

Research Paper

## “Dismantling centuries of misunderstanding”: The Role of the Kali Yatra Festival in Addressing Stigma Towards Kali Worship in Trinidad and Tobago

Roy Naipaul<sup>1\*</sup>, Sheneeza Bacchus<sup>2</sup>, Khagendra Nath Gangai<sup>3</sup>, Rita Persaud<sup>4</sup>,  
Soula Kyriakou<sup>5</sup>, Tejroi Naipaul<sup>6</sup>, Jimmy Naipaul<sup>7</sup>

### ABSTRACT

Kali worship occupies a paradoxical position within Trinidad and Tobago's Hindu Indo-Caribbean community: historically rooted yet persistently stigmatized, widely practiced yet publicly silenced. The Kali Yatra Festival, established in 2013, has sought to disrupt this marginalization through structured educational programming, offering devotees a collective space to engage with and reclaim their religious identity. This qualitative study examined how 40 Kali devotees in Trinidad and Tobago experienced this educational intervention, drawing on four virtual focus groups conducted between July and September 2025 and analyzed through interpretative phenomenological analysis. Three themes emerged: (1) educational exposure reframed Kali worship as scripturally legitimate, dismantling internalized and externally imposed stigma; (2) devotees moved from concealment toward actively educating others; and (3) shame gave way to collective pride and openly affirmed religious identity. Findings underscore the capacity of community-based festivals to foster stigma resistance and support identity transformation among marginalized religious communities.

**Keywords:** Hindu, Indo-Caribbean, Kali, Stigma, Caribbean

Religious stigma represents a powerful social-psychological force that shapes individual religious identity and collective expressions of faith. As a form of stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination directed toward specific religious practices, religious stigma operates through cognitive, affective, and behavioral mechanisms that mark certain forms of worship as deviant or unworthy of social acceptance (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001). Within diasporic religious contexts, stigma takes on particular

1 MSW, International Executive School, Strasbourg, France

2 BA, Amberton University, Texas, United States

3 PhD, Sharda University, Delhi, India

4 PhD, Wilfrid Laurier University, Ontario, Canada

5 PhD, International Executive School, Strasbourg, France

6 PhD, International Executive School, Strasbourg, France

7 PhD, International Executive School, Strasbourg, France

\*Corresponding Author

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complexity as minority communities negotiate between maintaining spiritual traditions and conforming to dominant religious norms. Understanding how stigmatized religious communities respond to marginalization through educational interventions offers critical insights into the psychological mechanisms through which religious stigma is maintained and potentially transformed.

The worship of Kali, the Hindu goddess of transformation and divine feminine power, within Trinidad and Tobago's (T&T) Indo-Caribbean community provides a compelling case for examining the psychology of religious stigma and resistance. Despite deep historical roots extending back to the 19th-century system of Indian indentureship, Kali worship has long occupied a marginalized position within both mainstream Hindu orthodoxy and broader society. The annual Kali Yatra Festival, founded in 2013 by Gopaul "Rick" Ragoonanan and now recognized as one of the largest Hindu festivals dedicated to Kali outside India, represents a deliberate psychosocial intervention aimed at challenging stigmatizing beliefs through systematic educational programming. This study explores the psychological dimensions of this intervention from the perspective of those most intimately affected: the devotees themselves.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### ***The Social Psychology of Religious Stigma***

Religious stigma, as conceptualized within social psychology, represents a specific manifestation of broader stigma processes wherein particular religious practices become marked as socially unacceptable or deviant (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001). Drawing from social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), religious stigma operates through intergroup dynamics where dominant religious groups establish normative boundaries that exclude or devalue minority religious expressions. This process involves cognitive components such as stereotyping, affective components including disgust and moral outrage, and behavioral components manifesting as discrimination and social distancing (Herek, 2007). Importantly, stigma emerges from power relations that enable certain groups to define religious legitimacy and enforce conformity to established norms.

Within the psychology of religion, scholars have examined how religious stigma impacts individual psychological wellbeing and collective religious identity. Ysseldyk, Matheson, and Anisman (2010) note that religious group membership significantly influences self-concept and psychological adjustment, with stigmatized religious identities creating unique challenges for identity integration. Research on minority religious groups has documented how stigma operates through external stigmatization, internalized stigma, and structural stigma embedded in institutional policies (Hatzenbuehler & Pachankis, 2016).

The psychological literature on stigma resistance has identified several mechanisms through which stigmatized groups respond to marginalization. Corrigan and Watson (2002) distinguish between challenging stigma through public education and empowerment strategies that strengthen in-group identity and resilience. Social identity theory suggests that stigmatized groups may employ identity management strategies including individual mobility, social creativity (reframing group characteristics positively), and social competition (directly challenging the status hierarchy) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Within religious contexts, these strategies take specific forms: theological reinterpretation to align with mainstream values and assertive claims for religious legitimacy through educational outreach.

