

21 Platforms and Poetry as a Popular Form of Engagement

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In 2019, *The New Republic* declared “instapoet” Rupi Kaur the “writer of the decade” (Alam 2019), an announcement signifying that contemporary literary culture is in a state of flux, as current understandings of authorship, audience, publication, and literature itself stretch across digital and analogue spaces. American journalist and author Rumaan Alam maintains that Kaur, and Indian-born Canadian poet, “understands better than most of her contemporaries how future generations will read” (2019). Specifically, her “achievement as an artist is the extent to which her work embodies, formally, the technology that defines contemporary life: smartphones and the internet” (2019). Alam’s praise for Kaur, however, is undercut by derisive comments about her style of poetry: her verse is sparse, deploys the rhetoric of self-help, and is led by a confessional quality that mark her poems “easy to dismiss” (2019). Such a divisive editorial piece, which simultaneously celebrates and denigrates the poet, highlights the complexity of the reluctance, and uneasiness currently felt in contemporary Euro-Western society about the convergence of digital and print poetic forms as a result of traditional literary ecosystems colliding with **social media platforms**. Nevertheless, the resurgence of poetry as a popular form of engagement productively highlights the literary sphere’s convergence with the world of social media entertainment. Though certainly not an exhaustive list, this article explains how aspects of **platformization** related to **self-branding**, participatory functions, accessibility, and transnational affordances have been significant mobilizers moving and evolving poetry into the world of popular culture. Through the innovations of social media platforms, poetry has once again become a popular form of engagement.

Social Media Poetry

One of the most recognizable forms of social media poetry is “instapoetry,” which will be the primary form under consideration in this chapter. The word “instapoetry” is a neologism that combines this social-media-born genre of poetry with the instantaneity afforded by social media platforms themselves. Throughout the 2010s, besides Kaur, a growing

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number of poets writing in English (e.g. Najwa Zebian, Tenille Campbell [Dene/Métis], Cleo Wade, Lang Leav, Nikita Gill, R.H. Sin, and others) began sharing their poetry on platforms such as Tumblr, Twitter, and most commonly Instagram, acquiring the nickname “instapoets” after the form attracted widespread popularity among online audiences. In releasing creative productions directly to Instagram, these poets have bypassed traditional publishing routes to connect with national and international audiences. Instagram is understood by its average user as a photo- and video-based social media platform. The Meta-owned site hosts over two billion active accounts globally as of December 2021 (*Statista* 2022). Poetry on Instagram is also shaped by the formal combination of visual, textual, and paratextual affordances of the platform itself. The form is typically known for its visual nature, short, epigrammatic verse, rhetorical and technical simplicity, and attachment to self-help culture, though these qualities are not necessarily prescriptive (see Figure 21.1). Though initially written and formatted for social media, instapoetry has since captured the attention of publishers and penetrated the print book market. In practice, social media poetry should be understood in the context of the convergence of digital- and print-based poetry, as traditional and new media forms diverge and intersect.

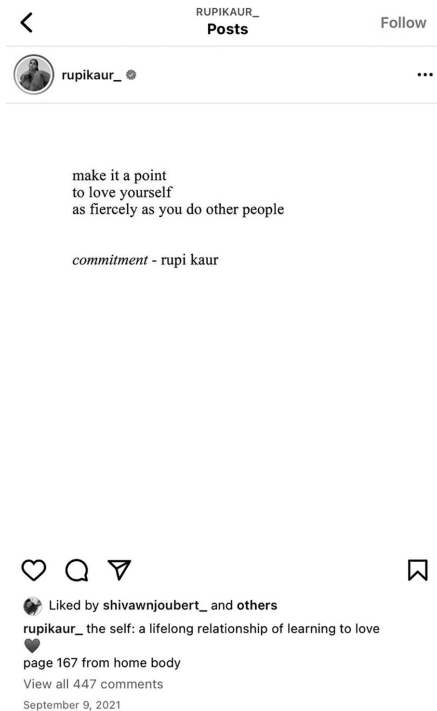


Figure 21.1 An example of a social media poem written by Rupi Kaur.

A Rise in Poetry Sales

There are statistics that show the extent of the impact that Instagram-based poetry has made on popular English-language poetry sales. According to BookNet Canada, in 2018, “for the second year in a row, unit sales in the poetry category increased significantly. In 2016, poetry sales increased by 79% over 2015, and between 2016 and 2017 the units sold increased by another 154%.” Similar narratives have come out of the United States and the United Kingdom. In 2018, The NPD Group reported that 47% of poetry books sold in the U.S. in 2017 were written by “instapoets.” While it might seem as though the digital orientation of instapoetry alone is responsible for the sudden rise of poetry sales, it is important to heed that advances in communication technologies have impacted how literature is written, published, and read for decades. Yet such significant changes in the popularity of poetry did not occur at once with the emergence of computers, the Internet, fax machines, or other technologies.

