Instapoetry:

The influence of Instagram and the online community

on the shaping of a new literary subgenre

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Bachelor Thesis

English Language and Culture

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Date: 11-07-2020

Words: 7086

**Abstract**

This thesis seeks to place the debate regarding the (literary) value of Instapoetry as a (sub)genre of poetry in a framework of media studies, communication studies and literary studies. Coming from the theory of social shaping, the influence of the platform and the user of Instagram are closely looked at in relation to Instapoetry. This is done by looking at the poetic genre of the lyric in combination with the affordances of Instagram and importance of the user community. These different elements show that most Instapoets still have a traditional understanding of poetry that is closely tied to the “lyricisation” (Jackson, 2008) of contemporary poetry. In addition, the platform is a shaping factor in Instapoetry as it puts limitations on the Instapoet and nudges them to certain actions and implied values. Lastly, the Instagram community is highly concerned about creating a safe space for Instapoets (especially coming from minorities) to share their work. This is closely tied to a feminist framework that is reflected in both the content as well as the comments on Instapoetry. By emphasising an intimate connection and openly discussing taboo subjects, an intimate atmosphere is being created in the online environment of mass readership. All these different elements are brought together in order to place the content of Instapoetry within the framework it is published in and to see how these influence each other.

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*For whosoever writes out truly any human feeling, writes poetry. All persons, even the most unimaginative, in moments of strong emotion, speak poetry.*

* John Stuart Mill

# **Introduction**

By the start of 2020, Instagram had over a billion users, and 4.2 billion likes were given on a daily basis (Aslam, 2020). Although Instagram initially started in 2010 as a photo-sharing platform where people could upload edited photographs, it now has grown to suit a much bigger variety of needs. The platform is now also being used for online marketing and news distribution, with some users even making a living out of paid promotions. Next to the features offered by Instagram itself, like Instagram TV (IGTV), shoppable tags in Stories, and live videos, users also have found numerous other ways of using the platform. One of these new ways of using Instagram is by writing so-called “Instapoetry.”

Exceptions-to-the-rule exist, but the general perception of Instapoems is that they are short and often make use of easy-to-understand, accessible language. In addition, Instapoems frequently carry a very general but inspiring message, making it appealing to mass readership (Miller, 2019). Themes such as otherness and selfhood (Miller, 2019), but also “gendered yet universal themes such as sexism, abuse, trauma, sexual violence, and friendship” (Giovanni, 2017, n.p.) frequently occur in Instapoetry.

Rupi Kaur is often heralded as one of the first and most well-known Instapoets worldwide, and she has transformed her social media popularity into success in traditional publishing venues. With over 3 million copies sold of her first book *Milk and Honey* (Miller, 2019) and almost 4 million followers on Instagram, Kaur belongs to the new generation of “poetic superstars” (Bresge, 2018, n.p.). As Instapoetry has become a very successful phenomenon over the years, some even claim it has not only stopped a general decrease of interest in poetry (e.g. Alam, 2019; Hill and Kuan, 2019), but also to have led to an overall “poetry revival” (Mohamed, 2020, n.p.).

However, there is a lot of negative criticism related to Instapoetry as well. As social media feeds are quick to change, and attention spans said to decrease considerably in the digital age (Roberts, 2018), contemporary poetry appears to have become much easier to read and to understand, compared to longstanding ideas about poetry as an ambiguous, challenging and profound artform, arising from the long process of finetuning a poet’s “craft;” this contrast is exacerbated by Instapoems that do not seem to evoke any form of deep or sustained contemplation. Instapoetry, following from the reference to “instant” in its name (Van der Starre, 2019, n.p.), is seen to be “produced quickly” in order to be “consumed quickly” (Roberts, 2018, n.p.). Therefore, it has become a truism that Instapoets are not self-conscious nor deliberate about the textual choices they make. They are said to not give any thought to the more technical aspects of poetry, such as the structure, metre, sound patterns and deeper meanings, but rather they simply write out any and all of their thoughts and feelings (Hodgkinson, 2019). For some, this makes Instapoems feel as if they are prosaic remarks written very hurriedly to be “cut up at random to resemble our conventional idea of poetry” afterwards (Hodgkinson, 2019, n.p.).

Since users of Instagram only need a valid email address to register, it is extremely easy to contribute to this platform and therefore to the field of Instapoetry. In the Community Guidelines, Instagram claims they want the platform to be “an authentic and safe place for inspiration and expression” which represents all the different cultural backgrounds of its users (Instagram, n.d.). The only restrictions imposed by Instagram concern posting images that include nudity or extreme violence. Compared to a traditional understanding of the publication of poetry, there is nothing (apart from the rules concerning nudity and extreme violence) that functions as a gatekeeper. No (aspiring) Instapoet needs to be acknowledged by a publisher or other literary authority before they can contribute to the field of Instapoetry. Due to the fact that all users can upload Instapoetry, not only do new forms of poetry arise, but the publication and spreading of these new forms also becomes much easier (Johnson, 2017). Because of this, Instagram is said to be “a multimodal platform that embraces both ‘high’ and ‘low’ forms of expression” (Miller, 2019).

As new dimensions are being created and readers of Instapoetry become more immediately and intimately connected compared to writers and readers within traditional publishing models (Kovalik and Curwood, 2019). Kovalik and Curwood (2019) argue that Instapoetry combines literacy to the modern urge for online connectedness. Instagram would lead to a genre which is “characterised as a new style of literature constructed in its socio-cultural context: the interconnected online world of readers, writers and reviewers” (p. 186).

