testifies to the ‘truth’ that an enjoyable time was shared through its visual records of liming.

Yet although the Trinidadians who were part of the study argued that social media cannot replicate a lime in itself, it can help to facilitate more spontaneous acts of getting together. Cousins and families might lime together, but liming between friends is more impromptu – anybody can turn up and the group can end up anywhere. In particular, the interactions between ‘Potter’, ‘Last King’ and ‘Errything’, as per their Facebook pseudonyms, reflect how liming is different between young male friends.<sup>31</sup>

Potter (so-named because he wears glasses similar to Harry Potter’s) is a student; in his spare time he works in a bar. Last King is between jobs and Errything works in security at a shop in the next town. Most days a week they will go out to the bar where Potter works, which is owned by their friend Merv. They all went to the same school and now, in their mid-twenties, still spend the bulk of their spare time together. As Potter explained, ‘basically, a lime is what other people consider hanging out or chilling out. But we do it with a lot of alcohol’. He holds up a bottle of Forrest Park Puncheon, Trinidad’s strongest rum. ‘This here will solve all the problems in Trinidad. I have the best job in de world. I work here (in the bar) an’ all my partners come by and we drink, call some girls, ting, ting and it is a lotta lotta fun.’ Social media has been both positive and negative in its effects on a lime, as Errything noted:

Facebook can be rel good for the lime. Yuh post on yuh partner’s wall, hey we goin’ here, there’s rel girls and everybody shows up, they bring more drinks, it’s cool. But social media is rel bad for the lime as well. Same ting. Yuh post on yuh partner’s wall. But someone else who you don’t want in the lime, he sees that and end up in the lime, that could spoil the lime. And before, when no one had smartphones, you just be sitting in a circle, drinkin, ultimate vibes, everybody laughin’ and havin’ a nice time. Now, everybody sitting on their phone, one girl, she sittin’ in the corner, textin’ away, she textin’ this man and that man and then some random man he turn up and we like ‘Who is you?’

The three have differing views about whether friends can actually lime online. Last King said absolutely not: ‘social media is what starts the lime. You send a WhatsApp or post a status like “We here. We outside” an’ everybody bounce up and that’s what starts the lime. But lime online, nah, yuh can’t do that.’ But Errything disagreed. ‘Nah, you can real lime

online. I does lime online all the time. You get on Skype, you video chat wit' four girls, you have one in each corner (on the screen) you take a shot and woah! And you know they does be chattin' wit other guys as well but that's cool,' he said.

Liming used to be a more publicly male activity, where men would stand and drink outside rum shops and talk about politics or comment on women passing by. Now, more recently, both men and women have begun to lime separately or together.<sup>32</sup> Young men still emphasise alcohol is needed for a good lime, while women and mixed groups focus on the company and hanging out without any impositions.

On Facebook friendships – especially girls' friendships – are put on public display through photos, tagging and collages. Comments reflect the reciprocal nature of friendships through banter and conversations comprehensible only between friends. Yet if photos and comments show the positive aspects of relationships, they can equally reflect the fragility of friendships and the speed with which they can disintegrate. The most common among such forms of postings are 'indirects', in which someone will say something about another person without actually referring to them by name, so that only the people closest to the situation will know what the comment or post is about. Indirects are also reflected in memes which have some moral commentary, normally associated with what good friends should be. It is common for friends to circulate these among those closest to them on WhatsApp, as well as sharing and tagging people in them on Facebook timelines.

Liming as friendship documented on Facebook or in the exchange of banter and images on WhatsApp signifies social visibility – not as an ideal, as is the case in family relationships, nor as an identification with a wider group, but as realised in practice. Closed groups in WhatsApp and photos on Facebook are the clearest examples of liming online, where having a good time, freeing up and reinforcing the positive aspects of relationships are more of a priority than resolving tensions, complexities and the difficult aspects of relationships.

## Conclusion

This chapter began by suggesting that the theme of family has an enormous impact on the discussion of polymedia (which formed the focus of Chapter 2). The reasons for this should by now be clear. Polymedia at first appears as a theoretical concept for the study and appreciation of the complementary relationships between the now myriad media

platforms that people have access to. So too, the initial emphasis is on individual choices of media and how these are judged by one's peers. Yet simultaneously, the focus of this book from the outset has been the intense sociality of a small town environment. The more abstract points about polymedia therefore here assume a concentrated form as judgements and choices are generally embedded in the context of family and peer relationships.

Subsequently, the examples given in the previous chapter in a sense become even richer in this one. Since social media is often employed in relationships within groups and not simply between two individuals, it lends itself to the complex dynamics of large extended families. The variety of available media tools may be used in efforts to resolve conflict, as in the use of WhatsApp as a 'happy medium', but it can also provide a forum for family or group conflicts to manifest themselves, as was the case in the story of Lisa and Olivia. From this basis, the chapter proceeded to examine a series of specific kinds of relationships. Vignettes given by individuals highlighted the extremes and contrasts that can result as combinations of the different media constituting polymedia are employed in various relationships contexts, such as fatherhood or friendship.

In the majority of these stories, the dynamics of transnational relationships and families that are separated for longer periods come into focus, rather than appearing as a distinct category of relationships. This reflects the dispersed nature of Trinidadian extended families, where almost everybody has a distant, if not close, relative living overseas.<sup>33</sup> When a relative in Australia makes a Skype call to 'the family', it means a phone being passed around to cousins, aunts and uncles in a living room in Trinidad, not just a video call from one individual to another. The various contexts for these communications – for example, home or work – reflect terms which, like all the other terms used here, must be understood in the light of their specific Trinidadian inflections. 'Liming' is not only catching up, but instead implies spending time together with no temporal constraints, even if with no specific purpose. Similarly, 'liming' on Facebook carries connotations of a benign social presence, signified, for example, by leaving an inconspicuous 'like' on a user's post.

The examples in this chapter also serve to counter popular arguments that social media is used to project oneself in the best possible light, in order to invoke envy or to inflate one's reputation. If we take social visibility as embodying and reproducing normative ideals, Facebook in relation to family is not simply about documenting how much better one's relationships are as compared with those of others.

Rather, depicting family relationships through posted images helps to set ideals that members themselves establish in public view in the hope of being able to live up to them. For example, the same family members who appear in amiable images of celebrations and events might also air their grievances via a phone call instead of instigating a face-to-face confrontation that could damage their relationship. Group or dyadic conversations over WhatsApp, away from the view of others, meanwhile enable communication to be far less monitored or self-censored, with the ideals of more 'truthful' relationships able to be realised in practice. Alongside long textual conversations, WhatsApp affords the sharing of images, humour, banter and visual punchlines that can reinforce the closeness of family relationships. Equally, however, more dyadic conversations also have the potential to become too truthful and in turn to lead to bacchanal.

As choices between media for communication increase, so too do judgements from others around how a person uses media to navigate a relationship. The choice among media therefore draws attention to how visibility and appearance do more than simply represent who you are: they become your moral reflection.

## 5

# Social media and social visibility: being very local and very global

It has thus far been argued that Trinidad's historical context means that people there have come to exist in society through visibility – a visibility whose significance culminates in the spectacle of the Carnival festival. From this basis it can then be further argued that uses of social media (and equally, its non-use) exemplify how people also realise their public identities through their relationship with digital media as another form of visibility. The Trinidadian trend toward self-exhibiting reaches its climax in the masquerade and performance of Carnival, yet the logic of visibility still manifests throughout the year in different forms. More so than simply representing who you are, visibility and appearance come in fact to determine *who* you are in social terms – and even subjective terms. People may present themselves as individuals, but as simultaneously sharing common values and norms within the bounds of a defined group. Moving beyond the family and extended familial relationships examined in the previous chapter, this chapter therefore argues that residents of El Mirador reflect two poles of a spectrum in relation to how they perceive themselves: the very local and the very global.

## A place-based sense of identity

Identification with the local here evokes the idea of place-based citizenship, as described by Haynes in relation to Hospiceños in *Social Media in Northern Chile*. Haynes uses 'citizenship' as a colloquial term in order to emphasise how individuals in Alto Hospicio see themselves as members of a political and geographic community.<sup>1</sup> As previously described, Hospiceños display collective identity by down-playing any form of individual distinction. Instead they attempt to conform to a semblance

of uniformity and thereby give a sense of collective marginalisation – an identity based on their geographic removal from the capital, Santiago. At the outset of this book I described El Mirador as an ‘in between’ place. The town is considered peripheral within Trinidad, especially in relation to larger cities such as Port of Spain and San Fernando, and the experience of marginality here is also quite distinct. For those who identify as very local, El Mirador’s place on the periphery as a rural Trinidadian town is therefore key. This chapter illustrates how for members of this group, life revolves around face-to-face relations, agricultural life and the market – a rural orientation whose extension is a rejection of digital technologies.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, those who identify as being globally-oriented have a strong sense of internationalism; they do not at all perceive themselves as marginal simply due to living in a county town. The vocational interests they pursue and lifestyles they project on image-circulating social media such as Facebook and Instagram are less distinctly ‘Trinidadian’. On the contrary, they document content relating to international holidays, television shows and brand consumption that could be posted by users anywhere in the world. This gravitation toward internationalism is, however, much more reflective of middle-class values, where ‘good taste’ and aesthetics as well as a sense of philanthropy are more publicly celebrated.

These local and global orientations also reflect a system of dual values that has been described (well before social media) as characteristic of Caribbean societies: that of respectability and reputation.<sup>2</sup> In one of social anthropology’s key ethnographic studies of the Caribbean, Wilson argues that a dual system of values has emerged on Anglophone Caribbean islands as a result of their colonial histories. On the one hand, respectability is rooted in social stratification by class, as perpetuated by colonial systems and manifesting in achievements around wealth and education that gravitate toward a Eurocentric culture and lifestyle. Reputation, meanwhile, is signified by local or ‘indigenous’ counterculture, personal worth, verbal skills, the life of the street and an anti-establishment ethos.<sup>3</sup> Where Chapter 4 explored how social visibility reflects ideal values in relationships, this chapter examines ideals around different kinds of social visibility and the efforts by various groups to attain them. It argues that presenting oneself as being locally oriented and thus ‘more’ Trinidadian is closely linked to achieving reputation or notoriety, while being more globally oriented or cosmopolitan reflects values which aspire to the ideal of respectability.<sup>4</sup>

Also highlighted here are varying attitudes toward the different kinds of visibility produced by relationships with social media itself. The examples given later in this chapter illustrate how embracing social media allows certain groups to develop a more sophisticated and cosmopolitan orientation, which in turn enables them to fulfil their goals around respectability. Equally, those who are ambivalent toward social media – that is, who embrace different platforms and keep up with trends, but do not use social media to align with global identities and values – are also ambivalent about the kinds of visibility that might result from exposing themselves through these platforms. Initially, however, the chapter examines so-called ‘digital resisters’ and how the refusal to use social media correlates to a refusal to embrace certain kinds of visibility within Trinidadian society.

## Digital resistance: being visibly invisible

On a street that was once a sugar cane plantation on the outskirts of El Mirador, a family with two daughters lives in a double-storey house. Their closest neighbours are 300 metres away. The eldest daughter, Priya, who is 17, wakes up at 5 am on weekday mornings; she has to be ready to leave at 6 am, when her father drives her to high school near the university. Although her school is less than 30 km away, it takes nearly an hour and a half to drive there in rush hour traffic. Priya’s younger sister, Reshma, still attends primary school in the centre of El Mirador. The girls sleep in on the weekends, but their mother, Mansi, still wakes up at 5 am, as she does on weekdays, to prepare food for the day. On Saturdays she wakes up close to dawn and listens to the morning show on the main East Indian radio station. She makes breakfast for the girls and cooks the other family meals. Mansi is fairly typical of Indo-Trinidadian women living in a small town: a stay-at-home mother who sometimes delivers dasheen and fruit from her parents’ farm to customers in the area. Both her daughters are extremely polite, quiet and tidy at all times, and Mansi prides herself on being a good wife, housekeeper, mother and cook. The local temple is very important in their family life. Several times a year they attend *pujas* (prayers) there, or hold a *puja* in their home or those of other relatives.

On one occasion Mansi mentioned that she had told her cousin who works in the bank about this research, saying that she would know ‘all sorts of people who use Facebook and webcam and ting’. As she started to cut up the whole chicken that was defrosting in the sink,

I asked Mansi how she mostly keeps in touch with the cousin. 'Oh, I will call her or I will go by hers,' she said. When asked if she used Facebook to contact her she replied, 'I'm on Facebook, but I don't really use it. I don't really have the time and I don't know many people on it. It's more for the youngsters.'

She began to explain how she gets in touch with her family throughout the week, for instance when she needs to organise a visit or to co-ordinate the delivery, pick-up and drop-off of goods. Large Trinidadian families often rely on their own relatives for sharing resources. If an uncle or brother is skilled at handyman jobs, for example, or a sister has spare plates and cutlery from a party she organised, they would be called on to help. So Mansi's parents share their fruit and dasheen with their relatives as well as selling them. As she explained, 'I have my cell phone, but I don't really do the calling. Maybe if I had to drop some dasheen and I wanted to check if the person's home. But I would still just drive to the house, it's not so far. Most family would call the house. And if we not home and it's important, they call Rakesh [her husband].'

Mansi reached to move Priya's laptop from the kitchen counter. She had acquired one of the newest models from Dell with a 15-inch screen and patterned cover. The laptop had been bought for Priya's final couple of years of school, and her parents were hoping it would last until university.

A couple of hours later Priya woke up and came downstairs. She turned on the television to the Disney channel cable. It was showing Hannah Montana, and even though Priya had grown out of the craze she and her friends went through when she was 12 or 13, she still tuned in to the old re-runs. As she watched, she checked her iPhone4, given to her by Rakesh's brother when he bought an iPhone5. She was supposed to go and see the latest Twilight film with her cousins that evening, and was messaging them on WhatsApp to find out what time she should be ready. They would probably stay at the mall after the film, maybe going on to the arcade or the T.G.I. Fridays restaurant nearby. Priya does not worry about getting in touch with her parents when she goes out with her cousins as they grew up together and only live down the road from one another. If she goes out with her friends from school, however, her parents will often go with her to the mall; they will wait for her there and drive Priya and her friends all back together. In this respect Priya's upbringing is very similar to Mansi and Rakesh's insofar as relatives are also viewed as friends and parents impose greater restrictions on the other people their children socialise with.

When she is at home, Priya mostly completes her homework or watches television, with her laptop and phone never far away and often in constant use. Strict parenting is coupled with a degree of freedom around outings and spending money on shopping with the daughters. Being from a prestigious school and of a generation that is more technology-savvy, Priya appears to be heading towards a future quite different from her mother's experience of growing up in El Mirador. For example, she and her parents had recently started looking at international scholarships in the UK or Canada where, if her grades were good enough, Priya would study medicine.

Mansi and her family are a seemingly typical example of ordinary life in a small town. For parents who work in El Mirador, and in particular for stay-at-home mothers, the home and extended family are the centres of gravity. Rooted predominantly on kinship, these networks are different from those of urban professionals, for whom networks are work and interest-based as well as focused on family. Mansi's family life has a strong connection to their East Indian heritage, through the temple and through food. On the one hand, their lifestyle reflects scenes reminiscent of rural ideals: a quiet life, filled with family and community, or being 'a country person from El Mirador'. On the other hand, the family also aspires to upward mobility, as Mansi and Rakesh provide Priya with opportunities around education, living abroad and becoming globally oriented.

The following weekend Mansi delivered dasheen and fruit to her neighbours from her parents' farm. Two of the houses were in suburban streets around the centre of the town and two were on the outskirts. Across the four households, none of the parents were on Facebook or owned smartphones. Yet all their children of high school age attended the same well-regarded school as Priya, and all owned a laptop (some a product of the Trinidadian government's 'one laptop per child' programme) and a smartphone, mostly a BlackBerry. Three of the four mothers were housewives, with the fourth running a home-based business selling cakes, while the fathers all worked for the public sector, two for the regional corporation and two for the water authority. None of the parents said that they had any need for Facebook or a different phone. The initial explanation for this might be to assume that not owning a smartphone or many digital devices is linked to cost. However, all their homes appeared comfortable; though two were smaller than the others, they were made of brick with other building materials in the car port, suggesting that they were in the process of being extended.

During the first household surveys a distinct group of respondents such as these families emerged who were not on Facebook and did not own a smartphone. It was described at the outset of this book that research participants were sought from four main areas of the town: some from two communities at the lower-income end of the spectrum and others from two sections that could be described as middle class. The homes of the latter were located on suburban streets near the centre of the town, while a final group, comprised of the broadly upper-middle class, owned businesses in the town and lived in a more affluent area. Conducting surveys in the suburban areas indicated that most of the non-users of digital media were women of Indo-Trinidadian background aged over 40 years.

In terms of gender, resistance therefore appears to relate to an intersection of ethnicity and class with a desire to maintain respectability. 'Good' and 'moral' mothers, so it is perceived, are too busy taking care of their household and children, visiting relatives and seeing their parents to have time to 'play' on social media. For them, social media is seen as entertainment, rather than a source of information or networking. Mothers are highly supportive of their children keeping up with current trends, being fashionable and having the best of everything. But their support is not only reflective of the love they have for their children; it also gives them more moral authority to not have or want these things themselves.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, new media is viewed as an extension of the privilege and opportunities they can give their children through self-sacrifice.

The context of ethnicity is quite important here. For no cultural group are women simply bodies. Among East Indians they represent the honour, respectability and modesty that are the responsibility of both husband and wife.<sup>6</sup> Women are therefore regarded through their performance of modesty – expressed through their dress, what they consume and the spaces they occupy. In public, walking with closed body language, casting the eyes downwards and occupying minimal space are not merely acts which connote invisibility and therefore respectability, but which bring the woman into visibility through her being sufficiently invisible.<sup>7</sup> The performance of modesty takes a new form in the digital age. Not using social media within a very deliberate text and social script is a symbolic rejection of visibility similar to walking in public with one's head held low. In the generation gap between mothers and daughters, it is quite acceptable for both 'local' and 'international' values and aspirations to be ascribed to the body. Daughters can wear fashionable clothing, tight jeans and so on, while using social media and

owning smartphones to show how modern the family's values are, even as the mother retains respectability and modesty by remaining invisible.

However, these more deliberate modes of opting out of digital media rarely register without ethnographic inquiry. There are several notable studies that have dealt with 'non-usage' beyond factors of age and resources.<sup>8</sup> In this study there were almost equal numbers of people in El Mirador who did not use smartphones or were not on social media as those who were. Across the field sites a general trend has emerged in which social media is used to a much higher degree by teenagers and young adults. Consistency emerges among teenagers, who generally want to keep up with their peers and have new and fashionable assets. For their parents, however, a rejection of new media is not as straightforward as it seems. 'Not needing' or 'not having the use for' certain things is not an issue that can be better understood through asking questions alone, as people tend to give answers that frame 'not needing' as a simple fact.<sup>9</sup> For some, 'I don't have the time' was the most obvious reason, highlighting that people structure their time by prioritising certain activities over others. In relation to this particular theme, understanding non-usage became much clearer in the research via an understanding of context and the rhythms and relationships of people's daily lives. 'Users' can easily talk about their experiences of what they or others do, what they like and what they do not like about each platform, who they communicate with and why, and the types of posts they discuss. Yet 'non-users' cannot necessarily define the specifics of non-usage – that is, of not doing.

The idea of digital resistance, which implies a deliberate refusal of something imposed, was introduced earlier through the example of Trevor. Though he has a phone in order to be contactable, Trevor actually seems to be uncontactable most of the time. His non-use of the phone indicates how an individual's response to relationships themselves also influences their relationship with new media. I followed Trevor over a couple of months; initially he would call me after he finished work, around 2 or 3 pm, to ask if I was free. Early on in the field work, when I did not have many participants to visit, I could join him at an hour's notice. He would drive me to other villages, some close to El Mirador and others more than an hour and a half away, deep in the bush or along the coast. He introduced me to his friends and their families without mentioning that I was working or doing research, but saying only that I was visiting Trinidad. Most of Trevor's friends are farmers and fishermen, and I saw many of them again when I started to join him to work in the market on Saturdays or Sundays.

