UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY SYDNEY

“Do It Fuh d’Gram”

The Influence of Gender Dynamics on the Content of Social Media Influencers and Consumers in Trinidad & Tobago

by Ave Le Blanc

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

under the supervision of Professor Ross Gordon, Associate Professor Lisa Schuster and Dr Sue Ann Barratt

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, Ave Le Blanc, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Business School at the University of Technology Sydney. This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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ABSTRACT

This PhD thesis examines how gender dynamics shape the practices and experiences of Social Media Influencers (SMIs) and the responses of their consumer followers within the SMI domain in Trinidad and Tobago (T&T). It analyses discourse in SMI-produced content and draws on narrative interviews with both SMIs and consumers.

Research shows that SMIs with marginalised identities, such as women, those outside the Global North, and those racialised or disabled, often face harmful gendered feedback online. This backlash shapes how they present themselves and influence within the SMI domain. Some self-censor, while others resist through self-expression. Scholars have called for deeper exploration of how consumers, brands, and social media platforms shape these dynamics, particularly at the intersections of multiple identities.

Guided by Crenshaw's intersectionality framework and Caribbean feminist scholarship, this study uses two data stages: (1) a Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of content from 40 SMIs, and (2) narrative interviews with 21 SMIs and 20 consumers, all drawn from this original sample.

Findings, presented across three articles, show how SMIs negotiate identity, challenge gendered expectations, and shape influence within the SMI domain. The thesis offers theoretical, practical, and methodological contributions to SMI gender marketing, social marketing, and Global South scholarship.

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION



1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. *RESEARCH PROBLEM*

My PhD research explores how gender dynamics shape the practices and experiences of Social Media Influencers (SMIs) as well as the responses of their consumer followers in Trinidad and Tobago (T&T). SMIs are individuals with a significant number of followers on platforms like Instagram who use their platforms to influence the views and actions of their followers (Freberg et al., 2011). In recent years, there has been growing interest in SMIs within marketing and consumer research, with increasing attention paid to their experiences of gender-related issues (Drenten et al., 2020; Gurrieri & Drenten, 2019a; Mardon et al., 2023). This PhD thesis contributes to and expands current understanding in this emerging area of inquiry.

An article by T&T journalist Mondezie (2018) provides a candid insight into the gendered experiences of SMIs operating within the T&T context. In the interview, esteemed T&T SMI and musician 'Ashana' revealed that she often faces criticism on social media for her music and curvaceous image, a scrutiny she feels is predominantly directed at women. She went on to state, "It is a double standard... but being sexy is empowering by itself" (Mondezie, 2018).

I am a Trinbagonian woman with several years of experience working in the digital departments of local advertising agencies, including collaborations with SMIs since the emergence of influencer marketing in T&T. Based on my experience, I have found Ashana's notion of empowerment, despite critiques concerning appearance and professional competence, to be quite common among SMIs. Although current research on SMIs explores the opportunities and challenges associated with gender in SMI marketing (for instance,

identifying that male and female consumers respond differently to SMIs (Aw & Church, 2021; Ooi et al., 2023)), reflections from Ashana and other SMIs highlight areas where further research is needed to better understand the gender dynamics of the influencer domain, as well as develop strategies that minimise gendered criticism towards SMIs exploring factors like sexuality, sex, class and race (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013; Mardon et al., 2023; Sobande et al., 2020). Ashana's experiences also unfold against a backdrop of rising gender-based violence in T&T, with researchers increasingly documenting how such violence manifests on social media platforms (Barratt, 2018; Esposito et al., 2014). Expanding marketers' understanding of gender within the SMI domain is therefore crucial, as these dynamics not only shape SMIs' exposure to online criticism but also influence their effectiveness and positioning as key actors in digital marketing.

SMI marketing has matured into a billion-dollar industry over the past few years, with women taking the lead (Geyser, 2024; Hudders & De Jans, 2021). Women, in particular, benefit from the SMI industry because it presents opportunities for economic empowerment, autonomy, and entrepreneurship (Duffy, 2015). SMI traits such as authenticity (self-presentations as genuine, honest, credible, original, prominent, and proficient) and transparency are considered important factors in their success on social media platforms (Lee & Eastin, 2021). SMIs leverage these qualities in their content to inspire pro-social behaviours and promote products and services alike.

Researchers have examined tactics used by SMI women, such as sharing selfies (Gannon & Prothero, 2016) and adopting sexualised aesthetics (Drenten et al., 2020), to present themselves as authentic. However, while these strategies may empower women and drive success, they also expose them to gendered harm (Levesque et al., 2023; Mardon et al., 2023; Ng, 2025). Feminist researchers suggest that 'authenticity' in this space is often

defined by conformity to racialised and gendered beauty norms – being white, slim, young, and embodying traditional feminine roles (Banet-Weiser, 2020; Duffy, 2015; Duffy et al., 2022).

SMIs whose content or identities challenge these traditional norms frequently face backlash from consumers and questioning of their authenticity, often on the basis of their social identities, appearance, or careers (Abidin, 2018; Mardon et al., 2023). This backlash, expressed through hateful online comments, dedicated critique forums such as *Get Off My Internets* (GOMI), and even offline interactions (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Lee & Abidin, 2024), reflects growing public criticism and resistance toward SMIs shaped by gendered expectations and power dynamics (Duffy et al., 2022). In more extreme cases, backlash escalates into cancel culture, where coordinated public shaming seeks to delegitimise an SMI's moral or social standing. Cancellation represents the most severe outcome of this process: an intensified form of consumer hatred that can result in reputational damage, social exclusion, loss of livelihood, severe psychological harm or even death (Demsar, 2023; Lee & Abidin, 2024).

Social media platform algorithms are found to similarly prioritise visibility along these same cultural codes, rendering invisible SMIs associated with queer sexualities (Abidin, 2019), lower social classes (Bishop, 2018), and non-white racial groups (Sobande, 2022). As 'being seen' is regarded as the ultimate benchmark for SMIs, such algorithms inadvertently affect the visibility of many, jeopardising their abilities to obtain brand endorsements.

In response, researchers have called for deeper examination of the intersectional dynamics shaping the SMI space and for clearer insights into how gender, race, class, and other social positions structure SMIs' experiences of privilege and discrimination in the social media domain (Levesque et al., 2023; Mardon et.al., 2023). Notably, Cottom (2016)

and Sobande (2022) contend that using single analytical factors such as race or sex falls short of comprehensively analysing people's lived online experiences. To this end, there are increasing calls for marketers to consider how gender intersects with other factors, such as race and sex, and pay specific attention to how power relations shape experiences in the social media domain (Sobande, 2022).

Taken together, these insights point to a clear research problem: although SMIs play an increasingly influential role in digital culture and marketing, little is known about how gender dynamics, and their intersections with race, class, sexuality, and local cultural histories, shape the experiences and practices of SMIs in T&T. Existing scholarship is largely grounded in Global North contexts and often relies on single-axis analyses that overlook the complex power relations influencing visibility, authenticity, and consumer responses in Global South settings. This gap limits our understanding of how SMIs navigate gendered criticism, negotiate empowerment, and engage audiences within a context marked by rising gender-based violence.

Accordingly, my PhD research utilises Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality framework (see Crenshaw, 1993) to examine the gendered factors that shape the SMI domain and the power relations that influence it. As researchers have observed, studies about SMIs' online experiences exist mostly within Global North contexts (Fowler & Thomas, 2023), and there is a need for new knowledge to examine the specific and culturally embedded lived experiences of SMIs and consumers within the Global South. Such knowledge could help us more fully understand global events like the Arab Spring, which have emerged within those contexts (Hurley, 2021).

To this end, my research is set in the Caribbean twin-island Republic of T&T. With a history of early Indigenous ownership followed by genocide, European colonisation, African

slavery, South-Asian indentureship, and abundant voluntary and forced migration, T&T's multi-ethnic society is characteristic of racial and ethnic tensions that emerged through its history of conquest and colonialism (Reddock, 2019). Caribbean feminists elaborate on how diverse ethnic groups relate to their histories of struggle, belonging, and contribution to nation-building in an attempt to secure their place in society. As Reddock (2019) notes, these tensions are often 'fractured, insecure and wounded' (p. 810), reflecting long-standing inequalities that continue to shape contemporary negotiations of identity and belonging. In this context, belonging, recognition, and citizenship go beyond mere legal membership in the state; they also involve acceptance of one's identity, social status, and cultural beliefs. These dynamics reveal the contextual complexities that distinguish T&T from Global North settings and highlight why identity claims remain deeply contested across racial and ethnic groups (Mohammed, 1994; Reddock, 2019).

Building upon Badejo et al.'s (2021) suggestion to apply context-specific knowledge to intersectional marketing and consumer research, particularly within Global South contexts, my thesis adopts a Caribbean feminist lens. These perspectives speak to ideas about Caribbean gender systems and help stimulate contextually and evidence-informed insights.

Fundamentally, my research addresses understudied areas in marketing by examining how intersectional factors, such as race, social class, and culture, in a dynamic and multilayered context like T&T shape SMI practices and experiences, as well as consumer responses. I regard SMIs as unique, complex, and dynamic individuals whose intersectional identities influence their perceptions and expressions of self in the social media domain. As intersectionality requires an examination of power relations, I utilise Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) to uncover expressions of power in SMIs' content and consumer responses. To deepen my analysis of power relations in the social media domain and account

for lived experiences, a pillar of intersectionality, I also draw upon narrative interviews with SMIs and consumers. The insights from my data are then applied to inform strategies that marketers can use to develop gender-transformative and equitable approaches for SMI marketing. Given the growing interest in and practices of influencers in representing good social causes, I also consider how these insights can be applied to gender-responsive social marketing initiatives, addressing researchers' call for improved insights into using SMIs to promote social change (Archer et al., 2020). In doing so, my findings align with critical social marketing's emancipatory agenda for gender equity, particularly in advocating for women within Global South contexts (Aya Pastrana et al., 2020, 2022; Gordon et al., 2022; Martam, 2016).

The following sections provide a brief introduction to the background, literature review, theoretical framework, research context, research gaps, aims and research questions, and the methodology featured in this PhD thesis. The chapter concludes with an outline of the thesis structure.

1.2 *BACKGROUND*

1.2.1 On Social Media Influencers

SMIs act as opinion leaders, influencing the attitudes and behaviours of their followers through content such as videos, images, comments, and personal views on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube (Freberg et al., 2011). SMIs often focus on areas of interest such as lifestyle, fashion, music, beauty, or health and well-being. They are categorised by follower count, with macro-level influencers attracting 100,000 to 1,000,000 followers and micro-level influencers garnering 1,000 to 100,000 followers (Kay et al., 2020). SMIs use their online presence to drive engagement (e.g., likes,

shares, and comments), increase commercial sales, build brand equity, shape public opinion, and promote pro-social behaviour change (Archer et al., 2020; Freberg et al., 2011). Consequently, SMI marketing has gained significant attention from marketers in recent years.

Marketers have recognised the influential power and reach of SMIs and are increasingly allocating substantial proportions of their budgets to SMI campaigns to promote brands, goods, services, ideas, and behaviours (Abhishek & Srivastava, 2021). The surge in SMI marketing is underscored by an anticipated global investment of US$266.92B by the end of 2025 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025). According to Neilson's (2021) report, 71% of consumers in the USA trust SMIs' advertising and opinions, and SMIs also play an important role in brand recall, with an 80% recall rate. Additionally, consumers exposed to SMI-led campaigns showed a notable 9-point increase in brand affinity and purchase intent compared to those unexposed to SMI advertisements (Neilsen, 2022). Along with the growing interest in SMIs in practice, academic research on SMIs, their influence on consumer behaviours, and their use in marketing has increased in recent years.

Existing scholarship has examined how SMIs establish trusting relationships with their followers (Reinikainen et al., 2020) and the significance of strategically aligning commercial products with SMIs and consumers to shape consumer responses and influence successful SMI marketing initiatives (Belanche et al., 2021). A key insight from such scholarship is that an SMI's authenticity (Lee & Eastin, 2021), novelty, and distinctness (Casalo et al., 2020) are pivotal to their success. Research has also shown that SMIs use tactics related to gender, such as showcasing their muscular bodies, to make their content seem more authentic and believable to their audience (Su et al., 2021). Along these lines, Ooi et al. (2023) called for insights that explore how gender differences among consumers affect their perceptions and attitudes toward SMI marketing. Furthermore, systematic reviews by

Abhishek and Srivastava (2021) and Fowler and Thomas (2023) emphasise the need for marketing scholarship to explore how the domain is shaped by socio-cultural factors, and how SMIs adopt activist identities to promote pro-social causes. These insights align with broader calls within social marketing to expand conceptual and practical understanding in this area (Alsalem et al., 2020; Archer et al., 2021). Along these lines, the interplay of factors such as gender, sexuality, and identity representation needs to be considered.

My PhD research aims to examine these underexplored areas regarding gender in SMI marketing research. I draw on recommendations by scholars within the SMI domain (Abidin, 2018; Duffy, 2015; Sobande, 2020) who assert that people's online experiences cannot be comprehensively examined using single analytical frames such as sex or gender alone. Instead, they should be analysed through the lens of power, manifesting through the intersection of factors like race, gender, sexuality, culture, and class. Accordingly, my PhD thesis examines how gender dynamics shape SMI practices and experiences, as well as consumer responses, in the SMI domain in T&T.

1.2.2 Defining Gender Dynamics

Gender dynamics, as a core concept of interest in this research, are understood here as a form of relationship among people. These relationships are "… informed by sociocultural ideas about gender and the power relationships that define them. Depending on how they are manifested, gender dynamics can reinforce or challenge existing norms" (EIGE, 2024, p. 1). Such norms are shaped by broader structures of power that sustain systems of oppression such as racism, classism, sexism, and capitalism. Though social media platforms can diversify representation, they also operate within global marketing and economic systems that privilege Western cultural norms (Rajmil et al., 2025). As marketing content circulates internationally, non-Western societies often consume campaigns grounded in Western values,

reinforcing cultural and economic hierarchies and marginalising local identities. These dynamics highlight how digital platforms can simultaneously reproduce and challenge structural inequalities, shaping how SMIs navigate visibility, authenticity, and belonging (Rajmil et al., 2025).

Specifically, I regard gender as a social relation which, as defined by Barriteau (1998), "refers to complex systems of personal and social relations through which women and men are socially created and maintained and through which they gain access to, or are allocated, status, power and material resources within society" (p.188). In so doing, I align my research with Sobande (2022), who contends that scholarship focusing on gender, shaped by socio-historical and socio-cultural power relations, should be particularly encouraged in future marketing research. Additionally, I build on Levesque (2023), who suggests that marketing researchers should enrich socio-cultural knowledge within the SMI domain.

1.3 Summary Literature Review: Gender Dynamics in the SMI Domain

While Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive review of the literature and outlines the theoretical framework guiding my PhD thesis, the following section introduces the key debates that shape my research direction. This overview highlights the central conversations that motivate my research and demonstrate why an intersectional, context-specific approach is necessary.

Research across the SMI domain demonstrates that gendered and intersecting identities shape labour, visibility, and audience responses, reflecting broader socio-cultural and structural power dynamics (Duffy, 2015; Duffy & Schwartz, 2018; Sobande, 2022; Veresiu & Parmentier, 2021). These studies collectively show that digital spaces often reproduce offline inequalities, particularly for women and marginalised groups (Duffy &

Pruchniewska, 2017; Ourahmoune & El Jurdi, 2022; Sobande, 2020). Building on this foundation, scholars have begun to examine how multiple identities, such as race, religion, age, and physical ability, intersect to shape SMI practices and consumer interpretations (Pemberton & Takhar, 2021; Södergren & Vallström, 2022; Veresiu & Parmentier, 2021).

A growing body of work from the Global South further highlights how colonial histories, gender relations, and socio-economic inequalities influence SMIs' experiences in ways that differ from Western contexts (Barratt, 2018; Hurley, 2021; Mondezie, 2021). These insights highlight the need for intersectional and feminist approaches that attend to local cultural and historical conditions (Hurley, 2021; Sobande, 2022).

Social marketing is a strategic and comprehensive approach that draws upon marketing alongside other relevant perspectives to promote behaviour and social change for social good (French & Gordon, 2019). Studies have also drawn attention to how harnessing SMIs' influence could play an important role in driving healthy behaviours and social change – including through engagement with social marketing theory and practice (Alsalem et al., 2020; Archer et al., 2021). Contemporary SMIs often create and engage with content that promotes aspects of social good (see Caribbean SMIs Yendi Phillip's period poverty reduction advocacy (@Yendizzle, 2021) and Anastasia Mootoo's advocacy to prevent GBV (@anastasiamootoo, 2021). However scholars note that gendered power dynamics continue to shape both their work and audience responses (Mueller, 2023; Robertson & Davidson, 2013). Yet theoretical and practical understanding of these dynamics remains limited, particularly in non-Western contexts.

Against this backdrop, my research adopts an intersectional approach informed by Caribbean feminist scholarship (Reddock, 2019; Aya Pastrana et al., 2022; Gordon et al., 2022) to examine the Global South SMI domain in T&T. My research contributes to ongoing

efforts to decolonise social marketing and expand intersectional understandings within the field (Cateriano-Arevalo et al., 2022; Raciti, 2021; Badejo et al., 2022). By foregrounding the socio-historical context of the Caribbean and exploring how gendered and intersecting identities shape SMIs' engagement with social good causes, my research positions itself within, and extends critical conversations that are currently underdeveloped in existing literature.

Insights from my research can inform social media policy, regulation, and SMI marketing, particularly social marketing for social good, by encouraging the adoption of intersectional approaches grounded in the specific gender dynamics of Global South contexts. Such approaches help ensure inclusivity while reducing the risk of harm or exclusion. Findings also support a proposed framework to guide how social marketing initiatives can more effectively engage SMIs to promote behaviour and social change. This aligns with broader efforts to strengthen context-specific, intersectional knowledge for gender transformation and equity within Global South settings (Aya Pastrana et al., 2020, 2022; Gordon et al., 2022; Martam, 2016).

The following section introduces intersectionality, the theoretical framework underpinning this research. The following section further introduces intersectionality, which is the guiding theoretical framework for my research.

1.4 Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality

The following section introduces the intersectionality theoretical framework informing this PhD research, which is then discussed in more detail in Chapter 2. Intersectionality was originally developed to consider the influence of power relations on the lived experiences of discrimination and oppression faced by African American women

(Crenshaw, 1993). Intersectionality emerged to help explain the multidimensionality of black women's experiences, which counters theoretical approaches that view gender, class, and race as mutually exclusive categories (see Figure 1.1). As Kimberlé Crenshaw (2017) explains:

> Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It's not simply that there is a race problem here, a gender problem here and a class or LBGTQ problem there – Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to these things. (p.1)

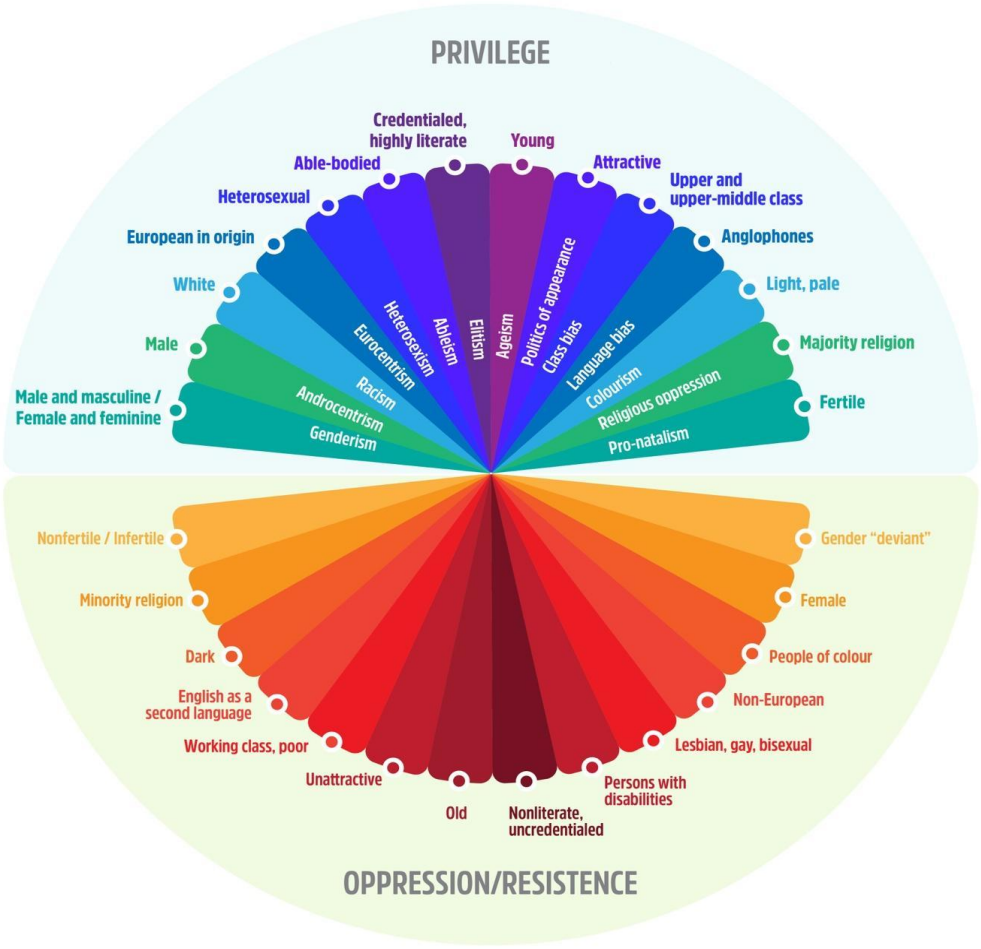


Figure 1.1: Diagram reflecting the Intersectionality Framework (adapted from Morgan, 1996)

Intersectionality offers a multi-faceted theoretical approach to explaining the experience of women who are not only marginalised based on gender but also alongside or 'in intersection with' their other personal attributes (such as race, sexual orientation, and economic class) (Crenshaw, 1993). Importantly, intersectionality provides an approach for understanding and interrogating power relations – and how and where power is held, distributed, and withheld to produce privilege or oppression based on the intersection of factors such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, language, and sexual orientation.

Marketing and consumer researchers are increasingly using an intersectional lens to explore and interpret people as well as their relationships and experiences (Badejo et al., 2021; Maclaran & Stevens, 2019). For example, Gopaldas and Siebert (2018) found that popular marketing images reflect not only racism and sexism, but an intersection of other marginalising factors, including ageism, colourism, and heterosexism in Indian society. On the other hand, Sobande (2020) argued that the supposed intersectionality-informed language used in marketing campaigns that promote political and social issues often serves to perpetuate stereotypical representations of structurally marginalised identities. Research in political marketing has drawn on intersectionality to identify how gender intersects with race and body image in a way that impinges upon the achievements of female politicians of colour (Sanghvi, 2019).

Intersectionality has been highlighted for its importance in shaping an informed multi-sectoral approach to diversity research, marketing, and advocacy (Gopaldas, 2013) and informing transformative models to assess power relations and confront oppressive conditions (Steinfield et al., 2019). It is considered an integral feminist theory with the potential to uncover feminised consumer perspectives, as well as patriarchal biases in marketing and advertising that reinforce gender inequalities (Maclaran & Stevens, 2019).

However, as Rosa–Salas and Sobande (2022) have argued, the transformative power of intersectionality has often not been fully realised in current marketing research and practice. There is a need for marketing scholarship to more closely interrogate the power relations within the influencer industry and not utilise intersectionality for only diversity and representation.

To this end, Sobande (2020) contends that deploying intersectionality within marketing practice with a limited focus on diversity and representation leads to issues of 'woke-washing', which leverages and dilutes the socio-cultural histories of oppression experienced by structurally marginalised consumers to market commercial products and services. Similarly, within marketing scholarship, intersectionality has been referenced in conversations surrounding identities, diversity, and representation (Södergren & Vallström, 2022), falling short of interrogating and transforming the power structures within industries that lead to oppression and privilege (Rosa–Salas & Sobande, 2022). Additionally, marketing researchers have called for a deeper intersectional understanding in underexplored areas, including the intersections of sexuality and religion, as well as the religious identities and backgrounds of both consumers and researchers (Rinallo et al., 2023). Marketing researchers also emphasise the need for contextually grounded intersectional insights from and into Global South contexts (Gopalas & Siebert, 2018; Ourahmoune & El Jurdi, 2022).

Accordingly, my PhD research adopts an intersectionality framework that enriches marketing knowledge about power and its influence on intersectional factors such as religion and sexuality in the Global South context of T&T. Indeed, Global South scholars have identified a need to advance intersectionality research beyond African American contexts, towards global and context-specific understandings and experiences of multi-ethnic societies (Reddock, 2019).

In a recent study on the experiences of human trafficking survivors in Nigeria using rescue services, Badejo et al. (2021) have argued for context-specific intersectionality research in marketing that acknowledges Global South cultural contexts and how different social characteristics intersect and forms of privilege and oppression are founded. Along this line, Reddock (2019) argues for intersectional studies that account for the specific gender, racial, ethnic, language, and cultural factors in the Caribbean to help better understand gender dynamics and power relations in society. This is important because the lived realities of persons living within these contexts are usually overlooked in mainstream Global North academic scholarship; also gender dynamics vary across contexts (Mohammed, 1994; Reddock, 2019). Therefore, to enable a more nuanced understanding of the gender dynamics at play within the SMI domain, we must examine the context in which they operate.

Accordingly, my PhD research draws upon scholarship from leading Caribbean feminists such as Patricia Mohammed, Sue Ann Barratt, Rhoda Reddock, and Eudine Barriteau. These Caribbean feminists have offered insights into the socio-historic and socio-cultural dimensions of gender in T&T, which is briefly described in the following section.

1.5 Research Context: Gender and SMIs in Trinidad and Tobago

This next section introduces the research context for my PhD research, which is the Caribbean Island nation of Trinidad and Tobago (T&T). The research context is discussed in further detail in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

T&T is a twin-island state located in the South of the Caribbean chain. Tobago (area – 300 square km) lies 30km northeast of Trinidad (area – 4,800 square km) and is the smaller of the two islands. T&T has a multiethnic, culturally diverse population of 1.4 million. This diversity originates from a unique history of Amerindian heritage, African slavery, European

inhabitation, Syrian–Lebanese immigration, and Asian indentureship with European colonisation. T&T society comprises the two largest ethnic groups, Africans (34.2%) and Indians (35.4%), with 'mixed race' (multiethnic) (22.8%) and 'other' (European Whites, Chinese, and Syrian Lebanese) (1.4%) forming the smaller portions of the ethnic population (Ramcharitar, 2021). Migrants, particularly Venezuelan refugees, have become a noteworthy part of T&T's population over the past five years (Ramcharitar, 2021). In terms of economic wealth and social status, smaller ethnic groups have been found to rise much higher in corporate management. Managers are 80% Syrians, 57% Whites, and 39% Chinese as opposed to 13% Indians and 7% Africans (Ramcharitar, 2021).

Research shows that women across ethnic and economic groups in T&T share a common concern about the prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV) (Mohammed, 1991). Feminist activism in the 1970s and 1980s played a pivotal role in challenging the country's dominant patriarchal structures, born from its colonial history, by confronting the normalisation of sexual violence and securing key legislative reforms for the protection and advancement of women (Mohammed, 1991). Although post-colonial Caribbean societies have created pathways for women's participation in social, political, and economic life, they remain shaped by enduring colonial patriarchal systems (Barriteau, 2001). This persistent patriarchy manifests in various ways, including GBV, as social structures across the region continue to fall short in meeting the needs and protecting the rights of women (Mohammed, 2003).

Social media platforms have emerged as a domain in which GBV manifests, particularly through consumer comments (Barratt, 2018; Esposito et al., 2024). Social media use in T&T is widespread, with 1.28 million people online by the end of 2025 (Kemp, 2025). In the same period, 974,000 social media user identities were active - around 64.4 percent of

the national population. Facebook and Instagram remain key platforms: 63.4 percent of Meta's eligible (13+) audience in T&T used Facebook, with a near-even gender split, while 58.1 percent used Instagram, where women made up just over half of the adult audience. TikTok has also become a major space for digital engagement, with 974,000 users aged 18 and above and a balanced gender distribution (Kemp, 2025).

Emerging research suggests that social media platforms in T&T function as spaces where users negotiate being both "very local" and "very global" (Sinanan, 2017). Local identity is often shaped by cultural traditions such as Carnival, where visibility and performance are central, while global orientations are heavily influenced by Western cultural power circulating through digital platforms. This dynamic can reproduce colonial hierarchies and shape how Trinbagonians see themselves, present themselves, and assign value to particular identities online (Sinanan, 2017). Although scholarship on digital social problems in T&T remains limited, researchers have shown that social media also operates as a site where women's expressions of femininity are policed and chastised, reinforcing gendered inequalities and constraining women's agency and autonomy (Barratt, 2018; Esposito et al., 2024; Haynes, 2016).

Indeed, Barratt (2018) reflects on GBV on social media news platforms, which emerges when consumers evaluate women's expressions of femininity based on colonial benchmarks of respectability, responsibility, and duty. Esposito et al. (2024) contend that many consumers within the social media domain view GBV through individualistic lenses, holding gendered perceptions of "ideal" and "less ideal" victims, deemed worthy of support and recognition based on their identities and behaviours. Haynes (2016), through her mapping of Caribbean cyberfeminists, notes that GBV also occurs in digital media spaces

that are traditionally shaped to confront gender inequality. She laments that the existence and experiences of Caribbean cyberfeminists are largely absent in academic literature.

Given that scholarship linking gender to social media is gradually emerging in the Caribbean context, particularly in T&T, further research is needed to better understand how gender dynamics unfold on social media platforms (Esposito et al., 2024; Haynes, 2016). My thesis contributes to the disciplinary knowledge of gender in marketing and consumer research by addressing these gaps in existing understanding and also by drawing upon recommendations from Sobande (2020) to utilise intersectional feminist theorising in examining the lived experiences of people in the SMI domain.

Furthermore, given SMIs' frequent engagement with social causes and the growing interest from both social marketing scholars (Alsalem et al., 2020) and marketing researchers in SMI-led activism (Fowler & Thomas, 2023), this research's findings offer recommendations for practitioners developing gender-responsive strategies that involve SMIs. The following section provides a brief discussion of the interplay between SMIs and social marketing and the knowledge my research contributes to this specific sub-discipline.

1.6 Research Aim and Research Questions

The following section outlines the research aim and questions guiding my PhD research, with further detail provided in Chapter 3.

While existing scholarship has examined how gender shapes SMI self presentation and audience responses (Pemberton & Takhar, 2021; Södergren & Vallström, 2020), researchers increasingly call for approaches that move beyond binary gender categories and incorporate intersectional perspectives attentive to power and underrepresented populations (Badejo et al., 2021; Gordon et al., 2022; Peñaloza et al., 2023; Rinallo et al., 2023). My

research responds to this call by adopting an intersectionality framework that foregrounds the power relations shaping SMI experiences.

Studies have shown that SMIs' identities influence their inclusion, exclusion, and representation on digital platforms (Abidin, 2019; Bishop, 2018), and scholars highlight the need to examine these identity dynamics in context (Fowler & Thomas, 2023). Accordingly, my research explores how gendered and intersecting identities shape SMIs' practices and experiences, as well as how consumers interpret and respond to their content.

Given the emphasis on context specific gender dynamics in intersectional research (Aya Pastrana et al., 2020; Badejo et al., 2021; Eckhardt & Kopalle, 2024; Gordon et al., 2022; Peñaloza et al., 2023; Uduehi et al., 2024), my resesrch draws on Caribbean feminist scholarship, which offers a nuanced understanding of how historical and structural power relations shape gender systems in the region.

Finally, research on SMIs' promotion of pro social content (Aboelenien et al., 2023; Fowler & Thomas, 2023) highlights the need for further insight into how social marketing can engage SMIs in gender responsive ways (Alsalem et al., 2020). My PhD thesis therefore also examines SMI and consumer perceptions of pro-social messaging and proposes a gender responsive framework for SMI led social marketing.

Building on existing scholarship, my research aims to explore how gender dynamics shape the practices of T&T SMIs and the responses of their followers. My PhD thesis will focus on answering the following research questions:

1. How do gender dynamics influence the content shared by SMIs?
2. How do SMIs and consumers navigate gender dynamics in the T&T SMI domain?

3. What can be learnt about gender dynamics in the T&T SMI domain to develop a framework for gender responsive influencer marketing, particularly in social marketing?

1.7 Outline of Research Methodology

The research methodology used for my PhD thesis is outlined in this section and explained in more detail in Chapter 3. To address the three stated research questions, my PhD research employs a two-stage qualitative methodology consisting of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FDCA) and narrative interviews (Figure 1.2). This methodology was purposely selected to complement the ontological, epistemological, and theoretical perspectives underpinning the research, which is further explained in Chapter 3 of the PhD thesis.

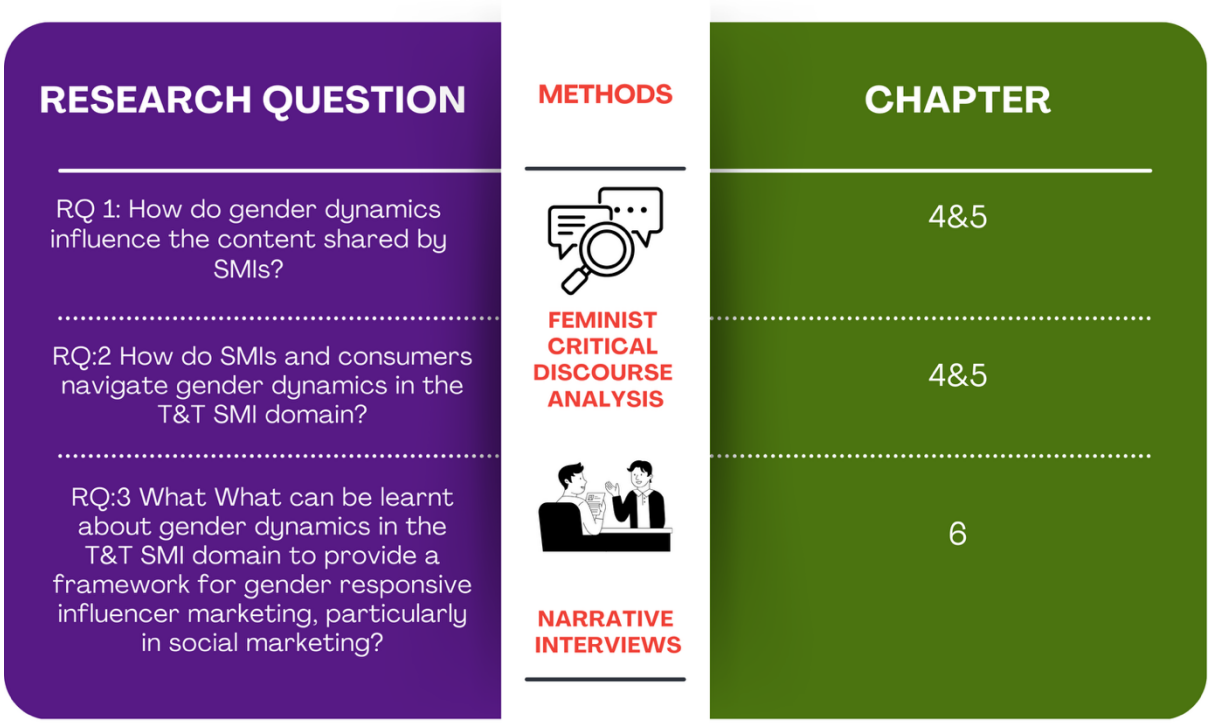


Figure 1.2: The 2-stage methodology employed to respond to all three research questions (Corresponding findings for each research question are in Chapters 4–6)

Stage 1 – Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

FCDA focuses on the social relations of gender (Young, 1979), examining how power and ideology are embedded in discourse (Lazar, 2017). In my research, the Instagram content of 40 SMIs from T&T was analysed over a three-year period using FCDA and guided by Caribbean feminist theory, which offered a contextual lens for interpreting power within the local setting.

The findings from Stage 1 provide a strong foundation for exploring gendered expressions and the dynamics shaping the SMI domain. The methods used in this stage also complement those used in Stage 2, as FCDA is often recommended to be conducted alongside other social science methods, such as interviews, to allow for deeper reflection and co-construction of meaning with research participants (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999).

Stage 2 – Narrative Interviews

With their open-ended nature, narrative interviews centre participants' lived experiences and seek to amplify their voices (Patton, 2015). Stage 2 of this PhD research involves 41 participants – 21 SMIs and 20 consumers – who take part in semi-structured narrative interviews. The interview guide allows for probing key issues within the SMI domain while remaining flexible enough to allow participants to speak freely and in their own terms (Bryman, 2008). This approach is particularly important in feminist research, and especially within Global South contexts where voices are often marginalised (Beoku-Betts & Adomako Ampofo, 2021; Kincheloe et al., 2018; Lincoln et al., 2023).

The analysis of this stage is also guided by a Caribbean feminist lens, which enables a culturally grounded understanding of gendered power and identity (Badejo et al., 2021;

Eckhardt & Kopalle, 2024). Like Stage 1, the findings from this stage respond to all three research questions, with a clear emphasis on co-creating knowledge and identifying strategies for transformative change (Beoku-Betts & Adomako Ampofo, 2021; Kicheloe & McLaren, 1998; Lincoln et al., 2023).

1.8 Structure of the PhD Thesis

The remainder of this PhD document is structured as follows. The next chapter presents the literature review, which explores key conversations surrounding SMIs within marketing, social marketing, and gender scholarship. This is followed by the methodology chapter, which outlines the research's ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological foundations. The subsequent three chapters each present stand-alone journal articles containing the findings from each methodological stage of the research; these articles have been submitted to the *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Marketing Management*, and *Journal of Social Marketing*, respectively. The authorship citations and publication status of each of these three journal publications are listed below:

1. Le Blanc, A., Gordon, R., Barratt, S.A., Schuster, L. (2026) (published). Yasss Queen! Re-interpreting Influence through Intersectional Understandings of the Social Media Influencer Domain. *Journal of Business Research*. (see Chapter 4)

2. Le Blanc, A., Gordon, R., Barratt, S.A., Schuster, L. (submitted and under third review). 'I don't want nobody call me no influencer': Navigating Identity and Self-Labelling in the Trinidad & Tobago Social Media Influencer Domain. *Journal of Marketing Management*. (see Chapter 5)

3. Le Blanc, A., Gordon, R., Barratt, S.A., Schuster, L. (submitted and under second review). *'If they keep it up, they deal with backlash':* Towards a gender responsive

framework to guide Social Marketers in engaging Social Media Influencers. *Journal of Social Marketing*. (see Chapter 6),

CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW



2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1 of this PhD thesis provided an overview of the research, including the justification of the research problem, the theoretical framework, research aims and questions, as well as the chosen methodology and research context. The following chapter reviews existing literature on gender within the social media influencer (SMI) domain, with a particular focus on scholarship in marketing and consumption that informs this PhD. Related studies utilising the intersectionality framework adopted for this research, as well as research contextualised through Caribbean feminist thought are also examined.

The structure of this chapter is as follows: it begins with a brief recap of the research problem, focus, and guiding research questions of this PhD research. This is followed by background literature on SMIs, including an overview of how gender has been examined within SMI scholarship, with specific attention to the cultural complexity and emerging gendered influences regarding SMIs and their content.

The next section explores marketplace responses to SMIs, beginning with consumer perspectives and followed by brand responses. This leads into a review of how such marketplace dynamics influence the ways SMIs construct and portray their social identities. The chapter then examines SMIs' engagement with activism, an emerging identity space that is currently underexplored.

This is followed by an examination of intersectionality, the conceptual framework guiding this research, and its application within social marketing, given the research's implications for this sub-discipline. A section on Caribbean feminism follows, outlining key studies that inform the context-specific lens adopted for the intersectionality framework

guiding this research. The chapter concludes by identifying gaps in the current literature and outlining how this PhD research contributes to addressing them.

2.2 Research Problem and Research Questions

The SMI industry has grown exponentially in recent years, evolving into a multi-billion-dollar global sector (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025). Marketers now capitalise on the strong follower relationships SMIs cultivate to drive sales (El Qudsi, 2025; Schaffer, 2020). Social marketers likewise want to harness these connections for pro-social campaigns and are seeking clearer guidance on how to engage SMIs effectively for the public good (Alsalem et al., 2020). Globally, the majority of SMIs are women, many of whom are drawn to the entrepreneurial flexibility the role offers, including the ability to work independently and on their own terms (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Hudders & De Jans, 2021).

Commercial brands often seek out SMIs who appear authentic, as authenticity is perceived as a key factor in attracting and retaining followers. In addition to authenticity, physical attractiveness and trustworthiness also play a significant role (Kay et al., 2020). For instance, SMIs who are perceived as highly attractive tend to receive more consumer attention and, consequently, more brand endorsements (Duffy et al., 2021). However, despite the opportunities the SMI industry provides for female entrepreneurship, women in this domain often face substantial gender-related barriers.

These barriers are enforced by marketplace hierarchies, particularly consumers and brands, which dictate how SMIs should look, speak, and behave in order to be considered legitimate, visible, and worthy of endorsement. As a result, SMIs must carefully navigate these pressures, working tirelessly to differentiate themselves through authenticity while simultaneously satisfying audience expectations and brand requirements (Duffy et al., 2024). This tightrope can lead to significant personal pressure. When SMIs make perceived

missteps, they may be subjected to public shaming or cancellation, which can escalate to severe consequences, including career loss or, in extreme cases, harm to their personal well-being or life (Lee & Abidin, 2021). While some countries have implemented legal protections for influencers, such safeguards remain limited and inconsistent, leaving many SMIs vulnerable (Lee & Abidin, 2021; Ng, 2025).

Given the increase in online harms, particularly gendered attacks against women SMIs via social media and hate sites (Fowler et al., 2023), there is a critical need for research that examines gender dynamics in the SMI domain through context-specific lenses (Lee & Abidin, 2021). Understanding how power operates within society, and specifically within the SMI space, is essential to proposing informed strategies for marketers (Sobande, 2020). These strategies can help mitigate harm, foster accountability, and support safer collaborations.

Accordingly, this PhD research is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do gender dynamics influence the content shared by SMIs?

RQ2: How do SMIs and consumers navigate gender dynamics in the T&T SMI domain?

RQ3: What can be learnt about gender dynamics in the T&T SMI domain to provide a framework for gender-responsive influencer marketing, particularly in social marketing?

2.3 The Research Focus

This PhD thesis examines how gender dynamics shape both the content produced by SMIs and the ways consumers respond to them. The following literature review explores key discourse surrounding gender in the SMI domain. It identifies key gaps emerging in the

existing SMI literature, particularly in the context of marketing scholarship, and outlines how this research addresses those gaps, contributing to both marketing and critical social marketing scholarship.

2.4 Social Media Influencers – Background

SMIs are individuals who gain social influence by amassing large followings on digital platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok (Reinikainen et al., 2021). Studies suggest that consumers often form intimate trans-social (two-way) and parasocial (one-way) relationships with SMIs, which in turn shape and influence their attitudes and behaviours through the content SMIs create and share, such as photos, videos, and written posts (Freberg et al., 2011; Lou, 2022; Mardon et al., 2023a; Reinikainen et al., 2021). Consumers are drawn to SMIs whose content is authentic, trendy, relatable, and aligned with their personal interests (Hudders & De Jans, 2021; Reinikainen et al., 2020).

Importantly, SMIs represent a broad spectrum of social identities, encompassing variations in gender, sexuality, race, class, ability, culture, and religion (Hudders & De Jans, 2021; Pemberton & Takhar, 2021; Viresiu & Parmentier, 2021). While men and non-binary SMIs are increasingly visible, research suggests that women continue to dominate the SMI domain, particularly in areas such as beauty, lifestyle, and fitness (Drenten et al., 2018; Hudders & De Jans, 2021; Oakenfull, 2024; Reinikainen et al., 2021).

The emergence of SMIs across global digital platforms has prompted their classification, not only in the entertainment industry but also within the SMI marketing domain. For instance, SMIs are classified as “microcelebrities”, a category that distinguishes them from traditional celebrities who typically gain prominence through mainstream media, such as television, film, or professional sports (Delbaere et al., 2020). Notably, SMIs are also commonly ranked according to the size of their social media following—micro-influencers

have the smallest follower counts, while mega-influencers have significantly larger audiences (Kay et al., 2019; Li et al., 2024). Other levels, such as mid-tier influencers, also exist and are defined contextually, depending on the platform or market (Webb, 2024).

Marketers have capitalised on the parasocial relationships that SMIs foster with their followers, which is also of growing interest to social marketers. These dynamics have made SMIs highly effective in promoting products, services, pro-social behaviours, and ideas (Archer et. al., 2020; Belanche et al., 2021; Delbaere et al., 2020; Ooi et al., 2023). SMIs' performance is typically assessed using key performance indicators (KPIs), such as engagement (likes, shares, and comments), impressions (reach), and lead or sales conversions driven by their content. The economic relevance of this model is reflected in the emergence of dedicated influencer marketing agencies that manage discovery, content planning, and performance metrics (Manzerolle & Daubs, 2021). Collaborations between brands and SMIs are designed to leverage influencers' reach and persuasive power, and they are widely viewed as profitable marketing strategies (Schaffer, 2020). Notably, 90% of marketers report a positive return on investment (ROI) from SMI collaborations (Schaffer, 2020), and approximately 75% of marketing professionals actively engage SMIs in brand promotion (Hughes et al., 2019). Global investment in influencer marketing stood at US$247.3bn, projected to reach US$266.92bn by the end of 2025 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025).

SMI marketing has gained scholarly interest across different disciplines over the past years. In tourism marketing, for instance, destination appeal is enhanced when the SMI aligns with both the audience and the promoted location (XuXu & Pratt, 2018). In sustainable fashion, SMIs have played a key role in shaping consumer preferences and promoting eco-conscious lifestyles (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022). Within journalism studies, SMIs have emerged as opinion leaders who blur the boundaries between credible and non-credible information sources, fulfilling young audiences' social information needs while also

functioning as informal fact-checkers, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Mututwa & Mare, 2021; Wunderlich et al., 2022). Feminist researchers have explored how gender roles are expressed in SMIs' content, particularly during global events like the COVID-19 pandemic, which revealed a shift towards more rigid, traditional postfeminist ideals of femininity (Palomeque Recio, 2020). In the Global South, researchers highlight Arab women's digital visibility (Hurley, 2021), social class differences among Muslim women's use of social media platforms (Kamran, 2023) and Caribbean SMIs' advocacy around gender justice (Sanatan, 2017).

Cultural scholars have examined how SMI marketing varies across different contexts, focusing particularly on consumer expectations of SMI's authenticity and how vulnerability is performed on social media, especially by SMIs from cultures that have been historically marginalised (Duffy & Meisner, 2023).

Notably, within marketing and consumption studies, there has been a tendency to focus on SMI marketing through the lens of influencers' personal traits, like trustworthiness and attractiveness, friendliness, and interactivity, and analyse how these shape commercially driven consumer behaviours (Fowler & Thomas, 2023; Chung Wa, 2022). However, less is known about SMIs who promote pro-social causes for social marketing purposes (Alsalem et al., 2020). Furthermore, based on systematic reviews of SMI marketing literature, scholars have called for future research to examine the moderating role of culture and context—particularly how these factors influence the ways SMIs, consumers, and brands perceive and embody sociocultural aspects, such as language, lifestyle, sex, race, and sexuality (Abhisek & Srivastava, 2021; Chung Wa, 2022; Fowler & Thomas, 2023; Gurrieri et al., 2023; Vrontis et al., 2021). Emerging studies within the SMI domain, such as Duffy et al. (2022, 2023) and Gurrieri and Drenten (2019), have begun exploring these areas, mostly in relation to gender.

The following section reviews the main academic conversations around how gender has been explored in the context of SMIs within the current literature, particularly within marketing scholarship. This is important as my research is situated within marketing and also considers implications for SMI social marketing from a critical social marketing perspective (see Gordon et al., 2022). Therefore, understanding how studies around SMIs have been approached from a gender perspective within Global North and Global South contexts is key to identifying gaps in marketing research and understanding where my research builds upon existing knowledge.

2.5 Gender in the SMI Domain

According to studies in the SMI domain, gender mediates the interactions between SMIs and consumers, which shapes the outcome, that is, product, opinion, or behaviour uptake. For instance, scholars have found that SMIs who depict themselves as genuine, thus moving away from the idealised perfect appearance often associated with SMIs, enable positive feelings and higher product uptake among consumer women (Claeys et al., 2023; Penttinen, 2025). Such authentic presentations by SMI men, however, were found to have a different effect among their male followers, who are more likely to be envious of the SMI, which also leads to increased product purchases (Jin & Ryu, 2020).

Researchers have also examined how SMIs use gendered tactics to reflect their authenticity and how these tactics influence the development of parasocial relationships with their audiences. For example, SMI women often use bodily appeals such as selfies featuring endorsed products (Gannon & Prothero, 2016), while male SMIs may display bare muscular torsos to enhance appeal (Su et al., 2021). Other strategies include sharing group photos versus solo images, which can also affect consumer perceptions of relatability and connection (Jin & Ryu, 2020).

Consumer responses to SMIs have also been found to vary by gender. Male and female followers prioritise different aspects in their parasocial relationships with influencers (Aw & Chuah, 2021; Lee et al., 2025; Ooi et al., 2023). For instance, male consumers are more likely to form parasocial relationships with SMIs they perceive as prestigious, often seeking respect and elevated social status. In contrast, female consumers tend to focus more on the practical utility of the endorsed products and are drawn to SMIs who present themselves as relatable or friendship-oriented (Aw & Chuah, 2021). Moreover, male consumers place greater importance on the SMI's credibility in shaping their opinions about the promoted product or service (Ooi et al., 2023).

While these findings provide useful insights for practitioners aiming to tailor SMI marketing strategies based on gender, researchers such as Ooi et al. (2023) suggest that cultural context plays a significant moderating role in consumer responses to SMIs. For example, in examining cultural stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, research demonstrates how the online behaviour of SMI men and women can challenge traditional gender norms, potentially creating barriers for newcomers entering the SMI industry (Edelblum & Warren, 2024). The following section thus explores ideas related to cultural complexity within the SMI domain, which are essential for understanding gender in this space. For projects like this PhD thesis, which explore gender dynamics, especially as expressed and interpreted in Caribbean contexts, and which account for these expressions as intersectional, examining how scholars have explored such cultural complexity is even more crucial. Further, this area of research largely remains outside of marketing scholarship (Abhishek & Srivastava, 2021; Fowler & Thomas, 2023; Lee et al., 2025) and is further developed in cultural studies and new media disciplines.

2.5.1 Cultural Complexity in the SMI Domain

Researchers have demonstrated the influence of cultural complexity in the SMI domain, where values and perceptions are shaped by marketplace and contextual influences (Penttinen, 2025; Sobande et al., 2020). For instance, Kim et al. (2024) compare the SMI domain in South Korea, where users tend to possess more collectivist values, with countries like the USA, where values tend to be individualistic. Within the collectivist-driven context, gender mediates brand identification where men are considered to lead with cognitive thinking as opposed to women, who are led by an emotional response to SMIs and their product promotion (Kim et al., 2024). Palomeque Rocio (2020) examines how constructions of normative femininity can intersect across sociocultural contexts to transform meanings of motherhood and domesticity during traumatic world events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in SMI women adopting strict heteronormative gender roles on social media platforms. Similarly, Lefebvre and Cowart (2022) explore consumers' tendency to question the morality of SMIs who undergo cosmetic enhancements to conform to gendered beauty standards. Depending on the context, this can result in certain SMIs being ostracised by consumers, as beauty standards differ between cultures.

However, in some cultures outside of the Global North, such as materialistic Global South Indian culture, SMIs generally possess less influence over consumers compared to mainstream celebrities, who are proven to have much more wealth, power, and status (Agnihotri & Bhattacharya, 2020). Similarly, Kamran (2023) demonstrates class-based differences among women social media users in Pakistan, showing that certain social media platforms function as emancipatory spaces primarily for working-class women, while others do not offer the same possibilities. This demonstrates how social media platform use and its

meanings vary across Global South contexts and cannot be assumed to mirror patterns observed in Western settings (Kamran, 2023).

These studies highlight the importance of contextually embedded research in the SMI domain as cultural factors significantly influence gendered behaviours. Though such studies have been regarded as significant to understanding gender dynamics in the SMI domain, further insights are needed, particularly within marketing scholarship (Fowler & Thomas, 2023). To this end, scholars investigating the role of culture in shaping gendered expressions in the marketing domain have called for further examination of socially constructed factors beyond biological sex, such as race, class, and colonialism, exploring how these influence the ways SMIs present themselves on social media platforms (Penttinen et al., 2025; Rodner et al., 2022). My PhD research addresses gaps related to cultural complexity by applying an intersectionality framework, which examines the overlap of socially constructed factors such as sex, race, and class. Grounded in local knowledge, this approach explores how these intersecting factors shape the experiences and practices of SMIs and consumers within the domain. Other scholars have also called for such context-sensitive approaches, with studies showing that SMIs' expressions across different platforms are nuanced by these intersecting social identities (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013; Mardon et al., 2023a; Sobande et al., 2020). These issues are explored further in the following subsection.

2.5.2 Socially Constructed Factors Shaping SMI's Self-Expression

Studies have demonstrated that in the SMI domain, gendered bodies, depicted through imagery and text, serve as key sites to which emotions attach, reinforcing and challenging perceptions tied to socially constructed factors such as race, sex, and physical ability (Gurrieri et al., 2023; Södergren & Vallström, 2022; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021). Along these lines, researchers have explored how SMIs utilise their bodies as well as language in their

content to express themselves beyond gendered binaries with regards to body composition, beauty, sexuality, race, and gendered expression. For instance, plus-sized SMI women have confronted cultural beauty norms, power, and the success associated with slim/thin women by expressing themselves as beautiful/sexy/stylish on social media platforms (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013). Similarly, SMIs living with disabilities have portrayed themselves as playful, exuberant, and fearless to challenge mainstream stereotypes of the community as pitiable and incapable (Södergren & Vallström, 2022).

Other studies have highlighted how some SMIs have breached cultural taboos about the body, sometimes using hashtags aimed to challenge expectations of the traditional gender and racial binaries and stereotypes of masculinity and femininity (Gurrieri & Drenten, 2019a; Sobande, 2018). Such work includes SMIs using hypersexualised imagery in the culture of pornification (Drenten et al., 2020), and their display of bodily scars to advocate for the normalcy of body-altering medical conditions (Gurrieri & Drenten, 2019b). Ultimately, researchers highlight the SMI domain as a platform where often marginalised individuals, especially women who experience this marginality as a result of their bodies and embodiment, can assert and advocate for not only recognition of their identity but also legitimacy and authenticity (Duffy et al., 2022).