The ease with which people can publish Instapoetry also creates a strengthened position for citizen authors. The term “citizen author” (CA), as defined by Johnson (2017), refers to people who actively share their own work within the global village, i.e. the internet, and therefore “[disrupt] the discourse of the book by challenging the hierarchy of the traditional publishing model and introducing new elements of power that are situated within the relationship between the citizen author, the reader and the publisher” (p. 132). The influence of citizen authors could eventually lead to new ideas and norms on publishing and authorship (Johnson, 2017).

However, to be able to fully understand the influence of citizen authorship but also the changing forms of poetry, it is crucial to look at the context that Instapoetry is written in, i.e. the technology itself. The theory of social shaping claims that technologies as well as its users influence one another. In social shaping, these factors are regarded to be equal (Baym, 2015). This theory is used as a foundation for further arguments in this thesis.

The platform itself, i.e. Instagram, allows for certain actions. These actions are called the platform’s affordances (Hutchby, 2001; Stanfill, 2014). Affordances are shaped by both the object, which in this case is the platform, as well as its user. Users may have different purposes for using a platform, resulting in different online behaviour and attitudes towards a platform. In 2001, Ian Hutchby proposed a definition of the term ‘affordances’ as it will also be used in this thesis. He defined affordances as “functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object” (p. 444). By doing so, Hutchby emphasises that the meaning of objects always comes from the interaction with the user, which is in line with the theory of social shaping. However, affordances can also push the user towards certain actions. The outcome of the platform differs depending on who uses it, but also when and where it is being used (2001). In addition, these affordances strengthen a platform’s identity, as it accentuates differences between other platforms.

Understanding the importance of the role of the platform itself as well as its user, will help gain more insight in the driving forces behind changes in the field of contemporary poetry. This thesis seeks to shed a light on the ways in which Instapoetry contributes to new literary conventions, arguing that Instapoetry can be seen as an inevitable extension of lyric poetry’s popularity, while also being shaped by the platform as well as by its users. This will be done by looking at the technical aspects of Instagram via the performance of a discursive interface analysis. Such an analysis seeks to “[interpret] websites’ embedded assumptions about their own purpose and appropriate use” (Stanfill, 2014, p.1062) while keeping in mind that the use of a platform can differ from the intended use. The analysis will be used as a starting point to further look into various Instapoems. By doing so, the influence of the platform in terms of normativity will be taken into account when looking at these poets and their posts. In addition, the way in which Instapoetry fits within the tradition of poetry will be looked at. This will be primarily done by looking at the content of Rupi Kaur’s posts as she is one of the most prominent Instapoets. There will be a focus on the presentation of the self in relation to both the lyric and confessional poetry as well as the role of femininity. Furthermore, the influence of the platform itself in shaping Instapoetry will be thoroughly examined. This will be done by looking at three types of affordances (functional, cognitive and sensory) as proposed by Stanfill (2014). Lastly, the influence of Instagram’s users will be discussed. A distinction will be made between the writers of Instapoetry, the citizen authors, and the readers of Instapoetry. Lastly, the interaction between the platform and its users will be looked at as a factor influencing Instapoetry as a subgenre.

# **Theoretical Framework**

## The influence of the poetic genre

Currently, there is much debate on whether or not Instapoetry can be regarded as being a proper form of poetry. Critics of Instapoetry argue that Instapoetry “works anywhere” (Bucknell, 2020, n.p.) and that it diminishes the literary tradition. According to Bucknell, Instapoets lack knowledge and eventually gain “a lucrative book deal by posting work online” (2020, n.p.). However, others, like Ailes (2020), firmly disagree with this view on Instapoetry. She suggests that the nature of Instagram allows for a less elitist take on poetry (Ailes, 2020). In addition, she emphasizes that some of the most successful Instapoets are young women of colour who in the first place might have less access to poetry publishing and therefore differ from traditional forms.

According to Stein (2010), there is a division between “academic poets” and “opposing poets” (p.5). Academic poets “tend to publish their work in hard copy largely via established journals and presses” (p.5) whereas opposing poets search for other ways to reach their audience. These different views can also be projected on the matter of Instapoetry. The academic poet would not acknowledge Instapoetry as a proper form of poetry whereas for the opposing poet, Instagram would be a perfectly suitable platform to publish one’s work. Nonetheless, to be able to make claims about Instapoetry as a subgenre, is necessary to have a further look in how ‘poetry’ itself should be defined regardless of these views.

In his “Thoughts on Poetry,” John Stuart Mill (1882) claims that in all cases poetry is something that must be *felt*. He writes that true poetry comes from all the varieties of human feelings, and therefore depicts the human soul. The writer gives shape to their inner state of being after experiencing specific feelings. One must have lived through and processed these feelings in order to write about them. These emotions do not necessarily have to come from an incident causing them; they could simply exist in the mind or the soul of the writer. Once a person is able to write out any kind of spontaneous and true human feeling, they write poetry, Mill argues. From this perspective, any person, regardless of background or education, can write poetry. Mill illustrates his view by saying:

Every truth which a human being can enunciate, every thought, even every outward impression, which can enter into his consciousness, may become poetry, when shown through any impassioned medium; when invested with the coloring of joy, or grief, or pity, or affection, or admiration, or reverence, or awe, or even hatred or terror; and, unless so colored, nothing, be it as interesting as it may, is poetry (1882, n.p.).