Among them was 'Fats', a fisherman who moved to El Mirador from the far southeast coast of Trinidad. After he makes his catch for the day and delivers it to vendors, he collects coconuts and sits by the road and sells them. Selling coconuts is mostly slow business, but the main reason he sits outside each day is to chat with as many people as he might if he had a cubicle in the middle of a busy office. People from the villages and town pass by on their way to work, on their way home from work, when picking up their children from school or visiting relatives. All of them stop and talk to him, some sitting for up to half an hour. The scenes of village life that are common to people such as Fats (for example, drinking from coconuts) are reminiscent of the classic depictions of Trinidad that appear in V.S. Naipaul's novels. In the evenings a few friends would join Fats, or he would stop by their houses for a cook up and lime. The rhythm of Fats's day brings people to him spontaneously – he does not have to contact friends or relatives to schedule times to see them or to find out about their lives. His lack of need for more technological connection stems from the fact that his daily routine encompasses socialising – the sharing of food, stories, jokes, complaints or problems – without having to expand his communications. Similarly when field work became busier and I had more participants to visit regularly I was unable to join Trevor at short notice, so had to start asking which days suited him best. But imposing such time restrictions did not appeal to the spontaneous spirit of liming, especially when visiting people in villages who valued not having to structure their time or make appointments 'like the people in cities'.

There are two main factors which drive digital resistance. The first is a refusal to adopt technology for further social communication because lives are already socially saturated. This means that people feel they already have too many face-to-face relationships (mostly family and extended family) putting demands on their time. Digital resisters already have enough expectations, obligations and negotiations in their lived social relationships; they do not wish to 'keep up with the times' or 'get on board'. For them new communications media is yet another structure that they would have to negotiate and strategise and learn the modes of conduct for within existing relationships. They feel their relationships would become more mediated.

The second reason has much to do with the first. For people who 'opt out' of using new media for personal communications beyond a basic mobile phone, social media does not only represent an increase of mediation in already complicated relationships. It also represents a lifestyle that is directly or indirectly in opposition to their immediate way of

life and values. Elements of gender, age and class are intertwined with these lifestyles and values, and thus also with the reasons why individuals do not wish to be associated with using digital media.

If people grow up in farming, there are shared values and practices that come with that exposure. Consequently when farmers work with other farmers there is a shared understanding around what is done and how it is done.<sup>10</sup> Social media meanwhile is perceived by digital resisters to be an extension of the increased technologisation of everyday life. Small-scale farming around El Mirador still does not use sophisticated machinery, and the transmission of farming knowledge and practice is between family and neighbours who have shared farming practices across generations. By contrast, digital technologies as commodities reflect an extension of the 'fashionable' products that became widely available after the oil boom in Trinidad during the 1980s – luxury items and branded goods that were made accessible to the growing middle class. Today social media is therefore associated with people who have more disposable income and thus desire the most contemporary goods, a value that digital resisters do not espouse.

For those with strong connections to market life in El Mirador, digital resistance is deeply entwined with a sense of identity. By 6 am on a Saturday morning, market stalls are set up and ready to go. Customers soon begin to arrive – only a few at first, then a steady flow which gradually builds across the morning (Figs 5.1a, 5.1b, 5.1c and 5.1d). On the weekend few people used smartphones at the market; if they did, it was mostly to make or receive phone calls. In the clothing stores or other shops on the main street in El Mirador, by contrast, smartphones are the main way of alleviating boredom when business is quiet over the course of the day. But the use of smartphones, Facebook and WhatsApp is not part of the market way of life.

Trevor is one of six siblings and sometimes his youngest brother Steven takes their mother, now in her seventies, down to the market to do her shopping. Unlike Trevor, who went to school in El Mirador and now works in a public office in the town, Steven went to high school in Port of Spain; he is now the purchaser for one of the big sports stores in the city. At 56 Trevor is also the oldest sibling, with Steven the youngest at 34. When they go shopping Steven mostly waits for his mother at the entrance of the market, chatting on his iPhone or looking at Facebook. He tries to stand out of the way of shoppers and out of the sun. A few acquaintances that he has seen over the years and recognises from living nearby walk past; they greet him and ask after his family, but do not have extended conversations.



**Figs. 5.1a–d** Images of the market in El Mirador. Note the different ages of salespeople on market stalls; these are usually family-run for generations



**Figs. 5.1a–d** Continued

For Steven's mother, by contrast, the market is her social life. Before they leave the house she showers, combs her hair and puts on her going-out dress and a pair of earrings. Although the shopping itself takes half an hour at most, the conversations with people she knows – from friends at the school where she used to work to former students and their families – can consume over an hour. As his mother is elderly, Steven would rather take her to the supermarket in the next town, which is larger and has air-conditioning. But although she sometimes asks to shop there when she wants to buy groceries in bulk, when she needs only a few things she chooses to go to the market, which she also prefers over the grocery stores in El Mirador. More than a convenient place to shop, the market is to her a social outing for the weekends.

The class dimension of digital resistance does not simply reflect a lack of means for using new media. Several vendors at the market are comfortably middle class as both farming in the area, especially on a larger scale, and selling in the main market are comfortable businesses with a steady income. Yet in a society as conscious of social visibility as Trinidad, one's jobs and place of work hold wider connotations about lifestyle and identity. Regardless of what income it generates, farming is still perceived to be a low-class, unsophisticated job. Throughout the research farmers and their families often noted (at least indirectly) that they are 'looked down on' by the university-educated and professionals. One dimension of digital resistance for them is therefore a refusal to update to smartphones or use social media because it sends a message to these elites that they aspire to emulate them, whereas they are in fact quite content being farmers. Far preferable would be a scenario in which others did not look down on them and the way they live. Opting out therefore means that they are able to magnify their values and way of life as simple, but moral country people, who choose to associate mostly with others who share their values and circumstances. Those who are older take it upon themselves to retain a more 'traditional' way of life, showing that they subscribe to these values through 'traditional' means of face-to-face communication. However, exceptions around opting out of new media are webcam – across all groups, there are people who want to use Skype with relatives and friends living abroad – and accessing websites such as YouTube for their personal interests.

The generation gap on issues of lifestyle, education and networks that was reflected between Mansi and Priya is also evident in the case of Trevor and Steven. Their mother is fairly typical of older people in El Mirador who rarely use social media (as noted above, apart from Skype, which they may use through younger relatives to speak with family

overseas). Beyond the popular assumptions that non-usage is related to cost and computer literacy, a theory of digital resistance for opting out of social media also helps to explain why there are fewer elderly people – in fact, next to none – using social media in El Mirador. The factors behind elderly people's disinclination toward social media are directly linked to an individual's relationships and the habits they practise out of a set of values. Not using digital media may not be a deliberate decision, but an effect that stems from their everyday activities.

For example, it is unlikely that Trevor, Mansi or Rakesh will become avid users of social media, whereas Lana is more likely to. Lana is 26; she works with her cousin and parents, selling produce at their fruit and vegetable stall, one of the biggest at the market. Her family have always been farmers, though she and her younger sister also studied at university. Lana studied finance and wanted to pursue an MA, while her sister studied agriculture. Their parents are friends with everyone at the market – they grew up with some of them and, in many cases, knew their parents from when they worked at the same market. Lana is on Facebook, but says she rarely uses it; she joined when she was studying in London, but has used it less since returning home. Because she has a wider network of associations from living overseas and acquired through her studies, she is more likely than older people in her market community to remain connected to groups who are either more international or have international aspirations.

Where older people do use digital media, it is to pursue their general interests and entertainment. Mr Taylor, for example, is a former novelist in his late sixties, living in the university district of St Augustines. His wife passed away ten years prior to the research and his children and grandchildren live in Canada. He has always had an interest in history and literature, and since retiring and largely living alone has been aware that it would be best for his wellbeing if he remains active. He moved to El Mirador five years previously as he had relatives in the area, and now lives in a small house on a residential street in the middle of the town, where it is easy for him to walk anywhere or to catch public transport if necessary. Every day Mr Taylor goes into the town centre – even if he does not have anything in particular to do – where he came across the internet café owned by Kumar (introduced in Chapter 2). At that time Kumar had just recently opened the café and had fewer than five desktop computers, and Mr Taylor only went there to Skype with his son and daughter in Canada. He was already familiar with Google and he had used other search engines when he was working, but Kumar introduced him to YouTube. Now Mr Taylor comes to the café at least three times a

week to watch videos on YouTube that he has not previously been able to access, such as footage of Ella Fitzgerald concerts or performances by Sammy Davis and Louis Armstrong. In fact, since discovering YouTube, Mr Taylor has watched performances by all his favourite musicians to whom he used to listen on records. He still does not use any social media beyond Skype, but regularly accessing content of interest on YouTube has aligned naturally with his daily routine of socialising with Kumar and walking around El Mirador.

Similarly, Eleanor, who lives on the outskirts of El Mirador, is in her early sixties and says that she 'doesn't really have the need for social media'. She still works part-time as a security guard and visits Kerry, her only daughter, most days of the week. Her home and garden are her pride and joy; even if she has worked a long day, she will still find time to tend to her flowers.<sup>11</sup> Most evenings Eleanor watches television and crochets. Her home is filled with crochet tablecloths, throw rugs and other decorative pieces. She also crochets elaborate dresses for dolls, of which she has shelves filled with all sizes.

Eleanor explains that her love of all kinds of crafts is a result of her family not having had much money while she was young. When her grandparents were very young, they were among the first generation of emancipated slaves. Eleanor remembers that their house was small and sparsely furnished, but that her grandmother taught her mother to crochet and later herself. It is a past time that they shared, and she considers it important to pass on. As she explains, 'We didn't have very much, so we had to make clothes and toys and ting. Wool was cheap then, it still is, so yuh could get good rel fast and make all kind of pretty tings.' In the last year Kerry was given a tablet by a friend who had upgraded to an iPad. They now meet at the local pizza chain restaurant, which has WiFi, and watch YouTube videos together – at least when the connection is strong enough to stream video. They mostly watch parts of 'old time' movies, such as Hollywood classics from the 1950s and 1960s, which they would have seen together when they were shown on television. Eleanor remembers when they were first screened in the cinema and when it was an occasion to go to see films, marvelling that she can now watch these for free and with just a click of a finger, when once they were so difficult to access.

The lives of elderly people such as Mr Taylor and Eleanor have been significantly impacted by digital media, despite their not using social media. As most of their networks are face to face, the real impact that digital media has had is not increased socialisation: it is rather increased access to their interests and entertainment which in turn reduces the

boredom and sense of isolation that many feel is inevitable with ageing. As they see their lives as simple, uncomplicated and unmediated, they are nonetheless examples of digital resistance. Their interests also have a sense of nostalgia for the world of their youth, when the values of community and family were more important. Of course, every generation seems to cherish the assumption that their lives were simpler, more authentic, more traditional and more values-based, but the real transformation for this group of digital resisters is that new media is used to retain or extend these values.

At first glance, it may seem odd to devote so much of this chapter to those who resist technology, rather than focusing on those who embrace it. Research suggests that many who opt out of digital technologies do so as an individual choice, whether by opting out altogether or deliberately minimising their use of technologies. Such voluntary non-usage can often be linked to expressions of socio-cultural identity.<sup>12</sup> Given this, there are surprisingly few ethnographic studies that seriously explore why groups of people refuse to engage with digital technologies, even when they may possess the means to own several devices.<sup>13</sup> The proportion of the population in El Mirador that can be described as digital resisters is significant in the field site (approximately 30 per cent). Groups of digital resisters might be less substantial in other areas in Trinidad, especially in the larger cities of Port of Spain and San Fernando, but it was observable in El Mirador that a significant amount of people, of different ages and different income levels, do not 'do' social media.

Of course attitudes to the use of technology do not stay frozen in time; for the same groups of digital resisters found in this chapter, the refusal to own smartphones or use social media may well change in the near future. The generation now in their forties are more likely to have children who are more upwardly mobile, and who in turn are more likely to study and live overseas. If this happens, these parents and their relatives will be more inclined to adopt social media to keep in touch with the young people abroad. Chapters 3 and 4 emphasised how Trinidadians generally are embedded in wider relationships of family and community, so it would therefore not be surprising that circumstances such as relatives migrating would represent an important shift to adopting social media to maintain these relationships. The more upwardly mobile and globally oriented youth are the focus of the next section.

In the cases that follow, social media is used to externalise aspirations that were previously held in the opposite direction – to associate with lifestyles, tastes and values that are more global. For these groups, their sense of cultural capital is located beyond the town. The first

example of the Rotaractors shows an already more cosmopolitan group, whose values seek to be more international; the second, of Amway Individual Business Owners, seeks to expand their group by incorporating others; and the third, Faith Community Church, are a local community who already know one another, but subscribe together to the values of US missionisation.

## **Internationalism and cosmopolitanism as respectability**

The youth wing of the traditional Rotarians, members of the Rotaract group in El Mirador, are in their twenties and early thirties. The group shares the more global values of philanthropy and citizenship associated with all branches of the international organisation.<sup>14</sup> Its members all have strong ties to El Mirador, having grown up and gone to school in the area, and some have parents who own or work for businesses in the town. Their postings on Facebook reflect environmentally conscious and ‘green’ issues – locally as well as in relation to global issues such as climate change – with many related memes and striking photographs.

Rotaractors further illustrate how such values succeed in encompassing both the international and the idiomatically Trinidadian. On the one hand, many of their values relate to beliefs that are widespread internationally, including those concerning Christmas and Christianity itself. The middle-class groups who constitute its membership are particularly cosmopolitan – for example, the young women look at international fashion blogs and YouTube videos – and in many ways reflect the tendencies that ‘clean cut’ organisations or interest communities espouse worldwide. The activities of the Rotarian youth group are not limited to recent developments around environmental or community outreach work, for example, beach clean-ups and packing hampers to distribute to the poor at Christmas. They now also encompass craft and baking activities that are associated with worldwide trends in the revival of knitting, crocheting and fabric work or baking and cake-decorating.

Megan

Megan has been a member of Rotaract for the past five years and has held several key positions in the organisation, including Treasurer and Vice President. As one of the main organisers for the El Mirador branch, she frequently convenes their events, co-ordinating the group on Facebook or via WhatsApp. On her Facebook timeline are a variety of posts that reflect

her different interests: these include fashion and Carnival events, but also environmental messages and photos of dishes she has experimented with cooking. She has an Instagram account, like several of her Rotaract and university friends, with around 20 interest boards on Pinterest.

Megan went to school in El Mirador and has remained friends with the classmates she grew up with, regularly catching up with them at one of the local bars. Her school friends are on Facebook and WhatsApp, but no other social media platforms. Although she sees herself staying in Trinidad, having attended the university and completed a couple of internships abroad, she is unsure to what extent she will remain connected to the town. Her family lives on a big plot of land where her mother still rears ducks and chickens and their home is further away from the town centre, towards the villages. Megan has loved growing up in the area. It was always quiet, she could see the stars at night and has never had to waste her high school years sitting for hours in traffic. But with a Masters in History and a degree in Environmental Sciences, she is not certain about the kind of career she could pursue in El Mirador. She has remained committed to Rotaract as the club has allowed her to spend a lot of time with like-minded people – many of whom have grown up the way she did, but now also have similar aspirations. Megan is typical of many young women her age. She has a deep attachment to home and a desire to go abroad, but for now, while her social circle shares the same dilemma, she can co-exist in both worlds.

## Devin

Devin also grew up in El Mirador and attended the same high school as Megan. He is 22 and lives on a main road near one of the major schools, so when he sits in his gallery will see no fewer than six neighbours walk past during the rush hour, saying hello as they go by. Devin recently returned from a study internship in the US, moving back home with his mother and grandmother, and is about to pursue his Masters in Literature.

The most striking feature of Devin's Facebook timeline or Instagram feed is his sense of humour. He posts a lot of selfies and photos of his travels and with friends – but he also does what not many Trinidadians do in photos: he pulls faces. Usually, when Trinidadians post photos of themselves, whether selfies or those taken by others, they tend to pose. Women will stand up straight and show their hips and curves while men will stand tall, especially if they are wearing a suit or an outfit for a night out. Even in his Rotaract photos, Devin smiles with his mouth open or

poses in a way that shows he does not take himself seriously. Of his selfies, he observes:

I kinda take the anti-selfie. Like I'll post a selfie of me on the sofa, put a tea towel on my head, drink a sweet drink and say "Just ran around the block". All my friends know I don't run. Or I'll post a selfie and it will be a really exaggerated duck face.

Although Devin grew up in El Mirador, he has not had the typical life of children raised there. He has already gone abroad several times, including working abroad; he reads extensively and he watches *Game of Thrones*. These might not be unusual things in themselves, but in El Mirador having more opportunities to travel and more UK-centric interests can generate the perception that an individual considers himself better than others in the town. Although Devin's tastes are different and his interests less Trini-centric, he counters this by posting with a sense of self-deprecation. Yes, he has his environmental, philanthropic and 'higher-brow' interests, but he also does not take himself too seriously.

## Nishant

Nishant is the most recent president of the El Mirador branch of Rotaract. In addition to his involvement in that organisation, he is also the head of the youth group at his local Hindu temple, a central aspect of his life since childhood. Outside of his normal working hours, his week is occupied predominantly by temple and Rotaract activities. Because of his role at the temple, where many are aware of his involvement with Rotaract, Nishant feels he needs to set an example for the young people there. His Facebook profile is very carefully curated for this reason. He loves Carnival, and a large aspect of his social life with Rotaract revolves around drinking and fetes at Carnival time. Yet he censors what people can see on his timeline, untagging himself from posts which show 'bad behaviour' or changing the settings to private so only he and his Rotaract friends can view them. Nishant comments that:

When people look at my Facebook page, I want them to see a real person. Yes, I am a Hindu and I go to temple and religion is very important to me, but I also like to go out and fete and have a good time. I think it's ok if people, especially the youths at the temple, see both sides of me.

Through his temple life, Nishant has more of a connection to El Mirador than either Devin or Megan. Yet although he has a strong sense of his town identity, there are aspects of life in El Mirador he avoids entirely, explaining 'I don't go out in El Mirador. I don't like the rum shops, the bars are a bit . . . they're not very nice and I don't really like the kind of people that go there, they're not my kind of people. If I want to go out, I prefer to go to Port of Spain'. Nishant's observation highlights the fact that where you are seen and who you are seen with also have a moralising component in Trinidad, just as certain behaviours are documented for display on Facebook. Like his personal appearance on Facebook, Nishant also curates where he is seen and who he is seen with, as people and places have connotations that significantly shape how one is perceived.

Rotaractors, more so than Amway Independent Business Owners (IBOs) or members of Faith Community in the following sections, succeed in integrating many other specifically Trinidadian traditions alongside a sense of internationalism. Most of the Rotaractors are involved with middle-class Carnival culture, attending all-inclusive fetes and posting photos from the types of social media photography businesses described in Chapter 3. As well as attending other fetes, Rotaractors also host their own or organise cruising fundraisers, with drinking a large element of liming and socialising more generally. Yet their environmental and philanthropic concerns also reflect the global middle-class values espoused by Rotaract. Its membership is quite small (around 30 people) and is not typical of young people in El Mirador. Yet their simultaneous global and local identities are shared by a large portion of the town's youth population, especially those who attended prestigious schools or university outside El Mirador. There are also more female than male members of Rotaract, which may point to something deeper about the variety of choices young women have in Trinidadian society. In terms of lifestyle, consumption and the identities available to them, women in contemporary Trinidad have more than options than previous generations did.

Rotaractors exemplify how values that are more Trinidadian – for example, around Carnival as spectacle and time to celebrate freedom, or around family and community – become projects for renewing tradition and establishing roots that also extend to social media. So, too, Rotaractors exemplify global interests and aspirations, as shown through the images they post around lifestyle. Social visibility through identifying with these values 'offline' is therefore made all the more visible via social media. Here it is not just what individuals show that becomes important, but how they see themselves through association

and identification with groups of a similar class and values. Likewise, as discussed below in relation to Amway IBOs, work may not simply be a job, but a lifestyle, in which generating wealth and success is based in an ideology of individual responsibility.

## **Amway: values of economic self-reliance**

Amway meetings are held in a large community hall in the next town from El Mirador, where loud *soca* music can be heard pumping from the crowded car park. Jane, who is introduced in more detail further on, is driving to the hall to join the rest of the team; all are wearing purple tops and sitting together at the front of the hall. They are all IBOs (Independent Business Owners) whose businesses started with the same sponsor. In the foyer, tables are set up with rows of motivational books and CDs available to buy. Some IBOs and guests are browsing through the books, others are chatting, but most are seated, waiting for the presentation to begin.