In 2003, for an editorial piece in *Newsweek Magazine*, Bruce Wexler wrote that “it is difficult to imagine a world without movies, plays, novels and music, but a world without poems doesn’t have to be imagined” (2003, 18). Just over one decade later, however, poetry has seemingly resurged everywhere in the world of popular culture in digital and analogue spaces. The staggering statistics underline that social media platforms, in particular, are changing how we create, share, and read literature—as best witnessed through the resurrection of poetry as a mainstream, best-selling literary form and a popular and accessible mode of engagement. These statistics also indicate that popular audiences of poetry are changing, too, given the influx of new readerships enjoying, consuming, and buying this poetry: “[T]hrough social media, traditional models of poetry are dismantled, notions of the traditional reader challenged, and the definition of poetry itself is up for radical reconsideration” (Jani 2017). Young poets are writing prolifically and taking up space in society—both online and offline. Yet the widespread popularity of social media poetry has sparked polarizing debates not only among literary scholars, critics, and audiences concerning literary merit and high/low culture but also in relation to racism, Euro-Western gatekeeping, and issues of social class. With social media blamed for “reinventing poetry” as “short-form communication” (Watts 2018, 14), what constitutes “real” poetry has come up for debate under the auspices of platformization.

Platformization

If it is not the advances of communications technologies alone that have catapulted poetry back into the domain of popular culture, then what is responsible? It is important to understand that it is not one thing alone that has sparked the resurgence of some poetry as a form of popular

culture, but rather a complex system of interrelated changes related to the rise of platforms and platform-based forms of cultural production. To define the present situation, the proliferation of poetry on social media points to the wider trend of what Anne Helmond calls “platformization”: “the rise of the platform as the dominant infrastructural and economic model of the web” (2015, 1). Platforms are typically understood as simple technological tools or social spaces that allow people “to do things online: chatting, sharing, commenting, dating, searching, buying stuff, listening to music, watching videos, hailing a cab, and so on” (Dijck et al. 2018, 10). But platforms are highly regulated, powerful systems that control, limit, and sensor users and the flow of cultural production (Cotter and Reisdorf 2020, 748; Dijck et al. 2018, 10; Gillespie 2015, 1). They are not irrelevant to the social dynamics they support, but rather, they “hide a system whose logic and logistics are about more than facilitating: they actually shape the way we live and how society is organized” (Dijck et al. 2018, 10). In this context, aiming to understand the implications of the platformization of popular poetry shows that there are numerous changes related to the presentation of the text; its participatory nature; authorly labour, self-presentation and identity; and also concerning methods of publishing and transnational forms of literary circulation, literacy, and readerly communities.

Working with Helmond’s term, David Nieborg and Thomas Poell argue that platformization affects the cultural industries, too, and “can be defined as the penetration of *economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions* of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems, fundamentally affecting the operations of the cultural industries” (2018, 4276). In *Platforms and Cultural Production*, Poell, et al. point out that “while platforms regularly generate new genres and engender diverse business models, it is also clear that they constrain the *creative* process in various ways” (2022, 7). Cultural production across sectors and genres of all sorts have been impacted: podcasting, music streaming, live streaming, and social media content creation are just some of the novel creative productions that have emerged due to platformization. While these might seem like completely new types of media, they are ultimately extensions of older, traditional media such as film, television, music, and literature. Stuart Cunningham and David Craig define this sphere of digital cultural production as “**social media entertainment (SME).**” This new, globalized screen media industry is in large part fueled by content creators who develop platform-dependent careers to connect with an audience and expand their cultural and economic reach (Cunningham and Craig 2019 5). At the same time, SME operates independently, convergently, and disruptively with older media industries – like the publishing or literary awards industries, for example. Poetry, too, has been affected by this widespread platformization: the digitally enabled rise of instapoetry as a particularly popular genre of poetry supported by Instagram points to how social media platforms are changing aspects of literary production. While this list

is not exhaustive, here are some of the ways in which instapoetry represents how literature is being “platformized” and why it has contributed to the resurgence of poetry as a mainstream form of engagement.