 However, he adds that poetry is very close to, but should not be mistaken for, eloquence. He claims that true poetry “appears to us to lie in the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener,” meaning that while writing, the poet is not thinking of the audience they are writing it for at all. Poetry, he argues, is “feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude, and [embodies] itself in symbols which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet’s mind” (n.p.). According to Mill, solitude and meditation would lead to real poetry. Eloquence, on the other hand, is being highly aware of speaking to, or writing for, an audience. The writer’s main focus is not on themselves, but rather it is on conveying a specific message to somebody else. In addition, eloquence comes from the interaction with one’s environment rather than coming from within. Thus, the key factors in writing poetry, according to Mill (1882), are that it comes from a moment of solitude and contemplation on individual feelings, without being concerned about the audience. The idea of not being aware of one’s audience creates a tension in the case of Instapoetry, as by definition it must be uploaded to Instagram in order to qualify as Instapoetry. However, it is important not to disregard the fact that in traditional publishing models, authors also cannot be fully unaware of the fact that their works could become published. Mill (1882) offers a view to nuance this tension. He suggests poets can first work on their feelings in solitude to reproduce it at some point in the presence of an audience. Therefore, the high awareness of, and interactivity with the audience does not necessarily have to mean that the Instapoet cannot meet Mill’s definition of poetry.

Although Mill outlined his definition of poetry over a hundred years ago, it continues to be influential in how poetry is identified and read today, namely in how it lays out the fundamental conventions for the “lyric poem.” According to Jackson (2008), poetry at its core is something that represents “subjective experience, (…) or deep thought, or social consciousness, or beauty, or truth, or literature” (p. 183). From this point of view, poetry does not limit itself to literary conventions but rather is a depiction of life. Nonetheless, Jackson (2008) argues that people have created an idealised picture of what poetry *should* be like. According to those who have this idealised view on poetry, divergence from this ideal could be harmful to the poetic genre and eventually lead to the loss of literary skill.

When looking at the different types of poetry, Jackson (2008) argues that almost all contemporary poetry is highly associated with the lyric. As a result of this phenomenon, called “lyricisation,” various types of poetry have slightly blurred together to the bigger audience. Jackson (2008) states that “when the stipulative functions of particular genres are collapsed into one big idea of poems as lyrics,” (p.183) poetry becomes more general and can serve as a combining factor between different subcultures.

Yet, despite its popularity, it remains hard to clearly define the lyric. This is partly because over the course of time, the term ‘lyric’ has been used in various ways. This led to an inconsistent use of the term (Wolf, 2005). The normative definition of the lyric as we know today, as described by Jackson, is that the lyric is a “short, narrative poem depicting the subjective experience of a speaker” (2018, p. 183). Wolf (2005) lists characteristics that are usually associated with the lyric. Whereas he claims some of these characteristics can be seen as somewhat outdated, others still apply to the modern use of the lyric. Next to its shortness, narrativity and subjectivity, Wolf (2005) argues that in lyric poetry, the use of language differs from the ordinary everyday use of language. According to him, the deviation can be seen “[in] the syntactic and semantic levels, in poetic rhetoricity and [by the] extensive employment of imagery” (p. 25). As a result, a lot of ambiguity can be found in lyric poetry. Additionally, in lyric poetry there usually is a sense of timelessness (Wolf, 2005). There is a relative unimportance of external factors compared to other genres of poetry. The poem evolves around the consciousness of the “lyric I” or in some cases the “lyric you” (Wolf, 2005). Furthermore, in lyric poetry, the content of the poem often is “dereferentialised,” (Wolf, 2005, p. 30) meaning that there are hardly any references to a known world in the poem. According to Wolf (2005), this dereferentialisation makes that most objects in the poem remain rather unspecified or anonymous. As a result, lyric poetry is more easily accessible to a bigger public, as the readers can identify themselves more to the poem and they can fill in the frequent gaps of information with their own experiences or ideas.

This perfectly suits a platform like Instagram, where all sorts of users are being exposed to poetry. Therefore, the poems are less restricted to time and place and speak to a more universal audience. Paradoxically, this also creates a tension as the personal, i.e. the private confession of the Instapoet which is crucial in the given definition of poetry, is accessible and applicable to mass readership.

## The influence of the platform

Technologies do not exist in a vacuum but are given meaning by their interaction with human beings. The “mediation approach” as illustrated by Verbeek (2015) claims that human beings and technologies are not two separate entities that have a certain interaction, but rather they are two actors constantly shaping each other. This is in line with the theory of social shaping and affordances as proposed by Hutchby (2001). Hutchby adds that technologies are both “functional and relational”, meaning that technologies as well as its users are shaped by the interaction “with, around and through them” (p. 444). As a result, the ultimate definition of a platform partly depends on the user. Therefore, the interpretation of the platform with the different ways of usage that come from this can be seen as a dynamic process between the platform and its user.

When using any technology, people always have a goal in mind; we view technology as a tool or vehicle (Verbeek, 2015). Despite the great diversity in social network sites (SNSs), one of the main purposes has always been to connect with others and to upload personal content (Baym, 2015). Because it is made extremely easy to share one’s private business, the urge to present oneself has also grown (Stein, 2010). SNSs are no longer solely used as an agent to facilitate interaction with others, but they “[have] generated new types and dimensions of social relations that were not intended in the design of the technology, but rather emerged from them” (Verbeek, 2015, p. 28). For example, a platform like Instagram has expanded its use to a platform for sharing any form of artistic expression with like-minded people, even though it started as a photo-sharing platform for friends.

In the designing process of any technology, developers build certain preferred uses into the product. To illustrate this, Hutchby uses an example used by Grint and Woolgar (1997) in which they opt that “technologies should be treated as ‘texts’ which are ‘written’ (i.e. configured) in certain ways by their developers, producers and marketers, and have to be ‘read’ by their users or consumers” (p. 445). In the designing process of the platform, developers limit the various options and interpretations to nudge the user into a specific interaction with the platform (Hutchby, 2001; Stanfill, 2014). However, this does not necessarily have to mean that the user blindly follows these preferred readings of the platform and thereby follows the path of least resistance. The “ideal *User”,* i.e. the intended user,may not always match with the “actual *site* *visitor*”(Stanfill, emphasis in original, 2014, p.1061). Similarly, ‘texts’ do not always necessarily have to be interpreted in the same way, as ‘readers’ always read a text from their own perspective and personal experiences.