The lights dim and a booming voice introduces Matthew, the most successful IBO in Trinidad, who is leading the presentations for the evening. Matthew is in his early thirties, clean-cut, with neat hair and wearing a suit. He is confident and commanding of the audience, who clap, whoop and cheer at the end of his proclamations of 'We're all here to make some money!' He introduces his young wife Reema – immaculately styled with glamorous hair and make-up and a sensible but flattering black dress that falls just below her knees. She seems shy at being invited on stage, but when Matthew passes her the microphone she is equally confident and motivational. The couple introduce several other speakers throughout the course of the night, all of them equally young, confident and well-dressed IBOs who recount their stories of progress and achievements in their businesses to date. The crowd is generous and expressive of their support, cheering loudly and thumping chairs. Jane mentions that not everybody in the room will get to make these sorts of presentations, as IBOs are only invited to present when they reach certain milestones in their businesses – either earning certain returns or recruiting a quota of new people. The faster you meet these milestones, the more frequently you will be invited to speak on stage.

Similarly to Carnival, where crossing the stage is the most exhilarating part of playing masquerade, appearing here seemed to be an extremely important moment. The stage symbolised achievement, and

the appeal of being seen on it seemed to be a large element motivating IBOs to improve their businesses. Jane was speaking for the first time that night and when she sat down after her presentation, she was full of energy and adrenalin. 'That was amazing,' she said, 'it just makes me want to do everything I can to go Platinum.'<sup>15</sup>

Amway meetings such as these are intended to generate motivation and enthusiasm among IBOs and to attract new distributors, integrating them into the community. Being invited to speak on stage and being seen at other events is a major aspect of Amway's rhetoric; to succeed in the business, one has to embody the business ethos of professionalism and success. Higher ranking IBOs stress the importance of looking the part to gain trust and authority among junior IBOs: the men wear suits and women tailored skirts, blouses and jackets. Team building is encouraged, and each team wears the same colour to make them easily identifiable and, especially, to be able to gauge the size of one team in relation to another. Motivational products are considered as important to the business as the goods sold themselves, and IBOs are encouraged to cultivate their philosophies and strategies toward building their businesses. Facebook is also considered an extension of the visibility afforded by meetings.

## Jane

Jane is in her late twenties and has a full-time job in addition to her Amway pursuits. She describes herself before joining Amway as having had far less confidence. She says what appealed to her was the people and team aspect of the business, rather than selling products. She found that working with her mentors compelled her to help other people on their way, with Facebook her main platform for connecting with the juniors on her team. As noted above, she still holds down a separate full-time job that carries her half way across the country every day, sometimes leaving her to sit in traffic for up to two hours there and back. In these instances she opens the Facebook app on her BlackBerry and scrolls down her timeline. She subscribes to a few positivity and motivational pages and will share memes that she comes across on her own timeline. The idea is that no matter where members of her team are, or whatever they may be doing, they know that she is thinking about and encouraging them from afar. She is also in a new relationship with a young man she met through IBO networking and, together, they have combined their entrepreneurial and personal lives. As well as motivational memes, which he too shares, they have started posting

images of themselves, well-dressed and at upmarket functions such as at Trinidad's Hyatt Hotel in Port of Spain.

Jane also sees Matthew and Reema as inspirations; they frequently go to Amway events in Florida and California, and their successes have taken them to Amway events as far away as Sydney. Indeed Matthew and Reema's Facebook timelines highlight the appeal of a successful, middle-class family life built on an ideology of hard work and self-responsibility. Matthew posts motivational memes similar to those shared by Jane, as well as pictures of himself and Reema at Amway events. He is tagged in photos that audience members have taken of him on stage more often than he posts his own pictures.

Reema too posts around events, but alongside photos of their new baby daughter, showing the cute things she does or how she looks at three and six months old. Although both couples' posts reflect genres typical of Trinidad – memes, family, religious posts for holidays and among women, make-up – they also convey more global aspirations through entrepreneurship and lifestyle.<sup>16</sup> Matthew and Reema, for example, post more images of themselves in the US or on international travel than they do of themselves at events in Trinidad. Yet the appeal of Amway itself has many Trini inflections. The call and response structure of meetings resembles the charismatic worship of Pentecostal churches, and there is a strong sense of association or belonging to a bounded, self-identified group. The idea of individual entrepreneurship also appeals to Trinidadians as it transcends the social categorisations of ethnicity and gender; as discussed below, the individual as self-responsible is also a theme central to Faith Community.

## **Faith Community Church: values of building community**

Faith Community Church was established by Pastor Aaron and his wife Shyla, who moved to the US to train as missionaries in the early 2000s. Although they had intended to remain living there, they decided that the best way to spread their message was to move back to the communities they grew up with in El Mirador. The congregation is fewer than five years old and has a following of around one hundred people. All members of Faith Community had previously attended another church in El Mirador or the next largest town in the region, but had attended less regularly or were finding that church no longer meaningful to their lives. At the time of research approximately half its members were under 20 and were avid users of social media, mostly Facebook and WhatsApp.

In addition to its Sunday church services, Faith Community has separate groups for parents, men, women and young people. All of these groups engage in community outreach in different ways, and social media is used to co-ordinate events. Some of the younger members of the church in the youth ministry post events such as church camps or sports days on Facebook and share Bible verses and religious or inspirational memes on their timelines.

The then pastor of the church strongly encouraged using Facebook to spread the church's message, especially among younger people whom he considered to be more technically savvy. He also personally posted messages for Easter and Christmas and throughout the year, wishing blessings upon the congregation. More recently, however, the pastor has found that his Facebook friends tend to clutter his timeline; he has to sift through it to find anything he thinks is relevant to the church and its ministry.

Similarly his wife posted photos of church events around Christmas and organized family games days, as well as family holidays. Yet the couple have experienced a negative backlash around the visibility of their family life; they had intended to share this with relatives and friends, but found it became the subject of jealousy. They have thus deactivated their Facebook accounts and now only circulate messages and photos to a family group on WhatsApp. However, other members of the youth group have continued to post around their families, friends and beliefs visibly to reinforce the nature of community to the church.

As Pastor Aaron and the leader of the youth group feel that the influence of Carnival is entirely antithetical to the church's teachings, Faith Community holds a retreat during the week of the festival. Instead of being exposed to fetes and street drinking, the church hires a school camp venue where families are invited to spend fellowship time together.

## Dylon

Dylon is one of the church's young parishioners. He completed high school two years ago and is now attending the local technical college. His older cousin David, and David's wife, run the church's youth and men's groups, and his parents and siblings, as well as some of his aunts and uncles and their families, also attend the church. Most weekends Dylon likes to go out to the mall, or to restaurants in Port of Spain with his cousins or friends. He does not drink very much, perhaps a single beer or a couple of Carib Shandys (a flavoured beer with very light alcohol content). Dylon dresses at church in the way he would when going

out, his hair slicked up and back and his short beard neatly trimmed and shaped. His sense of style is very similar to David's. Both brothers have an earring and stylish haircuts; they wear designer jeans and branded T-shirts or shirts and expensive shoes. The young men look 'cool' and stylish in a way that does not seem to fit the more conservative style of El Mirador's Catholic or Pentecostal churches.

Dylon's Facebook profile also displays a mixture of interests. He regularly shares memes with motivational quotes or a Bible verse superimposed on a scene, alongside birthday and graduation photos showing family life, outings with his friends in the city and links to articles of environmental concern. He mostly posts funny videos or others that can be described as spectacular, such as stunts or some event overseas. Dylon's use of Facebook differs from that of parishioners from other churches in El Mirador, who typically show their religiosity more than other themes, with frequent sharing of memes and homilies. Dylon's Facebook timeline is more rounded, however, his religious postings comprising one element in a wider range of lifestyle content.

Across all the above groups, the use of Facebook in particular shows a form of moralising that brings them closer to values we might normally associate with citizenship and political ideologies.<sup>17</sup> Members of Faith Community and Amway IBOs both emphasised that it is up to individuals to take control of improving their own lives, whether it be overcoming social problems in disadvantaged areas (part of the church's outreach programme) or creating individual wealth. Amway IBOs claim to be utterly disillusioned with the free education programme in Trinidad; they argue that such initiatives can leave many people with educational qualifications but few job prospects in an over-saturated market. A similar perspective is shown in Faith Community's attempts to compensate for the lack of social services – they do not simply hand out charity, but seek to draw people into, and build, their own sense of community. So the church also functions as a network for informal job hunting and education via its connections with after school programmes.

More generally, there is evidence of the kind of right-wing-inflected, political ideas dominant in US church ideologies in the anti-state, self-reliance ethos of Faith Community. Yet both it and the Amway IBOs community take advantage of the visual platform of Facebook to create the feel of a so-called 'imagined community', as described by Benedict Anderson – one in which individuals can easily identify themselves as part of the group.<sup>18</sup> In an attempt to compensate for what they feel the state has failed to provide, these groups adopt values from more

global influences, whether religion or entrepreneurship, as an alternative means for a collective identity through which individual aspirations can also be achieved.

Common to all three groups is the use of social media for realising various pre-existing aspirations. Of the three, Rotaractors perhaps strike the balance between engaging with global trends around environmentalism and philanthropy and retaining central local practices around liming, Carnival and humour. Amway IBOs and members of Faith Community meanwhile opt for more all-encompassing identities centred on work and religious communities that are less distinctively 'Trini' in ideology. Social media as a tool for extending the visibility of these more international values and aspirations can therefore be correlated with its use to promote other forms of visibility, as social media itself becomes emblematic of lifestyle and values.

### **Facebook fame: 'Let them see how big you are!'**

Whether groups perceive their identity as locally based or globally oriented, there is value in cultural capital. Yet for those who are unable to attain cultural capital, social media reflects a short cut to gaining a following and the associated publicity, social kudos or even notoriety – often in distinctly unsophisticated ways. If respectability is achieved through property ownership and/or an education that affirms one's place in a hierarchy, and reputation is gained through prominence in the strata of 'street' culture and/or affirming egalitarianism through play, performance and humour, then it can be argued that reputation in itself does not represent having true status in society.<sup>19</sup> Throughout the research the term 'Facebook fame' was used to describe a certain genre of posts – mostly videos gone viral in which individuals had recorded themselves or others acting in ways intended to shock, confront and generate conversation or bacchanal. The most common examples of these were fights among teenagers in high schools and teenage girls filming themselves wining (that is, dancing by gyrating the hips and buttocks) in their homes, usually in a more provocative manner than is seen in fetes. If the individuals are clearly visible and identifiable in the videos, one direct result is a dramatic increase in their number of Facebook friends and, in turn, a boost to their notoriety and reputation. However, as is explored in the following chapter, the shock factor of videos that result in Facebook fame can also obscure some of the potentially more serious discussions that could stem from their contents. Rather than the issues which underlie these – seemingly

isolated – social media incidents, it is the spectacle itself that becomes the subject of debate.

One such example, which dates from 2014, is that of a mother who was filmed giving her 12-year-old daughter ‘licks’ (a form of corporal punishment using a hand, slipper or belt), while requesting that her older daughter post the video to Facebook (Fig. 5.2). The six-minute film shows the mother irate at her teenage daughter for posting Facebook photos of herself posing in her underwear. She can be seen asking the other daughter to record the video on her laptop to post on Facebook as she smacks the younger daughter with a belt, asking her if she ‘feels she is a big woman now’. The girl cries as the mother continues to smack her to, as she states, ‘teach her a lesson’. The result was viral – by the following day, the video was appearing on the news and in the papers (Fig. 5.3). Such was its prominence that a heated public debate about the use of corporal punishment on children ensued, while a follow-up video was quickly posted online by the daughters in defence of their mother’s actions.

The mother came under attack online not only through Facebook and YouTube comments, but also from her peers who interacted with her face to face. She was quickly overwhelmed by the backlash, initially refusing to comment to the media. Within a couple of days, however, the older sister (who had recorded the incident) posted another video in which she and her sister gave an explanation defending their mother (Fig. 5.4). They noted that the video could give the impression of a harsh



**Fig. 5.2** Image from the viral video of 2014



Fig. 5.3 Cover of Trinidad and Tobago's newspaper *Newsday*, 24 April 2014

punishment, but that the mother had not really hurt the girl – rather, by teaching her a lesson, she was in fact being a good mother. That video also went viral. The result extended the debate about using corporal punishment on children (discussed further in Chapter 6) as well as introducing the phrase ‘Facebook fame’ into Trinidad’s social media vernacular.

In the days that followed the posting of the original video, the mother did speak to mainstream media to defend her actions. She stated



**Fig. 5.4** Image from the video of the sisters defending their mother (modified to preserve anonymity)

that ‘I did what I had to do because I do not want my child coming home at 14 or 15 with a belly [pregnant] and telling me she don’t know who the daddy is. I want my daughter to be an example to society’.<sup>20</sup> The elder sister then posted a second video to her Facebook page in which she attempted to explain the incident and exculpate her mother. Here she notes that:

My mom is very sorry for what...not what she did but for what happened with the video seeing that it went all viral. She did do it because Facebook is where my sister had her so-called fame and her rant and rave and my mom knew that she would have to put a curb to it because the road my sister was heading down was teenage pregnancy.

She then prompts her sister, who apologises to their mother for her behaviour and the ‘embarrassment’ it has caused. In conclusion, she adds that, ‘You may try to do it [post provocative photos on Facebook] for the fame but realise you are a special piece of God’s puzzle and you will fit in somewhere or somehow’.

The sisters’ own video attracted more Facebook friends to the pair, who remained the topic of conversation for several weeks, bringing them a degree of popularity in their area and at school.<sup>21</sup> The two videos were shared over 10,000 times before being removed from Facebook.

Such an incident illustrates how ‘Facebook fame’ achieved by going viral may garner a wide audience, but also promotes a kind of visibility that becomes bacchanal. Neither the 12 year-old girl, her older sister nor their mother intended these consequences, yet the source of their fame was precisely the kind of vulgarity and exhibitionism that increases reputation, but lacks the ‘sophistication’ typically associated with respectability. It therefore becomes apparent that where there are different types of visibility, there is also a spectrum of ambivalent attitudes towards the values ‘visible’ people embody.

## Conclusion

Located in one of the poorest areas of Trinidad, El Mirador provides a snapshot that reflects the experiences of many other places in so-called ‘developing countries’ or the ‘developing world’ as they undergo rapid industrial growth and urbanisation. Considering the role of communications in these developing areas, the last decade or more has seen an emphasis on increasing connectivity: that is, implementing an infrastructure that allows individuals to connect more efficiently to economic centres, bureaucracies and markets.<sup>22</sup> Yet with the recent spike in the availability of smartphones and affordable monthly or pre-paid plans, arguments of this kind around the need to ‘connect’ people are becoming increasingly outdated. A second element in the focus on increasing connectivity in developing areas is that of building social networks.<sup>23</sup> Here the underlying assumption is that when individuals have better infrastructure for communicating with one another, they will pool their resources, collectively growing their capacity to increase livelihoods through sharing information. Digital usage and connection therefore align with sharing information and knowledge, while non-usage and disconnection are perceived as a lack of resources.

Again, however, these arguments were largely put forward pre-social media.<sup>24</sup> This chapter has instead addressed assumptions around connectivity and building social networks by theorising social media as social visibility for the display of cultural capital. If social media has provoked one form of unprecedented social change, it is the potential to make anyone visible – digitally to realise social visibility to anyone else, within or outside of immediate personal networks and in real time. This cultivation and creation of appearance continues to have an impact, long after an image or status post has been made public. The trend in El

Mirador, as seen in the above cases, is that both users of social media and digital resisters continue to curate themselves for social visibility, typically portraying themselves as locally based or internationally oriented. Yet simultaneously this volume has aimed to move beyond the argument that social media simply increases or extends visibility. Instead it has argued that social media magnifies the process whereby social norms are brought to visibility – a visibility and appearance which also represent cultural capital associated with defined groups.

The town of El Mirador is ideal for investigating themes such as these. As an ‘in between place’, the impacts of the economic boom of the 1980s and attendant increase in the development of infrastructure and services have not resulted in an even distribution of resources within the town. For example, it is not unusual to see in the town centre a large, renovated, middle-class home next to a half-finished brick structure with a corrugated iron roof. Historically wealth has been made visible in Trinidad through one’s education and through embracing British and American culture. However, at the same time and especially for many Indo-Trinidadians, showing Indian identity through dress, food and religious life is also a way to assert a cultural identity. Showing how ‘cultural’ one is by exhibiting Afro- or Indo- heritage is intertwined with showing how global one is – not only through education and interests, but also through consumption and lifestyle.

Appearance is a long-standing theme in how Trinidadians understand themselves and relate to each other. Yet it is also a means of showing specific ethnic and class identities – performances for an audience that is essentially other Trinidadians. However, in El Mirador it is apparent that not using social media or owning a smartphone have equally strong connotations around social visibility and identity. Non-usage as a form of resistance thereby becomes a statement for asserting one’s identity that is as powerful as the postings and images by social media users. As well as functioning as an emblem for those who see themselves as more international, social media therefore also feeds digital resistance among those who see themselves as valuing locality and tradition.

Beyond these defining trends, the final story in this chapter illustrates how those who see themselves as neither locally based and community oriented nor globally oriented toward an international system of values are unable to achieve respectability among either grouping. Instead, they seek fame – becoming known by going viral in the crudest of forms and where the consequences of visibility cannot be controlled. So, too, the story reflects a greater ambivalence in uses of and attitudes toward social media. A generation gap emerges between the mother,

who was clearly unaware of what Facebook is or does (as is confirmed by her comments on the viral video), and the sisters, who appropriated it after receiving considerable attention, posting further viral videos to give voice to their perspectives and to defend their mother.

On one side, there are groups who embrace social media, successfully adopting it to project themselves as outward-looking or worldly and to integrate into groups with a similar world view. At the other extreme, meanwhile, are groups who reject social media, refusing to engage because they associate social media and those who use it with vulgarity – of the kind exemplified by the self-displays of the mother ‘giving licks’ and her daughters. In this sense there are two groups of digital resisters: those for whom social media finds no cultural fit with their everyday lives, and the affluent and educated classes who refuse to engage with digital platforms because they have the choice to do so. The latter group, seeing themselves as more elite, thereby refuse to make use of a digital platform that is too mainstream or ‘common’, such as those who embrace Instagram over Facebook.

The members of Rotaract, Amway and Faith Community exemplify the extension of social visibility to social media, which itself becomes an emblem of a distinct cosmopolitanism and international focus. As such, the content they post on social media becomes an extension of their prior aspirations. Where the use of social media appears at face value to indicate class and global connectivity, it could be assumed that the non-users at the other end of the spectrum are confined simply by not having the resources to participate in the same digital practices. However, as much as social media may function as an emblem of internationalism, it can also feed an attachment to localism through digital resistance. Given the ubiquity of Facebook, as highlighted in previous chapters, what digital resisters present by means of non-usage is in fact an equally strong performance of identity. The mundane practices of ordinary families, whose lives revolve largely around the countryside, draw attention to their values and practices through non-usage, but also by performing invisibility. Where global values and aspirations are important to one group and local values and aspirations to another, both are performed to the same audience. Ultimately, one is not more global or local than the other: both identities are constructed for display among other Trinidadians, be it through the use or non-use of social media.

Alongside these practices, it is clear not only that Facebook fame can serve as a shortcut to cultural capital, but also that reputation has its own consequences. A serious issue manifesting via social media

can be all too easily dismissed as it descends into spectacle and bacchanal. Drawing together these themes, the next chapter relates social visibility to political engagement. Here it becomes apparent that the residents of El Mirador do not generally 'do' politics; likewise not engaging in political debate on Facebook can signal a desire to preserve good relationships.

## 6

# The wider world: non-activism and the visibility of values

This chapter builds on the ideas of visibility introduced in Chapter 5, exploring everyday values and political engagement in the small town of El Mirador. In each book from the *Why We Post* series, Chapter 6 discusses social media in relation to larger or ‘bigger picture’ issues. Early on in field work in Trinidad a political event occurred that presented an ideal case study for examining in greater depth the links between political engagement and social media in that site.

In November 2012 Dr Wayne Kublalsingh, an activist and lecturer at the University of the West Indies, staged a hunger strike in front of the Prime Minister’s office in Port of Spain. It lasted for 21 days. Alongside the Highway Reroute Movement (HRM) group, Kublalsingh was protesting against the construction of a section of highway considered to be environmentally and socially damaging to the area. Residents were being relocated without adequate consultation, and the impact assessments previously undertaken, which had influenced the decision to construct the highway, were generally deemed inadequate and misleading.

