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Picture perfect poetry:

How the curated medium of Instagram affects the new poetic subgenre 'instapoetry' and how instapoet Rupi Kaur's poetry reflects her self-branding and social media presence.

Bachelor's thesis in English

Supervisor: Hania Musiol

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on ‘instapoetry’ as a genre, Instagram as a social medium and how Instagram influences popular instapoet Rupi Kaur’s poetry regarding the poem’s themes using the research of Pâquet, Manning and Banet-Weiser in addition to articles from popular culture magazines. Specifically, it examines the marketing and self-branding of Kaur, the cyber-sisterhoods created in her Instagram comment section as well as Kaur’s use of unifying language in her poetry. It concludes with an assessment of how Kaur’s online persona influences the subgenre of instapoetry and how Instagram influences Kaur as a poet.

Denne oppgaven har som mål å utforske ‘instapoesi’ som poetisk sjanger, Instagram som sosialt medium og hvordan Instagram påvirker den populære instapoeten Rupi Kaur sin poesi hva gjelder temaene i denne typen poesi ved å konsultere faglitteratur av Pâquet, Manning og Banet-Weiser i tillegg til artikler fra populærkulturelle nettmagasiner. Rent spesifikt utforsker denne oppgaven markedsføringen og ‘brandingen’ av Kaur, dannelsen av såkalte ‘cyber-søsterskap’ i hennes kommentarfelt samt Kaur sin bruk av samlende litterært språk i sin poesi. Den konkluderer med å ta for seg hvordan Kaur sin tilstedeværelse på nett påvirker instapoesi som poetisk sjanger og hvordan Instagram påvirker Kaur som poet.

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Introduction

What is instapoetry and how did it grow to become its own poetic subgenre? It all started with its unconventional publishing platform; Instagram. In October 2010 the world of social media changed forever with the launch of a new image-based social network that offered something new and fresh with its focus on photography (Manning 265) and separated itself from the likes of Twitter and Facebook. The shift from text-heavy content to visual input altered the way in which social media users chose to present themselves to the world through their accounts. Though Facebook and Twitter had allowed users to post pictures, image-based Instagram became a platform where ordinary people could present themselves as they wished and subsequently receive praise in the form of ‘likes’ and comments. Instapoetry as a phenomenon developed not long after the launch of Instagram and the origin of the poetic subgenre is often credited to Indian-Canadian Rupikaur (Banet-Weiser 141; Manning 268; Pâquet 297). Kaur has posted poetry on the social media site since 2013 and rose to fame in March 2015 after a picture she posted of herself in bloodstained trousers went viral in an attempt to combat the taboo subject of menstruation (Manning 268). The picture was taken down two times by Instagram for breaking community guidelines and the backlash Instagram faced simultaneously launched Kaur’s career and popularity (Manning 268-269).



Figure 1

She branded herself as a social media activist and *poet-artist* (Noel 545), unapologetically feminist and unafraid of taboo topics (Pâquet 298). Her poetry reviews and discusses themes of romantic and family relationships, gender inequality and racial injustice all of which resonate with her target audience of young women, often of color. (Pâquet 305). Like many other popular instapoets, Kaur is a young woman of color who addresses current events and themes of racial injustice, gender inequality, and personal relationships in an effort to normalize taboo topics. Her background as a Sikh Indian immigrant (Pâquet 297) directly impacts her poetry and she has often written about the South Asian immigration experience, a topic which has been historically underrepresented in literature. These young female poets of color, and Kaur in particular, represent a marginalized group who have previously been silenced, giving their peers a voice in the public sphere. Their Instagram grids often function as ‘safe havens’ for other women of color (Lee qtd. in Manning 273), providing support and protection for their followers. Instagram itself has been criticized for promoting Eurocentric beauty standards and subsequently upholding white, cis-gendered archetypes of beauty which excludes large portions of the social media site’s users (Banet-Weiser 143). Interestingly, Kaur simultaneously confronts and upholds these beauty standards through her self-branding, juxtaposing her poetry and her stylized selfies and portraits.