In her research on affordances, Stanfill (2014) suggests looking at platforms in accordance with Foucault’s “conception of power as productive” (p.1060). This theory gives shape to the idea that all things the user *can* do mean just as much as all the things a user cannot do. She adds that “[a] productive power framework operates from the premise that making something more possible, normative, or ‘common sense’ is a form of constraint encouraging that outcome” (p. 1060). Both encouraging as well as discouraging certain actions influence the ultimate online human behaviour. However, as Stanfill (2014) points out, the *can do’s* show more about the platform’s values, as it reveals whom the platform is intended for and how it should be used. Without being aware, users (partly) follow these instructions for the intended use of the platform. This principle can also be applied to the usage of SNSs and in this case, Instagram. When using this platform, the user deliberately chooses to make use of this SNS and not any other SNS. On Instagram, sharing images is most logical action to perform. Therefore, the primary action is sharing visual content. This also has implications on the importance of the visual aspect of the Instapoem as this is one of the most important factors within the platform.

## The influence of the users

During the 2000s, the internet developed from being very limited in use to a new user-generated sphere. This shift is generally referred to as the emergence of “Web 2.0.” The main focus of Web 2.0 was creating user-generated content and increasing online connectedness. With this user-generated content, new ways of online connectivity also arose. The number of applications for online connectivity grew rapidly (van Dijck, Poell and Waal, 2016) and as a result, both users as well as different platforms became more and more connected to each other. The rise of new forms of connectedness in combination with technical improvements of SNSs led to new ways of sharing information and data. Online websites and platforms were no longer restricted to the primary use of textual content, allowing for multimodal perception and expression (Kovalik and Curwood, 2019).

With the changes in the online sphere, the offline world changed as well. Due to the low barriers of entry, various online platforms provided more opportunities for writers of poetry to share their work. New ideas and beliefs about authorship and publication also arose because of the popularity of citizen authorship on SNSs (Johnson, 2017). By using online platforms for publication, the CA no longer makes use of traditional forms of publication and as a result the CA is more in control of their own work, as it no longer needs to be approved by editors and publishers. Consequently, this process alters the ultimate definition of the book and publishing industry as a whole. Whereas the publishing of a printed book can still be seen as the ultimate goal, there are now more ways to achieve this goal. Writers can write anything they want, and these poems are directly ‘published’ onto the reader’s feed. This allows authors to write more freely about what they want. By doing so, they gain more and more exposure. In addition, this uncomplicated way of publishing gives authors the chance to practise their writing as they can instantly see how their audience responds to it. Thus, the divergence from traditional publishing forms to online sharing and publishing has created a new definition of books and therefore the publishing of poetry as well (Johnson, 2017).

Citizen authors, Johnson argues, actively take advantage of the online world. They are said to make deliberate choices as they “[discriminate] between social platforms based on their own interests, needs and by what is available to them” (Johnson, 2017, p. 140). By doing so, it becomes easier for CAs to address like-minded people. The platform brings together people with similar purposes, as they all have decided to use that specific platform to fulfil their needs. Additionally, the connectedness between users of the platform itself, for example by using hashtags, connects authors very easily to their readers. There are fewer restrictions in terms of connectedness compared to traditional publishing forms.

In addition, Instagram also provides an opportunity to connect to various online communities. Both online and offline communities share features as described by Baym (2015). These features include a sense of shared space, shared practices, shared resources and support, shared identities and interpersonal relationships (Baym, 2015). Within the Instagram community, these features can be observed as well.

In any community there is a need to feel secure and to be able to receive help from other members (Baym, 2015). On Instagram, support can be found in many different ways. The message shared in posts can be supportive, but the interaction between users can also lead to emotional support, esteem support or informational support (Baym, 2015). In their research on Instapoetry, Kovalik and Curwood (2019) found that “community and interactivity” (p. 185) were highly valued among Instapoets. Because of the self-publishing element of Instapoetry, the author is able to create and maintain a close relationship with their readers but also with other Instapoets (Johnson, 2017). Johnson adds that “[the] connectivity to other readers and writers in the global village often feels like a personal connection between the readers and writers, writers and writers, and readers and readers” (p. 136). This eventually leads to a “form of intimacy [that] (…) can result in positive relational outcomes” (p. 137). The Instapoets that Kovalik and Curwood (2019) questioned in their research said that they “value the community for the purposes of feedback and emotional support” (p. 190). This feedback is given both via Direct Messaging (DM) and in the comments below a post. Because readers can now give direct feedback to the writer in great numbers, the process of writing and especially editing has drastically changed compared to the traditional publishing process. Writing poetry has become a collaborative activity which is accessible to all interested.

As a result of the great accessibility of Instagram, the diversity in the field of poetry increased. Johnson (2017) claims that primarily women take advantage of this freedom to “disrupt the hierarchisation of literature” (p. 136). Miller (2019) claims that “Instapoetry is repeatedly framed (…) in terms of its capacity to function as a vehicle through which the silenced might find a voice” (n.p.). In addition, Bresge states that Instapoetry serves as a “megaphone to poets who are diversifying the metrical discourse by speaking directly to marginalized communities whose tastes have historically been dismissed as trivial or niche” (2018, n.p.).

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# **Technological framework**

To gain a further understanding about the normative claims of Instagram, it is important to look at all the different affordances it has. Stanfill (2014) makes a distinction between three types of affordances that are applicable to discursive interface analyses. These are functional, cognitive and sensory affordances.