My research builds on these insights to examine, through RQ1, the embodiment of women SMIs in the Caribbean context, which is underexplored in marketing scholarship. Addressing gaps in the literature, I apply an intersectional lens to explore how gendered norms and stereotypes are conveyed through SMIs' expressions, investigating whether these expressions reinforce or challenge dominant gender norms.

However, researchers have also emphasised the need for future studies to examine how gendered elements shape marketplace responses, such as those from consumers and

brands, towards SMIs, noting that these responses vary across different contexts (Abhishek & Srivastava, 2021; Ge & Gretzel, 2018; Mardon et al., 2023a).

2.6 Influences on Marketplace Responses on SMI's Self-Expression

2.6.1 Consumer Response

Consumer responses to SMIs are subjective, with perceptions of an SMI's authenticity, morality, and transparency shaped by broader, context-specific ideas of masculinity and femininity, which, in turn, are influenced by factors such as race, sex, and sexuality (Edelblum & Warren, 2024). Some studies demonstrate that consumers tend to embrace SMIs who reflect similar gender expressions to themselves (Hudders & De Jans, 2022). For example, consumers are more likely to engage with SMIs whose content resonates with their racial, ethnic, or sex identities, such as black consumer women's uptake of haircare promoted by black SMI women in British digital spaces (Sobande, 2017), or young women's propensity to be influenced by popular SMI women, even more than traditional celebrities, when mobilising youth voter participation (Harff & Schmuck, 2024). Researchers have also examined SMIs' influence over consumer collectives, which become deeply entangled with social norms that shape social roles and economic activities (Mardon et al., 2023b).

Other research points to the drawbacks of SMI influence, including SMIs' reinforcement of normative masculine and feminine ideals. For instance, SMI women's adoption of traditionally conservative feminine personas, such as clever and glamorous or kind and tough, to adapt to the male-dominated political discussion arena, serves to uphold the gender gap in online political debates (Vochocová, 2017). Similarly, SMI women encouraging their followers to engage in constant self-monitoring and self-improvement in pursuit of feminine perfection can foster feelings of ongoing self-scrutiny, shame, anxiety,

and vulnerability, and declines in overall well-being as consumers strive to meet socially constructed standards of feminine beauty (Barari, 2023; Camacho-Miñano & Grey, 2021; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021).

These studies offer insights into consumer responses to SMIs based on identity congruence and the pursuit of contemporary gender ideals. Researchers have also begun to delve deeper into the complex gender dynamics in the SMI domain, examining the intricacies contained in consumers' harmful gendered feedback towards SMIs, which can involve instances of gender-based online abuse (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Duffy et al., 2022; Mardon et al., 2023a). Recent research suggests that when consumers' parasocial relationships with SMIs are broken, they turn to SMI hate websites, such as 'Get Off My Internets' (GOMY), where they post content that specifically questions the authentic expressions of SMI women, particularly regarding their bodies, relationships, and careers (Mardon et al., 2023a). This is evident in consumer perceptions of the immorality of SMIs who have undergone cosmetic enhancement procedures (Lefebvre & Cowart, 2021), as well as through consumers' hate speech and homophobic comments about homosexual SMIs' social media content (Abidin, 2019). Such harmful feedback primarily targets SMI women, often based on consumer perceptions of the women's 'failed' femininity due to misalignment with norms around authentic bodies, conservative behaviour, or privileged race, ethnicity, and class (Duffy et al., 2022); however, SMI men are also affected. Their online behaviour is closely monitored and can be negatively judged when perceived as too closely associated with femininity (Edelblum & Warren, 2024).

On the very extreme end, consumer resistance towards SMIs can result in SMIs' experiencing cancel culture, which is a growing form of consumer resistance that is often driven by identity-related issues (Demsar et al. 2023; Lee & Abidin, 2024; Lewis & Christin, 2022). Through cancel culture, consumers hold commercial brands and their affiliates

accountable, granting legitimacy to those who align with societal values related to political ideology, race, class, sexuality, gender, and opposing corporate greed and abuse (Demsar et al. 2023). Cancel culture often manifests as extreme consumer hate, primarily through bullying and the loss of commercial endorsements (Demsar et al., 2023). This can result in SMIs withdrawing from online spaces and, in some cases, has even been linked to tragic outcomes such as death (Lee & Abidin, 2024; Ng, 2025). As key players in the online marketing industry, SMIs' encounters with cancel culture are an area of growing interest, especially in contexts like the Global South, where regulations on brand disclosure are unclear and protections for SMIs when facing harmful consumer feedback, particularly those from marginalised racial or ethnic backgrounds, are limited or inconsistent (Lee & Abidin, 2024; Radics & Abidin, 2024). Studies have emphasised the need to examine cancel culture further, not only because it affects SMI's wellbeing but also to understand its root causes across contexts and develop informed responses (Lee & Abidin, 2024; Penttinen, 2025).

Taken together, these studies provide useful insights into how socially constructed factors shape consumer responses and perceptions towards SMIs: in some cases, consumers follow SMIs because they are similar to them, congruent in factors such as culture, race, class, and ethnicity (Hudders & De Jans, 2021). In other cases, SMIs are found to influence consumer feedback in ways that may prove harmful to them, as they can perpetuate uneven gendered expectations and representation, such as widening the gender gap in critical online discourse (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021). Research has also focused on consumers and their role in creating online spaces that criticise and cancel, particularly SMI women, based on their authentic gendered roles and identities. These impacts, shaped by the socially constructed factors outlined earlier, prompt the exploration in my PhD thesis. Set in a particular context, my thesis elaborates on their manifestation and implications for often understudied cohorts. SMI studies have also highlighted the role of commercial brands in shaping the gender

dynamics in the domain (Audrezet et al., 2020; Gurrieri et al., 2023; Weismueller et al., 2020). Though this area remains underexplored, emerging studies do provide some insights for consideration. These are outlined below.

2.6.2 Brand Response

Studies examining brand responses and the uptake of SMI marketing highlight how broader social inequities, related to race, class, gender, and sexuality, are perpetuated throughout different stages of collaboration between commercial brands and SMIs. These inequities are manifest in the algorithms used for selecting and evaluating SMIs, as well as in the ways their content creation and brand disclosures are managed (Bishop, 2018; Duffy & Meisner, 2022; Radics & Abidin, 2022).

Social Media Algorithms

Digital influencer management tools like 'Peg' are designed to drive commercial growth by matching brands with high-performing SMIs (Pegco, 2025). These tools also aim to protect brand reputation, as research shows that influencer scandals can negatively impact SMIs, their associated brands, and other partners (Bishop, 2021; Demsar et al., 2023). Upon examination of these tools, researchers have identified bias in the algorithms that govern certain influencer management tools, asserting that they uphold traditional gender hierarchies that favour ideologies associated with higher social class, whiteness, and heterosexuality (Bishop, 2018, 2021). This is evident in the systematic quantification of SMIs' perceived brand friendliness and risk to the brand during the selection process - a practice that often reflects biased moral judgments and can exclude SMIs from Global South contexts and those from societally marginalised groups, such as women of colour and LGBTQIA+ individuals (Bishop, 2021).

Studies have also identified algorithmic bias on the social media platforms used by SMIs, which affects their overall performance (Abidin, 2019; Bishop, 2018; Duffy & Meisner, 2023). For instance, a closer examination of YouTube algorithms demonstrated bias, awarding visibility to highly feminised content (Bishop, 2018). Similarly, researchers have documented instances where content from socially marginalised groups, including queer content, has been restricted on social media, leading to reduced visibility and exemplifying platform-based gatekeeping (Abidin, 2019). More recent studies continue to examine the experiences of SMIs from these groups, highlighting how platform algorithms often disadvantage them (Duffy & Meisner, 2023). Many express feelings of anxiety and fatigue from trying to adapt their content to ever-changing visibility metrics, which tend to reward content from socially dominant groups while penalising others through account suspensions and content removals (Bishop, 2018; Duffy & Meisner, 2023).

Building on this work, emerging research has suggested that visibility on social media is deeply shaped by platform power relations that reproduce colonial hierarchies (Rajmil et al., 2024). Market research, content moderation, and recommendation systems continue to privilege Western cultural norms, limiting the visibility of Global South creators within the SMI domain (Kamran, 2023; Rajmil et al., 2024). Research from the Global South has begun to trace how SMIs respond to these dynamics - using vernacular expression to enhance cultural legibility (Bhatia et al., 2024), navigating classed and platform-specific visibility hierarchies, and tailoring their strategies to the affordances of different platforms (Kamran, 2023). Yet this emerging body of work also highlights significant gaps: particularly, the need for deeper examination of how colonial power is embedded in the architectures that govern visibility, and how SMIs negotiate, resist, or remain constrained by these algorithmic structures (Rajmil et al., 2024).

Brand Collaboration Disclosures

Researchers suggest that consumers prefer authentic, transparent, and trustworthy content from SMIs, which can undermine the success of brand-endorsed content, as its commercial nature may compromise the SMI's authentic self-expressions (Audrezet et al., 2020; Martínez-López et al., 2020; Weismueller et al., 2020). While in some contexts, SMIs may be legally obligated to disclose brand affiliations (Ng, 2025), in other contexts, such disclosure is ambiguous and based on the SMI's preference or arrangement with the brand (Abidin, 2016; Lee & Abidin, 2024). To explain how SMIs navigate these tensions, Audrezet et al. (2020) propose a four-path framework outlining the different ways SMIs manage authenticity in commercial collaborations. Their model identifies four approaches - absolute, fairytale, disembodied, and fake authenticity - each reflecting different combinations of passion and transparency, and each carrying distinct implications for SMIs' wellbeing, identity, and audience trust. This framework helps clarify why SMIs vary in how they balance personal values with commercial demands, and how these choices shape consumer perceptions of authenticity.

Notably, researchers have suggested that brand disclosures have less effect on SMIs' brand-related outcomes compared to other traits, such as attractiveness and expertise (Weismueller et al., 2020). However, studies within the SMI context suggest that such marketable traits of SMIs can be largely mediated by gender-related factors. For instance, attractiveness and expertise are found to be contingent on race, sex, age, and body–related factors, while some SMIs' expert contributions are sometimes overlooked because of their gender (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Sobande et al., 2020).

This gendered, socially constructed shaping of SMI traits of attractiveness and expertise are reflected in existing studies, for instance, in research that suggests the SMI industry mirrors the social inequities of contemporary society, noting increased visibility

afforded to influencers who are thin, white, and young (Duffy & Hund, 2015). Other studies demonstrate how brands use influencers who are perceived as ethnically and racially appealing to promote certain social narratives, for example, the increased use of black SMIs to promote social justice events like Black Lives Matter (BLM) (Keddo, 2025). In such cases, SMIs are pressured to promote commercial agendas through their content, exposing them to public scrutiny amid sensitive and often volatile social climates, while brands face criticism for engaging in racial exploitation (Keddo, 2025; Sobande, 2020, 2021). Furthermore, while some SMIs are compensated for their brand-related content, studies suggest that the expert content produced by SMIs from societally marginalised racial and ethnic groups are often used, misused, and overlooked by commercial brands without proper credit or compensation (Sobande et al., 2020).

The studies referenced above show that, much like consumers' responses to SMIs, commercial brands' endorsements of and approaches to SMI marketing can also be gendered. These practices are shaped by socially constructed factors, such as race, sex, age, and body-related attributes, and are further reinforced by algorithmic tools that reflect existing power hierarchies both within and external to the SMI domain (Abidin, 2019; Bishop, 2018; Duffy & Meisner, 2023). Such factors are culturally and contextually constructed, reinforcing calls for future marketing research to explore how they shape the SMI domain, particularly in relation to broader societal gender norms (Fowler & Thomas, 2023).

My research examines how intersecting social factors shape gender dynamics in the SMI domain, influencing both SMIs and consumer experiences. By prioritising SMI perspectives in RQ1, this thesis addresses a gap in understanding how brand involvement shapes these gender dynamics and, in turn, influences influencers' online practices and experiences (RQ2).

The gender dynamics reflected in marketplace responses to SMIs intersect with their personal traits such as race, sex, and sexuality, to shape their social identities, which refers to how they choose to present themselves within the SMI space (Duffy et al., 2024; Fowler & Thomas, 2023; Langner et al., 2013). Studies have highlighted the need to explore these identities further, particularly within marketing research, as they offer important insights into how gender dynamics influence the ways SMIs create and deliver value as key players in the online consumption landscape (Duffy et al., 2024; Farivar & Wang 2022; Fowler & Thomas, 2023).

2.7 Constructing SMI Identities: Navigating Authenticity and Marketplace Response

By examining how SMIs navigate marketplace dynamics to maintain authentic self-expression, researchers have found that SMIs face public pressure to adapt their social identities to avoid negative consumer backlash and the risk of cancellation (Duffy et al., 2024; Levesque et al., 2023). These studies show that SMIs from socially marginalised groups, such as women and immigrants, face greater challenges in managing their authenticity, gaining visibility, and maintaining brand endorsements while trying to avoid cancellation (Duffy et al., 2024; Glatt, 2023). Researchers have examined these dynamics by highlighting the extensive labour required of SMIs, given they face constant pressure to be vulnerable, and aesthetically and culturally authentic, while also navigating algorithm-driven platform visibility—such efforts often go undercompensated (Abidin, 2016; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Glatt, 2023; Gurrieri et al., 2023; Penttinen, 2025).

Such pressure is placed on SMIs by consumers, who may, for instance, force SMIs to speak on sensitive topics, such as political issues and world events, exposing them to harm and cancellation (Duffy et al., 2024). Similarly, authenticity demands from commercial

brands, which cause SMIs to sometimes rely on sharing content relating to their personal and social constructs, such as race and religion, to engage audiences for commercial gains, also leave SMIs vulnerable to harmful feedback (Glatt, 2023). Scholars have noted that these dynamics have contributed to the term "social media influencer" becoming culturally taboo in the marketplace, as it is often associated with freeloading and a lack of professional credibility (Duffy & Sawey, 2021).

Studies also explore the strategies SMIs use to maintain their authenticity and relevance while navigating visibility and endorsement requirements (Duffy et al., 2024; Glatt 2023). These include expressing opinions on sensitive topics they would not otherwise align with, in responding to pressure from consumers and brands (Duffy et al., 2024). For instance, SMIs have posted black squares on their social media accounts, in performative allyship during BLM protests, to build and maintain credibility with their followers (Wellman, 2022). Other SMIs adopt altogether non-controversial social identities by refraining from posting about sensitive areas and events, thereby avoiding negative backlash and protecting their identities (Levesque et al., 2023). These SMIs sometimes create alternative means, such as Finstagram (alternative Instagram) accounts, to express their true and unfiltered identities, away from consumer and commercial brand pressure (Goode et al., 2023).

These studies highlight the power dynamics in the SMI domain, where brands and consumers play a key role in determining the legitimacy of influencers and their content. At the most extreme end, SMIs deemed illegitimate may face cancellation, which can have severe consequences—not only threatening their livelihoods and personal wellbeing (Lee & Abidin, 2024) but also affecting affiliated brands and other partners (Demsar et al., 2023). Furthermore, SMIs' social identities, shaped by personal and societal factors, become deeply entangled in these power structures, influencing how they are perceived and treated within the industry (Duffy et al., 2024; Glatt, 2023; Levesque et al., 2023). Researchers have noted

that these pressures faced by SMIs raise questions not only about SMIs' personal wellbeing (Levesque et al., 2023) but also about how they are represented on social media platforms (Fowler & Thomas, 2023; Gurrieri et al., 2023).

To this end, there is a growing call for deeper insights into how SMIs adopt social identities that support activism and representation in the domain within the field of marketing, specifically social marketing scholarship (Aboelenien et al., 2023; Alsalem et al., 2020; Fowler et al., 2023; Gurrieri & Drenten, 2019b). With these trends bearing such significance to SMIs' behaviours across all platforms, this research also examines how SMIs who are based in the Caribbean country T&T evaluate and explain their encounters with the power, gender, and social dynamics that scholars see as mapped onto their identities, content, and levels of influence on social media platforms.

2.8 SMIs as Agents of Change: Integrating Activism and Representation into Social Marketing

Marketing scholars have noted that when traditional offline support systems fail and individuals face discrimination, vulnerable consumers often turn to online platforms to advocate for themselves and seek support through identity-related narratives (Ekpo et al., 2018; Gurrieri & Drenten, 2019b; Sobande, 2019). For instance, research has highlighted activism on social media by marginalised groups, such as Black British women advocating for BLM during the COVID-19 pandemic (Sobande, 2022), and female breast cancer patients and survivors sharing their treatment journeys online (Gurrieri & Drenten, 2019b). These forms of activism have led researchers to call for social marketing, which focuses on promoting and advocating for social change and social good, to further examine activism in online spaces (Gurrieri & Drenten, 2019b). In particular, scholars have emphasised the need to explore how SMIs can be leveraged to encourage healthful and socially positive

behaviours in the digital environment (Alsalem et al., 2020; Gurrieri & Drenten, 2019b; Sobande, 2022).

Studies both within and outside of the marketing domain have begun to explore SMIs' use of their platforms to drive various social change narratives (Bradley et al., 2023; Cheung et al., 2024; Sokolava et al., 2024). Within marketing, research has proposed alternative strategies beyond metrics, such as likes and follower counts, to engage SMIs for pro-social outcomes (Aboelenien et al., 2023). Scholars advocate for examining SMIs' linking strategies, including how they humanise their content, demonstrate pro-social behaviours, and remain authentic to the causes they promote (Aboelenien et al., 2023). Other studies suggest that SMIs' strategies also include encouraging positivity and confidence in pro-social behaviours, such as promoting the uptake of green products to support sustainability (Cheung et al., 2024). Their displays of socially enjoyable activities, for example, cooking together, not only highlight economic and health benefits but also foster a sense of community (Sokolava et al., 2024). Similarly, their demonstrations of kindness in the SMI domain help build parasocial relationships with followers, which can enhance consumer wellbeing and contribute positively to society as a whole (Bradley et al., 2023).

In the health promotion domain, although researchers have recommended the use of SMIs for the promotion of health-seeking behaviours (Coffie et al., 2024), they also identify the damaging effects of SMIs, such as promoting the normalisation of concerning behaviours, including youth gambling (Pitt et al., 2023). Such research has highlighted the need for comprehensive and critical approaches in both research and policy frameworks to more effectively examine harmful marketing tactics and develop evidence-based responses to address them (Pitt et al., 2023). To this end, researchers within business scholarship have proposed that SMIs can be valuable for driving pro-social outcomes, rather than solely contributing to harmful behaviours (Lee & Chung, 2025). The research suggests a link

between the social causes SMIs promote and their area of expertise, resulting in consumers' increased perceptions of SMI authenticity and willingness to adopt pro-social outcomes (Lee & Chung, 2025). When SMIs are aligned with consumers' views on controversial social issues, this congruence signals greater authenticity on the part of the SMIs, which in turn increases the likelihood of consumers adopting pro-social behaviours (Lee & Chung, 2025).

However, marketing researchers have also stressed the importance of critically examining how activism is displayed within the SMI domain (Fowler et al., 2023; Gurrieri et al., 2023; McVey et al., 2024). This is particularly important because such displays can mask harmful marketplace practices, including the exploitation of labour and women's bodies (Drenten et al., 2020; McVey et al., 2024). Activism can also be framed in ways that make compliance appear as resistance, for example, portraying SMI women's content creation as empowerment, when in reality, they are operating within restrictive industry norms (McVey et al., 2024). Additionally, intensive content production can be positioned as a form of social responsibility, placing the burden of labour on SMIs under the guise of activism (McVey et al., 2024). My PhD thesis addresses these gaps by utilising findings on gender dynamics in the T&T SMI domain to inform a gender-responsive, culturally sound framework for social marketing, which responds directly to RQ3. Specifically, this approach aligns with critical social marketing, a branch of social marketing that seeks to critically examine marketplace and consumption practices in order to promote emancipatory pro-social behaviours (Gordon et al., 2022).

A key agenda of critical social marketing is an emphasis on decoloniality and intersectionality for gender responsive social change (Gordon et al., 2022). Gender responsiveness is defined as policies or programmes that "recognises gender norms, roles, and inequalities, and includes deliberate measures to actively minimise their harmful impacts" (World Health Organisation, 2022). This thesis applies an intersectional framework

to explore and analyse SMIs' presence in the marketplace and how they engage both their commercial and social responsibility functions. In so doing, it advances marketing scholarship aimed at moving beyond binary perspectives, especially as my research also explores how gender intersects with other factors, such as race, age, religion, and sexuality in the SMI domain (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013; Mardon et al., 2023a; Sobande et al., 2020).

Importantly, my research is situated in the Global South, as researchers have highlighted an urgent need to better understand gender dynamics in the SMI domain beyond Global North contexts (Fowler et al., 2023; Gurrieri et al., 2023; Vrontis et al., 2021). Additionally, in response to calls for deeper engagement with contextual complexity in the SMI domain and to advance critical social marketing's decolonial agenda, my research draws on Caribbean feminist theory, which has an inherently intersectional framework, to provide context-specific insights and guide the research (Gutiérrez Rodríguez & Reddock, 2021). The following conceptual framework offers further details about the intersectional framework adopted for this research.

2.9 Conceptual Framework – Intersectionality

Intersectionality recognises that gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and other social and cultural factors are not separate or mutually exclusive categories. Instead, they intersect to shape individuals' experiences of privilege and oppression (Crenshaw, 1989).

Emerging in the twentieth century, intersectionality was developed as a critical lens to better understand power relations and their influence on social inequalities. It arose from Black feminist thought, particularly the recognition that mainstream social advocacy movements in the United States, such as those centred on gender (women's movements) and race (Black movements), failed to adequately address the unique, intersecting experiences of Black women (Crenshaw, 1989; Gopaldas, 2013). Crenshaw's (1989) work on

intersectionality directly challenged this gap, countering the theoretical and social erasure of Black women's multidimensional realities.

Applications of this framework theorise that marginalisation does not occur solely on the basis of gender but through its intersection with other factors, such as class, appearance, political affiliations, and ethnicity (Crenshaw, 1989). At the core of intersectionality is an emphasis on how power operates through and between social identities and structures, both interrogating and reinforcing dominant cultural norms (Crenshaw, 1991). For instance, within marketing, intersectionality has been used to expose the dominance of privileged racial and gender groups in mainstream media and the erasure of marginalised communities, which ultimately reinforces social inequities (Gopaldas & Siebert, 2018). Other researchers have called for greater inclusion of underrepresented groups, particularly those from outside European contexts and groups such as Black British women (Sobande, 2022), in marketing and specifically social marketing research (Ourahmoune & El Jurdi, 2022). Intersectionality has also been applied as a framework to examine the SMI domain; however, research in this area remains nascent, as outlined in the following paragraphs.

2.9.1 Intersectionality in the SMI Domain

Researchers assert that intersectionality emerges as a useful framework to explore the SMI domain, as it is designed to interrogate limits that frame understandings about SMIs as gendered, and signals where such gendered identities and expressions overlap with other social identities, statuses, and power structures (Harju & Huovinen, 2015; Sobande, 2022).

For example, within marketing scholarship, studies highlight the strategies used by SMI women to resist restrictive stereotypes about the female body (Harju & Huovinen, 2015; Matich et al., 2019). Plus-sized women, for instance, challenge societal ideals of thin feminine beauty, resisting limitations that emerge at the intersection of body image and

gender (Harju & Huovinen, 2015). Similarly, women have contested patriarchal interpretations of the female body through online activism, such as the #FreeTheNipple campaign, which draws on gendered power dynamics to promote bodily autonomy (Matich et al., 2019). Intersectionality has also been applied to explore how sex, sexuality, and religion intersect in the SMI domain. For example, research has examined how French Muslim SMI women use fashion as a form of embodied empowerment, challenging and transforming negative stereotypes and stigma directed at Muslim women in France. Taken together, these studies have begun to demonstrate the relevance of examining SMIs lived experiences in the domain, with particular focus on intersectional cultural and contextual complexity.

Researchers have, however, identified an overarching need for further intersectional studies within the marketing domain, where intersectionality has been deployed less frequently than in other disciplines (Eckhardt & Kopalle, 2024; Uduehi et al., 2024). Furthermore, the applications of intersectionality within marketing scholarship have been critiqued, with scholars noting a tendency to focus primarily on diversity and identity while overlooking its potential to interrogate the uneven structures of societal power linked to intersecting categories of difference (Rosa-Salas & Sobande, 2022; Steinfield et al., 2019). For example, although existing studies have explored various intersecting tensions and forms of discrimination within the SMI domain, some socially constructed factors remain underexplored, which contributes to the persistence of social inequities in this space (Veresiu & Parmentier, 2021).

This gap is evident in areas such as age, where the lived experiences of older SMIs are largely overlooked (Veresiu & Parmentier, 2021), and in the limited attention paid to harmful stereotypes and the embodied acts of resistance among SMIs living with disabilities (Södergren & Vallström, 2022), as well as SMIs living outside of Global North contexts (Glatt, 2023). These critiques of intersectionality extend beyond the SMI domain, with

researchers identifying several intersections that require further exploration. These include religion, sex, and sexuality (Rinallo et al., 2023), race and ethnicity (Sobande et al., 2020), and the experiences of individuals within broader, understudied populations (Eckhardt & Kopalle, 2024; Gopaldas & Siebert, 2018; Uduehi et al., 2024). Researchers have also called for the use of context-specific lenses that can identify and address the underlying systems of power shaping these experiences (Badejo et al., 2021; Eckhardt & Kopalle, 2024; Uduehi et al., 2024).

Accordingly, there have been calls for marketing researchers to recognise the value of intersectionality not merely as a tool for promoting diversity and representation but as a powerful framework for identifying power structures and addressing how they reproduce privilege and oppression within specific contexts (Rosas-Salas & Sobande, 2022; Steinfield et al., 2019). To this end, intersectionality has the potential not only to advance the diversity and gender-responsive agenda of marketing and, by extension, critical social marketing but also to support the inclusion of context-specific perspectives from underexplored Global South contexts, which largely remain outside the mainstream marketing discourse (Aya Pastrana et al., 2020; Badejo et al., 2021; Gordon et al., 2022; Peñaloza et al., 2023; Udeuehi et al., 2024).

Studies utilising intersectional frameworks are expanding in the social and new media, as well as cultural scholarship domains. These studies demonstrate the cultural complexities that exist within Global South contexts, paying specific attention to the underlying power structures that perpetuate inequities and inform and support online activism. For example, Hurley (2021) highlights how SMIs in the Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) region, who are endorsed by affluent Global North brands to create high-end content and present themselves as agentic and affluent, can inadvertently harm more vulnerable groups. This includes working-class women, whose everyday struggles are often

erased in such portrayals, thereby deepening social inequities both online and offline (Hurley, 2021).

These findings align with other research, such as Kamran's (2023) study of working-class Muslim women in Pakistan, which examines their use of TikTok as a strategic way to express their class, sex, and sexual identities. This form of activism challenges dominant ideas that associate "high-class femininity" with morality—an association that largely exists outside TikTok and is reinforced on other social media platforms (Kamran, 2023). Similarly, Mesquita and Nascimento (2024) examine the experiences of gay fathers in Brazil who showcase fatherhood-related activities on social media as a form of homeoparenting activism. Through this, they promote visibility around their struggles and resist exclusion by challenging dominant societal constructions of masculinity and its association with heterosexuality (Mesquita & Nascimento, 2024).

Taken together, these studies examine activism in the SMI domain with a focus on identifying and addressing structures of stereotypical power (Hurley, 2021; Kamran, 2023). These studies also highlight that achieving a comprehensive and accurate understanding of Global South phenomena requires the use of context-specific lenses. Relying on Global North perspectives risks misrepresenting or overlooking the lived experiences of the populations being studied (Hurley, 2021). Building on these studies, the context of my PhD research is the Caribbean twin island Republic of T&T, which is located in the Global South. I draw on Caribbean feminist perspectives to contextualise my intersectional analysis, which aims to have specific implications for social marketing.

2.9.2 Intersectionality in Social Marketing

Social marketing aims to promote behaviour change for social good. Within this scholarship, scholars have engaged with gender in various ways. Some have focused on

testing gender-focused initiatives to address societal challenges, such as GBV and reducing harmful behaviours among youth (Evans et al., 2019; Martam, 2016). Other research has examined the gendered impacts of social marketing campaigns, calling for closer scrutiny of programmes that may produce unintended consequences, including reinforcing stereotypes or causing harm, rather than supporting well-being (Gurrieri et al., 2013).

Furthermore, other studies highlight the gendered nature of behaviours and the need for gender-responsive approaches that consider the interplay of gender dynamics and power relations within specific contexts (Aya Pastrana et al., 2020, 2022). This is evident in research examining how target audiences perceive socially focused campaigns that promote equitable behaviours as alternatives to harmful mainstream gender norms (Robertson & Davidson, 2013). Such findings draw attention to the complications that render necessary the strategic positioning and promotion of gender-responsive behaviours in ways that are accepted, rather than rejected, by target audiences (Robertson & Davidson, 2013).

To this end, researchers have identified the need for social marketing to further explore the role of socio–cultural factors and contextual power that shape people's behaviours (Aya Pastrana et al., 2020, 2022; Gurrieri et al., 2013; Martam, 2016). As critical social marketing offers a framework for practitioners to engage in social and reflexive critique of commercial marketing processes and transform them to support emancipation, research that interrogates gender dynamics is closely aligned with this approach (Gurrieri et al., 2013). However, researchers also urge social marketers to turn this critical lens inward, encouraging them to examine social marketing initiatives to ensure they advance equity rather than reinforce or widen social disparities (Gurrieri et al., 2013).

Accordingly, scholars have specifically advocated for the use of intersectionality as a framework to critically analyse harmful power structures, challenge gendered stereotypes, and promote emancipation (Aya Pastrana et al., 2022; Badejo et al., 2021; Gordon et al.,

2022; Sobande, 2022). These approaches are informed by the social relations of gender (Young, 1979) and cultural mechanisms that reproduce gendered perceptions within the specified context (Aya Pastrana et al., 2020, 2022). By considering these socio-cultural factors, social marketing can broaden its scope and promote emancipation in underexplored areas. This includes addressing injustices faced by marginalised groups, such as Black women (Grier & Poole, 2020; Sobande, 2022), communities in Global South contexts (Cateriano-Arévalo et al., 2022; Gordon et al., 2022), and populations outside of heteronormative frameworks (Aya Pastrana et al., 2020).

Emerging studies within critical social marketing have adopted intersectionality to explore experiences of privilege and oppression in underexplored contexts and regarding underexplored social issues. For instance, Badejo et al.'s (2021) ethnographic study in transformative services research explored the lived experiences of human trafficking survivors in the Nigerian context, where race, compared to ethnicity and spiritual beliefs, is a less important factor in influencing privilege and oppression. Similarly, Gordon et al. (2022) developed an intersectionality-informed critical social marketing framework and applied it to the underexplored issue of child labour. The framework considers the social drivers of child labour, such as neocolonial power hierarchies and globalisation, and advocates for the use of decolonial research methodologies to guide critical social marketing initiatives aimed at addressing the issue (Gordon et al., 2022).

Researchers advocate for further intersectional inquiries within critical social marketing, specifically in underexplored areas, such as the Caribbean, where there is a lack of studies that address health issues which have become societally stigmatised through an interplay of contextual gendered factors (Aya Pastrana et al., 2020; Malika et al., 2025). Furthermore, research has shown that in certain contexts, consumers prefer social marketing initiatives that are socio-culturally informed and aligned with their lived experiences (Patino

et al., 2014). To this end, critical social marketing promotes decoloniality by recognising and legitimising knowledge produced outside dominant Global North contexts (Aya Pastrana et al., 2020; Cateriano-Arévalo et al., 2022; Gordon et al., 2022). Indeed, scholars emphasise that gender dynamics are context-specific and can only be fully understood through knowledge grounded in the lived experiences of individuals within those contexts (Aya Pastrana et al., 2022; Badejo et al., 2021; Gurrieri et al., 2012).

The studies cited above highlight key discussions around gender in social marketing and show how critical social marketing, as a line of inquiry, encourages deeper critiques related to gender, decoloniality, and intersectionality within the field. My PhD research engages with these debates by considering their implications for critical social marketing. It is guided by an intersectionality framework, interpreted through a contextual Caribbean feminist lens, which directly addresses observable gaps in critical social marketing related to intersectionality, decoloniality, and context-specific advocacy for marginalised groups in underexplored settings (Aya Pastrana et al., 2020; Cateriano-Arévalo et al., 2022; Gordon et al., 2022).

2.10 Framing the SMI Domain through a Caribbean Feminist Lens

T&T is a multi-ethnic society shaped by a complex history of both forced and voluntary migration, including early Amerindian settlement, African enslavement, Spanish and European colonisation, and South Asian indentureship. The society that emerged from early conquest and colonialism is marked by deep-seated racial and ethnic tensions (Reddock, 2019). Caribbean feminists have long explored how histories of struggle and efforts toward national development shape relationships both within and between various ethnic groups, in an attempt to secure their legitimacy and belonging within society. Within this context, acceptance of one's identity, as well as cultural and class status, plays a key role in

determining one's belonging and recognition within the state, beyond formal legal citizenship (Reddock, 2019). This is reflected in ongoing contestations between both marginalised and mainstream cultural groups, each fragmented and seeking recognition in both local and global arenas (Reddock, 2019). Caribbean feminists emphasise that these dynamics distinguish postcolonial Global South societies from those in the Global North, where dominant mainstream cultures typically overshadow marginalised groups (Mohammed, 1994; Reddock, 2019).

Within Caribbean contexts, such as T&T, societal perceptions of femininity are shaped by norms of respectability, which prescribe appropriate behaviour, particularly at the intersections of race, ethnicity, class, and gender (Barratt, 2018). Such respectability politics, inherited through colonialism, grant legitimacy to feminine behaviours that are religious, sexually conservative, modest, well-mannered, and neatly presented (Green, 2006). Given the contextual nature of respectability politics, it is essential to analyse how they are locally constructed and expressed. Applying frameworks derived from other contexts, particularly those rooted in Global North perspectives, risks producing inaccurate interpretations and overlooking the nuanced ways respectability operates within specific socio-cultural settings (Mohammed, 2018).

Barratt (2018) shows that in T&T respectable femininity is defined differently across racial and ethnic groups. For example, among Indo-Trinidadian women, respectability is linked to ideals of purity and responsibility, while Afro-Trinidadian women's identities have historically shifted between notions of docility and vulgarity, often being aligned with masculinity (Barratt, 2016, 2018). Highlighting the fragility of being regarded as "respectable", Barratt (2018) further demonstrates that respectability is constantly negotiated, particularly for women of colour, who rely on it to shape perceptions of their legitimacy

(Henry & Wilson, 1975). Furthermore, perceptions of women's morality also influence how ethnic groups are hierarchically positioned, contributing to ideas of superiority among them.

These gender dynamics significantly impact access to social and economic resources, revealing contextual complexities that clarify how the T&T context differs from other spaces, like the Global North (Mohammed, 1994; Reddock, 2019). Caribbean feminists have also theorised masculinity in context. Masculinity is often defined by traits such as reputation, sexual virility, leadership, hypersexuality, and heterosexuality. King (2014) demonstrates how race and ethnicity mediate expressions of masculinity; for example, Indo-Caribbean masculinities are often associated with docility and industriousness, traits shaped by the historical context of East Indian immigration to T&T during the post-slavery emancipation period.

Caribbean feminists have explored how social media is used as a platform where feminine respectability is negotiated, policed, and punished (Barratt, 2018; Esposito et al., 2024). For instance, Barratt (2018) demonstrates how consumer discourse, expressed through language, is used both to negotiate and reinforce expectations of feminine respectability, often chastising women who deviate from these norms through forms of GBV. Similarly, Esposito et al. (2024) shows how consumers in online spaces use respectability politics as benchmarks to decide whether to extend empathy or support to victims of domestic violence and their families.

Gendered activism on social media platforms is also an increasingly important focus within Caribbean feminist scholarship (Baldwin & Cossy, 2018; Haynes, 2016, 2017). This includes Roper and Wint's (2020) examination of Jamaica's Tambourine Army, which, through online activism against sexual violence in religious institutions, transformed behaviours traditionally linked to respectable femininity (such as silence, compliance, and acceptance) into bold and agentic forms of vocal protest. Indeed, Haynes (2016) also

highlights the work of Caribbean cyberfeminists who use their platforms to expose and challenge the harmful effects, such as victim blaming and shaming, of policing behaviours based on standards of respectability.

While these studies explore the implications of advocacy in the online domain, especially as these are conducted by women actors, they do not elaborate to a similar degree on work by men or other gendered people in the space. This trend is also apparent in research that explores gendered experiences on social media platforms and other online spaces. In this research of SMIs in the Caribbean context, I focus on SMI women's experiences and the social and gendered factors impacting them; however, I also go beyond extant research to elaborate on SMI men's experiences and actions in an effort to better understand how experiences not often accounted for can provide insights into understanding SMIs in general.

The studies referenced above showcase the gender dynamics within the T&T context, where different ethnic groups engage in constant contestation of citizenship, based on their socio–cultural histories, including the contributions of their ethnic groups to national development (Barratt, 2018; Barriteau, 2001; Reddock, 2019). These insights also illuminate how respectability politics are inherited and mediated based on race, sex, culture, and ethnicity within specific contexts, and how they manifest across offline and online domains (Barratt, 2018; Haynes, 2016, 2017). As Caribbean feminism is intersectional by nature and emerges from grassroots activism within the region, it is well aligned to provide contextual and lived experience insights to the intersectional framework utilised for this PhD research. Furthermore, given that Caribbean feminists regard social media as a useful platform for examining lived experiences (Baldwin & Cossy, 2018; Haynes, 2016, 2017), my thesis is further aligned with existing studies on social media platforms.

The sections above outline key discussions on gender within current scholarship—particularly in marketing and social marketing, as well as the theoretical contributions of

intersectionality and Caribbean feminist theory, which together form the framework and lens guiding this PhD research. The following section highlights the key gaps identified in the literature reviewed above and identifies how my research will address each gap.

2.11 Summary of Literature Gaps

This PhD thesis aims to explore how gender dynamics shape the practices of SMIs and the responses of their followers in T&T. Accordingly, my PhD research will focus on addressing gaps in the literature as follows:

GAP 1: Research in marketing and social marketing highlights the need for further scholarship that moves beyond binary understandings of gender, advocating for the use of frameworks that account for cultural complexity and underexplored intersections, such as sexuality, race, and religion (Abhishek & Srivastava, 2021; Aya Pastrana et al., 2020; Badejo et al., 2021; Fowler & Thomas, 2023; Gordon et al., 2022; Martam, 2016; Peñaloza et al., 2023; Rinallo et al., 2023). Scholars have also emphasised the importance of examining bodies and text within the SMI domain, as these serve as key sites through which both SMIs and consumers perpetuate or resist power.

In line with this, my research adopts an intersectionality framework that moves beyond binary understandings of gender as a power relation, allowing the relevant intersections to emerge organically from the data (Gurrieri et al., 2023; Södergren & Vallström, 2022; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021). These will be explored through examinations of SMIs' imagery and text in Paper 1 (see Chapter 4) of this thesis. Furthermore, these gaps will be addressed in response to RQ1: *How do gender dynamics influence the content shared by SMIs?* This is further elaborated on in the final chapter of this thesis.

GAP 2: Current studies reveal a gap in understanding how SMIs construct their social identities, particularly in relation to the way in which marketplace dynamics and platform algorithms shape these identities within the context of broader gender norms and the pressure to appear authentic (Abidin, 2019; Audrezet et al., 2020; Bishop, 2018; Duffy & Meisner, 2023; Farivar & Wang 2022). This line of research also examines how SMIs navigate cancel culture, which scholars identify as highly context-specific and in need of further exploration, particularly due to its significant impact on SMIs' wellbeing (Demsar et al., 2023; Lee & Abidin, 2024; Lewis & Christin, 2022). This is especially relevant in countries where regulations around brand disclosures and broader protections for SMIs remain unclear or underdeveloped (Lee & Abidin, 2024).

These studies provide valuable insights into the gender dynamics within the SMI domain, upon which my PhD research builds. My research is set in T&T, where regulations governing SMIs' endorsements and their protections are not yet established. As such, Paper 2 of my research focuses on how SMIs' construct their social identities and how the marketplace both shapes and is impacted by SMIs' social identities. This further responds to RQ2 of my PhD thesis: *How do SMIs and consumers navigate gender dynamics in the T&T SMI domain?*

GAP 3: In exploring the development of SMIs' social identities, investigations into how SMIs adopt activist personas and the role this plays in shaping representation within the SMI domain are so far limited (Aboelenien et al., 2023; Fowler & Thomas, 2023; Gurrieri et al., 2023). This gap is relevant because SMIs can promote representation and advance social change or detract from it by promoting harmful behaviours (Lee & Chung, 2025), or even become actors through which exploitative marketing practices can be masked (Drenten et al., 2018; McVey et al., 2024). Therefore, further research is needed to critically examine how SMIs engage in activism on social media platforms, particularly within social marketing,

where scholars have called for deeper exploration of how SMIs can be leveraged to advance pro-social causes and drive meaningful social change (Alsalem et al., 2020).

My PhD research responds to this gap by examining the implications of SMIs' activism for social marketing. Specifically, it explores how activist social identities are curated and displayed across various levels of expertise and follower ranks (Fowler & Thomas, 2023), and how consumers engage with and respond to these forms of representation. This research is found in Chapter 6 of this thesis and responds to RQ3: *What can be learnt about gender dynamics in the T&T SMI domain to provide a framework for gender responsive influencer marketing, particularly in social marketing?*

GAP 4: Across all areas identified in the literature review, namely within the SMI domain, wider social marketing and marketing scholarship, and through the intersectionality framework, there is an overarching call for further decolonial, context-specific perspectives (Aya Pastrana et al., 2020; Badejo et al., 2021; Eckhardt & Kopalle, 2024; Gordon et al., 2022; Peñaloza et al., 2023; Uduehi et al., 2024). Emerging research provides perspectives utilising intersectionality and context-specific knowledge (Hurley, 2021; Kamran, 2023), and my PhD research builds on these contributions.

Indeed, the Caribbean feminist lens utilised by my research can support a decolonial perspective, which foregrounds ongoing colonial struggles rather than framing colonialism as a singular shaping moment of post-emancipatory societies (Gutiérrez Rodríguez & Reddock, 2021). As this gap is overarching, it is identified and addressed across all three journal papers produced through this research (Chapters 4, 5, and 6) and is discussed further in the final chapter of this PhD thesis.

GAP 5: Aligned with researchers' calls for decoloniality is an emphasis on restoring intersectionality to its full explanatory power, not merely as a framework for addressing diversity but as a critical tool for analysing power and structural inequality (Rosa-Salas &

Sobande, 2022; Steinfield et al., 2019). This is identified in SMI studies where scholars have asked for further explorations into the socially constructed factors that are shaped by power (Veresiu & Parmentier, 2021) within marketing (Rosa-Salas & Sobande, 2022) and social marketing (Gordon et al., 2022).

My PhD research addresses this gap in current research by applying an intersectionality framework with a specific focus on power dynamics. This approach is further enriched by Caribbean feminist theory, which is inherently intersectional and deeply attentive to how power is historically constructed and expressed across both offline and online spaces (Hurley, 2021; Ourahmoune & El Jurdi, 2022).

2.12 Conclusion

The chapter above outlines the existing academic discourse on gender within the SMI domain and explores the literature underpinning the theoretical framework, intersectionality and Caribbean feminism, within which this research is grounded. It examines the roles and influence of key actors in the domain, including consumers, social media influencers (SMIs), brands, and platform algorithms, and identifies key gaps in the literature.

These gaps include the need for more inclusive, non-binary approaches to gender; a deeper exploration of social identities within the SMI space, particularly among influencers who adopt activist personas; and stronger alignment with the aims of the social marketing sub-discipline, where SMI-led initiatives are an emerging area of interest.

The chapter also highlights the lack of research engaging with decolonial perspectives in marketing and social marketing, and calls for a return to the original purpose of intersectionality as a critical framework for analysing power. The research questions guiding this PhD research are designed to directly address each of these gaps, contributing new insights to the field.

In the following chapter, I describe the methodology utilised for this PhD research, which addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do gender dynamics influence the content shared by SMIs?

RQ2: How do SMIs and consumers navigate gender dynamics in the T&T SMI domain?

RQ3: What can be learnt about gender dynamics in the T&T SMI domain to provide a framework for gender responsive influencer marketing, particularly in social marketing?

CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY



3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the methodology adopted for this PhD research, which is grounded in a becoming ontological and constructionist–critical epistemological worldview. This perspective not only prioritises understanding lived experiences within specific contexts but also emphasises the need for critical thinking, analysis, and action, specifically responding to and challenging systems of power that reinforce gendered hierarchies and oppression.

The chapter is structured to reflect the components of the research paradigm – ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodologies used - and show how each element aligns to support the overall PhD research project. It begins with an overview of research paradigms, introducing the philosophical foundations of my research. This is followed by a detailed discussion of my research's ontology and epistemology, illustrating how knowledge is understood, valued, and co-constructed between the researcher and the participants.

Researcher positionality and reflexivity are then discussed under the axiology section, outlining the values and subjectivity brought to the research. This is followed by a background on the research participants, highlighting their perspectives and the values they bring to the research context. A contextual overview of gender dynamics within the T&T SMI space then follows, offering insights into the broader structures that shape the domain and the significance of this thesis's focus. Together, these sections establish a foundation for understanding how power is experienced within the T&T SMI domain. The section concludes with an outline of the ethical considerations guiding the research and the intentional steps taken to co-create value with participants throughout the process.

The methodology section then presents the research design - the overarching plan and purpose of the research, followed by a detailed account of the research approach, sampling strategies, and data collection methods. These are presented according to the two stages of my thesis: Stage 1, which employed Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FDCA), and Stage 2, which involved narrative interviews.

The chapter concludes with a summary of the methodological approach, setting the stage for the stand-alone journal papers presented in Chapters 4–6 of this thesis.

3.2 Summary of the Research Paradigm

A paradigm is a set of basic beliefs about how we make sense of the world, our place in it, the nature of reality, and the possible relationships within and between its parts (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 2013). I first summarise the research paradigm adopted for my research, before explaining each component in more detail. These beliefs guide and justify our approach to understanding complex issues. Paradigms are accepted on faith and are not typically subject to external justification, as individual worldviews represent their most fundamental truths (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Paradigms can sometimes overlap when people share similar core assumptions, for example, constructivism and critical theory both view reality as socially constructed (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). However, paradigms may also conflict when worldviews diverge significantly, for instance, objectivists believe that objective reality exists independently of perception, while constructionists assert that knowledge is constructed and that there is no absolute truth (Crotty, 1998).

Lincoln and Guba (2013) propose that paradigms are shaped by the interaction of four core elements (see Figure 1): the ontological question (what is the nature of reality and what can be known about it?), the epistemological question (what is the nature of knowledge and the relationship between the knower and what can be known?), the axial question (how do I

exercise morality in this world?), and the methodological question (how can the inquirer explore and come to know reality?) (Crotty, 1998; Lincoln et al., 2023).



Figure 3.1: *Overview of Research Paradigm Components*

For my PhD thesis, I have engaged with the ontological approach of *becoming*, which perceives reality as a constantly changing social process. Within marketing and consumer scholarship, gender studies have been explored through ontological perspectives of *being* and

becoming (Hearn & Hein, 2015; Maclaran et al., 2009; Poole et al., 2021). However, an ontology of *becoming* is increasingly supported by gender researchers, including those from the Global South, who call for studies to adopt adaptive approaches that reflect the diverse gendered realities and experiences of different social groups (Eckhardt & Kopalle, 2024; Hearn & Hein, 2015; Poole et al., 2021; Purkayastha, 2021; Stanley & Wise, 1993). This perspective directly challenges ontologies of *being*, which position reality as fixed and unchanging (Poole et al., 2021; Stanley & Wise, 1993). As my PhD thesis is rooted in Global South feminist perspectives, adopting an ontology of *becoming* enables me to explore the dynamic and changing experiences of those in contexts that are often understudied within mainstream marketing scholarship.

Epistemologically, my research adopts both a constructivist and a critical lens, drawing on the growing recognition of their overlap (Charmaz, 2020; Lincoln et al., 2023). Within marketing and consumer research, gender studies are increasingly explored through a variety of epistemological perspectives (Eckhardt & Kopalle, 2024). A constructivist critical approach allows me to value subjectivity and multiple perspectives, consistent with the *becoming* ontology, while also critically addressing systems of power and inequality embedded in social life structures that are central to critical theory (Best et al., 2018; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 2013). This approach emphasises mindfulness of how power shapes knowledge, aiming to produce value-mediated and emancipatory findings—core goals of Global South and broader feminist research (Hammersley, 1992). This aligns with the intersectional paradigm guiding my research, which remains underexplored in marketing and consumption research (Eckhardt & Kopalle, 2024).

Consistent with constructivist and critical lenses, my research adopts an axial stance that emphasises open and honest dialogue with participants, and the ongoing use of reflexivity to acknowledge any biases I may bring to the research (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). In

line with this approach, I also examine and explicitly recognise the values of external stakeholders and the broader context in which the research is situated. Furthermore, I embrace the challenge of using my research to question dominant ideas about gender representation in marketing and consumer research, while amplifying the emancipatory voices of my participants. This approach is especially important for intersectional research in the Global South (Purkayastha, 2021), as well as in marketing and consumer scholarship more broadly (Eckhardt & Kopalle, 2024).

Methodologically, I adopt a qualitative approach consisting of FDCA and narrative interviews to foster constructive critique as well as dialogue between my subjects and me. This methodological approach enabled my critical examination of power dynamics within lived experiences and supports the development of strategies to challenge gender injustices and promote emancipation (Hammersley, 1992). This is consistent with Global South feminist methodologies, which emphasise amplifying the voices of historically marginalised, understudied groups (Beoku-Betts & Adomako Ampofo, 2021). The elements of my research paradigm (ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology) are explained in further detail in the paragraphs that follow.

3.3 The Ontological Question

Early Greek thinkers suggested that how we assert ourselves is shaped by our ontology, that is, by our understanding of the nature of being or reality (Poster, 1996). Ontology draws from two broader schools of thought: *being*, associated with thinkers like Parmenides, who viewed reality as fixed and unchanging, where change is seen as illusory and meaningless; and *becoming*, aligned with thinkers like Heraclitus, who saw reality as dynamic and ever-changing and adopted strategies to accommodate constant change (Poster, 1996).

Scholars have critiqued a tendency within marketing and consumption scholarship to adopt perspectives aligned with *being*, which often encourage static and binary approaches to gendered realities (Despande, 1983; Hearn & Hein, 2015 Maclaran et al., 2009; Zainuddin & Gordon, 2020; Poole et al., 2021). Such approaches have been shown to reinforce dominant ideologies, often omitting the experiences of marginalised groups, including those who are othered by race, ethnicity, sexuality, history, and culture (Eckhardt & Kopalle, 2024; Hearn & Hein, 2015; Poole et al., 2021; Purkayastha, 2021; Stanley & Wise, 1993). To this end, gender researchers in marketing and consumer studies have advocated for alternative approaches that involve an interrogation of power relations to explore ideologies that are either privileged or oppressed in certain contexts (Badejo et al., 2022; Eckhardt & Kopalle, 2024; Poole et al., 2021).

Global South feminists have challenged us to go even further, interrogating terminologies (for example, "colonisation") and social identities (for example, "indigenous") that are consistent with dominant Global North ideologies (Purkayastha, 2021). Such ideologies have been critiqued for promoting broad generalisations and stereotypical assumptions about large groups, for example, constructing women in Global South contexts as a homogeneous group of "Third World Women", while ignoring their specific racial and ethnic relationships with the socio-cultural and political factors that shape their lives (Mohanty, 1988; Purkayastha, 2021). The dominant discourse also silences large groups by promoting visibility through the lens of dominant Global North perspectives, which often overlooks the struggles and experiences of marginalised groups within underexplored contexts (Poole et al., 2021; Purkayastha, 2021). To this end, scholars suggest an intersectional approach to understanding gender as a dynamic and ever-changing idea within marketing and consumer research, interrogating power and how this shapes privilege and oppression within a given context—consistent with *becoming* ontological perspectives

(Eckhardt & Kopalle, 2024; Hearn & Hein, 2015; Poole et al., 2021; Purkayastha, 2021; Stanley & Wise, 1993). As I explain later, my research adopts this *becoming* ontological approach, which underpins a constructionist-critical epistemology and draws upon intersectional frameworks grounded in contextual Caribbean feminist thought.

3.4 The Epistemological Question

Epistemology questions the relationship between the person trying to know something and the thing they are trying to know (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). It draws upon ontology, as imagining the relationship between the knower and the known is based on how we view reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). My PhD research draws upon constructivism and critical theory epistemologies. These are explained in the following sections.

3.4.1 Constructivism

The constructivist lens holds that there are multiple realities, each shaped by individuals' lived experiences, cultures, and social interactions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 2013). As a result, one person's understanding of the world may differ significantly from another's, since their realities are informed by who they are and where they come from. From this perspective, and in alignment with *becoming*, there is no single, fixed truth but rather beliefs, which are considered valid within their specific contexts and may evolve over time (Lincoln et al., 2023).

Constructivism has, however, been critiqued for its tendency to emphasise the validation of individual perspectives without always critically interrogating those views (Crotty, 1998). In response, constructivist scholars have argued that harmful, oppressive, or discriminatory meanings can, and should, be challenged and revised within a constructivist framework (Lincoln et al., 2023). In this way, constructivism may also draw on insights from

other non-positivist paradigms, such as critical theory, to deepen our understanding of people's multiple realities and develop actionable strategies to challenge harm and discrimination (Lincoln et al., 2023). My research integrates constructivism and critical theory, drawing on the strengths of both approaches to amplify participants' lived experiences and develop strategies for transformative, emancipatory change (Charmaz, 2020). Critical theory is discussed next.

3.4.2 Critical Theory

Critical theorists view reality as something that was once flexible but has been structured and shaped over time by systems of socio-historical power that influence political, gendered, and cultural realities, resulting in societal norms that appear natural or fixed (Best et al., 2018; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1994). Critical thinkers critique traditional theories, such as those in mainstream science and economics, for their tendency to describe what exists, rather than interrogate the power structures that shape society and determine who benefits from them (Abromeit, 2018; Best et al., 2018). Researchers adopting a critical lens, therefore, aim to uncover the political forces behind these constructions, challenge unjust norms, and empower individuals to resist oppression (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Kincheloe and McLaren, 1998).

In this way, critical theory is inherently political, reflexive, value-driven, and grounded in an ongoing process of reflection and action (Crotty, 1998; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1998). While some critics argue that a truly free, just, and equal society may be an unattainable ideal, critical researchers maintain that each step toward emancipatory change is meaningful (Crotty, 1998). It encourages interrogation of societal power structures, how power operates, who benefits, and how it produces and sustains inequality (Abromeit, 2018; Best et al., 2018; Crotty, 1998; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1998).