The reason for exploring this particular event is that assumptions about the political potential of social media have proliferated in mainstream media since 2011. These perspectives assume that the accessibility of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter has *caused* the significant political mobilisations that have occurred worldwide, from the public protests of the Arab uprisings to the Occupy movements.<sup>1</sup> To counter these claims a growing body of scholarly research is now more critical of assumptions that one of the main roles of social media is to increase meaningful political participation. Most notably, some of these analyses of digital technologies and social media and their role in political engagement proceed from a critical examination of what political engagement means in a

particular place.<sup>2</sup> It is undeniable that social media is being used to mobilise people to political action on an unprecedented scale. Yet to understand the relationship between social media, political engagement and activism better, these movements need to be contextualised in everyday practices.<sup>3</sup> For example, it is productive to question how an individual shifts from becoming aware of a political issue or event to taking part in political movements themselves. Is it through exposure in the mainstream media, such as in the news, or from seeing articles and posts by others on social media and perhaps ‘liking’ or reading a number of articles?

Kublalsingh’s hunger strike and the HRM protests were the most recent activist strategies in the Trinidadian political landscape, where politics includes not only parties, but issues of economic development and governance. Activism is not widespread in the country and only a small group of people would openly label themselves as ‘activists’ – an identity that most people in El Mirador would rather disassociate themselves from (although there are exceptions). The context and repercussions of Kublalsingh’s actions and HRM’s grievances are too complex to discuss in detail in a volume on social media, but this chapter will draw on some of my experiences from the ethnographic research in examining the protest. When considering the town’s discussions of the protest alongside the more quantitative data from the questionnaires described in Chapter 1 a significant finding emerged: non-activism is an equally powerful form of identity. The everyday concerns and values that emerge most regularly through posts relate to preserving relationships and navigating the ideals around relationships.

This became clearest in a negative example: discussions around the viral video of a mother giving her daughter ‘licks’, a form of corporal punishment, which was considered in Chapter 5. The debates sparked by the video centre on the issues that are the most immediate to the majority in the town, and would not be categorised as ‘political’ as such. Together with that of Kublalsingh and HRM, however, this case study illustrates social media’s role in relation to public life in Trinidad in the process of making everyday values visible. These values are generally regarded as the ‘right’ or correct kind of values to make visible, whereas activism is considered by people in the town to be more performative. As such, the community contested the pretensions of this form of social visibility through the use of humour, just as they did in relation to the ‘licks’ video. Humour is an important aspect of Trinidadian social and public life: it provides a mode of bonding and is also an equalising mechanism against the inequalities of class, ethnicity and gender relations. It

thereby also becomes a way of proving that one elevates community values over other forms of individual distinction. Building on these themes, this chapter also explores what kinds of visibility are considered appropriate or otherwise.

As was argued in the previous chapter, ideals around different kinds of social visibility are revealed through the use of social media. However, unlike the groups described to illustrate different kinds of social visibility, most ordinary citizens in El Mirador do not aspire to being cosmopolitan or international, nor do they seek worldliness as a form of cultural capital. Activism may also be viewed unfavourably as it negates the place-based identity of El Mirador. In the field work it became apparent that ordinary citizens in a small town do not actually engage with politics in a highly visibly way because it invites the risk of social judgements and their consequences. Accordingly, this chapter will be divided into two parts. The first half details the case of the hunger strike and the extent of engagement with politics on Facebook by people in El Mirador. The second half explores the everyday values the community elevates in favour of politics and how these are expressed on Facebook.

## Dr Kublalsingh's 21-day hunger strike

The first extended period of field work in Trinidad in 2011 formed the basis of the book *Webcam*. In November 2012, when following up with the research participants, 40 individuals gave updates on the new apps they were excited about or the upgraded phones that had been provided with their plans. The news that was dominating local mainstream media featured a protest in front of the Prime Minister's office in the capital city, Port of Spain. After a couple of days, residents in the town were discussing the protest increasingly – it was 'the news' that was unfolding. I followed how the event was received in the field site, from hearing how people spoke about it to viewing it through mainstream media and visiting the site of the protest at Prime Minister Persad-Bissessar's office.

The protest intensified quickly because it was led by a relatively well-known figure, Dr Wayne Kublalsingh, the leader of the HRM (mentioned above) and a lecturer in literature at the University of the West Indies. He had planted himself on the street in front of the Persad-Bissessar's office, on a hunger strike. At that point Kublalsingh was already into his second week of elected starvation, with the stated aim of persuading the Prime Minister to reassess the decision to build a section

of a highway linking the southern areas of Point Fortin to San Fernando. The hunger strike and its purpose generally confused and exasperated the public. News outlets had sensationalised Kublalsingh and, although his interviews gave an impression of being passionate but articulate, some of the national newspapers focused on his discord with Persad-Bissessar and his history of environmental activism – this included a landmark court case in which his protests had halted the construction of a smelter.<sup>4</sup> The response to his actions in El Mirador was a combination of fascination with the gossip around the situation and criticism of his perceived attention-seeking behaviour and efforts to ‘stop progress’. No fewer than ten of the research participants talked about the hunger strike in different terms, noting that it was not clear what Kublalsingh was trying to achieve or why. He was spoken about as a spectacle and the subject of political gossip. The hunger strike had arisen in several conversations in the town, for example in bars, shops and restaurants – anywhere where people could read a newspaper. But the comments were mostly negative, with one research participant stating that, ‘I feel he should just die’ and another saying, ‘Those people are crazy, trying to stop a highway’.

The day after at the university, an hour’s drive away from the Prime Minister’s office, there seemed to be a very different side to the story. A group of around a hundred, made up of former students of Kublalsingh and others from the faculties of law, geography, environmental studies, gender studies and development studies, came together and walked around the campus to express solidarity with Kublalsingh and his actions. Other students engaged the group in questions or discussions on the hunger strike’s implications for local politics and governance as well as the construction of the section of the highway. The staff and students who supported Kublalsingh created a Facebook event to stimulate debate and show their support. Some 176 people responded as ‘attending’, with two staff members who are active in development issues along with three of their students posting regularly on the page.

The facts gleaned from conversations and the media so far were these. Firstly, the aim of the hunger strike was to force a discussion with Persad-Bissessar to reconsider the construction of the section of the highway as it would have negative impacts on the environment and the communities living in the area. Secondly, Kublalsingh and the HRM were not against the construction of the entire highway, which would connect the cities of Point Fortin and San Fernando; indeed, they agreed that it would bring much needed economic growth to the area. Rather,

they were disputing the building of a section of the highway, intended to connect the much smaller town of Debe to Mon Desir, due to factors of economic and social disruption.

At the Prime Minister's office, Dr Kublalsingh was now on day 15 of his strike, abstaining from both food and water. His health had begun to deteriorate and a large group from the HRM had joined his protest; they sat with him in solidarity, as accompanied by a group of journalists, cameramen and photographers from Trinidad's main television and print news outlets (Fig. 6.1). Kublalsingh's relatives also came to the site every day. They were becoming increasingly concerned about his deteriorating health and were paying for a doctor to remain on call at the site. The protest nonetheless appeared to be a calm and mostly pleasant gathering. Members of the HRM held placards and distributed pamphlets to passers-by and others who had come to inspect the scene at the office. Local musicians in support of Kublalsingh brought their guitars to lift the protesters' spirits (Fig. 6.2).

When the effects of not eating and drinking became more visible, Kublalsingh began to garner more interest from the general public around the subject of the highway and his own dedication to the movement. This was reflected in greater discussion of the issue in the mainstream media. Kublalsingh and the HRM meanwhile claimed that



**Fig. 6.1** Dr Kublalsingh being interviewed by television journalists



**Fig. 6.2** Dr Kublalsingh with musicians showing their support

the construction of the highway was proceeding in the spirit of ‘bogus’ development. For example, the construction of the highway had been taking place over six years, with responsibility for the project swinging between the two major political parties, the PNM and UNC. No adequate economic, social and environmental impact studies had been carried out under the previous PNM government, who had approved the highway’s construction. The disputed section of the highway is also within Persad-Bissessar’s own constituency, the area of Siparia, and so there are further allegations that the rush to complete that section of the highway is primarily to satisfy residents and boost her popularity there. There have also been allegations that the communities that will have to be resettled – some 40,000 households – have received no concrete notice of compensation, nor information concerning the date or site of relocation. In the case of supporters of the local government or those with connections to influential businesses in the area, it was also claimed by the highway’s opponents that they had been handsomely ‘paid off’ to relocate quietly. The main argument for the highway construction is an

economic one: that it would increase connectivity for business and alleviate traffic in the region.

Kublalsingh's hunger strike and the HRM protest at the Prime Minister's office soon began to reveal how ordinary citizens perceive politics in Trinidad. On day 19 of the strike another activist and supporter of Kublalsingh, Ishmael Samad, stormed the site of the protest to perform a 'citizen's arrest' and remove Kublalsingh, stating that he would not let him commit suicide. Minutes before Kublalsingh had been attended to by his doctor, who was now on stand-by, visiting the site twice a day. An ambulance was also kept on hand, funded by his family. In the confrontation, Samad grabbed Kublalsingh by the wrists and attempted to drag him upright from his cot. Cameramen and photographers sprang to capture the incident. As Kublalsingh was pulled at by Samad, his sister and doctor tried to pull him back down, while journalists and members of the HRM attempted to restrain Samad. The incident was one of the key events in the protest, staged to receive attention from Trinidadian mainstream media, and one of which a large proportion of the population would have been aware.

## **An activist from El Mirador**

In the last week of Kublalsingh's hunger strike Ayanna, a 23-year-old law student at the University of the West Indies, also visited the protest site at the Prime Minister's office. Ayanna was born in one of the coastal villages, but moved to El Mirador with her family when she was 12. Every day, she wakes up at 4.30 am to catch the bus to an office in Port of Spain where she is completing an internship. She is interested in family law, in particular women's rights, and on weekends runs a mentorship programme in the village where she was born for young girls without opportunities for higher education. She had also been following Dr Kublalsingh on the news and attended the solidarity walk at the University. 'This has gone far beyond the issue of the building of a highway,' she explained. 'The man is trying to make a difference in how we think about our own rights in Trinidad. This is about governance and accountability.'

On day 18 of the hunger strike Ayanna went to the Prime Minister's office and met a couple of older students from the University of the West Indies on the way. She did not know them very well, but sat with them as they discussed the protest. One student commented, 'This is what happens day in and day out in Trinidad and Tobago; people just don't

care about environmental issues or about standing up to make a change. Everybody complains about the state of the country, this and that, but they won't inform themselves about what is going on. We are just so far behind.' Another replied, 'I can't believe more people just don't care about this. If the government can just decide to build a highway in one area and kick people off their land in one place, they can do it anywhere.' Ayanna listened to their conversation quietly. When she arrived, she met with a couple of her own friends and stood with them throughout the day. Later, she said she was glad that she had gone to the office and seen what was going on for herself. As she noted:

I'm lucky though. I can do that, I have more flexible time where I can go, I know other people who support him, but they're lawyers as well. Think about people in El Mirador, they are trying to make their day to day work, they put their kids in school, they don't work the kind of jobs where they can just hang out and protest. The girls before, they're right, but it's very Maraval<sup>5</sup> activism. They hang out at theatres and have artist friends and talk about world issues. El Mirador people don't have this luxury. And when people from there talk about people from here, they talk about us like we're rel bush.<sup>6</sup> They don't really know how we live and what is important to us.

On the way home, Ayanna met her older cousin Roger at the mall for dinner. 'Eh eh, yuh been limin' with Kublalsingh and Kamla [i.e. Bissessar-Persad]?' he joked. 'This is what I mean,' explained Ayanna. 'These issues are just a big joke. Nobody wants to think about them, they just be laughin' at him.' Roger's relationship with his younger cousin has always been close and is one in which they can share a joke. His style of talking is quite common among Trinidadian men; a performative mode of banter that is also partly a show of masculinity. This sort of talk used to be called *picong*, where one would make a joke of a person or insult them through using humour so their insult does not provoke serious offence.<sup>7</sup> *Picong*, now more commonly spoken about by young people as 'shit talk', is also a way of showing that individuals do not take themselves too seriously, that they don't think they are above or better than anyone else.

Ayanna continued to explain to Roger why he should care about the hunger strike, telling him:

Imagine if that was your daddy's house or mine? That the government just want to build a highway and there was no fair way for them to have a say about it, they just have to move. Or worse,

imagine if it was yuh grandfather's house. An old man, he spent most of his life doing up the house, that's where your father was born, you spent yuh childhood there and the government can just take it away. That is what he is protesting for. It is not just about a highway, it is about the government being fair.

Roger in turn replied that the government was never fair, 'so what is de point, why get yuh self all worked up for? The people don't care, they talk about it for a week and then they forget about it. Yuh can't do nothing about that'. The conversation continued and eventually Ayanna and Roger agreed to disagree. An argument such as theirs, which becomes heated then simmers down again, is a common exchange. Between those who know each other very well, this style of discussion can gain in tempo, becoming animated and passionate, escalating to a peak and then becoming subdued again. Trinidadians from the town are quite open in talking to one another when they are with close friends and family. Yet around issues that are more difficult, or when deep grievances exist between people who are close, sensitive topics are rarely spoken about (a situation discussed in Chapter 4). Matters of opinion are more acceptable to debate, a dynamic which also translates to Facebook. An example of this is the people who were already involved with the issues surrounding the hunger strike.

Ayanna was the only person from El Mirador who went to the Prime Minister's office during the hunger strike. Her actions and engagement online were more typical of those in activist circles and, even though she did not identify with the HRM, she had more of an inclination to go to the Prime Minister's office following discussions with her own friends. Her peers also study law and share her interests in governance, rights and the democratic process. They held these concerns before studying together, as did Ayanna – a fact that made her stand apart from other people in El Mirador.

Ayanna's Facebook profile shows a variety of interests. She rarely posts images of herself day to day, only on occasion, and she updates her status with different themes, such as jokes about the weather, a dream she's had or something she's eaten. She always posts using local dialect; for example, in one case she writes: 'First doubles raise now dis strong strong breeze jusso jusso. Is this the end of days?' ['First, the price of the Trinidadian food 'doubles' has raised and now this strong strong breeze, just so, just so.'] She frequently shares news and commentaries that have appeared around national issues, especially if they relate to gender issues. As she explains, 'I like to post things that cause a reaction.

Not a shock, but just a strong opinion, something important, something to make you think about the country you're living in.' Although she has often become involved with heated debates on Facebook with her peers and other people from Port of Spain, she has never had a public debate with anybody living in El Mirador. Ayanna joined a couple of Facebook groups around the HRM and the university's group in support of Kublalsingh when her friends were already talking about the issue. She shared some articles and commentaries and began to get involved in conversations with friends on her timeline.

On 5 December 2012 Kublalsingh ended his hunger strike after 21 days. By that stage his legs and feet were swollen from the effects of kidney deterioration, and his body and face appeared severely emaciated. Although the Prime Minister had not appeared to speak with him personally, Kublalsingh received official word from her office that she would agree to reassess the decision around the disputed construction. The day her notice was announced, there was a brief media spectacle of interviews and Kublalsingh flexed his arms in a bodybuilder's pose for the cameras, showing his now disfigured form. He returned home to the care of his family, the HRM went back South and there was a brief period of respite.<sup>8</sup>

## Social media and politics in El Mirador

In El Mirador at that time, many people were talking about the hunger strike and the highway in person, often linking it to the role of the government. For them 'politics' connotes anything involving corruption, political parties and their history or commentary on the performance of previous prime ministers. They also openly debated the conduct of Kamla Persad-Bissesar herself and of the national security minister Jack Warner, alongside scandals that other current politicians had been involved in. These associations were reflected in the household questionnaires, in which queries about Facebook and politics would often be met with initial comments to the effect that 'I'm not interested in politics' or 'I don't care about politics' or 'I don't discuss anything to do with politics' – responses suggesting a desire to disassociate themselves from being embroiled in bacchanal. When politicians appear in the news in Trinidad, it is regularly in relation to scandals. Equally, when people speak about them, it is in personal terms where the individual – who they know and what they do, with whom – is most often the topic of conversation. Kublalsingh was also spoken about in a similar tone: namely

it was noted that he is rich and privileged, and now simply wants to attract attention for his own gratification. On Facebook meanwhile the responses to his actions were varied, as is reported in the questionnaire results (Fig. 6.3).

Question	Affirmative responses
Did you see anything on Dr Kublalsingh’s hunger strike on your Facebook time line?	62%
Did you see ‘serious’ posts (positive or negative comments, debate)?	24%
Did you see ‘funny’ posts (jokes, images, memes)?	39%
Did you like, share or comment on those posts?	4%

**Fig. 6.3** Results from questionnaire section on ‘politics’ and Facebook

More than half the respondents saw posts or images about Kublalsingh on their timeline at the time of the hunger strike. Fewer than ten saw shares with links to news stories, or just ‘facts’ or ‘information’. Most of the respondents who noted posts of Kublalsingh saw serious debate, moral commentary, support or criticism or posts that could be described as funny – for example, memes, jokes or other images that made fun of Kublalsingh’s hunger strike. Of these respondents, only five said they ‘liked’ posts and these ‘likes’ were only for images and memes. Four respondents said they posted themselves or commented on another post. Two respondents described these comments as belonging to the ‘debate’ category’. A high school student states that:

I saw a lot of serious posts, it’s a serious matter. People made a lot of jokes about it, but I saw Dr Kublalsingh’s actions as serious. Yes, we want the highway, but look at biodiversity. I saw jokes too and I was furious about it. How could people make fun of it, humans are greedy creatures, the more we get the more we want, people need to be more mature about it. I got into a heated debate about it on Facebook and in school. He has a right to take a stand for what he believes in.

During these questionnaires, which were conducted face to face, half the respondents revealed their personal position on the issue, whether in support of or against Kublalsingh’s actions, and discussed what the highway signified for them. Yet when it came to questions of direct

participation in the issue on a visible platform such as Facebook, the same group also drew back from the discussion, saying that they witnessed posts or read the views of others but did not comment themselves. A male respondent attempted to shed light on this, noting that, ‘once it have anything to do with the government, we don’t take it serious’. Another observed that, ‘I hate politics with a passion, so I don’t follow that, but I see a lot of news that comes up’.

How ordinary citizens responded to Kublalsingh’s hunger strike is contextualised by what they would otherwise post, share, comment on or like, as is summarised in the frequency of actions data (Fig. 6.4). The most frequent action of respondents was ‘liking’, which 49 individuals claimed to do at least daily, with the second most frequent action commenting on posts by others. At the other end of the spectrum 35 people responded that they rarely posted photos of themselves.

When participants were asked about the frequency of their ‘liking’ and ‘sharing’ activities and the content they reacted to, the most common responses were, ‘whenever I’m on’, ‘whenever I check’, ‘depends on

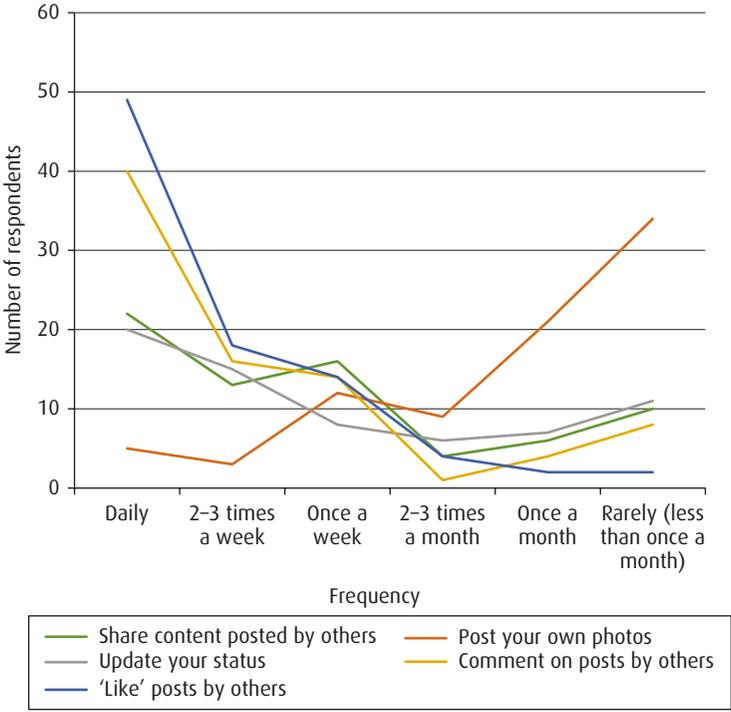


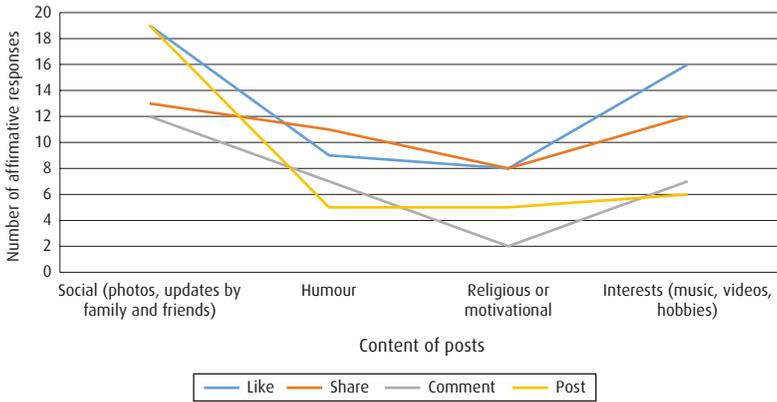
Fig. 6.4 Frequency of ‘liking’ and ‘sharing’ on Facebook

what mood I'm in' and 'whatever I feel to do'. It was more difficult for respondents to quantify their usage according to time-orientation, such as 'every few days' or 'a few times a week'. Anthropologist Kevin Birth suggests that time-management for Trinidadians is more about the management or modification of social relations.<sup>9</sup> Here the decision to 'like' or 'share' appears to be based less on individuals responding to particular posts according to themes or interests and more akin to checking to see what is going on. Facebook is more of a 'meta-friend'; the site in itself is like a person with whom users can continuously check in as a source of company or whenever they are bored.<sup>10</sup>

Respondents also emphasised that if they most frequently access Facebook on their phone, they constantly check their timeline throughout the day or have adjusted their settings to notify them of new posts by particular contacts. If the content then appeals to the individual at that time, they are more likely to 'like' or 'share'. From the questionnaires it seems that respondents rarely post a personal status, but 'like' posts by others almost every day. Among 'liking', posting and sharing, 'liking' is the most benign form of acknowledgement and yet still connotes participation in the discussion. 'Liking' reflects the social idiom of liming (discussed in previous chapters), where a person can hang around with no particular purpose and without drawing attention to themselves.