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### ***Hinduism and Kali Worship in the Caribbean: Identity and Adaptation***

The presence of Hinduism in T&T is intimately tied to the system of Indian indentureship that brought approximately 147,000 Indian laborers to the Caribbean between 1838 and 1917 (Jacobsen, 2023; Moura Mello, 2025; Vertovec, 1998). From a psychological perspective, this migration represented a massive disruption of religious and cultural identity, requiring individuals and communities to reconstruct spiritual practices under conditions of displacement, cultural heterogeneity, and power asymmetry. Among diverse Hindu communities, the worship of Kali emerged as a distinctive religious practice, particularly among Tamil-speaking communities from South India who brought devotion to Mariamman, a village goddess who became syncretized with Kali in the Caribbean context (Jacobsen, 2023; Vertovec, 1998).

The evolution of Kali worship in T&T reflects broader psychological processes of religious adaptation within the Indo-Caribbean diaspora. Facing the ruptures of displacement and colonial plantation pressures, indentured laborers engaged in what contemporary psychology might term "cultural identity work": the active negotiation and reconstitution of religious practices to maintain continuity with ancestral traditions while adapting to new social realities (Khan, 2004; Vertovec, 1992). In the absence of rigid caste hierarchy and with limited access to Brahmanical priests, many Indo-Trinbagonians developed more fluid, personal forms of devotion emphasizing direct communication with the divine through practices such as spirit possession, drumming, and animal sacrifice (Lima, 2020; McNeal, 2003). These practices can be understood through the lens of experiential religion, where embodied, ecstatic forms of worship provide powerful psychological experiences of connection to the divine and community (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009; Jacobsen, 2023).

From a psychological perspective, Kali Mai worship served multiple functions within the Indo-Trinbagonian community. The goddess became a source of psychological support and coping, with devotees seeking her intervention for healing, protection, and spiritual guidance (Guinee, 1992; Lima, 2020). The practice of spirit possession, central to many Kali Mai rituals, can be understood as a culturally sanctioned altered state of consciousness that provides both individual psychological benefits and reinforces group cohesion (Bourguignon, 1976; Lima, 2020).

### ***Psychological Dimensions of Stigma Toward Kali Worship***

The stigmatization of Kali worship in T&T illustrates how religious stigma operates through multiple psychological and social mechanisms simultaneously. During the colonial period, European missionaries and administrators viewed Kali worship through orientalist frameworks that constructed indigenous religious practices as primitive and uncivilized (Said, 1978; Tsuji, 2009). Practices such as animal sacrifice and spirit possession became focal points for moral panic, activating disgust responses and boundary-marking that reinforced colonial power hierarchies (Bose, 2022; Tsuji, 2009). From a psychological perspective, these colonial attitudes became internalized within segments of the Indo-Trinbagonian community itself, particularly among the emerging middle class seeking social mobility and respectability.

The advent of Hindu reform movements in T&T, particularly the Arya Samaj in the early 20th century and the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha founded in the 1950s, intensified stigmatization through ingroup policing mechanisms. These organizations promoted what they termed the "Great Tradition" of Hinduism based on Sanskrit texts and Brahmanical

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authority, explicitly contrasting this with the "Little Tradition" of folk practices associated with lower castes and Tamil communities (Vertovec, 1992; Bose, 2022). This dichotomy reflects psychological processes of ingroup/outgroup categorization wherein dominant subgroups establish hierarchies of authenticity and respectability. Kali worship, with its emphasis on ecstatic possession and animal sacrifice, became emblematic of the "inappropriate" forms of Hinduism that reformers sought to suppress.

The psychological consequences of such stigmatization can be understood through social identity theory, where practitioners faced threats to their religious identity as a positive component of self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Devotees who attended Kali temples or performed rituals involving animal sacrifice often experienced social ostracism from mainstream Hindu communities (Khan, 2004; Vertovec, 1998). This exclusion likely activated minority stress: chronic stress resulting from stigmatized social status (Frost & Meyer, 2023; Grigoreva & Szaszko, 2024; Meyer, 2003). The visual iconography of Kali (fierce appearance, protruding tongue, necklace of skulls) contributed to widespread misconceptions about the goddess as violent or demonic.