This thesis explores how Instagram as a publishing platform and its norms affects instapoetry and how Rupri Kaur’s poetry reflects her self-branding and social media presence. First, I will present Rupri Kaur as an instapoet and examine how her additional role of influencer might affect her main role as a poet. Next, I will review the norms of Instagram and how they affect the instapoets’ self-branding and curation of their Instagram grids, focusing on Rupri Kaur. Lastly, I will analyze three poems by Kaur that have been printed in her poetry collections and later posted on her Instagram grid by applying close reading and examining how they correspond to her relationship with her audience. I will conclude by assessing Instagram’s influence on Kaur’s poetry and discuss why it is important to explore instapoetry and the impact it has on its audience.

Instapoets act as influencers as well as poets, primarily in the way they market their work but also in the way they brand themselves and their personal lives. Instapoets, as other influencers, are expected to keep up with the demand for social media input and their poetry often mirror current events as they happen in real time. As a direct result of this and its ever-

evolving publishing platform, instapoetry is in constant flux, continuously changing along with society. The genre's adaptability has become one of its strengths, acting as one of the reasons for its popularity online. Although instapoetry has proven very popular online amongst its audiences, as a subgenre it has been overlooked and discredited by literary scholars for being too 'simple' and outright bad (Pâquet 311; Manning 264). This highbrow notion of poetry having to be difficult and complicated in order to be considered good implies that instapoets and their audiences are simple and 'lesser than', subsequently upholding conservative ideas of poetry and cultural leisure being reserved for the rich and educated. As Pâquet explains, this elitist view maintains "damaging binaries" that disregards instapoetry's cultural impact (302). The polarizing effect instapoetry has had in the literary, and particularly poetic, community highlights these conservative views on the emergence of the unconventional poetic form.

Seeing as this poetic subgenre is still very young the literature is naturally quite limited. Because of this, the literature is fairly recent and therefore reliable, as the literature develops in real time with the development of the genre. However, as technology and the world of social media is in constant development, instapoetry and the academics have to keep up with this evolution. I have consulted mainly peer reviewed journal articles to ensure the material is accurate and up to date. Additionally, I have examined articles from popular culture magazines for additional material due to this being such a recent field of study. The magazine articles add new perspectives and give us an understanding of how this subgenre is met by its fans and critics alike. Academic journals written by literary scholars Lili Pâquet, Maria Manning and Sarah Banet-Weiser as well as an abstract of Kate Eichhorn's book *Content* have been my main sources in this thesis on which I have based most of my arguments on. These scholars have focused specifically on instapoets and Instagram as a poetry publishing platform, opening up a debate on whether the poets reflect authenticity or not through their social media presence. I, however, have strained from discussing authenticity to a large extent simply because it would be impossible to prove authenticity in a small thesis like this with no real opportunity to do my own research. Instead, I aim to investigate how Instagram as a publishing platform influences the instapoets and the poetry itself through its norms and set standards.

Chapter 1: Instapoets and the many hats they wear

In this chapter I explore how Rupi Kaur connects with her audience through her additional role as influencer by looking at her self-branding and the themes of her poetry. The emergence of ‘cyber-sisterhoods’ in the comment section of her Instagram grid is reviewed in relation to the different roles of her online persona.

Content creators known as ‘instapoets’ are often women of color, a marginalized group that has previously been, and still are, undermined and ignored in society and the public sphere (Manning 269; 272). Manning argues that Instagram poetry offers young women of color a platform that they have previously been denied through silencing and oppression (269). As she points out, this marginalized group has been underrepresented both in the literary world and on social media and in the press, especially in terms of the opportunity to represent themselves and their stories (Manning 273). A lot of the instapoets’ poems often address the oppression, abuse and discrimination women of color have experienced at the hands of white people and men for centuries. As Manning points out, because this marginalized group has previously been silenced and refused a platform to express their art, the fact that Instagram now offers them a platform which aids oppressed voices and their personal experiences, facilitates new conversations (Manning 272-273). Seeing as these are lived experiences being put into writing (Manning 272-273), one could argue the level of authenticity does increase thus resonating with an oppressed audience. In fact, writers and poets of color are often assumed and expected to write autobiographically to reflect their battles (Noel 544). However, one could raise the question on whether being authentic is even important. Poetry itself has never been weighed down by a demand for authenticity, so one could ask if instapoetry is any different. One could argue the need for authenticity in instapoetry because of the poets’ social media presence and the way they capitalize off their followers, and there is a definite need for a genuine relationship between the influencer and the influenced in order for the relationship to be profitable. However, this is not necessarily something which has to affect the poems themselves because poetry allows the reader to embody the poems and thus make their own readings based on their previous experiences (Constantine 8). Therefore, one could argue against a requirement for authenticity in Instagram poetry.