Respondents were also asked what they would usually like, share, comment on, post or ignore. The highest category for engagement is social posts, updates and photos, where people engage with the posts of others as well as posting themselves. Yet when asked what they would commonly ignore and why, 20 respondents answered that they most commonly ignore posts that are 'too personal' because they 'hate to see bacchanal': namely people who post too frequently or are irrelevant to them personally, as is largely consistent with daily social life in El Mirador. The highest level of engagement that respondents reported with politics on Facebook was seeing a news article on their timeline, posted by one of the major news stations they have liked and subscribe to. This they would read in the same way as if they had come across it in the newspaper and for the same reasons – to be informed and up to date with current events.

Figure 6.5 summarises the content respondents usually engage with on Facebook. Notably respondents 'like' social posts by family and friends as much as they would 'post' social updates and photos themselves, reflecting the heavily entwined nature and importance of lived relationships in El Mirador (Fig. 6.5).



**Fig. 6.5** Engagement with Facebook content which shows everyday concerns

Situating individuals' responses on their engagement with the hunger strike on Facebook in relation to what individuals usually engage with on Facebook helps to provide an insight into their everyday concerns. Despite discussing and debating Kublalsingh, his hunger strike and the highway, people in El Mirador are generally not willing to engage in acts of dissent in public spaces, to cause bacchanal or to put themselves out there by being 'bold face' about concerns that are not immediately important to them. This is a result of the risks that might flow from too much or the wrong kinds of visibility, or from the connotations of being a political influencer, when party politics is something most people distrust. Residents also want to avoid any association with bacchanal. Indeed, the following anecdote from Cherie illustrates how explicit political aspirations are better realised through working from the initial foundations of family and community values.

## An aspiring politician in El Mirador

Cherie is 36 years old. She was born in El Mirador, but spent her childhood in Port of Spain, where her mother was one of the district representatives for the political party in power at that time. Cherie returned to El Mirador when her first two daughters were born since her relatives had remained living in the town. After having held a few different professional jobs in the city, she returned to El Mirador with the idea of establishing an affordable after-school care programme that would provide

primary and high school students with the space and support to complete their homework, as well as with some extra tuition. She ran the programme for nearly a decade and noted that, despite her providing educational support and becoming familiar with a number of students' families, several female students were not completing high school. Instead they were starting families of their own. Having been raised by a single mother who experienced difficulties yet maintained the priority of educating her daughter, Cherie is highly critical of the general attitude in the town, perceiving this as 'a backwards mentality' with a lack of regard for girls' education.<sup>11</sup>

She decided to run as the town's representative for women's issues for the same party her mother belonged to. Accordingly she began commuting to Port of Spain to attend meetings and network, on top of her existing job running the programme. Some political activity began to filter onto Cherie's Facebook page: for example, she updated her profile photo to an image of her wearing a T-shirt in the party's dominant colour, but without a logo as she did not want to be too overt about her political affiliations and aspirations. Cherie also shared posts on gender issues in the region, most frequently around education, yet did not share any explicitly referring to the party. The town is quite divided along the lines of party support, with most of Cherie's friends and family supporting her party. However, several others who know her were also generally supportive of her demands to increase educational initiatives for girls in the area, even if they do not support the party. In the early stages of her political career, Cherie has cautiously promoted her cause. She has avoided entering into explicit political conversation on related issues, since most of her peers would identify with her wishes to better the community through educational programmes rather than her desire to enter into party politics.

## Everyday values: morality and humour

Participants' responses to questions on Facebook activity made it clear that in El Mirador people do not generally engage with formal politics to a great extent, nor see themselves as particularly political. There are exceptions in the cases of those who are actively involved with political parties or when political campaigns are run as social and family events, which more people are likely to attend and where they will socialise for the day. Yet even at these events the interest in political parties is secondary. Rather, being explicitly non-activist is important to maintaining

good relationships in the town. Here an upstanding member of the community is not an ideological person, but a moral one who holds 'correct' and non-controversial everyday values.

A telling instance in revealing how citizens of El Mirador think about public life occurred in 2013, when the government held a series of open meetings, inviting the public to express their views on constitutional reform. Some of the concerns raised were around voting and representation. One notable comment from one of the meetings was, 'Do we want to continue with a half-way house to a full democracy? Our voting needs to be more representational'. Another participant expressed support for the resumption of capital punishment. The main issues that were voiced during the several hours in which the panel listened to the members of the public were around crime, God and the El Mirador Pass – a long stretch of road that separates the town from the main highway.

The last issue is emblematic of how the town views itself in relation to the rest of the country. Most mornings and evenings, cars and maxis are usually stuck on the stretch for up to an hour, not including the journey on the highway. The stretch of road is isolated, dotted by houses, with few lights.<sup>12</sup> Almost everybody in El Mirador knows of somebody who has been in a fatal car accident there. The issue of the protest provoked comparisons with the stretch, some seeing it as a symbol of El Mirador's status as a backwater, a place of no particular interest. If El Mirador was better connected by a highway, it was argued, the profile of the town would be lifted in the eyes of the rest of the country.

These concerns were raised passionately in the consultation on constitutional reform. As one person explained, 'We need a highway instead of the stretch, it just takes too long! There is always jam on the road and if yuh travelling, yuh just goin' nowhere for hours.' A middle aged woman asserted that, 'We need an alternative route to Port of Spain. It takin' an hour jus' to get on de highway! I want to see improvements on the road and we need to extend the highway to the town.' With the hunger strike having taken place only a few weeks prior, one of the panellists joked that 'I don't want to see any of you going on a hunger strike for a highway, ok?' – a jibe received with good humour by the crowd.

Other comments at the meeting emphasised a decline of the place of God in society. One elderly woman argued that 'God should not be removed from the constitution, the country is already in chaos. Schools are already dealing with a lack of morality and we should not give any consideration to any pressure group who wants to remove God from the constitution!' These impassioned words attracted murmurs of

agreement and reiterations of 'Amen' and some applause. Crime was a central concern for people in the meeting, as was the question of how laws should be changed to protect victims rather than criminals, especially if crime is committed by a perpetrator invading a private home. Like the place of God and moral standards in contemporary Trinidadian society, harsher punishments for criminals and the importance of parents setting moral standards for children appeared to be the most pressing issues. Rather than discussing stipulations and clauses in the constitution, the speakers from El Mirador emphasised community, tradition and values, as the official document is seen as too far removed from their daily lives. And although the tone of the meeting was on the whole serious, the master of ceremonies also engaged in banter with both the panel and audience. This snapshot of the public voicing their concerns indicates how people simply wanted to be heard in the presence of panellists, including representatives of the Ministry from Port of Spain. Their worries as well as their values around religion, morality, crime and safety, all diffused by a cutting good humour, are also reflected in the world of Facebook as the type of politics with which people from El Mirador do engage.

Religion is one of the dominant themes appearing on social media, ranging from a benign presence, for instance sending greetings and sharing Hallmark-card style images for occasions such as Christmas, Diwali and Eid, to overt moralising. References to God appear most commonly in status updates by those who identify as belonging to Pentecostal or evangelical churches – for example, 'He's my king' or 'His love for us' or 'GOD made you the way you are for a reason'. Although posts with religious connotations or commentary are more common among older people, those under 25 do still post related themes, albeit to a lesser extent. More Christian-oriented posts take the form of status updates or memes with Bible verses or homilies, with some references to God or Jesus in words. Religious posts by younger Hindus are made only through images depicting the deities.

Beyond religion, moral commentary emerges in several guises on social media – most often in posts around the ideal state of family and romantic relationships, as well as friendships. In relation to family, for example, siblings might post a status or share a meme and tag their brother or sister. Sentimental memes appear regularly, such as cute photos of puppies and kittens hugging, accompanied by text to the effect of 'love overcomes all differences'. These sorts of posts are more common among siblings who do not live in the same household. Mother's and Father's Day are also obvious occasions when adults, even more than

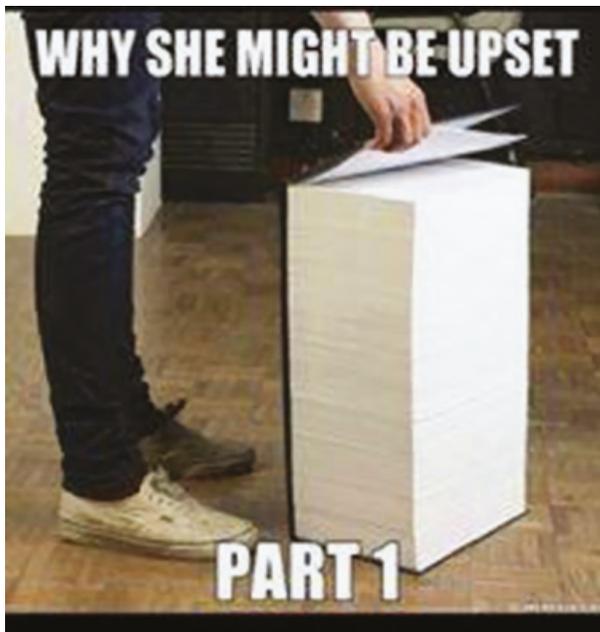
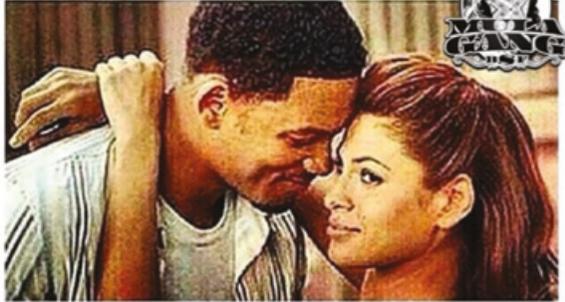
children, make public their appreciation for their parents, either sharing a meme with sentimental wording or an old or recent photo of themselves with their mother or father. Other relations are tagged in status updates or photos throughout the year, especially around family celebrations such as birthdays, anniversaries and *pujas*. Moralising around family relationships appears through publicly expressing concern on Facebook by sharing and tagging, similar to trends of posting around friendships (as discussed in Chapter 4).

As well as humour, moralising is shown through memes about romantic relationships. The perceived ideal of romantic relationships based on fidelity, loyalty, trust, sensitivity and care is expressed by sharing memes with commentary such as 'true dat' ('true that'). On the other hand, antagonism between couples or a desire not to be taken for granted is also expressed through gendered banter and visual humour, as seen in the contrast between these examples (Figs 6.6a and 6.6b).

As far as political engagement is made public, it is likewise expressed through moralising and humour. Commentary on the moral state of the country more generally, for example, appears through sharing a crime story from the news or posts expressing exasperation, horror or shock at the incident, usually accompanied by a link to the story or news article. These shares attract some debate through comments discussing the appropriate penalty for perpetrators and the need for more mechanisms in place to protect victims.

The case of the video of the mother giving her daughter licks, discussed in Chapter 5, is one example of serious engagement and public debate on issues of morality and appropriate behaviour. The video was previously discussed in relation to its Facebook fame and the way in which social media can be used to gain reputation and notoriety in an unsophisticated manner, when certain groups in society do not have the means to achieve respectability. Yet the video also portrayed an extremely common form of punishment. Many Trinidadian children would have experienced licks at some stage, this being the expected form of punishment for very bad behaviour. At least some among these children would now say as adults that they did not experience any permanent negative effects from having received such punishment. As in relation to the themes discussed in Chapter 4, the global norms around good parenting entailing not smacking children have infused many conversations, including ones that unfolded after the video went viral. Journalist Joshua Surtees comments in the T&T Guardian that 'licks' is an ambivalent word: it is 'the employment of a soft word for a hard fact'.<sup>13</sup> This observation was also reflected in the country's reaction to

That "Boring" chick usually is the wifey chick. Don't rag her B/c she goes to school, goes to work, and goes home. Those are the Best ones 💍



**Figs. 6.6a, b** Humorous memes about relationships, one commenting on ideal girlfriends and another joking about girlfriend problems

the video, as people were divided over whether the punishment was on one hand too harsh, and possibly an example of child abuse, or on the other a fair expression of the mother's 'tough love', ensuring that her daughter would not behave in the same way in the future. In El Mirador parents and children alike posted comments or shared stories offering their own opinion – far more than had publicly commented on the political developments around the hunger strike.

Several factors drew attention to the video on Facebook, eliciting both serious discussion and humour. Firstly the two sisters, both the one who was punished and the one who filmed the video, have more than 1,000 Facebook friends each (numbers which increased after the video went viral) and live in a lower-income area of Port of Spain. Despite the incident inciting a moral debate, both the girls are also examples of the 'Facebook fame' discussed in Chapter 5. Secondly, the house is clearly visible in the video, with parts of the home appearing unfinished in exposed brick and a corrugated iron roof. The mother is wearing a singlet top with no bra and a long house skirt. They exemplify the stereotypical brashness of lower-income Afro-Trinidadian families. Thirdly, the mother tried to punish the girl by using Facebook, reasoning that if the daughter wanted to be seen on Facebook, she could be seen receiving licks. Yet from what she states in the video, it is clear that the mother is not familiar with, and does not understand, how the platform works. The theme of the generational divide between children who use Facebook and their parents who variously dismiss, do not understand or fear Facebook becoming prominent in their children's lives also emerged in the commentary. However, the incident was also commented upon through the use of humour, such as the following meme that was widely circulated (Fig. 6.7).

Trinidad has a complicated history of race relations, but racial humour is also appropriated by people who are of Indo-, Afro- and mixed Indo-Afro backgrounds in the town, either generalising about themselves or others. As discussed in other chapters, ethnic background in social relationships is not a pressing concern in itself. However, when appropriated into stereotypes more generally, especially by political parties, race is seen as a dividing factor. Otherwise it is by virtue of close relationships and mixed families that race becomes (to some extent) an acceptable topic to joke about, as it does not alienate any one individual. Part of the reason that it was seemingly acceptable to joke about race in this instance is that the domestic issue of licks is familiar to Trinidadians from different classes of Afro-, Indo- and mixed Indo-Afro backgrounds alike.



Fig. 6.7 Meme referring to the viral video of the mother giving her daughter licks in 2014

### It's good to be funny

The role of humour has been thoroughly observed and documented in Trinidad<sup>14</sup> – notably that attempting to make others laugh shows a spirit of inclusion. Through sharing common reference points and experiences, it reinforces group norms and values and becomes a form of everyday play. Some authors' explanations of humour reinforce the idea of a 'Carnival logic' that is present throughout the year. Accordingly, word play has been viewed as a particular skill that is characteristic of calypso, while humour is integral to liming and being seen in public.<sup>15</sup> Humour has also appeared as a benign presence across several stories in this volume – a key element of the way in which families, relatives and friends relate to one another 'offline'. Even when a serious situation such as the hunger strike arose, the most difficult factor for Ayanna was that the university students and artistic and activist circles in Port of Spain took themselves and their world views far too seriously. Pretentiousness and serious self-regard – although one might support serious issues – characterise being 'stush', whereas residents in El Mirador value being decidedly 'anti-stush'.

When individuals post photos, there is almost invariably some joking in the comments and discussion – for example, if a young woman poses in an outfit before going out, but the photo shows her in her gallery next to the dog food. No matter how attractive and stylish she looks, if the dog food can be seen comments will follow to the effect of ‘eh eh, yuh advertising for Pro Plan now!’ Trinidadians also joke about ethnicity on a personal level, with playing up or banter about race and ethnicity appearing on Facebook.<sup>16</sup>

Angela, for example, is half Indo-Trinidadian from her mother’s side and half Chinese from her father, whose ancestors migrated in the late nineteenth century. She has inherited more of her mother’s darker complexion, but also has her father’s Chinese features so, depending on how she styles her hair and make-up, she can look quite different between photos. One of her cousins jokes with her endearingly about her Chinese heritage, and she in turn comments about how efficient her father is, running his business and teasing her that she has not become an accountant, engineer or pharmacist yet. When Angela posted a selfie before going out, some of her male friends commented ‘Fine China’ and ‘Lovely China Doll’, but her cousin commented ‘Ok, so yuh lookin rel Chinee Chinee in dis pic!!!’ – banal remarks which contrasted with how glamorous she looked and the compliments paid to her.

Humour appears in comments on posts by others and those most frequently shared are funny videos and memes. Visual humour is the most common. This was readily apparent in relation to the 2014 World Cup, which proved an extremely popular media and social media event. Families watched the game in homes and bars and pubs screening the main matches, especially later in the competition. Online broadcasts displayed clear support for some countries over others. And when some exceptional incident occurred, it was shared primarily through humorous memes (Figs 6.8a, 6.8b, 6.8c and 6.8d).

When politics does appear on Facebook, it is also mainly through humour. When a politician appears on the news, especially in relation to scandal or bacchanal, it will appear on Facebook shortly afterwards through memes and banter – whether the subject is Dr Kublalsingh and his second protest in 2014 or Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar herself (Figs 6.9a, 6.9b, 6.9c and 6.9d).

Most importantly, and as in forms of social interaction such as *picong* (‘shit talk’) and performative banter, humour is used to show that people do not take themselves too seriously or get overly upset about circumstances outside their control. Politics portrayed through scandal, bacchanal and humour becomes an expression of disillusionment on the



all these memes..., theyre|killing me

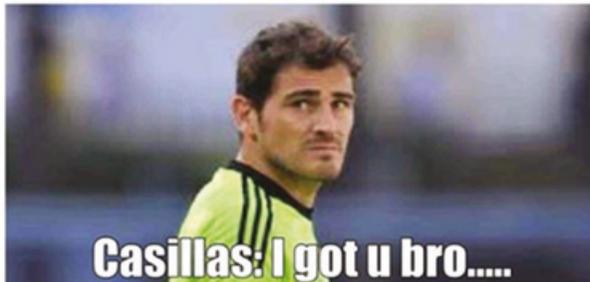
The Flying Dutchman



Like · Comment · Share

9 people like this.

#TooSoon

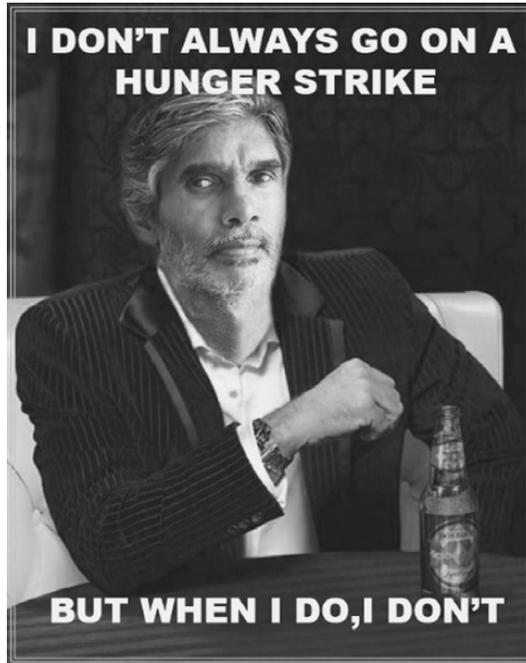


Figs. 6.8a–d Continued

part of individuals who feel that they can make no difference to wider society. Yet derision or dismissal of politics also elevates personal values and moral orientations, for example religion, as these are seen as important factors to take seriously.