Self-Branding

Communications scholar Alice Marwick points out that self-branding is one of the key elements to succeeding commercially on social media: “[t]he idea of turning yourself into a brand is now presented as an essential Web 2.0 strategy, and is firmly instilled in modern business culture” (2013, 164). And through social media, the process of self-branding has become accessible to many without the help of the larger media powers. In their work on the “selfie” as a composite visual and verbal text, Toni Eagar and Stephen Dann argue, for instance, that “the self has become commodified for all through technology. Individuals who were excluded from human branding performance because of the traditional media’s control of access to production can now create a mediated human-brand image” (2016, 1836). With the advances of social media, “the internet allows noncelebrities to build and display an image of themselves to a mass audience without the power ascribed by fame” (Eagar and Dann 2016, 1837). Through this conscious process of self-branding, which “requires creating a persona, producing content, and strategically appealing to online fans by being ‘authentic’” (Marwick 2013, 114), instapoets are able to manufacture their own microcelebrity personas to gain the attention of fans. Coincidentally, Lili Pâquet argues that “Instagram poets can amass followers on their sites by branding themselves in certain ways, using not only poetry but also selfies” that construct a certain public persona (2019, 297). In their capacity as microcelebrities, instapoets foster intimate relationships with their readers that increase engagement by turning their lives into a brand that is congruent with the values their poetry purports to represent (see Figure 21.2). The poet’s online persona becomes enmeshed with their poetry, and also functions as a way to self-publicize their writing.

Participatory Functions

Instagram offers interactive features like commenting, tagging, direct messaging, and sharing that enable instantaneous virtual communication among users from different locations (Kumar et al. 2021; Ty 2018), turning the reading of poetry into a participatory, community-oriented activity. As literary scholars Bronwyn Williams and Amy A. Zenger write, “[d]igital technologies allow individuals to sample and remix popular culture content, write back to popular culture producers, and connect with fellow fans from around the corner and around the world” (2012, 2). As a space of participatory culture, social media poetry engages readers in a way that is more intimate and immediate than what the traditional model of publishing allows. Participatory culture is a term coined

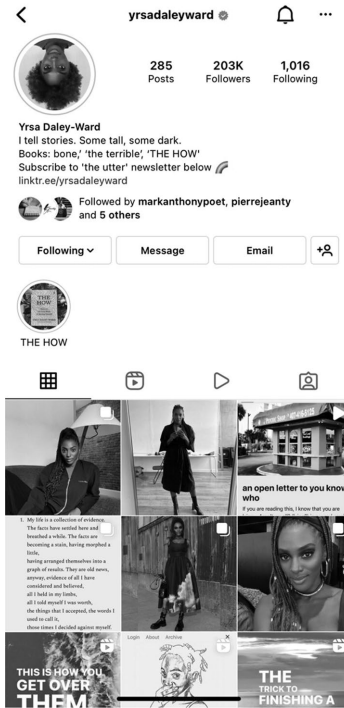


Figure 21.2 An example of instapoet Yrsa Daley-Ward’s Instagram feed, featuring personal photographs, book publicity, and personal reflections that create a uniform self-brand that becomes associated with the poetry itself.

by Henry Jenkins to describe most commonly online cultures where fans interact with each other as well as with creative productions and the users who made them. This new participatory matrix essentially creates digital poetry fandoms positioned around texts uploaded to Instagram. Readers can leave comments, tag others, engage directly with the author and other readers, and so forth, that foster growing fandom communities of readers and consumers. Rahma Sugihartati suggests that “people who are part of the online fandoms do not just understand the popular cultural texts they are font of and consume; they also interpret, and produce meaning and new cultural texts as a form of expression” (2020, 307). Such participatory functions allow for reading and cultural communities to flourish into popular spaces of interaction and consumption around poetry as a pleasure activity.

Accessibility

The logic of the social networking site necessitates that social media poetry fits within its cultural constrains in order to be uploaded to the