In addition to their roles as poets, instapoets also act as influencers and life coaches exemplified by the role Rupi Kaur has taken on. These poets need to be social media savvy and marketable in addition to being gifted writers. Poets who publish their poetry ‘traditionally’ in printed works are made to market themselves and promote themselves in a different way and to a lesser extent rely on creating a brand of their own personal self. When it comes to instapoets and influencers, every aspect of the person is marketed in order to create a brand that resonates with their target audience. Kaur’s brand is marketed to convey a feeling of gaining a virtual ‘older sister’ when you follow her, a cool and loving maternal figure who validates your feelings and ensures you are not alone in your trauma. She replies to her audience’s comments on her Instagram and is thus more directly present in her readers’ lives than ‘traditional’¹ poets, strengthening her relationship with them with every post she posts.

All published authors have managers and marketing teams who work closely with them and strategize their moves in order to profit financially, and ‘traditional’ poets have the ‘privilege’ and freedom of allowing themselves to act just as poets and not influencers. Influencers’ personas on social media platforms are constructed from marketing strategies designed to convey certain chosen attributes to attract certain groups and capitalize off them. In an interview with *Rolling Stone Magazine*, Kirsty Melville, the president and publisher of Rupi Kaur’s publishing agency Andrews McMeel Publishing, said “[i]n this digital world where content marketing is this sort of buzzword, Rupi is the content and it doesn’t need the marketing” (Carlin, “Meet Rupi Kaur”). However, as all other major influencers, Rupi Kaur employs a marketing team who manage her social media and promotes her and her work as a full-time job (Eichhorn, “The rise of insta-artists”). One could consider this statement from Melville as an attempt to distance Kaur from the marketing strategies of Instagram, in an effort to separate Kaur’s role as a poet from her role as an influencer. However, for instapoets these roles often intertwine and are hard to separate because the roles directly affect each other. By understanding instapoets’ additional roles as influencers as constant, one could better understand the poetry itself. Kaur’s poetry is exclusively comprised of descriptions of collective experiences and trauma experienced by her and her audience, which gains more attraction and interaction on her social media.

¹ The word ‘traditional’ is in this context used to describe ‘non-instapoets’; poets who post their poetry through print and not directly on social media.

Instapoets distinguish themselves from other poets by acting as influencers and life coaches through their self-branding. Instapoets are social media savvy and have to be hyper-aware of opportunities of profit and capitalization by being available and approachable at all times. While ‘traditional’ poets just focus on being poets, instapoets experience more pressure to post which in turn can lead to both hastily and shallow poetry and the repetition of already published pieces. This pressure can culminate into an oversaturation of poetry in real-time in an attempt to stay relevant. Instapoets often write and post poetry relating to major events as they happen, as well as repost existing poetry and contextualize it in Instagram’s ‘caption’ feature to fit the conversation on current events. Contemporary poet Warsan Shire’s poem “What They Did Yesterday Afternoon” dealing with war crimes and conflict in Kenya and Somalia (Giovanni, “The problem”) is a good example of this recontextualization. A specific part of Shire’s poem went viral on social media after the Paris bombings in November 2015 (Giovanni, “The problem”; Agodon, “A poet explores”), interestingly relating the poem to attacks on Western countries by non-white terrorists rather than its intended meaning.