**Figs. 6.9a–d** Humorous postings on political topics: (a) ‘Legalise weed tanty (aunty) Kamla’; (b) Prime Minister Persad-Bissessar’s cabinet reshuffle; (c) Dr Kublalsingh’s contested second hunger strike; (d) Speaker of the House, Wade Mark



Figs. 6.9a–d Continued

The following final story illustrates several points. Throughout the book anecdotes around family have appeared consistently, as this is the most important element in Trinidadian social life. Families are the first forms of socialisation and these foundational relationships last throughout most people's lives. They also expand and become the site of tremendous creativity and nurturing across an individual's lifetime. In a small town where extended families live in very close proximity and are in frequent contact, individuals also invest an enormous amount of energy into navigating and preserving these relationships in order to minimise grievances. Conflicts will still occur, but governing large families also ensures that conflict can be dealt with and moved on from so that relatives can then co-exist peacefully. This story about a family holiday illustrates how humour is one of the principal mechanisms for preserving the feelings of others, as well as for ensuring social cohesion.

## #bbqsauce

Kerron is 19 years old. He and his sisters Amala and Avalon (aged 22 and 23 respectively) wanted to organise a trip to Tobago with a few cousins and friends. They rented a house with a swimming pool in an estate close to the beach. Because they were organising the trip with a friend flying in from Florida, they needed to do so quickly, with minimal hassle. As they have a large extended family, they knew that other cousins would like to join them and did not want to leave some relatives out. So Amala sent out some text messages and after a few days, when a few cousins replied that they were not sure if they could make the trip and others did not respond at all, she took this as a Trinidadian 'no' (meaning that a person can decline something in a number of indirect ways – for example, not answering the phone or stating that they are busy more than once – so as to avoid the confrontation of actually saying 'no'.) They then went ahead and booked the trip.

Kerron had never been on a plane before, and going on a holiday without parents and older relatives was a special event for the siblings and cousins. They went to restaurants, drove around the island, took a boat ride to the reef and lounged by the luxurious pool. For many Trinidadians ideal holidays are luxurious getaways with large houses or hotel rooms and the finer things that they would not normally indulge in on a regular basis. (The contrasting idea of backpacking with minimal

clothes and infrequent laundry or cutting costs by staying in budget accommodation is not one to which young Trinidadians aspire.)

One of Avalon's friends, Nada, posted several photos of the holiday on Instagram and Facebook. Nada is also in her early twenties and lives in the more urban area of Trin City, an hour away from El Mirador; she works at an insurance firm. She does not know many of Kerron, Amala and Avalon's relatives and she and her own friends enjoy working and earning an income to spend on their lifestyle. So Nada's posts received numerous 'likes' and comments such as 'Gyul (girl) wish I was there wit u'. But Kerron and Amala were more wary of posting only the leisurely and luxurious aspects of their holiday, as they did not want to come across as 'stuck-up' to relatives unable to join the trip. On the second night Avalon and Nada were cooking dinner. Nada wanted to prepare dishes other than Trinidadian dishes, so as well as the barbeque chicken she made focaccia and a Greek salad. She photographed the meal to upload to Instagram. Kerron and Amala's boyfriend Timothy contributed to the meal by mixing two common kinds of Master Foods sauces that are found in any Trinidadian pantry to make their own barbeque sauce: a task that took less than two minutes and made the least exciting contribution to the elaborate meal that had taken the young women hours to prepare. The young men started teasing them by mentioning barbeque sauce any time anybody complimented Avalon and Nada on the dinner. By the end of the trip, #bbqsauce had become the footnote for anything on the trip that undermined something luxurious, international or pretentious. Timothy went paragliding, but said it was not as good as #bbqsauce. Avalon and Nada visited the salon and came back with manicures, but Kerron said he was disappointed that they did not choose #bbqsauce colour and should get them done again. On the final night they went to a fine dining restaurant where, very politely, Kerron asked the waiter to bring barbeque sauce for his sushi rolls.

#bbqsauce was not only a running in-joke that came out of close company on a holiday; it also allowed the group to post on Facebook in a way that was self-deprecating and showed that they did not take themselves too seriously. They posted fun and glamorous holiday photos – in swimsuits, by the pool and sightseeing – but could also post in silly poses and over-performative ways with #bbqsauce, such that relatives who saw the photos would think they were clowning around and not having a 'mature' holiday. Of course the group was showing what an enjoyable holiday they had, yet by posting frivolity and self-deprecation alongside seriousness they could not be accused of simply showing off.

## Conclusion

As well as a humorous means of posting around a family holiday to counter the impression of showing off, #bbqsauce also reflects the narrative of the town of El Mirador as a place ‘in between’ – not quite a city and not quite a village. Undermining the privileged experience of travel or owning an expensive smartphone to post lifestyle images on social media, the cousins also remained tongue-in-cheek, thereby positioning themselves as unpretentious. A key flaw of those they perceive as the wealthier classes in places such as Port of Spain (town) is that these groups take themselves, their position in Trinidadian society and their world view too seriously – traits which contrast with people from El Mirador (the bush). Similarly activism as a more performative form of visibility is also contested by those in El Mirador.

This contrast is amplified by how those living in El Mirador show that they not only understand, but value their place in Trinidadian society. For example, they show a sense of humility by conveying to others that they do not take themselves or their perspectives on the world too seriously. This is not to say that individuals living in El Mirador do not care about issues such as the environment, governance or economic development, but they see them as further removed from their immediate lives, having very little influence on decision-making circles. Non-activism is more about rejecting activism and the elitism associated with being an activist than rejecting the importance of economic and social issues themselves. Conversely, economic and social issues are most relevant in the region of El Mirador, where many of the surrounding villages are underdeveloped and difficult to access. Yet it is this same population who feel they have the least impact on wider political or national issues.

This chapter began with an account of a political event that I participated in directly in an attempt to gain ethnographic data on political engagement through participation and observation. By following the case study of Dr Kublalsingh’s hunger strike, with its various facets of activism, governance and development, I gained a wealth of insight into how serious issues unfold (a subject explored outside of this volume).<sup>17</sup> Yet any ethnography of social media is committed to following what people (in this case inhabitants of El Mirador) do, and it became clear as the hunger strike unfolded that in this small town people do not ‘do’ politics.

For residents in a peripheral, rural area, serious engagement in political discussion runs the risk of the wrong kinds of visibility, an idea that builds on those explored in Chapter 5. Being seen as overly political

and identifying with the ideas of urban activists also risks being thought to take oneself too seriously; becoming embroiled in gossip and bacchanal are further negative consequences of social visibility. As the opposite of activism, non-activism then becomes a form of visible identity geared toward preserving good relationships.

This was not, however, a lost opportunity to understanding the values of El Mirador better. Studying social media through ethnography also offers the opportunity to observe the extent to which postings can constitute ethnographic data. There is a temptation to think of values as institutionalised – whether through the church or other forms of religion or through political engagement. In this study, religion is one of the most common topics on Facebook. Yet everyday values are shown through an equally dominant genre of posting: humour. Although this chapter set out specifically to investigate politics in a small town, it is therefore not surprising that the core values of an ‘in between’ place do not centre on the wider world, but rather around the everyday. Humour allows residents of El Mirador to ‘take down’ people or issues that they do not like, and to counter those taking others or themselves too seriously.

The core values revealed in postings bring us back to the picture of El Mirador laid out in Chapter 1. Here there is as strong a sense of aspiration toward cosmopolitanism as there is regard for tradition and community. Yet the two must co-exist, and often both sets of values are found in the same household. The key concern for people living in the town is therefore around maintaining immediate social relationships – or not taking oneself too seriously in a way that elevates the individual above others.

## 7

# Conclusion: social media through ethnography

This book opened with a quote from Bunji Garlin's 2013 soca anthem 'Savage'— 'anti-stush. Dem call we anti-stush'. The phrase implies something to the effect that 'they call us the opposite of posh, sophisticated and pretentious'. Garlin himself has strong ties to El Mirador, and this perhaps explains why the sentiments of his song have such resonance for this research. Indeed, 'anti-stush' might best describe the ethos of the town. The underdeveloped region has increasingly become home to expanding squatter settlements, but at the same time El Mirador has seen the emergence of a significant middle class, one which takes pride in the identity of an uncomplicated country people with good values. They embrace education and wealth, and are internationally oriented. Yet they also want to 'live good with people'<sup>1</sup> – that is, they still understand the virtues of being Aesop's country mice, rather than their urban counterparts.

The final story in Chapter 6 illustrated how posting around humour serves as a socially inclusive mechanism, in that the individual is not seen to take his or her own views too seriously so as to elevate themselves above others. Being perceived as unpretentious is important to those living in a small town such as El Mirador. In the context of Trinidad, the place is regarded as being of no real significance. It is not a special destination to visit, although plenty pass through the town on their way to the region's beaches and resorts. Those living there understand that such visitors would regard the town as stagnant and its inhabitants as uncouth country people who might live out their entire lives there, attending local schools and then working in the town, visiting other parts of the country only infrequently. Yet there are also many others, whether born there or more recent migrants, for whom El Mirador might be a place where they eat, sleep and reside, but whose work and

social lives are elsewhere: they do not really live in El Mirador. An ethnographic study of social media, as documented in this book, reveals these truths about the town. It is an 'in between' place that is the country when compared to the city, and which may or may not be home to those who live in and around it.

In turn, then, what does an ethnographic study of El Mirador contribute to our understanding of social media? This question can be answered in part through comparison and conversation with the other volumes published in the *Why We Post* series. None of the authors began their projects out of a particular fascination with digital technologies *per se* (Nicolescu and Spyer were employed in media and communications, however, and Miller has written several volumes on digital media). Although the object of inquiry was social media, as anthropologists none of the researchers could be described as having fetishised technologies. None started from an entirely optimistic viewpoint about the future orientation of the possibilities of social media. Nor were they entirely pessimistic that social media would detract from or corrode a sense of authenticity, meaningful communication or even fundamental humanity. Anthropologists study social media in the context of relationships. In each of the research sites social media presented the perfect lens through which to begin to paint a portrait of the place and its people more broadly, exploring beyond what they do 'online'. In many cases social media became the gateway or entry point for analysing themes that have long held interest for anthropologists.<sup>2</sup> In other cases it was gaining insight into the character of a place and how its residents develop a sense of identity from where they live that helped us to appreciate what they post on social media and why.<sup>3</sup> For this reason our topics were driven primarily by our research participants' actions, rather than the presumed object of the study, 'social media'.

Accordingly, the main aim of this chapter is to consolidate an argument around how theorising social media as social visibility provides an alternative to the dominant view appearing consistently in journalistic accounts – namely that social media makes individuals more narcissistic or somehow more individualistic.<sup>4</sup> An anthropological approach to social media instead takes into account the context in which individuals are embedded. It also considers that the norms around what a given individual makes visible are driven by culture and society itself. Such a holistic approach differs from a psychological perspective which might claim that what we witness from a person's surface, including what they post on social media, is the product of individual drives or the ego.

Take, for example, the concept of the selfie, which appears frequently in popular media.<sup>5</sup> Selfies are often framed in the aforementioned accounts as the latest indication that human society is shifting from a community-oriented sociality to a more fragmented, individualistic one. In developed Western nations conversations concerning neoliberalism abound, with the selfie reflecting an emblem of neoliberalism as the normalised commodification and performance of the self.<sup>6</sup> Yet in their own local cultural context Trinidadian participants in this study did not express any particular concern about selfies as some expression of superficiality or self-absorption. Rather, selfies for them seemed to be a quite reasonable additional function of media, considering the significance of visibility within their society.

From the wider standpoint of our global, anthropological study of social media, different genres of selfie were also apparent, refuting the idea that they are simply indicators of individual ‘narcissism’. For example, in Chile ‘footies’ – more humble and unpretentious images of one’s feet in everyday settings – were almost equally popular as classic, face-based selfies. And in the English field site teenagers were found to take nearly five times as many selfies with friends as they did by themselves.<sup>7</sup> In Trinidad selfies are taken and posted by people of different ages, not only by teenagers. The wider context for the comparatively larger number of photos posted in the Trinidadian field site, meanwhile, is that visibility is central to personhood, and so how one appears in public also indicates membership of specific social groups. Visibility in Trinidad is a social phenomenon, not an individually driven one, and as such does not fit neatly into the popular psychological discourse of vanity and narcissism.

## **A study of social media in the Caribbean?**

This idea of visibility underpins every chapter of this book. It has been used to show that visibility is not simply related to showing-off, but also to displaying unpretentiousness or being ‘anti-stush’ in a town that prides itself on retaining community values. Through a study of El Mirador, each of the various sections of this volume have contributed to understanding social media in different ways.

Chapter 1 established that in addition to being a place ‘in between’, El Mirador is characterised by an intense, small-town environment in which individuals at least know one another’s families. This in turn shapes residents’ social relations and what they disclose over social

media. Previous modes of communication, and the relationship of social media as 'new' media to these 'old' media, formed the focus of Chapter 2. For example, in the Alleyne family the television is very much 'social' media, as it is enjoyed more when watched together. An assessment of the media landscape in the town considered not only internet availability, infrastructure and the patterns of ownership of different devices, but also the idea of how networks of people are socially and culturally embedded. Information is not simply 'information'. Rather, it is always intertwined with the world views of those who circulate it, and its circulation as content posted to platforms such as Facebook becomes subject to the same social mechanisms that existed prior to social media. Among these in Trinidad are 'maco' and 'bacchanal', which continue to function as modes of keeping people in check, ensuring that expressing or documenting oneself controversially results in public scrutiny and gossip.

Chapter 3 most clearly conveyed how images posted to Facebook are not only intended to make others envious, but also to show belonging to different groups and to acknowledge these relationships. Cassandra, for example, may post numerous selfies, but such pictures do not dominate her profile as compared to the other photos she posts with friends and family. In fact, individuality as an ideal on social media appeared to migrate physically to the entirely separate platform of Instagram, due to Facebook's shift to being a more group-oriented platform.

Chapter 4 highlighted how in Trinidad family is a collective noun as well as a set of relationships between individuals who happen to be related to one another. While posts on Facebook might serve to document milestones of bonding, they also portray the ideals of family relationships which, in turn, family members must seek to live up to. Here the concept of polymedia was employed to emphasise the role of choice in communicating through different forms of media. Communication over WhatsApp, for example, can highlight not only the great richness but also the complexities of tight-knit relationships among extended families. Abundant sharing can lead to revealing too much, or to generating conflicts which then need to be resolved.

In Chapter 5 social visibility was explored in relation to creating cultural capital. As was detailed, people tend to curate their appearance (and thereby their identities) either as global and cosmopolitan or as that of a 'simple' country person. Social media thus becomes emblematic of the associated values. For the youth involved with Rotaract and the Amway IBOs, using social media signified being internationally oriented. Meanwhile, among others such as Trevor and his peers, for whom

the market is the centre of social life, digital resistance was an equally strong statement of a locally based sense of identity.

The tension between asserting individual views and trying to maintain good relationships came into sharpest focus in Chapter 6. With the example of political expression, it became clear that serious belief or engagement in this realm is rarely displayed in order to avoid unfavourable public scrutiny and attention. Instead social visibility in El Mirador helps to explain why residents in the town see themselves as explicitly non-activist and demur from engaging with politics on Facebook. Activism is perceived by those in the town as a performative mode of visibility that effectively elevates one's views above others', while the core values of the town instead remain centred around the everyday. Rather than controversial discussion on Facebook, the most common genres of post in El Mirador are humour, banter and sentimental or moral memes: content which reinforces a sense of community and of preserving relationships with those living in the same place.

Social media as visibility thereby contributes to a wider understanding of contemporary society. The dualism reflected in Trinidad, where individuals both embrace a sense of freedom and maintain a strong orientation toward family and community, is also a characteristic of other Anglo-Caribbean societies. The concept of visibility that has been employed throughout this volume is in fact a tacit one, well understood not only in Caribbean societies, but also among other 'island' and 'post-colonial' cultures. 'Correct' forms of self-presentation as moral reflections of an individual have been an important aspect of personhood in the histories of these societies. Subsequently the 'visibility' discussed throughout this text is now part of a wider global consciousness, as social media has become a key tool through which people worldwide materialise themselves.

## **Social media and society: visibility and normativity**

As outlined in the introduction, this volume sits in close conversation with two other books that investigate the relationship between social visibility and normativity in the *Why We Post* series: Nicolescu's *Social Media in Southeast Italy* and Haynes' *Social Media in Northern Chile*. Both texts argue for an understanding of social media as a space to express a place-based sense of identity. While Nicolescu's study explores how on their Facebook profiles individuals curate themselves as consistent with their day-to-day persona, including by embracing a shared

sense of Italian style, Haynes explores how the people of Alto Hospicio remain intentionally unstylish. Countering assertions that social media is primarily used for individual self-expression, Haynes finds that Hospiceños suppress multiple forms of individuality in favour of a collective identity and shared sense of local community. As in the case of El Mirador, Haynes' field site is regarded as a backwater where the population responds with their own local incarnation of 'anti-stush'.

In the Trinidadian context, visibility is a central manifestation of normativity – that is, the everyday views and values which prevail and are considered natural in a particular place. This includes views on what is correct or incorrect, appropriate or inappropriate, fair or unfair, right or wrong, and what makes sense in the world or what does not.<sup>8</sup> Social visibility meanwhile implies that there are norms around what individuals make visible to others and what they should conceal or obscure. This is also a key element in Spyer's volume on Brazil, where the norms around what to make visible are analysed in terms of a similar analogy of 'lights on' and 'lights off'. It is evident that there is a social process by which norms develop around the appropriate ways to create visibility. Social media is an invaluable means for understanding that process and how individuals navigate, comply with, challenge or subvert the associated norms. Consequently this volume has not simply been about the uses of social media in Trinidad, but has also explored how social media in Trinidad contributes to theories of visibility.

As the example of Carnival illustrates, people can visibly express individuality, but within set parameters and within a designated time and space. Although freedom and self-expression are particularly important to Trinidadians, exercising a certain degree of autonomy is not necessarily a common experience for those living in small towns. For example, 86 per cent of participants who responded to the second survey reported that they consult friends before accepting a friend request on Facebook, just to make sure that the person befriending them is somehow connected to their networks. Often decisions by an individual are likewise made with consideration towards, or consultation of, family members. The concept of polymedia discussed in Chapters 2 and 4 illustrates how relationships with different family members, as well as the family unit itself, shape the use of different platforms for navigating these obligations.

Yet even as an aspiration, social visibility is not without its dangers. Throughout the field work there were several instances on mainstream news of attacks against women, the most notable being the assassination of a high-profile lawyer in a drug trafficking trial. Beyond the incident

itself, the enduring repercussions were that young, university-educated women were deterred from (or at least thought twice about) entering professions that involve being in the public eye, especially those involved with the law, activism and governance issues. Ayanna, who was introduced in Chapter 6, was particularly vocal about the incident through work with her own community-based organisation, which encourages young girls in the area to pursue multiple streams of education and skills development. She described how the more extreme incidents of violence against women that have received national attention are rooted in everyday views and values around how women should behave. In conversations in the town it is common to hear assumptions around ‘good girls’ as typically quiet, reserved and happy to remain in and around the home. Such assumptions are not new, and have been observed in previous ethnographies on kinship in the Caribbean.<sup>9</sup> However, although such descriptions would emerge in conversation, in reality most young people have female friends who, for example, travel to and from Port of Spain into the late hours of the evening. They lime with male and female friends, and at least some parents seem genuinely enthusiastic about raising independent young women. Parents may caution their daughters against showing images of themselves on Facebook, yet they also seem to approve of them cultivating an attractive appearance. So too, dominant discourses around the ideals of womanhood are countered by the relative autonomy women have in relationships. Because of the more flexible nature of the family structure, it is not uncommon for women to have children with different baby-fathers, and extended families are generally supportive if a woman leaves a relationship due to abuse or neglect. This is typical of what we mean by social visibility: there are often contradictory pressures – in this case, to look both attractive and modest – with which everyone has to contend.