Notably, although feminist research often falls under the umbrella of critical theory, due to its focus on power and action, not all feminists align with this paradigm (Crotty, 1998; Hammersley, 1992). Hammersley (1992) notes that some feminist scholars critique the critical paradigm for potentially framing feminism within a predefined political agenda. This perspective can be reflected in the belief held by some researchers that intersectionality constitutes a paradigm in its own right (McCall, 2005). However, following suggestions in marketing and consumer research that intersectionality's principles can be further articulated and expanded (Gopaldas, 2013), my stance for this PhD thesis aligns with Guba and Lincoln (1994) in positioning intersectionality as a perspective within the constructivist and critical theory paradigms, but one that should also be informed by context-specific, culturally grounded ideas. The axial approach guiding this research, which emphasises ethics and reflexivity in building knowledge, is detailed in the following section.

3.5 The Axial Question

Axiology concerns the role of values, such as ethics, beliefs, and spirituality, in shaping research (Lincoln et al., 2018). It plays a fundamental role throughout the research process and, as such, should be considered an integral component of the research paradigm.

Both constructivism and critical theory assert that knowledge is co-created through the interaction between the researcher and research participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 2013). This emphasises the intrinsic connection between ontology and epistemology and reflects a shared rejection of the ideology that knowledge is objective or value-free (Lincoln et al., 2023). While constructivists focus on understanding meaning and lived experiences, critical theorists aim to uncover and challenge the power structures that sustain inequality and oppression (Abromeit, 2018; Best et al., 2018; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 2013).

Aligned with these perspectives, constructivist-critical studies emphasise that the values and background of the researcher, stakeholders, participants, and the broader social context must be openly acknowledged, as they are central to shaping the knowledge produced (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 2013). This directly addresses the axial question of the relationship between the inquirer and the known, positioning the researcher as an active and reflexive participant in the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 2013).

Accordingly, the following sections present my positionality and reflexivity as the lead researcher and author of this thesis. This is followed by axiological reflections, which include a brief overview of the research participants and a discussion of key gender dynamics within the T&T social media domain that frame this research. These reflections are grounded in the understanding that knowledge is context-bound and shaped by power dynamics (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1998; Lincoln et al., 2023). Lastly, I explain the ethical considerations that were adopted for this PhD research.

3.5.1 Researcher Positionality

I am a mixed-race woman from T&T, which many nationals refer to as "Spanish" (Khan, 2013). My ethnic background includes African, Afro-Venezuelan, French Creole, and Indo-Trinidadian heritage.

Growing up, I became aware that I was treated differently depending on the space I occupied, whether in school or later in the workplace. Raised in a working-class family, with kinky Afro-textured hair and a mid-sized body, I was not considered popular in school. However, as I progressed into the professional world, particularly within the entertainment industry and leading marketing and advertising agencies, others began to point to my lighter skin tone as a source of privilege in those settings. But was it truly a privilege? While I was able to gain access to these spaces, I quickly noticed that my influence was limited, especially

in comparison to women who not only had lighter skin but also embodied other features aligned with Eurocentric beauty ideals, such as slim figures and long, straight hair.

My interest in how power dynamics operate through bodily appearance, especially for women in the entertainment and marketing/advertising industries, deepened when I became involved in SMI marketing on the agency end. In my role, I often proposed influencers to clients based on campaign briefs that outlined criteria for brand congruence, ranging from appearance and follower count to their overall aesthetic, marital status, occupation, and social media behaviour. While some choices were logically aligned, for example, recommending SMIs who were parents to promote baby formula, other decisions made me increasingly uneasy. I realised that I was often evaluating SMIs through a lens shaped by societal norms, selecting them based on how attractive, trendy, or respectable they appeared. Women who were seen as conventionally attractive and who wore revealing outfits on their platforms were typically cast to promote alcohol, yet these same women were dismissed by clients in the health and social change sector as irresponsible and lacking respectability, deemed unfit to endorse practices like handwashing or breastfeeding. These observations led me to explore gender dynamics in the SMI domain, which is the aim of this PhD thesis.

My experiences conducting research in the SMI domain in T&T revealed yet another power hierarchy: the dominance of mainstream marketing and consumption literature that centres knowledge produced in Global North contexts, while significantly under-examining those from the Global South. This gap is particularly stark in relation to intersectionality and, more broadly, gender research—core aspects of my inquiry. The experiences of SMI women in T&T, shaped by specific postcolonial, racial, and class dynamics, cannot be fully understood without drawing on Caribbean feminist scholarship, which offers the necessary contextual grounding.

In line with the constructivist and critical lenses guiding my research, my aim is not only to understand and amplify the voices of SMIs and consumers in T&T for emancipatory purposes but also to elevate the body of knowledge produced by Caribbean feminist scholars since the 1970s. Their work, deeply intersectional in nature, critically unpacks how power is constructed and negotiated in multi-ethnic, postcolonial societies like T&T. Such insights respond to calls for contextual, Global South insights in gender studies within marketing and consumption scholarship. The following section provides insights into researcher reflexivity.

3.5.2 Researcher Reflexivity

Purkayastha (2021) highlighted the significance of reflexivity in conducting studies within Global South contexts, aiming to develop more respectful scholarship. This mirrors the responsibility and values indicated by the constructivist-critical paradigm and is important for ontological perspectives of *becoming*, as it broadens understandings of contextual power relations. Throughout the research process, I maintained a reflexive journal to note my own subjectivities, which enabled ongoing reflection on my own values, assumptions, and positionality, as well as those of the participants engaged in this PhD research and wider society (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). I utilised the contents of this journal, particularly during the data collection process, noting my reactions to participants, emerging assumptions, and moments where my positionality shaped the interaction. I continued to draw on these reflections throughout analysis and writing to track interpretive decisions, remain attentive to power dynamics, and ensure transparency and rigour in the development of themes.

Key aspects of my reflexivity included, first, acknowledging my personal experiences with SMIs, their followers, and brands that engage SMIs for both commercial and non-commercial purposes, to avoid these experiences from influencing the new insights gathered from research participants. Additionally, I recognised my own biases shaped by Judeo-

Christian norms around religiosity and feminine respectability standards. Acknowledging these biases allowed me to more objectively examine the power dynamics within the SMI industry, beyond the limits of my own perspective.

Second, I reflected on the influence of the wider socio-historical context in shaping both my own perspectives and those of the participants. Researchers must remain critically aware not only of the broader national context but also of cultural dynamics across space and time (Fairclough, 2010; Purkayastha, 2021). In the multicultural context of T&T, religious festivals (such as the Muslim celebration *Hosay*) and cultural events (such as Carnival) shape the perspectives of those living within this society. As the lead researcher, I consciously reflected on my evolving relationship with these cultural contexts to foster openness and objectivity. The following section presents axiological reflections, providing insights into the participants engaged in my PhD research.

3.5.3 Axiological Reflections

Axiological reflections focus on the researcher's awareness of participants and their experiences within a specific cultural and social context. The sections below include reflections on the experiences of SMIs and consumers, followed by considerations of the gender dynamics that influence and shape those experiences.

Background of Research Participants

Reflecting global trends, SMIs in T&T are predominantly women from diverse professional backgrounds (Hudders & De Jans, 2022). They are typically categorised by follower count into four tiers: mega (100k+), macro (50–100k), mid (10–50k), and micro (<10k). These SMIs represent a range of races, ethnicities, socio-cultural and economic backgrounds, and sexualities. While some SMIs build their popularity directly through social

media platforms, others gain followings through careers in the entertainment industry, such as music or comedy, and later bring their established audiences to the social platforms.

However, those who align with societal beauty standards tend to attract large followings more quickly than those who operate outside these norms. Although the SMI domain presents itself as a space where diverse perspectives and creative expression can flourish—amplifying voices and talents that might otherwise go unrecognised—it is also shaped by hierarchies of power and mechanisms of control.

As Barratt (2018) found in her content analysis of consumer responses to a local news update, online audiences (in this case, SMI followers) often act as gatekeepers of harmful societal norms, policing what is considered legitimate or responsible behaviour. This scrutiny frequently becomes entangled with SMI's personal identities, such as their race, religion, sexuality, gender, social class, and ethnicity, through public commentary and criticism.

Consumers, therefore, hold significant power in shaping the influence SMIs can wield in the online domain. They reward or reject influencers based on how they present themselves and what they represent. From my own experience collaborating with SMIs since the early days of the industry, and through engaging them in this PhD research, I can attest to the fears many hold around being 'cancelled' or deemed illegitimate. It is a constant threat—one that compels many to tread carefully, often avoiding controversial topics or opting for more neutral expressions (Levesque et al., 2023).

Still, SMIs are not all treated equally. Privilege and discrimination are often assigned based on their physical appearance—race, ethnicity, sex—and how closely they conform to societal and cultural stereotypes. These dynamics deeply influence how SMIs navigate visibility and authenticity in the domain. Notably, some SMIs actively resist these normative constraints, using their platforms to challenge dominant social expectations and advocate for their own legitimacy and visibility and that of others who do not conform to restrictive norms

(Roper & Wint, 2020). These acts of resistance align with what Caribbean feminist scholars have identified as a form of cyberfeminism—digital practices through which SMIs challenge inequality and create new knowledge. Scholars such as Haynes (2016, 2017) and Baldwin and Cossy (2018) have called for greater attention to these cyberfeminist interventions, which not only disrupt dominant narratives but also expand the possibilities for representation and empowerment within the SMI domain.

Given the central role consumers play in attributing power and legitimacy to SMIs, they are also included as participants in this PhD research. Consumers follow SMIs for a variety of reasons, chief among them the ability to identify with one or more aspects of an SMI's social identity (Hudders & De Jans, 2022). Like SMIs, followers represent a diverse range of sexes, races, ethnicities, and socio-economic backgrounds. While most interact with SMIs by liking or sharing content, others engage more directly by commenting or sending private messages across different platforms.

Consumers often perceive SMIs as personal brands—composites of values, aesthetics, personal identities, endorsed products, and perceived authenticity within their field of expertise, whether that be lifestyle, food, fashion, music, or design. Once consumers begin to support an SMI, their relationship is often deeply personal and loyal, often referred to by researchers as a trans-parasocial (two-way) relationship (Lou, 2022) or a para-social (one-way) relationship (Hudders & De Jans, 2022; Mardon et al., 2023a). They hold SMIs accountable to the personas they present online and attribute a significant degree of trust and influence to them. However, when an SMI deviates from these expectations, whether by expressing unpopular views, shifting their appearance, or aligning with conflicting brands, followers may interpret this as inauthentic. In such instances, consumers may feel betrayed and compelled to withdraw the influence and legitimacy they once granted, sometimes publicly calling out the SMI on social media. This dynamic further reflects the role of

consumers in shaping how SMIs present themselves on social media platforms and demonstrates the precarious balance SMIs must maintain to navigate power, identity, and audience expectations in the online domain.

Reflections on Research Participants

Caribbean feminist scholars such as Barratt (2018) and Esposito et al. (2024) have identified gender dynamics in online spaces that closely mirror those in offline contexts within T&T. Indeed, Caribbean feminists have long theorised the persistence of colonial-era gender relations in postcolonial T&T, noting that although the period of emancipation was believed to mark progress towards gender equity, many inequalities remain entrenched (Barriteau, 2001).

While women in T&T today technically have access to political, socio-economic, and cultural spheres, they are still often regarded as second-class citizens in practice, expected to continually prove their worth to gain full recognition in these spaces (Barriteau, 2001). A key mechanism by which these gender hierarchies are reinforced, both online and offline, is through the enforcement of "respectability politics". This refers to the expectation that women conform to ideals of respectable femininity, including a neat appearance, moral decorum, and roles tied to motherhood and domestic responsibility (Barratt, 2018; Green, 2006).

Barratt (2018) highlights how online consumers police women's behaviour based on these respectability standards, often enacting a form of GBV, via public online comments, to punish those who deviate from them. Similarly, Esposito et al. (2024) observe that women who are victims of GBV are judged online against these same standards, with public empathy selectively extended only to those who conform to ideals of respectability.

Barratt (2018) further illustrates how these respectability standards are mediated by race, ethnicity, and social class. For instance, Afro-Trinidadian women have historically been positioned between extremes—cast either as docile or vulgar, often associated with masculinity and denied full recognition as economically or sexually autonomous. In contrast, Indo-Trinidadian femininity is more often framed around ideals of purity, respectability, independence, and responsibility. These Victorian-influenced standards of femininity were inherited from T&T's colonial past.

As Mohammed (2018) cautions, it is essential that any framework used to examine respectability politics be grounded in the specific cultural and historical context of the Caribbean. Failing to do so risks misrepresenting or overlooking the nuanced ways these dynamics manifest, thereby compromising both the accuracy and ethical integrity of the analysis.

The subsections above outline my personal positionality, including my background, values, and perspectives as the lead researcher and author of this PhD thesis. They also provide insight into the participants of this research—their behaviours, concerns, and the power relations embedded in the context of the online domain in T&T. I include this information because, from a constructivist and critical theoretical perspective, knowledge is understood to be co-created between the researcher and participants, and shaped by the power hierarchies present within the research context. The following sections describe the ethical considerations utilised for my research.

3.5.3 Ethical Considerations

Aligned with the constructivist-critical approach, I adhered to the ethical requirements outlined by the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2023). Before commencing this PhD research, I obtained ethical approval from the University's Human

Research Ethics Committee (HREC #6201). This research was conducted in two stages, each with distinct ethical considerations, outlined below:

Stage 1 – Ethical Considerations for the Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

This stage involved analysing the content and consumer interactions (via comments) of 40 SMIs from T&T on Instagram over a 36-month period. Although this content is publicly available, I followed recommendations from intersectional scholars who emphasise the need for transparency when collecting, analysing, and reporting data from the SMI domain (Edwards & Esposito, 2019).

Accordingly, I obtained informed consent from 20 micro- and mid-tier SMIs who were more accessible due to smaller followings. For the remaining 20 macro- and mega-tier SMIs, a waiver of consent was approved due to challenges in accessibility related to their professional demands. However, aligned with my constructivist-critical lens, which prioritises ethical transparency and the safeguarding of participants (Lincoln & Guba, 2013; Lincoln et al., 2023), I sought additional written consent from all SMIs whose data were directly presented in the findings. Each SMI was given the opportunity to review and approve their contributions before the manuscripts were submitted for publication. This was done in adherence with university ethics guidelines and copyright principles, to ensure no harm was caused, particularly given the emancipatory aims of intersectional and critical research (Eckhardt & Kopalle, 2024; Edwards & Esposito, 2019).

Stage 2 – Ethical Considerations for the Narrative Interviews

This stage involved face-to-face narrative interviews with 21 SMIs and 20 consumers in T&T. Informed written consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation. Each received a TT$100 voucher as recompense for their time, in accordance with University Human Ethics Committee approval. The interview protocols were pre-tested

for clarity, contextual relevance, and cultural sensitivity (Eckhardt & Kopalle, 2024). Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities, and member checks were conducted to confirm the accuracy of recorded data.

Throughout data collection and analysis, I maintained a reflexive journal to document my interpretations, emotional responses, and reflections on participant interactions. In line with my constructivist-critical orientation and guidance from intersectionality, SMI marketing and Global South research scholars, these reflections were analysed alongside and reported through a Caribbean feminist lens (Eckhardt & Kopalle, 2024; Edwards & Esposito, 2019; Purkayastha, 2021).

All social media screenshots (Stage 1) and interview recordings (Stage 2) were stored securely on a password-protected drive on the University's server and, in line with ethical guidelines, will be retained for five years. Signed consent forms from Stage 2 were stored in a locked cabinet in my primary PhD supervisor's office.

The following section outlines the methodology used for my PhD research.

3.6 The Methodological Question

In social science, a researcher's worldview—their beliefs about reality and knowledge—shapes not only the choice of methodology but also what is considered important and valid in the research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Accordingly, the chosen research design for this thesis emphasises dialogue and reflection between the researcher and participants, aligning with its combined constructivist-critical approach (Lincoln et al., 2023). From a constructivist perspective, the researcher facilitates a shared understanding of lived experiences through dialogue (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 2013). In contrast, critical theorists not only facilitate understanding but also take on the role of activists, using dialogue to challenge and transform unjust systems (Crotty, 1998; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1998; Lincoln et al.,

2023). I adopted a two-stage qualitative methodology for my PhD research, with the intent to not only explore participants' lived experiences but also uncover power relations embedded in discourse and co-create strategies for transformative change (Charmaz, 2020). The methodology set out was used to respond to the following research questions:

RQ1: How do gender dynamics influence the content shared by SMIs?

RQ2: How do SMIs and consumers navigate gender dynamics in the T&T SMI domain?

RQ3: What can be learnt about gender dynamics in the T&T SMI domain to provide a framework for gender responsive influencer marketing, particularly in social marketing?

3.7 Research Design

The research design is a structured plan that outlines the purpose of the research through its objectives and research questions, and details how those questions will be addressed (Patton, 2015). It serves as a framework for data collection and analysis, ensuring alignment with the research's purpose. This includes prioritising different aspects of the research process, such as exploring causal relationships between variables, understanding the drivers of behaviour within specific contexts, generalising findings beyond the research sample, and examining the interconnectedness of social phenomena over time (Bryman, 2008).

Marketing and consumption studies employ a range of methods to address different research purposes (Ding et al., 2020). Within gender-focused marketing research, scholars have stressed the importance of acknowledging how research methods and the values that underpin them influence what is highlighted and what remains understudied (Eckhardt & Kopalle, 2024). There is a tendency in marketing scholarship to treat gender as a binary and to apply a one-size-fits-all approach across diverse contexts (Eckhardt & Kopalle, 2024).

While this may be effective in some areas of inquiry, it risks oversimplifying the nuanced and culturally specific expressions of gender (Eckhardt & Kopalle, 2024; Uduehi et al., 2024).

As such, marketing and consumer researchers increasingly encourage new studies that aim to explore gender through culturally, socially, and historically grounded perspectives, highlighting how gender is shaped and reshaped through context, time, and social relations (Fowler & Thomas, 2023; Gurrieri et al., 2023). In Global South contexts, however, such research remains limited (Badejo et al., 2021; Ourahmoune & El Jurdi, 2022). My research is designed to address this gap by illuminating the gendered social relations that shape the (SMI) domain in T&T. Drawing on Caribbean feminist scholarship, I interpret this research through a Caribbean feminist lens, not only to generate rich contextual insights but also to amplify the voices of my participants—voices that deserve to be heard and valued within marketing scholarship. I assert that their experiences align with that of other marketing scholars, who have demonstrated how gender can only be meaningfully understood when analysed through the specific cultural and social contexts in which it is lived (Badejo et al., 2021).

This PhD research also responds to calls for increased qualitative inquiry within SMI marketing research (Fowler & Thomas, 2023). Qualitative studies prioritise words over numbers and are typically grounded in constructivist and critical paradigms (Bryman, 2008; Patton, 2015). They aim to explore meaning, understand how systems operate, examine people's lived experiences and perspectives, and identify how broader structures influence individual lives (Patton, 2015). These approaches also emphasise the significance of context in shaping behaviour.

While qualitative research has faced criticism, particularly for its perceived subjectivity and concerns about transparency, generalisability, and replicability (Bryman, 2008), this thesis embraces the value of context-specific, subjective insights. The purpose of

this PhD research is not to generalise findings but to present rich, contextualised knowledge that reflects the complexity of the local setting. This aligns with my constructionist-critical worldview, which recognises that knowledge is shaped by social, cultural, and historical contexts and cannot be separated from them (Crotty, 1998; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1998; Lincoln et al., 2023).

To ensure transparency, the following sections provide a clear outline of the research process, including the rationale for selecting information-rich cases. This research draws on the strengths of qualitative inquiry through a two-stage design. Stage 1 employed FCDA, while Stage 2 involved narrative interviews (see Figure 3.2). The insights generated from Stage 1 offered a strong foundation for exploring gendered expressions and the power dynamics shaping the SMI domain. Importantly, FCDA is well-positioned to be used with complementary methods, such as interviews, allowing for deeper reflection and the co-construction of meaning with participants (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 2010). The combination of these methods supports a rich, contextual understanding of the research topic. These methods were strategically selected to address all three research questions and align with the overall purpose of the thesis. They are discussed in more detail below.

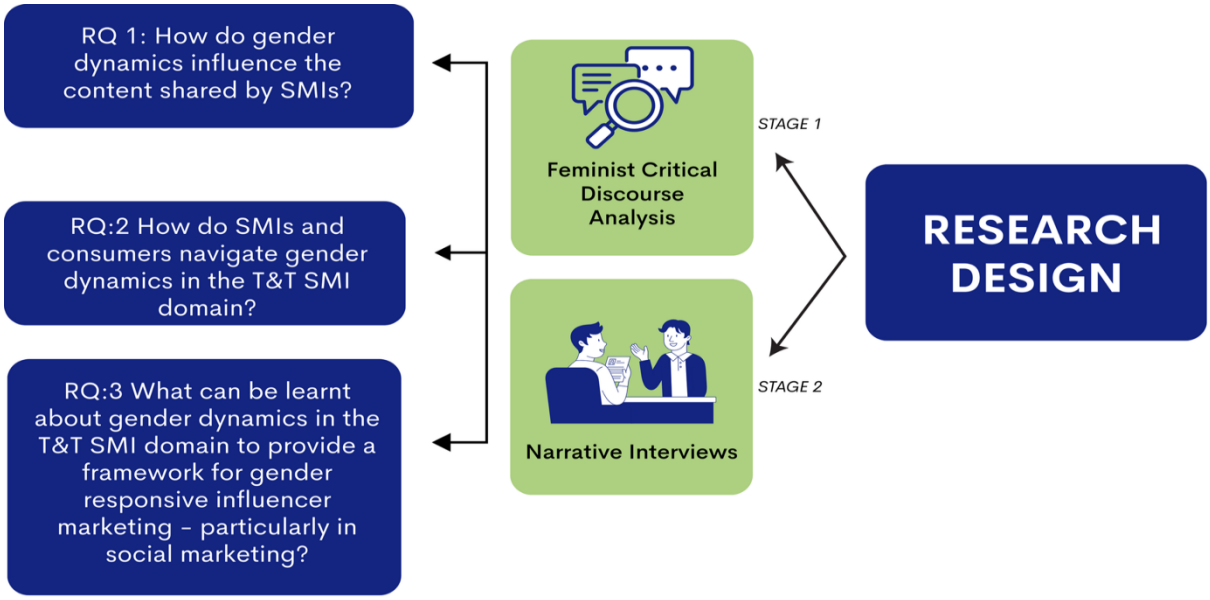


Figure 3.2: The 2-stage qualitative research design adopted for this PhD

3.8 Stage 1: Research Methodology: Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

This stage of the research used FCDA to examine the Instagram feed content of 40 SMIs from T&T, along with consumer responses. Instagram was selected not only for its combination of visual and text-based content, which offers a rich context for analysis, but also because, compared to blogs and YouTube, it remains underexplored in qualitative SMI research within marketing (Fowler & Thomas, 2023). FCDA builds on the foundations of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) by incorporating feminist theory, providing deeper insights into how power and ideology are embedded in discourse, especially in ways that construct and sustain gender hierarchies and broader social structures (Lazar, 2017).

CDA, as defined by Fairclough (2013), is a method for systematically analysing the relationships between language and broader social structures. It is both descriptive and normative in nature, aiming to expose social injustices through discourse while identifying potential strategies for change (Fairclough, 2013). Its attention to power dynamics through language makes CDA particularly suited to studies using the intersectionality framework, such as this one, which explores how socio-cultural, historic factors intersect to shape gendered meaning.

This approach responds to Mühleisen and Waileck's (2008) call to recognise the underexplored yet significant influence of language on gender in the Caribbean. Similarly, Barriteau (2003) highlights the need for future gender projects to consider the social relations of gender in efforts to reduce inequality. FCDA aligns with this vision by centring justice, transformation, and the role of discourse in reproducing or challenging dominant gender ideologies (Lazar, 2017).

While other CDA-based approaches have been used in social research, such as Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis by Pemberton and Thakhar (2021) and Discourse Historical Analysis by Esposito (2017), these methods were designed to explore specific political or technological influences. Given this research's focus on how gender dynamics influence SMIs' social media content and consumer engagement, a feminist lens is more appropriate.

Our use of FCDA also responds to calls for more qualitative methods in SMI marketing research, particularly those that examine real-world content (Fowler & Thomas, 2023; Vrontis et al., 2021). While previous studies have predominantly analysed such content (text and imagery) quantitatively, this can obscure the nuanced role of power in shaping discourse on online platforms (Cottom, 2016). As a descriptive, analytical, and emancipatory method, FCDA enables us to critically examine how gender ideologies are embedded in the content and interactions within the SMI domain, and how these discourses can be negotiated or resisted (Lazar, 2005).

3.8.1 Sampling for FCDA

Stage 1 of this thesis used purposive sampling to identify 40 SMIs as information-rich cases relevant to the research purpose (see Figure 3.2) (Levesque et al., 2023; Patton, 2015; Pemberton & Takhar, 2021). The aim was not to generalise findings to a

broader population but to gain a deeper understanding of power relations and gendered identity construction within the online domain—an approach that is more feasible and effective with smaller sample sizes (Gurrieri & Drenten, 2019b).

To reduce selection bias and promote the use of more randomised approaches in SMI research (Vrontis et al., 2021), the sample was drawn from a pre-established sampling frame containing the Instagram handles of the top 100 SMIs in T&T based on endorsement uptake among leading local marketing agencies. This frame was developed by a local SMI marketing expert who operates independently from the research team. Such experts are typically contracted by local marketing and advertising agencies to identify suitable influencers for both local and international campaigns.

Based on previous literature highlighting the differences in engagement levels among SMIs of varying follower sizes (Kay et al., 2019; Li et al., 2019), the sampling frame was stratified into four tiers tailored to the local context: mega-level SMIs (over 100k followers), macro-level (50–100k), mid-level (10–50k), and micro-level (under 10k). From each tier, the top 10 SMIs were selected, beginning at the top of the ranking and working downward, resulting in a total sample of 40 SMIs. Care was taken to ensure diversity across ethnicity, race, sexuality, sex, and age to enable a thorough intersectional analysis. Pseudonyms are used for all interview participants and are reflected on Table 3.1. Tables 3.1 and 3.2 present the study participants along with their self-reported gender designations and country-specific ethnic categories, using the context-appropriate classifications drawn from T&T's national census.

The Instagram content from these 40 SMIs, along with related consumer comments, was collected and analysed. In keeping with the importance of voice and shared understanding demonstrated through the constructivist-critical lens, as well as the intersectional framework and Global South feminist benchmarks, member checking was

implemented to ensure the interpretation of meanings from the data was co-created (Patton, 2015).

Social Media Influencers' Gender and Ethnicities							
Category	**#**	**Gender**	**Ethnicity**	**Category**	**#**	**Gender**	**Ethnicity**
MEGA ***Over 100k Followers***	1	Female	Mixed Other	**MID** ***10 - 50k Followers***	21	Male	Mixed African and East Indian
	2	Female	Mixed Other		22	Male	Mixed African and East Indian
	3	Male	African		23	Male	Mixed Other
	4	Male	African		24	Female	Mixed
	5	Male	Mixed Other		25	Male	African
	6	Male	African		26	Female	East Indian
	7	Female	Mixed Other		27	Female	Mixed Other
	8	Male	African		28	Female	Mixed Other
	9	Male	African		29	Female	Chinese
	10	Female	African		30	Female	African
MACRO ***Over 100k Followers***	11	Female	African	**MICRO** ***Under 10k Followers***	31	Female	Mixed African and East Indian
	12	Female	East Indian		32	Female	Mixed Other
	13	Female	Mixed Other		33	Female	Caucasian
	14	Female	Mixed Other		34	Female	Mixed African and East Indian
	15	Male	African		35	Female	Mixed Other
	16	Female	Mixed Other		36	Female	African
	17	Female	Mixed Other		37	Female	African
	18	Female	East Indian		38	Male	African
	19	Female	Chinese		39	Female	African
	20	Male	Mixed		40	Female	Caucasian

Table 3.1: Participants engaged for Stage 1- FDCA

3.8.2 Data Collection and Analysis for FCDA

Data collection was carried out over a 36-month period from November 2022 to November 2024. During the analysis phase, I engaged in iterative, collaborative discussions with my PhD supervisory team. Together, we reviewed and refined emerging themes by connecting them to relevant theories and contextual insights that evolved throughout the research process. The analytical framework followed a four-step approach informed by FCDA and CDA principles (Fairclough, 2010; Lazar, 2017), grounded in Caribbean feminist theory and drawing on methodological practices used in previous SMI research (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013).

Step 1: Thematic Analysis

For the thematic analysis of the FDCA data, I adopted an analytic approach that facilitated the collection and development of a rich, contextualised dataset, offering deep, organic insights into interactions within the SMI domain (Cottom, 2016; Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013). The initial stage involved unobtrusive observation, or "lurking", to identify contextual gendered patterns in both SMI content and consumer responses. This mirrored the method used in Gurrieri and Cherrier's (2013) study of fashion blogs.

Following this, I compiled a dataset of text and imagery shared by SMIs over a six-month period (January – June 2023), resulting in 3,042 posts spanning over 2,000 pages. I employed inductive coding to analyse the data, allowing themes and patterns to emerge naturally from the content (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this initial analysis, my supervisory team and I observed a noticeable increase in gendered SMI content and consumer engagement around the Carnival period in T&T.

Aligned with the thesis' constructivist-critical perspective (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1998; Lincoln et al., 2023), I adhered to FDCA procedures to examine the interplay between discourse, power, and domination (Lazar, 2017). These procedures built upon the foundational steps of CDA, including "form-and-meaning of text analysis", "analysis of discourse practice", and "analysis of discursive events as social practice" (Fairclough, 2010) (detailed in Steps 2–4 explained below)

In parallel, I conducted a visual semiotic analysis of the SMI content, treating imagery and text as integrated texts (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021). This allowed for the identification of visual-textual relationships and a deeper interpretation of the meanings embedded in SMI posts and associated consumer comments (Drenten et al., 2020; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021).

Step 2: Form-and-Meaning of Text Analysis

This step focused on examining SMI content in relation to their social and personal identities, shaped by intersectional factors such as religion, class, race, and phenotype, drawing on insights from Caribbean feminist theory (Khan, 2004; Reddock, 2014). The analysis explored how these identities were constructed, reinforced, or negotiated through SMIs' and consumers' content, with attention to the broader socio-cultural and historical narratives identified by Caribbean feminists (Barratt, 2018; Barriteau, 1998). This stage is essential to FDCA, as it underscores the interconnectedness of text with the social and personal identities of both SMIs and consumers, as well as how these identities are positioned in relation to others (Fairclough, 2010; Lazar, 2017).

Step 3: Analysis of Discourse Practice

This step involved analysing SMIs' content alongside consumer comments, with a particular focus on the historical and contemporary gendered meanings conveyed through vernacular, emojis, and other language styles used by both SMIs and consumers (Fairclough, 2010; Gurrieri & Drenten, 2019b; Lazar, 2005). As Fairclough (2010) notes, this stage is crucial for understanding interdiscursivity—the ways in which different language styles are drawn upon, combined, and interpreted in the creation and reception of text.

Step 4: Analysis of Discursive Events as Social Practice

This step required an analysis of how the meaning of text shifts across different contexts and over time, with a particular focus on the manifestation of gendered power relations. The analysis was framed within three interconnected contexts: the immediate context (Instagram), the institutional context (local and international media), and the broader societal context (T&T during Carnival) (Fairclough, 2010; Lazar, 2017).

Histography was employed to trace how SMIs and consumers engage with gendered power dynamics in the present, particularly during Carnival, in relation to past eras of the festival (Barriteau, 2012; De Freitas, 1999). This involved examining how historical gender relations in T&T continue to shape, and are reshaped by, current discourses and representations (Barriteau, 2012; De Freitas, 1999).

The section above outlines the implementation of the FDCA method in Stage 1. The findings are presented in Chapters 4 and 6 of this thesis. Stage 2, narrative interviews, is discussed in the following section, beginning with the research approach and sampling strategy and followed by data collection and analysis procedures.

3.9 Stage 2: Research Methodology: Narrative Interviews

This stage involved the analysis of 41 narrative interviews conducted with SMIs and consumers within the T&T context over 6 months (January – June 2023). The inclusion of consumers addresses increasing calls within SMI marketing research to examine follower perspectives, not solely those of influencers, in order to gain deeper insights into gender and identity dynamics within the SMI domain (Abhishek & Srivastava, 2021; Farivar & Wang, 2022). Narrative interviews were selected for their open-ended structure, enabling participants to share lived experiences in their own words (Patton, 2015) (see Appendix for protocol).

This approach aligns with Global South feminist scholarship as well as the constructivist-critical lens, which emphasises the importance of amplifying participants' unfiltered voices while situating them within the specific power relations and sociocultural contexts that shape their intersectional experiences (Beoku-Betts & Adomako Ampofo, 2021; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1998; Lincoln et al., 2023; Purkayastha, 2021). The methodological choices in this stage also respond to calls for more qualitative research that critically engages with power and sociocultural factors in the SMI domain, particularly in underrepresented, multi-ethnic contexts in the Global South (Fowler & Thomas, 2023; Gurrieri et al., 2023; Ourahmoune & El Jurdi, 2022; Reddock, 2019).

3.9.1 Sampling for Narrative Interviews

A sample of 21 SMIs and 20 consumers (see Figure 3.3) was recruited using purposive sampling, which prioritises in-depth study among information-rich cases (Levesque et al., 2023; Patton, 2015). An initial sampling frame (as referenced earlier in Stage 1: FCDA), comprising the top SMIs in T&T, was obtained from a leading SMI marketing expert, who operates independently from the research team. The list featured SMIs of varying expertise,

ages, sex, sexualities, and racial and ethnic backgrounds, categorised into four groups relevant to the T&T context: mega-level SMIs (over 100k followers), macro-level (50–100k followers), mid-level (10–50k followers) and micro SMIs (under 10k followers). Drawing on insights from Kay et al. (2019), who observed varying consumer engagement patterns across SMIs with different follower categories, the primary researcher recruited five SMIs from three categories, with only six from the mid-level category, for the interviews. Additionally, five consumers of similarly diverse backgrounds were selected from the follower list of each chosen SMI by the primary researcher. Interviews were conducted and analysed thereafter.

CONSUMERS			
#	NAME	GENDER	ETHNICITY
1	Andre	Male	Mixed Other
2	Ricardo	Male	African
3	Jamal	Male	Caucasian
4	Marcus	Male	Mixed African and East Indian
5	Kareem	Male	Mixed Other
6	Darnell	Male	Mixed Other
7	Nathaniel	Male	African
8	Antonio	Male	Mixed Other
9	Shane	Male	African
10	Tyrone	Male	Mixed Other
11	Aaliyah	Female	Chinese
12	Danika	Female	East Indian
13	Janelle	Female	Chinese
14	Keisha	Female	Mixed Other
15	Rochelle	Female	East Indian
16	Tamika	Female	African
17	Selena	Female	East Indian
18	Anika	Female	Caucasian
19	Nyah	Female	Caucasian
20	Camille	Female	Mixed African and East Indian

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS				
#	NAME	GENDER	ETHNICITY	RANK
21	Jerome	Male	African	MEGA
22	Joshua	Male	African	MEGA
23	Ryan	Male	African	MEGA
24	Malik	Male	African	MACRO
25	Orlando	Male	East Indian	MACRO
26	Javon	Male	Mixed African and East Indian	MID
27	Rohan	Male	Mixed African and East Indian	MID
28	Trevon	Male	African	MICRO
29	Shanelle	Female	Mixed Other	MEGA
30	Maritza	Female	Mixed Other	MEGA
31	Tasha	Female	East Indian	MACRO
32	Althea	Female	Mixed Other	MACRO
33	Trina	Female	Mixed Other	MACRO
34	Nina	Female	African	MID
35	Kemba	Female	East Indian	MID
36	Nadine	Female	Mixed Other	MID
37	Amy	Female	Mixed Other	MID
38	Ayanna	Female	Mixed Other	MICRO
39	Sade	Female	African	MICRO
40	Celeste	Female	African	MICRO
41	Crystal	Female	African	MICRO

Table 3.2: Participants engaged for Stage 2 – Narrative Interviews

3.9.2 Data Collection and Analysis of Narrative Interviews

Data collection was conducted over a six-month period through face-to-face narrative interviews. Field notes were recorded during each session, facilitating opportunities for reflexive dialogue throughout the process (Beoku-Betts & Adomako Ampofo, 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2022; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1998; Lincoln et al., 2023; Purkayastha, 2021). As interviews progressed, the social identities of SMIs emerged as recurring and significant themes. The semi-structured interview protocol allowed for flexibility in deepening the inquiry when these identities surfaced, enabling the exploration of tensions between SMIs and consumers and the broader factors that shaped these dynamics (Bryman, 2008; Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Importantly, the interviews were intentionally designed to foster open and honest dialogue as a means of co-creation, in which knowledge was not merely extracted but jointly constructed with participants (Beoku-Betts & Adomako Ampofo, 2021; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1998; Lincoln et al., 2023; Purkayastha, 2021). This co-creative process focused on understanding how participants envisioned the design and delivery of social change campaigns involving SMIs. These insights were instrumental in shaping a grounded, culturally relevant, and gender-responsive approach to activism, demonstrating the potential for SMIs to be meaningfully engaged in support of social change (Fowler & Thomas, 2023; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1998; Lincoln et al., 2023).

A reflexive thematic analysis was applied to the interview data from 41 participants (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013). This analysis was both collaborative and dialogic, involving ongoing engagement with the data, Caribbean feminist literature, and marketing scholarship. The aim was to uncover underlying power relations, critically reflect on the complexity of intersectional identities within the SMI domain and examine strategies

for gender-responsive change (Purkayastha, 2021). Reflexivity was central throughout the process, with a commitment to amplifying participants' voices while maintaining critical awareness of positionality and the subjectivities embedded in the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1998; Lincoln et al., 2023).

The analytic process began with familiarisation through repeated listening of audio recordings and detailed review of transcripts. Open coding was employed as an inductive strategy to identify emerging concepts, patterns, and divergences in the data, particularly in relation to participants' perceptions of SMIs' social identities and the lived experiences that shaped them. This was followed by axial coding, a deductive stage used to identify relational patterns and recurring themes across the dataset (Brooks et al., 2021; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Levesque et al., 2023).

Initial themes, such as *authenticity* and *identity*, were identified and iteratively refined through comparison with relevant literature and the conceptual framework underpinning the research. The development of final themes involved multiple rounds of review and discussion within the research team, which included scholars with expertise in both marketing and Caribbean feminist theory (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Findings from Stage 2 are presented in Chapters 5 and 6. Chapter 5 explores how SMIs' social identities are shaped by their lived experiences and interactions with key actors in the marketplace, namely consumers and brands. These interactions influence how SMIs express themselves, communicate, and determine the extent to which they participate in the SMI domain. Chapter 6 focuses on developing a framework for gender-responsive social marketing that meaningfully engages SMIs.

3.10 Conclusion

This methodology chapter has outlined the philosophical foundations, ethical considerations, and methodological choices that guided this PhD thesis. Grounded in a becoming, constructionist-critical, and qualitative paradigm, the approach reflects this research's commitment to understanding lived experiences while interrogating the power structures that shape them. The use of FCDA and narrative interviews, combined with a co-creating approach to knowledge production, enabled a rich, contextually grounded exploration of gender dynamics within the T&T SMI domain.

Importantly, this chapter has also demonstrated how the research design responds directly to all three overarching research questions that guide this PhD thesis. These responses are explored in depth in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, which are presented in the format of standalone journal articles. The findings across these chapters are then discussed collectively in the final Discussion chapter, highlighting their contributions to theory, practice, and future research.

CHAPTER 4

Yasss Queen!

Towards an Intersectional Understanding of the Social Media Influencer Domain



1.0 Introduction

2.0 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

- Gender in the SMI Domain
- Intersectionality in the SMI Domain
- Towards a Caribbean Feminist Analysis of the SMI Domain

3.0 Methodology

- Research Context
- The 'Queen' Archetype
- Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis
- Sampling
- Data Collection and analysis

4.0 Findings: Queen a Feminine Archetype of Resistance

- 'Three 'Queens': Gendered relations of power in the T&T SMI Domain
- Marieange Bovell
- Charlotte Chadee
- Destra Garcia

5.0 Discussion and Implications

- The Impact of Gendered Expectations
- Interactions and Influence

6.0 Limitations, Future Research and Conclusion

4. YASSS QUEEN! TOWARDS AN INTERSECTIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER DOMAIN

Abstract

Researchers have emphasised the importance of enhancing our theoretical understandings about how gender, as an intersectional identity, influences both the content created by social media influencers (SMIs) and consumer engagement. This study addresses this gap by exploring how SMIs shape their influence on social media platforms, whilst navigating both emancipatory and subjugatory forces in their interactions with consumers in the Caribbean. Through analysis of SMIs' content and consumer responses, we interrogate the recurring feminine archetype "Queen", used to highlight valued representations of femininity as legitimate and privileged. This archetype becomes rooted in social identity frames that foreground varying gendered ideals for women, depending on how these intersect with other social identities such as race, class, and age. We interpret this rootedness through a Caribbean feminist lens, using Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis. The study shows how assessments of SMIs' potential depend on the complexity of the social identities that frame their content and persona.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This paper examines how gendered interactions between women social media influencers (SMIs) and their followers in Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) impact influence. Specifically, we demonstrate how SMIs shape their influence on social media platforms, whilst navigating both emancipatory and subjugatory forces in their interactions with consumers. SMIs have emerged as key players in the online marketplace, leveraging their power to influence attitudes, opinions, and purchasing intentions among consumers (Mardon et al., 2023; Vrontis et al., 2021). Our research joins existing conversations on gender in the SMI domain in marketing and consumer research (Drenten et al., 2020; Gurrieri & Drenten, 2019a; Mardon et al., 2023). We respond to the call for greater attention to understanding how power influences the lived experiences of women in the SMI domain (Pemberton & Takhar, 2021; Sobande, 2022). We regard power not as a fixed entity but as a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by social, cultural, and historical contexts. Power transcends domination to include agency, resistance, and the capacity for change (Hall & Morley, 2020).

Our study is informed by Crenshaw's (1989) intersectional framework, which posits that the interplay of multiple identities (like gender, race, ethnicity, religion, language, and age) results in experiences of privilege and exclusion. Specifically, we demonstrate how consumers attribute status, value, and legitimacy to SMI women in T&T, based on levels of privilege assigned to their intersecting social identities, and how this shapes the way they are perceived and valued. We examine the recurrence of the language "Queen" to reference a feminine archetype used by SMIs and consumers to draw attention to valued representations, and the recognition of such as legitimate and privileged in context.

Prior SMI research has pointed to intersectionality's value to explorations of how power shapes influencers' online identities as expressed through their embodied and verbal

expressions (Pemberton & Takhar, 2021; Sobande 2022). Researchers have also urged marketers to consider contextually grounded understandings of differences that stem from an intersectional analysis, which helps speak to how these are related to social, political, and cultural relations of power, particularly in understudied contexts across the Global South (Badejo et al., 2021; Orahmoune & El Jurdi, 2022). Furthermore, scholars have problematised a tendency in marketing and consumer research generally (Rosa-Salas & Sobande, 2022; Steinfeld et al., 2019), as well as in SMI research specifically (Veresiu & Parmentier, 2021), for intersectionality to be predominantly framed as identity, de-emphasising critiques of hegemonic power structures.

We, therefore, speak to how social structures produce and reproduce oppression and privilege for SMIs who identify with intersecting and overlapping categories of difference, and how this empowers or disempowers their capacity to shape trends in the market and frame audience perspectives. The collision of social status and gender identity, embodied by SMIs, prompts culturally rooted interpretations of feminine value, privilege, legitimacy, and exclusion. We analyse these interpretations through a Caribbean feminist lens, which is inherently intersectional and adopts a decolonial perspective that highlights ongoing colonial struggles rather than framing colonialism as a singular shaping moment of post-emancipatory societies (Gutiérrez Rodríguez & Reddock, 2021). In this case, the experiences in focus are those of SMI women who embody the privilege of being declared as ‘Queen’ in the T&T Carnival space. A Caribbean feminist lens affords, in this paper, a theoretical and conceptual framework that clarifies the nuances, contradictions, historical underpinnings, and normative mechanisms that structure Caribbean lived experiences.

Using Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) as our broader methodological and analytical framework, we examine SMI content and consumer responses to address the following research questions:

RQ1: How do intersectional factors (e.g., race, class, gender), reflected in interactions with consumers, shape the expressions of T&T SMIs?

RQ2: How do these expressions dialogue with, confront or reify colonial powers?

Specifically, we focus on SMIs' content and consumer responses in the context of T&T's iconic carnival celebrations. During the carnival season, SMIs share content that showcases their bodies and utilise language that shapes the experiences of both local and international consumers. This content can take the form of the extraordinary expressions that characterise the Carnival season, unlike any other period of the year.

By utilising Caribbean feminist theory, we contribute to contextualised intersectional theorisations interpreting marketplace discourses and gendered power relations in the Global South (Badejo et al., 2021; Orahmoune & El Jurdi, 2022) that can better explain the SMI landscape. We also build on efforts to refocus intersectionality as a lens through which power can be interrogated in marketing and consumer research (see Rosa-Salas & Sobande, 2022; Steinfeld et al., 2019) through our inquiry of the T&T SMI domain. We consider the implications of our analysis to better understand gendered expectations as well as interactions and influence in the SMI domain.

4.2.1 Gender in the SMI Domain

Research on SMI marketing has identified gender as a key factor influencing how consumers interact with SMIs. Studies have shown that an SMI's gender affects consumer perceptions of their genuineness (Claeys et al., 2023), ability to build parasocial relationships (Hudders & De Jans, 2021), and use of appeals, like displaying parts of their bodies to appear authentic (Gannon & Protero, 2016). Research has also highlighted the moderating role of the consumer's gender in affecting their purchase decisions, as men and women have different perspectives on consumption (Hudders & De Jans, 2021). However, while these insights offer valuable data for informing SMI marketing campaigns, researchers have also emphasised the moderating influence of culture. When combined with gender, this interplay can lead to varied reactions in the SMI domain due to differences in norms rooted in that culture (Ooi et al., 2023). Therefore, culturally and contextually embedded studies of the SMI domain are crucial (Fowler et al., 2023).

Researchers emphasise the cultural complexity of this space, where diverse opinions and perceptions are shaped by marketplace and contextual influences (Sobande et al., 2020). To account for the complexity of the SMI domain, researchers have suggested adopting frameworks that move beyond binaries to examine the interaction of gender with other factors such as race, age, religion, and sexuality (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013; Mardon et al., 2023; Sobande et al., 2020). Different groups of SMI women have used the domain to express themselves beyond these binaries. For example, plus-sized women express themselves as beautiful/sexy/stylish online in a culture that often links beauty to specific definitions of success, power, and social connections afforded only to slim/thin women (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013). Similarly, SMIs living with disabilities challenge mainstream

stereotypes of the community as pitiable and incapable by presenting themselves as fun, playful, adventurous, and able to act (Södergren & Vallström, 2022).

Other studies have highlighted how some SMIs have breached cultural taboos about the body, through, for example, hashtags that challenge expectations of the traditional gender binary and stereotypes of masculinity and femininity (Gurrieri & Drenten, 2019a). Such work includes the adoption of porn-chic aesthetics in the culture of pornification (Drenten et al., 2018) and the display of bodily scars to advocate for health-related conditions (Gurrieri & Drenten, 2019b). Ultimately, researchers highlight the SMI domain as a platform where often marginalised individuals, especially women who experience this marginality as a result of their bodies and embodiment, can assert and advocate for not only recognition of their identity but also their legitimacy and authenticity (Duffy et al., 2022).

Intersectionality, then, emerges as a useful framework to interrogate limits that frame understandings of the SMI as gendered and points to where such gendered identities and expressions overlap with other social identities, statuses, and structures (Sobande, 2022).

4.2.2 Intersectionality in the SMI Domain

Harju and Huovinen (2015) and Matich et al. (2019) highlight the importance of intersectionality in understanding how SMIs present their bodies as sites of activism to confront problematic stereotypes of femininity and feminine beauty. Pemberton and Takhar's (2020) study of French Muslim SMIs interrogates the intersection of gender, religion, and race to explore how they confront racially stigmatised islamophobia. Similarly, Veresiu and Parmentier (2021) examine how intersections of age and gender enable older women SMIs to challenge entrenched Western beauty ideals. Glatt (2023) explores how marginalised SMIs manage online harm and relational labour through an analysis of intersecting marginalised

identities. These studies demonstrate the relevance of more comprehensive understandings of lived experiences in the SMI domain.

However, intersectionality, as it is used in marketing scholarship, has been subject to critique, with scholars citing a tendentially limited focus on notions of identity and diversity, rather than addressing the structural vulnerabilities or risks based on social, political, and cultural relations of power relating to intersecting categories of difference. Indeed, Veresiu and Parmentier (2021) highlight that despite emerging studies exploring intersecting tensions and oppression in the marketplace, some socially constructed factors that sustain unequal structures of power remain underexplored. For example, there is a degree of blindness to harmful stereotypes and acts of resistance that are often applied in the SMI domain (Södergren & Vallström, 2022; Veresiu & Parmentier, 2021). Notably, Rosa-Salas and Sobande (2022) urge marketing and business researchers to recognise that intersectionality does not just account for a range of identities and pays homage to apparent diversity—it is, instead, a powerful tool for examining how power structures reproduce inequalities and privilege (Cottom, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991).

The potential for intersectionality to not only advance marketing's diversity and equity agenda but also help identify and address unequal power structures and dismantle knowledge hierarchies has been noted by some researchers (Orahmoune & El Jurdi, 2022; Rosa-Salas & Sobande, 2022). This approach encourages the inclusion of understudied experiences and perspectives in marketing and business scholarship (Badejo et al., 2022; Udeuehi et al., 2024). Specifically, Sobande (2022) emphasises the importance of enriching SMI studies with knowledge from the Global South, particularly as influencers from, or with ancestry in, contexts like the Caribbean, such as Nicki Minaj or Majah Hype, have been recognised as trendsetters in the Western SMI domain.

Accordingly, Badejo et al. (2021) call for context-specific intersectional theorisations and research in the Global South, where varying factors often emerge and overlap in different ways from those in Global North contexts, leading to distinct experiences of privilege and oppression across diverse cultural contexts. For instance, Hurley's (2021) study on SMI women in the Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) region suggests that their displays of power through self-representation on social media are deeply influenced by the socio-political and historical inequalities in their local contexts. She notes that while Arab SMI women may present themselves as empowered and agentic by sometimes adopting affluent Global North aesthetics, these affordances do not translate to other Arab women on social media or in offline contexts. Such research, which remains nascent in the SMI domain, also highlights the risk of misunderstanding lived experiences when Global South phenomena are viewed through a Global North lens without considering the local context (Hurley, 2021).

In the current research project, we draw upon Caribbean feminist perspectives to provide a context-specific intersectional lens through which the social relations of gender (Young, 1979) and cultural mechanisms that reproduce feminine subordination can be understood. We adopt this approach to explore the more expansive implications on lived experiences of SMIs because of how closely intertwined these are with structures of power that rest in race, ethnicity, class, bodies, language, sexuality, culture, religion, and age as social statuses (Lindsey, 2020).

4.2.3 Towards a Caribbean Feminist Analysis of the SMI Domain

With a history of early Indigenous ownership followed by genocide, European colonisation, African slavery, South-Asian and other indentureship, and abundant voluntary and forced migration, T&T's multi-ethnic society is characteristic of racial and ethnic tensions that emerged through its history of conquest and colonialism (Reddock, 2019).

Caribbean feminists elaborate on how diverse ethnic groups relate to their histories of struggle, belonging, and contribution to nation-building in an attempt to secure their place in society. In this context, belonging, recognition, and citizenship extend beyond mere legal membership to the state—they also involve acceptance of one's identity, social status, and cultural beliefs (Reddock, 2019). In Global North discourse on multiculturalism, mainstream culture clearly dominates marginalised groups. However, in post-colonial Global South contexts, the mainstream is fractured and insecure, leading both mainstream and marginalised groups to feel overlooked and seeking recognition for their cultures, both locally and globally (Mohammed, 1994; Reddock, 2019).

While consumer researchers in the US have examined issues of race and respectability in the marketplace (Crockett, 2017; Rosa-Salas & Flower, 2020), Global South scholars like Varman et al. (2024) highlight how these issues play out in different ways outside Global North contexts. Respectability politics are often inherent in Caribbean countries, such as T&T, whereby one must emphasise religiosity, modesty, good behaviour, sexual conservatism, propriety, morality, and neat appearance to be considered legitimate (Green, 2006). These rules and norms of respectability strongly influence how people should behave, particularly at the intersections of race, ethnicity, class, and gender—and significantly shape understandings of femininity. Barratt (2018) highlights that being considered 'respectable' is fragile and requires constant negotiation, especially for women of colour, where it is a crucial factor that determines their legitimacy (Henry & Wilson, 1975). Caribbean feminists have explored social media as a platform where women's respectability is both negotiated and policed. For instance, Barratt's (2018) content analysis of online discourse highlights how language and expressions are used to enforce standards of feminine respectability in the region. Similarly, Esposito et al. (2024) demonstrate how respectability politics on online

forums determine which victims of domestic violence are deemed worthy of support and empathy, and which are not.

Caribbean feminist writers also shed light on activist efforts on social media that challenge restrictive notions of gendered respectability in the pursuit of gender justice. For example, Haynes (2016) discusses the work of Caribbean cyberfeminists who counteract victim-blaming and shaming tied to respectability standards. Similarly, Roper and Wint (2020) reflect on the Tambourine Army in Jamaica, which redefined feminine respectability from its rootedness in ladylike behaviour—'silence, containment, passivity'—to an enactment of boldness and assertiveness through vocal protests against sexual violence, particularly in the church, which as a traditional institution demands feminine respectability.

These studies emphasise the importance of interpreting social media discourse through the lens of Caribbean feminine respectability, which involves context-specific meanings and experiences that might not be accurately understood through other respectability frameworks (Mohammed, 2018). For example, in the Caribbean context, feminine respectability is rooted in Victorian standards of femininity (Barratt, 2018), a colonial legacy that differs from the rigid racial segregation historically characteristic of the United States of America. They also highlight how Caribbean feminist theory is itself grounded in context, emerging from grassroots activism in the region; further, in the contemporary regional marketplace, social media serves as a valuable platform for examining lived experiences (Baldwin & Cossy, 2018; Haynes, 2016, 2017). It also provides a useful site of inquiry for exploring how Caribbean women negotiate and resist oppressive power through embodiment and discourse (Baldwin & Cossy, 2018).