platform, receive visibility, and attract an audience. As a visual form, textual and literary considerations are often governed by aesthetic principles: material conditions fundamentally require that poems on Instagram are uploaded as a picture file that fits within standardized photographic dimensions, such as 1:1 among other traditional photographic aspect ratios. Such size restrictions necessitate that length be adjusted for the poem to fit on the platform's interface. The logistical basis is that instapoets have a short time to pique their readers' curiosity: instapoems compete with other images in both the user-curated and algorithmically-sorted explore feeds that feature influencers and other creators, gourmet meals, photo shoots, fashion, selfies, memes, exotic travels, and more. For this reason, James Mackay writes, social media poets are often described in derisive terms that undercut their work's emphasis on "emotional honesty and direct statement over figurative language, complex symbolism, or even metaphor: confessionalism shorn of craft" (2020, 240). While it is true that this line of poetry can be intentionally unambiguous in order to attract readers by evoking an immediate emotional response, this is in itself a particular type of aesthetic constraint suited to the medium, and not necessarily deserving of such harsh criticism. On Instagram, for example, poems are usually written in short free verse and simple language in order to simultaneously emphasize the beautiful appearance of the poem as a piece of visual media alongside its sentimental textual message, blending both the lexical and the textual. Based on this criteria, this form of poetry deviates from conventional understandings of poetry as a "high art" form containing the formal elements of structure, rhythm, meter, imagery, and so forth. As literary scholar Aarthi Vadde observes, social media poets "operate outside the professional literary circles that dictate prestige" (2017, 38). As the logic of the platform influences the poetry to be more accessible, its popularity has increased among the masses – average users who turn to social media for entertainment.

Transnational Dimensions

An important aspect of social media is that it allows literary productions to travel across the platform to users in disparate locations with an ease and ubiquity that is much easier and cheaper than what the traditional model of publishing allows. Eleanor Ty points out, for instance, that social media "has enabled instantaneous sharing of information and images, and communication between people in different geographical locations" (2018, 213). A poem produced in one country can be shared and read in other countries around the world that have access to that particular platform within minutes. These transnational dimensions have allowed poems to reach audiences much more quickly, not to mention attracting audiences from many different locations. Authors interact with readers in countless geographical locations, and fandoms are made up of readers across regional, national, and even linguistic lines that support transnational networks of readers and innovative modes of literacy that

collapse under the category of the nation-state. Rather, “[t]he global expansion of the Internet through networked devices is enabling emerging cultures of production that are revealing new webs and patterns of cultural affinity based on language, culture, and region” (Kumar et al. 2021, 171). The international parameters of virtual spaces, at the level of the platform, conceptualize cultural production within and between a network of many interconnected national borders – which is fundamentally changing how texts circulate in the digital sphere, undermining “notions of national identity and culture as the primary organizing category for cultural circulation” (2021, 171). The transnational dimensions of these participatory texts forge large communities of international readers in online spaces that trouble national frameworks of literature, and allow creative productions to spread and multiply across countries to create mass cultural networks of readers.

Conclusion

As the platform model becomes more fully integrated into the digital literary sphere, it is clear that the innovations of social media have helped turn poetry into a form of popular engagement. Platform affordances have supported the revival of some poetry, like social media poetry, into a popular cultural phenomenon. What constitutes “real” poetry is up for debate, however, as the rising popularity of poetry has re-ignited beliefs that poetry is an elite form of literature – a category to which social media poets should not belong, some critics argue, for their craft is too commercial, too popular, to be aligned with traditional poetry. Arguably, social media poets are one of the most diverse groups of poets. Future research that intersects with gender and sexuality studies, race studies, or globalization studies, for example, should be discussed to analyze how these digital spaces challenge or exacerbate systemic inequalities that mirror the realities of social life beyond the digital platform. Just as other industries have been affected by platformization – news, fashion, and music industries, for example – poetry, too, is being affected and must be examined through a critical, platform-centric framework.

Key Words

Social Media Platforms: Social media platforms are apps and programs that enable social and public interaction, and the sharing of ideas, information, and creative productions. As platforms, they function as digital structures that support applications, businesses, and a wide range of corresponding ecosystems.

Self-Branding: The act of marketing oneself as a brand is self-branding, usually involving the development of a distinct public persona that communicates their lifestyle, values, and authentic personality traits.

Platformization: Platformization is the influence of platforms in re-shaping and re-directing various aspects of virtually all cultural industries not only in form, content, or appearance, but in the realm of distribution, production, and reception, too (Helmond 2015; Poell et al. 2022).

Social Media Entertainment (SME): a new globalized screen media industry comprising a digital ecology of content creators, platforms, interactive cultural productions, engaged audiences, and more. (Cunningham and Craig 2019). SME often intersects with older, more established industries, like the publishing industry and other literary ecosystems (Holm 2022).

Critical Thinking Questions

- 1 What other aspects of social media do you think are responsible for re-igniting a mass cultural interest in poetry as a form of popular engagement?
- 2 What are some of the negative repercussions of the platformization of poetry? While this article raised some of the basic points of platformization, what do we make of labour practices, algorithms, censorship, and so forth?
- 3 This chapter has mainly focused on the digital aspect of social media poetry. How do we grapple with the digital and analogue dichotomies of social media poetry than goes on to become a print publishing phenomenon?

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