Warsan Shire as a poet is interesting to discuss in this context because she refrains from defining herself as an instapoet. She has published her poetry traditionally as printed works but has also had her poetry posted on social media, and Instagram particularly, by fans (Giovanni, “The problem”). As pointed out in a BuzzFeed News article, Shire’s poetry has received more critical acclaim than Kaur’s (Giovanni, “The problem”). Is this because Shire purposefully distances herself from Instagram and instapoetry? If that is the case, this upholds the highbrow notion of poetry and art being reserved for the rich and educated - preserving poetry as something that needs to be dissected and thoroughly analyzed in order to be considered worthy of critical acclaim. Kaur has stated that her poetry is meant to be accessible and straightforward, rather than perceived as simplistic and ‘easy’ (Carlin, “Meet Rupi Kaur”). As Pâquet argues, the use of less rigid and unconfined language can actually give the poets and their work more credibility, and in turn resonate more with their audiences (309). The common characteristics of instapoetry such as nature metaphors and motifs, line breaks and the use of exclusively lowercase letters all contribute to the unpretentious ‘vibe’ of the genre (Pâquet 302). Because Kaur presents herself as unpretentious and more genuine in the delivery of her art, she connects with her audience and in turn generates a bigger profit. Her

self-branding as ‘the older sister you never had’ causes the building of cyber-‘communities’ in her comment sections on her social media, solidifying her strong bond with her audience.

Poetic sisterhoods

Because Kaur and other female poets of color resonate with oppressed young women (often of color), their comment sections are safe spaces where young women can share past experiences and trauma and find support in each other and the poet (Manning 273). These collective online spaces of acceptance facilitate strong bonds of sisterhood and strengthen not only the followers’ bond with the poet but also their loyalty towards her (Manning 273). As Manning argues, many women of color tend to choose sharing their personal experiences within these cyber-sisterhoods over keeping their anonymity online (273), evidently proving how important these online ‘safe havens’ are for marginalized groups in need of healing. In April of 2022, Rupi Kaur was interviewed by ABC News in America regarding her book *Milk and Honey* being put on a list of suggested banned books in the state of Texas in America. The reasoning for the attempted ban of *Milk and Honey* was “suggestive artwork and poems that discuss sexuality and domestic abuse” (Rojas, “5 banned books”). On April 22nd, Kaur herself posted a clip of her television appearance on her Instagram grid which garnered over half a million views and over 50.000 likes in just seven hours (Instagram/rupikaur_). Under



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rupikaur_ over the last few months parts of texas and oregon have banned or attempted to ban 'milk and honey' from schools and libraries. why? because it explores sexual assault and violence experienced by a young woman.

the banning of 'milk and honey' along with an ever growing list of literature is dangerously terrifying. banning books is the banning of culture and experiences for everybody.

i think about who i was at 21-years-old when i published 'milk and honey'. before this book reached your hands and sold millions of copies my proudest memories were and still are- young women and men who used this book as a safe haven from their own experiences of sexual assault. it's sad this safe haven is now restricted from them.

in the words of one parent from oregon fighting to keep 'milk and honey' on shelves:

"you all want to protect your children from a measly little book but not the situations it touches on. let the students read if they want they are old enough to be aware of the

Figure 2



Figure 3

the post hundreds of followers commented in solidarity with Kaur and many commented that the book in question had helped them work through their own trauma after experiencing sexual assault and violence (Instagram/rupikaur_).

This emphasizes the sisterhood-culture created by Kaur and other instapoets on their Instagram pages, allowing for safe spaces for young women to lean on each other and on the poets. The fact that these women feel safe enough to open up about personal trauma online for the world to see, enforces the notion of the ‘public safe space’ often found in instapoets’ comment sections. Furthermore, that *Milk and Honey* might be banned is not necessarily a bad thing for Rupi Kaur, because she is an instapoet and her poetry is already available online. Furthermore, the attention and solidarity she has been met with could prove to further increase her popularity and in turn increase her profit. As a young woman of color being censored, she is simultaneously undermined and uplifted by opposite groups of people, acting as a polarizing figure in a highly polarized world. As evident from the debate on suggested banned books, the mere presence of her poetry is perceived as threatening by conservative politicians and voters, arguably underlining the need for representation of minorities and other marginalized groups. Demonstrated by her followers’ interaction in her Instagram comment sections, Kaur’s social media presence and literary work directly contributes to the healing of past trauma experienced by these marginalized groups and thus proves the need for such voices in the public sphere. Through her online persona she virtually resonates with her audience on a personal level further emphasized by her curated posts on her Instagram grid.

