Social Media in Trinidad

Sinanan, Jolynna

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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. 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\(^2\) 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.\(^3\) 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.\(^4\) 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.\(^5\)

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, yet in Trinidadian and wider Caribbean kinship systems the mothering of children is also performed by other female relatives, irrespective of biological relationships.

**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. 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. One of the key themes within this research is the difference in structures between Indo-Trinidadians 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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.17 ‘New’ Chinese migrants (xin yimin) numbered an estimated 5,000 in Trinidad in 2002.18 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.19

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 landline phones previously, social media has aided in bridging distances between parents and children who live apart in the same country or abroad. 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.

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. 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. 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. 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.

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. 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
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. 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 convener, outlining that they needed to fix a date, decide who was going to source the cake and decorations, nominate which families where 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 grand-
parents’ 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 inter-
action 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, peo-
ple 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 plat-
forms such as Pinterest. On Skype the cousins saw each other’s most co-
operative 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 pres-
ent 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. 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. 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. 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.³¹

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. 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. 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.