Functional affordances allow for any action the user can perform on the platform. Certain actions that can be performed on one platform, might not even be an option on another platform. Cognitive affordances guide the meaning-making process of the interface. This process is primarily done by “naming, labelling, and/or site taglines and self-descriptions” (Stanfill, 2014, p.1063). Lastly, sensory affordances include all the features that have to do with of the user’s senses. These affordances include the interface’s “visibility, legibility or audibility” (p.1064).

## Discursive interface analysis

### *Functional affordances*

Instagram’s primary way of submitting personal content is by uploading visual material. This shows that there is an emphasis on the visual aspect of the platform, as there are no other ways of uploading personal content. Users cannot solely upload textual content as it always needs to be accompanied by a photograph or edited background.  When uploading content, users can decide between either uploading to one’s personal profile or creating a 24-hour lasting Story. The files need to meet certain technical criteria in order to be uploaded. Videos cannot be longer than one minute, or they need to be split up. Photographs cannot contain more than 1080 pixels wide, otherwise Instagram automatically changes the size of the file. However, users can upload up to ten different images in one post. Despite the technical limitations, Instagram allows various extra options for the uploaded content, like the addition of text, gifs, sound and filters to a post. These features are very easy to add in a Story, but it usually requires the use of external applications when uploading a post.

Once a user uploads something onto their profile, they can do this by using the ‘plus’ icon in the middle of the bar at the bottom of the screen. This icon has a centralised position compared to other functionalities. After pressing this icon, the application divides the screen into two different sections. In the upper part of the screen, the camera is being activated and in the lower part, the user is taken to their gallery from which a photo can be selected to be uploaded. For every post, the application provides space where extra information, a description or a caption can be added. According to Van der Starre (2019), this ease in uploading is in line with the instantaneous character of the application. She argues that the idea of creating content and directly posting it afterwards is a crucial component in the identity of Instagram.

When looking at the possibility of downloading images, Instagram shows different values compared to other SNSs, like Facebook or Twitter. Whereas downloading content can be done quite easily on other SNSs, there is no possibility to do so without making use of external websites or applications. The visual component and authenticity seem to be more valuable to Instagram’s user. In addition, users cannot contribute, share or make use of the work provided by others. Again, it can be said that Instagram’s User values authenticity more than users of other SNSs.

Lastly, when using the search function, Instagram brings the user to an ‘explore page.’ On this page, only the top shows the actual search bar. The rest of the page is filled with posts the user might like based on their behaviour. Instagram’s algorithm offers a personalised selection of posts and stories. These posts and stories come from profiles that the user does not follow at that time but are similar to the ones that the user already does follow and engage with (Canning, 2019). This feature offers the opportunity to easily find similar posts to the ones the user already likes. In the case of Instapoetry, this can strengthen the position and reach of Instapoems. In addition, prominent Instapoets will be more likely to set the tone for others Instapoets, as similar posts, e.g. in terms of layout, will be featured on this page.

### *Cognitive affordances*

When it comes to the labelling of different terms the platform seems to be rather straightforward. Uploads are called ‘posts,’ reactions to these posts are ‘comments,’ and people can ‘like’ a post. Compared to other SNSs, none of these tags add an extra layer of information or meaning to this specific platform. Interestingly, people who subscribe themselves to an account are called ‘followers’ and not ‘friends’ like Facebook, or ‘connections’ like LinkedIn. When looking more closely at the definition of the word ‘follower’ multiple definitions arise. Next to the definition associated with social media usage, a follower can be said to be “a person who supports and admires a particular person or set of ideas,” but also a “fan” or “devotee” (Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries, n.d.; Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary, n.d.). Compared to other SNSs, the term ‘followers’ implies a lot more distance between two users.

As a result of this distance, the idea that authors, like other well-known people, have a certain distance to their public is further enhanced. As a fan, one relies on the work produced by the person whom they follow. For a fan, there is little influence on the work that eventually will be produced. This suits the more traditional approach to authorship, where the author and the reader usually are not directly connected.

However, this implied distance between users could make it easier to follow people one might not know in person. Users do not have to befriend the people they choose to follow, so they can simply decide to follow a user based on the work they publish. As a result, there is a smaller gap to follow people whom one might not know. This makes it easier to follow people based on the content of their profile.

### *Sensory affordances*

Instagram’s design is very minimalistic. In the default design there is a white background and all the letters and drawings are in black; this is the light mode. If the phone settings of the user are set on dark mode, Instagram will automatically be presented in dark mode as well. In the dark mode, all white colours are black, and the letters and drawings are white. The only colours Instagram uses (apart from the colours in posts or profile pictures) are the coloured lines that are placed around unseen Stories. These colours represent Instagram’s logo and are a combination of yellow, orange, pink and purple. Notifications or unseen messages are highlighted by round red-orange badges. Because the colouring scheme of the platform is this minimal, the attention of the User will probably be automatically drawn to the parts where colouring is used, namely (unseen) user Stories and posts.

In addition, there are various icons that have different functionalities. On the top half of the screen, there is a camera icon to create a Story, Instagram’s logo to bring the user back to the start of the homepage and an icon that represents both an arrow as well as a folded plane to take the user to their DM’s. Furthermore, there are icons under every post to allow the user to like, respond or send a post to other users. There also is a bookmark-icon which allows the user to save a post. On the bottom half of the page, there are five different icons. These icons are used to take the user to the home screen, the search and explore page, to create a post, to show all the received likes and comments. The last icon is the user’s profile picture to take them to their own profile. Once again, this primary use of images instead of words or labels emphasises the importance of the visual aspect of the platform.

The auditive functionalities of the application largely depend on the smartphone settings. Videos instantly start playing if the user scrolls past the post, but the music only automatically joins if the phone settings are not muted. If a phone is muted, the user can decide to watch the video without sound, or to put the sound on by clicking on the post, or by turning the phone’s volume up or down.