The literature documents how stigma manifested through multiple channels: social discrimination against devotees, exclusion from official Hindu organizations and celebrations, and silence from religious leaders who refused to publicly teach about the goddess (Ashby, 2010; McNeal, 2012; Sookdeo, 2015; Tsuji, 2009). This created what McNeal (2003) terms a paradox of visibility and invisibility: Kali remained widely worshipped in rural areas and working-class communities yet remained largely absent from public Hindu discourse. From a psychological perspective, this marginalization likely created identity conflicts for practitioners, particularly younger generations navigating between family religious traditions and mainstream social acceptance.

### ***Educational Interventions and Stigma Reduction: The Kali Yatra Festival***

The Kali Yatra Festival, inaugurated on September 1, 2013, represents a deliberate psychosocial intervention designed to challenge stigma through systematic educational programming. Contact hypothesis theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) suggests that prejudice can be reduced through intergroup contact under appropriate conditions. The festival creates such conditions by bringing together diverse segments of the Hindu community and broader Trinbagonian society in a context that foregrounds positive representations of Kali worship. The festival employs multiple psychological mechanisms for attitude change including persuasive communication, social modeling, and experiential learning.

The educational dimension operates through several psychological channels. Cognitive reframing constitutes a central strategy: nightly discourses by learned pundits provide theological context for Kali's iconography, challenging stereotypes by explaining her fierce appearance as protective power rather than violence, and her consumption of demon blood in mythology as symbolic removal of negative thoughts rather than bloodthirstiness (Ashby, 2010; McNeal, 2012; Sookdeo, 2015). This approach aligns with cognitive-behavioral models of stigma reduction that target stereotypes through factual information and alternative interpretive frameworks (Corrigan, Morris, Michaels, Rafacz, & Rüsçh, 2012). By providing scriptural authority for Kali worship within mainstream Hindu theology, these discourses attempt to relocate the practice from the margins to the center of religious legitimacy.

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Beyond cognitive intervention, the festival employs affective strategies through cultural performances: theatrical productions, devotional music, classical dance, and visual installations present Kali as embodying both fierce protection and maternal love (Kali Yatra Festival, n.d.). These performances work at the level of emotional processing, potentially triggering what Haidt (2001) terms "moral emotions" such as awe and reverence that can shift attitudes powerfully. The inclusion of female religious leaders, including T&T's first female swami and several punditas, challenges gender hierarchies and provides social models of female spiritual leadership (Trinidad Newsday, 2024).

The festival's strategic positioning within T&T's national cultural calendar (culminating on Independence Day with a street parade and ritual immersion) represents an assertion of religious identity at the level of collective representation. This public visibility can be understood through theories of collective self-esteem and group pride: by claiming public space and national attention, the festival works to transform Kali worship from a marginalized practice into an integral component of Trinbagonian identity (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992; Pawłowska, 2025).

However, despite the festival's prominence and explicit mission, scholarly examination of its psychological impact remains remarkably limited. While anthropological and journalistic accounts document organizational activities, there is notable absence of psychological research examining how devotees themselves understand and experience the festival's educational initiatives. Key questions remain unanswered: How do Kali worshipers interpret the festival's pedagogical strategies? Do they perceive tangible changes in how they are treated by non-devotees? How do they negotiate between traditional private worship and the festival's public, educationally-focused presentation of Kali? What meanings do they ascribe to the festival's efforts to reclaim Kali worship from marginalization?

### ***The Purpose of This Study***

Despite a decade of Kali Yatra Festival celebrations explicitly designed to challenge religious stigma through education, less is known, from a narrow empirical perspective, about whether Kali devotees themselves perceive meaningful shifts in their experiences of stigma, religious identity, or social acceptance. Existing scholarship on Caribbean Kali worship offers rich historical and ethnographic accounts but largely overlooks the psychological dimensions of how contemporary educational interventions shape lived experiences of religious marginalization. Without exploring how devotees experience the festival's educational mission, navigate its cultural spaces, and make psychological sense of any changes in their social worlds, claims about the festival's influence on stigma remain speculative. From a psychology of religion perspective, devotees are not passive recipients of educational messages but active meaning-makers who interpret, appropriate, and potentially resist festival narratives in ways shaped by their own religious experiences, social locations, and psychological needs. This study explores the psychological dimensions of Kali devotees' lived experiences of the Kali Yatra Festival and its educational efforts to address stigma toward their religious practice in T&T. The research question guiding this inquiry is: *How do Kali devotees in Trinidad and Tobago psychologically experience the Kali Yatra Festival and its educational efforts to address stigma toward Kali worship?*