## **Communities of competition, communities of sentiment**

This struggle between normativity and individuality is apparent throughout this book, and suggests a more ambivalent relationship to normativity than is found by Haynes among the Hospiceños of Chile. The Trinidadians in this field site ascribe to underlying norms that emerge through mundane actions and manifest in the way they perform social scripts. Yet Trinidadians have an equally deep desire to assert and express themselves as individuals, with the result that they tend to do both. As in many societies today, especially for young people,

the pressure to be a distinct individual is an actual social and normative pressure. Riggio observes that Trinidad Carnival has continuously been characterised by multiplicity and contradictory intentions – it is both fiercely competitive and hierarchical. As an intercultural festival, where various cultural practices share the same space, the differences between groups of people are placed boldly on display, rather than being obscured or minimised.<sup>10</sup> Instead of ‘being different together’ – a feature which is more characteristic of a place such as Nicolescu’s Italian field site, Grano – the differences between individuals and neighbourhoods are brought to the fore and highlighted.

Through an anthropological perspective, social media shows us that what individuals post (even posts that appear as forms of self-expression) are in fact a product of society itself – the norms, aspirations, tensions and contradictions that exist simultaneously. One of the reasons why the Why We Post project deemed memes the ‘moral police’ of the internet is that they allow people to express their values and disparage those of others in a less direct and more acceptable way than was previously possible.<sup>11</sup> Memes using humour are doubly effective, relying on an understanding of shared circumstances and a sense of inclusion in order to ‘get’ their meaning. The moral lessons that emerge through memes and the semiotics that appear in photos posted to social media are thus deeply reflective of the societies that produce them. Similarly, memes as moral lessons also reflect the contestation of values within a society, as was discussed in relation to changing norms of parenting in Chapter 6.

Trinidadian society has undergone rapid changes since independence in 1962. The oil boom of the early 1980s brought an influx of new consumer goods and increased wealth, although this new wealth was not distributed evenly across the island. As a consequence of the increase in imported commodities, homes, cars and clothes became strikingly important as means for expressing individual style and identity.<sup>12</sup> Curating style through accessorising and furnishing home interiors and vehicles was soon as important as adornments to the individual body. Today, social media is yet another forum in this progression of technologies and capacities for making oneself socially visible – that is, visible in highly normative ways.<sup>13</sup>

Benign (and sometimes not so benign) antagonism between categories of people has been the subject of much scholarship on Trinidadian society.<sup>14</sup> Researchers have recognised that much of this division and antagonism is constituted by the projection of values; none of it is intrinsic to being female or Afro-Trinidadian or having a high income.<sup>15</sup> Because of the country’s past, Trinidadians are certainly prone

to value judgements around the consequences of economic or technological change. It can be argued that social structures around class, gender and ethnicity have historically been especially potent sources of division given the hierarchies of labour imposed by colonial rule. 'Stush', for example, is clearly imbued with a distinct moral judgement. Accordingly, Chapters 3 and 6 contain parallel narratives of group identification with, and adherence to, community norms as a moral obligation incumbent upon each individual. The point for anthropologists then is to resist lapsing into judgements simply of whether certain technologies are positive or negative, though this is the intention of a good deal of cultural theory.<sup>16</sup> Clearly our research participants are full of their own value judgements around the positive and negative aspects of social media – appraisals which we as anthropologists report and discuss, while at the same time attempting to refrain from imposing our judgements or eliding these with local views and values. One previous field work-based study by Miller was carried out at a time when Trinidad was experiencing rapid economic change from the aforementioned oil boom. During this period preceding the ubiquity of social media, he discovered that local aspirations were expressed through increased consumption around lifestyle. In a later study on slum communities in the Dominican Republic, Erin Taylor reflects on Miller's ethnographies and what he describes as the 'burden of self-creation'. As she elaborates:

We have more power than ever before to create our own identities and rewarding lives, but we are daunted by the magnitude of the task. Given the vast ranges of norms, values and options that exist today, it is difficult to judge how we are faring in comparison to other people. Am I wealthy or am I poor? What social class do I belong to? Not everyone will answer these questions with the same set of criteria.<sup>17</sup>

This study of social media in El Mirador has revealed that in the face of rapid changes and shifting norms across social groups, there remains a desire for competition: to outdo your neighbour, to live in a bigger house or overseas, or to have a better education. Yet these in turn highlight countervailing pressures whereby individuals attempt to bring one another down, a dynamic which is also documented in one of the most influential ethnographic studies carried out in the Caribbean, Peter Wilson's *Crab Antics*.<sup>18</sup> The title of the text refers to the idea that you can leave a barrel containing crabs open, as since crabs always tend to bring each other down, none actually manages to escape to the top.

These social struggles (and others) have long been apparent to anthropologists working in the Caribbean. As contemporary researchers we are perhaps fortunate in that the rise of social media has rendered them all the more conspicuous. With people now embracing new media, the visual – and therefore the concept of social visibility – has become even more integral to the way we communicate. As such, this book has emphasised another core dualism to add to those previously explored. This dualism emerges in the way in which a social pressure to express oneself as a particular individual is matched by the desire to form a community of sentiment, where people imagine and feel things together and disdain any individual pretension towards superiority.

## Appendix

In February, March and April 2013 my field work assistant Kara from the Department of Geography at the University of the West Indies and I surveyed 100 residents in El Mirador about their uses of social media in relation to their household. The survey consisted of two components, an in-depth household survey, which took one hour to complete and a 'rapid survey' requiring only ten minutes.

The first part of the survey contained questions regarding basic demographics: gender, age, domestic situation, occupation, ethnic or racial identification and longevity in El Mirador. It continued to ask about family attributes and indicators of wealth. The majority of the survey consisted of questions relating to uses of social media: which media the respondent used, how long had accounts been held, with what frequency were these social media used, what sort of devices were used to access the media, with whom did the respondent communicate using the media, how many 'friends' did the respondent have and where were these other people located.

The second part of the survey asked questions related to communication with family members on social media, differences between social media friends known face-to-face and those known only online, fake profiles, use of photographs online and the relationship between social media usage and business or commerce. This survey also asked for assessments of happiness, popularity, social obligations and interpersonal tensions as a result of social media usage.

These surveys were both quantitative and qualitative in nature, and were replicated in all nine field sites of the Global Social Media Impact Study. Quantitative cross-field site analyses are available in Chapter 4 of the edited volume *How the World Changed Social Media*, which explores various themes of the study as a whole.

# Notes

## Chapter 1

- 1 Liming describes a Trinidadian pastime in which people spend leisure time together without doing anything in particular; it is fairly unstructured in terms of plans or a set destination. Examples of liming between friends are given in Chapter 4. See Eriksen, T. H. 1990. 'Liming in Trinidad: the art of doing nothing.' *Folk*, 32(1): 23–43. Lieber, M. 1976. "Liming" and Other Concerns: The Style of Street Embedments in Port-Of-Spain, Trinidad.' *Urban anthropology*: 319–34. Miller, D., 1991. 'Absolute freedom in Trinidad.' *Man*: 323–41.
- 2 The phrase 'and ting' literally means 'and thing' – that is, 'et cetera'.
- 3 Eriksen, T. H. 1990. Hosein, G. J. 2008. *Everybody Have To Eat: Politics and Governance in Trinidad*. Ph.D. thesis, London: UCL. Riggio, M., ed. 2004. *Carnival: Culture in Action – The Trinidad Experience*. New York: Routledge. Khan, A. 2004. *Callaloo Nation: Metaphors of Race and Religious Identity Among South Asians in Trinidad*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.
- 4 See for example <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-power-prime/201107/technology-is-technology-stealing-our-self-identities>; and [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/r-kay-green/the-social-media-effect-a\\_b\\_3721029.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/r-kay-green/the-social-media-effect-a_b_3721029.html).
- 5 Street, A. and Copeman, J. 2014. 'Social theory after Strathern: An introduction.' *Theory, Culture & Society*, 31(2–3): 7–37, esp. p. 14.
- 6 Birth, K. 2008. *Bacchanalian Sentiments: Musical Experiences and Political Counterpoints in Trinidad*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press; Franco, P. 1998. 'Dressing Up and Looking Good: Afro-Creole Female Maskers in Trinidad Carnival.' *African Arts*, vol. 31, Iss. 2: 62–7; Hosein, G. J. 2012. 'Transnational spirituality, invented ethnicity and performances of citizenship in Trinidad.' *Citizenship Studies*, 16(5–6): 737–49; Lovelace, E. 2004. *The Dragon Can't Dance*. Alexandria: Alexander Street Press; Mason, P. 1998. *Bacchanal! The Carnival Culture of Trinidad*. London: Latin America Bureau (Research and Action) Ltd; Riggio, M., ed. 2004.
- 7 Riggio, M., ed. 2004. 6.
- 8 Burton, R. 1997. *Afro-Creole: Power, opposition and play in the Caribbean*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. 157.
- 9 See Khan, A. 2004; Palmer, C. 2006. *Eric Williams and the Making of the Modern Caribbean*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of Carolina Press; Clarke, C. 1986. *East Indians in a West Indian Town*. London: Allen and Unwin; Yelvington, K., ed. 1993. *Trinidad Ethnicity*. London: Macmillan; Singh, K. 1994. *Race and Class Struggles in a Colonial State: Trinidad 1917–1945*. Kingston: University of the West Indies Press; Premdas, R. 2007. *Trinidad and Tobago: Ethnic Conflict, Inequality and Public Sector Governance*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 10 Riggio, M., ed. 2004. Chapter 7 ("Play Mas" – Play me, play we'). 93–108, esp. p.94.
- 11 Miller calls the idea of truth produced on the outside for the gaze of others 'surface ontology'. Miller, D. 1994. *Modernity: an Ethnographic Approach*. Oxford: Berg. Mahmood argues that truth produced on the outside as enacted resonates within. Mahmood, S. 2005. *Politics of Piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- 12 See Gómez Cruz, E. and Lehmuskalio, A., eds. 2016. *Digital Photography and Everyday Life: Empirical Studies on Material Visual Practices*. London: Routledge; and Gómez Cruz, E. and Thornham, H., 2015. 'Selfies beyond self-representation: the (theoretical) f(r)ictions of a practice.' *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 7.
- 13 Nicolescu, R. 2016. *Social Media in Southeast Italy*. London: UCL Press. Haynes, N. 2016. *Social Media in Northern Chile*. London: UCL Press.
- 14 Haynes explains that normativity and solidarity are important social values; they highlight their collective, marginalized citizenship and erase individual forms of distinction, including other forms of marginalised identity based on gender, indigeneity and sexuality. Haynes, N. 2016.
- 15 Bharadwaj, A. 2003. 'Why adoption is not an option in India: the visibility of infertility, the secrecy of donor insemination, and other cultural complexities.' *Social science & medicine* 56(9): pp.1867–80, esp. p.1870. Haynes further explains that those who transgress social norms become subject to gossip. Haynes, N. 2016. Similarly, for Nicolescu social sanctions are exercised on those who express themselves as being too individual. Nicolescu, R. 2016.
- 16 'Dougl'a refers to a person of mixed Indo-Trinidadian and Afro-Trinidadian descent. See Segal, D. 1993. Chapter 4: "Race" and "colour" in pre-independence Trinidad and Tobago.' In Yelvington, K., ed. *Trinidad Ethnicity*. London: Macmillan. Reddock, R., 1999. 'Jahaji bhai: The emergence of a dougl'a poetics in Trinidad and Tobago.' *Identities Global Studies in Culture and Power* 5(4): 569–601. Cornwell, G. H. 1999. 'Cosmopolitan or mongrel? Créolité, hybridity and "douglarisation" in Trinidad.' *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 2(3): 331–53. England, S., 2010. 'Mixed and multiracial in Trinidad and Honduras: Rethinking mixed-race identities in Latin America and the Caribbean.' *Ethnic and Racial Studies*,33(2): 195–213.
- 17 Miller, D. and Sinanan, J. 2014. *Webcam*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- 18 Diwali is the most significant festival in Hinduism. It celebrates the triumph of light over dark, good over evil, knowledge over ignorance and hope over despair. For the heritage of celebrating Diwali in Trinidad see Jha, J. C. 1973. 'Indian heritage in Trinidad, West Indies.' *Caribbean Quarterly* 19(2): 28–50.
- 19 Hine, C. 2000. *Virtual Ethnography*. London: Sage. Pink, S. et al. 2016. *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice*. London: Sage.
- 20 Brereton, B. 1981. *A History of Modern Trinidad 1783–1962*. Kingston: Heinemann Educational Books. Malik, Y. K. 1971. *East Indians in Trinidad: A Study in Minority Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 21 Reid, B. 2007. *Popular Myths about Caribbean History*. Mona: University of the West Indies Press.
- 22 Brereton, B. 1981. Singh, K. 2010. *British-Controlled Trinidad and Venezuela: A History of Economic Interests and Subversion, 1830–1962*. Mona: University of the West Indies Press. Clark, C. 1986.
- 23 Griffin, C. 1997. Chapter 13: 'Human Rights and State Security in Trinidad and Tobago.' In Griffith, I. and Sedoc-Dahlberg, B., eds. *Democracy and Human Rights in the Caribbean*. Boulder: Westview Press. 230–46. Ryan, S. 1994. Chapter 14: 'Problems and Prospects for the Survival of Liberal Democracy in the Anglophone Caribbean.' In Edie, C. *Democracy in the Caribbean: Myths and Realities*. Westport, London: Praeger.
- 24 It is important to note that since independence and up to 1986 politics in Trinidad has been inseparable from the story of Eric Williams and his party, the PNM. The party retains its associations with the more Afro-Trinidadian population, in contrast to the previous government, an alliance whose main constituent party was the party traditionally associated with the Indo-Trinidadian population. However, both of these alignments between ethnicity and politics are complicated by issues of class and religion. See Oxaal, I. 1982. *Black Intellectuals and the Dilemmas of Race and Class in Trinidad*. Cambridge: Schenkman Books; Wilson, S. 2012. *Politics of Identity in Small Plural Societies: Guyana, the Fiji Islands, and Trinidad and Tobago*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 25 Ministry of Planning and Sustainable Development Central Statistical Office. 2012. *Trinidad and Tobago 2011 Population and Housing Census Demographic Report*. Port of Spain: Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.
- 26 Anthony, M. 1988. *Towns and Villages of Trinidad and Tobago*. Port of Spain: Circle Press of Long Circular Road.

- 27 Ministry of Planning and Sustainable Development Central Statistical Office. 2012. Krishnakumar, A., Narine, L., Roopnarine, J. L. and Logie, C. 2014. 'Multilevel and cross-level effects of neighborhood and family influences on children's behavioral outcomes in Trinidad and Tobago: the intervening role of parental control.' *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* 42(6): 1057–68.
- 28 'Baby father' and 'baby mother' are colloquial terms for the parents of a child who do not live together. See Smith, R. 1996. *The Matrifocal Family: Power, Pluralism, and Politics*. New York, London: Routledge; MacDonald, J. and MacDonald, L. 1973. 'Transformation of African and Indian Family Traditions in the Southern Caribbean.' *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 15 (2): 171–98; Chevannes, B. 2001. *Learning to Be a Man: Culture, Socialization, and Gender Identity in Five Caribbean Communities*. Barbados: University of the West Indies Press. Barrow, C. 1996. *Family in the Caribbean: Themes and Perspectives*. Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers. Abrahams, R. 1983. *The Man-Of-Words in the West Indies: Performance and the Emergence of Creole Culture*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- 29 Madianou, M. and Miller, D. 2012. *Migration and New Media*. London: Routledge.
- 30 For more critical analysis see Hussain, M. M. and Howard, P. N. 2013. 'What Best Explains Successful Protest Cascades? ICTs and the Fuzzy Causes of the Arab Spring.' *International Studies Review* 15.1: 48– 66; Lim, M. 2013. 'Many Clicks but Little Sticks: Social Media Activism in Indonesia.' *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43(4): 636–57; Morozov, E. 2009. 'Iran: Downside to the "Twitter Revolution".' *Dissent* 56(4): 10– 14. Trottier and Fuchs give a comprehensive overview of social media, political engagement and the relationship between citizens and state in their introduction to Trottier, D. and Fuchs, C. 2014. *Social media, politics and the state: protests, revolutions, riots, crime and policing in the age of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube*. London: Routledge.
- 31 Space and place (used here to erode the distinction between the 'offline' and 'online' worlds) is also a central theme in Xinyuan Wang's volume in this series. In this she describes a parallel migration: rural workers migrate physically to the factory town and at the same time 'migrate' digitally to their social media world, which for them is very much a place where they 'live'. Wang, X. 2016. *Social Media in Industrial China*. London: UCL Press. Our uses of place reflect Lefebvre's 'lived space', which is both material and symbolic/representational, and Massey's use of space as 'formed out of the particular set of social relations that interact at a particular location'. (1992: 12). See Lefebvre, H. 1991. *The Production of Space*, Cambridge: Blackwell; Massey, D. 1992. 'A place called home?' *New Formations*, 17(3): 3–15; Peake, L. and Trotz, A. D. 1999. *Gender, Ethnicity and Place: Women and Identities in Guyana*. Routledge: London.

## Chapter 2

- 1 Miller, D. 1997. *Capitalism: An Ethnographic Approach*. Oxford: Berg. Miller, D. 1992. 'Chapter 10, The Young and the Restless in Trinidad: A case of the local and the global in mass consumption'. In Silverstone, R. and Hirsch, E., eds. *Consuming Technologies: Media and Information in Domestic Spaces*. London: Routledge. McFarlane-Alvarez, S. 2007. 'Trinidad and Tobago Television Advertising as Third Space: Hybridity as Resistance in the Caribbean Mediascape', *Howard Journal of Communications* 18(1): 39–55.
- 2 Madianou, M. and Miller, D. 2012. *Migration and New Media*. London: Routledge.
- 3 Miller, D. 1997. McFarlane-Alvarez, S. 2004. 'The quest for national identity and visual sovereignty in Trinidad and Tobago television advertising', *Advertising & Society Review* 5(3).
- 4 McFarlane-Alvarez, S. 2004. 40.
- 5 Most recently independent film makers have been gaining some critical acclaim at international film festivals and are using social media to publicise their films. See for example *After Mas*, directed by Karen Martinez (2014) and *Play the Devil*, directed by Maria Govan (2016).
- 6 A cutlass is a long-handled, curved blade, similar to a machete.
- 7 Miller, D. 1997. McFarlane-Alvarez, S. 2007. 'Trinidad and Tobago Television Advertising as Third Space: Hybridity as Resistance in the Caribbean Mediascape', *Howard Journal of Communications* 18(1): 39–55.
- 8 McFarlane-Alvarez, 2004. 8.
- 9 Miller, D. 1997. 204.
- 10 Miller, D. 1997. 240.