From this discursive interface analysis, it can be said that Instagram’s primary focus is on the visual aspect of the application. Posts and (unseen) Stories are highlighted in the design, and the use of words to navigate is limited. In addition, auditive functionalities are secondary compared to the visual functionalities of the platform. Additionally, the User values authenticity and creative individuality. The implied distance between users can lead to a strengthened position for popular authors of Instapoetry, but it also makes it easier to connect to others based on their work.

## General analysis

### *Content*

Instagram is said by some to be a “vehicle through which the silenced might find a voice” (Miller, 2019, n.p.). These silenced include people “whose tastes have historically been dismissed as trivial or niche” (Bresge, 2018, n.p.), like women or people of colour. By using “language of equal rights,” (Miller, 2019, n.p.) minorities all over the world can identify themselves with the content of the Instapoem. Those Instapoets who are successful in addressing equality matters tend to be very successful overall as well (Miller, 2019). In addition, Miller (2019) states that most Instapoets write in a confessional mode. In this confessional mode, the private state and emotion of the poet are centralised. This is done by close self-examination and self-dramatisation. The confessional mode fits within the lyricisation of poetry as both (sub)genres evolve around one central figure. In the lyric, this is the lyric I, and within the confessional the speaker coincides with the writer of the poem and their personal view is presented (Poetry Foundation, n.d.).

However, the confessional mode seems to be highly gendered. Within the tradition of the confessional mode, the private sphere is closely tied to the female perspective as most male poets historically were recognized to move beyond “self-deprecations and self-assertions” to “larger, more objectivity formulated appraisals of God, humanity, society” (Gilbert, 1977, p. 444). Female confession, on the other hand, is historically tied to the domestic. As a result, this type of confessional poetry focusses on the private sphere. In the case of Instapoetry, poets like Kaur are said to take on a feminist confession. She adheres to the female confessional mode, while at the same time she also “seeks to trouble and subvert the limitations placed upon the identities of women, often by revelling in subject matter regarded as taboo, including a focus on menstruation, female desire, sexual violence, and abuse. (…) In these terms, the genre may ‘cater to specific needs’ arising from ‘the context of women’s recent cultural and political struggles’, implying that all women understand certain issues regarding their gender, e.g. feelings of oppression, fear and sacrifice. By addressing these sensitive issues, Instapoets seem to recognise that ‘women’s problems are not private but communal” (Miller, 2019, n.p.). In one of her poems, Kaur writes: “i stand / on the sacrifices / of a million women before me / thinking / *what can i do / to make this mountain taller / so the women after me / can see farther”* (March 5, 2020). This poem is an explicit example of this view on female-connectedness and the universality of female struggle. The feminist confessional poet is said to focus on the self while also speaking on behalf of the oppressed reader.

Interestingly, both male and female Instapoets seem to use this feminist take on Instapoetry as a lot of Instapoets seem to focus on the way in which women are presented online or treated in real life. Miller (2019) argues “there is close attention to the ways in which the bodies of women are surveilled and policed, and a rejection of forms of patriarchal containment and control” (n.p.). In addition, the female perspective is used a lot more than the male perspective. Frequently, this is in relations to (heterosexual) relationships. r.h. Sin (@r.h.sin, 1.9 million followers), for example, always presents himself to be on the woman’s side. In his posts he often writes about women who are hurt of have been mistreated by the actions of men. Sin even dedicates posts on apologising to women by saying, “I want to apologize on behalf of all the men who overlooked the magic that lives within your heart / You didn’t deserve to be treated that way and now you’re reading these words and at this point you realise that I am indeed talking directly to you” (April 21, 2020). He also addresses men who seem to criticise his perspective on gender roles by saying “dear weak inadequate men who are offended by the content here that encourages women / Fuck you / Your opinions and suggestions hold no weight or value” (April 7, 2020).

However, it seems questionable to what extent Instapoetry can be seen as truly female confessional poetry offered from a feminist view. The ultimate goal of the confessional mode is to lead to a deep self-examination and catharsis. The self is thoroughly examined and, in some ways, exposed to the audience. Miller (2019) argues that the language use within Instapoetry “in relation to the freedoms of women, [is] often expressed within passé romantic tropes and earnest faux feminism” and “is little more than cliché framing patriarchal control within a language of liberation and love” (n.p.). Strikingly, the female’s identity is closely tied to her relation to men and often presented by a “male-defined code of femininity” (Miller, 2019, n.p.). This male-defined code always connects women to elements of the natural world and a lot of Instapoets seem to be using these elements (Miller, 2019). Lang Leav (@langleav, 545 thousand followers), for example, writes “[t]he moon does not need the sun to tell her she is already whole” (February 24, 2020), Cleo Wade writes: “find someone / be their rock / (keep them grounded) / be their north star / (help them find their way) / let / them / be this / to you / too (January 3, 2020) and Kaur recurrently uses this kind of writing as well. Kaur also accompanies her poems with drawings of elements from nature.

Despite the seemingly shallowness of this form of feminist confession, Instagram does allow for voices of minorities to be heard. Although the algorithm and popularity of specific themes/designs can favour some posts over others, there are no hard restrictions in contributing to the genre of Instapoetry. This allows for new chances and perspectives to be shared, which is in line with Mill’s findings (1882) claiming that poetry serves as a way to share one’s self-exploration and findings about the self and the other.

### *Design*

As the primary focus of the platform is on the visuality, the way in which the poem is presented is of great importance (Van der Starre, 2019). There is great diversity in how different Instapoets present themselves on their profile pages. Whereas some Instapoets seem to only post Instapoems or other textual content, others also seem to value sharing more intimate and personal content.