Caribbean feminist perspectives as a stream of Global South feminism can, therefore, offer valuable insights into marketing and consumer scholarship, particularly because they

are inherently intersectional, examining how power influences the experiences of intersecting social identities (Hurley, 2021; Orahmoune & El Jurdi, 2022). The following methodology elaborates on how Caribbean feminist theory is used for analysis and the interpretation of this study's findings.

4.3 METHODOLOGY

4.3.1 Research Context

Considered the Mecca of Carnival celebrations, the T&T Carnival is a vibrant annual celebration with a lively atmosphere, where people can let go of their everyday inhibitions, particularly around sexuality (De Freitas, 1999). The annual build-up to T&T Carnival begins immediately after Christmas, culminating in a vibrant street parade in the two days before Ash Wednesday. Originating in the 18th century following the Emancipation Bill, which abolished African slavery, the festival became a platform for the newly freed slaves to challenge and subvert the colonial social order. They transformed the French colonists' opulent carnival, a 17th-century tradition, into an act of resistance (De Freitas, 1999).

Evolving into the post-colonial era, Carnival has extended to other Caribbean nations and further afield to Global North territories, including Canada, New York, and London, demonstrating its adaptability and transformability (St. Bernard, 2020). Notably, women's behaviour frequently emerges as a subject of national discussion, having endured a history of regulatory control against colonial standards of respectability, purity, and responsibility (De Freitas, 2009). Furthermore, Caribbean writers, including Mason (1998), have noted that even outside of Carnival time, Carnival culture mediates the cultural expression and attitudes of T&T people, crossing the boundary of the carnivalesque into everyday life. Our study explored the Carnival 'Queen' archetype, a figure with deep historical roots extending back

to the transatlantic slave trade, where it symbolised endurance and resistance against colonial control. This historical and cultural archetype offers an ideal context through which we can examine power in the T&T SMI domain.

4.3.2 The 'Queen' Archetype – A Historical and Cultural Citation

Our research foregrounds the Carnival 'Queen' archetype, which emerged during our analysis as an expression of femininity shaped by historical and cultural events and understandings. This archetype frames SMIs so-identified as representations of both emancipatory and oppressive forces rooted in intersectional factors such as gender, culture, sexuality, religion, race, age, and social class in the T&T context (Bascombe, 2016; Ramsay, 2021). This builds on Caribbean feminist scholarship examining the significance of the Queen archetype for the cultural space.

Caribbean feminist scholars chart the emergence of the 'Jamette' Queen (French Creole term associated with women from lower social classes who were deemed immoral), for instance, which occurred in the 19th century during the early days of T&T Carnival. Black 'Jamette' Queens led groups who paraded the streets in spectacular dresses and armed themselves with weapons like sticks, broken bottles, and stones to illegally fight rival groups (Ramsay, 2021). They also utilised their vocals in their resistance acts to boast about their violent conquests and sexual expertise. Ramsay (2021) noted the importance of the Jamette Queen in reshaping gender dynamics and identity in T&T, as some women were regarded as 'fighters'.

However, repressive colonial norms continue to dominate the Carnival space and threaten to stifle the Jamette Queen and any similar expression, particularly through state-arranged Carnival Queen competitions, which celebrate Eurocentric ideals of beauty in

opposition to Jamette expressions (Noel, 2020). These colonial standards are also manifest in the slim, light-skinned feminine models used to market T&T Carnival to the world (St. Bernard, 2020). As prominent Caribbean feminist scholar Rhoda Reddock (2019) articulates, age-old tensions about whiteness vs blackness, respectability and responsibility vs the emancipation of women's bodies, hypersexuality vs conservative/religiosity arise herein as these are enacted through racially ambiguous brown, able bodies that reflect the Creole national identity ideal.

Such tensions exist in the background of absolute inclusivity, persistent as the core message of T&T Carnival. These underlying tensions are revealed through the application of FCDA, the methodology used in this study.

4.3.3 Research Approach – Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

We draw upon FCDA to examine the Instagram feed content of 40 SMIs and the responses of consumers. FCDA is an extension of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), integrating feminist theory to provide rich and nuanced understandings of power and ideology in discourses that produce and reproduce gender hierarchies and social orders (Lazar, 2007). Our decision to use FCDA in this study responds to the call for more qualitative approaches in SMI research, particularly those that examine real-world content (Fowler & Thomas, 2023; Vrontis et al., 2021). Such content, often in the form of imagery and text, has so far been typically analysed quantitatively, which can overlook the qualitative nuances of power and its role in shaping the social media domain (Cottom, 2016). FCDA, being at once descriptive, analytical, and emancipatory, allows us to critically investigate how gender ideologies—which perpetuate power imbalances—become embedded in specific contextual discourses (for example, SMIs' online content and consumer comments) and how

these are and can be resisted (Lazar, 2005). Prior to commencement, approval for the study from the appropriate University Ethics Committee was obtained.

4.3.4 Sampling

Forty SMIs were originally selected using purposeful sampling, which identifies informative cases that reveal rich insights into the topic being studied (Levesque et al., 2023; Patton, 2015; Pemberton & Takhar, 2021). To reduce bias and address recommendations by Vrontis et al. (2021), who encourage the use of random samples in SMI research, the sample for this study was randomly drawn from a sampling frame containing the handles of the top 100 SMIs on Instagram in T&T. A final sample of 40 SMIs was selected to achieve greater depth in our analysis, which is more feasible with smaller samples (Gurrieri & Drenten, 2019b). Our focus was on examining SMIs' content, which provided the rich information necessary for examining gendered power relations and identities in discourse, rather than aiming to generalise the findings to a larger population (Patton, 2015).

The sampling frame was generated by a local SMI marketing expert, independent of the research team. The expert was engaged because local marketing agencies in T&T often rely on such professionals to recommend SMIs for both local and international campaigns. Building on insights from Kay et al. (2019) and Li et al. (2024), who have identified differences in engagement patterns among SMIs based on the number of followers, the sampling frame stratified SMIs into four categories relevant to the T&T context: mega SMIs (over 100k followers), macro-level (50 –100k followers), mid-level (10–50k followers), and micro SMIs (under 10k followers). SMIs of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, gender, sexuality, class, and ages were included on the list to observe intersectional patterns. The content of the 10 SMIs in each of the following categories (40 SMIs in total), as well as consumer responses, were then collected and analysed.

4.3.5 Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection and analysis followed an iterative and collaborative approach with the research team. Ideas were discussed, reflexive dialogues took place, emergent themes were proposed and refined through toggling between data, theory, and context, and representations of meaning were gradually developed over the course of a 12-month period to interpret the findings. Member checking was also carried out with our SMI participants to facilitate the co-creation of interpretations of meaning from the data (Patton, 2015). Our analysis followed four key steps informed by FDCA and CDA conventions (Fairclough, 2010; Lazar, 2007) and Caribbean feminist theory, as well as integrating methodological practices adopted in prior SMI research (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013).

(1) *Step 1: Thematic Analysis*

First, adopting an approach utilised by Gurrieri and Cherrier (2013) in their analysis of online fatshion blogs, we lurked and observed identifiable gendered patterns and themes in SMIs' content and consumer responses to gain contextual understanding. We then collected the content (text and imagery) shared by the 40 SMIs and the corresponding consumer responses over six months. This generated a dataset of 3,042 posts and over 2,000 pages containing corresponding consumer comments. We then employed inductive coding, which focused on allowing patterns and themes to naturally emerge from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach enabled us to gather and develop a rich base of information, offering organic insights into interactions in the SMI domain (Cottom, 2016; Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013). During this process, we identified an increase in gendered SMI posts and consumer comments around Carnival time.

To explore the connections between discourse, power, and domination, we followed established FCDA procedures (Lazar, 2007), building on Fairclough's (2010) CDA methodology and including 'form-and-meaning of text analysis', 'analysis of discourse practice', and 'analysis of discursive events as social practice' (Steps 2–4 explained below). Simultaneously, we applied Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2021) visual semiotics analysis. Imagery was analysed alongside text as 'integrated text' to compare and identify similarities between visual and textual elements, examining the meanings constructed in the SMIs' posts and in consumers' responses (Drenten et al., 2020; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021)

(2) *Step 2: Form-and-meaning of Text Analysis*

This step highlights the interdependency of text and social and personal identities, as well as in relation to others (Fairclough, 2010; Lazar, 2007). Our analysis focused on SMIs' content alongside their identities, which were defined by intersectional factors such as phenotype, sex, religion, and class, as informed by Caribbean feminist theory (Khan, 2004; Reddock, 2014). Additionally, we examined the SMIs' social and personal relations as evident through their content, considering the narratives they establish, reproduce or negotiate in the context of socio-cultural and historical tenets outlined by Caribbean feminists (Barratt, 2018; Barriteau, 1998).

(3) *Step 3: Analysis of Discourse Practice*

This step focuses on interdiscursivity, examining how text is created and interpreted. It identifies which language styles are used and how they are applied (Fairclough, 2010; Lazar, 2007). Our analysis combined consumer comments with SMI content, paying special attention to historical and contemporary gendered meanings reflected in the use of vernacular,

emojis, and other language styles by both SMIs and consumers (Fairclough, 2010; Lazar, 2005).

(4) *Step 4: Analysis of Discursive Events as Social Practice*

This step looks at the text in three contexts: the immediate context (Instagram), the institutional context (local/international media), and the broader societal context (T&T during Carnival) (Fairclough, 2010; Lazar, 2007). At this stage, we used historiography to analyse how the text from the SMIs and consumers relates to gendered power dynamics (Lazar, 2007), comparing the present situation in the SMI domain with past eras of Carnival and the history of gendered power relations in T&T and the Caribbean (Barriteau, 2012; De Freitas, 1999). We interpreted the findings through the lens of Caribbean feminist perspectives, searching for the intersectionality of identities that become archetypal and the gender dynamics at play in expressions, experiences and consumer responses. These are presented below.

4.4. FINDINGS: QUEEN A FEMININE ARCHETYPE OF RESISTANCE

4.4.1 'The World is Nothing Without you, Queen!' – Characterising the SMI Queen

Across our sample of 40 SMIs, we identified 14 SMI women who were referred to as 'Queens' by consumers. From our overall analysis, 'Queens' are publicly regarded, owned, loved, and endorsed through the assignment of the title. 'Queen' is also a part of the stage names of SMIs who are popular culture artistes ('Queen of Bachannal' and 'ViQueen'). They are characterised as beautiful, physically fit, youthful, sexy, and talented in specific fields such as singing, dancing, sewing, and event management. 'Queens' are also described as strong, confident, powerful, classy, and/or with the agency and expertise to be seen as equals

to their male counterparts. They are viewed as role models for future generations of women who share similar race, ethnic, and class identities, as well as leaders and country ambassadors blessed by God. They are assigned 'Queen' as a prescriptive, which is granted based on the audience's evaluation of their worth and their deservingness of rest, respect, protection, celebration, and acknowledgement. Additionally, they are recognised for their steadfastness, resilience, and resistance to limiting gender norms, yet some are also regarded as 'Queen' because they are considered good mothers.

The SMIs who are identified as 'Queen' in interactions with their audience embody different intersecting social identities. Table 4.1 below outlines these combinations of features across gender, sex, and race/ethnicity. Notably, though Table 4.1 does not explicitly address class or aspects of appearance, such as hair type and skin colour, as elements of SMIs' embodied gender and social identities, it is important to consider that, in this cultural context, such phenotypical traits play a key role in shaping interpretations of class. Alongside aesthetics like dress and body stylisation, class is interpreted through phenotypical stereotypes rooted in colonial hierarchies (Barratt, 2021).

Elements of SMI's Gender Identities as they Intersect with Other Social Identities											
Category	**#**	**Gender**	**Sex**	**Race**	**Ethnicity**	**Category**	**#**	**Gender**	**Sex**	**Race**	**Ethnicity**
MEGA ***Over 100k Followers***	1.	Feminine	Female	Afro Spanish	Mixed	**MID** ***10-50k Followers***	21.	Masculine	Male	Afro Indo/ Dougla	Mixed
	2.	Feminine	Female	Afro Spanish	Mixed		22.	Masculine	Male	Afro Indo/ Dougla	Mixed
	3.	Masculine	Male	Afro Trinidadian	African		23.	Masculine	Male	Spanish	Mixed
	4.	Masculine	Male	Afro Trinidadian	African		24.	Feminine	Female	Afro Spanish	Mixed
	5.	Masculine	Male	Afro Spanish	Mixed		25.	Masculine	Male	Afro Trinidadian	African
	6.	Masculine	Male	Afro Trinidadian	African		26.	Feminine	Female	Indo Trinidadian	Mixed
	7.	Feminine	Female	Afro Spanish	Mixed		27.	Feminine	Female	Indo Caucasian	Mixed
	8.	Masculine	Male	Afro Trinidadian	African		28.	Feminine	Female	Afro Amerindian	Mixed
	9.	Masculine	Male	Afro Trinidadian	African		29.	Feminine	Female	Afro Asian	Mixed
	10.	Feminine	Female	Afro Trinidadian	African		30.	Feminine	Female	Afro Trinidadian	Mixed
MACRO ***50 – 100k Followers***	11.	Feminine	Female	Afro Trinidadian	African	**MICRO** ***Under 10k followers***	31.	Feminine	Female	Afro Indian/ Dougla	Mixed
	12.	Feminine	Female	Indo Trinidadian	Mixed		32.	Feminine	Female	Spanish	Mixed
	13.	Feminine	Female	Spanish	Mixed		33.	Feminine	Female	Caucasian	Mixed
	14.	Feminine	Female	Afro Caucasian	Mixed		34.	Feminine	Female	Indo Trinidadian	Indian
	15.	Masculine	Male	Afro Trinidadian	African		35.	Feminine	Female	Spanish	Mixed
	16.	Feminine	Female	Afro Spanish	Mixed		36.	Feminine	Female	Afro Trinidadian	African
	17.	Feminine	Female	Spanish	Mixed		37.	Feminine	Female	Afro Trinidadian	African
	18.	Feminine	Female	Indo Spanish	Mixed		38.	Masculine	Male	Afro Trinidadian	African
	19.	Feminine	Female	Asian	Mixed		39.	Feminine	Female	Afro Trinidadian	Mixed
	20.	Masculine	Male	Indo Trinidadian	Mixed		40.	Feminine	Female	Caucasian	Mixed

4.4.2 Three 'Queens': Gendered Relations of Power in the T&T SMI Domain

Here, we focus on vignettes of three SMI women, chosen from the 14 influencers in our sample, who were classified as 'Queens' by consumers. Their classification demonstrates how SMIs and consumers' frame power and influence in the market through evaluations made during interactions. These 'Queens' were selected as exemplifiers of the varying types of SMI women who may exist in the market: Marieange—an SMI whose relevance emerged solely through her social media presence (Instagram); Charlotte—an SMI whose relevance bridged the offline and online world in a particularly male-dominated field in T&T (she is a popular DJ); and Destra—an SMI who is a local celebrity.

Marieange Bovell – Instagram Star, The Textbook Influencer

Marieange (see Figure 4.1) is a macro-level SMI with an Instagram following of 94.2k. She is popular for her beauty and fashion content, especially on Instagram, where she posts content about her family, modelling career, clothing business, and involvement in, as well as enjoyment of, Carnival celebrations on local, regional, and international stages. Though Marieange keeps some elements of her life private, she has hinted at her relationship with a well-known soca artiste (a person who sings carnival music). Marieange's classification as a Queen became relevant during her interaction with her audience, who responded to a series of her Instagram posts of her enjoying T&T Carnival 2023. Marieange

posted 10 photos and videos of her wearing her Carnival costume on the parade route (see, for example, Figure 4.1 above).

Marieange's photos foreground her body, clad in Carnival costumes. She maintains a side pose, with the right leg bent and left leg straight, accentuating the curve of her body as she holds her pregnant stomach. Marieange is smiling and showcases her curves through an S-Curve stance (Guay et al., 2013).



Figure 4.1: Photos posted by Marieange Bovell on Carnival Monday (left) and Carnival Tuesday (Right)

Marieange confronts the historical stereotype of pregnant and maternal bodies being covered up and excluded during Carnival parades as acts of maternal responsibility and respectability. Marieange, who at the time was about 8 months pregnant, posted her photos on Instagram not only to celebrate her participation in the yearly national festival but to acknowledge the feminine expectations that often serve to curtail women's movement in public spaces. In her captions (see below), she subtly addresses the cultural evaluations of appropriate feminine behaviour that could become relevant due to her actions. For example, Marieange uses the hashtag '#doctorsapproval' as well refers to special care by herself 'after I soak…' and others 'taking care of me'.

Caption 1: My Carnival babyyy!!! 😩🤍

Can't believe I made it on the road under these circumstances. Talk about superwoman. 😜

@carnivaltribe you were amazing!! I'm so ready for you tomorrow 🐓 (after I soak and elevate these feet 😩😂)

#carnivalmonday #tribe #day1 #noplacelikehome #trinidad #pregnant #homestretch

Caption 2: Mother of all Carnivals they said 😩

This is one for the books! I couldn't not represent for Carnival, our Culture and Women! It's so amazing what we can do. Loved embracing every moment of it. ✨

@carnivaltribe thank you so much for an amazing experience and taking care of me every step of the way! ❤️

PS. No, I didn't cross the stage lol. Just had to touch it 😩😂

#motherofallcarnivals #trinidadcarnival #thegreatestshowonearth #tribe #pregnancy #womanpower #doctorsapproval

Marieange also cites the extraordinary nature of her presentation and, more importantly, her resistance to Caribbean feminine prescriptions: "This one is for the books…..Can't believe I made it…talk about superwoman…I couldn't not represent our Culture and Women". In her declaration, Marieange invokes the persistent relations of power that mediate all feminine expressions of identity in the Caribbean, long interrogated by Caribbean feminists (Barratt, 2018; Barriteau, 2012). She fits in the "Carnival is Woman" framing of the festival, used both by the state and the private sector to market the nation and its tourist product (St. Bernard, 2020), by meeting the beauty ideal but simultaneously being resistant by displaying public nudity and revelry while pregnant.

Indeed, the construction of the Caribbean mother as a nurturer emerges prominently throughout T&T's carnival history, occupying a recurring theme in early Calypsoes (carnival music) and upheld to date (De Freitas, 1999). Marieange, however, confronts the confinements imposed through maternal mores, which stipulate that mothers behave

respectably (partly by suppressing sexuality) and adhere to Judeo-Christian religiosity and lifelong commitment and sacrifice (De Freitas, 1999).



Figure 4.2: Photo posted by Thema Williams on Carnival Tuesday

Through her captions, Marieange both owns and celebrates her decision to take part in Carnival. The gendered contention evident in Marieange's presentation of herself as a woman and as an SMI draws positive evaluation from her audience. Incidentally, in the reinforcement of the SMI Queen archetype, this tendency for positive evaluation is evident in comments made in response to other SMI women. For example, SMI Thema's followers celebrated her as Queen "U the best 🔥" and "A Queen🔥😍" in response to a photo of her clad in Carnival costume, along with her caption that promoted "work/ life balance" for women and gratitude towards her Carnival band for reminding her that "it's okay for women in business/ entrepreneurs to do both" (see Figure 4.2).

Just as commenters did with Thema, they declared Marieange as a Queen, granting legitimacy to, in her case, her contradiction of established social norms.

> Commenter 1 states: "You go Queen... this world would be nothing without you Queens"

> Commenter 2 states: “Way to go girl don’t listen [to] the people in the back, pregnancy is not a disability you are expected to work while pregnant why not do all you are capable to as long as it suits you ❤️❤️”

Commenter 1 hails Marieange’s validity unambiguously and explicitly. Commenter 2 goes further, foregrounding what Marieange has already recognised in the interaction. The commenter references the societal expectation of women to work while pregnant yet conform to the societally confining role of ‘mother’ (regarded as ‘disability’) by sacrificing their involvement in any task that is pleasurable to them. Caribbean feminists would have theorised this as part of the feminine responsibility/respectability requirement (Barratt, 2018; Green, 2006). The basis of the consumer’s comment unearths the historical and political control of women’s bodies that has existed since the pre-emancipation era, manifesting itself in contemporary society (Beckles, 2017; Brerton, 1998; Shepherd, 2008). Xia (2021) suggests that in the pre-emancipation era, women slaves resisted control over their bodies, sexuality, forced marriage, and childbearing, as this meant an increased workload for them and their children, denying them the opportunity to ascend the social hierarchy through interracial unions with the European ruling class. Currently, control over women’s bodies manifests through political and social life, including popular culture.

Tensions, therefore, arise between the limited socio-historical values that shape maternal bodies and the freeing abandonment of gendered and bodily constraints that define the Carnivalesque. It is here that Marieange emerges as powerful—“this world would be nothing without you Queens”—as she makes a political statement using her body to resist traditional constraints placed on maternal bodies. On a broader scale, Marieange’s resistance suggests SMIs play a role in mobilising resistance to political and hierarchical power structures that uphold oppressive values in society. Herein, Marieange creates an avenue

where we can further understand how SMIs leverage their platforms for representation and activism purposes (Fowler et al., 2023).

Though Marieange is undoubtedly endorsed as valid and valued by her audience, being declared their Queen, her posts are also subject to critique. Her femininity is always interpreted through some combination of race/ethnicity, phenotype, class, and other social identity/status. A group of commenters discussed how an alternative evaluation of Marieange's embodiment and apparent resistance to Caribbean feminine prescriptions would be likely if her body did not wear the colonially rooted privilege assigned to her phenotype (light skin, slim, curvy).

> Commenter 3: "If this was a person in a dancehall we would hear how ghetto she is, but I digress. To each their own"
>
> Commenter 4: "Gona say it, if she was darkskin & playing mas while pregnant those who are all here for it would be mad about it"
>
> Commenter 3 (responds to Commenter 4): "facts or at a dance"

The reference to the performance space—the Jamaican Dancehall vs the Carnival Parade—by Commenter 3 alludes to different degrees of recognition and privilege assigned to the two spaces (Hope, 2018; Stanley-Niaah, 2004). Stanley-Niaah (2004) references Dancehall as not just a space or event but an institution with its own codes and rules. Dancehall lifestyle is situated in a conflicted space between the high (consisting of individuals with lighter brown skin tones) and low (consisting of individuals with dark-skinned tones) social classes, providing a platform for lower classes to express their feelings about being marginalised in post-colonial Jamaica (Stanley-Niaah, 2004).

In addition, Commenter 4's observation that a woman who is dark-skinned would not be granted the same privileged evaluation of 'Queen' by the audience invokes what Caribbean feminists have explained as the inequalities that persist in the region because of the consequences of the black/white binary and the racialisation of bodies (Barratt & Ranjitsingh, 2021). Indeed, Cooper (2004) posits that Dancehall spaces are for Black people to dress up and transcend the confines set by their social status and skin colour. However, with Carnival, which was introduced to Jamaica by T&T expatriates and further embraced by upper and middle-class Jamaicans of white and light-brown skin tones, these individuals are given the space to 'abandon respectability, parade their nakedness in the streets' and 'get on bad' … on their terms (Cooper, 2004, p.138).

In analysing Marieange's content and expression as intersectional, it becomes clear that gender, race, and class dynamics together mediate consumer–SMI relationships. These dynamics result in some SMIs being privileged and praised for embodying acts of gendered resistance (Fowler et al., 2023; Mardon et al., 2023) or oppressed, because of cultural tensions, often articulated through vernacular language (Abhishek & Srivastava, 2021). This analysis builds on Caribbean feminist theory in the social media space by demonstrating how socio-cultural differences mediate consumer feedback on social media platforms, thereby affecting consumer evaluations of femininity based on women's intersectional identities and behaviours (Barratt, 2018; Baldwin & Cossy, 2018; Esposito et al., 2014). Furthermore, it elaborates on the explanatory power of context-based knowledge through an intersectional lens, particularly in marketing and business scholarship with its focus on consumption in understudied, multi-ethnic regions (Badejo et al., 2021).

Charlotte Chadee – Popular Local DJ, with an established SMI presence

Charlotte Chadee (see Figure 4.3) is a mid-level SMI with an Instagram following of 32.5K. Charlotte is recognised as one of the few successful women DJs/music producers in T&T. Charlotte's Instagram content comprises her work as a DJ/music producer in a male-dominated space, as well as her brand endorsements and everyday life. Charlotte differs from Marieange in that she is not a textbook SMI; instead, she gained popularity and influence through her DJ career in the offline world. Charlotte plays at local fetes, corporate events and engages in gender justice advocacy, with the latter also prominent online. Her classification as a Queen also became relevant during her interactions with her online audience. Her audience responded to her posts about life lessons as well as her assertions of her own uniqueness and authenticity. In addition, over the Carnival period, she too posted seven images and videos of herself, which complemented her declarations of wisdom and authenticity. For example, see Figure 4.3 above.

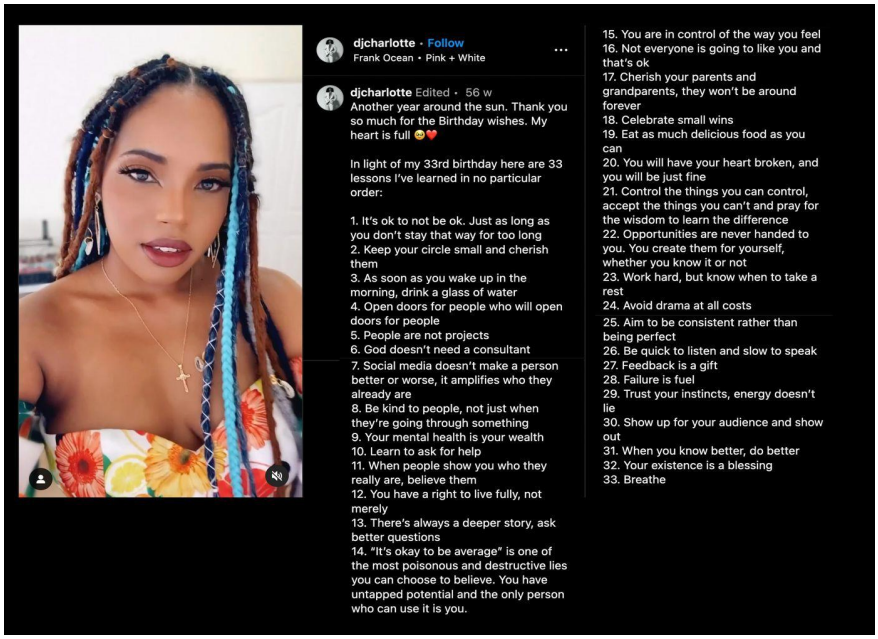


Figure 4.3: Screenshot of video posted by Charlotte Chadee on her Birthday

Charlotte is wearing make-up, and her hair is styled in faux locs with extensions in shades of blue and brown with silver adornments. A golden crucifix also hangs around her

neck, suggesting her ties to Christianity. In her caption, Charlotte outlines 33 lessons that she has learnt throughout her life. Her list is extensive, encompassing her insights into spirituality, family values, the workplace, life course mantras, and health and wellbeing. Although Charlotte does not explicitly suggest that her followers adhere to the lessons she shares, she addresses her followers directly through her use of 'you' and 'your' and incorporates relatable situations, like navigating failures and opportunities. Charlotte also, crucially, reveals her own appreciation of the interaction between herself and her audience—for example, Lesson 27 ("Feedback is a gift") and Lesson 30 ("Show up for your audience and show out") in her caption.

Notably, Charlotte's list is resistant to expectations of feminine containment, in that it empowers women to prioritise themselves and confront limiting notions of womanhood. She asserts a perspective that is reminiscent of Caribbean feminists' critiques of the move to 'housewifeization' of women in the region (Reddock, 1994). Due to slavery and colonisation, these women were never coddled or contained but were always in the public sphere, engaged in productive and reproductive labour—they pursued their own pleasures even if such were not normatively recognised (Mohammed, 2003). Charlotte shares her lesson to "Eat as much delicious food as you can" (Lesson 19). In this, she is in contention with notions of beauty often applied to different ethnic groups of women in T&T and the Caribbean (Ragbir, 2012). Her statements in Lesson 14 ("'It's okay to be average' is one of the most poisonous and destructive lies you can choose to believe. You have untapped potential and the only person who can use it is you"), Lesson 15 ("You are in control of the way you feel") and Lesson 16 ("Not everyone is going to like you and that's ok") also contradict stereotypical notions of femininity as featured by 'rapport/ report talk' debated by feminist scholars of language and gender (Cameron, 2020). By engaging in 'rapport talk', Charlotte fosters intimacy and

connection with her followers, challenging 'report talk' that typically features feminine stereotypes related to women's appearances and ways of being. Charlotte's followers, like Marieange's, show admiration for her embodiment.

Commenter 5: "I like you as you, naturally. But THIS is a gorgeous representation."

The commenter expressed admiration for Charlotte's natural appearance and emphasised that her aesthetic in her post is gorgeous. Charlotte's Instagram feed features many photos and videos of her without makeup and wearing her naturally curly hair. In post-colonial societies like T&T, physical appearance significantly shapes one's interpersonal interactions and societal perceptions (Tate, 2015). On the surface, brown skin tones like Charlotte's signify idealisations of mixedness— 'Creole identity'—as they emerge through the mixing of ethnic groups that inhabited the island throughout history, including African, Indian, European, Asian, and French Creole (Tate, 2015).

Charlotte posted these insights in celebration of her birthday. It is in bringing birthday greetings that her audience declared her a Queen.

Commenter 6: "Happy birthday Charlotte. Ps these braids are everything"

Commenter 7: "Yasss queenn!!!! Happy Blessed Birthday Fav! Love & Light 🫶✨".

Commenter 8: "Bless earth day Queen 🥳🥳🥳🥳💫"

Commenter 9: "Happy bornday queen"

Commenter 6 points out her admiration, particularly for Charlotte's faux loc hairstyle. Cooper (2004) implies that dreadlocks inherently manifest traditional African hairstyles, which confront the dominance of Eurocentric ideas around beauty.

Commenters also praised another SMI woman based on the way she represented her aesthetic, the elements of her hairstyle, grooming, and beauty, qualifying her to be an authentic Queen like Charlotte. SMI Nakiah (Figure 4.4) is declared a Queen through the comments 'Get on Rasta..", "Watch cleanliness 😍😍😳", "Role model🥹".



Figure 4.4: Photo posted by Nakiah on Carnival Tuesday

Therefore, taken together, the evaluation by commenters of Charlotte and Nakiah as Queens draw upon interpretations of intersecting influences such as religion, popular culture, race and gender, to recognise SMI women's agentic assertion of their own social and gender norms. In particular, Charlotte's embodied narrative of resistance earned her the Queen privilege, which is evident in Commenter 7's phrase "Yasss queenn!!!! Happy Blessed Birthday Fav! Love & Light 🫶✨".

Fundamentally, we observe Charlotte's use of marketing tactics to enhance relatability and authenticity (Abidin, 2018; Gannon & Prothero, 2016), but she also infuses narratives of resistance into hegemonic gendered norms through the discourse of self-determination and agency invoked by her text in another post:

> Charlotte: "So you think I'm unpredictable? Thanks!
>
> I wear what I want, say what's on my mind and I never play what you think a female DJ should play. Yes, I make my own decisions and have my own opinions. And no, I'm not on my period."

Her audience recognises this assertion of herself as valuable and worthy of privilege by again titling her Queen, this time not only for her aesthetic but for her talent:

Commenter 10: "[This is] Saying beautiful queen in music"

Operating in a male-dominated industry, Charlotte's interaction with her audience reveals how SMIs maintain their authenticity when challenging the status quo (Levesque et al., 2023). Furthermore, her resistance demonstrates how SMIs promote perspectives on women's roles in the global marketplace and empower consumers to challenge limiting gender stereotypes (Fowler et al., 2023).

Destra Garcia aka 'Queen of Bacchanal'– Soca Celebrity

Destra Garcia (see Figure 4.5) is a soca artiste and mega-level SMI with an Instagram following of 643K. Dubbed the 'Queen of Bacchanal' [Bacchanal meaning a wild event with enjoyable vigorous dancing, drinking, and other revelry (Winer, 2009)], Destra's Instagram content features her work as a recording artiste/performer in different parts of the world, as well as her family (including her daughter), friends, colleagues in the soca industry, and her enjoyment of various Carnival festivities. Destra receives audience evaluation as a positive reinforcement of her status as 'Queen'. It is in response to her hypersexualised image of femininity (which flouts the respectability and responsibility frame cited by Caribbean feminists as the norm) that her commenters reinforce what she herself asserts: she is a Queen both for her body and her talent. She shared her body in resistance through 14 photos and

videos over the Carnival period. Figure 4.5 above is a screenshot from one of the posted videos.

Destra's video foregrounds her back with her almost bare, round posterior most visible. The feathered structure of her costume frames her head, posterior and legs, drawing attention to her posterior. Her braids are blonde and fall to her thighs, dangling in the middle of her posterior, which she shakes (in the moving image) rhythmically from side to side, up and down. Destra makes a powerful statement of resistance in her video by showcasing her curves (Ramirez, 2016) and her sexualised performance, a clear flouting of the rules of respectable femininity in T&T.

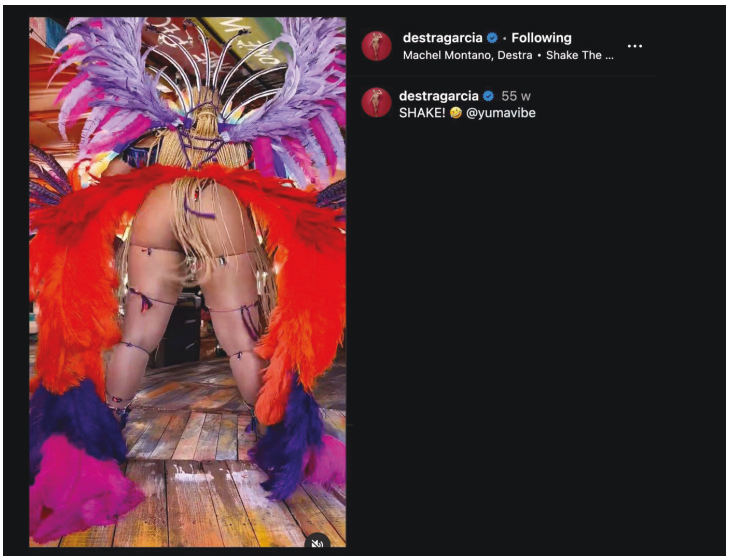


Figure 4.5:Screenshot of video posted by Destra Garcia on Carnival Tuesday

In another posted video, Destra declares herself, fellow soca artiste Patrice Roberts, and mega rap celebrity Nicki Minaj as 'Queens' for their artistry and their personhood as women.

Destra: [points to Nicki] "She's not just the Queen of Rap, She's a Queen, Period."

Nicki: "Queen Thing, King Thing – That's all that comes out of Trinidad"

Her audience agrees:

Commenter 11: "Yasss Queen shake it pon dem 😍😍😍"

Commenter 12: Queen of bacchanal get throu🙌💖🔥🔥🔥❤️❤️

Commenter 13: #shaketheplace #shakethestage Queen @destragarcia

🔥❤️‍🔥❤️‍🔥❤️

Destra supports, through her foregrounding of her posterior (as seen in Figure 4.5), Tate's (2015) assertion that women's bottoms symbolise a history of resistance in the region. Enslaved women's bodies, especially their bottoms, were sites of control during slavery, having been strictly regulated and constrained through fear and force (Tate, 2015). Though Black women's sexuality was stifled during slavery, their bodies were still viewed as sexual objects (Hem-Lee-Forsyth et al., 2019). Bottoms were hypersexualised, fetishised, and feared by the colonial ruling class, who, in attempts to curb Black women's agency, spread the stereotype of their physical and mental inferiority (Tate, 2015). However, in Caribbean territories, the efforts to marginalise Black women's bodies have been resisted, manifesting to date in the celebration of Black bottoms in popular culture like Dancehall and Carnival (Tate, 2015). Therefore, the prominence of Destra's bottom in the shot, arguably a decisive choice by a celebrity who would choose shots purposefully, becomes a celebration of resistance. Despite also being light-skinned like Marieange and Charlotte, with similar privileges, she challenges negative views on race and gender by transforming the Black woman's body from a site of stigma and control to freedom and pride. In doing so, she exemplifies how culture can shape hypersexual expressions of resistance and empowerment, building on Drenten et al.'s (2020) analysis of SMIs' sexualised performances on social media.

Despite this, and like Marieange, Destra, too, is subject to critique for her resistance to feminine norms of respectability, seen in the debate about feminine propriety between her commenters.

Commenter 14: “At what age do soca female artistes mature? When you are young and new in the game I know sex appeal would help but when you have all these years in the game you still doing this?”

Commenter 15: [Responding to 14] “You haven’t seen Calypso Rose perform and it shows!”

Commenter 16: [Responding to 14] “ it’s carnival and she can do what she wants”

The movement of Destra’s body in her video draws focus to her bottom. She moves her body to the beat of her track called ‘Shake the Place’. Her caption reads “SHAKE! 🤣”, which suggests that she is performing the very same movement that her song commands. The movement of her hips (referred to as ‘wining’) may be read as a form of bodily resistance performed first in the region by enslaved women, which encountered constant attempts at suppression and regulation by ruling classes (Plaza & DeCosmo, 2020). During the 19th century, Jamettes wined in dance bands. Notably, women of African and Indian ethnicities who became Calypsonians (people who sing carnival music), despite it being a male-dominated platform, ushered in significant social transformations through their performances. They promoted agency and empowerment of women, who were seen as socially marginalised in a post-colonial patriarchal society, according to Caribbean scholars who explored the relations of power that define gender in the region (Mahabir, 2001). These women Calypsonians harnessed the moves of the Jamette, reclaiming control of their bodies through both their bodily movements and verbal commentary.

Commenter 14 expressed dissatisfaction with Destra’s content and appeared to publicly scold her for her bodily representation at her age (late 40s) by saying: “When you

are young and new in the game I know sex appeal would help but when you have all these years in the game you still doing this?" Indeed, Cooper (2004) references popular culture Queens' rejection of ageist stereotypes that prescribe replacement by younger women. This is reflected in Commenter 15's rebuttal, "You haven't seen Calypso Rose perform and it shows!". Commenter 15 references 83-year-old Calypso Rose, also known as 'Calypso Queen of the World', who, though an older Calypsonian, continues to wine during her performances. Furthermore, the commenter's mention of Destra's use of sex appeal to gain visibility in the soca industry speaks to the ideology that women's wining and bodily expressions are only for the male gaze, as such a gaze tends to be less preoccupied with older bodies.

Along these lines, writers like Frank (2007) argue that women's sexual bodily expressions, including wining, in Carnival indicate a lack of self-control as their sexuality is subject to taboo and patriarchal (colonial) control. However, Hem-Lee-Forsyth et al. (2019) suggest that ideas around patriarchal control in Black women's wining misunderstand their bodily expression. Wining, especially when done alone, indicates women's reclaiming of their bodies and unrestricted expression of their sexuality. This is expressed in Commenter 11's comment "Yasss queen shake it pon dem (on them) 😍😍😍" and Commenter 12's comment "Queen of bacchanal get throu🙌❤️‍🔥🔥🔥🔥❤️❤️".

Moreover, Commenter 14's implied chastisement contained in the question "You still doing this?" aligns with Barratt's (2018) notion that women of colour are judged online based on their adherence to respectability politics. Destra's actions are thus publicly criticised based on these gendered benchmarks. These gender norms are potentially repressive or enticing attention depending on the context (Drenten et al., 2020). However, she remains a Queen for those who contend with this criticism.

Another SMI woman, Meiling, who is captured in Figure 4.6 wining alone, is also subject to review for her aesthetic and her embodiment of feminine sexuality. One male commenter, explicitly recognising her appeal and the desire it elicits within him, comments as follows: "That whine [wine] would of made my night 🔥". Another commenter is more declarative, hailing Meiling not for her body but for her artistry, as others did for Destra: "The pink, the makeup, the hair 👌truly the queen of Monday wear." Meiling is one of the top producers of costumes worn on Carnival Monday, traditionally dubbed 'Monday Wear'.

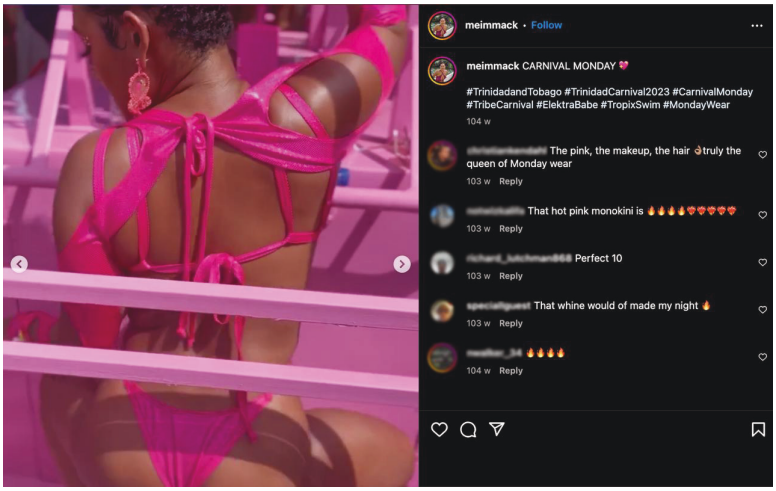


Figure 4.6: Screenshot of video posted by Meiling on Carnival Monday

Like Marieange and Charlotte, Destra's emergence as Queen rests in her expression of a narrative of resistance that is both celebrated and criticized by consumers. Destra's embodied display draws attention to the racial and class dynamics that inform SMIs' gendered resistance at any age (Veresiu & Parmentier, 2021) as well as agentic deployment of their sexuality (Drenten et al., 2020). Indeed, Destra's embodiment offers valuable insights into the mediating factors in the market by illustrating how social standards of women's respectability can be inextricably linked to religiosity, a connection shaped by colonial control over Black women's bodies (Rinallo et al., 2023). This influence persists even in festivals like Carnival, where forms of resistance that are expressed using physical bodies are celebrated. As aforementioned, the Jamette resistance of Carnival Queens has been well-documented in Caribbean feminist scholarship and is credited with initiating a ripple effect of

transformation and freedom for T&T women. Destra's embodied display builds on this knowledge by highlighting the emergence of Jamette resistance on social media among SMIs who play a significant role in the online marketplace (Baldwin & Cossy, 2018).

4.5. Discussion and Implications: Summary

4.5.1 The Impact of Gendered Expectations

Our findings draw attention to how consumers in the SMI domain value and legitimise SMI women, allocating a status of power based on gendered expectations that are shaped contextually through the social relations of gender (Young, 1979). Our paper draws on Caribbean feminist theory, which reminds us that in multi-ethnic postcolonial contexts like T&T, gendered power does not strictly rest in one racial group but can be given and retracted based on the intersectional identities at play in SMI women's embodied and verbal expressions (Mohammed, 1994; Reddock, 2019). These findings demonstrate how the T&T context emerges as different from, for example, the Nigerian context discussed in Badejo et al. (2021), where elements of class and location have greater influence on privilege than race. This indicates, to some degree, how race/ethnicity, language, and embodiment intersect with expressions and understandings of gender (Mardon et al., 2023).

We find that normative standards of femininity and respectability in T&T are expressed through consumer responses to SMI Queens. These are articulated through public criticism of Marieange's embodied expressions of the carnivalesque while visibly pregnant, and Destra's hypersexuality, flouting expected standards of respectability in Caribbean culture (Barratt, 2018). Observably, both in Global North (Duffy et al., 2022; Mardon et al., 2023) and Global South contexts (Barratt, 2018; Esposito et al., 2024), consumers commonly evaluate SMI women's expressions of femininity and respectability based on heteronormative

standards. Our findings highlight that gendered interactions in T&T take a form distinct from other contexts in the Caribbean. For example, in popular culture, T&T Carnival is celebrated across racial, ethnic, and class groups. However, in Jamaica, Dancehall is regarded as a celebratory space for Black working-class people, while Carnival is embraced by lighter-skinned people of the higher economic class (Cooper, 2004). The dynamics of the T&T SMI domain also contrast with the Global North context, where respectability standards may be shaped from histories characteristic of strict racial separation (for example, in the case of African Americans (Crockett, 2017; Rosa Salas & Flower, 2020)). Our findings, therefore, align with Varman et al. (2024), who demonstrate that post-colonial societies experience respectability politics in diverse and varied ways. Indeed, Gurrieri et al. (2023) call for marketing scholarship to deepen its understanding of the contextual complexities that SMIs contribute to the domain by interrogating power, privilege, culture, and resistance. Research of this nature can help develop strategies to safeguard SMIs from harmful backlash, particularly when they are criticised for deviating from context-specific standards of respectable and responsible femininity—criticism that can significantly impact their well-being and ability to influence in the domain (Lee & Abidin, 2024).

Gendered expectations are also challenged by Marieange, Charlotte, and Destra through their status as powerful SMI Queens. We find consumer comments that praise Queens for their resistance, encouraging them to continue to be bold and eschew the judgement of those who wish to suppress their agency and influence. This points to how SMI Queens reflect embodied, affective, and expressive intensities associated with T&T Carnival. It also highlights that SMI Queens emerge with a similar fervour of resistance, displayed by their earlier counterpart—the Jamette Queen of the early postcolonial period in T&T, who historically confronted the limits of traditional gender norms (Ramsay, 2021). This unique

cultural expression and exchange extends the scope of SMI resistance and activism, which is often contested, for example, in the often more conservative Global North SMI domain (Duffy et al., 2022). Our analysis highlights the tensions inherent between ideas of respectability and judgements of women's bodies and the empowered resistance and activism of T&T Queen SMIs—as also identified by Fowler and Thomas (2023).

4.5.2 Interactions and Influence

Our findings also highlight tensions that emerge through the interactions between consumers and Queen SMIs that mediate how they are endorsed or sanctioned in ways that frame their influence (Duffy et al., 2022; Mardon et al., 2023). Indeed, consumers establish privilege and dominance through the attribution of the Queen archetype to SMIs like Marieange, Charlotte, and Destra for their resistant expressions, whether bold or understated. Extending earlier SMI studies (Södergren & Vallström, 2022), our findings also uncover that because SMIs are active on global market platforms, such as Instagram, which spans culturally and ethnically diverse populations and expectations, SMIs can also become subject to consumers' misinterpretation of their resistant expressions and influence. This emerges with Destra, who was chastised as immature for using her sex appeal at her age. This also becomes evident with Marieange, who received criticism of her unquestioned privilege, which would not be granted to the typical body of the Jamaican Dancehall culture—where an expression like hers would shift consumer interpretation from Queen to ghetto or lower class. As SMIs gain influence in the marketplace, marketers must examine resistance in context, as well as the power dynamics shaping SMI embodiments and consumer responses (Gurrieri et al., 2023). Neglecting these dynamics can have ripple effects beyond SMIs, affecting intermediaries, including endorsing brands (Reinikainen et al., 2021).

The rich and complex interplay of race, class, ethnicity, gender, religiosity, and popular culture in the T&T context shapes the ability of SMI Queens to engage, connect with, be challenged by, and influence consumers. In many ways, Queens are powerful, influential and resplendent. This often leads to positive and effective influence that is resistant, empowering, and transformative. The power of Queen SMIs and the intensities of Carnival appear to create spaces and places online that are subversive and transgressive, challenging and shifting gendered hierarchies. However, it can also elicit attempts to silence and discipline, which can lead to community counter-resistance by those lower in the 'status hierarchy' (Mardon et al., 2023; Sobande et al., 2020). Furthermore, even in the Carnival context where embodied freedom is celebrated, such gatekeeping persists. This reinforces the significance of context-specific, intersectional insights to avoid suppressing activism or reinforcing harmful gatekeeping of bodies. Questions remain about whether Queens' carnivalesque influence extends beyond T&T Carnival into everyday social media. Though less visible outside the season, carnival culture shapes expressions year-round (Mason, 1998). This distinction, as Mason (1998) notes, sets T&T Carnival apart from others, like the Rio Carnival, which are confined to specific times and spaces.

This illustrates the complexities of the SMI market through the example of the infinitely nuanced Caribbean. Complexity in global hyperconnected markets that straddle the online and offline world warrants greater attention. Our work challenges normative and hegemonic understandings of SMIs, informed by Global North ideologies that circulate alongside the distinct cultural histories of the Global South and often drown these out in the fray (Orahmoune & El Jurdi, 2022).

4.6 LIMITATIONS, FUTURE RESEARCH AND CONCLUSION

This research has drawn on Caribbean feminist theory and intersectionality to examine gendered power relations in the T&T SMI domain, building on earlier insights from marketing researchers (e.g., Mardon et al., 2023; Veresiu & Parmentier, 2021). We find that the value of SMIs and consumer feedback relies on how power shapes aspects of their identities and ability to influence or be influenced. We emphasise how SMI identities, in turn, influence their content and perceptions of their worth. Nielson's (2022) report encourages professionals to leverage insights from academic experts in intersectionality to craft inclusive initiatives that involve SMIs. Accordingly, we assert that marketing and business professionals should consider examining the power dynamics in the SMI domain to craft inclusive and gender-transformative SMI strategies in the Caribbean and the wider diaspora.

This study foregrounds the Instagram content of three SMI women, all of whom are privileged based on their skin tone and who were actively posting over the T&T Carnival season. Future studies could explore SMIs' content and associated consumer responses in more diverse SMI groups in the Global South to understand how they negotiate power in the SMI domain by portraying their identities as well as navigating consumer responses. Additionally, we note that the resistance displayed by Charlotte, a mid-level SMI operating in a male-dominated industry, was a more verbal and subtly embodied nature compared to Destra and Marieange, who are SMIs with a higher social media following. Drawing upon studies by Kay et al. (2019) and Li et al. (2024), future studies could also examine the factors that result in SMIs' decisions to embody bold or understated resistant acts, and whether their decisions vary by follower category.

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used CHAT GPT in order to assist in shortening the word count of a few sentences. After using this tool/service, the author(s)

reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.


CHAPTER 5
'I don't want nobody call me no influencer':
Navigating Identity and Self-Labelling in the Trinidad and Tobago Social Media Influencer Domain
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5. 'I DON'T WANT NOBODY CALL ME NO INFLUENCER': NAVIGATING IDENTITY AND SELF LABELLING IN THE TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER DOMAIN

This study explores how social media influencers (SMIs) and consumers interpret the SMI label within the multicultural, Global South context of Trinidad and Tobago. Responding to calls for deeper insight into identity and self-branding online, we draw on narrative interviews with SMIs and consumers analysed through a Caribbean feminist lens. We show that marketplace experiences, shaped by intersecting factors of gender, race, class, and cultural norms, influence how SMIs present their identities through self-labelling strategies - rejecting, reframing, or pairing the SMI label with alternative titles such as such as 'collaborator'. While some SMIs embrace the label for visibility, others resist its stigma or adapt it to maintain relatability and navigate power hierarchies. Overall, our findings reveal self-branding as a form of identity work embedded in social hierarchies, underscoring the explanatory power of intersectionality in underexplored Global South contexts.

Keywords: social media influencer; Caribbean; identity; intersectionality; Global South

Summary Statement of Contribution

This paper deepens understanding of social media influencer (SMI) identities and self-branding in the Global South. Responding to calls to explore how influencers construct

identity, we examine, through an intersectional lens, how SMIs and consumers negotiate identity and interpret the SMI label. Focusing on Trinidad and Tobago, we show how SMIs contest, resist or strategically adopt labels to manage value, credibility and visibility. Our findings reveal identity construction and self-labelling as forms of power negotiation within marketplace relations.

5.1 Introduction

This paper examines how social media influencers (SMIs) and consumers of their content interpret the meaning and significance of the SMI label as a central identifying term and how SMIs engage in personalised branding strategies as a response. SMIs strategically construct identities that offer novelty and perceived value to differentiate themselves and maintain visibility within the increasingly saturated online industry (Arnesson & Reinikainen, 2024; Duffy & Pooley, 2019). However, scholars have identified tensions within the SMI domain, noting that SMIs may face criticism and marginalisation from both consumers and brands when their identities are perceived to be inconsistent or inauthentic across online and offline contexts (Gerhards, 2025; Khamis, 2016). More recently, researchers have also observed growing resistance to the SMI label itself, which has become culturally stigmatised and associated with morally questionable practices such as seeking free products or services without offering substantive value in return (Gerhards, 2025; Duffy & Sawey 2021).

Although emerging studies suggest that some SMIs engage in strategies to transcend these stereotypes, such as asserting their value and professional legitimacy through rejecting the SMI label and self-branding with alternative identities, this stream of research remains nascent (Gerhards, 2025; Khamis et al., 2017). Furthermore, the processes through which SMIs self-brand and negotiate their identities, particularly in response to such stigmas, and

how this shapes how they show up as influential actors in the marketplace, remain underexplored in current marketing research (Favrier & Wang, 2022; Gandini, 2016)

This research draws on narrative interviews with SMIs and their consumer followers to explore how both groups interpret, challenge and negotiate the meaning and significance of the SMI label as a central identifying term. Responding to calls for deeper, contextually grounded intersectional analyses of SMIs in the Global South (Fowler & Thomas, 2023; Ourahmoune and El Jurdi, 2022), including the Caribbean (Sobande, 2022), we locate our study in the twin-island Caribbean nation of Trinidad and Tobago (T&T). Although SMIs from, or with ancestry in, the Global South are recognised as key marketplace trendsetters, limited research examines how intersectional factors shape their experiences and identity negotiations within the SMI domain, warranting context-specific insights (Hurley, 2021; Sobande, 2022).

We explore how SMIs' negotiated identities are inherently intersectional, as Crenshaw (1989) explained in her theorising of intersectionality and the multiple jeopardies it brings to individuals. Thus, their experiences always occur at the point of contact between privilege and oppression, which emerge from the interaction of multiple identity factors such as sex, religion, race and social class (Crenshaw, 1989). Understanding SMI identities as such and locating this study in T&T, this paper interprets SMI and consumer explanations and evaluations through the perspective of Caribbean feminist philosophy and theorisation, thus elaborating not only the power relations made relevant by Crenshaw's (1989) theory, but closely examining the range of social identities that are especially relevant to SMI and consumer identity negotiations within the Caribbean. Therefore, the intersecting social identities of gender, class, ethnicity and other context-specific factors made relevant by SMIs

and consumers are central to a gendered analysis of their experiences with personalised branding strategies - particularly self-branding.

This context of T&T, a multicultural, multi-ethnic society shaped by early settlers, European colonisation and diverse forced and voluntary global migration (Mohammed, 2018), features unique cultural contradictions such as expectations about gender, race, ethnicity, class ideals and representation (Barratt, 2018). This lens provides a critical understanding of power in identity formation, aligning with calls for deeper intersectional engagement that interrogates power in marketing research (Rosa-Salas & Sobande, 2022; Steinfeld et al., 2019).

Specifically, we illustrate how SMIs' identities are shaped by cultural, gendered and social norms that emerge through their interactions with brands and consumers, and how these tensions manifest in their self-labelling, influencing how they express themselves, communicate and participate in the SMI domain. We seek to address these research questions:

RQ1: How do T&T SMIs' interactions with consumers and brands shape their decision to challenge, accept, or reject the SMI label as a core aspect of their identity?