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**METHOD**

**Participants**

Participants comprised 40 Kali devotees from T&T (aged 18 - 58), all of whom had attended or actively participated in the Kali Yatra Festival. Recruitment was conducted through purposive sampling via announcements at local Kali temples. Eligibility criteria required participants to be 18 years of age or older, self-identify as Kali devotees, have attended a minimum of one Kali Yatra Festival, and be willing to discuss their personal experiences with the festival and the stigma surrounding their religious practice. Participants were organized into four mixed-gender focus groups of 10 individuals each, a structure intended to facilitate in-depth discussion while maintaining manageable group dynamics. Detailed demographic information is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Summary of Sample Demographics**

Characteristics	N	%	M	SD
Gender				
Male	17	42.5		
Female	23	57.5		
Education Level				
Primary or less	1	2.5		
Secondary	8	20		
Post-secondary/Tertiary	9	22.5		
University degree or higher	22	55		
Age			38	2.7

**Note.** Participant demographic characteristics were obtained through a brief demographic questionnaire completed prior to focus group participation.

**Data Collection**

Data were collected through four virtual focus groups conducted via Microsoft Teams between July and September 2025. The virtual format was selected to accommodate participants' geographic distribution across T&T and to provide accessibility for devotees who might face transportation or scheduling constraints. Each focus group session lasted approximately 1 hour and was audio-recorded with participants' consent.

The research team developed a semi-structured interview guide designed to explore devotees' psychological experiences of the Kali Yatra Festival and its educational efforts to address stigma. The interview guide included open-ended questions addressing: (1) personal experiences of stigma related to Kali worship, (2) perceptions of the festival's educational initiatives, (3) psychological impacts of festival participation, (4) changes in how devotees experienced their religious identity, and (5) perceptions of shifts in social acceptance or stigma over time. Example questions included: "Can you describe what the Kali Yatra Festival is like for you?", "Tell me about your experiences as a Kali devotee in Trinidad and Tobago," and "How do others in the Indo-Caribbean community respond to your religious practice?" The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility to pursue emergent themes while ensuring key topics were addressed across all groups. Focus groups, rather than individual interviews, were selected to capitalize on group dynamics and shared meaning-making, enabling participants to build on each other's experiences and generate richer discussions about collective experiences of stigma and resistance.

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### ***Analytical Strategy***

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), an approach particularly suited to examining how individuals make sense of significant life experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Willig, 2021). IPA's focus on lived experience and meaning-making aligns with this study's aim to understand the psychological dimensions of how devotees experience the festival's educational interventions and navigate religious stigma. While IPA is traditionally applied to individual interviews, recent scholarship has recognized its utility for focus group data when the research question centers on shared experiences within a specific community (Tomkins & Eatough, 2018; Smith & Fieldsend, 2021).

All focus group recordings were transcribed verbatim by the first author, with identifying information removed to protect participant confidentiality. Analysis proceeded through the iterative stages characteristic of IPA: (1) repeated reading of transcripts to achieve immersion in the data, (2) initial noting and exploratory coding to capture descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments, (3) development of emergent themes, (4) searching for connections and patterns across themes, and (5) integration of themes across all four focus groups (Alase, 2017; Willig, 2021).

To enhance analytical rigor, all seven authors independently analyzed the complete set of transcripts, each generating their own coding schemes and preliminary themes. The research team then convened for collaborative analysis sessions in which independent interpretations were shared, compared, and discussed. Through iterative dialogue and negotiation, the team worked toward consensus on the most salient and well-supported themes, ensuring that final themes reflected shared interpretive understanding while remaining grounded in participants' accounts. Disagreements were resolved through returning to the data and discussing alternative interpretations until agreement was reached.

### ***Quality and Rigor***

Quality and rigor were established using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through investigator triangulation: all seven authors independently analyzed the full dataset, then engaged in consensus-building discussions to minimize the influence of individual bias. Transferability was addressed through thick description of the research context, participant characteristics, and analytical procedures, enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to other contexts. Dependability was ensured through maintaining a detailed audit trail documenting analytical decisions, theme development, and the evolution of interpretations throughout the analysis process. Confirmability was strengthened through the research team's ongoing reflexivity, explicitly discussing their own positions relative to the research topic, potential biases, and how their perspectives might shape interpretation. Finally, the use of verbatim transcription and the inclusion of participant quotations in reporting findings ensures transparency and allows readers to assess the trustworthiness of interpretations.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

The study received ethical approval from the International Executive School, Strasbourg, France. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation, with consent forms clearly outlining the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and participants' rights to withdraw at any time without penalty. Participants were assured of

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confidentiality, with all identifying information removed during transcription and pseudonyms used in reporting findings. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely and accessible only to the research team. Given the potentially sensitive nature of discussing experiences of religious stigma, participants were informed of their right to decline answering any questions and were provided with contact information for local support resources.