- 11 Miller, D. 1995. 'Chapter 11, The consumption of soap opera: *The Young and the Restless* and mass consumption in Trinidad.' In Allen, R. C., ed. *To Be Continued... Soap operas around the world*. London: Routledge.
- 12 The murder rate for 2011 decreased to 354 and 379 in 2012, but rose again to 407 in 2013 and 403 in 2014. See the OSAC Trinidad and Tobago 2016 Crime & Safety Report <https://www.osac.gov/pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=19522>.
- 13 See Livingstone, S. 2002. *Young People and New Media: Childhood and the Changing Media Environment*. London: Sage; Padilla-Walker, L., Coyne, S. and Fraser, A. 2012. 'Getting a High-Speed Family Connection: Associations Between Family Media Use and Family Connection', *Family Relations* 61(3): 426–40; Danby, S., Davidson, C., Theobald, M., Scriven, B., Cobb-Moore, C., Houen, S., Grant, S., Given, L. M. and Thorpe, K. 2013. 'Talk in activity during young children's use of digital technologies at home.' *Australian Journal of Communication* 40(2); Davis-Kean, P. E. and Tang, S. 2015. 'Parenting with Digital Devices.' In Scott, R. A. and Kosslyn, S. M., eds. *Emerging Trends in the Social and Behavioral Sciences: An Interdisciplinary, Searchable, and Linkable Resource*. DOI: 10.1002/9781118900772.
- 14 Between 2000 and 2011 15,455 Trinbagonians emigrated. See Central Statistical Office. 2012. Trinidad and Tobago 2011 Population and Housing Census Demographic Report. Port of Spain: Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, Ministry of Planning and Sustainable Development.
- 15 Although since 2014 use of Instagram has increased extensively in urban parts of Trinidad, such as Port of Spain and San Fernando.
- 16 'Macoing' and 'bacchanal' are explained by Mrs Hinds in the short films on Trinidad for Why We Post, available at <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/why-we-post/research-sites/trinidad/>.
- 17 See Tandoc, E. C., Ferrucci, P. and Duffy, M. 2015. 'Facebook use, envy, and depression among college students: Is facebooking depressing?' *Computers in Human Behavior* 43: 139–46; Appel, H., Gerlach, A. L. and Crusius, J. 2016. 'The interplay between Facebook use, social comparison, envy, and depression.' *Current Opinion in Psychology* 9: 44–9.
- 18 Nicolescu, R. 2016. *Social Media in South Italy*. London: UCL Press.
- 19 See Hunte, C. 2016. 'US-based professor: Media only focusing on scandal, bacchanal.' *Daily Express*, 29 March.
- 20 The average amount of photos posted per person in El Mirador is 732, compared to 450 in the English field site, The Glades. See Miller, D. and Sinanan, J. 2017. *Visualising Facebook*. London: UCL Press.
- 21 'Maco' and 'bacchanal' illustrate how Facebook is less of a technology and more of an enactment of a cultural world that is Trinidad. See Miller, D. 2011. *Tales from Facebook*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- 22 'Trini' refers to the constant discourse within Trinidad around what is typically Trinidadian, as opposed to actual 'Trinidadians', who represent a varied population.
- 23 See Miller, D. and Horst, H. 2013. 'Introduction: The Digital and the Human: A Prospectus for Digital Anthropology.' In Horst, H. and Miller, D., eds. *Digital Anthropology*. London: Berg.
- 24 Sociologist Erving Goffman argues that everyday encounters and interactions may seem natural, but are in fact the products of artifice. Different circumstances frame interactions and cue certain behaviours. See Goffman, E. 1975. *Frame Analysis*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- 25 Madianou, M. and Miller, D. 2012.
- 26 See also Sinanan, J. 2016. 'Chapter 4, Social Media and Sorting Out Family Relationships.' In Tettegah, S., ed. *Emotions, Technology and Social Media*. London: Elsevier. 36–60.
- 27 See Papacharissi, Z., ed. 2011. *A Networked Self: Identity, Community and Culture on Social Network Sites*. New York: Routledge; Rainie, L. and Wellman, B. 2012. *Networked: The New Social Operating System*, Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- 28 See 'Government of Trinidad and Tobago Works with Coursera to Boost Education and Improve Career Skills Nationwide', <https://blog.coursera.org/government-of-trinidad-and-tobago-works-with/>
- 29 An idea attributed to Tichenor, P., Donohue, G. and Olien, C. 1970. 'Mass media flow and differential growth in knowledge.' *Public Opinion Quarterly* 34 (2): 159–70.
- 30 Approximately 35 per cent of key research participants.
- 31 The early 2000s saw a sense of optimism regarding the bridging of informational divides by increasing access. Although these debates preceded social media, they largely influenced policies such as 'one laptop per child'. See Chen, W. and Wellman, B. 2004. 'The Global Digital Divide Within and Between Countries.' *IT & Society* 1(7): 39–45; Norris, P. 2001. *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide*.

- Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Warschauer, M. 2004. *Technology and Social Inclusion: Rethinking the Digital Divide*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- 32 Miller, D. 2011. 68.
- 33 See Couldry's critical analysis in Couldry, N. 2015. 'The myth of "us": digital networks, political change and the production of collectivity.' *Information, Communication & Society* 18(6): 608–26.
- 34 See Donner, J. 2015. *After Access: Inclusion, development and a more mobile internet*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. Ewing, S., Rennie, E. and Thomas, J. 2015. 'Broadband policy and rural and cultural divides in Australia.' In Andreasson, K., ed. *Digital Divides: The New Challenges and Opportunities of e-Inclusion*. Boca Raton, London and New York, NY: CRC Press. Kretschmer, S., Correa, T., Rennie, E., Thomas, J., Robinson, L., Salgado, S., Schejter, A., Ben Harush, O. R., Tirosh, N., Mola, S., Mendels, J., Shaham, M., Abu-Khaf, G., Yang, Q. and Yates, S. J. 2016. 'The digital divide: Worldwide challenges for communication across the life span in the digital age.' In Nussbaum, J., ed. *Communication Across the Life Span*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc. 123–47.
- 35 See Guilbaut, J. 2004. 'Chapter 19: On redefining the nation through party music.' In Riggio, M., ed. *Carnival: Culture in Action- The Trinidad Experience*. Routledge: New York. 228–40. Stahl also argues that sentiment also creates a sense of intimacy that is central for forging a shared sense of identity amongst subcultures. See Stahl, G. 2003. 'Chapter 2: Tastefully Renovating Subcultural Theory: Making Space for a New Model.' In Muggleton, D. and Weinzierl, R., eds. *The Post-subcultures Reader*. Oxford, New York: Berg. Appadurai's original term described strengthening a sense of national identity in the face of global homogenisation. See Appadurai, A. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- 36 Khan, A. 2004. *Callaloo Nation: Metaphors of Race and Religious Identity Among South Asians in Trinidad*. London and Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

## Chapter 3

- 1 This was the case at the time of research, across 2011 to 2014. In 2016 more research participants had joined Instagram and followed several others, but they tended to post fewer images themselves, as compared to posting and sharing on Facebook.
- 2 Rainie and Wellman describe social networks by defining relationships as personal or ego-centred. Each individual is 'at the centre of his or her own personal network: a solar system of one to two thousand and more people orbiting around us'. See Rainie, L. and Wellman, B. 2012. *Networked*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. 55. The same volume argues for social media as facilitating wider social networks based on loose ties, with 'networked individualism' allowing individuals to reject the restrictions placed on them from being associated with close-knit groups. The material presented in this volume, and the comparative material in *How the World Changed Social Media*, challenge approaches to social media that are based on ego-centred, individual networks.
- 3 Ministry of Planning and Sustainable Development Central Statistical Office. 2012. *Trinidad and Tobago 2011 Population and Housing Census Demographic Report*. Port of Spain: Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.
- 4 See Miller, D. and Slater, D. 2000. *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*. Oxford: Berg. 57–8.
- 5 Kerrigan, D. 2014. 'Languaculture and grassroots football: "Small goal" in Trinidad.' *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*. September 2014. 1–17: 1. See also Craig, S. 1981. *Contemporary Caribbean: A Sociological Reader*. St. Augustine: The University of the West Indies Press.
- 6 See Miller, D. 1994. *Modernity: An Ethnographic Approach*. Oxford: Berg; Barnes, R. and Eicher, J. B. 1992. *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning in Cultural Contexts*. New York: Berg; Gilbertson, A. 2014. 'A Fine Balance: Negotiating fashion and respectable femininity in middle-class Hyderabad, India.' *Modern Asian Studies* 48(1): 120–58.
- 7 Braithwaite, L. 1975. *Social Stratification in Trinidad: A Preliminary Analysis*, Kingston: University of the West Indies. Meighoo, K. 2003. *Politics in a 'Half-Made Society': Trinidad and Tobago, 1925–2001*, Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers. Singh, K. 1994. *Race and Class Struggles in a Colonial State: Trinidad 1917–1945*. Kingston: The University of the West Indies. Wilson,

- S. 2012. *Politics of Identity in Small Plural Societies: Guyana, the Fiji Islands and Trinidad and Tobago*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. Premdas, R. 2007. *Trinidad and Tobago: Ethnic Conflict, Inequality and Public Sector Governance*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 8 Malik, Yogendra K. 1971. *East Indians in Trinidad: A Study in Minority Politics*. London: Oxford University Press. 11.
  - 9 Khan, A. 2004. *Callaloo Nation: Metaphors of Race and Religious Identity Among South Asians in Trinidad*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press. Munasinghe, V. 2001. *Callaloo or Tossed Salad? East Indians and the cultural politics of Identity in Trinidad*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
  - 10 See Nevadomsky, J. 1983. 'Economic organization, social mobility, and changing social status among east Indians in rural Trinidad.' *Ethnology* 22(1): 63–79 and Nevadomsky, J. 1980. 'Changes over time and space in the East Indian family in rural Trinidad.' *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*. 433–56.
  - 11 Clark, C. 1986. *East Indians in a West Indian Town: San Fernando, Trinidad, 1930–70*. London: Allen and Unwin. Yelvington, K. 1993. *Producing Power: Ethnicity, Gender and Class in a Caribbean Workplace*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. 59–60. Premdas, R. 1999. Chapter 5. 'Public Policy and Ethnic Conflict Regulation: Trinidad and Tobago.' In Young, C. *The Accommodation of Cultural Diversity: Case Studies*. London: Macmillan. 103–26.
  - 12 Yelvington, K. 1995. *Trinidad Ethnicity*. London: Macmillan. 1.
  - 13 Yelvington, K. 1993.
  - 14 Mohammed, P. 2002. *Gender Negotiations among Indians in Trinidad 1917–1947*. Basingstoke: Palgrave. 7.
  - 15 Riggio, M., ed. 2004. *Carnival: Culture in Action – The Trinidad Experience*. New York: Routledge. 94.
  - 16 Khan, A. 2004, p. 23.
  - 17 Abraham, S. 2001. 'The shifting sources of racial definition in Trinidad and Tobago, and Guyana: a research agenda.' *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24(6): 979–97.
  - 18 Birth, K. 1999. *'Any Time is Trinidad Time': Social Meanings and Temporal Consciousness*. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press. 19.
  - 19 See Kerrigan, D. 2014. Kerrigan describes 'languaculture', referring to specific codes and styles of talk, which are symbolic constructions of the societies from which they emerged.
  - 20 Alim, H. S., Ibrahim, A. and Pennycook, A. 2008. *Global linguistic flows: Hip hop cultures, youth identities, and the politics of language*. London: Routledge. Reddock also describes hybrid or mixed cultures as the intersections of categories of race. Reddock, R. 2014. Chapter 3. "'Split Me in Two": Gender, Identity, and "Race Mixing" in the Trinidad and Tobago Nation.' In King-O'Riain, R. C., Small, S., Mahtani, M., Song, M. and Spickard, P. *Global Mixed Race*. New York: New York University Press. 44–68.
  - 21 Meighoo, K. 2003. Ryan, S. 1972. *Race and Nationalism in Trinidad and Tobago: A Study of Decolonization in a Multiracial Society*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. Singh, K. 1994. Yelvington, K. 1995.
  - 22 Naipaul, V. S. 1967 (2001). *The Mimic Men*. London: Vintage Books; 1961 (2003). *A House for Mr Biswas*. London: Pan Macmillan; 1959 (2000). *Miguel Street*. Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers.
  - 23 See Hinton, S. and Hjorth, L. 2013. *Understanding Social Media*. London: Sage for uses of social media for impression management. See Katz, J. E. and Lai, C. 2014. Chapter 5. 'Mobile Locative Media: The Nexus of Mobile Phones and Social Media.' In Goggin, G. and Hjorth, L., eds. *The Routledge Companion to Mobile Media*. London: Routledge. 53–61.
  - 24 In relation to locality, Wilk poses the idea of 'global systems of common difference', where particular kinds of diversity are celebrated, while at the same time suppressing others. See Wilk, R. 1995. Chapter 6. 'Learning to be local in Belize: global systems of common difference.' In Miller, D., ed. *Worlds Apart: Modernity through the prism of the local*. London and New York: Routledge. 110–33.
  - 25 See Hjorth, L. and Richardson, I. 2014. *Gaming in Social, Locative, and Mobile Media*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 59–75, for notions of playfulness and camera phone practices, and Cruz, E. G. and Lehmuskallio, A., eds 2016. *Digital Photography and Everyday Life: Empirical Studies on Material Visual Practices*. London: Routledge, for critical essays on digital photographic practices more generally.
  - 26 Bourdieu observes that although it appears that hierarchies within societies have changed, the social differences between groups have not changed at all. Those from lower groups within the social hierarchy are not necessarily able to share the views and tastes expressed

by those of a higher class, even though they have the economic means to participate in that culture. See Bourdieu, P. 1984 (tr. Richard Nice). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

## Chapter 4

- 1 See Haynes, N. 2016. *Social Media in Northern Chile*. London: UCL Press, and Strathern, M. 1988. *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- 2 In media studies the concepts of remediation, mediatisation and mediation have influenced polymedia as well as providing a point of departure for it (see Bolter, G. and Grusin, R. 2000. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press; Couldry, N. 2008. 'Mediatization or mediation? Alternative understandings of the emergent space of digital storytelling.' *New Media & Society* 10(3): 373–91; Couldry, N. and Hepp, A. 2013. 'Conceptualizing mediatization: Contexts, traditions, arguments.' *Communication Theory* 23(3): 191–202). These terms attempt to capture the intersection between the perspectives of technological determinism and social shaping of technologies (MacKenzie, D. and Wajcman, J. 1999. *The Social Shaping of Technology*. Buckingham: Open University Press; Mackay, H. and Gillespie, G. 1992. 'Extending the social shaping of technology approach: ideology and appropriation'. *Social Studies of Science* 22(4): 685–716) to varying degrees, whereas polymedia resocialises theories of new media by situating different communication media within their wider media ecologies. The concept recognises how each medium finds its place with respect to other media (Horst, H., Herr-Stephenson, B. and Robinson, L. 2010. Chapter 1 'Media Ecologies.' In Ito, M. et al. 2010. *Hanging Out, Messing Around and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press; Ito, M. et al. 2010. *Hanging Out, Messing Around and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press; Madianou, M. and Miller, D. 2013. 'Polymedia: Towards a new theory of digital media in interpersonal communication.' *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 16(2): 169–87. Slater, D. and Tacchi, J. A. 2004. *Research on ICT innovations for poverty reduction*. UNESCO) and idioms of practice. Bolter and Grusin's concept of remediation is helpful in this respect and has influenced the emergence of polymedia as a theory, as people's experience with one media mode often influences their experience with another. There is an assumption that face-to-face conversation is somehow a purer, more natural mode of communication, a discourse taken up by Turkle (Turkle, S. 2011. *Alone Together*. New York: Basic Books). Polymedia takes inspiration from Bolter and Grusin's remediation in that it assumes that all human communications are mediated, for example through technology or other invisible frames such as norms of rules and respect typical of kinship relations. The mediation that takes place through communications media adds another layer onto already mediated relationships.
- 3 For more in-depth discussion on polymedia see Madianou, M. 2016. 'Ambient co-presence: transnational family practices in polymedia environments.' *Global Networks* 16(2): 183–201; Madianou, M. and Miller, D. 2013. 'Polymedia: Towards a new theory of digital media in interpersonal communication.' *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 16(2): 169–87 and Madianou, M. and Miller, D. 2012. *Migration and New Media*. London: Routledge.
- 4 Madianou and Miller also developed the theory of polymedia to address what they felt were lacking in other social theories of media. They outline three precursors to the emergence of polymedia: access, affordability and literacy (Madianou, M. and Miller, D. 2012, 2013). From their field work in the Philippines and, later, in Trinidad, mobile phone plans and internet access are affordable enough to be ubiquitous. Monthly phone plans can also include unlimited broadband access. In El Mirador it is common for individuals to have both a basic mobile phone and a smartphone. The basic phone is more for immediate contact with relatives who do not have smartphones and the other for multi-purpose use. Having multiple phones also relates to the prerequisite of literacy, and of having a certain level of proficiency and confidence in differentiating between media usage.
- 5 See Hjorth, L., Horst, H., Pink, S., Zhou, B., Kato, F., Bell, G., Ohashi, K., Marmo, C. and Xiao, M. 2016. Chapter 22 'Digital kinships: intergenerational locative media in Tokyo, Shanghai and Melbourne'. In Hjorth, L. and Khoo, O., eds. *Routledge Handbook of New Media*

- in Asia. Oxford, New York: Routledge; Pink, S., Sinanan, J., Hjorth, L. and Horst, H. 2015. 'Tactile digital ethnography: Researching mobile media through the hand.' *Mobile Media & Communication*, DOI 2050157915619958.
- 6 Smith, R. T. 1996. *The Matrifocal Family: Power, pluralism and politics*. New York, and London: Routledge.
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- 30 Bell, S. and Coleman, S., eds. 1999. Pahl, R. 2000.
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## Chapter 5

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  - 4 Miller builds on Wilson's dual values of reputation and respectability by contributing the dual logics of transience and transcendence in his volume *Modernity, an Ethnographic Approach* (Miller, D. 1994). Partly due to a history of slavery and indentured labour, this dualistic logic expresses certain contradictions of modernity. Trinidadians place distinct emphasis on a sense of freedom and transience encapsulating the values of the present, immediacy and life of the street, crafting one's appearance through style, a sense of performance and overt sexuality. The point here is that others judge a person according to the appearance they create, rather than the structures or institutions they are positioned by. Transcendence represents the home, domesticity and values that are permanent, a desire to create roots, continuity and tradition, characterised by education, religion and morality. See the discussion of Trinidadian values in Chapter 7 of *Visualising Facebook* for how transience and transcendence are displayed on social media. Miller, D. and Sinanan, J. 2017. *Visualising Facebook: A Comparative Perspective.* London: UCL Press.
  - 5 On Indo-Caribbean motherhood see Grahame, K. M. 2006. 'Shifting arrangements: Indo-Trinidadian women, globalization, and the restructuring of family life.' *Sociological Spectrum* 26(5): 425–52.
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## Chapter 6

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- 4 A smelter is a factory for extracting metal from ore and produces high amounts of carbon monoxide. Dr Wayne Kublalsingh's involvement with the landmark anti-smelter movement, which was settled in the High Court, solidified his reputation as an environmental and economic activist. He gained a reputation as being against 'bogus' development on the one

hand, but also as someone who repeatedly appears in the media to draw attention to his agenda. The construction of the Debe–Mon Desir section of the highway has been plagued with debate and allegations of corruption. In September 2014 Kublalsingh embarked on a second hunger strike as, although it was agreed that the section of the highway would be reviewed, construction has continued. His second hunger strike reportedly exceeded 100 days. In April 2016 construction of this section of the highway was suspended due to economic difficulties.

- 5 Maraval is one of the wealthiest suburbs in Port of Spain.
- 6 ‘Really from the bush’, meaning ignorant country people.
- 7 Samuel, A. 2004. ‘Descendants of a Sharp-Tongued Dialectic: Calypso and the Chantwell.’ *ProudFlesh: New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics and Consciousness* 3.
- 8 Kublalsingh’s hunger strike in 2012 resulted in the government funding the independent civil society body, the Joint Constitutive Council, to conduct an inquiry into re-assessing the evidence on which the decision to construct the section of the highway was based. The findings were compiled into the publicly accessible Armstrong Report in 2013. This represented a precedent in Trinidad’s history, in which the state, compelled by a protest movement, agreed to sponsor an impartial review within policy making. For more detail see Mendez-Franco, J. 2014. ‘Second Hunger Strike Over Highway May Leave Trinidad & Tobago Fighting For Its Soul’. <https://globalvoices.org/2014/09/28/second-hunger-strike-over-highway-may-leave-trinidad-tobago-fighting-for-its-soul/>.
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## Chapter 7

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- 14 Kerrigan, D. 2012. 'White Supremacy vs. Gangsterism on the Small Goal Football Field.' *Anthropology Now*. December 2012. Khan, A. 2004. *Callaloo Nation: Metaphors of Race and Religious Identity Among South Asians in Trinidad*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press. Singh, K. 1994. *Race and Class Struggles in a Colonial State: Trinidad 1917–1945*. Kingston: University of the West Indies Press. Yelvington, K. 1995. *Producing Power: Ethnicity, Gender and Class in a Caribbean Workplace*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
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Drawing on 15 months of ethnographic research in one of the most under-developed regions in the Caribbean island of Trinidad, this book describes the uses and consequences of social media for its residents. Jolynna Sinanan argues that this semi-urban town is a place in-between: somewhere city dwellers look down on and villagers look up to. The complex identity of the town is expressed through uses of social media, with significant results for understanding social media more generally.

Not elevating oneself above others is one of the core values of the town, and social media becomes a tool for social visibility; that is, the process of how social norms come to be and how they are negotiated. Carnival logic and high-impact visuality is pervasive in uses of social media, even if Carnival is not embraced by all Trinidadians in the town and results in presenting oneself and association with different groups in varying ways. The study also has surprising results in how residents are explicitly non-activist and align themselves with everyday values of maintaining good relationships in a small town, rather than espousing more worldly or cosmopolitan values.

**JOLYNNA SINANAN** is Vice Chancellor's Postdoctoral Research Fellow at RMIT University, Melbourne. From 2011-2014, she was Research Fellow in Anthropology at UCL. She is the co-author of *How the World Changed Social Media*, *Visualising Facebook* and *Webcam*. Her areas of research are digital ethnography, new media, migration and gender in Trinidad, Australia, and Singapore.



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