RQ2: How do T&T SMIs' identity negotiations impact their ability to influence within the marketplace?

In summary, our findings reveal participants in our research make sense of the SMI label by shifting, rejecting, accepting or strategically pairing it with their own professional titles. In doing so, they reveal how their interpretations of value, responsibility and visibility are expressed through self-branding, reaffirming that their identity negotiations are shaped by intersectional, context-specific factors.

5.2.1 Self Branding, Identity Construction and Negotiation in the SMI Domain

Emerging research points to identity and self-branding as central to SMIs' work, particularly in shaping consumer responses, attitudes, and uptake outcomes (Farivar & Wang, 2022; Li et al., 2024; van Reijmersdal et al., 2024). van Reijmersdal and colleagues (2024) conceptualise the development of an SMI's virtual identity as an ongoing process of self-presentation, whereby SMIs carefully curate their personas through self-branding practices. Li and colleagues (2024) further demonstrate that an SMI's identity interacts with the identity of their audiences to influence perceptions of credibility and brand motives, which subsequently determine outcomes such as purchase intention. Similarly, Favriar & Wang (2022) show that SMIs' social identities are central to forming meaningful connections with followers that shape purchase decisions, and that these connections can be strengthened through storytelling.

However, scholars also highlight the constraints imposed on self-presentation by commercial partnerships. That is, identity work in the SMI domain is not entirely under SMIs' control but negotiated within the demands and pressures of commercial relationships and consumer response (Audrezet et al., 2020; Khamis et al., 2017; Levesque et al., 2023). For example, Audrezet et al. (2020) argue that self-presentation becomes problematic when SMIs collaborate with brands, as these collaborations often require SMIs to compromise their authenticity and adjust their identities to meet brand expectations. While these studies demonstrate how identity and self-branding can be leveraged to influence consumer behaviour, recent work has begun to reconceptualise identity construction and self-branding as forms of identity labour in the digital domain (Abidin, 2018; Banet-Wiser, 2021; Goode et al., 2023; Khamis et al., 2017). This perspective moves beyond viewing identity as a

persuasive tool to understanding it as ongoing, relational, and socio-culturally mediated work shaped by platform logics, follower expectations, and broader structural forces.

Gandini (2016) expands the discourse on self-branding by framing it as a relational form of digital labour that involves not simply crafting a marketable identity but investing in social relationships that generate social and reputational value. Importantly, he argues that access to reputational capital is shaped by broader socio-cultural structures, particularly class, and calls for further research into how these inequalities shape self-branding practices - an area still largely overlooked in current marketing scholarship (Gandini, 2016). Attention to reputation also appears in SMI research that examines identity through the lens of morality and legitimacy. For instance, Cocker et al. (2021) show that consumers hold SMIs responsible for moral transgressions, such as failing to disclose paid partnerships, revealing the reputational risks embedded in the contexts within which SMIs operate.

Building on these insights, Gerhards (2025) demonstrates how SMIs engage in identity-shifting tactics to position their work as meaningful and legitimate in response to stereotypes that classify influencer labour as 'dirty work'. Abidin (2018) further conceptualises authenticity and identity as elements of a 'performative ecology,' emphasising that SMIs continuously construct and negotiate these performances to deliver novelty and value in a competitive landscape. Extending Gandini's (2016) concerns about the mediating effect of class, Banet-Weiser (2021) problematises the notion of authenticity even further, arguing that authenticity itself is racialised, classed, and constrained by social privilege. These pressures give rise to significant identity tensions that affect influencer well-being. SMIs navigate competing demands for positivity, relatability, and transparency, often experiencing thwarted autonomy, emotional labour, and difficulty maintaining an integrated sense of identity (Levesque et al., 2023).

Taken together, these perspectives highlight the ethical, socio-cultural, and practical tensions embedded in self-branding, particularly when individuals must continually shift their identities to meet expectations of authenticity and value. Such research highlights the need for deeper socio-cultural insights into how SMIs construct, negotiate, and protect their identities within the increasingly complex SMI domain. This study deepens socio-cultural insights through its explorations of SMI-consumer negotiations and relations in T&T as a Caribbean, Global South context. This actual and imagined geography is also interrogated through the application of the critical lens of Caribbean feminist intersectional analysis.

5.2.2 Applying Intersectional Analysis to Relations Within the SMI Domain

An intersectional lens has been applied to examine power hierarchies and investigate how these dynamics shape SMIs' intersecting identities and experiences of privilege and oppression within specific contexts (e.g., Matich et al., 2019; Pemberton and Takhar, 2021). For instance, Pemberton and Takhar (2021) examine the intersections of sex, sexuality and religion to elaborate how French hijabi women who are fashion SMIs, help transform negative stereotypes that perpetuate fear and stigma toward French Muslim identity in France. Similarly, Harju and Huovinen (2015) showcase plus-sized SMI women, analysing their resistance to limiting stereotypes that emerge from intersections of gender and body image within contemporary beauty culture.

However, Veresiu and Parmentier (2021) note that marketing research often applies intersectionality narrowly to individual agency, while overlooking how broader power structures continue to marginalise certain groups in the SMI domain. Aligning with this critique, Rosa-Salas and Sobande (2022) call for marketing researchers and practitioners to

use intersectionality to address underlying power relations, while others assert the need to explore these power relations in marketplaces outside of Global North contexts to provide context-specific insights (Badejo et al., 2021; Gordon et al., 2022). Hurley's (2021) study of SMIs in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) illustrates how some influencers' affiliations with affluent Global North brands promote high-end lifestyles that do not reflect the socioeconomic inequalities experienced by many women in the region. More research, however, is needed to examine SMI's social identities and how they are influenced by power relations, particularly in under-examined Global South contexts such as the Caribbean.

5.2.3 Interrogating Caribbean SMIs' Social Identities Through a Caribbean Feminist Lens

SMIs and consumers alike exist in a post-colonial context in the Caribbean that continues to be subject to historical tensions rooted in slavery, indentureship and other mechanisms of colonisation that foster insecurities around identity and belonging. Caribbean feminists, who employ an inherently intersectional, ecletic epistemology which interprets Caribbean people's unique perspectives (Mohammed, 1998), have theorised how these tensions prompt competing narratives over which group faces the greatest struggles (Reddock, 2019). Therefore, Caribbean feminist perspectives afford understanding of how SMIs and consumers, be they women, men or sex and gender non-conforming people, navigate social identities and relations significantly impacted by varied and often unequal access to social and economic resources (Barriteau, 2012) within the region.

While consumption researchers and other scholars have interrogated complex race, class and other social relations (e.g., Crockett, 2017; Varman et al., 2024; Watson et al., 2010), Caribbean feminists such as Mohammed (1994) and Reddock (2019) have

foregrounded the inherent complexities that frame the Caribbean as unique, nuanced and bearing its own contradictions, ambiguities and culturally located narratives that contend with hegemonic narratives of difference and diversity recognisable in the Global North. For instance, Reddock (2019) describes racial and ethnic tensions in T&T society as 'fractured, insecure and wounded' (p.810) highlighting that each ethnic group carries a history of inequality and struggle from their ancestral homelands and colonialism. It is the Caribbean's long and complex history of ethnic mixing shaped by distinct colonial trajectories across its English-, French-, Spanish-, and Dutch-speaking regions that cultivate multiple intersecting socio-cultural narratives as norm. Scholars note that colonisation, slavery, and indentureship produced deeply interwoven populations, where questions of race, colour, class, and identity are inseparable (Barratt, 2020). Specifically, T&T's diverse population has its roots in a history shaped by early Amerindian settlers, African slavery, Spanish and European colonisation, South-Asian indentureship and other migrations. This history embeds its people in layered dualities, for example, in terms of race, the overlap between a black-white binary, black-indian binary, and creole-pure binary (Barratt, 2020). Within this context, race is understood through ancestry, colour, and group evolution, with racial mixing widely regarded as a defining feature of society. Many people identify with multiple racial influences, reflecting the broader view of T&T as an inherently mixed, creole society (Barratt, 2020).

Caribbean feminists most significantly help reveal how SMIs' and consumers lived experiences remain inherently intersectional by drawing on context-specific knowledge that demonstrate that privilege and power within the region cannot be fully understood through external frameworks (Mohammed, 2018). Therefore, this research employs an approach rooted in this Caribbean feminist intersectional perspective. Specifically, we explore the following questions:

RQ1: How do T&T SMIs' interactions with consumers and brands shape their decision to challenge, accept, or reject the SMI label as a core aspect of their identity?

RQ2: How do T&T SMIs' identity negotiations impact their ability to influence within the marketplace?

5.3 METHODOLOGY

5.3.1 Research Approach – Narrative Interviews

This study draws on narrative interviews with SMIs and consumers in T&T. Consumers are included in our sample as part of our response to calls for more follower-centred research to deepen understanding of gender and identity in the SMI space (Farivar & Wang, 2022). Narrative interviews, with their open-ended format, enabled rich accounts of lived experiences (Patton, 2015). In line with Global South feminist approaches (Purkayastha, 2021), this method centred participants' voices while critically examining the power dynamics shaping their intersectional realities. Our approach aligns with calls for more qualitative, context-specific SMI studies in underrepresented, multi-ethnic Global South settings (Gurrieri et al., 2023; Fowler & Thomas, 2023). Ethical approval was granted by [withheld for review process] (HREC #6201). Participants were informed of potential risks, including possible identification, and provided informed consent to participate.

5.3.2 Data Collection and Sampling

Forty-one face-to-face narrative interviews were conducted totalling an average of 3,690 minutes over 6 months (January – June 2023). An 8-page interview guide was used for this research. For SMIs, questions explored their journey into influencing and experiences with consumers and brands, focusing on gender, race, and social class. For consumers, the guide examined their views on SMIs and interactions with content, especially around these same social factors.

We recruited 21 SMIs and 20 consumers (see Table 5.1 using pseudonyms) using purposive sampling to enable in-depth exploration of information-rich cases (Patton, 2015). A leading local SMI marketing expert, operating independently from the research team, provided an initial sampling frame of top SMIs in T&T categorised into four groups by follower count: mega (100k+), macro (50–100k), mid (10–50k), and micro (<10k). Following Kay et al. (2019), we selected five SMIs from the mega, macro and micro tiers, and six from the mid-tier. SMIs were contacted by phone, starting from the top of each list until consent was obtained. As SMIs in this context are predominantly women (Hudders & De Jans, 2022), our sample reflects this gender balance. For each tier, five consumers who followed those SMIs were then recruited from SMIs' Instagram follower lists via direct messaging. Although SMIs attract regional and international audiences, only local followers were interviewed, as our focus was on perspectives shaped by T&T's market context.

CONSUMERS			
#	NAME	SEX	ETHNICITY
1	Andre	Male	Mixed Other
2	Ricardo	Male	African
3	Jamal	Male	Caucasian
4	Marcus	Male	Mixed African and East Indian
5	Kareem	Male	Mixed Other
6	Darnell	Male	Mixed Other
7	Nathaniel	Male	African
8	Antonio	Male	Mixed Other
9	Shane	Male	African
10	Tyrone	Male	Mixed Other
11	Aaliyah	Female	Chinese
12	Danika	Female	East Indian
13	Janelle	Female	Chinese
14	Keisha	Female	Mixed Other
15	Rochelle	Female	East Indian
16	Tamika	Female	African
17	Selena	Female	East Indian
18	Anika	Female	Caucasian
19	Nyah	Female	Caucasian
20	Camille	Female	Mixed African and East Indian

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS				
#	NAME	SEX	ETHNICITY	RANK
21	Jerome	Male	African	MEGA
22	Joshua	Male	African	MEGA
23	Ryan	Male	African	MEGA
24	Malik	Male	African	MACRO
25	Orlando	Male	East Indian	MACRO
26	Javon	Male	Mixed African and East Indian	MID
27	Rohan	Male	Mixed African and East Indian	MID
28	Trevon	Male	African	MICRO
29	Shanelle	Female	Mixed Other	MEGA
30	Maritza	Female	Mixed Other	MEGA
31	Tasha	Female	East Indian	MACRO
32	Althea	Female	Mixed Other	MACRO
33	Trina	Female	Mixed Other	MACRO
34	Nina	Female	African	MID
35	Kemba	Female	East Indian	MID
36	Nadine	Female	Mixed Other	MID
37	Amy	Female	Mixed Other	MID
38	Ayanna	Female	Mixed Other	MICRO
39	Sade	Female	African	MICRO
40	Celeste	Female	African	MICRO
41	Crystal	Female	African	MICRO

Table 5.1: Sample of 21 SMIs and 20 consumers interviewed for this study

5.3.3 Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis foregrounded participants' perspectives and evaluations of themselves during interactions in the SMI domain (Purkayastha, 2021), with the research team collaborating and interrogating the basis of their own interpretations of meaning, categorisations (Braun & Clarke, 2022) and relevant application of Caribbean feminist literature and marketing scholarship to elaborate a response to the research questions.

Step 1: Data preparation and familiarisation

First, we de-identified all data using pseudonyms. The research team then engaged in broad familiarisation with the recordings and transcripts, reading and re-reading the material to gain an initial sense of participants' narratives.

Step 2: Inductive open coding

We next conducted open coding as an inductive process to compare emerging concepts and identify patterns and divergences in the data. During this stage, we generated initial codes and identified themes such as 'value', 'responsibility' and 'irresponsibility', as well as key labels including 'social media influencer' and 'content creator'.

Step 3: Interrogating concepts, actions and consequences

Using Caribbean feminist literature, we then examined the actions, interactions and consequences associated with these concepts, paying attention to the experiences that shaped how participants understood and used these terms.

Step 4: Deductive axial coding using Caribbean feminist lenses

We applied axial coding as a deductive approach to interpret participants' language and the

underlying conceptual meanings. This stage also drew on Caribbean feminism to contextually explain the phenomena under study.

Step 5: Iterative theme development and review

Finally, the development and review of themes were iterative. Multiple rounds of discussion took place within the research team, which included scholars with expertise in both marketing and Caribbean feminist theory, to refine and consolidate the final themes.

Findings are presented in four themes - Shifting from Label, Rejecting the Label, Identifying Alongside the Label and Identifying with the Label (see Figure 4.7) - expressed in standard English for clarity, as participants often spoke in Trinbagonian Creole. This translation was carried out by the two authors who are native to T&T. This allowed us to foreground the cultural and power dynamics shaping how participants expressed their perceptions.

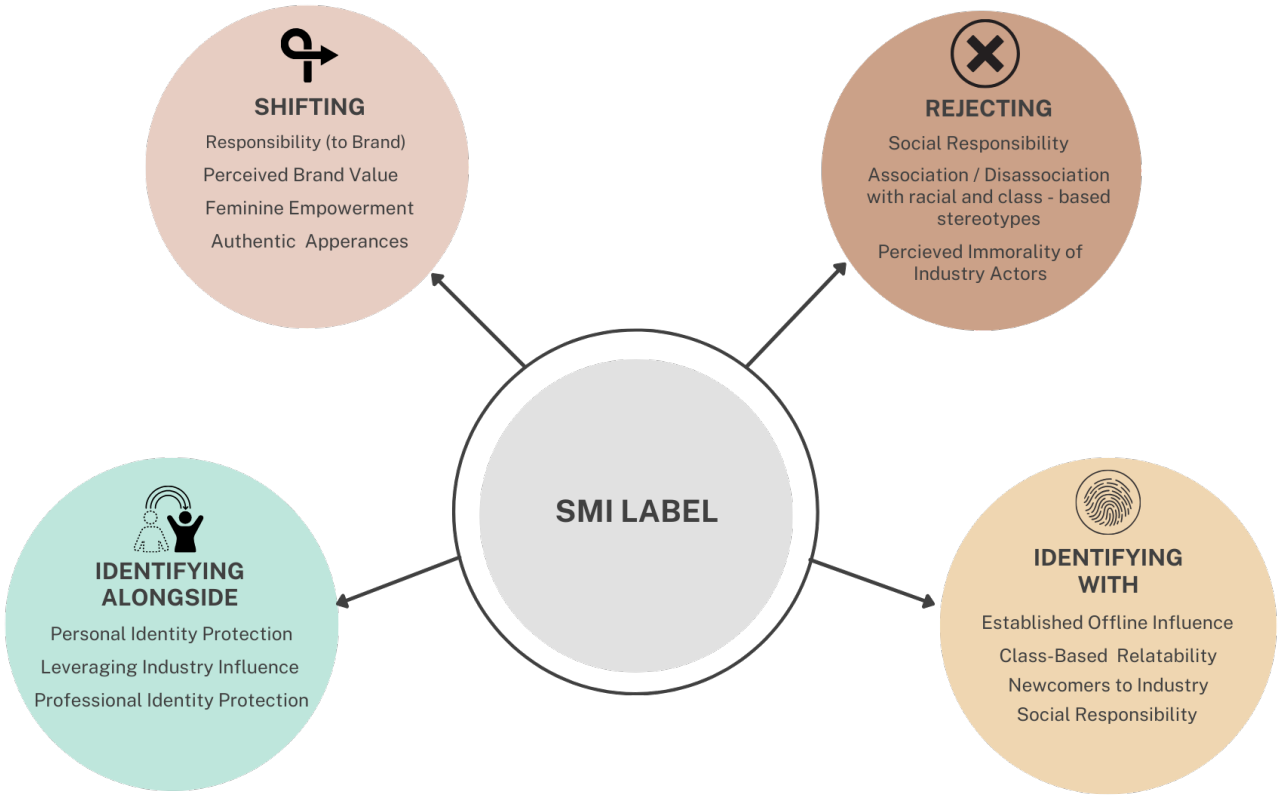


Figure 5.1: Four Types of Responses to the SMI Label.

5.4.1 Shifting From The Label

The findings show the term ‘influencer’ was viewed as problematic by some, as SMIs thought it imposed a heavy burden of responsibility on them and consumers believed SMIs to be irrelevant and controlled by brands. As a result, SMIs redefined their roles to escape the negative connotations in context, preferring a shift to labels such as ‘content creator’.

For instance, Kemba, a predominantly East Indian mid-level fitness SMI, explains that when she was new to the industry, she promoted products that she would not normally use:

> I wouldn't lie in the beginning when it became like a paid thing, I was like, oh my God, yeah, I didn't use this product before, but maybe I could try it out … but now I'm literally like, if you are not within my niche, I'm not doing it … it took me a while to reach that point.

She explains how she now views the SMI label, referring to her past promotion of products that she would not normally use as ‘cringe’:

> I just don’t like the term influencer. I find that’s such a powerful word … to think that you have all of this influence, like, you are just doing it … So, I always try to ask myself why am I sharing this? Is it gonna help somebody? … Or am I doing it because I'm being paid to say it?’ So that's the cringey part.

Kemba expands on the reason for her decision to adopt the label ‘content creator’:

> I feel like there's a difference between a content creator and an influencer. A content creator doesn't have to have a huge amount of following … they just create content, whatever they like, they just do it and they create content that is seemingly better to be consumed. They don't just stick around or picture whatever. They create content.

Kemba associates the SMI label with a lack of integrity, involving the promotion of products solely for payment and minimal effort with regards to content creation. This aligns with Duffy and Sawey's (2021) assertion that the term has become culturally taboo, linked to freeloading Instagram personalities who solicit free products without offering meaningful value. Similarly, Gerhards (2025) notes that SMIs increasingly re-label their identities to distance themselves from such negative stereotypes. Kemba also emphasises her preference to promote products that would be beneficial to her followers, emphasising notions of feminine responsibility and duty inherent to T&T (Barratt, 2018).

Consumers in our sample, including Janelle who is of Chinese descent, highlight that they too value the responsible promotion of products, particularly on the part of macro-level SMIs.

> I think there comes a level of responsibility when you're an influencer. Especially like a macro influencer too - if you don't think that you have an influence on people's behaviour to buy a product, then why do you sell it? … Celebrities are being sued because their endorsement basically told me to invest my money… And now I've lost all my money because you didn't check to see if this thing [the promoted product] was regulated.

Indeed, Reinikainen and colleagues (2021) suggest that brand betrayals can harm SMIs' relationships with their followers, and may even have spillover effects on unrelated

audiences, including those unrelated to the SMI and the brands they promote. Furthermore, by suggesting that SMIs take on greater responsibility as their follower count increases, Janelle points to culturally specific expectations of SMIs with different magnitudes of followers (Fowler & Thomas, 2023).

SMIs also noted that distancing themselves from the SMI label signals a preference for emphasising their skills and value. For instance, Trina, a macro- level gaming SMI of Mixed ethnicity who also shifted to the 'content creator' label, presents herself as authentic in her avoidance of culturally idealised feminine embodiment and expression, appearing bare-faced with visible acne and using heavy vernacular language, including expletives to present herself on her platform. She explains:

> I just start actually putting effort into my content and that's where it is. I realised... I am more than just gaming, because the gaming community is so heavily filled. It's a male-dominated industry. And I want to stand out from it and not be like a typical bimbo that is on that platform, you know, in industry and capitalising for their looks. I was like, no, well I am more than that, I wanted to bring a holistic side of myself to the game.

Trina ascribes her value to the SMI domain as a feminine presence that stands out among men in the male-dominated online gaming industry. She emphasises the importance of leveraging her skills and value, rather than her appearance. Indeed, her views echo Barratt's (2016) observation that Caribbean women often reject the 'girly girl' stereotype - a feminine prototype who is granted power through physical beauty yet simultaneously limited by assumptions that she lacks autonomy, is weak or dependent, and is perceived as ignorant.

Trina's views are echoed by other SMI women such as Sade, who also identifies as a 'content creator'. Sade is a plus-sized African micro-level SMI who creates fashion, haircare and lifestyle content. She emphasises the effort she puts into learning about the brands she promotes to deliver quality content:

> When I started creating content, I would learn things so that I can speak to things.

However, she notes that this level of commitment is no longer typical, with many SMIs now engaged for their follower count rather than expertise. She critiques this shift, describing them as 'paid mouthpieces.' Sade also highlights gendered power disparities shaped by sexuality, class, physicality and cultural expectations of feminine beauty; disparities that she herself contends with due to her self-appearance, e.g. being classified as plus-sized. She suggests that women with larger followings often do so by appealing to the male gaze (Haynes, 2017), benefiting from 'pretty privilege' (Chance, 2023):

> They show pretty face, nice body…Pose up somewhere or the other whatever…Men flock for those things - so a lot of these people have those kind of [large] audiences.

She contrasts her own position to such privileged SMIs, signalling gendered inequalities in post-colonial Caribbean society, where entrepreneurial success is mediated by intersecting power structures of gender, race and class (Esnard, 2023). Their references to 'pretty privilege' also align with Ramati-Ziber and colleagues' (2020) concept of the perfect beauty norm - a belief that pushes women to invest significant time and money into perfecting their appearance. This pressure can detract from their overall success and well-being, and can limit women's power in the workplace, even for those who try to resist or counter these stereotypes.

Despite the privilege associated with some SMI women's race, class and embodiments, the collective emphasis placed on the value of content and expressed preference for labels that acknowledge their efforts in this domain reflects Esnard's (2023) recognition of the similarity of Caribbean women's experiences in the public sphere and productive labour. Esnard (2023) explains how Caribbean women entrepreneurs face uneven gender-based disparities, with socioeconomic identity factors further mediating their experiences in the workplace.

Collectively, participants who shifted away from the SMI label towards alternative self-branded identities did so to avoid negative stereotypes associated with being an SMI and to align themselves with identities perceived as more valuable within the domain (Gerhards, 2025). Consumer feedback reinforced these stereotypes, particularly perceptions of SMIs as irresponsible (Cocker et al., 2021). Overall, these insights extend Khamis et al.'s (2017) assertion that SMIs must manage their identities and self-brand to deliver consistent value to consumers and brands, highlighting the cultural complexity and dynamism of this process. This identity work becomes more pronounced in the cases that follow, where SMIs reject the SMI label entirely rather than distancing themselves from it.

5.4.2 Rejecting The Label

Some SMIs in our study completely rejected the SMI label, associating it with heightened social responsibility and morally ambiguous brand endorsement practices. They further noted that intersectional factors, including race and social class, mediated these experiences, shaping how they choose to self-identify and self-brand in the SMI domain.

For instance, SMI Tasha, a macro-level lifestyle SMI of East Indian descent who identifies as a content creator and not an SMI, describes how she educates brands on how her services differ from those expected of SMIs:

> I mean in Trinidad with regards to working with [advertising] agencies… if they do approach me they say, “Hey, we want an influencer”, but what they're asking for is not what I do… They probably want like a promo girl. So, I kind of try to let them know - hey this is what I do, these are like my packages, this is the kind of content you're going to get. Just so they can understand that okay I can't give you exactly what you want. And again, differentiate the terms -like what I do versus what you think I do.

Tasha’s reference to her experiences with local advertising agencies suggests that brand engagement dynamics for SMIs vary across contexts (Fowler & Thomas, 2023). Presenting herself as typically neat, well-spoken and polished, Tasha goes on to explain how her race, class and ethnicity shape her interactions with endorsing brands and, in turn, influence how she constructs her self-identity within the SMI domain.

> Sometimes brands completely shy away from the Indian culture … In the past, like when I did [working-class fast-food brand] ads, I was always the extra because the Indian girls were never like the main focus. We were always in the background … This [working-class fast-food brand] go for like TikTokers that speak anyhow, conduct themselves anyhow online. They don't really have that, I wanna say class, but their approach is completely different versus somebody that has curated content that actually focuses on their feed… versus someone like me - they put me more for a [higher end chain restaurant] … they won't choose me for the [working-class fast-food brand].

Tasha emphasises the interplay of race, class and ethnicity to illustrate her feelings of exclusion from collaborating with a brand she loves. Indeed, Reddock (2019) refers to post-colonial T&T society as a competitive patriarchy, through which the perceived morality or virtue of women and wider community is often leveraged to assert ethnic superiority. Racial purity defines Indianness within context, while Africanness was regarded as inferior in the aftermath of colonialism (Barratt, 2021). Tasha's issue with the working-class fast-food brand, therefore, emerges amid tensions among race, class and ethnicity as she believes the brand collaborates with African SMIs, who, in her view, demonstrate shortcomings in conforming to dominant notions of social etiquette and minimal effort in their posts. As Tasha does not identify with this group, she is selected for more societally elevated fast-food brands like the higher-end chain restaurant.

Other SMIs, such as Crystal, a micro-level travel SMI of African descent who identifies as a 'travel blogger' but has stopped creating new branded content, rejected not only the SMI label but the industry entirely. She attributed her withdrawal from active SMI work to the SMI industry being 'toxic' and 'fake,' recalling the following incident as a key reason she went dormant on her platforms:

> Like, you know, George Floyd happened and then I think there was this other guy shortly after and there was a movement and we were talking about Black representation. But as the movement built, it literally started turning into a bunch of niches with Black influencers talking about the fact that makeup brands aren't reaching out to them. Why aren't you calling me? I'm like, yo, whoa, this is not … like a man died. Like somebody died. And same thing happened with the travel blog movement. Black travel bloggers and everybody was like, this was their moment in time. And I felt like it lost its authenticity.

Crystal noted that while African SMIs secured brand collaborations during the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in the USA, they were dropped once the trend subsided. This aligns with Sobande's (2020) critique of Global North brands, which often publicly support social justice narratives while simultaneously erasing them. In the T&T context, Crystal explains that once such global trends fade, longstanding hierarchies within the SMI domain, privileging appearance, race and class, reassert themselves. Her experience demonstrates that SMIs may disengage not only due to platform and visibility frustrations (Duffy & Meisner, 2023), but also because of power relations.

For consumer Rodney who is of African descent, like other consumers in our sample, rejection of the SMI label is also complete.

> There is no such thing as a social media influencer, it's just somebody who could market yourself better and they're their own business. So they don't influence anything other than a weak mind. So you get paid to tell me a great story, and if I buy the story, I buy the book. Right? So the influencers are nothing – They're zero because their market life or their shelf life is as good as their content.

Rodney's valuation of SMIs as irrelevant suggests another reason why SMIs like Trina, Sade and Tasha emphasise their value in the SMI domain.

Other SMIs, especially those who gained popularity offline, also reject the SMI label but prefer to be recognised only by their original profession. For instance, SMI Javon is a mid-level SMI of Mixed African and East Indian descent and is the lead singer of a popular local musical band. He explains why he prefers to be called an 'artiste who is gifted the social media medium to reach more people'.

> I don't want nobody call me no influencer - that carries so much responsibility, but now it doesn't. The word 'influencer' … And if that's the title that you wanna take onto yourself, like, you have to be really careful. Do you really wanna be influencer for [working-class fast-food brand]? … It goes back to what I was saying before, like intention - what's your intention? This is a very, very powerful tool.

Javon explains that he rejects the SMI label entirely, despite having been approached for brand endorsements and engaging in a few non-commercial collaborations. He identifies primarily as an 'artiste who uses his voice to advocate for social justice and truth.'

> You know, before [social media], artistes might have had to do anything from standing up on the side road selling their stuff, or, you know, giving talks in a town hall or somewhere that they have or [are] among other artiste friends. But now we have a space where artistes, who have opinions about society, can put things out and say, 'this is how I feel about how we're living and where we are'.

Javon positions himself not as an SMI but as an artiste who uses social media to bypass traditional gatekeepers and speak publicly on social issues. His influence, therefore, stems from cultural credibility and authenticity rather than from commercial partnerships. Researchers such as Kaptian and colleagues (2022) note that traditional celebrities who built their fame outside social media can still hold influence within the SMI domain. However, the extent of that influence depends heavily on the cultural context (Agnihotri and Bhattacharya, 2021).

Taken together, SMIs linked their rejection of the SMI label to negative experiences with brands and other influencers shaped by their gender, race, class, and ethnicity, showing how these encounters determine how they identify, position themselves, and decide whether

to participate in the domain. Their rejection of the label reflects the unequal power relations shaping who is recognised, valued, and rewarded in the SMI domain. This aligns with Gerhards' (2025) observation that SMIs distance themselves from the SMI label to reclaim power over how they are defined - choosing identities based on their creative work rather than a marketer-imposed term burdened by negative stereotypes.

These narratives also show how SMIs influence brand practices and social justice messaging, extending emerging insights on influencer activism (Fowler & Thomas, 2023). In doing so, they help construct brand meaning - sometimes fuelling 'woke washing', where brands exploit social justice discourse for profit (Sobande, 2020) - prompting SMIs to reassess their values and identities (Wellman, 2022). Through their evaluations, SMIs and consumers reveal the dynamics of hierarchies tied to race, class, and how these can be seen as affording privilege to some SMIs over others, shaping who is heard, valued, and legitimised in the domain. Other SMIs in our sample opted to identify alongside the traditional SMI labels.

5.4.3 Identifying Alongside the SMI Label

Participants often identified as both SMIs and professionals, reserving the SMI label for those with significant influence while using co-branding strategies to protect personal and professional identities. This is exemplified by Nadine, a mid-level SMI who is of Mixed descent and identifies as both a 'content creator' and 'influencer'. Nadine is a professional swimsuit designer who shares lifestyle content. She explains how she can be viewed as an SMI, where influence as rooted in expertise and community rather than popularity, though she identifies with the content creator label:

> I think influencer now is just kind of like somebody who actually has a strong community in a sense. Who people would go to for advice … or, I think, works well in like niches if it's like, 'oh, you're really good at business things and finance'. And I guess if it comes to sewing, and being a specialty with bikinis, then I would be like, yes, I could consider myself an influencer in that way…that's how I would consider influence. I don't like people who just post on things, I'm just like, you kind of just a wannabe celebrity. And I would not consider it an influencer.

Her recognition of the relevance of the label to her identity and output positions her as knowledgeable and accountable in her niche.

Similarly, Althea, a mid-level lifestyle SMI of Mixed descent, self-brands as a 'collaborator' to mitigate the forceful connections of the SMI label:

> I feel like influencer is such a strong [word] in terms of like you're trying to influence people. I'm not trying to influence anybody unless it's pretty positive. But, um, I prefer the word collaborator because I feel that way it's like, okay, a piece of you as well as the product or the company. Not just, okay this chocolate bar, it's so good for you and, and you're just selling it to people and trying to brainwash people or thinking people like you so they're gonna buy it.

In her chosen label, Althea signals her preference to be publicly positioned as collaborating with an endorsed brand, believing this transparency helps avoid misleading consumers and the backlash - public criticism and questioning of her authenticity- that often follows. Althea's insights align with Lee and Abidin (2021) who demonstrate that SMI's failure to disclose particularly lucrative brand endorsements tends to impact women more significantly, as followers question their sense of responsibility and accountability.

Nadine and Althea critique popular SMIs for projecting inauthentic identities, either as ‘wannabe celebrities’ or manipulative marketers, and these concerns are echoed by consumers. For instance, Mixed ethnic consumer Antonio critiques the shiftiness of an apparent authentic identity of a popular SMI woman he knows personally in the context of T&T.

> [Regarding] her being influencer … influencer because she has followers - but did she buy her followers? How she get them? … She can't sell me nothing… She can't sell my wife nothing… she can't sell none of we … But she promote them [brands]. But again, if she take the time out to get better, if she's doing this, she doing everything. And it's like, well, you cannot do everything. So she's confused as to what, who she is, what she is … you can’t be selling one soap today then tomorrow you're talking about some other soap you know? If I was to ask her, ‘what's your brand?’ she be like ‘what? I'm just popular and people just want to hear what I have to say!’

Antonio’s questioning of the verifiable impact of his friend [a mega-level SMI woman] suggests that SMI women must demonstrate professional mastery to validate their influence. Through his response, Antonio invokes Barriteau’s (2001) ‘passbook metaphor’ which highlights how Caribbean women, despite having legal rights, are often required to prove their worth to fully access and exercise those rights, in this case, rights to claim economic dominance and referred power. Furthermore, Antonio’s response reflects other consumer comments about SMI women that question the authenticity of their careers and are gendered in nature (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Mardon et. al., 2023).

SMIs in our sample also reflected on past experiences where their professionalism was questioned by consumers due to their association with the SMI label. For example, Amy,

a mid-level SMI and well-known DJ of Mixed ethnic descent, primarily identifies as a DJ and only secondarily as an SMI. Amy described an experience that led her to withdraw from posting on X [formerly Twitter] altogether, after being pressured to participate in a live panel discussion with male entertainers on gender-based violence (GBV).

As the panel faced public criticism for lacking female representation, the organiser specifically asked Amy to appear simply as a representative of women in the entertainment industry. Despite her reservations, she agreed to participate:

> As I went and joined his [the organiser's] team. I didn't even say anything … people were like 'Not her!' 'Stick to [local rum which Amy promotes as an SMI]!'. As I went on all the heat went to me, and I panicked because I started to see all the tweets and that's when it hit me - the anxiety, I guess even after like it rolled into the next day. Like people were tweeting about me and they weren't even mentioning [tagging her account] me - but because it was a LIVE broadcast, you were just seeing all the tweets with my name saying 'Not Her!' 'She's a joke' 'She doesn't represent all women' 'Send a professional'… It was horrible.

Amy shared that she put her phone down for a week, afraid to face the backlash from consumers. Since then, she has been hesitant to engage with her followers and has adopted a non-controversial approach on X. Her participation in the LIVE discussion intertwined her identity as a woman in T&T with her roles as a DJ and rum brand endorser. More importantly, such intersections affected Amy's capacity to speak on the topic, and in turn, influence audience opinions about GBV. Consumers criticised her perceived privilege as a female DJ in a male-dominated industry, assuming she was insulated from GBV threats. Her experience reflects Esposito et al.'s (2024) argument that judgments of GBV victims often hinge on identity factors.

Alternatively, some SMIs suggested that embracing the SMI label can be strategically beneficial, enabling them to leverage influence alongside the identities through which they gained popularity online. For instance, Maritza, a mega-level lifestyle SMI of Mixed descent, identifies as both an SMI and a content creator:

> I would describe an influencer, as somebody who has strong face value in society… Somebody could be an influencer but not a content creator. So they could have the face value but not know how to edit content or how to create content to engage other people to engage businesses… With a content creator, you have to be creative, you need to stay on trend… with an influencer, most of them are told what they have to say or what they have to do… I am more content creator. But I still am both.

Maritza explained that, through her active interaction with her younger followers, she shaped her identity as an SMI/content creator who confronts societal taboos surrounding sex.

> Caribbean parents don't speak about like sex, they don't speak about intimacy. It's only when you find a trusted YouTube influencer or a relative outside of your family or even in schools … that's when the topics would come up. I don't like that. So I would try to cater for the unknown - the things that I wish I knew to my younger followers … A lot of them messaged me about advice for relationships, advice for their self-confidence. And they would admit to me that they don't want to go to their moms because their mothers would be like "Girl hop outta dat eh!"

Maritza operates within a society where intersecting taboos rest between gender, sex, sexuality and age. Sharpe and Pinto (2006) demonstrate that the taboo nature of sexuality in the Caribbean, rooted in colonialism, confines women's, particularly Black women's sexuality, within the boundaries of Victorian respectable femininity (Barratt, 2018). Maritza,

however, recognises that she can influence positively and realigned her content to benefit her audience. Indeed, Kempadoo (2004) notes that Caribbean women increasingly exercise agency over their sexuality, challenging respectability norms. Maritza exemplifies this, using the SMI label to enhance her influence while identifying as a content creator to retain creative control.

Collectively, this study finds that some SMIs pair their professional identities with the SMI label, leveraging its associations with influence and visibility while distancing themselves from negative associations attached to the label. Such dual positioning legitimises their presence but comes with trade-offs: as Khamis et al. (2017) argue, self-labelling remains problematic because SMIs are often judged through the lens of the influencer identity rather than their expertise, shaping how they participate online. Other SMIs opted to maintain the SMI label.

5.4.4 Identifying With The Label

Though there was a trend of distancing or rejection of the SMI label among SMIs, some in our sample fully embraced the SMI label. Notably, these SMIs either had an established offline following that they successfully transitioned to social media or were newcomers to the industry. For instance, Mixed ethnic, mega-level SMI and celebrity singer Shanelle, who brought her large offline following online, explained that she does not rely on or accept brand endorsements unless they are both lucrative and reputable.

> All the things that I've done so far on social media as an influencer, people have come to me to do it. I've never reached out to anyone. Um, there's a lot more that [has] come in, but they're not necessarily serious, or lucrative.

On the other hand, a newcomer to the industry, micro-level SMI Ayanna identifies as an SMI but expresses surprise at her newfound influence. Like more seasoned SMIs such as Kemba (mentioned earlier), she also describes the SMI label as 'cringe':

> It makes me all cringe to describe myself as an influencer. Cause I feel like… it's almost like saying I'm famous in a way. This makes me cringe, I guess. I'm having a hard time just accepting that this is what it is, you know? So I guess my mindset on that is well … I guess to see it as it is … I am an influencer.

The SMI men in our research who similarly embraced the SMI label belonged to different following tiers and first built their reputations offline as professionals (e.g., in media or engineering). Unlike Javon [aforementioned], however, they additionally established strong public profiles as comedians, which helped them transition into social media endorsements. For instance, mega-level African SMI Malik, who is also a professional engineer and comedian, explains why he identifies as an SMI.

> My focus was always to use my content to influence. It wasn't just to create 50,000 views so that I could make money from the views. It was to use the content, the talent as the hook to reign them in and then speak something that's positive. Because… a comedian has the power to influence because everybody pays attention to the joke.

However, mid-Level African SMI Rohan, who is also a comedic entertainer and a media professional, explains his connection to his network of grassroot audiences as the site within which he operates as an SMI, especially one is authentic and trustworthy.

> Being a truth speaker, I view myself as somebody that I ain't come for no bullshit. If I don't like something, I'm not gonna endorse it…and I tend to keep my brand that way, so people know that when they see stuff on my page, it's not just because I'm being

> paid to do it. It's because I really believe in it, which is what I think is the real catalyst behind, a powerful influencer.

Rohan emphasised using comedy to remain relatable to his grassroots audience, aligning with consumer Rochelle's view that SMI men are valued for their humour and perceived authenticity.

> I usually see [SMI] men using comedy more. They seem more realistic like they're not trying to seem what they think their gender should be. So they seem more natural generally to me… more than [SMI] women would … they don't seem like they wanna heavily retouch their stuff … slim their waist and it would be society's standards.

Rohan further explains how he grounds his authenticity in deliberate efforts to transcend some of the stereotypical identifiers associated with blackness. As an African male SMI, he shares the experience of many Black Caribbean men who often face significant barriers when they attempt to climb the social hierarchy, which prompts them to resist marginalisation through music, relationships, community interactions, and political discourse (Beckles, 1996). Rohan admits that he works to elevate his self-presentation and social class affiliation.

> If I want higher [brands] to hire me, then I have to have a certain image, you know what I mean? Cause I had dreads [dreadlocks] as you know … I'm like, okay, social media is now it. I have to have a visual appearance now and I choose to have a clean visual appearance because I want to host at the [High-End hotel] - I wanna be the next [local comedy entertainer turned celebrity talk show host and politician]! You understand? With a bit of comedy, so I have to keep a certain image. So extremely important when it comes to image.

Rohan's acknowledgement that he maintains a polished appearance for brand endorsement opportunities not only reflects honest self-awareness about his actions in the industry, but also highlights the steps Black Caribbean men often take to gain validity and recognition in corporate spaces (Fraser, 2023). This is true even when their deepest connections lie elsewhere, in Rohan's case, with his grassroots audience.

Similarly, SMI Jerome, an African mega-level SMI who also presents a polished appearance, explained that while such 'clean' aesthetics can signal affluence, followers remain supportive as long as SMIs continue to represent their interest and stay relatable to their social group. He explains how he has been able to sustain connections through such social group affiliation,

> I get plenty support from the darker skin community because of the fact that people like to see the black man succeed. Every time I do something new, they say, "yeah, I like it … but, you know what? I like even more cause you're a black man … you just represent us."

Consumer Tyrone, however, points out the risk of appearing to have dual social group affiliation, stating that he is not convincingly influenced by SMIs that do not share his social position:

> Somebody who thinks that they're God's gift to you? … Because they're [SMIs] rich and they could tell anybody what they want or however they want or, you know? Even if they're not saying anything, but they're just portraying a certain type of lifestyle. While they might be rich and famous … I don't connect to that.

While perceived authenticity is important for both men and women SMIs, Rochelle particularly emphasises the responsibility of SMI women to present a more balanced and natural image with fewer filters to protect consumers.

> I just think, generally social media influences how people feel real life is when it isn't. And I think you have impressionable people on social media all the time.

Notably, researchers have highlighted how consumers often question SMI women's femininity, which is closely tied to perceptions of their responsibility and accountability to broader society (Duffy et al., 2022; Mardon et al., 2023). In this way, maintaining authenticity is particularly demanding for SMI women who experience heightened scrutiny (Banet-Wiser, 2021). Although there are limited insights into the gendered experiences of SMI men, Rohan's strategy of refining his appearance to reflect his identity offers useful insight into how some male SMIs navigate gendered expectations on social media platforms (Edelblum and Warren, 2024).

Our findings suggest that for SMIs who are new to the industry and those who are already established celebrities offline, alignment with the SMI label matters far less than for SMIs whose influence is built exclusively through social media. This nuance adds to nascent understanding of how SMIs use self-labelling to manage their identities (Gerhards, 2025) by showing that factors such as length of time in the SMI role and dependence on the industry to gain influence can shape whether SMIs experience moral dilemmas associated with the label and adopt strategies to distance themselves from it. SMIs face and navigate intense scrutiny tied to gendered expectations shaped by race, class, and cultural norms. They are under pressure to sustain influence (connection with followers) and expand influence (commercial partnerships). These dynamics contribute to scholarship on how intersecting factors, such as race and class norms, shape identity in the SMI domain (Mardon et al., 2023) and extend

emerging insights into the gendered experiences of SMI men on social media platforms (Edelblum and Warren, 2024).

5.5 Implications

Our findings contribute to marketing, gender and intersectionality literature by showing how SMIs and consumers negotiate identity through self-labelling practices within the influencer domain. Addressing RQ1, we illustrate how T&T SMIs' interactions with consumers and brands shape their perceptions of value, credibility and responsibility, prompting shifts in self-identification. Some reject the term 'influencer' in favour of pre-existing identities such as 'artiste'; others shift to alternative labels like 'content creator' to assert greater autonomy; some co-brand with titles like 'collaborator' to mitigate brand backlash; while newcomers and offline celebrities are more likely to accept the SMI label. For RQ2, we show that these identity choices influence marketplace power, including brand selection and endorsement opportunities, as suitability is mediated by intersecting social characteristics. Consumers also tend to reject SMIs they perceive as overly privileged, while some SMIs strategically realign their identities to counter stereotypes and deepen resonance with core audiences. Overall, our study highlights the explanatory power of intersectionality and its relevance in underexplored Global South contexts (Badejo et al., 2021; Ourahmoune & El Jurdi, 2022; Rosa-Salas & Sobande, 2022).

5.5.1 Theoretical Contributions

Our findings contribute to knowledge around: (1) gendered value and identity construction in the SMI domain, and (2) adaptation of SMIs social identities for impact in the marketplace.

Gendered Value and Social Identity Construction in the SMI Domain

First, our study highlights how, in a multi-ethnic, postcolonial context like T&T, SMIs' identities are shaped by both their own and consumers' perceptions of their value. SMI men tend to be valued for their relatability to core, often class-based audiences, while SMI women are judged based on their femininity, through traits like responsibility and being role models, which in turn affect their and consumer perception of value. These dynamics are reflected in the experiences of SMI men Rohan and Javon, who stress staying grounded, and SMI women Trina and Sade, who critique higher-ranked SMI women for relying on appearance rather than meaningful content. Such perceptions are often shaped and regulated by consumer expectations (Barratt, 2018; Duffy et al., 2024; Mardon et al., 2023), as seen in consumer Rochelle's view of SMI men as relatable and comedic, versus SMI women's focus on beauty standards.

Our findings reinforce prior research showing that consumers regulate SMI women through ideals of authentic, responsible femininity (Barratt, 2018; Duffy et al., 2024; Mardon et al., 2023). In T&T, SMI men gain influence through relatability and humour, yet this is constrained by racialised norms, such as associations with Blackness that diverge from Eurocentric standards (Beckles, 1996), extending emerging insights into gendered valuations of male SMIs (Edelblum & Warren, 2024). Conversely, while SMI women, especially those

considered attractive, may dominate the industry (Hudders & De Jans, 2022), their influence can be undermined when addressing serious topics affecting a wider audience outside of their niche, as seen in the case of Amy, who was criticised for appearing on a public platform where GBV was being discussed. Furthermore, these insights provide a nuanced understanding of how gender, socio-cultural and other contextual factors shape consumer perceptions of SMIs, which in turn influence how SMIs construct their identities in T&T.

Adapting SMIs' Social Identities for Impact in the SMI Domain

Our findings also highlight that SMIs' negotiation around their identities is manifest in how they label themselves. This extends prior research on multiple identities as a means of asserting authenticity (Abidin, 2018; Goode et al., 2023) and emerging work on distancing from negative taboos tied to the influencer label (Duffy & Sawey, 2021; Gerhards, 2025). These self-labelling strategies allow SMIs to reframe their identities for both followers and brands. Some, like SMI Nadine, adopt co-branded identities alongside the SMI label to navigate gendered power hierarchies, resist negative stereotypes (Duffy & Sawey, 2021), assert their value, and mitigate risks such as public backlash or cancellation (Levesque et al., 2023). Some SMI men also expressed discomfort with the influencer label, but unlike women SMIs, their concerns centred on maintaining allegiance to core, class-based audiences. This finding deepens understanding of how class and gender mediate self-labelling strategies in the SMI domain (Edelblum & Warren, 2024; Gerhards, 2025).

While some established SMIs reject the influencer label altogether, micro-level newcomers like SMI Ayanna are ambivalent and some mega-level SMIs like Shanelle feel empowered to embrace the influencer label, selectively choosing endorsements. Notably, Shanelle's status as a celebrity singer reinforces her social identity and power, enabling her

influencer presence to draw on this offline fame. Research has suggested that an SMI's influence often varies by follower ranking, pointing to a need for further exploration of how SMIs differ across categories and cultural settings (Kay et al., 2019; Fowler & Thomas, 2023). Our study advances understanding by pointing to how, for some SMIs, power related to their primary social identity (e.g., soca artiste, or musician) shapes their ability to influence. However, as Janelle articulated from the consumer perspective, greater visibility brings heightened expectations for accountability among macro- and mega-level SMIs, highlighting how visibility amplifies responsibility and value judgments.

Second, our findings also demonstrate that SMIs' identities influence how they engage with brands, shaping whether they are silenced or exert their influence. For instance, SMI Crystal withdrew from social media after observing brands temporarily endorse African influencers during the BLM movement, only to abandon them afterward. This reflects Sobande's (2020) critique of Global North markets, where brands commodify social issues for short-term gains without addressing structural inequalities. Crystal's experience extends current understanding about this discourse by illustrating how these practices can manifest in the multi-layered T&T context, where identity, status, and cultural acceptance remain contested according to intersections of sex, class and ethnicity (Reddock, 2019).

Furthermore, SMI Tasha noted that local brand selection practices extend beyond race, with some clients favouring SMIs based on gendered stereotypes, vernacular use, and perceived social etiquette. However, as SMI Tasha also illustrated, these intersectional dynamics do not necessarily always create alignment between SMIs and followers based on characteristics such as ethnicity (Hudders & De Jans, 2022). Such alignment is less evident in certain content areas, such as food, where acceptance tends to be broader across class and ethnic lines. These insights help deepen understanding of inclusion and exclusion within the

SMI domain across different market categories such as lifestyle, food, and beauty (Fowler & Thomas, 2023).

Consistent with prior research (Mardon et al., 2023), our findings show that SMI women's power and legitimacy are shaped by how they construct and are perceived through their identities. Intersectional factors such as class, gender, and profession shape consumer responses. Extending Duffy et al. (2022) and Mardon et al. (2023) on 'call-out' culture, we show how SMIs are often judged not for what they say, but how their identities are perceived. As consumer Tyrone put it, 'nothing needs to be said': privileged embodiment alone can prompt disengagement. In contrast, SMI women like Maritza used feedback as a springboard for activism. Rather than reacting to pressure, her advocacy arose from observing silences, particularly among privileged followers, on taboo topics. This reveals how SMIs can also shape activist roles through self-positioning in complex cultural contexts (Fowler & Thomas, 2023).

5.5.2 Practical Contributions

Marketers should adopt an intersectionality-informed approach when engaging SMIs for endorsements. Research shows that intersectional factors such as race, ethnicity and class significantly influence how SMIs express authenticity, take ownership of their content, and reflect their lived experiences online (Sobande, 2020). Marketers should draw on these insights and, in line with recommendations from Neilsen (2022), collaborate with intersectional scholars and experts to develop strategies that challenge, rather than reinforce, harmful gender stereotypes within specific cultural contexts.

Marketers should also listen closely to SMIs' concerns. Although the term 'SMI' is widely used in research and practice, studies suggest it has become culturally loaded or even

taboo (Duffy & Sawey, 2021). Alternative labels like 'content creator' have emerged to reflect differing levels of creative autonomy (Kapitan et al., 2022) and as a means of transforming negative taboos associated with SMI work (Gerhards, 2025). However, our findings suggest that these labels remain fluid and are often shaped by power dynamics within the SMI space, influencing how SMIs perceive their value and by extension, their identities, further aligning with the problematisation around identities and individual self-labelling asserted by Khamis et al. (2017). Marketers should therefore develop context-specific labels in consultation with SMIs and informed by research evidence.

Furthermore, studies have noted the challenges SMIs face, including public call-outs and cancellation (Duffy et al., 2024; Lee & Abidin, 2021). For example, SMI Amy experienced backlash when consumers questioned her professional credibility simply because she participated in an online discussion. Although she did not present herself as an expert, her association with the SMI label led audiences to judge her as unqualified, highlighting how the label itself can create expectations that invite criticism. This points to the pressures SMIs can face, in this case to participate, regardless of their chosen level of engagement. To address such risks, marketers should implement the broader lens afforded by intersectionality and evidence-based ethical guidelines that protect SMIs' wellbeing and create safer online environments.

5.6 Limitations and Future Research

Because intersectionality is increasingly used in marketing scholarship and industry as a segmentation and diversity tool, often detaching it from the power relations and structural histories it was developed to address (Rosa-Salas & Sobande, 2022), this paper adopts Caribbean feminism as a context-specific intersectional framework**,** grounded in the region's

distinct socio-historical realities and attentive to systems of power (see Badejo et al., 2021). Our findings demonstrate the importance of this approach**,** as SMIs' negotiations of identity and self-labelling are deeply shaped by the racialised, gendered, and classed power dynamics embedded in T&T's social landscape. These dynamics influence how SMIs take up, resist, or redefine labels such as "influencer" labels that are widely used within industry practice yet carry moral, cultural, and structural implications for those who inhabit them.

Our research provides context-specific insight into how SMIs in T&T continually shape and re-shape their identities through interactions with brands and consumers. We show that these identity negotiations are expressed through self-labelling strategies that often challenge or redefine the SMI label, influencing how SMIs engage with followers and brands. Grounded in T&T's socio-historical and multicultural context, this research does not seek to generalise its findings to the wider Caribbean or the Global South. Rather, it points to the need for further context-specific, intersectional analyses of power within the Global South SMI domain. Building on emerging insights into the gendered dimensions of SMI men's experiences, future research could further examine how gender and power shape their online identities across cultural contexts. Our findings also suggest that SMI-brand relationships vary by region, warranting further exploration of how Global South SMIs navigate identity when engaging with Global North brands and audiences.

CHAPTER 6

'IF THEY KEEP IT UP, THEY DEAL WITH BACKLASH':

Towards a Gender Responsive Framework to Guide Social Marketers in Engaging Social Media Influencers



6. *'IF THEY KEEP IT UP, THEY DEAL WITH BACKLASH':* TOWARDS A GENDER RESPONSIVE FRAMEWORK TO GUIDE SOCIAL MARKETERS IN ENGAGING SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

Abstract

***Purpose**:* Our article aims to examine how gender norms shape the experiences of social media influencers (SMIs) and consumers when engaging in pro-social initiatives, and to develop a conceptual and practical framework to guide social marketers in engaging SMIs in gender responsive social marketing campaigns. This is important because SMIs operating in the pro-social domain face backlash that can undermine both campaign effectiveness and SMI safety, yet practical guidance on how to address these dynamics remains limited.

***Design/methodology/approach**:* Our research draws on intersectionality, interpreted using a Caribbean feminist theoretical lens. We conducted a multi-method feminist critical discourse analysis of content posted by 40 SMIs, alongside qualitative interviews with 21 SMIs and 20 consumer followers in Trinidad & Tobago.

Findings: Gender norms rooted in colonial legacies shape how SMIs and consumers perceive credible and effective SMI-led pro-social campaigns. Drawing on participants' experiences, our study proposes key considerations for a gender responsive framework focused on SMI-follower congruence, stronger representation, leveraging SMIs' cultural intelligence to enhance engagement with pro-social causes, and ensuring consistency in their self-presentation.