### RESULTS

Interpretative phenomenological analysis revealed three master themes describing how Kali devotees experienced the festival's educational efforts to address stigma: (1) Making Sense Through Education: Cognitive Reframing, (2) Finding Our Voice: From Shame to Agency, and (3) No More Hiding: Identity Transformation and Collective Pride. Participant quotes are presented using pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. Table 2 provides an overview of the master themes and sub-themes.

*Table 2 Overview of Master Themes and Sub-Themes*

Master Theme	Sub-Theme(s)
1. Making Sense Through Education: Cognitive Reframing	<i>1a. Understanding replaces ignorance</i> <i>1b. Seeing we're not alone</i>
2. Finding Our Voice: From Shame to Agency	<i>2a. Speaking up instead of staying quiet</i> <i>2b. Protecting our children from what we went through</i>
3. No More Hiding: Identity Transformation and Collective Pride	<i>3a. The fear is going away</i> <i>3b. We can be proud now</i>

#### **Master Theme 1: Making Sense Through Education: Cognitive Reframing**

This master theme captured how the festival's educational programming produced cognitive shifts that directly challenged stigmatizing beliefs devotees had encountered, and in some cases internalized.

##### *Sub-theme 1a: Understanding replaces ignorance.*

Devotees described how festival teachings provided them with theological explanations that reframed Kali from a frightening or illegitimate deity into a scripturally grounded protective mother figure. This cognitive shift appeared to reduce both external stigma and internalized negative beliefs. Priya explained:

I didn't even know Kali was in the main scriptures, nah. I thought it was just something we doing in Trinidad, like our own thing. When the pundit show us in the Devi Mahatmyam where she come from, I was like wow, this is real real Hinduism. It's not some dotish backward thing like people does say. That change my whole mindset, boy.

The educational discourses reinterpreted Kali's iconography through symbolism rather than literalism, giving devotees cognitive tools to counter stereotypes. Rajesh noted:

People look at the pictures and they thinking she's some bloodthirsty demon or what. Even I used to wonder about it, ent, like why she looking so frightening? Then at the festival they explain everything, the tongue, the skulls, the blood, all of it have

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meaning. Now when somebody talking stupidity, I could tell them look, allyuh just don't understand the symbolism.

This acquisition of interpretive frameworks appeared to serve a protective function, reducing vulnerability to stigmatizing narratives. Participants described feeling "armed with knowledge" that bolstered their confidence.

### *Sub-theme 1b: Seeing we're not alone.*

Beyond individual cognitive changes, devotees experienced collective validation through witnessing the scale of the festival and the public endorsement of respected religious authorities. This social proof challenged their perception of Kali worship as marginal or deviant. Kamla, a 55-year-old devotee, expressed:

For so long we thought it was just us, just our little group doing this thing that nobody else accepting. Then you go to the festival and it have hundreds and hundreds of people, it have big big pundits teaching about Mother Kali like it normal. You realize oh gosh, we actually okay. Nothing wrong with we at all.

This collective dimension activated social comparison processes that reduced feelings of deviance. Vishnu stated:

The festival proving we legitimate. All these years people making us feel like we doing something wrong, but look nah, all these religious leaders there teaching about Kali. If it was really bad or backwards, they go be there? I don't think so, man.

Several participants noted that seeing other devotees openly celebrating reduced their sense of isolation and normalized their practice. Anil shared:

Is one thing to believe in something yourself. Is different when you seeing you part of something bigger. The festival showing us we not weird, we not alone. That does do something to your confidence, real talk.

## **Master Theme 2: Finding Our Voice: From Shame to Agency**

This master theme illuminated the shift from passive acceptance of stigma to active resistance, as devotees gained confidence to educate others and challenge misconceptions.

### *Sub-theme 2a: Speaking up instead of staying quiet.*

Devotees consistently described how festival knowledge enabled them to move from silence and avoidance to active intervention when encountering stigmatizing attitudes. This behavioral shift reflected enhanced self-efficacy and reduced shame. Lakshmi explained:

Before I used to just avoid talking about it. If somebody ask what temple I going to, I'd change the subject or give some vague answer. Now I telling them straight, I going to the Kali Mai temple. And if they have questions or they saying something ignorant, I educating them. The festival teach me what to say.

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This transition from concealment to disclosure represented significant identity work and was experienced as empowering. Participants described satisfaction in "setting people straight" rather than internalizing stigma. Indira noted:

I remember this woman at work say something about how Kali worship violent and barbaric and thing. Before I would've just feel bad and say nothing. But this time I was like, actually lemme tell you what it really mean. And I explain what I learn at the festival about the symbolism and everything. She was real surprised. But I feel good standing up for it, yuh know?