When simply looking at Instapoems instead of the overall profile page it is striking that the Instapoet frequently adheres to a very minimalistic design.The design that is adopted by various Instapoets usually includes a white or neutral-coloured background with the text in either a handwritten form, a typewriter-font or a more standard and neutral font. Highly associated with older forms of writing, the typewriter can also be seen as a reference to the withstandingart of authorship. As Van der Starre (2019) states, the typewriter honours the art of poetry and emphasises the craftsmanship behind it. Kovalik and Curwood (2019) add that seems to be a “strong favoritism amongst poets for text and graphics” (p. 191). Furthermore, the use of video and audio in combination with Instapoetry seems not to be done frequently. According to Kovalik and Curwood (2019), “[this] reliance of text may reflect that traditional understandings of what constitutes poetry are being upheld amongst the young Instapoetry community, despite their willing adoption of a few multimodal elements” (p. 191-92). From this perspective, it can be argued that a lot of Instapoets use their knowledge of the poetic tradition in order to (visually) shape their own work as they acknowledge older forms and uses of poetry within the online sphere.

The design in most Instapoems also seems to perfectly fit the minimalistic and instantaneous character of the platform. The Instapoet seemingly focusses more on the message of the poem instead of how it looks. Nonetheless, Instapoets always need to make use of an external application or website in order to create their post as this cannot be done by only using Instagram. Whereas it seems that little effort goes into the process of designing the post, the Instapoet does need to perform multiple actions on various platforms in order to be able to post his/her work.

Lastly, it is striking that the use of interpunction and capitalisation varies greatly among different Instapoets. Rupi Kaur, for example, uses neither of these. Her posts do include some italicisation for titles or quotes, but that is all she does. Other Instapoets seem to switch between using interpunction and capitalisation, and some strictly adhere to the traditional rules of when to use interpunction and capitalisation.

### *Comment section*

An interesting part of Instapoetry is the importance of the comment section. The comment section functions as a tool for connectivity between writers and readers, but also fellow writers and fellow readers of Instapoetry. Some Instapoets use the comment section primarily to repeat the content of their poem or to add information, e.g. Tyler Knott Gregon (@tylerknott, 316 thousand followers) but also Lang Leav, who shares information about what inspired her to write a poem or in what circumstances she did. Others share more personal and intimate information about themselves in this section and therefore strengthen their own persona, e.g. Rupi Kaur and Nikita Gill (@nikita\_gill, 580 thousand followers). Many other Instapoets also use this section to promote their own work or to encourage their readers to start creating their own work. This shows that there is not a fixed use for this section. However, some patterns can be seen in how writers and readers use this feature of Instagram.

The comment section of Instagram creates a new dimension and tension in the bigger field of authorship. Communication patterns have changed rapidly due to the new dimension of connectivity offered by social media (Kovalik and Curwood, 2019) and within the comment section direct interaction between writers and readers is made possible. However, the Instapoet needs to bring two extreme opposites together, i.e. the chance to directly speak to any follower but simultaneously dealing with a global interest in readership. Because this number is not limited in a way as physical contact would be, the Instapoet needs to make deliberate choices on how to present them self. As a result, Instapoets seem to emphasise that there is a bond between themselves and their readers. Beau Taplin (@beautaplin, 660 thousand followers) always ends his message with “x love Beau.” Occasionally, Taplin likes or responds to a comment. However, when he does so, he does not necessarily respond in a way to start a conversation. Sometimes he only sends an emoticon or expresses feelings of love or gratitude towards his followers. When he does this, he frequently uses the first name of the specific user to address them e.g. “so grateful for you Leon boy” or “hope you’ve been happy lately Bruna x” (May 19, 2020). While it is very hard for Instapoets to personally respond to all comments on their post, most do strive to give the impression that they are closely connected to and involved with the lives of their readers. By providing the reader more information about themselves, the Instapoets can weaken the tension of the immensely high number of readers. By creating the feeling of a direct connection between the author and the reader, the Instapoet does not become estranged from their audience. This also works the other way around. Because of all the information provided by the Instapoet, the reader can also feel as if they really know the Instapoet.

Another way in which the comment section is used is by the application of a wide range hashtags. This is done by both writers as well as readers of Instapoetry. By doing so, they deliberately place themselves within a self-assigned framework of like-minded (aspiring) Instapoets or followers. Commonly used hashtags include #poetsofinstagram, #writersofinstagram, #poem, #poetry and #poetrycommunity. In addition, it creates a feeling of connectivity in an otherwise very individualistic platform. It helps to find a post and to connect to others who also place themselves within the same framework. As a result, well-established writers, aspiring writers and readers become connected. Within this community some Instapoets seem to deliberately emphasise a direct connection (Miller, 2019). The sense of community in Kaur’s work evolves around connectivity and sisterhood, leading to a “community of care” (Miller, 2019, n.p.). This community of care uses the rhetoric of sisterhood and care in order to create a sense of safety. In one of the captions Kaur emphasises the connectivity of vulnerability by saying “if anyone is in a vulnerable situation—then all of us are in a vulnerable situation” (April 6, 2020). By focussing on a shared identity, the boundaries between the individual and the other become less and a communal feeling is strengthened (Miller, 2019). Instead of destructive competition imposed by patriarchy, the focus is on learning from each other and building others up (Miller, 2019). This is clearly seen in one of Kaur’s other posts: “when one rises we all rise. when someone else wins it doesn’t mean we’ve lost. success doesn’t work like that. success multiplies. when we celebrate each other’s accomplishments we make the movement stronger. we make more space for all. we win more together” (October 8, 2019). In a PBS interview Kaur emphasises that her poetry was “never really intended to get into the literary world,” but that she writes it for the “17-year-old brown woman in Brampton who is not thinking about that space, who is just trying to live, survive, get through her day” (Kaur, 2018, n.p.) She adds: “a lot of the readers are young women who are experiencing really real things, and they’re not able to talk about it with maybe family or other friends, and so they go to this type of poetry to sort of feel understood and to have these conversations” (n.p.). From Kaur’s perspective, the power of Instapoetry and the community of care lies in the ability to express and share personal experiences and to learn from others. The safety that comes with this rhetoric as well as the exposure to similar posts by the use of both using hashtags as well as Instagram’s algorithm lead to a feeling of intimacy and connectivity. As a result, a safer environment is created (for minorities) to speak out and to contribute to genre.