***Originality**:* Our article makes a dual contribution. Theoretically, it extends understanding of SMI authenticity and backlash by demonstrating how gendered power, shaped by race, sexuality, and class within a Global South context, determines whose voices

are seen as credible in pro-social messaging. Practically, it offers the first empirically grounded, gender responsive framework for SMI selection and engagement in social marketing, addressing calls for more intersectional and context-specific approaches in the field.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Our paper draws on research with social media influencers (SMIs) and consumers conducted in the multi-ethnic, postcolonial context of Trinidad and Tobago (T&T), to develop a conceptual and practical framework for engaging SMIs in undertaking gender responsive social marketing. Gender responsive initiatives acknowledge that people of different genders face distinct roles, needs, and barriers. These initiatives design and implement policies and programs that address these inequalities, ensure systems and practices that work toward gender parity and the elimination of gender-based discrimination (INEE, 2019). We operationalise gender responsiveness as a framework for evaluating how SMI selection, representation, content and engagement can address or mitigate gendered harm while strengthening the effectiveness of pro-social initiatives. In doing so, our work bridges both theoretical and practical gaps by contributing to a growing conversation in critical social marketing scholarship regarding the need to carefully account for gender and intersectionality in theory, research, and practice (Aya Pastrana *et al.*, 2021; Gordon *et al.*, 2022; Gurrieri *et al.*, 2013).

SMI marketing has expanded globally, with research highlighting traits like authenticity, credibility, and knowledge as key to forming parasocial (one-way) relationships that enhance their influence (Ooi *et al.*, 2023). Although academic scholarship in this field is advancing, marketing scholars, including social marketing scholars, have called for deeper insights into and a better understanding of using SMIs for social good (Alsalem *et al.*, 2020;

Fowler and Thomas, 2023). However, the social media domain is shaped by complex gendered social relations (Mueller, 2023), and some SMIs who have publicly faced gendered harassment (Mondezie, 2021) are particularly marginalised based on their race, gender, sexuality, and culture, and often face public scrutiny, online abuse, and career risks, even when promoting social change (Duffy and Meisner, 2023).

In the context of T&T, SMI Ashana describes facing gender-based harassment and backlash through harsher criticism directed at her image and music: treatment she notes male artists seldom face. She also highlights being sexualised because of her curvier body, reflecting gendered double standards in how women performers are judged (Mondezie, 2021). T&T is in the Global South, and its multi-ethnic society is shaped by multiple intersecting layers of social identities rooted in power relations that frame privilege and marginalisation (Reddock, 2019). The term "Global South" broadly refers to regions in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania, typically outside Europe and North America (Dados and Connell, 2012). It highlights enduring inequalities in economic and political power between wealthier nations (the 'North') and less-resourced nations (the 'South') (Beoku-Betts and Adomako Ampofo, 2021).

In the T&T context, SMIs have been actively involved in promoting social change (see Nakiah Castang). However, when doing so, they often encounter criticisms or backlash that reference their gendered expressions or interpretations of their gender, which have so far been underexplored in social marketing scholarship. Our paper draws on research conducted in T&T to chart a way forward towards more gender responsive and emancipatory approaches to using SMIs in social marketing. It responds to calls for context-specific, decolonial knowledge by utilising intersectional approaches within critical social marketing scholarship (Gordon *et al.*, 2022; Raciti, 2021).

Our paper applies Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality framework, particularly as it has been mapped onto Caribbean lived experiences by Caribbean feminists. It uses Caribbean feminists' rooting of intersectionality within a regionally grounded epistemology that foregrounds colonial history, local power relations, and culturally specific narratives as constitutive of gendered experience (Barratt, 2018; Barriteau, 1998; Mohammed, 2018), to evaluate the meanings and significance of the criticism and backlash encountered by SMIs in the T&T context, and to frame a practical approach to establishing gender responsiveness as central to SMI campaigns for social transformation.

We regard gender as a social construct that varies over time, shaped by norms, behaviours, and roles associated with women, men, girls, boys, non-binary and non-conforming, as well as the relations between them. Because intersectionality is increasingly used in marketing scholarship and industry as a segmentation and diversity tool, often detaching it from the power relations and structural histories it was developed to address (Rosa-Salas and Sobande, 2022), our paper adopts Caribbean feminism as a context-specific intersectional framework, grounded in the region's distinct socio-historical realities and attentive to systems of power (see Badejo *et al.*, 2021).

Methodologically, our study applies Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) to SMIs' published posts, alongside thematic analysis of qualitative narrative interviews with SMIs and their followers (consumers). Based on this analysis, our paper presents key insights and recommendations for developing grounded, culturally relevant approaches for social marketers seeking to engage SMIs in ways that are gender responsive. In doing so, social marketers can address the harmful gendered impacts that persist in the SMI domain while amplifying strategies for gender responsive social change, as called for in the literature (Aya Pastrana *et al.*, 2022; Badejo *et al*., 2021; Gordon *et al.*, 2022). Accordingly, our paper addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do gender norms shape the experiences of SMIs and consumers in T&T when engaging in pro-social initiatives?

RQ2: What practical guidelines can support social marketers in designing SMI-led campaigns that are gender responsive?

6.2 Literature Review

6.2.1 Assessing Gender Responsiveness in Social Marketing

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines gender responsive programmes as those that consider gender norms, roles, and inequalities and take active steps to reduce their harmful effects (WHO, 2022), to advance gender equity as outlined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Aya Pastrana *et al*., 2022). Social marketers have explored gender in various ways across the field. At the campaign level, studies have tested gender-based initiatives focused on condom use among men and women (Nkwei *et al.*, 2022), addressed gender-based violence to promote gender equality (Martam, 2016), targeted risky behaviours among youth (Evans *et al*., 2019) and in the Caribbean, used to promote sexual and reproductive health and advocacy against gender-based violence (White, 2018).

While these studies highlight the importance of recognising how culture shapes gendered behaviours in behaviour change campaigns, emerging scholarship urges social marketers to move beyond binary understandings of gender. This includes critically examining how programmes aimed at promoting gender equity may unintentionally exclude marginalised groups, such as racial minorities, sexually and gender-diverse communities (Smith *et al*., 2024), and populations outside the Global North (Aya Pastrana *et al.*, 2022; Badejo *et al*., 2021; Gordon *et al.*, 2022).

Furthermore, scholars such as Gurrieri *et al.* (2012) caution that without adopting a critical lens, social marketing initiatives may reinforce rather than challenge inequities. Increasingly, research highlights the need to interrogate how power constructs gender stereotypes, as doing so can enhance the effectiveness of campaigns addressing health issues like HIV and HPV, where stigma plays a significant role in shaping behaviour (Malika *et al.*, 2025).

Researchers have also highlighted a general lack of attention to gender responsive strategies and have called for more initiatives grounded in gender responsive frameworks (Aya Pastrana *et al.*, 2022), despite the availability of tools such as the WHO Gender Responsive Assessment Scale (GRAS), which is used to evaluate the gender responsiveness of pro-social initiatives (Aya Pastrana *et al.*, 2022). However, these tools have largely been applied at the policy and strategy level, leaving limited guidance on how gender responsiveness can inform programme level decisions, including the selection and engagement of SMIs.

In social marketing, gender responsive initiatives are increasingly important for addressing issues such as gender-based violence, an escalating concern in the Caribbean and in T&T specifically (Esposito *et al.*, 2024). This highlights the need to document and evaluate these initiatives to strengthen their nascent reach and impact across the Caribbean region (White, 2018). However, for these initiatives to be effective across diverse populations, including those in the Caribbean and other Global South contexts, they must move beyond single-axis analyses of gender and account for how race, class, sexuality, and other intersecting identities shape who is reached, who is harmed, and whose experiences are centred in campaign design (Aya Pastrana *et al*., 2022; Gordon *et al*., 2022).

6.2.2 Enhancing Gender Responsiveness in Social Marketing Through an Intersectional Lens

Intersectionality is essential to gender responsive social marketing initiatives because it enables organisations, scholars and practitioners to identify how gendered harms and exclusions, as well as opportunities for behaviour and social change for social good, emerge differently across intersecting identities, rather than treating gender as a uniform identity (Aya Pastrana *et al*., 2022; Gordon *et al.*, 2022; WHO, 2022). Within social marketing, there are increasing calls for contextually grounded intersectional approaches that attend to power dynamics to strengthen the gender responsiveness of programmes (Aya Pastrana et al., 2020; 2022; Badejo *et al.*, 2021; Gordon *et al.*, 2022). This is especially important in the SMI space, as Caribbean feminists such as Barratt (2018) foreground how race, ethnicity, class, and gender intersect to shape gendered violence on digital platforms, particularly as women challenge normative constructions of femininity.

Marketing researchers have begun applying intersectionality to the SMI domain, such as examining how SMI women navigate harmful stereotypes across religion, gender, and sexuality (Pemberton and Takhar, 2021). However, intersectionality is still often reduced to a diversity or representation tool rather than a framework for analysing how power marginalises individuals across interlocking identities (Le Blanc *et al.,* 2026; Rosa-Salas and Sobande, 2022; Veresiu and Parmentier, 2021).

In the SMI space, social categories such as age, class, and ability remain underexplored despite being shaped by broader power structures (Södergren and Vallström, 2022). These dynamics surface in how SMIs perform activism online, prompting calls for deeper intersectional inquiry in social marketing (Sobande, 2022). However, scholarship continues to focus largely on commercial SMI dynamics, leaving limited understanding of

how intersecting identities shape SMIs' experiences when engaging in pro-social activism and how the backlash they face undermines both their wellbeing and campaign effectiveness.

Importantly, existing intersectional approaches in marketing, social marketing and SMI marketing scholarship have largely drawn on frameworks developed in Global North contexts, without adequately accounting for the distinct socio-historical formations, rooted in colonialism, slavery, and indentureship, that shape gendered experience in the Caribbean and other postcolonial settings (Badejo *et al.*, 2021; Jafari *et al.,* 2012). Caribbean feminist scholars assert that intersectionality, while foundational, requires contextual adaptation to account for these specific configurations of power (Reddock, 2019). Caribbean feminist scholarship extends intersectionality by situating gendered power within postcolonial histories of race, labour and respectability, enabling gender responsiveness to be assessed in relation to locally specific risks and forms of backlash faced by SMIs. It is this adapted, regionally grounded intersectional lens that this study employs. A contextually-grounded intersectional lens, therefore, becomes essential for informing gender responsive approaches, as it clarifies how people of all genders navigate gendered roles, needs, and barriers shaped by hierarchical power structures. When considered in the SMI domain, an intersectional understanding of gender responsiveness foregrounds vulnerability and backlash as structurally patterned rather than as related to individual causes.

6.2.3 SMI Vulnerability and Backlash in the Social Media Domain

Researchers note that while social media has expanded opportunities for SMIs - particularly those marginalised by race, sexuality, and ability - it remains shaped by structural inequalities that privilege dominant ideals and make socially challenging content less visible or profitable (Glatt, 2023). Brand partnerships reinforce these pressures, encouraging SMIs to

align with commercial norms and share personal or emotional aspects of their identities to maintain authenticity and visibility (Duffy *et al*., 2022).

For instance, these dynamics are evident in how gendered meanings are negotiated through women's bodily self-representation (Gurrieri and Drenten, 2019), activism such as #FreeTheNipple (Matich, 2019), and disability SMIs' efforts to challenge stereotypes (Södergren and Vallström, 2022). In the Global South, researchers highlight Arab women's digital visibility (Hurley, 2021), Indian SMIs' use of vernacular expression to assert cultural realities (Bhatia *et al*., 2025), and Caribbean SMIs' advocacy around gender justice (Sanatan, 2017).

SMIs who draw on intersecting identities to engage in pro-social activism face heightened vulnerability due to algorithmic pressures and gendered expectations of authenticity and respectability (Duffy *et al.*, 2022; Glatt, 2023). Consumer backlash, which refers to growing public criticism and resistance toward SMIs, often shaped by gendered expectations and power dynamics (Duffy *et al*., 2022), can escalate to cancellation, with reputational and career consequences (Demsar *et al*., 2023; Lee and Abidin, 2021), particularly when SMIs challenge dominant gender norms in pro-social contexts.

Audience responses to cause-related messages are similarly shaped by gender-role stereotypes, which can generate resistance when messages depart from normative expectations (Robertson and Davidson, 2013), and gender influences involvement with social action advertising (Mueller, 2023). Research in the Global South further shows that gender disparities experienced by SMI women can reproduce offline inequities and complicate claims of empowerment (Hurley, 2021), with classed, sexualised, and gendered dynamics of visibility requiring deeper examination (Kamran, 2023). Yet this work offers little guidance on how social marketers should navigate these dynamics when selecting and collaborating

with SMIs for pro-social campaigns, particularly in contexts where intersecting inequalities may intensify risks.

Together, these three bodies of literature - gender responsive social marketing, intersectional approaches in the SMI domain, and SMI vulnerability and backlash - reveal a significant gap: the absence of an empirically grounded, intersectional framework to guide gender responsive, protective engagement of SMIs in pro-social social marketing, especially within Global South settings such as T&T.

T&T is a multicultural, multi-ethnic society shaped by early settlement, European colonisation, and diverse waves of forced and voluntary migration (Mohammed, 2018). Experiences of privilege, marginalisation, and social belonging emerge from historically specific configurations of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and culture (Reddock, 2019). Caribbean feminist scholars have long asserted that colonial legacies continue to shape access to resources, social hierarchies, and contested narratives of national identity and ethnic belonging (Reddock, 2019). It is these mediating factors that inform the interpretation and evaluation of criticism and backlash in focus as part of SMI experiences in the cultural space.

Writers such as Mohammed (1994) and Reddock (2019) emphasise that the Caribbean cannot be understood through simplified binaries or Global North framings; instead, it is characterised by complexity, contradiction, and culturally specific narratives that reflect its layered histories. Guided by this tradition, our present study employs an inherently intersectional Caribbean feminist approach to analyse how gender, race, and other social categories shape everyday experiences and interactions within the T&T SMI domain.

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6.3.1 Research Approach

Our study draws on 41 in-depth interviews with consumers and SMIs. The open-ended nature of narrative interviews facilitates rich accounts of lived experience (Patton, 2015). Our study also applies a Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) to content produced by 40 SMIs within 12 months (November 2022 – 2023) in the T&T context. FCDA integrates feminist theory to uncover how power and ideology operate within discourse to sustain gender hierarchies and social orders (Lazar, 2017). This qualitative approach responds to calls within marketing (Fowler and Thomas, 2023) and social marketing (Ourahmoune and El Jurdi, 2022; Sobande, 2022) for deeper exploration of SMIs' and followers' lived experiences. It also aligns with Global South feminist scholarship, which advocates for research that centres contextually grounded, unhindered narratives (Purkayastha, 2021).

6.3.2 Sampling

An independent local SMI marketing expert provided an initial sampling frame of the top SMIs in T&T, grouped by follower count: mega (100k+), macro (50–100k), mid (10–50k), and micro (<10k), following Kay *et al*. (2019), who highlight engagement differences across SMI tiers.

For the FCDA, we selected ten SMIs from each tier, beginning at the top of the ranking and working downward (see Table 1). We reviewed their Instagram content and analysed posts that promoted pro-social behaviours, defined as involving voluntary actions intended to enhance others' well-being, reflecting a shift from self-focused orientations toward more service-oriented, socially minded ways of engaging with the world (Septarini *et al*., 2025). This included both personal and commercial-oriented posts.

For the narrative interviews, we recruited 21 SMIs and 20 consumers (see Table 2) who were compensated with meal vouchers. Five SMIs from each tier, mega, macro, and micro, and six from the mid-tier were contacted by phone, starting from the top of each list until consent was obtained. Fifteen of these SMIs also appeared in the FCDA sample, as not all were available for interviews. For each tier, five consumers who followed those SMIs were then recruited via direct messages sent to followers on Instagram.

6.3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection and analysis followed an iterative, reflexive process involving the full research team - the authors of this paper - with ongoing discussion and interpretation across data, theory, and context.

The FCDA utilised a four-step process informed by CDA conventions (Fairclough, 2010; Lazar, 2017) and Caribbean feminist theory. First, we conducted systematic lurking to identify gendered themes in SMIs' pro-social content and follower responses. Imagery and text were analysed as integrated texts (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2021), generating a dataset of 68 posts and 178 pages of comments, which were inductively coded to identify emerging patterns. Second, drawing on Caribbean feminist scholarship, we examined how SMIs' identities, shaped by race, phenotype, sexuality, and social relations, were constructed and communicated within their socio-cultural and historical context. Third, we analysed the historical and contemporary gendered meanings embedded in SMIs' and consumers' use of vernacular and other linguistic styles. Finally, we examined the immediate platform context (Instagram), institutional media context (local/ international media), and broader T&T

context, using historiography to interpret how SMI and consumer texts reflected and reproduced gendered power dynamics over time.

Over six months (January – June 2023), we conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews (totalling 3,690 minutes), guided by an eight-page protocol (see appendix) that was developed based on existing SMI literature and allowed flexibility for participants' perspectives. Questions explored experiences and practices related to gender in the SMI domain, SMIs' approaches to pro-social content, and consumers' preferences for receiving gender responsive messaging. Reflexive thematic analysis followed familiarisation, axial coding, and theme refinement (Braun and Clarke, 2022). During analysis, the research team identified themes that aligned closely with those emerging from the FCDA; these are presented together, with the FCDA illustrating how interview-based themes manifest in online practice.

Ethical approval was obtained before data collection, and all SMIs whose content appears in the FCDA vignettes provided informed consent for publication of their content. Pseudonyms are used for all interview participants and are reflected on Table 6.2. Tables 6.1 and 6.2 present the study participants along with their self-reported gender designations and country-specific ethnic categories, using the context-appropriate classifications drawn from T&T's national census.

Findings are presented in the following section across four themes: (1) confronting content incongruency, highlighting the importance of SMI-cause fit and SMI-follower alignment shaped by gendered and intersecting identities; (2) the reproduction of gender norms in shaping perceptions around pro-social causes; (3) valuing cultural intelligence, where SMIs' knowledge of pro-social causes and cultural awareness support effective engagement; and (4) consistency of offline/online SMI expressions, ensuring that SMIs

politics and self-expressions align online and in-person, to build trust in pro-social messaging.

M365 Copilot was used to support language refinement (e.g., identification of grammatical errors) during manuscript preparation. All use occurred under an enterprise data protection agreement.

Social Media Influencers' Gender and Ethnicities							
Category	**#**	**Gender**	**Ethnicity**	**Category**	**#**	**Gender**	**Ethnicity**
MEGA	1	Female	Mixed Other	**MID**	21	Male	Mixed African and East Indian
	2	Female	Mixed Other		22	Male	Mixed African and East Indian
Over 100k	3	Male	African	***10 - 50k***	23	Male	Mixed Other
Followers	4	Male	African	***Followers***	24	Female	Mixed
	5	Male	Mixed Other		25	Male	African
	6	Male	African		26	Female	East Indian
	7	Female	Mixed Other		27	Female	Mixed Other
	8	Male	African		28	Female	Mixed Other
	9	Male	African		29	Female	Chinese
	10	Female	African		30	Female	African
MACRO	11	Female	African	**MICRO**	31	Female	Mixed African and East Indian
	12	Female	East Indian		32	Female	Mixed Other
Over 100k	13	Female	Mixed Other	***Under 10k***	33	Female	Caucasian
Followers	14	Female	Mixed Other	***Followers***	34	Female	Mixed African and East Indian
	15	Male	African		35	Female	Mixed Other
	16	Female	Mixed Other		36	Female	African
	17	Female	Mixed Other		37	Female	African
	18	Female	East Indian		38	Male	African
	19	Female	Chinese		39	Female	African
	20	Male	Mixed		40	Female	Caucasian

Table 6.1: Sample of 40 SMIs used for FCDA

CONSUMERS			
#	NAME	GENDER	ETHNICITY
1	Andre	Male	Mixed Other
2	Ricardo	Male	African
3	Jamal	Male	Caucasian
4	Marcus	Male	Mixed African and East Indian
5	Kareem	Male	Mixed Other
6	Darnell	Male	Mixed Other
7	Nathaniel	Male	African
8	Antonio	Male	Mixed Other
9	Shane	Male	African
10	Tyrone	Male	Mixed Other
11	Aaliyah	Female	Chinese
12	Danika	Female	East Indian
13	Janelle	Female	Chinese
14	Keisha	Female	Mixed Other
15	Rochelle	Female	East Indian
16	Tamika	Female	African
17	Selena	Female	East Indian
18	Anika	Female	Caucasian
19	Nyah	Female	Caucasian
20	Camille	Female	Mixed African and East Indian

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS				
#	NAME	GENDER	ETHNICITY	RANK
21	Jerome	Male	African	MEGA
22	Joshua	Male	African	MEGA
23	Ryan	Male	African	MEGA
24	Malik	Male	African	MACRO
25	Orlando	Male	East Indian	MACRO
26	Javon	Male	Mixed African and East Indian	MID
27	Rohan	Male	Mixed African and East Indian	MID
28	Trevon	Male	African	MICRO
29	Shanelle	Female	Mixed Other	MEGA
30	Maritza	Female	Mixed Other	MEGA
31	Tasha	Female	East Indian	MACRO
32	Althea	Female	Mixed Other	MACRO
33	Trina	Female	Mixed Other	MACRO
34	Nina	Female	African	MID
35	Kemba	Female	East Indian	MID
36	Nadine	Female	Mixed Other	MID
37	Amy	Female	Mixed Other	MID
38	Ayanna	Female	Mixed Other	MICRO
39	Sade	Female	African	MICRO
40	Celeste	Female	African	MICRO
41	Crystal	Female	African	MICRO

Table 6.2: Sample of 21 SMIs and 20 consumers interviewed for this study

6.4 FINDINGS

Participants described how social and gendered power structures shape pro-social campaigning, influencing how SMIs present themselves in the online social marketing space and how consumers engage with and interpret pro-social content. While our entire data set generated core analytical themes, the FCDA also illustrates how these dynamics are enacted and contested in real world SMI-follower interactions. Our findings offer important insights for social marketers when engaging SMIs to communicate pro-social messages in gender responsive ways and are organised around four key themes: (1) confronting content incongruency, (2) the reproduction of gender norms, (3) valuing cultural intelligence, and (4) consistency of offline/online SMI expressions. Interview data is presented alongside FCDA vignettes under each theme.

6.4.1 Confronting Content Incongruency

During interviews, both SMIs and consumers emphasised the importance of promoting pro-social causes, noting that effective campaigns should consider not only the fit between the SMI and the cause but also the fit between the SMI and their followers.

For example, Consumer Nathaniel, who is of African descent, highlighted the importance of SMIs determining their followers' interest in pro-social causes:

> [SMIs should] probably do some focus groups with their core people for this [pro-social causes] to see how to go about it or if to go about it - if it aligns with their brand that they've built this following from. Because if I come to you to see shoes ... and, all of a sudden yuh switch to trying something else … I'm not here for this … I don't really see you as a holistic influence in my life.

SMIs agreed, for instance, macro-level and Indian SMI Tasha explained that:

> First, make sure it's [the pro-social cause] aligned with your brand. Because if it's not, your followers are going to be like, what the hell's about that? They're not gonna understand what you are … It's just gonna come off as like something paid. It's not gonna be authentic.

Tasha's suggestions about maintaining authenticity and not appearing as 'paid off' align with studies within the SMI domain offering guidance on balancing brand involvement and endorsement disclosures while maintaining SMIs' authenticity (Audrezet *et al*., 2020). However, the literature also reveals the gendered drawbacks of consumer perceptions of lack of authenticity on the part of SMIs, leading to a severance in the parasocial relationships initially established (Mardon *et al*., 2023). This is also exemplified in emerging themes from the FCDA through comments on photos posted by macro-level mixed ethnic SMI Marieange Bovell (see Figure 6.1, which presents data from the FCDA), where she publicly announced her first pregnancy.

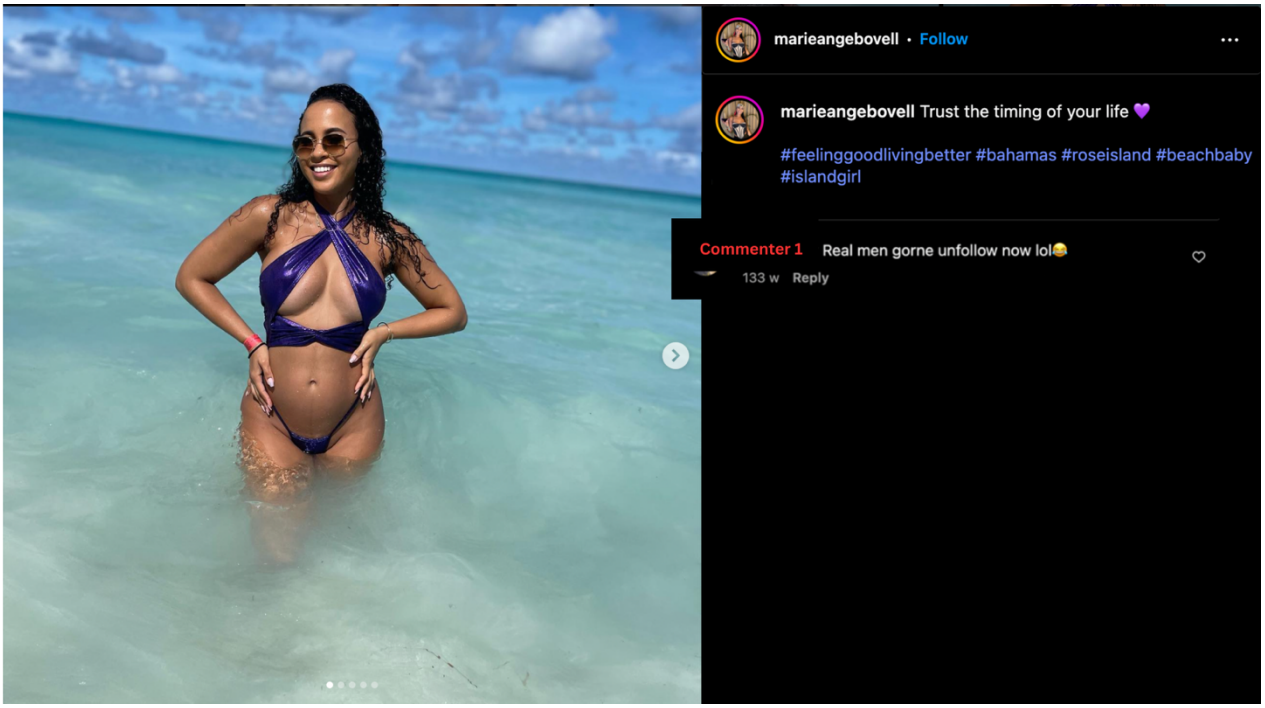


Figure 6.1 (FCDA Data): Photo posted by SMI Marieange Bovell

While SMI Marieange's post does not feature a pro-social campaign directly, it illustrates the gendered dynamics that shape how SMIs are perceived by consumers when their content shifts, dynamics that social marketers must assess before and during SMI-led campaigns. SMI Marieange, a model and entrepreneur, shared 9 posts of a pro-social nature over the 12-month FCDA period. She curated her profile in a way that did not foreground her romantic relationships. However, when she posted a caption urging followers to 'trust the timing of your life,' accompanied by an image publicly expressing joy about her pregnancy, the follower response revealed the gendered fragility of the SMI-audience relationship and the real-world consequences that personal content shifts can have for an SMI's credibility and reach in the domain where pro-social campaigns operate.

With this post, Marieange received many congratulatory messages from followers, particularly within T&T society where femininity is closely tied to motherhood and responsibility (Barratt, 2018). However, reflecting the 'double bind' faced by SMI women,

whose displays must be neither ‘too real’ nor ‘not real enough’ (Duffy *et al*., 2022), others perceived incongruency or ‘a switch’ in her content. Some expressed surprise, disappointment, or disinterest in this shift, while others rejected the expectation that followers should simply accept the new focus of her posts. A most precise example of how followers confronted her incongruency in this case is demonstrated through the following comment:

Commenter 1: “Real [many] men gonna unfollow now 😂.”

Marieange's presentation of herself before her pregnancy announcement received significant social capital and gendered privilege because of her body and embodiment of feminine beauty. Her desirability stemmed from her lighter skin tone and slender body, which reflect dominant beauty ideals inherited from colonialism (Green, 2006). However, the reaction to her changing content reveals the gendered risks faced by SMI women, specifically, how her pregnancy and presumed connection to a male partner were interpreted as reducing accessibility to her beauty and femininity in the eyes of her audience.

Across the SMI and consumer interviews, Marieange’s post, and the follower comments it generated, a shared pattern emerged that differs from typical authenticity concerns. Rather than questioning whether her content felt “real,” participants and followers focused on the alignment between her personal circumstances and the pro-social messages she endorses. This emphasis on SMI-cause fit, rather than authenticity per se, highlights how shifts in an SMI’s personal narrative can shape audience reception (Duffy *et al*., 2022). Together, these insights point to the need for social marketers to carefully assess SMI-cause alignment when engaging SMIs for gender responsive pro-social campaigns.

6.4.2 Reproducing Gendered Norms

SMIs and consumers explain that gender dynamics, including ideals of Caribbean femininity, expressions of sexuality, gender role expectations, and their intersection with race, class, and sexual identity and orientation, can all determine how brands use SMIs for pro-social causes.

In terms of gender ideals, micro-level African SMI Crystal explained how SMI women's femininity serves as an idealised criterion that legitimises their advocacy for pro-social causes:

> People trust women more because they're supposed to be more nurturing. We tend to take [pro-social] messaging from a woman easier than from a man … You do need to get vulnerable at times … and probably a little bit personal. In some instances, men may not be as comfortable.

Crystal's suggestion reflects the norms of femininity in the Caribbean - mothering and responsibility. Women are granted social power and legitimacy once their behaviour sufficiently expresses traits such as nurturing, sacrifice, and respectability (Barratt, 2018; Green, 2016).

Consumer Nathaniel, who is of African descent, illustrates another element of social and gendered feminine privilege that is often made relevant: beauty/grooming and respectability. Nathaniel described how SMI women should present themselves when promoting social causes:

> You should look appealing. You don't need to have on [wear] the latest of any gear, but you should present yourself well … if you're a lady … if you didn't do your hair, tie it up. We accept you for who you are.

While Nathaniel's observation reflects ideals of feminine respectability, which often equate legitimacy with a woman's neat appearance (Barratt, 2018; Green, 2016), Crystal highlights how other intersecting social identities, such as race, impact that legitimacy:

> I'm saying this from a black person's perspective, you can't get away with what other people can get away with … just because we see a white influencer dressed in sweats on the couch... and say whatever she wants and get away with it. We can't afford to do that … if we're going pro-social and want to deliver a positive message especially, just take it seriously [focus on] presentation of self.

Crystal's assertion is supported by Caribbean feminist scholarship, which highlights that standards of feminine respectability vary by race. Black women, in particular, are often required to constantly navigate and negotiate norms of decency and morality to be seen as legitimate (Barratt, 2018; Green, 2016).

Another key gendered dynamic is highlighted by mixed African and Indian consumer Marcus, who observes that it is often easier for women to promote pro-social causes because their sex appeal attracts attention, highlighting the intersection of body representation and sexuality. He remarked:

> Even if it's a health issue that faces men, who do you think men will listen to faster? A woman doctor showing cleavage or a man doctor? I'll watch the video with the woman doctor … Sex sells and yuh have to sell.

Marcus highlights the culture of pornification among SMI women, which suggests SMI women adopt "porn-chic" aesthetics to increase visibility and express sexual agency on social media (Drenten *et al*., 2020). However, scholars warn that the promotion of pro-social causes, especially those related to women's bodies, can reinforce stigma, exclude certain groups, and mask harmful marketing practices (Gurrieri *et al*., 2013; McVey *et al.*, 2024).

These risks are exemplified by mega-level and mixed ethnic SMI Maritza, who recalls being approached by a client offering brand endorsements in exchange for sexual favours. Maritza expresses strong support for brands that encourage women to dress modestly when promoting pro-social causes:

> A woman would go on social media talking about some kind of health advice … and she would have on [wear] something that shows her cleavage - the comments would focus on her cleavage. So that's why a lot of the campaigns would put in the campaign brief: 'Please wear a proper shirt, do not have your breasts outside'.

Maritza recommended backgrounding sexuality, asserting, like some other participants, that both SMI men and women are similarly effective at promoting pro-social causes based on the context:

> It matters because of experience. So, you cannot get a male to promote period poverty, unless they are dealing with more the statistics path and not the experience path … you cannot get a female to talk about growing up as a male, unless it's like say a doctor who specialises in that. I believe you have to line up females and males with exactly what they go through and what they can experience …that would make the content more organic.

Maritza's suggestion echoes current SMI research on how SMIs convey authenticity and how consumer responses to uptake vary by sex (Aw and Chuah, 2021; Gannon and Prothero, 2016). However, scholars note that behaviours are inherently gendered, and intersectional analysis reveals how they vary across culture, sex, sexuality, and embodiment (Aya Pastrana *et al.*, 2022). Figure 6.2 illustrates this through a video screenshot by mixed ethnic, micro-level SMI Leah, who promotes period advocacy, a cause she aligns with through lived experience.

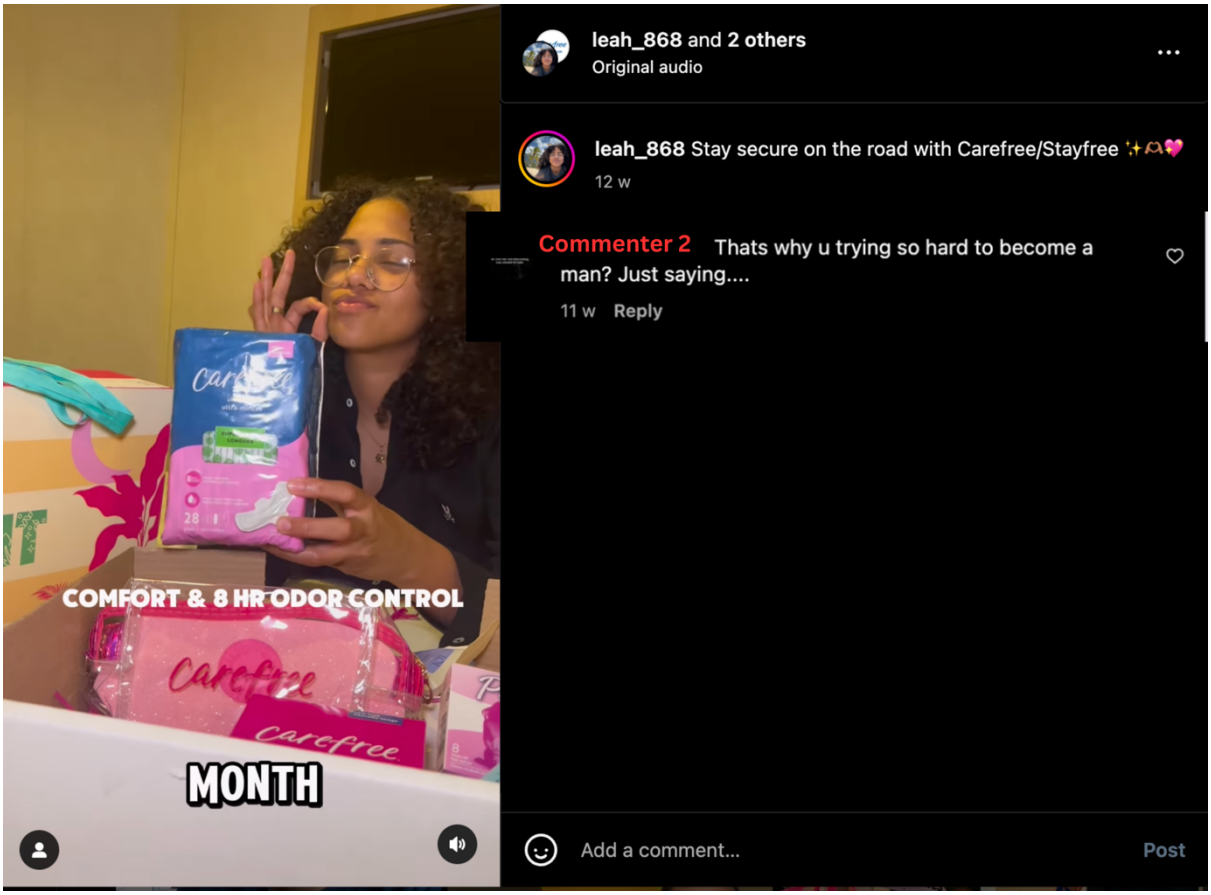


Figure 6.2 (FCDA Data): Screenshot of Video Posted By SMI LEAH_868

SMI Leah, a foodie who openly identifies as a lesbian, developed her online following with content featuring her trying various foods with friends and family, as well as with her girlfriend. She shared 3 posts of pro-social nature during the 12-month FCDA period. In her post 'Stay secure on the road with Carefree/ Stayfree', Leah explains her gratitude for receiving a package of period care products and expresses that though she loves being a woman, she shares the sentiments with other women that periods get them down.

Leah's followers expressed appreciation for her period care package. However, Commenter 2 focused on Leah's embodiment and gender expression, possibly seeing her as less traditionally feminine. Leah's not wearing stereotypically feminine fashion, sexual

orientation, and deeper voice led Commenter 2 to make the following assumptions about her gender and sex identity: “Thats why u trying so hard to become a man? Just saying....”

Leah’s expressions are overt - she embraces her sexuality, speaks as she does, and wears looser clothing, challenging the tendency to make female masculinity invisible while building a following that values her authenticity. However, her visible rejection of traditional feminine norms, such as modesty, conservatism, and heterosexuality (Green, 2016), draws public criticism, as seen in Commenter 2’s remarks. King (2014) explains that women who desire women and visibly express themselves outside traditional feminine norms are often penalised not just for nonconformity, but specifically for not being attracted to men.

Our findings highlight participants’ views on gender as an important factor that brands must consider when promoting pro-social causes. Cultural complexities are also expressed by participants, signalling intersections of sex with other factors, such as race, sexuality, embodiment and how such shapes stereotypes around masculine and feminine expression. These insights add cultural depth to existing research on SMI–brand fit and consumer responses based on sex (Aw and Chuah, 2021).

6.4.3 Valuing Cultural Intelligence

Participants in our study emphasised that SMIs should be both knowledgeable and genuinely passionate about the pro-social issues they promote, as well as the broader cultural context in which these issues exist. Understanding this context is key, as it may present barriers to the behaviours they aim to encourage. Importantly, participants linked knowledge to the ability of SMIs to respond effectively to consumer feedback, particularly when

navigating sensitive topics shaped by intersecting factors such as gender, social class, and self-expression.

SMI Crystal, who is of African descent, highlighted the value of cultural intelligence in context, explaining that knowledge base and tactful expression are key to not only cultivating influence but mitigating backlash:

> You need to also have thick skin because people are gonna come to you and it's not good when our response is just to snap back. Oh my God, just rise above it sometimes! Always be that place where you could be a role model … because as soon as you fall once, your credibility is just shot… be aware, informed and open to what's happening around you.

Crystal, through expressions of duty and submissiveness, reflects norms of feminine respectability in T&T (Barratt, 2018; Green, 2006). Yet, Caribbean feminists note that many SMI women now use social media to assert agency and challenge these restrictive norms (Haynes, 2016). As a result, some respond to followers with honesty and knowledge, defending their right to share content on their own terms.

However, consumers recommended that SMIs not only equip themselves with the necessary knowledge to promote pro-social causes but also choose causes they are genuinely passionate about. Consumer Ricardo, who is of African descent, expressed that SMIs should:

> Choose something [a pro-social cause] that they actually believe in, so that you're not faking it to be genuine… you're gonna get a lot of negative backlash, but don't take that on…that's kind of inevitable.

Indeed, Barari (2023) notes that pro-social messages often provoke backlash. Echoing this, consumer Antonio, who is of mixed ethnicity, explained that when consumer followers question an SMI about a pro-social cause they promote, he expects them to respond transparently. As he put it:

It's their choice, but I think they should respond [to followers' questions about pro-social causes SMIs promote] if there's more to be said … if it's something that works against who they are, they should make an apology and remove it. And if they keep it up, then they deal with backlash!

Figure 6.3 features African SMI Tim Tim, who shares a passionate post advocating for the abolition of a mandatory school exam and uses the comments section to defend his position in response to critical feedback.



Figure 6.3 (FCDA Data): Post shared by SMI Tim Tim

Mid-level SMI Tim Tim is an entertainer, musical artiste, and radio personality, who shares content about social causes, current events, his family, and work. He shared 5 posts of pro-social nature during the FCDA data collection period. In his post 'Congrats to all', Tim

Tim congratulates students on completing the Secondary Entrance Assessment (SEA), an exam taken by 11-year-olds in the Caribbean to transition from primary to secondary school. He, at the same time, argues that the SEA should be abolished, as it demotivates children who do not gain entry into prestigious schools and causes parents to lose confidence in their children's academic potential. His followers mostly show support; however, a few, like Commenter 3, critiqued Tim Tim's assertion by suggesting the only persons who support his argument are those who did not have the opportunity to attend a prestigious school:

> Anybody who agree with this ain't go to the big school and them … don't mash up [destroy] the ppl [people] thing cause you ain't inside 😂…. I ain't go the people school either… when you remove the exam, who getting to go [prestige schools]? (Commenter 3)

The commenter raises concerns about how access to education in T&T is shaped by intersections of social class, race and gender (Bailey, 2014), which informed his assumption that Tim Tim, who connects with grassroots audiences, did not attend a prestigious secondary school typically associated with higher-status occupations. Tim Tim responds by dismissing the commenter's criticism, stating that their point is invalid because he himself passed his SEA exams to attend a prestigious first-choice school, and many of his peers from similar schools share his views. His response reflects underlying discourses of social class, aligning with Bailey (2014), who argues that scholars must consider the intersectional roots of educational underparticipation, as such issues are shaped by intersections of race, gender, social class, and ethnicity. The intersection of these factors creates experiences of educational privilege within T&T's secondary school system, where high-performing, prestigious institutions are typically same-sex, supported by wealthier social classes, and often managed

by religious organisations (Deosaran, 2019). These hierarchies are legacies of colonial rule that have remained, determining access to education.

Our participants' insights highlight the importance of consumer responses in shaping both SMIs' and consumers' recommendations that SMIs be knowledgeable and genuinely passionate about the pro-social causes they promote, as well as the cultural context in which they do so. These dynamics highlight the intersectional roles of SMIs as emerging activists and add to our understanding of Caribbean men's digital advocacy, complementing research on Caribbean women's online activism (Baldwin and Cossy, 2018) and contributing to nascent insights about SMI men's advocacy in marketing scholarship (Edelblum and Warren, 2024).

6.4.4 Consistency of Offline/Online SMI Expressions

SMIs and consumers asserted that for SMIs' pro-social campaigns to be effective, their self-expression and politics must align, as audiences encounter them across both online and offline spaces. This adds a further dimension to the earlier discussion of authenticity, which focused on followers' assessments of whether an SMI's content felt 'real' in the online domain. Here, both SMIs and consumers emphasised that SMIs must also navigate critiques tied to gender conformity and expectations around gender, sex, and sexuality, highlighting that authenticity is not only about content coherence but also about how SMIs inhabit gendered identities in public.

Comedian and mega-level SMI Joshua is of African descent and known for portraying both masculine and feminine personas to consistently deliver pro-social content. He shared that although he receives positive feedback both online and offline, his performance carries gendered risks:

> I think my beard has blessed me with the confidence to do the characters I do and still remain neutral in the eyes of men and women. Our culture here, they quick to call yuh bullerman and all kinda battyman [homosexual male] because I'm playing a woman role. So, there are very few instances where I have gone around people that I don't know, and people openly ask, 'you like man?'

Joshua's case shows how gender and sexuality shape public perceptions of SMIs. By impersonating feminine traits, he risks being seen as less masculine according to Caribbean norms of heteronormative masculinity (Nurse, 2004). His beard, however, helps project hegemonic masculine embodiment, which is key to maintaining his masculine reputation (King, 2014). Despite the gendered risks triggered by his gendered play, his consistent pro-social messaging has earned him credibility and brand collaborations online and offline.

Consumers such as Nathaniel, who is of African descent, draw attention to another layer of expected SMI consistency across contexts and social identities:

> I would not respect your views as someone who we know is a closet abuser, if you are doing a 'let's not abuse' campaign. I would not believe you if I know you're a snob and you talking about poverty. There's that sincerity and genuine nature that you need to have.

Consumer Danika, who is of Indian descent, recalls an experience when she met an SMI she avidly followed who promotes literacy:

> I sit on the table, she's on her phone constantly … doesn't communicate with you … seems very uninterested. So that kind of turned me off. It's not like I'm expecting her to be the same [as she is online], but at least I would like to see something close to it.

Consumers Nathaniel and Danika emphasised that SMIs should not only align with pro-social causes in their content but also reflect those values in their everyday behaviour. Figure 4 highlights an example of this interaction through a post shared by SMI Nakiah.

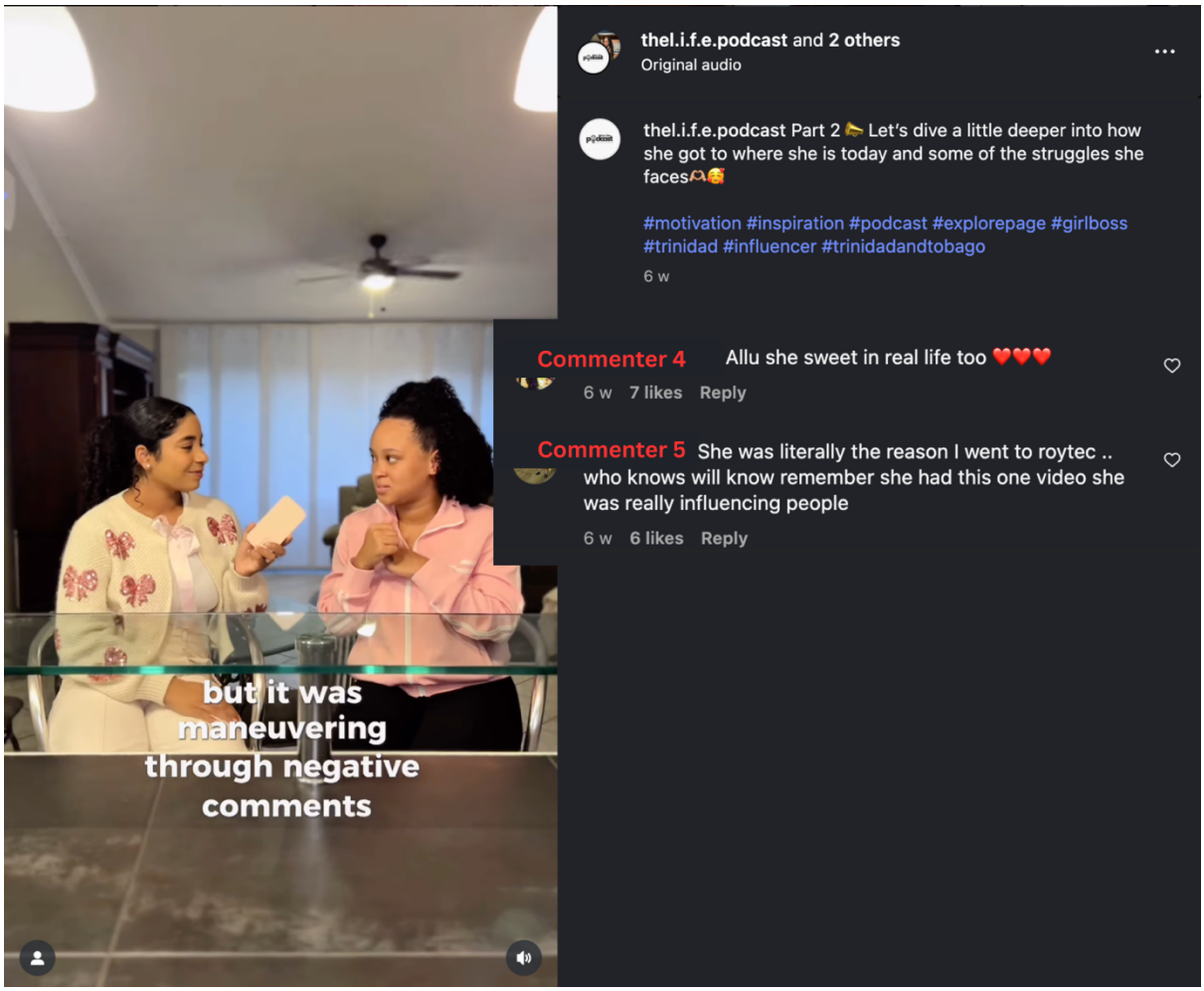


Figure 6.4 (FCDA Data): Post shared by SMI Nakiah

Lifestyle, mixed ethnic SMI Nakiah shares content about her family, work life, and issues affecting women and girls. She shared 11 posts of a pro-social nature within the FCDA data collection period. In her collaborative post 'Part 2', Nakiah is interviewed by a podcaster about her experiences as an SMI over the past ten years. Nakiah highlights that one of her greatest challenges is manoeuvring negative follower comments. Her commenters help clarify how she overcame that challenge through their endorsements of her consistency in the offline and online world:

Commenter 4: “Allu [you all], she sweet in real life too ❤️❤️❤️” and

Commenter 5: “She was literally the reason I went to Roytec [Tertiary Institution] …”

Follower comments on Nakiah’s content further illustrate participants' preferences for SMIs whose offline gender expressions align with their online presence are apparent, adding a new dimension to SMIs’ engagement for activism (Fowler and Thomas, 2023).

6.5 Discussion and Implications

Our findings contribute to calls in social marketing and broader marketing scholarship to advance insights into SMIs’ engagement in pro-social causes (Alsalem *et al*., 2020; Fowler and Thomas, 2023). Given the gendered dynamics of the social media domain, we also respond to scholars urging more gender responsive approaches in social marketing programs (Aya Pastrana *et al*., 2022; Gurrieri *et al.*, 2013; McVey *et al*., 2024). Addressing RQ1, we show that gender norms, particularly those related to sexuality, race, social class and appearance, shape how SMIs and consumers perceive credible and effective SMI-led pro-social campaigns. Drawing on participants’ experiences and evaluations, as well as insights from the FCDA, we outline key considerations for a gender responsive framework for engaging SMIs in pro-social campaigns (see Table 6.3).

6.5.1 Theoretical Contributions

Collectively, our paper contributes knowledge around (1) authenticity, alignment, and the shifting terrain of pro-social influence and (2) gendered responses and resilience in pro-

social campaigns. As demonstrated in our findings, perceptions of SMI authenticity become complicated when shifts in their content, such as changes in life circumstances or contestation with followers regarding pro-social causes, disrupt expectations of alignment between SMIs and consumers. These dynamics are shaped by gender norms, tied to femininity, sexuality, appearance and race, which influence how credibility and effectiveness are assessed in pro-social content. As consumer Tasha noted, abrupt shifts in content risk losing followers' interest, while consumer Nathaniel emphasised that audiences do not always view SMIs as moral authorities.

These dynamics are clearly illustrated in the FCDA. Commenters questioned SMI Leah's gender in response to her period advocacy post, drawing on assumptions about her feminine self-presentation. SMI Marieange's pregnancy announcement further reveals how intersecting power relations shape audience expectations; her news prompted concerns about whether she could maintain the single, unattached persona that had contributed to her popularity. Similarly, while respondents such as Nathaniel referenced the need for SMI women to maintain a 'neat' appearance, SMI Crystal highlighted how race intensifies these pressures, noting that Black SMIs must pay particular attention to appearance to be perceived as credible in their promotion of pro-social causes. These responses reflect how audience expectations, rooted in colonial-inherited ideals of respectable femininity, reinforce gendered and heteronormative norms that shape which identities are deemed legitimate and marketable - patterns evident in both Global North (Duffy *et al.,* 2022) and Global South (Barratt, 2018) contexts. This not only extends current understandings of the intersectional nature of SMI backlash on social media platforms (Mardon *et al.*, 2023) but also demonstrates in practice how gender shapes perceptions of SMIs' authenticity when promoting pro-social causes.

While authenticity remains central to SMI success, our findings demonstrate that this alone is insufficient for understanding consumer responses to pro-social campaigns. Building on Duffy *et al*. (2022) notion of the authenticity double bind - being 'real' but not too real nor not real enough - we show that SMIs may be viewed as authentic in some domains yet still face backlash in others, particularly around gender-related narratives (Mueller, 2023). Although prior research highlights the importance of commercial SMI–brand and SMI–audience fit (Martínez López *et al.,* 2020), our findings extend this work by showing that pro-social campaigns also require careful attention to followers' perceptions of SMI-cause fit, as distinct from authenticity per se, with gender playing a central role in this assessment.

Our findings also highlight that SMI-led pro-social campaigns will inevitably attract some degree of backlash, which can be mitigated when SMIs demonstrate cultural intelligence, both in how they communicate the pro-social cause and in how they respond to follower feedback. For example, consumer Ricardo advised SMIs to expect backlash as an inherent part of promoting pro-social issues. This backlash is often tied to gendered expectations, particularly those linked to race and social class, as illustrated by commenters' assumptions about the type of educational institution Tim Tim attended. While this aligns with Duffy *et al.*'s (2024) observation that managing feedback is increasingly seen as part of an SMI's role, our findings extend this understanding by showing that this burden intensifies in the context of pro-social causes. This raises important questions about SMIs' safety on social media platforms and highlights the need for strategies that centre the protection and wellbeing of SMIs.

Given that existing research demonstrates that negative consumer perceptions of SMIs can affect the brands they endorse (Demsar *et al.*, 2023), our study contributes new insight by showing how backlash in pro-social campaigns not only threatens brand reputation but also

exposes SMIs to heightened vulnerability online. These findings therefore advance knowledge on gendered resilience and response within the SMI domain (Glatt, 2023), further highlighting the need for protective, gender responsive strategies when engaging SMIs in pro-social initiatives.

6.5.2 Practical Contributions

Drawing on insights from participant interviews, the FCDA, and industry experience, we offer a practical contribution in the form of key considerations for a gender responsive framework that outlines recommendations, implementation strategies, and anticipated challenges for engaging SMIs in pro-social campaigns (see Table 6.3). The framework proposed bridges both theoretical and practical gaps in knowledge as we contribute to areas of SMIs and gender responsiveness that are under-researched within the social marketing scholarship (Alsalem *et al.*, 2020; Aya Pastrana *et al*., 2022; Fowler and Thomas, 2023).