Several devotees described actively seeking opportunities to discuss Kali worship rather than avoiding the topic, representing a marked shift in their relationship to potential stigma. Rajesh shared:

Now if religion come up in conversation, I actually bringing up Kali. I want people to know, man. I not embarrassed anymore. I want to educate them because is the ignorance causing the stigma, right? So why I should hide when I could teach them?

*Sub-theme 2b: Protecting our children from what we went through.*

A salient dimension was devotees' motivation to ensure younger generations would not experience the burden of religious shame. Parents described using festival teachings to raise confident children. Priya explained:

My daughter is seven and she going to the festival every year. She know all about Mother Kali, she proud of it true true. When her friends ask about we religion, she explaining it to them no problem. She not going to grow up feeling shame like how I grow up. The festival giving she something I never had.

This intergenerational focus revealed how adult devotees' past experiences of internalized stigma motivated their investment in creating different conditions for children. Shanti reflected:

We suffer with the shame and the hiding for so many years, boy. I don't want my grandchildren going through that bacchanal. When they learning about Kali at the festival from young, they growing up confident. They not going to have that voice in their head telling them something wrong with them.

The emphasis on protecting children suggested that many participants continued processing their own experiences of minority stress and stigma-related distress through intergenerational transmission of pride.

### **Master Theme 3: No More Hiding: Identity Transformation and Collective Pride**

This master theme captured the profound transformation in how devotees experienced their religious identity, moving from anxiety, concealment, and shame toward confidence, openness, and pride.

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*Sub-theme 3a: The fear is going away.*

Devotees described substantial reductions in the anticipatory anxiety that had characterized disclosure of their Kali devotion. Many recounted years of concealing their practice due to fear of judgment, and experienced the festival as catalyzing relief from this burden. Kamla shared:

I used to be so careful about who knowing. If somebody ask what kind of Hindu I is, I'd just say Hindu and hope they don't ask more questions. I was scared of what they'd say, how they'd look at me. After a few years coming to this festival, that fear just... it mostly gone now. I not afraid to say I worshipping Kali Mai.

This reduction in anxiety reflected both cognitive changes (reframing Kali as legitimate) and perceived social changes (witnessing shifting attitudes). Vishnu explained:

The festival changing how people seeing Kali worship. It not as taboo anymore, ent. So I not as worried about saying it. Plus I know now how to explain it if somebody have a problem. But honestly most people more accepting than before.

Multiple participants described experiencing relief from no longer managing the cognitive and emotional burden of concealment. James stated:

Not having to hide it anymore, that huge, man. I didn't realize how much energy I was putting into keeping it secret until I didn't have to do it no more. Is like this weight come off.

*Sub-theme 3b: We can be proud now.*

Beyond the absence of negative emotions, devotees described experiencing active pride in their religious identity, particularly through the festival's public visibility. The Independence Day parade was especially meaningful, symbolizing Kali worship as integral to national identity. Rajkumary expressed:

When we in that parade on Independence Day, walking through the streets with the Kali murti, I feeling so proud. We saying this is Trinidad culture, this is we heritage. I not hiding anymore. I out there celebrating and it feeling like pure sweetness.

This public affirmation appeared to enhance collective self-esteem, with devotees experiencing pride not just individually but as a community gaining recognition. Mary noted:

Watching the festival get bigger every year, seeing more and more people coming, seeing it on the news and thing, that making me proud to be a Kali devotee. We not the ones people laughing at anymore. We becoming mainstream.

Several participants explicitly connected their identity transformation to the festival's educational mission, emphasizing that education enabled this change. Yogendra explained:

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The education is what changing everything, boy. People learning about Kali and they stopping the judging. And when they stop judging, we could stop hiding and start being proud. Everything connected like that.

Diro summarized this sentiment:

Education erasing the stigma, just like they say it would. The more people learning the real story, the less we have to feel shame. The festival giving us back we dignity, yuh know?

While participants acknowledged that stigma had not entirely vanished, they emphasized that their experience had fundamentally shifted. Haresh reflected:

Look, it still have some people who don't get it or who looking down on us. But it not hurting me the same way anymore. I know what I know. I have my community. I have pride. The festival give me that through the education and through bringing all of we together. That powerful, real powerful.