Lastly, the community on Instagram can also be a valuable tool for readers only. As Kovalik and Curwood (2019) argue, the aesthetic and sense of community can empower young people to “consider their emotions and identities and reclaim power after mental health battles” (p. 190). The community of care brings like-minded people together. There are few residential limitations to this. As a result, people can share in their personal experiences worldwide. Especially regarding frequent recurring universal themes such as otherness and selfhood, but also cultural anxieties, trauma, abuse and relationships, this connectivity can be very useful to process certain (unpleasant) experiences.

# **Conclusion**

Despite its seemingly sudden and recent popularity and impact, Instapoetry does notactually replace any poetic genre nor function as a fully self-contained literary genre. It still emphatically draws upon conventions of lyric poetry and, particularly, to the confessional mode; thus, it seems to frequently recall the traditional forms and art of poetry writing. Within Instapoetry, however, there are many new ways of social interaction and self-presentation.

When looking at the Instapoetry, it can be seen that users of Instagram have a fairly traditional understanding of poetry. Numerous Instapoets make use of the conventions associated with the lyric genre. Additionally, the confessional mode is frequently used as well. Similar to lyric poems, Instapoems are relatively short and subjective. Within both genres, there is a focus on the self, or the lyric I, by means of self-examination and self-dramatisation. In addition, there are hardly any references to very specific people or places in Instapoetry. Most of the Instapoets seem to place their work within the framework of confessional poetry where one’s identity plays an important role. Because of this, the poems become more easily accessible and applicable to a wide audience. The focus of the Instapoet is more on the presentation of the inner feelings than on the technicalities of the poem itself.

Furthermore, the platform can be said to strengthen the minimalistic preference of the Instapoets. The length of the poem, for example, needs to be short in order to fit the technical measures of Instagram. In this way, it can be said that the platform is a force in shaping the poem. Thus, the output is essentially intertwined with Instagram’s functionalities and affordances. With the primary focus on visual elements, the presentation of the poem is a crucial element in Instapoetry. Even though the platform offers a wide range of functionalities to present one’s work, usually Instapoets seem to prefer a minimalistic and textual presentation. Despite having the availability of new ways of presentation, users tend to adhere to a traditional understanding of what poetry should be. Frequently recurring literary devices are the extensive use of imagery, odd interpunction and enjambement. Therefore, the Instapoet does seem to be aware of the visual presentation of their work but does not actively separate this from the traditional view on poetry. The Instapoet combines modern technologies and functionalities with the literary tradition.

Paradoxically, whereas it is fairly easy to post on Instagram, prominent authors are still put on a pedestal because of the algorithm used on the explore page. As a result, these prominent Instapoets set the tone for others. However, a similarity in design or used hashtags makes it easier for the aspiring Instapoet to connect their work to the influential Instapoet and therefore possibly gain more attention from readers compared to not having these options. Nonetheless, it remains hard as an individual to be acknowledged due to the enormous size of Instapoetry. Instapoetry still has a somewhat hierarchic structure, as having more followers means that one has more exposure. Again, by doing so, the platform’s algorithm decides who gets more exposure and therefore who is worth connecting to in order to gain more exposure as aspiring Instapoet.

Eventually, the role of the platform, the user and the poetic genre come together in the platform’s ability to strengthen a connectedness amongst its users. The community of Instapoetry seems to focus on creating a safe space for minorities. From a female perspective, a community of care arises in which one of the most important features is to develop one’s literary skills within this community instead of creating a competitive atmosphere. For users of Instagram, the online community can be regarded as a way to connect to like-minded people. The safety of the community of care is crucial for this strong position of Instagram’s user as this also allows for minorities to connect and share their experiences. The dereferentialisation and timelessness both found in the lyric as well as in Instapoetry help in achieving this goal, as it makes it easier to relate to the poem. Traumas, taboo subjects and personal emotions are being shared fairly openly, and because of the safe connectedness, these ‘difficult’ subjects become more and more acceptable to discuss. As a result, people can become more connected, despite the suggested distance in Instagram’s terminology.

Due to the limitations of this research, it remains difficult to make claims about the full impact of Instapoetry. This is partly because within this thesis, only a few prominent Instapoets have been looked at. Next to these Instapoets there are also users who publish anonymously or those who do have a high number of followers but are not verified by Instagram. However, what can be said at this moment about Instagram is that it provides new opportunities for people to create and share their work. As a result, the publication of poetry is no longer restricted to a limited number of people. Instapoetry seems to positively influence the overall interest in poetry and seems to be more inclusive than other forms of poetry.

While not excessively used yet, this creates new forms and ways in which poetry might be shaped in the future. Instagram certainly allows for a more dynamic, interactive take on poetry. The ease and importance of the connectedness within the online community are what gives Instapoetry a new dimension compared to other forms of poetry and makes it easier for people to contribute to the wider field of poetry, regardless of their background. Thus, the platform could eventually lead to less elitist and more inclusive take on authorship while still maintaining parts of the literary tradition. Because readers and writers are closely connected within a safe environment, there is room to openly discuss and process taboo subjects. If Instapoetry survives the test of time, it could lead to new ways writing, reading and experiencing poetry and this might create a bright new future for poetic involvement and author diversity.

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