Given that our findings show that gender norms shape both SMIs' and consumers' perceptions of credibility and effectiveness, patterns evident across Global North (Duffy *et al.*, 2022) and Global South (Barratt, 2018) contexts, we present these considerations for use within the T&T context and beyond, to support the promotion of gender responsive pro-social messaging. The four key recommendations are: (1) conduct research to identify SMIs whose values, content, and audience align with the pro-social cause to be promoted, (2) consider representation and gender dynamics in an SMI's selection, (3) start with [SMI's] cultural intelligence, then build passion and knowledge about and around pro-social causes, and (4) evaluate the consistency of the SMI's self-presentation across platforms and contexts.

Recommendation 1: Conducting Research to assess SMI alignment

SMIs and consumers stressed the need to assess not only an SMI's alignment with a pro-social cause but also how followers may react. Abrupt content shifts can lead to disengagement, and followers do not always view SMIs as moral authorities. These insights highlight the value of strategic, ethical engagement (Aboelenien *et al.*, 2023) and the importance of co-creation in developing gender responsive approaches (Aya Pastrana *et al*., 2022; Smith *et al.*, 2024). We recommend that practitioners identify SMIs whose values, content, and audiences align with the pro-social cause. Although resource-intensive, this research-driven approach strengthens gender responsive campaign design and supports calls for more inclusive and equitable social marketing practice (Barari, 2023; Mueller, 2023; Robertson and Davidson, 2013).

Recommendation 2: Consider representation and gender dynamics in SMIs' selection

Participants noted that gender strongly shapes SMI selection for pro-social campaigns. Some, like Crystal and Nathaniel, described women as naturally more nurturing and expected SMI women to maintain neat and appealing appearances (Green, 2006). These views reveal how gendered and heteronormative norms influence who is seen as legitimate and marketable, echoing findings across Global North and South contexts (Barratt, 2018; Duffy *et al.,* 2022). Practitioners should avoid reinforcing these biases, as doing so undermines the aims of critical social marketing (Gordon *et al*., 2022) and Global South feminist scholarship (Purkayastha, 2021). We therefore recommend that practitioners consider representation and gender dynamics when selecting SMIs.

Inclusive gender representation remains challenging in contexts like T&T, where heteronormativity is dominant. Audiences often resist departures from traditional roles

(Robertson and Davidson, 2013), yet representation matters: consumers want to see their identities reflected (Mueller, 2023). Practitioners should prioritise inclusive representation (Aya Pastrana *et al.,* 2022; Smith *et al*., 2024) and collaborate with intersectional scholars to co-design content and response strategies informed by consumer feedback.

Recommendation 3: Start with SMIs' cultural intelligence and build passion and knowledge about and around pro-social causes.

Participants recognised that promoting pro-social causes often exposes SMIs to criticism, making it essential that SMIs draw on cultural intelligence, which is an understanding of both the pro-social cause and the social dynamics shaping audience reactions. Our findings show that this burden is heightened in pro-social contexts and is further complicated by gendered assumptions, as reflected in SMI Joshua's experiences having his sexuality questioned when promoting pro-social causes. Practitioners should therefore prioritise SMIs who can navigate these dynamics and support them in building pro-social cause-specific knowledge. Reflecting Mueller's (2023) concerns about gender responsive work in diverse online spaces, we recommend using contextual insights to distinguish harmful stereotypes from legitimate barriers raised in feedback, co-creating response strategies with SMIs to maintain authenticity, and ensuring fair compensation to avoid reinforcing inequities that disproportionately affect women and other marginalised SMIs (Duffy *et al*., 2024; Sobande, 2020).

Recommendation 4: Start with SMIs' cultural intelligence and build passion and knowledge about and around pro-social causes.

Participants valued consistency between SMIs' online and offline self-expression when promoting pro-social causes. Examples such as Nathaniel's reluctance to support SMIs lacking altruistic behaviour and Danika's reaction to mismatched online-offline personas illustrate how credibility depends on follow-through beyond curated content. This extends Aboelenien *et al.'s* (2023) work by showing that offline altruism is a key dimension of authenticity in pro-social campaigns. Practitioners should therefore assess SMIs' consistency across platforms and contexts.

Although this adds complexity to SMI selection, consistent SMIs can offer greater campaign resilience and are better positioned to handle critical audience feedback. At the same time, poorly managed responses can undermine brand ethics, dilute pro-social messaging, and heighten cancellation risks (Demsar *et al*., 2023). In line with Aya Pastrana *et al.* (2022), we recommend co-creating gender responsive response strategies with SMIs to preserve their authentic voice while aligning with campaign values.

Recommendation	Suggested Implementation	Perceived Challenges
1. Conduct research to identify SMIs whose values, content, and audience align with the pro-social cause.	Identify the SMIs your target audience trusts most for the pro-social behaviour you want to promote, using evidence (not assumptions). Then, conduct additional research with segments of their followers to explore how the pro-social message should be delivered, and assess whether, and how well, it is likely to be received.	Practitioners may not always find SMIs who perfectly align with all pro-social behaviours—and in some contexts, such influencers may be rare and even non-existent. Brands should, therefore, approach SMI selection comprehensively, allowing audience insights to guide campaign decisions. For example, an SMI who has become a parent may be viewed as a credible advocate for breastfeeding, despite past associations with less health-oriented promotions. Audiences value seeing their views reflected (Mueller, 2023), and social marketers have a responsibility not only to promote pro-social behaviours but also to challenge limiting notions of gendered respectability and responsibility (Gordon *et al.*, 2022). Co-creation of campaign strategies among practitioners, SMIs and their audiences is essential here (Aya Pastrana *et al.*, 2022). While this can extend campaign timelines and increase costs, it is critical for crafting gender responsive, culturally resonant campaigns.
2. Consider representation and gender dynamics in SMI selection.	When selecting SMIs based on research aligned to your pro-social campaign goals, collaborate with intersectional experts (context-based theorists and researchers who are experts in intersectional theorising and application) to ensure a balanced and inclusive representation. This involves balancing follower preferences with the need to reflect and include groups who are often marginalised due to sex, sexuality, religion, or gender expression.	Practitioners face a key challenge in selecting SMIs for inclusive pro-social campaigns: audiences often prefer SMIs who conform to traditional, heteronormative gender roles (Robertson and Davidson, 2013), and social media dynamics amplify this bias (Mueller, 2023). Relying on consumer preferences alone can unintentionally silence marginalised voices and reinforce harmful stereotypes. The challenge is to balance audience appeal with representation. Involving context – based intersectional experts can help strengthen the gender responsiveness of campaigns and support efforts to avoid perpetuating gendered stereotypes while amplifying underrepresented voices (Badejo *et al.*, 2021; Gurrieri *et al.*, 2013).

3. Start with SMIs' cultural intelligence, then build passion and knowledge about and around pro-social causes.	During SMI selection for pro-social campaigns, prioritise influencers who are genuinely passionate about pro-social causes, alongside audience preferences. Once engaged, brief SMIs on key facts and societal barriers and enablers to behaviour uptake. Compensate SMIs fairly for their involvement throughout the research and campaign co-creation processes, and for the use of their platform and time spent responding to consumer feedback.	Pro-social campaigns with gender responsive aims often attract audience backlash (Mueller, 2023), making it crucial for practitioners to co-develop response strategies with SMIs. A key challenge is distinguishing harmful, stereotype-driven feedback from constructive, contextually relevant insights, and responding in ways that both protect the SMI and advance campaign goals. Practitioners may also face external pressure to pull campaigns if backlash escalates, given rising risks of cancellation for SMIs and affiliated brands (Demsar *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, an additional internal challenge is that many organisations lack policies or budgets to fairly compensate SMIs for their time, expertise, and emotional labour—posing an ethical risk, especially in campaigns aimed at promoting equity (Gurrieri *et al.*, 2013). Without addressing these barriers up front, practitioners risk reinforcing the very inequities that gender responsive campaigns seek to challenge (Duffy *et al.*, 2024; Sobande, 2020).
4. Evaluate consistency of SMIs' self-presentation across platforms and contexts.	Using evidence, assess target audiences' and previously engaged brand perceptions of SMIs across both online and offline platforms.	Assessing SMIs' offline self-presentation adds time and complexity to identifying the most suitable influencers for pro-social campaigns. However, for gender responsive programs, this extra effort can yield stronger, more resilient outcomes, as SMIs with consistent altruistic character enhance audience perceptions of authenticity, a key driver of influencer success (Lee and Chung, 2025). A further challenge is managing SMI responses to critical consumer feedback, which can inadvertently shift focus away from campaign objectives and threaten cancellation (Demsar *et al.*, 2023). To mitigate this, investing time in co-creating response strategies with SMIs is essential. This helps them maintain both authenticity and alignment with client ethics while keeping the campaign's goals intact.

Table 6.3: Emerging recommendations, perceived implementation and challenges for gender responsive SMI social marketing initiatives.

6.6 Conclusion

This article bridges theoretical and practical gaps in understanding how gender shapes the use of SMIs within social marketing. We show how gender norms influence the experiences of SMIs and consumers in T&T when engaging in pro-social initiatives and use these insights to propose a framework for designing gender responsive SMI-led campaigns. Drawing on narrative interviews and guided by Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, our findings demonstrate how strategic engagement with SMIs can mitigate gendered harm, promote equity, and strengthen pro-social campaign outcomes. In doing so, our research contributes to under researched areas of social marketing by offering evidence-based strategies to support gender responsive practice.

A key strength of this study lies in its integration of FCDA with narrative interviews, enabling a nuanced understanding of how gendered norms shape both the production and reception of pro-social content. Although grounded in T&T, the gendered dynamics identified here, including femininity norms shaping SMI credibility, race and gender intersecting to determine whose voice is seen as legitimate, and heightened vulnerability when SMIs challenge dominant norms, are documented across both Global North and Global South contexts (Duffy et al., 2022; Kamran, 2023; Mardon et al., 2023). This suggests that the T&T context offers a sharper lens through which to examine structurally widespread patterns.

The framework's four recommendations address features of SMI-led pro-social campaigns that are relevant wherever gender norms shape audience reception of pro-social messaging. While developed within a Caribbean context, the framework can be adapted to reflect locally specific configurations of gender, race, and power across other multicultural

and postcolonial settings. A limitation of the study is that all participants self-identified as either male or female, reflecting the heteronormative conditions of the T&T SMI domain. As such, developing gender responsive guidance that is fully inclusive of non-binary and gender diverse SMIs remains an important direction for future research. Further work should also test the framework's applicability across diverse settings and extend its scope to other platforms and campaign types where the interplay of gender norms and pro-social messaging may take different forms.

CHAPTER 7
DISCUSSION



7. DISCUSSION

My PhD thesis has examined how gender dynamics shape the practices and experiences of Social Media Influencers (SMIs) as well as the responses of their consumer followers in Trinidad and Tobago (T&T). Chapter 1 introduced the research problem, provided background to the research, and justified its aims. Chapter 2 examined key discourses surrounding gender in the SMI domain and justified the adoption of an intersectionality theoretical framework informed by a Caribbean feminist lens. Chapter 3 outlined and justified the qualitative methodology adopted for my research, along with its ontological, epistemological, and axial foundations. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 presented the research findings in the format of stand-alone journal papers.

This chapter revisits the research objective and outlines how my PhD has answered the stated research questions guiding this thesis, before outlining the key theoretical contributions and implications of the research to understanding how gender dynamics influence SMIs' content and how such dynamics are navigated by both SMIs and consumers. It also highlights the practical implications for developing gender-responsive SMI strategies within marketing, particularly in social marketing contexts. The chapter then discusses the research limitations and suggests directions for future research. The final section concludes the thesis.

7.1 Review of PhD Thesis Objective, Research Questions and Key Findings

The objective of my PhD thesis was to examine how gender dynamics shape the practices and experiences of SMIs as well as the responses of their consumer followers within the T&T SMI domain. My interest in this research stems from my own experiences witnessing gendered harm directed at SMIs, an issue reflected in emerging literature on the experiences of influencers, particularly women from culturally, socially, or structurally

marginalised groups, including those defined by age, religion, and race (Pemberton and Takhar, 2021; Sobande, 2022; Veresiu and Parmentier, 2021). My thesis responds to calls for more contextual research that addresses these critical issues, particularly within understudied regions in mainstream marketing scholarship, such as the Global South (Mardon et al., 2023; Sobande, 2022).

The section below outlines how my research responds to its three guiding research questions, with each question addressed in the corresponding chapters. Table 7.1 summarises the key findings by chapter, which are further explained in the discussion that follows.

7.1.1 RQ1: How do gender dynamics influence the content shared by SMIs?

RQ1's focus on how gender dynamics shape SMIs' content is important considering findings from Global North studies showing that both consumer feedback and brand-driven platform algorithms influence how SMIs present themselves (Duffy & Meisner, 2023; Levesque, 2023). Similar patterns emerge in Global South contexts, where research shows that while SMI women from marginalised backgrounds may appear empowered through showcased brand affluence, their content can also reproduce social inequalities by failing to reflect the broader realities of other women within the same context (Hurley, 2021). These studies informed my approach to gender dynamics by moving beyond binary gender-related categories and instead examining how power intersects with factors such as gender and social class (Gurrieri & Drenten, 2019a; Sobande, 2018, 2022).

In response to RQ1, my thesis examined SMIs' embodied expressions and consumer responses on Instagram, drawing on scholarship that views the body as a site where gender norms are both reinforced and resisted (Harju & Huovinen, 2015; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021), as discussed in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 builds on this by analysing narratives from interviews with SMIs and consumers, in line with the recommendations of Fowler and Thomas (2023)

and Vrontis et al. (2021), to explore how socio–cultural factors shape both content creation and consumer interpretation through lived experiences.

In Chapter 4, RQ1 is addressed by examining how the embodied expressions of SMI women, conveyed through imagery and text, reflect power and influence shaped by intersecting factors such as religion, sex, sexuality, popular culture, age, and embodiment. The findings further show that the value attributed to SMIs and the feedback they receive from consumers are closely tied to how power informs aspects of their identity and their capacity to influence and be influenced. The research also highlights that an SMI's identity not only affects the content they create but also how their worth is perceived. Chapter 5 extends this analysis by exploring how culturally assigned roles of masculinity and femininity, mediated by race and social class, shape the development of SMIs' social identities as expressed through their content. These dynamics also influence their access to brand endorsements and determine whether they are silenced or empowered to take on new social identities that challenge restrictive gender stereotypes in their engagement with consumers.

My thesis, therefore, responds to RQ1 by showing that gender dynamics, shaped by intersecting factors such as religion, sex, sexuality, popular culture, age, and embodiment, are reflected in SMIs' content in two main ways: by reinforcing existing gender norms through adaptations of identity based on brands' and consumers' perceived gendered value, which is shaped by heteronormative standards of respectable femininity and responsible masculinity; and by challenging these norms through expressions of social identities that defy such standards.

7.1.2 RQ2: How do SMIs and consumers navigate gender dynamics in the T&T SMI domain?

RQ2 centred on how SMIs and consumers navigate gender dynamics within the T&T SMI domain. This stream of inquiry is particularly relevant given existing studies that highlight the gendered nature of the SMI space, where consumers often challenge the authenticity of SMIs' expressions of masculinity and femininity, sometimes in harmful ways (Duffy et al., 2022; Edelblum & Warren, 2024; Mardon et al., 2023). At the same time, SMIs use their platforms to embody expressions that resist limiting stereotypes and make visible their lived experiences (Gurrieri et al., 2023; Södergren & Vallström, 2022; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021). RQ2 responds to calls to deepen our understanding of how power shapes perceptions of gendered representation and expression within specific contexts, and how these dynamics are navigated by key actors in the SMI domain, in this case, SMIs and consumers (Veresiu & Parmentier, 2021).

In response to RQ2, my thesis examined consumer reactions to SMIs' embodied expressions on Instagram to understand the gender dynamics reflected in both their discourse and content. After completing narrative interviews, my analysis paid close attention to how power, shaped by social identity factors such as gender, race, and sexuality, influenced the perspectives of both consumers and SMIs.

Addressing RQ2, Chapter 4 demonstrates that SMI women navigate gender dynamics by sharing content that often resists societal gender norms of femininity that are dictated by Victorian standards of heteronormative respectability, including women's neat appearances, sexual conservativeness, religiosity, and duty (Barratt, 2018; Green, 2006). These expressions are particularly visible during cultural moments like Carnival, where SMI women echo the acts of resistance historically displayed by influential women in early postcolonial T&T.

Consumers navigate gender dynamics through their responses, allocating power based on their valuations of SMIs' expressions against contextual gendered expectations. Some consumers affirmed SMI women's resistant expressions by hailing them 'Queens', while others were openly critical, particularly of displays of hypersexuality aligned with the carnivalesque period, which they viewed as violating norms of respectable femininity. Chapter 5 also responds to RQ2 by showing that SMIs draw on both their own and consumers' perceived perceptions of value and authenticity to label and position themselves within the SMI domain. Gender dynamics are revealed through these perceptions, reflecting enduring colonial standards of masculinity and femininity. SMI men are often valued for their relatability and sense of responsibility to core, often class-based audiences, while SMI women are judged based on how they perform femininity through traits such as independence, hard work, and serving as role models.

My thesis further responds to RQ2 by demonstrating that consumers' responses to influencers' content reveal how they navigate gender dynamics in the SMI domain, often drawing on heteronormative gendered standards of respectable femininity and responsible masculinity. These responses serve to assign or withhold power, sometimes reinforcing and other times challenging stereotypical gender norms. In turn, SMIs interpret these reactions through a gendered lens and adapt their social identities by changing the labels they use to describe themselves, strategically positioning themselves to reflect perceived value and authenticity.

7.1.3 RQ3: What can be learnt about gender dynamics in the T&T SMI domain to provide a framework for gender responsive influencer marketing, particularly in social marketing?

RQ3 examines the implications for SMI-led marketing and social marketing initiatives, guided by a proposed gender responsive framework that accounts for gender dynamics within the domain. This area of inquiry is critical, as both theoretical and practical understandings of SMIs' roles in advancing gender equity remain underdeveloped. While emerging research has begun exploring SMI activism (Gurrieri & Drenten, 2019a; Koivunen et al., 2025), scholars note that the diversity of gendered perspectives in the online domain complicates efforts to promote gender responsive narratives (Mueller, 2023). This presents challenges, especially for social marketing, where the goal is to advance gender equity and emancipation (Aya Pastrana et al., 2022). RQ 3 contributes to expanding knowledge in this area by prioritising gender responsiveness, acknowledging warnings from social marketing scholars that initiatives addressing gender-based harms can sometimes produce unintended consequences (Gurrieri et al., 2013; Robertson & Davidson, 2013).

In response to RQ3, my thesis examined SMIs' self-expressions and consumer reactions to pro-social content shared by SMIs. Through separate interviews with SMIs and consumers, I explored their perceptions of gender dynamics in SMIs' content.

Findings across Chapters 4 to 6 show that, regardless of the nature of their content, SMIs are subject to gendered backlash. In Chapter 4, for example, SMI Marieange's respectability as a mother was questioned due to her embodied expression where she wore a costume during Carnival in T&T. Similarly, in Chapter 6, SMI Leah's gender was scrutinised when she promoted menstrual health. Chapter 6 also draws on insights from both SMIs and consumers to show that such backlash often stems from judgments about SMIs' embodied expressions that deviate from heteronormative norms, as well as from expectations about the

appropriate role and purpose of influencers. For instance, SMI Joshua's portrayal of female characters led to questions about his sexuality, which negatively influenced responses to both his commercial and pro-social content. Drawing on insights from emerging gender dynamics, my thesis recommends a framework that leverages SMIs' existing passions, while also acknowledging and addressing potential gendered backlash. This can be achieved through the co-creation of campaign strategies with academic experts in intersectionality, SMIs, and consumers, supporting social marketers in promoting more resilient and inclusive gender responsive messaging.

Addressing RQ3, my thesis finds that gender dynamics, shaped by socially constructed norms of heteronormative behaviour and rooted in colonial power, significantly influence SMIs' ability to drive pro-social content. This creates a complex challenge for social marketers aiming to promote gender responsive content, as social media is a space where diverse and often conflicting opinions on gender identities are openly expressed. Strategies that reinforce dominant, heteronormative gender expressions may gain traction but risk perpetuating harmful norms, while truly gender responsive approaches often provoke backlash. In response, this thesis proposes a co-created, gender responsive framework designed to build more resilient campaigns. Key themes include: SMI and follower congruence—the alignment of the pro-social cause with the SMI and their followers; enhancing representation—the relevance of the SMIs' gender in relation to the cause being promoted; knowledge of the cause and context—where building an understanding of and around the cause strengthens the SMI's ability to respond to consumer feedback; and consistency—selecting SMIs who demonstrate altruistic values both online and offline. This framework is detailed in Chapter 6 of this PhD thesis.

The section above reviewed the research questions addressed in this PhD thesis and outlined the key insights that emerged from the findings presented in Chapters 4 to 6—these are summarised in Table 7.1 below. The following section discusses the theoretical contributions of my research.

Chapters	Key Findings
4: Yasss Queen! Towards an Intersectional Understanding of the Social Media Influencer Domain in Trinidad and Tobago.	**RQ:1 How do gender dynamics influence the content shared by SMIs?** SMI women experience power and influence through an interplay of intersectional factors in the SMI domain. Their content is shaped by their resistance to societal gender norms surrounding femininity, as well as by through contextual gender dynamics. These expressions reflect embodied, affective, and expressive intensities tied to specific cultural moments, such as Carnival in T&T, where SMI women often echo the forms of resistance displayed by influential women throughout early postcolonial history.
	RQ2: How do SMIs and consumers navigate gender dynamics in the T&T SMI domain? Normative standards of contextual femininity and respectability in T&T are expressed through consumer response to SMI women. These are articulated through public criticism of SMI womens expressions, like hypersexuality, that flout expected standards of respectability in Caribbean culture (Barratt, 2018). Consumers also value and legitimise SMI women, allocating statuses of power based on gendered expectations that are shaped contextually through the social relations of gender. our findings also uncover that because SMIs are active on global market platforms such as Instagram, spanning across culturally and ethnically diverse populations and expectations, they can also become subject to consumers' misinterpretation of their resistant expressions and influence.
5: 'She cyar sell me Nothing': Navigating Authenticity and Social Identity in the Caribbean Social	**RQ1: How do gender dynamics influence the content shared by SMIs?** Gender dynamics, shaped by culturally assigned roles of masculinity and femininity and mediated by factors such as race and social class, influence SMIs' social identities. These dynamics affect whether they are able or unable to engage with brands, and whether they are silenced or empowered to adopt activist roles that challenge limiting gendered stereotypes in their interactions with consumers.

Media Influencer Domain	**RQ2: How do SMIs and consumers navigate gender dynamics in the T&T SMI domain?** SMIs draw on perceptions of their value and authenticity, shaped by intersecting social factors, to determine how they label themselves. This, in turn, influences how consumers perceive their worth. Findings show that SMI men are often valued for their relatability and responsibility to core, often class-based, audiences, while SMI women are judged by how they perform femininity through traits like independence, hard work, and being role models.
6: *'They quick to call yuh Bullerman':* Towards a gender responsive framework for social marketing initiatives featuring Social Media Influencers.	**RQ3: What can be learnt about gender dynamics in the T&T SMI domain to provide a framework for gender-responsive social marketing campaigns utilising SMIs?** SMIs and consumers call for more evidence-informed approaches to social marketing campaigns involving influencers, as pro-social messaging often faces gendered backlash. Such backlash stems from judgments about SMIs' embodied expressions that deviate from heteronormative norms, as well as from consumer expectations about the influencer's role and purpose. These insights highlight the need for practitioners to collaborate with contextual academic experts in intersectionality and engage both SMIs and their followers in the development of social marketing campaigns. Such campaigns should adopt gender-responsive strategies, including a focus on inclusivity and the selection of SMIs who consistently demonstrate altruism and genuine passion.

Table 7.1: Summary of key responses to the research questions addressed in this PhD thesis, organised by the journal articles presented in Chapters 4-6 of this thesis document

7.2 Theoretical Contributions

My PhD research makes three broad conceptual contributions, summarised in the next paragraphs. It also makes several contributions to knowledge, which I have organised around six themes, examined in more detail in subsequent sub-sections.

In terms of broad contributions, first, my thesis responds to scholars who have called for more qualitative research involving real-life subjects and consumer follower perspectives to understand how these shape practices within the SMI domain across different contexts (Abhishek & Srivastava, 2021; Fowler & Thomas, 2023; Vrontis et al., 2021). By capturing both the lived experiences of SMIs and the views of their followers, my research offers a more nuanced understanding of how power operates from multiple vantage points. In doing so, it prioritises the amplification of SMI and follower voices and draws upon the analysis of imagery shared by SMIs, to uncover embodied insights into gendered power relations (Gurrieri et al., 2023; Södergren & Vallström, 2022; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021).

Second, theoretically, my thesis prioritises the interrogation of power through the use of intersectionality, responding to calls from marketing, specifically SMI marketing scholars, to look beyond individual agency and examine wider structures of inequality (Veresiu & Parmentier, 2021). This approach led to a focus on how intersecting factors, such as age, sexuality, religion, and education, shape embodiment, expression, and discourse among SMIs and consumers. In doing so, the research contributes new knowledge about understudied intersections within the SMI space (Rinallo et al., 2023; Veresiu & Parmentier, 2021).

Third, the thesis contributes Global South knowledge to marketing scholarship, challenging the dominance of Western-centric frameworks and perspectives (Peñaloza et al., 2023; Udeuehi et al., 2024). By centring Caribbean feminist thought and contextual realities, my research highlights the complex and diverse realities of the Global South, particularly the

Caribbean, which cannot be fully understood through Western frameworks (Kravets & Varman, 2022). In line with scholars such as Mohanty (1988), my thesis further challenges homogenising narratives and emphasises the importance of using local contextual knowledge to interpret discourse and practice. This approach revealed specific power dynamics at play and offered more culturally grounded insights (Beoku-Betts & Adomako Ampofo, 2021).

Importantly, my findings demonstrate how Western cultural norms continue to shape the SMI domain in T&T and the wider Caribbean (Sinanan, 2017). For example, the privileging of SMIs who embody Eurocentric standards of femininity and masculinity, and the temporary elevation of African SMIs during global movements such as BLM, reflect ongoing forms of cultural and aesthetic colonialism. These dynamics reproduce hierarchies of race, class, and gender that have long structured Caribbean societies (Barratt, 2018), Yet my thesis also identifies forms of resistance: SMIs and consumers push back against these imported norms, critiquing the superficiality of identity-based engagement and challenging the classed and racialised expectations placed upon them. This tension between Western influence and local contestation offers important lessons for T&T and the broader Caribbean, illustrating how globalised social media cultures interact with, and sometimes intensify, existing inequalities.

My PhD thesis also makes contributions to knowledge, categorised as five key themes: (1) the impact of gendered expectations, (2) interactions and influence, (3) gendered value and social identity construction, (4) adapting SMIs' social identities for impact in the SMI domain, and (5) building resilience through collaboration for gender responsive initiatives. These contributions offer theoretical insights into how gender dynamics shape SMI content (RQ1), how SMIs and consumers navigate these dynamics (RQ2), and what learnings about gender dynamics inform a framework for gender responsive SMI marketing,

including in social marketing campaigns (RQ3). These contributions are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

7.2.1 The Impact of Gendered Expectations in the SMI Domain

My research demonstrates the complex underpinnings of SMIs' influence and what such influence signifies in contemporary societies where it is framed through social media platforms, especially through the interactions between SMIs and varied audiences. Building on existing insights that examine SMIs' gendered expressions through embodiment (Gurrieri et al., 2023; Harju & Huovinen, 2015; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021), my findings show that SMI women use their influence to share embodied expressions that challenge restrictive societal expectations of feminine respectability. For instance, in Chapter 4, SMI Destra embodied a hypersexualised expression that flouted norms of feminine respectability, which typically uphold sexual conservatism for women in T&T (Barratt, 2018). However, within the Carnival context, where sexual expression is celebrated in resistance to the historical sexualisation and control of Black women's bodies, her performance offers a culturally grounded perspective that challenges assumptions in the extant literature that SMIs' sexualised labour is solely tied to pornification (Drenten et al., 2020). Accordingly, the research emphasises what Caribbean feminists have long asserted—that feminine respectability is understood not only across different geographical contexts but also shifts within the same context, depending on socio-cultural occasions For example, in T&T, gendered discourse and embodied expression intensify during Carnival compared to other times of the year (Mohammed, 2018). In summary, this research contributes to both SMI marketing and gender and marketing scholarship by deepening our theoretical understanding of SMIs' embodied expressions as shaped by their specific socio-cultural contexts. Within SMI marketing, it extends existing studies (e.g., Drenten et al., 2020) on sexualisation by

linking it to empowerment, framed by socio-historical influences. While Drenten et al. (2020) examine sexualisation in relation to the culture of pornification, this study explores it in a popular subculture within a specific geographic cultural context, showing that SMIs' hypersexual expressions can signify empowerment, drawing on historical 'Queen' archetypes who resisted through their sexuality.

In the field of gender and marketing, particularly within intersectional research, my PhD thesis advances emerging knowledge on underexplored, socially constructed factors such as sexuality and age. These are areas identified as needing further investigation by Veresiu and Parmentier (2021) and Rinallo et al. (2023). My research brings attention to the ongoing tensions surrounding these factors within the studied context. For instance, while some of Destra's followers regard her hypersexual performance as empowering and associate it with privileged 'Queen' status, others criticise it based on her age (late 40s), suggesting that such expressions are inappropriate in terms of how she should express herself at her age (conservative, dutiful). This finding highlights how gendered expectations related to age led consumers to revoke an SMI's power, as reflected in their comments. It directly responds to calls by Veresiu and Parmentier (2021) to examine how power dynamics shape SMI women's self-expression within the domain.

My thesis also situates SMIs' followers as key actors who influence how SMIs experience power and influence—an area identified by Vrontis et al. (2021) and Abhishek and Srivastava (2021) as requiring further exploration within marketing scholarship. The research shows how consumers determine which SMIs are granted legitimacy and which are silenced; these judgments are shaped by gendered expectations surrounding masculine and feminine expression and mediated by personal factors such as the SMIs' sex, social class, and race. Consumers' validation of respectable femininity is illustrated in Chapter 4, where a follower stated that SMI Marieange would not have experienced influential power and

legitimacy if she were darker-skinned. We further demonstrate in Chapter 5 that consumers negotiate SMI men's displays of responsible masculinity. For example, SMI Rohan's decision to cut off his dreadlocks to appear more 'clean cut' to secure endorsements from higher-level brands reflects dominant ideals of responsible masculinity. This is mediated by race, which is consistent with the work of Caribbean feminists who show that, depending on the context, Black men's responsibility is often judged through neatly groomed appearances to gain validity in the workplace (Fraser, 2023). In the SMI domain, this research finding is novel because it highlights the role of race in shaping how SMIs' followers evaluate respectable femininity and responsible masculinity. While previous research has highlighted follower discrimination towards SMI women based on their ability to conform to ideals of entrepreneurial success (Duffy et al., 2022), a gap remains in understanding how race specifically mediates expressions of femininity across different contexts. Similarly, emerging studies on masculinity in the SMI space, like Edelblum and Warren (2024), have largely overlooked the influence of race. Together, these gaps highlight the need for a deeper understanding of how race and sex intersect to shape the SMI domain, as urged by Mardon et al. (2023). The gaps also underscore the value of context-specific examinations of constructions of femininity and masculinity that apply intersectional frameworks, as this thesis does (Badejo et al., 2021; Eckhardt & Kopalle, 2024).

7.2.2 Interactions and Influence in the SMI Domain

My thesis highlights the significance of networked power and social capital in a socio-cultural context. It highlights this by establishing how influence and the capacity to be an SMI rest in navigating varied levels of social identities in a particular context. For instance, in Chapter 4, we show how tensions around sex, social class, and popular culture surfaced in a vernacular consumer response to SMI Marieange, a lighter-skinned influencer.

One commenter claimed that she would not have received such privileged feedback for her bodily expression—being pregnant and dressed in a Carnival costume—if she were instead a woman in a Jamaican dancehall context. Caribbean feminists such as Stanley-Niaah (2004) and Cooper (2004) have previously discussed the race- and class-based tensions between Jamaican Dancehall and Carnival spaces. Dancehall is often framed as a space where darker-skinned, lower-income Jamaicans express their marginalisation through celebratory performance, while Carnival is seen as a site where lighter-skinned, higher-income participants can temporarily abandon respectability. This example illustrates how SMIs' embodied expressions on global platforms can be judged according to gendered rules from different cultural contexts, ultimately revoking Marieange's power to influence.

My thesis also contributes to the SMI marketing literature by emphasising the mediating role of vernacular language and the influence of cultural nuance on interactions and influence within the SMI domain. While emerging studies have explored aspects of language use, such as emojis to boost engagement (Ge & Gretzel, 2018), a gap remains in understanding how vernacular language specifically conveys cultural complexity and shapes an SMI's ability to influence (Abhishek & Srivastava, 2021). My research addresses this gap by demonstrating how vernacular expressions serve as a key lens through which cultural complexity operates in the SMI space. In doing so, it extends nascent scholarship in this area and responds to calls by scholars such as Agnihotri and Bhattacharya (2021) and Kim et al. (2024) for deeper attention to the cultural dimensions of SMI marketing.

Further to SMIs' interactions with consumers, the findings highlight that SMIs' interactions with brands also shape their influence in the SMI domain, which is also largely shaped by cultural perceptions around socially constructed characteristics such as gender, race, and class. The findings demonstrate that SMI's power is never fixed but constantly negotiated through dynamic relationships among key actors, including SMIs, consumers, and

brands, and shaped by their interactions within broader contextual power structures. This is illustrated in Chapter 5, where SMI Tasha explains that a working-class fast-food brand chose to collaborate with Black SMIs, believing their race, class, and gendered expression aligned more closely with the brand's grassroots audience. In doing so, they overlooked Indian SMIs, like Tasha, despite her being a regular consumer of the product. These findings offer contextual nuance on how brands shape influence through social identities and gendered stereotypes (Sobande, 2020). They reflect the broader dynamics of T&T society, where no single racial or ethnic group dominates (Reddock, 2019) and extend existing insights into the role of social identities and culture in shaping networked power and influence (Farivar & Wang, 2022). To summarise, my thesis makes theoretical contributions to SMI marketing research and gender-focused SMI scholarship by demonstrating the mediating role of culture in shaping influence through SMIs' interactions with key actors in the domain. While emerging studies have begun to explore language use in SMI marketing, my research foregrounds the role of vernacular language, showing how consumers use it to assign power and status to influencers. This directly responds to calls by Abhishek and Srivastava (2021) for deeper insights into the role of vernacular language in the SMI space. Additionally, my research advances understanding of cultural complexity by illustrating how culturally informed racial, ethnic, and class-based stereotypes shape SMIs' interactions with brands. These stereotypes influence which SMIs are included or excluded from brand partnerships, based on their social identities. Although existing research acknowledges that SMIs' social identities affect consumer behaviour (Farivar & Wang, 2022), less is known about how brands strategically leverage cultural stereotypes to shape inclusion, exclusion, and influence. Along these lines, my thesis directly responds to calls by Fowler and Thomas (2023) and Sobande (2022) to examine the impact of socio-cultural factors on influence in the SMI domain.

7.2.3 Gendered Value and Social Identity Construction in the SMI Domain

My thesis asserts that SMIs' social identities are fluid and continuously reshaped, with self-labelling practices used to signal and negotiate gendered power and value within the SMI domain. These negotiations and valuations are based on societally shaped rules of gendered behaviour, based on respectable femininity and responsible masculinity. Specifically, Chapter 5 shows that many participants reject the taboo label 'social media influencer', a term now often linked to freeloading and low value (Duffy & Sawey, 2021). Instead, they choose labels that better reflect their perceived power and marketplace value—labels shaped by cultural norms of feminine respectability, masculine responsibility, and identity factors such as gender, race, and class. For example, SMI Trina, who appears bare-faced with visible acne and posts in a male-dominated niche, stressed the hard work behind her content creation, contrasting herself with 'typical' influencer women who, in her view, rely on looks alone. She, along with other SMIs, therefore, prefers the term 'content creator'. Participants likewise expect SMI women to demonstrate hard work and accountability, aligning with ideals of feminine respectability, as elaborated by Green (2006). Chapter 6 adds nuance around expectations of SMI women. As SMI Crystal notes, Black women do not receive the same affordances as women from more socially privileged racial or ethnic groups. This echoes Caribbean feminist critiques that Black women's legitimacy is continually policed (Barratt, 2018). Theoretically, my thesis extends SMI marketing and gender-focused scholarship by revealing the fluid, self-constructed social identities of SMI women through their strategic use, or rejection, of the influencer label. While prior work acknowledges the stigma around the 'influencer' label (Duffy & Sawey, 2021) and the appeal of alternatives such as 'content creator', which holds more autonomy and value (Kapitan et al., 2022), little is known about how SMIs negotiate these labels amid gendered constraints. My research

finding is novel in this regard, as it raises questions around labelling in the SMI domain. By demonstrating that within the T&T context, SMIs adopt or coin labels to signal value and power, based on their self-valuations that are shaped by race, class, and other socio-cultural factors, this thesis answers calls by Fowler and Thomas (2023) to probe how culture shapes identity representation in the SMI domain.

Similarly, in Chapters 5 and 6, we show that SMI men are often valued for demonstrating masculine responsibility by maintaining social identities that align with their working-class audiences. However, the experiences of SMIs Rohan and Joshua in Chapter 5 reveal how quickly these identities can be destabilised, particularly when they are associated with high-end products or exhibit traits perceived as feminine. This reflects the theorising of Caribbean feminists that masculinity is contextually fragile and easily undermined by associations with femininity (King, 2014; Nurse, 2004), and aligns with findings that Black Caribbean men face greater obstacles in navigating social hierarchies compared to men from more affluent racial and ethnic groups (Beckles, 1996). These findings also support recent research showing that SMI men's associations with femininity can compromise their ability to hold influence (Edelblum & Warren, 2024), while also extending this knowledge by demonstrating how race and social class further mediate these effects. For example, in Chapter 6, SMI Joshua's portrayal of feminine personas to promote his content led to consumers questioning his sexuality. In intersecting with feminine-type behaviours, these identity factors amplify the challenges SMI men face in asserting influential power within the domain.

In summary, my research makes theoretical contributions to SMI marketing and gender-focused marketing literature by showing how SMIs use identifying labels to construct and reconstruct their social identities. These labels reflect their self-perceived power and value in the domain, shaped by their gendered, racialised, and classed experiences. While

existing studies have highlighted the gendered stereotypes and devaluation associated with the traditional 'influencer' label (Duffy & Sawey, 2021), there is limited understanding of how SMIs navigate and reshape their identities in response to these associations. My research finding is novel in that it advances knowledge in the emerging area of social identity formation within the SMI domain (Farivar & Wang, 2022) and illustrates how race, in particular, influences both identity and influence, responding to gaps identified by Mardon et al. (2023). Additionally, this research introduces new insights into how SMIs engage in activism by creating and adapting identity labels as a form of self-expression. In doing so, the thesis responds directly to calls by Fowler and Thomas (2023) for a deeper understanding of SMIs' activist expressions. Further, this research insight contributes to Caribbean feminist scholarship, following Baldwin and Cossy's (2018) call for an improved understanding of displays of gendered expression on social media platforms.

7.2.4 Adapting SMIs Social Identities for Impact in the SMI Domain

My research demonstrates how SMIs' social identities shape their experiences of privilege or exclusion within the SMI domain. It shows that factors such as race, ethnicity, and social class significantly influence an SMI's power and visibility. These identity markers affect how SMIs are perceived and engaged with, ultimately determining who is granted legitimacy and power and who is overlooked or silenced. For example, in Chapter 5, SMI Tasha shared that she no longer engages with a popular working-class fast-food brand, as she feels sidelined by them due to her ethnicity and social class.

My thesis also demonstrates the role some brands play in promoting and subsequently silencing SMIs based on aspects of their social identities, impacting how they show up in the SMI domain. This is evidenced in Chapter 5 through SMI Crystal's reflection on how Black SMI women saw an increase in brand endorsements during the height of the Black Lives

Matter (BLM) protests in the United States, only to experience a sharp decline afterwards, disrupting the visibility and opportunities they briefly gained during that period. My findings reflect similar assertions made by Sobande (2020), who critiqued marketers in Global North contexts for engaging in 'woke-washing'—referring to the appropriation of marginalised groups' historical struggles to advance commercial interests. My thesis, however, demonstrates how these practices unfold on social media platforms in the multi-ethnic Global South context of T&T, where identity, status, and cultural acceptance remain contested according to intersections of sex, class, and ethnicity (Reddock, 2019). That is, my research shows that in the context of T&T, trends shift frequently, reflecting an offline society where no single racial or ethnic group holds dominant power (Reddock, 2019). As a result, initiatives promoting diversity, such as support for BLM, are often short-lived, requiring SMIs to constantly reconfigure their social identities to remain relevant and appealing to brands. This finding extends the current understanding of how SMIs construct and adjust their identities in response to social and commercial pressures, addressing a gap in the literature identified by Farivar and Wang (2022).

The findings in Chapter 5 further demonstrate that SMIs' observations of how others leverage aspects of their social identities to secure brand endorsements, and how brands selectively hire or dismiss SMIs, contribute to their growing frustration with the industry. These dynamics often lead to the silencing of SMIs, as some, like SMI Crystal, choose to withdraw from what they describe as a 'toxic' environment. In summary, my thesis makes a theoretical contribution by demonstrating that SMIs' social identities shape their influence within the SMI domain, sometimes resulting in their silencing or withdrawal. While existing research has shown that SMIs from marginalised groups often face heightened gendered backlash on social media (Duffy & Meisner, 2023), less is known about how contextual factors influence their ongoing impact in the domain—highlighting the value of this research.

This thesis further demonstrates that valuations of SMIs' social identities can either amplify their voices on certain issues or lead to their silencing on social media platforms. For example, in Chapter 5, SMI Nakiah leveraged and adapted her social identity to amplify her voice for the empowerment of young women. My research demonstrates that SMIs are often not judged solely by what they say, but by how their identities are perceived both within and beyond the SMI domain. For example, SMI Amy's experience of silencing/ temporary cancellation occurred when her influence was challenged by working-class women who viewed her as unfit to speak on gender-based violence (GBV). This perception stemmed from her higher social class, inferred from her success in the popular, male-dominated entertainment industry. Caribbean feminists have previously examined these dynamics in the context of consumer responses to social media news reports, showing how online audiences assess who is deserving of empathy based on social identity factors (Barratt, 2018; Esposito et al., 2024). My research extends this knowledge by demonstrating how similar dynamics play out within the SMI domain. In Amy's case, her position of power within a privileged entertainment space undermined her perceived legitimacy to speak on behalf of working-class women affected by GBV. These findings provide contextual insights into how socio-cultural factors, such as sex, race, and social class, shape SMIs' social identities, influencing their representation in the SMI domain. This occurs through processes of withdrawal and silencing or the adaptation of identity. This research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on how socio-cultural factors shape SMIs' influence, addressing the gap identified by Fowler and Thomas (2023).

Taken together, my thesis makes theoretical contributions to SMI marketing and gender-related marketing research by demonstrating that SMIs' social identities significantly shape their influence, whether through silencing, cancellation, or the strategic adaptation of identity to appeal to privileged consumer groups. While emerging research has shown that

consumers align with aspects of an SMI's identity to guide purchase intentions, there is limited understanding of how these identities actively shape SMIs' influence within the domain (Farivar & Wang, 2022). My research addresses this gap by showing that SMIs often leverage their identities to support social causes; however, these same identity markers can lead to silencing, temporary cancellation, or the need to reconfigure their social identities to maintain relevance. Findings foreground the role of contextual dynamics, particularly in settings like T&T, where no single racial or ethnic group holds dominant power (Reddock, 2019). In such environments, brands tend to capitalise on short-lived online trends related to diversity and representation, which in turn influence the visibility and legitimacy of SMIs. These insights build on the contextual knowledge that Lee and Abidin (2025) identify as crucial to understanding and addressing cancellation, which can have harmful implications not only for SMIs but also for associated brands and affiliates (Demsar et al., 2023).

7.2.5 Building Resilience Through Collaboration for Gender Responsive Initiatives

My thesis makes theoretical contributions towards gender responsive social marketing initiatives using SMIs. The findings highlight the gendered complexity of the SMI domain and the challenges faced by both SMIs and practitioners, particularly when promoting both pro-social causes and commercial content, as consumer judgments of SMIs' social identities often overshadow the intended message. This dynamic is illustrated in Chapter 6 where SMI Leah promotes pro-social content and the commenter questions her gender in response to Leah's post, which intended to promote advocacy around menstruation. Caribbean feminists expand on these gender dynamics, showing that when women, in this case SMI Leah, express masculinity and/or sexuality in ways that fall outside societal norms of respectable femininity, it further complicates how consumers judge their embodied expressions, as they are critiqued for their non-conformity to these norms (King, 2014). These findings

contextualise what other scholars have noted—the challenges of promoting gender responsive campaigns, particularly within social marketing, as social media have diverse audiences who desire to see reflections of their gender identities (Mueller, 2023; Robertson & Davidson, 2013). While existing research highlights these limitations, there is less clarity on how to conceptually, empirically, and practically advance gender responsive social marketing initiatives. My research addresses these complexities by proposing strategic approaches to gender responsive SMI-led initiatives. Specifically, it suggests building campaigns grounded in academic insights, cultural context, and the lived knowledge of SMIs and their followers to foster resilient responses to inevitable gendered feedback.

My research findings highlight the importance of developing informed responses to consumer feedback on gender responsive initiatives through collaborative processes involving SMIs, their followers, academic experts in intersectionality, and practitioners. SMIs emphasise that much depends on how they respond to consumers, noting that their credibility and transparency with followers can be compromised in the process. This is exemplified in Chapter 6, where consumer Nathaniel and SMI Tasha emphasise the importance of follower congruence with the pro-social causes SMIs promote. This research asserts that strategies to build resilient responses to consumer feedback must stem from the collaboration and co-creation of evidence-based campaign strategies and responses. Chapter 6 illustrates this through SMI Crystal's recommendation that influencers develop knowledge not only about pro-social causes but also about the broader societal barriers and enablers that shape behaviour uptake. Through these strategies, my research supports the assertions of critical social marketing scholars, such as Badejo et al. (2021) and Gordon et al. (2022), who argue that context-specific, intersectional frameworks strengthen efforts to advance gender equity. The findings also reaffirm the importance of co-design in shaping gender responsive initiatives, aligning with insights from Aya Pastrana et al. (2022) and Smith et al. (2024). My

research contributes to theoretical knowledge in SMI marketing, gender-focused marketing, and social marketing by introducing collaborative, co-design strategies to enhance gender responsiveness in SMI-led campaigns. This contribution builds on emerging scholarship by Aboelenien et al. (2023), which highlights the practices of SMIs promoting non-commercial content. In doing so, it directly responds to Gurrieri et al.'s (2012) call for social marketing strategies that actively promote gender equity while avoiding unintended consequences that may undermine it.

To conclude, my thesis contributes to SMI marketing research, gender-focused marketing, and social marketing scholarship by demonstrating that informed responses to consumer feedback, developed through collaborative processes involving SMIs, their followers, academic experts in intersectionality, and practitioners, can support more resilient gender responsive initiatives led by SMIs. While existing studies show that SMIs often face gendered backlash and may respond by censoring or silencing themselves (Duffy et al., 2024), there is limited understanding of how to design more resilient, SMI-led campaigns that equip influencers with strategies to navigate such feedback. My research addresses this gap by highlighting the value of co-design and collaboration in developing gender-responsive initiatives. In doing so, it directly responds to calls for deeper insight into how SMIs can be leveraged for social good (Barari, 2023) and offers practical strategies for initiatives that challenge gendered stereotypes, particularly in the context of health-related issues, an area identified as needing further attention in regions such as the Caribbean (Malika et al., 2025). These practical contributions, among others, are further outlined in the following section.

7.3 Practical Contributions

This PhD research makes practical contributions by proposing strategies to enhance the protection of SMIs within the social media domain. The section below provides

actionable recommendations aimed at safeguarding SMIs at the policy level, the SMI level, and within practitioner spaces. The section concludes with a list of practical recommendations for SMI-led gender responsive initiatives.

7.3.1 For Policymakers

On the basis of my PhD research, I urge policymakers in T&T to draft and enforce legislation aimed at protecting SMIs on social media platforms. In T&T, there is currently no legislation dedicated specifically to regulating social media or influencers. Instead, regulation falls under general national laws, such as those addressing defamation, and the Advertisements Regulation Act 2000, which prohibits the promotion of certain products and services, such as tobacco. Social media-related crimes are investigated by the Cyber Crime Unit of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service once reported. This legal landscape is similar to that of the United States, which allows the largely unregulated use of social media under free speech protections, though specific laws address areas such as data privacy, child protection, and advertising transparency.

However, the global rise in social media use has prompted other countries to develop regulatory frameworks to govern its use. For example, within the European Union, the Digital Services Act 2022 provides a unified framework requiring transparency in advertising, restrictions on illegal content, and protections for individual rights (ECC-NET, 2024). Some EU countries go further: France and Spain have formal legal definitions for 'influencers' and enforce specific laws, such as mandatory disclosure of sponsored content. In addition, France bans the promotion of high-risk products. Australia, as another example, is widely regarded as a global leader in this space, particularly with the enactment of the Online Safety Act 2021. This law empowers regulators to quickly remove harmful content, particularly in relation to adult and child safety and cyberbullying. Under this Act, industries must adhere to

codes that include influencer-specific regulations, such as mandatory disclosure of paid advertisements, obtaining consent before sharing user-generated content, and actively moderating comments. Industries are also legally responsible for reporting and removing defamatory comments, as they are considered liable for all content published on their social media platforms.

As previously highlighted, in contrast, T&T does not have protections in place specifically for users, including SMIs, in the social media domain. This is demonstrated in Chapters 5 and 6, where the absence of clear legal safeguards for social media use in T&T leaves SMIs to protect themselves, shape their public identities, police comments, and absorb reputational risk on their own. This reflects a broader issue in multicultural societies, such as Singapore, for example, where existing laws are similarly outdated and ill-equipped to deal with the complexities of digital influence (Radics & Abidin, 2022). In contrast, in T&T, recent high-profile legal cases against SMIs for defamation, sedition, and financial fraud (Achong 2024, 2025; BBC News 2024) reveal how quickly authorities respond when SMIs are perceived as a threat.

Based on my research, I recommend that T&T policymakers take a clear first step by introducing influencer marketing disclosure regulations similar to those in the EU and Australia. Currently, some T&T SMIs voluntarily disclose paid advertisements to comply with international standards, but such disclosures are neither stipulated nor enforced locally. Such regulations would have the benefit of sharing responsibility for the content with brands and platforms, allowing for support in reporting and removing defamatory comments from followers, and holding them legally accountable for the material published under their name. Introducing this clarity could help reduce gendered violence towards SMIs and offer them basic yet crucial legal protections in the social media landscape. In my research, SMI Althea highlights in Chapter 5 that she adopts the title ‘brand collaborator’ to share responsibility

with the brand she features, thereby diffusing negative feedback from followers. Clear legislation around advertising disclosure would also help SMIs avoid situations like those described by Lee and Abidin (2025) in the South Korean context, where SMIs have experienced cancellation and had to issue apologies for failing to disclose brand collaborations.

Taking inspiration from the law in the EU and Australia, where industries are legally responsible for reporting and removing defamatory comments as they are considered liable for all content published on their social media platforms, T&T should introduce such legislation to ease the burden on SMIs. This type of legislation would empower brands to monitor, report, and remove comments on sponsored SMI content without facing backlash for hindering free speech or failing to acknowledge and address the harmful feedback of consumers.

Based on my thesis findings, I recommend that legislators incorporate the insights of academic experts in intersectionality when drafting regulatory frameworks for social media usage and, specifically, influencer marketing. While there are mechanisms to report harmful content on social media platforms, the research findings demonstrate that such affordances are inadequate, as evidenced, for example, by SMI Crystal's experience of having to let some consumer comments slide to avoid irrevocably losing credibility. Furthermore, scholars like Duffy and Meisner (2023) show that consumers often exploit platform protection mechanisms to report and remove content, particularly that of SMIs from marginalised groups. This signals a deeper challenge, where SMIs may receive unequal protections based on their social identities.

Radics and Abidin (2022) demonstrate that in Singapore, repressive laws, such as those that criminalised sodomy, have historically shaped stereotypes that portray LGBTQI+ communities as engaging in illegal behaviour, thereby limiting their ability to seek protection

from harm. Although such laws have since been reformed in Singapore to promote legislative inclusivity, T&T still upholds similar legislation (Surtees, 2025). This can undermine the ability of marginalised groups to be recognised as legitimate victims and access legal protection against hate crimes, resulting in unequal access to justice based on individuals' social identities (Radics & Abidin, 2022). Intersectional scholars, including Caribbean feminists like Kempadoo (2004), have written extensively about laws that suppress gendered sexual expression, highlighting how such practices persist despite legal prohibitions. These scholars offer valuable contextual insights into the stereotypes surrounding SMIs' social identities and are well-positioned to propose strategies to address and reduce gendered harm in the digital domain.

7.3.2 On the SMI Platform Level

Within the social media domain, META provides users with tools to report illegal content such as child sexual abuse material, compromised accounts, and comments that suggest cyberbullying or inflict harm. Users are encouraged to block individuals with whom they have negative interactions and to escalate reports to local authorities if harmful behaviour continues. Under Australian law, META is responsible for identifying and removing content that breaches legal regulations. Introducing similar legislation within the T&T context could provide protections to users on social media platforms and go some way in protecting SMIs. Currently, SMIs require the support of multiple persons to report fake duplicate profiles and harmful content before the issue is raised with META. Even when the issue is raised, it takes hours or days before META replies with their evaluation of the issue, and this sometimes results in harmful content remaining on the social media platform.

Based on my research findings, I recommend that META develop a mechanism allowing SMIs to register their occupation using validated documentation. This system should also provide accessible channels, such as live chat or email, for SMIs to report harmful content, including requests for the removal of abusive posts and the blocking of duplicate or troll accounts. Timely responses are essential, as gendered harm can have significant impacts on SMIs, as evidenced in Chapter 5, where SMI Amy was subject to cancellation via harmful comments on the X social media platform. In Chapter 6, participants called for the development of pro-social campaigns that are resilient to harmful consumer feedback, further highlighting the need for institutional support structures.

7.3.3 For SMIs

My thesis findings suggest that SMIs should exercise caution by ensuring that the content they share is both accurate and legally sound. This recommendation mirrors SMI Crystal's perspective, detailed in Chapter 6, advocating for SMIs to increase their knowledge of and around pro-social causes to safeguard themselves from harm and develop informed responses to consumer feedback. While global regulations around social media aim to protect users, they also place increased responsibility on SMIs to comply with regulatory standards (ECC-NET, 2024). Although no specific laws exist in the social media domain as of yet, several SMIs have faced cancellation or public backlash for sharing content that violated state laws or promoted public health misinformation (Maharaj et al., 2021; Trinidad Guardian News Desk, 2020). Based on the findings of this research, I caution SMIs to engage responsibly by familiarising themselves with local laws, such as those related to defamation, intellectual property, and the prohibition of sharing child pornography (Nathu, 2015), and to carefully ensure the legality of their content before posting. Doing so can help mitigate the risk of reputational harm, legal consequences, and consumer backlash.