### **DISCUSSION**

This study explored the lived experiences of Kali devotees in Trinidad and Tobago as they engage with the Kali Yatra Festival and its educational efforts to address stigma toward their religious practice. The findings reveal that devotees experience the festival as producing shifts in how devotees understand, express, and experience their religious identity. Through educational programming that provides scriptural legitimacy and symbolic reinterpretation of Kali's iconography, devotees undergo cognitive reframing that challenges both externally imposed and internalized stigmatizing beliefs (Link & Phelan, 2001). This cognitive shift enables behavioral transformation from concealment and silence to disclosure and active education of others, ultimately producing identity transformation characterized by reduced anticipatory anxiety and the emergence of pride in Kali devotion as a central component of religious self-concept.

These findings align closely with social identity theory's predictions regarding how stigmatized groups respond to threats to their collective identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Rather than pursuing individual mobility strategies that would distance devotees from their stigmatized religious identity, the festival facilitates social creativity and social competition strategies. The educational discourses reframe Kali worship as scripturally legitimate and theologically sophisticated, exemplifying social creativity through positive reinterpretation of group characteristics previously devalued by dominant Hindu orthodoxy (Vertovec, 1992; Bose, 2022). Simultaneously, the festival's public visibility and demand for recognition from mainstream religious authorities represent social competition, directly challenging the status hierarchy that marginalized Kali worship. Devotees' accounts suggest that these collective strategies prove more beneficial than individual attempts to minimize religious identity, consistent with research indicating that collective approaches to stigma resistance can protect wellbeing and strengthen in-group bonds (Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010). The cognitive reframing documented in this study resonates with Corrigan and colleagues' (2012) models of stigma reduction through education, which demonstrate that interventions targeting multiple stigma components simultaneously (cognitive stereotypes, affective responses including disgust, and behavioral discrimination) produce more effective attitude change (Herek, 2007). However, this study extends existing literature by demonstrating how

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education functions not only to change external attitudes but also to reduce internalized stigma (Hatzenbuehler & Pachankis, 2016) and enhance religious pride among stigmatized individuals themselves.

The transformation from passive acceptance of stigma to active resistance represents a particularly significant finding. The festival provides cognitive resources (knowledge, interpretive frameworks), social resources (community validation, authority endorsement), and emotional resources (collective pride, reduced shame) that enable devotees to challenge stigma actively rather than merely endure it (Corrigan & Watson, 2002). This shift from concealment to disclosure represents moving from "passing" (hiding stigmatized identity) to full disclosure without apology (Goffman, 1963), reflecting enhanced self-efficacy and transformed identity management strategies (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The intergenerational dimension of devotees' experiences warrants particular attention, as adult devotees' investment in protecting children from internalized stigma reflects their own experiences of minority stress (Meyer, 2003) and suggests that religious stigma's effects persist across the lifespan, shaping parenting practices and socialization goals. This focus aligns with research on cultural transmission within diasporic communities (Khan, 2004; Vertovec, 1992), highlighting how stigmatized communities actively work to create different identity formation conditions for subsequent generations (Ysseldyk et al., 2010). The festival thus functions not only as a stigma reduction intervention but as a site of cultural preservation and identity transmission, addressing concerns about religious continuity in contexts of marginalization.

The transformation from concealment to pride documented in this study speaks directly to minority stress literature. Meyer's (2003) model posits that stigmatized individuals experience chronic stress from concealment efforts, anticipation of rejection, and internalized negative attitudes. Devotees' accounts of reduced anxiety, relief from the burden of hiding, and emerging pride suggest that the festival may mitigate minority stress processes. This finding extends minority stress research, typically focused on sexual minorities, to religious minorities in diasporic contexts, demonstrating how stigma operates similarly across different social identities and how collective interventions might buffer against stress processes. The role of public visibility and collective representation in devotees' experiences illuminates the importance of symbolic politics for stigmatized religious communities. The festival's frequent alignment with Independence Day celebrations and its use of public space through street parades represent "spatial resistance," claiming visibility in national public space and asserting Kali worship as integral to Trinbagonian identity rather than marginal or foreign. This public dimension appears particularly significant for enhancing collective self-esteem, as predicted by Luhtanen and Crocker's (1992) model wherein public evaluation of one's group influences private regard for group membership.

The contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Asimovic, 2024; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Rehman et al., 2024) provides a useful framework for understanding the festival's mechanisms, though devotees' accounts emphasize education as the primary driver of change rather than contact per se. This suggests that in contexts where stigma stems primarily from misinformation and misunderstanding, educational components may be particularly crucial for effective stigma reduction. The festival combines contact with structured education, perhaps representing an optimal approach for addressing religious stigma where misconceptions about practices and beliefs drive marginalization. The findings also

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illuminate tensions between universalizing and particularizing strategies in responding to religious stigma. Devotees emphasize that Kali worship is "real Hinduism" grounded in Sanskrit scriptures (universalizing) while simultaneously celebrating its distinctive Indo-Caribbean manifestation (particularizing) (McNeal, 2003; Ragoonanan Maharaj, 2025). This dual approach suggests that stigmatized religious communities strategically deploy both sameness claims (we are legitimate members of the broader tradition) and difference claims (our distinctiveness is valuable) depending on context and audience.