I also call for SMIs to collaborate more widely to create gender responsive campaigns, while acknowledging that some SMIs may feel that such an approach limits their creative freedom in developing their content. However, this recommendation is aligned with voices like SMI Tasha's in Chapter 6, where she proposes aligning influencers with causes to ensure authenticity and anticipate audience reactions to sudden shifts in content. Chapter 6 highlights the need for a more gender responsive approach to campaign development that brings together practitioners, SMIs, academic experts in intersectionality, and SMI consumer followers. This approach, as outlined in Chapter 6, should also include assessing SMI and follower congruence, enhancing representation, leveraging SMIs' existing passions, building knowledge of the cause, and ensuring consistency of SMIs' characters in online and offline settings.

7.3.4 For Marketers/ Social Marketers

Given that SMIs have limited legislative protection in many jurisdictions, including in T&T, I call on marketers to create and uphold ethical guidelines for engaging SMIs. These guidelines should align with laws affecting SMIs (for example, intellectual property and defamation), supporting the creation of responsible and accurate content. They can also draw from best-practice frameworks such as the Australian Influencer Marketing Council (AiMCO), which outlines standards for working with SMIs ethically (AIMCO, 2025). Importantly, these should be co-designed with SMIs, their consumer communities, practitioners, and academic experts in intersectionality to ensure they are practical and culturally grounded. These ethical guidelines could include recommendations on racial and ethnic representation, discouraging practitioners from using SMIs in short-term, race- or ethnicity-based campaigns. This is illustrated in Chapter 5 by SMI Crystal's observation that

Black SMIs experienced only brief engagement during the BLM protests. As explained in Chapter 6, the guidelines can also address uneven patterns of client approval of SMI content based on race and ethnicity. Crystal highlights that SMIs who are privileged by race and social class often receive client approval for content that requires minimal effort, in contrast to the higher expectations placed on SMIs from lower social classes and more marginalised racial groups—an imbalance that ethical standards should actively seek to prevent.

The findings of my research also highlight the importance of marketers actively listening to SMIs and acknowledging the challenges they face. While some scholars note that the label 'social media influencer' has become culturally taboo, with terms like 'content creator' offering greater perceived creative autonomy (Kapitan et al., 2022), this label remains common in marketing practice. My thesis highlights the need for a critical re-evaluation of such terminology and encourages further research into inclusive and contextually respectful alternatives that better reflect the professional contributions of SMIs.

Similarly, I urge practitioners to adopt more flexible and context-sensitive approaches when developing campaign strategies based on the findings of my research. Chapter 5 highlights the case of SMI Amy, who initially declined a live show appearance but eventually agreed under client pressure. This led to her temporary cancellation on a major platform and her subsequent silence there. This example illustrates how SMIs often understand their audiences well and can foresee potential backlash. Given that scholars have shown how an SMI's cancellation can affect endorsing brands and affiliates (Demsar et al., 2023), practitioners should respect SMIs' expertise and remain open to adapting campaign strategies based on SMIs' insights.

My thesis findings also highlight the need for more responsible and ethical representation in influencer selection. In Chapter 5, SMI Tasha explains how brands often choose SMIs based on social identity markers, such as race and class, engaging only those

who fit a certain image while sidelining others. This experience led her to stop working with one such brand. Similarly, in Chapter 6, SMI Crystal critiques the practice of using identity-based struggles for temporary commercial gain - a form of 'woke-washing' (Sobande, 2020) - raising important concerns about exploitative representation in the domain. In light of these findings, I challenge such practices and advocate for the implementation of ethical guidelines, such as those discussed above, to guide brands toward selecting SMIs based on merit rather than stereotypes. Doing so helps prevent the reproduction of inequities linked to SMIs' intersecting identities and strengthens, rather than undermines, the objectives of gender responsive campaigns.

The following outlines key practical recommendations for social marketing practitioners to consider when developing SMI-led, gender responsive campaigns drawn from the findings in Chapter 6. The complete framework is presented in Chapter 6 of this thesis; however, four key recommendations outlined below.

First, my thesis recommends that social marketing practitioners engage SMIs whose values, content, and audience closely align with the pro-social cause being promoted. This aligns with scholarly work emphasising the importance of authenticity and transparency in SMIs' expressions when promoting pro-social causes (Aboelenien et al., 2023). My findings build on this by highlighting that consumers value congruency not only between the SMI and the cause but also between the SMI and their followers. Participants suggest that consumers should be involved in the process of selecting influencers to ensure the promoted cause aligns with the aesthetic and style that originally made the SMI appealing.

Second, I recommend that social marketing practitioners enhance gender representation and consider contextual gender dynamics in SMI-led pro-social campaigns through strategic, evidence-informed approaches. My findings echo existing scholarship,

which highlights a tension between efforts to promote gender responsive content and the consumer backlash such efforts often receive, particularly when audiences expect heteronormative representations. This backlash can inadvertently reinforce, rather than challenge, gender bias (Mueller, 2023; Robertson & Davidson, 2013). However, participants in my research advocate for resilience in the face of such pushback. To this end, I recommend that social marketers prioritise the emancipation and gender equity of groups marginalised by gender, sex, and sexuality. This includes developing resilient strategies by co-designing campaigns with both academic experts in intersectionality and SMIs, drawing on influencers' deep understanding of their platforms and audiences.

Third, my thesis encourages social marketing practitioners to engage SMIs who already show genuine passion for the pro-social causes being promoted and to support them in deepening their knowledge about the cause and its broader socio-cultural context. This approach can help SMIs produce more impactful content and build informed responses to public feedback. Participants emphasised the importance of audience response, echoing existing studies that show how pro-social messaging, if not handled carefully, can unintentionally harm the influencer, the endorsing brand, and its affiliates (Demsar et al., 2023). When SMIs are both passionate and informed, they are better able to present content that aligns with their established personas while also addressing barriers and enablers to behaviour change, traits that foster trust and relatability with consumers (Aboelenien et al., 2023; Lee & Chung, 2025).

Fourth, social marketing practitioners are encouraged to consider not only how SMIs present themselves in online spaces but also how they engage in offline contexts. While existing research has largely focused on the online strategies SMIs use to promote pro-social causes and engage audiences (Aboelenien et al., 2023; Koivunen et al., 2025), my thesis finds that consistency in character across both online and offline platforms helps SMIs maintain an

authentic voice when responding to consumers. This consistency can support more resilient and credible social marketing campaigns and aligns with Global South feminist research that prioritises the amplification of unhindered, authentic voices (Beoku-Betts & Adomako Ampofo, 2021).

In conclusion, my recommendations demonstrate the multi-layered action required to strengthen protections for SMIs and support the development of gender responsive pro-social campaigns. At the policy level, my thesis findings highlight the urgent need for legislative clarity and influencer-specific regulation in T&T, drawing on international best practice to reduce gendered harm and ensure equitable protections for SMIs across intersecting identities. At the platform level, my research highlights the importance of institutional support from META and similar social media companies, whose current reporting mechanisms remain insufficient for addressing the speed and scale of online abuse experienced by SMIs.

At the individual level, SMIs benefit from developing deeper knowledge of pro-social causes, understanding relevant legal frameworks, and collaborating with others to build more resilient, contextual and authentic campaigns. Finally, within practitioner spaces, my thesis recommendations call for ethical guidelines, co-designed with SMIs and academic experts in intersectionality, to ensure responsible representation, reduce stereotype-driven selection practices, and respect the expertise SMIs hold regarding their audiences.

Across these domains, my thesis suggests that protecting SMIs and advancing gender-responsive social marketing requires coordinated action that addresses structural inequities, challenges exploitative practices, and centres the lived experiences of SMIs themselves. By integrating these insights, practitioners, policymakers, platforms, and SMIs can collectively foster safer, more equitable, and more effective environments for pro-social influence.

7.4 Limitations of the Research

My PhD research employed a sampling frame generated outside of the research team to select SMIs and their consumer followers for narrative interviews. While this sampling approach generated rich insights for analysis, the findings are limited to the perspectives of those included. Additional nuance may have emerged had the sample included SMIs and consumers living with disabilities or those operating further outside of heteronormative gender norms, for example, SMIs identifying as non-binary. As such, the findings are not representative of all intersectional identities of SMIs in T&T; however, efforts were made to diversify the sample, spanning SMIs following tiers as well as varied gender, racial, ethnic, class, and sexual identities, to include as many perspectives as possible.

My research centres on the perspectives and experiences of SMIs and consumers in the SMI domain. However, its scope is limited to the perspectives of these actors, but findings suggest that both local and international brands and clients play a significant role in shaping the social identities and lived experiences of SMIs and consumers. These influential perspectives were not directly examined in this research; however, they provide a promising direction for future research.

My thesis is delimited to the SMI domain in T&T. While one of the strengths of this thesis lies in providing nuanced, context-specific insights, as called for in the literature (Badejo et al., 2021), scholars have noted that the cultural diversity of the social media space makes efforts to promote gender equity particularly complex—a point echoed in the findings of this research. While Chapter 4 addresses one aspect of this cultural complexity, the broader scope of these dynamics extends beyond the focus of this study and warrants further exploration.

The content presented through Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FDCA) in this thesis is limited to material shared by SMI women during Carnival and to SMIs promoting pro-social causes. However, as shown in Chapter 4, discourse shifts throughout the year in response to events such as religious festivals and high-profile news stories, as discussed by Barratt (2018) and Esposito et al. (2024). This represents a limitation of the research, which focuses on discourse from six SMIs during the Carnival period (Chapter 4) and four SMIs who engaged in pro-social messaging (Chapter 6). To more fully understand how power operates across the SMI domain, future research would benefit from analysing content over a longer timeframe and across a larger and more diverse sample of SMIs.

The constructivist–critical research paradigm underpinning my PhD research is rooted in a qualitative methodology that is inherently subjective. While I took steps to address potential biases, such as employing iterative discussions with my research team and engaging in ongoing reflexive thought, my own subjectivity as a researcher, including prior experiences collaborating with SMIs, may have influenced and, at times, limited my interpretation of the findings.

The following section outlines directions for future research, proposing ways to build on the limitations of my research and apply its recommendations in broader contexts.

7.4.1 Directions for Future Research

My thesis proposes key areas for future research to expand current knowledge about SMIs, using an intersectional lens. My research explored the intersectional factors shaped by power that emerged through the analysis of SMIs' content, consumer responses, and narrative interviews with both SMIs and consumers. These insights moved beyond binary understandings of gender, highlighting the complex ways power operates in the SMI domain. Notably, the thesis identified underexplored intersections, such as the role of educational

attainment alongside gender, and how these influence perceptions of SMIs and shape their experiences of power. Future research could examine these dimensions more deeply, particularly in other culturally specific settings. In addition, my thesis findings highlighted nuances around SMI's use of vernacular, pointing to the need for further exploration of how English-language dominance and Anglo-Saxon cultural norms shape SMI identity construction, content production, and audience reception in T&T and the wider Caribbean. While this thesis touched on the influence of Western movements such as BLM and the privileging of Eurocentric standards of femininity and masculinity, future studies could more fully investigate whether Western cultural influence is amplified in English-speaking Global South contexts and how this shapes digital inequalities, cultural expression, and pro-social communication. As such, this thesis contributes to addressing Gap 1 identified in Chapter 2 and supports the knowledge-building recommendation outlined in the practical contributions, though further research in these areas remains necessary.

Additionally, Chapter 4 investigates the socio-cultural meanings embedded in SMIs' embodied expressions, responding to calls in Gap 1 for further examination of how gendered power relations shape self-expression. My thesis, however, proposes future research into how embodied meanings are constructed and negotiated across a broader range of identities, including men, non-binary and virtual (AI-driven) SMIs. For example, findings in Chapter 6 show how some SMI men face scrutiny regarding their sexuality, revealing the role of gendered stereotypes in shaping public perceptions. Though studies have begun to explore these areas (Edelblum & Warren, 2024), further research could explore these dynamics in more depth, across varied socio-cultural contexts.

A key finding of this thesis is that social identities significantly shape how privilege and marginalisation are experienced within the SMI domain, addressing Gap 2 outlined in Chapter 2. As demonstrated in Chapter 4, cultural nuances often lead to misinterpretations of

SMIs' expressions by audiences outside their cultural context—an important consideration given the global and diverse nature of the SMI space. Future research should explore how SMIs navigate interactions with culturally dissimilar audiences, and how these dynamics influence the construction and reconstruction of their social identities. Such insights are particularly relevant when co-designing campaigns, as highlighted in the practical contributions of this thesis.

Furthermore, efforts to support SMIs' wellbeing at both policy and practice levels should be guided by research, as outlined in the practical contributions of my thesis. Case studies can offer valuable insights into how different contexts establish protections for SMIs and how these measures impact experiences of gendered backlash. In turn, contexts that currently lack such protections can use these findings to develop practical, context-specific guidelines aimed at safeguarding SMIs in the domain.

Building on addressing Gap 3 identified in Chapter 2, my thesis offers insights into how SMIs adopt activist self-identities and explores perceptions of these identities to inform a gender responsive framework for social marketing. While the thesis explores SMI's adoption of activist identities in Chapters 5 and 6, the findings suggest that such identities are more nuanced and cannot be fully defined under a single category of activism. For example, Chapter 6 highlights an SMI who promotes literacy, alongside others focused on men's health advocacy. While emerging studies have begun to examine different types of activist SMIs, such as Aboelenien et al. (2023) on ethical influencers and Koivunen et al. (2025) on de-influencers who resist consumerism, my thesis highlights that, in contexts like the Global South, SMIs often express activism through a wider range of culturally embedded social identities. Future research should account for these nuances and explore how socio-cultural factors shape the construction of SMIs' identities and their experiences of power within the

domain. This offers a valuable opportunity to deepen our understanding of pro-social influence across diverse cultural contexts.

My thesis asserts that Caribbean feminist knowledge can contribute meaningfully to marketing and social marketing's decolonial aims by challenging dominant knowledge hierarchies, addressing Gap 4 identified in Chapter 2. However, as asserted in Chapter 4, not all non-Western knowledge should be grouped under broad terms like 'decoloniality'. Future research should explore underrepresented contextual knowledge in scholarship, particularly how it shapes power dynamics within the SMI domain. In doing so, marketing and consumption scholarship can expand its efforts to incorporate non-Western knowledge using more inclusive and accurate terminology that reflects the diverse theoretical contributions of Global South scholars (see Purkayastha, 2021).

Lastly, my research centres power relations within an intersectional framework to address Gap 5 identified in Chapter 2. Future studies are encouraged to adopt context-specific, intersectional approaches to better understand the unique socio-cultural factors shaping experiences within their respective domains. Such insights are essential for co-creating gender responsive, SMI-led strategies in both marketing and social marketing, aligning with the practical recommendations outlined in my thesis.

7.5 CONCLUSION

My PhD thesis explored how gender dynamics shape the practices and experiences of Social Media Influencers (SMIs), as well as the responses of their consumer followers in Trinidad and Tobago (T&T). It specifically examines how gender influences SMI content and explores how both SMIs and consumers navigate these dynamics within the SMI domain. My research offers implications for gender responsive, SMI-led marketing initiatives and proposes a framework to guide gender responsive social marketing strategies.

In closing, my thesis demonstrates that understanding and addressing the gendered dynamics of social media influence is not simply an academic exercise but a necessary step toward building safer, more equitable digital environments. By centring the lived experiences of SMIs and consumers in T&T and analysing them through an intersectional, Caribbean feminist lens, my research exposes the structural forces that shape credibility, vulnerability, authenticity and power in the SMI domain. The framework and recommendations developed here offer practical pathways for policymakers, platforms, marketing / social marketing practitioners, and SMIs to design pro-social initiatives that are both ethically grounded and gender responsive.

Overall, my research contributes to scholarship on intersectionality, Caribbean feminism, gender, and marketing. It highlights the importance of prioritising SMIs' wellbeing in light of growing scholarly reports of gendered harm in the domain. My thesis asserts that a comprehensive, context-specific understanding of the intersecting factors that shape SMIs' experiences of privilege and discrimination is essential. Such understanding can inform strategies and future research aimed at reducing harm in the SMI space, while advancing gender equity and emancipation. While the work is rooted in a specific Caribbean context, its insights speak to global patterns of inequality and the urgent need for more inclusive, gender responsive approaches to digital influence. Ultimately, my thesis contributes to a growing body of scholarship and practice committed to transforming the SMI domain into a space that not only communicates for social good but actively advances justice, dignity, and equity for those who shape its messages.

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8. REFERENCES

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APPENDICES



9. APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 – STAGE 1 PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FORM

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FOR QUT RESEARCH PROJECT
Data Collection for Discourse Analysis

"Do it fuh the Gram": Exploring the gender dynamics that shape the practices of SMIs and the responses of their followers, in the context of pro-social campaigns in T&T.

QUT Ethics Approval Number 6201

Research team

Principal Researcher:	Ave Le Blanc, PhD student School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations, Faculty of Business and Law, Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Brisbane, Australia
Associate Researchers:	Professor Ross Gordon, Principal Supervisor School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations, Faculty of Business and Law, Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Brisbane, Australia Dr Lisa Schuster, Associate Supervisor School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations, Faculty of Business and Law, Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Brisbane, Australia Dr Sue Ann Barratt, External Supervisor Institute for Gender and Development, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago

Why is the study being conducted?

This research project is being undertaken as part of a PhD study for Ave Le Blanc.

The purpose of this project is to explore how gender dynamics shape the practices of Social Media Influencers (SMIs) and the responses of their followers, in the context of pro-social campaigns in Trinidad and Tobago (T&T).

You are invited to participate in this research project because you are a Social Media Influencer from T&T.

What does participation involve?

Your participation will involve providing consent to have your feed and stories content scraped using the APIFY tool (https://apify.com/zuzka/instagram-profile-scraper) and analysed for the purposed of identifying the gendered language used in your content as well as user comments on your posts.

Your participation in this research project is entirely voluntary. If you do agree to participate you can withdraw from the research project without comment or penalty. You can withdraw anytime during the research process and any information already obtained that can be linked to you will be destroyed. Your decision to participate or not participate will in no way impact upon your current or future relationship with QUT or the UWI.

You will be able to review the key findings of this study as soon as they become available.

What are the possible benefits for me if I take part?

It is expected that this research project will benefit you directly. The outcomes of the research will assist your clients in better understanding the development of SMI strategies that are gender neutral and inclusive. In time, these strategies should work to minimise the occurrences of negative gendered user comments on your content. You can request a brief summary of the outcomes of the study by sending an email to the researcher (ave.leblanc@qut.edu.au).

What are the possible risks for me if I take part?

There are some risks associated with your participation in this research project. These include the risk of disclosing your identity in the written thesis. To minimise these risks none of your personal information will be included in the data. Pseudonyms will be used to refer to you, and your visual content will be altered, and text content paraphrased to protect your privacy.

What about privacy and confidentiality?

Your personal information will not be collected or used for the purposes of this research. Your Instagram content will be saved in a password protected shared drive that is only accessible to the research team. All data will be destroyed after a 5-year period.

Any data collected as part of this research project will be stored securely as per QUT's Management of research data policy. Data will be stored for a minimum of 5 years, and can be disclosed if it is to protect you or others from harm, if specifically required by law, or if a regulatory or monitoring body such as the ethics committee requests it.

Every effort will be made to ensure that the data you provide cannot be traced back to you in reports, publications and other forms of presentation. For example, we paraphrase your quotes, we will not use any names, or names will be changed, and/or details such as dates and specific circumstances will be excluded. Nevertheless, while unlikely, it is possible that if you are quoted directly your identity may become known.

You will be identified as a participant in this research only with your specific consent, once you have read your interview transcript.

How do I give my consent to participate?

We would like to ask you to sign a written consent form (enclosed) to confirm your agreement to participate.

What if I have questions about the research project?

If you have any questions or require further information please contact one of the listed researchers:

Ave Le Blanc	ave.leblanc@qut.edu.au	+61
Professor Ross Gordon	ross.gordon1@qut.edu.au	
Dr. Lisa Schuster	lisa.schuster@qut.edu.au	
Dr. Sue-Ann Barratt	Sue-Ann.Barratt@sta.uwi.edu	

What if I have a concern or complaint regarding the conduct of the research project?

QUT is committed to research integrity and the ethical conduct of research projects. If you wish to discuss the study with someone not directly involved, particularly in relation to matters concerning policies, information or complaints about the conduct of the study or your rights as a participant, you may contact the QUT Research Ethics Advisory Team on +61 7 3138 5123 or email humanethics@qut.edu.au.

Thank you for helping with this research project. Please keep this sheet for your information.

QUT	**CONSENT FORM FOR QUT RESEARCH PROJECT** **Data Collection for Discourse Analysis**

"Do it fuh the Gram": Exploring the gender dynamics that shape the practices of SMIs and the responses of their followers, in the context of pro-social campaigns in T&T.

QUT Ethics Approval Number 6201

Research team

Principal Researcher:	Ave Le Blanc, PhD student School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations, Faculty of Business and Law, Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Brisbane, Australia
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Statement of consent

By signing below, you are indicating that you:

- Have read and understood the information document regarding this research project.
- Have had any questions answered to your satisfaction.
- Understand that if you have any additional questions you can contact the research team.
- Understand that you are free to withdraw without comment or penalty.
- Understand that if you have concerns about the ethical conduct of the research project you can contact the Research Ethics Advisory Team on +61 7 3138 5123 or email humanethics@qut.edu.au..
- Agree to participate in the research project.

Please tick the relevant box below:

☐ I **agree** for my Instagram content to be scraped and studied.

☐ I **do not agree** for my Instagram content to be scraped and studied.

Name _____

Signature _____

Date _____

Please return the signed consent form to the researcher.

QUT	**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FOR QUT RESEARCH PROJECT** **Data Collection for Discourse Analysis**

"Do it fuh the Gram": Exploring the gender dynamics that shape the practices of SMIs and the responses of their followers, in the context of pro-social campaigns in T&T.

QUT Ethics Approval Number 6201

Research team

Principal Researcher:	Ave Le Blanc, PhD student School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations, Faculty of Business and Law, Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Brisbane, Australia
Associate Researchers:	Dr Lisa Schuster, Chief Supervisor School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations, Faculty of Business and Law, Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Brisbane, Australia Professor Ross Gordon, Adjunct Supervisor School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations, Faculty of Business and Law, Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Brisbane, Dr Sue Ann Barratt, External Supervisor Institute for Gender and Development, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago

Why is the study being conducted?

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The purpose of this project is to explore how gender dynamics shape the practices of Social Media Influencers (SMIs) and the responses of their followers, in the context of pro-social campaigns in Trinidad and Tobago (T&T).

You have been invited to participate in this research project because you are a Social Media Influencer from T&T.

What does participation involve?

You have provided us with consent to have your Instagram feed and stories content scraped using the APIFY tool (https://apify.com/zuzka/instagram-profile-scraper) and analysed for the purposes of identifying the gendered language used in your content as well as user comments on your posts. We seek your consent to use screenshots of your content in publications for this research, which include the thesis, journal and conference papers and to credit you as the creator of your content.

Your participation in this research project is entirely voluntary. If you do agree to continue participating in this study, you can withdraw from the research project without comment or penalty. You can withdraw anytime during the research process and any information already obtained that can be linked to you will be destroyed. Your decision to participate or not participate will in no way impact upon your current or future relationship with QUT or the UWI.

You will be able to review the key findings of this study as soon as they become available.

What are the possible benefits for me if I take part?

It is expected that this research project will benefit you directly. The outcomes of the research will assist your clients in better understanding the development of SMI strategies that are gender-neutral and inclusive. In time, these strategies should work to minimise the occurrences of negative gendered user comments on your content. You can request a brief summary of the outcomes of the study by sending an email to the researcher (ave.leblanc@qut.edu.au).

What are the possible risks for me if I take part?

There are some risks associated with your participation in this research project. These include the risk of disclosing your identity in the written thesis. To minimise these risks, you will be able to review the content that we plan to include in the write-up of the project before giving your written consent.

What about privacy and confidentiality?

Any personal information that is not on your Instagram feed, will be not included in the data to protect your privacy. Your Instagram content will be saved in a password-protected shared drive that is only accessible to the research team. All data will be destroyed after a 5-year period.

Any data collected as part of this research project will be stored securely as per QUT's Management of research data policy. Data will be stored for a minimum of 5 years, and can be disclosed if it is to protect you or others from harm, if specifically required by law, or if a regulatory or monitoring body such as the ethics committee requests it.

You will be identified as a participant in this research only with your specific consent.

How do I give my consent to participate?

We would like to ask you to sign a written consent form (enclosed) to confirm your agreement to participate.

What if I have questions about the research project?

If you have any questions or require further information please contact one of the listed researchers:

Ave Le Blanc	ave.leblanc@qut.edu.au	+61 [redacted]
Dr. Lisa Schuster	lisa.schuster@qut.edu.au	
Professor Ross Gordon	ross.gordon1@qut.edu.au	
Dr. Sue-Ann Barratt	Sue-Ann.Barratt@sta.uwi.edu	

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Thank you for helping with this research project. Please keep this sheet for your information.

CONSENT FORM FOR QUT RESEARCH PROJECT

Utilising Screenshots and crediting Social Media Influencers for Discourse Analysis - CONSENT FORM

Statement of Consent:

By signing below, you are indicating that you:

- Have read and understood the information document regarding this research project.
- Have had any questions answered to your satisfaction.
- Understand that if you have any additional questions you can contact the research team.
- Understand that you are free to withdraw without comment or penalty.
- Understand that if you have concerns about the ethical conduct of the research project you can contact the Research Ethics Advisory Team on +61 7 3138 5123 or email humanethics@qut.edu.au..
- Agree to participate in the research project.

Email *

Valid email

This form is collecting emails. Change settings

Please tick the relevant box below:

Checkboxes

I agree for my Instagram content to be published and to be credited as the creator of my c...

I do not agree for my Instagram content to be published and to be credited as creator of m...

Add option or add "Other"

Required

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FOR QUT RESEARCH PROJECT
– SMI Interview –

"Do it fuh the Gram": Exploring the gender dynamics that shape the practices of SMIs and the responses of their followers, in the context of pro-social campaigns in T&T.

QUT Ethics Approval Number 6201

Principal Researcher:	Ave Le Blanc, PhD student School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations, Faculty of Business and Law, Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Brisbane, Australia
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You are invited to participate in this research project because you are a Social Media Influencer from T&T.

What does participation involve?

Your participation will involve a face-to-face audio recorded interview at an agreed upon time and location that will take approximately one hour to one hour a half of your time.

Questions will include:

- What is your history with using social media?
- What do you value most about social media?
- What kind of content do you share on your social media account(s)?

Your participation in this research project is entirely voluntary. If you do agree to participate you can withdraw from the research project without comment or penalty. You can withdraw anytime during the interview. If you withdraw within four weeks after your interview, on request any information already obtained that can be linked to you will be destroyed. Your decision to participate or not participate will in no way impact upon your current or future relationship with QUT or the UWI.

You will be able to review a transcript of your responses after the interview.

What are the possible benefits for me if I take part?

It is expected that this research project will benefit you directly. The outcomes of the research will assist your clients in better understanding the development of SMI strategies that are gender neutral and inclusive. In time, these strategies should work to minimise the occurrences of negative gendered user comments on your content. You can request a brief summary of the outcomes of the study by sending an email to the researcher (ave.leblanc@qut.edu.au).

To recognise your contribution should you choose to participate, the research team is offering one shopping voucher to the amount of TTD 100 at a store of your choice.

What are the possible risks for me if I take part?

There are some risks associated with your participation in this research project. These include possibly feeling emotionally upset with questions asked during this interview. To minimise these risks, please feel free to skip any questions that make you feel uncomfortable or advise me if you would like to stop the interview at any time..

What about privacy and confidentiality?

All comments and responses are coded i.e. it will be possible to re-identify you. A re-identifying code stored separately to personal information (e.g. name, address), will only be accessible to the research team, and the code plus identifying information will be destroyed within 1 month.

Any personal information that could potentially identify you will be removed or changed before files are shared with other researchers or results are made public. The information that will be removed include usernames, name, initials, location, date of birth, place of work, occupation, income, education.

Any data collected as part of this research project will be stored securely as per QUT's Management of research data policy. Data will be stored for a minimum of 5 years, and can be disclosed if it is to protect you or others from harm, if specifically required by law, or if a regulatory or monitoring body such as the ethics committee requests it.

As the research project involves an audio recording:

- You will have the opportunity to verify your comments and responses within one month after interviews have been transcribed. You will be allocate a two-week period to provide any feedback and points of clarification.
- The recording will be retained for the minimum retention period of 5 years after the last research activity.

Every effort will be made to ensure that the data you provide cannot be traced back to you in reports, publications and other forms of presentation. For example, we will only include the relevant part of a quote, we will not use any names, or names will be changed, and/or details such as dates and specific circumstances will be excluded. Nevertheless, while unlikely, it is possible that if you are quoted directly your identity may become known.

How do I give my consent to participate?

We would like to ask you to sign a written consent form (enclosed) to confirm your agreement to participate.
Due to the nature of the research project a verbal consent mechanism will also be used before your interview.

What if I have questions about the research project?

If you have any questions or require further information please contact one of the listed researchers:

Ave Le Blanc	ave.leblanc@qut.edu.au	+61
Professor Ross Gordon	ross.gordon1@qut.edu.au	
Dr. Lisa Schuster	lisa.schuster@qut.edu.au	
Dr. Sue-Ann Barratt	Sue-Ann.Barratt@sta.uwi.edu	

What if I have a concern or complaint regarding the conduct of the research project?

QUT is committed to research integrity and the ethical conduct of research projects. If you wish to discuss the study with someone not directly involved, particularly in relation to matters concerning policies, information or complaints about the conduct of the study or your rights as a participant, you may contact the QUT Research Ethics Advisory Team on +61 7 3138 5123 or email humanethics@qut.edu.au.

Thank you for helping with this research project. Please keep this sheet for your information.

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FOR QUT RESEARCH PROJECT
Interview - Consumer

"Do it fuh the Gram": Exploring the gender dynamics that shape the practices of SMIs and the responses of their followers, in the context of pro-social campaigns in T&T.

QUT Ethics Approval Number 6201

Principal Researcher:	Ave Le Blanc, PhD student School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations, Faculty of Business and Law, Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Brisbane, Australia
Associate Researchers:	Professor Ross Gordon, Principal Supervisor School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relationships, Faculty of Business and Law, Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Brisbane, Australia Dr Lisa Schuster, Associate Supervisor School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations, Faculty of Business and Law, Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Brisbane, Australia Dr Sue Ann Barratt, External Supervisor Institute for Gender and Development, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago

Why is the study being conducted?

This research project is being undertaken as part of a PhD study for Ave Le Blanc.

The purpose of this project is to explore how gender dynamics shape the practices of Social Media Influencers (SMIs) and the responses of their followers, in the context of pro-social campaigns in Trinidad and Tobago (T&T).

You are invited to participate in this research project because you are a regular social media user from T&T who follow at least one Social Media Influencer.

What does participation involve?

Your participation will involve a face-to-face audio recorded interview at an agreed upon time and location that will take approximately one hour to one hour a half of your time.

Questions will include:

- Can you walk me through your process of following a Social Media influencer?
- Can you describe what factors make you follow a Social Media Influencer?
- What gender of Social Media Influencers do you tend to prefer?

Your participation in this research project is entirely voluntary. If you do agree to participate you can withdraw from the research project without comment or penalty. You can withdraw anytime during the interview. If you withdraw within four weeks after your interview, on request any information already obtained that can be linked to you will be destroyed. Your decision to participate or not participate will in no way impact upon your current or future relationship with QUT or the UWI.

You will be able to review a transcript of your responses after the interview.

What are the possible benefits for me if I take part?

It is expected that this research project will not benefit you directly. The outcomes of the research will assist Social Media Influencers' clients in better understanding the development of SMI strategies that are gender neutral and inclusive. In time, these strategies should work to minimise the occurrences of negative gendered user comments on Social Media Influencer's content You can request a brief summary of the outcomes of the study by sending an email to the researcher (ave.leblanc@qut.edu.au).

To recognise your contribution should you choose to participate, the research team is offering one shopping voucher to the amount of TTD 100 at a store of your choice.

What are the possible risks for me if I take part?

There are some risks associated with your participation in this research project. These include possibly feeling emotionally upset with questions asked during this interview. To minimise these risks, please feel free to skip any questions that make you feel uncomfortable or advise me if you would like to stop the interview at any time.

What about privacy and confidentiality?

All comments and responses are coded i.e. it will be possible to re-identify you. A re-identifying code stored separately to personal information (e.g. name, address), will only be accessible to the research team, and the code plus identifying information will be destroyed within 1 month.

Any personal information that could potentially identify you will be removed or changed before files are shared with other researchers or results are made public. The information that will be removed include usernames, name, initials, location, date of birth, place of work, occupation, income, education.

Any data collected as part of this research project will be stored securely as per QUT's Management of research data policy. Data will be stored for a minimum of 5 years, and can be disclosed if it is to protect you or others from harm, if specifically required by law, or if a

regulatory or monitoring body such as the ethics committee requests it.

As the research project involves an audio recording:

- You will have the opportunity to verify your comments and responses within one month after interviews have been transcribed. You will be allocate a two-week period to provide any feedback and points of clarification..
- The recording will be retained for the minimum retention period of 5 years after the last research activity.

Every effort will be made to ensure that the data you provide cannot be traced back to you in reports, publications and other forms of presentation. For example, we will only include the relevant part of a quote, we will not use any names, or names will be changed, and/or details such as dates and specific circumstances will be excluded. Nevertheless, while unlikely, it is possible that if you are quoted directly your identity may become known.

How do I give my consent to participate?

We would like to ask you to sign a written consent form (enclosed) to confirm your agreement to participate.
Due to the nature of the research project a verbal consent mechanism will also be used before your interview.

What if I have questions about the research project?

If you have any questions or require further information please contact one of the listed researchers:

Ave Le Blanc	ave.leblanc@qut.edu.au	+61
Professor Ross Gordon	ross.gordon1@qut.edu.au	
Dr. Lisa Schuster	lisa.schuster@qut.edu.au	
Dr. Sue-Ann Barratt	Sue-Ann.Barratt@sta.uwi.edu	

What if I have a concern or complaint regarding the conduct of the research project?

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Thank you for helping with this research project. Please keep this sheet for your information.

CONSENT FORM FOR QUT RESEARCH PROJECT
Interview

"Do it fuh the Gram": Exploring the gender dynamics that shape the practices of SMIs and the responses of their followers, in the context of pro-social campaigns in T&T.

QUT Ethics Approval Number 6201

Research team

Principal Researcher:	Ave Le Blanc, PhD student School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations, Faculty of Business and Law, Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Brisbane, Australia
Associate Researchers:	Professor Ross Gordon, Principal Supervisor School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relationships, Faculty of Business and Law, Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Brisbane, Australia Dr Lisa Schuster, Associate Supervisor School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations, Faculty of Business and Law, Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Brisbane, Australia Dr Sue Ann Barratt, External Supervisor Institute for Gender and Development, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago

Statement of consent

By signing below, you are indicating that you:

- Have read and understood the information document regarding this research project.
- Have had any questions answered to your satisfaction.
- Understand that if you have any additional questions you can contact the research team.
- Understand that you are free to withdraw without comment or penalty.
- Understand that if you have concerns about the ethical conduct of the research project you can contact the Research Ethics Advisory Team on +61 7 3138 5123 or email humanethics@qut.edu.au.
- Understand that the research project will include an audio recording.

- Agree to participate in the research project.

Please tick the relevant box below:

☐ I **agree** for the interview / focus group to be audio recorded.

☐ I **do not agree** for the interview / focus group to be audio recorded.

Name _____

Signature _____

Date _____

Please return the signed consent form to the researcher.

Exploring the gender dynamics that shape the practices of SMIs and the responses of their followers, in the context of pro-social campaigns in T&T.

Schedule of Interview Questions
Stage 2: Narrative
Interviews (Consumers)

INTRODUCTION

1. Introduce yourself
2. Explain the purpose of the interview
3. Remind them it is being recorded, and reassure them about confidentiality etc (make sure you have all the necessary consent forms)
4. Check whether they have any questions
5. Remind them they can withdraw from data collection at any time
6. Advise them that they will receive participant shopping voucher at the end of the discussion

READ OUT: Thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview. The aim of this interview is to get to know you and your perceptions about the content that Social Media influencers share. I have some questions that are arranged around the following themes:

Your use of social media, interactions and engagement with Social Media Influencers, perceptions of gender and other influencers toward Social Media Influencer's content, navigating critical feedback on social media, as well as your thoughts on using Social Media Influencers for pro-social content.

There are no right or wrong answers to the questions, but the questions provide a structure for us to have a conversation. If there are any questions you are not comfortable answering, please understand that you are under no obligation to answer them and you may terminate the interview at any stage.

YOUR USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Q1. So, can we start with you telling me a bit about your history with using social media?

PROMPTS: When did you first start using social media and why?
What platforms you are on and why?

Q2. What are the good things about social media – what value do you get out of it?

Q3. What are the downsides to social media – what don't you like about it?

Q4. Do you think social media has an influence on people and how does it do this?

PROMPTS: does it impact their ideas, attitudes, behaviours?
Ask people to give examples

Q5. Do you think social media has had an influence on you?

PROMPTS: does it impact your ideas, attitudes, behaviours?
Ask people to give examples

YOUR INTERACTION WITH SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

This project is about social media influencers. So, if you don't mind, I am going to ask you some questions about this?

Q1. What do you understand to be meant by social media influencers? How would you describe them?

Q2. Do you think social media influencers have an impact on people and how do they do this?

PROMPT: Do SMIs impact people's ideas, attitudes, behaviours?
Ask people to give examples

Q3. Do you think social media influencers have an impact on you and how do they do this?

PROMPT – does SMIs impact people's ideas, attitudes, behaviours?
Ask people to give examples

Q4. What Social Media Influencers do you follow on each platform?

PROMPTS: Can you give me a couple examples of Social Media Influencers you follow on the social media platforms you're on, as well as the type of content they post?

Q5. Can you explain your engagement and interaction with Social Media Influencers?

PROMPTS: How often do you engage with SMIs? How do you engage – likes, comments, shares, DMs, other forms - and what drives this?

Q6. Tell me more about what will make you LIKE content from a Social Media Influencer?

Q7. What about comments on and direct messages with SMIs?
Can you describe what features of Social Media Influencer content will influence you to interact with the person(s) in this way?

Q8. Can you describe in what ways content posted by Social Media Influencers is beneficial to you?

YOUR PROCESS IN FOLLOWING (OR NOT FOLLOWING) SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

I'd like to now chat with you about the factors that influence you to follow and engage with an SMI.

Q1. Can you walk me through your process of following a Social Media Influencer?

PROMPTS: You see their content first? Or you search for their platforms first? Then what happens?

Q2. Can you describe what factors make you follow a Social Media Influencer?

Q3. Can you explain what factors influence you to unfollow a Social Media Influencer?

Q4. Can you describe the extent to which Social Media Influencer's physical appearance affects your decision:

(a) to like / comment on their content?

(b) to follow them on their social media platforms?

PROMPT: Explain your response

Q5. Can you describe the extent to which Social Media Influencer's gender affects your decision:

(a) to like / comment on their content?

(b) to follow them on their social media platforms?

PROMPT: Explain your response

Q6. Explain how your sexual orientation shapes your decision

(a) to like / comment on Social Media Influencer content?

(b) to follow Social Media Influencers

PROMPT: Explain your response

Q7. What about race? Can you describe how this influences you:

(a) to like / comment on Social Media Influencer content?

(b) to follow Social Media Influencers

PROMPTS: Explain your response

Q8. Explain how Social Media influencer's socio-economic status might influence you:

(a) to like / comment on Social Media Influencer content?

(b) to follow Social Media Influencers

PROMPTS: What about the geographical location Social Media Influencers are from? Describe how this plays a role in your decision to follow or comment on SMI content.

Explain your response

Q9. Explain how Social Media influencer's religiosity or spirituality might influence you:

(a) to like / comment on Social Media Influencer content?

(b) to follow Social Media Influencers

PROMPT: Explain your response

Q10. Explain how Social Media influencer's use of language (use of gendered pronouns like he/ him/ she/ her, use of accents, slang etc.) might influence you:

(a) to like / comment on Social Media Influencer content?

(b) to follow Social Media Influencers

PROMPTS: Explain your response

CONSUMERS PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER INFLUENCES TOWARDS SMIs

Q1. Can you tell me what gender of Social Media Influencers you tend to prefer?

PROMPT: Why do you think you mostly follow this specific gender?

Q2. How do you think feminine presenting (SMIs who express gender in a feminine way) Social Media Influencers present themselves on their social media platforms?

PROMPT: Can you give me examples of feminine presenting Social Media Influencers and how they present themselves on their social media platforms?

Q3. What are your views on this? What do you think about how feminine presenting Social Media Influencers present themselves on social media platforms?

PROMPTS: How should they present themselves? Why do you think this way?

Q4. How do you think masculine presenting Social Media Influencers (SMIs who express gender in a masculine way) present themselves on their social media platforms?

PROMPT: Can you give me examples of masculine presenting Social Media Influencers and how they present themselves on their social media platforms?

Q5. What are your views on this? What do you think about how masculine presenting Social Media Influencers present themselves on social media platforms?

PROMPT: How should they present themselves? Why do you think this way?

Q6. What about people who are do not clearly identify as masculine or feminine – non-binary SMIs? How do you think they present themselves on their social media platforms?

PROMPT: Can you give me examples of Social Media Influencers who do not clearly identify as masculine or feminine – are non-binary, and how they present themselves on their social media platforms?

Q7. What are your views on this? What do you think about how non-binary Social Media Influencers present themselves on social media platforms?

PROMPTS – How should they present themselves? Why do you think this way?

Q8. Do you think people's gender influences their perceptions of Social Media Influencers and their content. If so, how?

PROMPT: Please explain your answer?

Q9. What about your own gender– do you think that shapes your perceptions of Social Media Influencers and their content? If so, how?

PROMPT: Please explain your answer?

CONSUMERS PERCEPTIONS OF OTHER INFLUENCES TOWARDS SMIs

I'd now like to talk to you a bit about how other factors influence perceptions towards SMIs.

Q1. Do you think people's cultural background influences their perceptions of Social Media Influencers and their content. If so, how?

PROMPT: What about the cultural background of the SMI? Please explain your answer?

Q2. What about your own cultural background – do you think that shapes your perceptions of Social Media Influencers and their content? If so, how?

PROMPT: Please explain your answer?

Q3. Do you think people's sexual orientation influences their perceptions of Social Media Influencers and their content. If so, how?

PROMPT: What about the sexual orientation of the SMI? Please explain your answer?

Q4. What about your own sexual orientation – do you think that shapes your perceptions of Social Media Influencers and their content? If so, how?

PROMPT: Please explain your answer?

Q5. Do you think people's race influences their perceptions of Social Media Influencers and their content. If so, how?
PROMPT: What about the race of the SMI?
Please explain your answer?

Q6. What about your own race - do you think that shapes your perceptions of Social Media Influencers and their content? If so, how?

PROMPT: Please explain your answer?

Q7. Do you think people's ethnicity influences their perceptions of Social Media Influencers and their content. If so, how?

PROMPT: What about the ethnicity of the SMI?
Please explain your answer?

Q8. What about your own ethnicity - do you think that shapes your perceptions of Social Media Influencers and their content? If so, how?

PROMPT: Please explain your answer?

Q9. Do you think people's socio-economic status influences their perceptions of Social Media Influencers and their content. If so, how?

PROMPTS: What about the socio-economic status of the SMI?
Please explain your answer?

Q10. What about your own socio-economic status – do you think that shapes your perceptions of Social Media Influencers and their content? If so, how?

PROMPT: Please explain your answer?

Q11. What about people's religiosity or spirituality – do you think that shapes people's perceptions of Social Media Influencers and their content? If so, how?

PROMPT: Please explain your answer?

Q12. What about your own religiosity or spirituality – do you think that shapes your perceptions of Social Media Influencers and their content? If so, how?

PROMPT: Please explain your answer?

Next, I'd like to talk with you about how you navigate feedback on social media.

Q1. Can you describe any positive feedback (like positive comments on social media) you've seen about Social Media Influencers and their content?

PROMPTS: Please give examples of positive interactions you have seen between SMIs and followers. Why do you think this happened?

Can you explain any negative feedback (like negative comments and social media user posts) that you've seen about SMIs? Why do you think this happened?

Q2. Have you ever posted positive comments about Social Media Influencers and their content?

PROMPTS: Please give examples of positive interactions you have taken part in with SMIs. Why did this happen?

Have you ever posted negative comments about SMIs and their content? Please explain with examples about these interactions. Why did this happen?

Q3. Tell me more about what you think and feel about positive comments about Social Media Influencers and their content:

PROMPTS: Do you reply comment to users who make the comments?
Do you LIKE the comments if you agree with them?
Do you screenshot the comments and share with others? Etc.

What about how you think and feel about negative comments about SMIs and their content? Can you explain how you

respond to these?

Q4. Describe any positive comments you may have shared with others about Social Media influencers and their content.

PROMPT: Who did you share these comments with and how did you share it?

Describe any negative comments you may have shared with others about SMIs and their content. Who did you share these comments with and how did you share it?

Q5. Have you specifically seen any positive interactions between SMIs and followers (in either direction) that you think were due to gender?

PROMPT: Please give examples of positive interactions due to gender you have seen involving SMIs. Why do you think this happened?

What about negative interactions between SMIs and followers due to gender? Can you explain any that you may have seen? Why do you think this happened?

YOUR VIEWS ON PRO-SOCIAL CONTENT

To wrap up this interview, I want to talk a bit about your views on Social Media Influencers and their promotion of pro-social (like health and wellness content or social/ political activist content etc.) content.

Q1. What types of pro-social (like health and wellness content or social/ political activist content etc.) have you seen Social Media Influencers promote on their social media accounts?

Q2. What were your thoughts on how the influencer promoted this type of content?

Q3. Explain what personal attributes (if any) a Social Media Influencer should have if they opt to promote pro-social (like health and wellness content or social/ political activist content etc.) messages

Q4. Describe to what extent physical appearances are relevant for a Social Media Influencer to effectively promote positive health and social change messages.

Q5: Describe to what extent you think gender is a relevant factor for a Social Media Influencer to effectively promote health and social change messages.

Q6. If you were a client who wanted to promote this type of content (like health and wellness or social/ political activist content etc.) – describe how engaging a Social Media Influencer might or might not help you promote the message?

Q7. Scenario – A Social Media Influencer you follow posts about a social cause (like health and wellness or social/ political) that you do not agree with. Explain how you respond to this content.

Q8. Describe what you think a Social Media Influencer should do if they post about a social cause that you do not agree with.

Q9. What tips do you offer to Social Media Influencers of they would like to promote pro-social (like health and wellness or social/ political) content?

PROMPT: Can you explain why you have provided these tips to the Social Media Influencer?

WRAP UP - Ask if there are any final questions and Thank participants for their time.

Exploring the gender dynamics that shape the practices of SMIs and the responses of their followers, in the context of pro-social campaigns in T&T.

Schedule of Interview Questions
Stage 2: Narrative
Interviews (SMIs)

INTRODUCTION

7. Introduce yourself
8. Explain the purpose of the interview
9. Remind them it is being recorded, and reassure them about confidentiality etc. (make sure you have all the necessary consent forms)
10. Check whether they have any questions
11. Remind them they can withdraw from data collection at any time
12. Advise them that they will receive participant shopping voucher at the end of the discussion

READ OUT: Thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview. The aim of this interview is to get to know you, your Instagram content development process, and your views regarding how gender dynamics shape your content, as well as that of your followers. I have some questions that are arranged around the following themes:

Your use of social media, Social Media Influencer background, gender influences on your brand, as well as perceptions of success and critical experiences a Social Media Influencer, as it relates to pro-social content.

There are no right or wrong answers to the questions, but the questions provide a structure for us to have a conversation. If there are any questions you are not comfortable answering, please understand that you are under no obligation to answer them and you may terminate the interview at any stage.

YOUR USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Q1. So, can we start with you telling me a bit about

your history with using social media?

PROMPTS: When did you first start using social media and why?
What platforms you are on and why?

Q2. What are the good things about social media – what value do you get out of it?

Q3. What are the downsides to social media – what don't you like about it?

Q4. Do you think social media has an influence on people and how does it do this?

PROMPTS: does it impact their ideas, attitudes, behaviours?
Ask people to give examples

Q5. Do you think social media has had an influence on you?

PROMPTS: does it impact your ideas, attitudes, behaviours?
Ask people to give examples

YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER BACKGROUND

This project is about Social Media Influencers. So, if you don't mind, I am going to ask you some questions about your social media presence and content?

Q1. What do you understand to be meant by the term 'Social Media Influencers'? How do you describe yourself and other Influencers?

Q2. Do you think Social Media Influencers have an impact on people? How do you think they do this?

PROMPT: Do SMIs impact people's ideas attitudes, behaviours?
Ask people to give examples.

Q3. Can you describe how you became a Social Media Influencer?

Q4. Can you tell me more about your social media platform(s)?

PROMPTS: What kind of content do you post?
How your content differs across platforms?

Q3. Can you tell me more about your followers?

PROMPTS: What do your followers like most about you?
How would you say your content benefit your followers?

GENDER INFLUENCES ON SMIs SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE

Q1. Can you describe your social media presence to me.

PROMPT: What influenced you to create your social media persona?

Q2. How do you think feminine presenting Social Media Influencers (SMIs who express gender in a feminine way) present themselves on their social media platforms?

PROMPT: Can you give me an example of feminine presenting Social Media Influencers and how they present themselves on their social

media platforms?

Q3. What are your views on this? What do you think about how feminine presenting Social Media Influencers present themselves on social media platforms?

PROMPTS – How should they present themselves? Why do you think this way?

Q3. How do you think masculine presenting (SMIs who express gender in a masculine way) Social Media Influencers present themselves on their social media platforms?

PROMPT: Can you give me examples of masculine presenting Social Media Influencers and how they present themselves on their social media platforms?

Q4. What are your views on this? What do you think about how masculine presenting Social Media Influencers present themselves on social media platforms?
PROMPT: How should they present themselves? Why do you think this way?

Q5. What about people who are do not clearly identify as masculine or feminine – non-binary SMIs? How do you think they should present themselves on their social media platforms?

PROMPT: Can you give me example of Social Media Influencers who do not clearly identify as masculine or feminine – are non-binary, and how they present themselves on their social media platforms?

Q6. What are your views on this? What do you think about how non-binary Social Media Influencers present themselves on social media platforms?

PROMPTS: How should they present themselves?
Why do you think this way?

Q7. Would you say that your cultural background shapes your content? If so, how?

PROMPTS: Explain your answer

Q8. Do you think that your gender and sexual orientation influence your content? If so, how?

PROMPTS: Explain your answer

Q9. What about your race? Do you think these factors influence your content? If so, how?

PROMPTS: Explain your answer

Q10. What about your ethnicity? Do you think it influences your content? If so, how?

PROMPTS: Explain your answer

Q10. What about your socio-economic status and geographic region where you are from? Do you think these factors influence your content? If so, how?

PROMPTS: Explain your answer

Q11. How about your religiosity or spirituality? Do you think this may play a part in shaping your content. If so, how?

PROMPTS: Explain your answer

Q12: Can you tell me more about the language (gender pronouns such as she/ him, as well as use of slang, accent used etc.) you use in your content?

PROMPT: What influenced your decision to use this language in your content?

SMI's PERCEPTIONS OF INCLUENCES OF SMI SUCCESS

I'd now like to talk to you a bit about the factors that influence perceptions about SMI's success.

Q1. Can you first explain to me how you pitch your Social Media Influencer business to potential clients.

PROMPT: Do you have a document that you send to potential clients? If so, can you describe what this document includes?

Or you have a specific message that you send to clients?
Or verbal pitch? If so, can you describe the content of this correspondence?

Q2. What factors do you believe define a successful Social Media Influencer?

Q3. Explain to the extent that you regard yourself as a successful Social Media Influencer.

Q4. Can you explain how significant your physical appearance is to your success as a Social Media Influencer?

Q5. Describe the role that socio-economic class plays in the success of Social Media Influencers locally.

Q6. Can you tell me how your gender might influence your success as a Social Media Influencer?

Q7. What about your race? tell me how this plays a part

in your success as a Social Media Influencer.

Q7. What about ethnicity? tell me how this plays a part in your success as a Social Media Influencer.

NAVIGATING GENDER DYNAMICS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Next I'd like talk to you about navigating positive and negative experiences on social media, as well as a bit about your satisfaction with payment of your services.

Q1. Can you tell me about any positive experiences (direct messages, comments etc.) you may have experienced as a Social Media Influencer?

PROMPT: How did you respond to these situations?

What about negative experiences? Explain your responses to these

Q2. Explain to what effect you believe that gender may play a significant role in influencing public comments on SMIs content

Q3. What about economic and social class? Describe how you think these factors may or may not influence public feedback.

Q4. Describe how you believe Social Media Influencer's race may influence public comments.

PROMPT: What about an SMI's ethnicity? Describe how this may or may not influence public comments.

Q5. Explain to what extent you believe the compensation for your Social Media Influencer work is commensurate with time and effort you

invest in creating your content.

PROMPT: Describe how this may be different or the same across other SMIs of different gender/ race / ethnicity/ social and economic class/ physical appearance

Q6. (If different across gender/ race / ethnicity/ social class/ physical appearance) Describe how you navigate these experiences with uneven compensation for your Social Media Influencer work?

PROMPT: Do you negotiate payments with clients? If so, describe the factors that you would use to develop your cost benchmarks.

PRO-SOCIAL CONTENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA

To wrap up this interview, I want to talk a bit about your views on promotion of pro-social (like health and wellness content or social/ political activist content etc.) content.

Q1. Describe how you think your followers react (or will react) to positive health and social change content shared on your social platform. (Positive social content includes the promotion of exercise and healthy habits, promotion of equality and freedom of speech and choice etc.).

PROMPT: How do you react to your followers' response?

Q2. Explain the key features that you believe positive health and social change content should possess when promoted by a Social Media Influencer.

PROMPT: Can you explain why you identified these

features?

Q3. Explain what personal attributes (if any) a Social Media Influencer should have if they opt to promote positive health and social change messages.

Q4. Describe the extent to which physical appearances are relevant for a Social Media Influencer to effectively promote positive health and social change messages.

Q5: Describe to what extent you think gender is a relevant factor for a Social Media Influencer to effectively promote health and social change messages.

WRAP UP

Ask if there are any final questions and Thank participants for their time