From a psychology of religion perspective, these findings contribute to understanding how religious experience and identity are shaped by social context, power relations, and collective action (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009; Storm, 2025). Devotees' accounts demonstrate that religious experience is not purely individual or transcendent but deeply social, influenced by stigma, validation, and collective representation. The transformation in how devotees experience their relationship with Kali (from shame-tinged to pride-filled) suggests that social stigma can colonize even intimate dimensions of religious life, while collective action through festivals can reclaim and transform these experiences (Ysseldyk et al., 2010; Hung & Chan, 2025). This underscores the importance of attending to power, marginalization, and resistance within psychology of religion research rather than treating religious phenomena as occurring in social vacuum, and highlights the continued relevance of festivals and public rituals as sites where education, community, and sacred celebration converge to produce meaningful social change in diasporic religious contexts (Vertovec, 1998; Khan, 2004). Importantly, the stigmatization of Kali worship is not unique to T&T but has been documented throughout Indo-Caribbean communities, including in Guyana and Suriname, where similar patterns of marginalization within Hindu orthodoxy persist (Vertovec, 1992). Given the success of the Kali Yatra Festival in addressing stigma through educational interventions, similar initiatives in other Caribbean nations with significant Indo-Caribbean populations might prove valuable for supporting Kali devotees in those contexts. The expansion of such festivals or the development of regional networks connecting Kali devotees across the Caribbean could amplify the collective validation and normalization processes documented in this study, potentially creating broader transnational movements that challenge stigma at a regional rather than national level.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

Although this study offers rich insight into how the Kali Yatra Festival fosters identity transformation and counters stigma, several considerations provide context for interpreting the findings and avenues for future research. By capturing devotees' subjective experiences, the study illuminates the personal and collective processes through which engagement with the festival supports shifts from shame to pride and promotes agency. However, because the study reflects experiences at a single point in time, it remains unclear how durable these transformations are or the extent to which they correspond to broader shifts in social attitudes toward Kali worship. Future research could adopt longitudinal designs to track both devotees' experiences and community-level perceptions over time, providing a more nuanced understanding of the festival's sustained impact.

The sample consisted exclusively of active festival participants, who may represent particularly committed and engaged devotees. Those who attend sporadically or not at all may experience stigma differently, and exploring these perspectives could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse ways stigma is navigated within the Kali worship community. The use of focus groups allowed for dynamic, collective reflection, yet

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social dynamics may have influenced disclosure, particularly regarding ongoing stigma or internalized shame. Additionally, the research team’s positionality relative to Kali worship and Hindu communities inevitably shaped data collection and interpretation, underscoring the importance of reflexivity in qualitative research.

Building on these findings, future work could explore demographic and contextual variation in experiences of stigma and resilience, assess the perspectives of non-devotees to corroborate reported shifts in attitudes, and conduct longitudinal research to chart trajectories of identity transformation, particularly for newcomers to the festival. Comparative studies across Caribbean contexts, exploration of youth engagement, assessment of wellbeing outcomes, and the potential development of transnational networks of devotees represent further opportunities to deepen understanding of how marginalized religious communities resist stigma, cultivate pride, and sustain resilience. Collectively, these directions promise to extend the contribution of this research to the psychology of religion and the study of collective identity and stigma resistance.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study is one of the first to explore the lived experiences of devotees of a stigmatized religious practice as they engage with educational interventions designed to address religious marginalization. The findings reveal that Kali devotees in Trinidad and Tobago experience the Kali Yatra Festival's educational initiatives as catalyzing transformations across cognitive, behavioral, and identity domains, fundamentally reshaping their relationship to religious stigma. Through cognitive reframing that provides scriptural legitimacy and symbolic reinterpretation, devotees move from passive recipients of stigma to active educators challenging misconceptions, ultimately experiencing their Kali devotion with pride rather than shame. These findings demonstrate the power of collective, educationally-focused interventions to address religious stigma not merely by changing external attitudes but by transforming stigmatized individuals' lived experiences of their religious identity. By foregrounding devotees' voices and lived experiences, this research illuminates the mechanisms through which marginalized religious communities resist stigma and reclaim dignity, contributing to psychology of religion literature on stigma, identity, and resilience while highlighting the continued relevance of festivals as sites where education, community, and sacred celebration converge to produce meaningful social change.

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