As Pâquet points out, instapoetry is heavily influenced by self-help literature (296-297). The combination of poetry and self-help literature culminates into a subgenre consisting of ekphrastic metaphors, distinctive line breaks and specific themes (Manning 267). Themes of self-invention, inner healing and inner beauty dominate instapoetry just as they do in self-help literature. The healing qualities of Kaur’s poetry alongside her use of so-called “self-help selfies” (Pâquet 298) understates the calming and healing nature of her online personality. Kaur regularly posts what could be considered self-help selfies, carefully edited pictures of herself in meditating positions or in which she is “smiling gratefully” to the camera, conveying a sense of inner peace and content (Pâquet 298-299).



Figure 4

The combination of self-help selfies, illustrations, profound poems and “body-positive ekphrastic metaphors and imagery and an authentic vintage aesthetic” all add up to the ‘perfect’ Instagram ‘self’ which appeals to her target audience (Pâquet 299; 305). The use of illustrations signalizes an old-fashioned, simple and romantic approach to life which is widely appropriated by instapoets (Pâquet 299). As Pâquet argues, “[t]he idea seems to be that poets are old-fashioned and romantic and that this romanticism is an appealing deviation to the focus on superficial physical attributes that is common to the rest of Instagram” (299). This attempt to create distance between themselves and their poetry and the rest of Instagram might indicate the business savvy trait of disassociating themselves from the norms and thus relating to their audience in order to profit financially. However, as Genz & Brabon points out, the creation of a curated ‘self’ requires some degree of “authentic self-representation” itself to even happen, arguing that self-branding might be more authentic than one might think (qtd. in Manning 274). The strategy around marketing influencers’ brands as authentic juxtaposes the lived experiences of these young female poets of color, raising the question of whether or not the online persona they portray in order to profit financially is curated or not (Banet-Weiser 141). As Manning argues, the recounting of experiences on social media can tend to “flatten” the experiences and in turn reduce them to ‘just stories’ (275). Though this contributes to upholding cyber-sisterhoods in which women can confide in each other and

bond over past traumas, this simplification of lived experiences can lead to denigration and discredit of serious issues (Manning 275).

Rupi Kaur mainly writes about heterosexual relationships and the power dynamics between men and women. Some of her poems are about love and healthy relationships, however quite a few of her poems are about toxic relationships and male physical, sexual and psychological violence towards women. She has written about rape, sexual assault and controlling and manipulating behaviors women face at the hands of men. Further, Kaur has written numerous poems from the standpoint of women of color, especially relating to immigration and the challenges that follow the integration to new home countries. She writes her poems and talks about them as if they are all self-experienced, relating to the flattening of, and subsequent reduction of, lived experiences. Kaur has been accused of “tailoring” the South Asian immigrant experience and her poetry to fit the white gaze (Kumar, “Why do we love to hate”). Some critics claim Kaur blur the lines between her own and the collective trauma experienced by South Asian women, thus undermining and generalizing complex trauma and the immigration experience (Kumar, “Why do we love to hate”). The way Kaur embodies the challenges and trauma she and her audience experience through her poetry could ‘flatten’ and reduce the experiences, but it could also help normalize them and provide her readers with support. The relatable nature of her online persona facilitates the creation of cyber-sisterhoods in her comment sections, arguably proving how effective her self-branding has been for the growth of her career as an instapoet. One could argue Kaur’s social media persona embodies the conflicting relationship between instapoetry and Instagram as a publishing platform through the facilitation of such cyber-sisterhoods in the comment sections of perfectly stylized portraits and profound poetry.

Chapter 2: How Rupi Kaur's self-branding affects her poetry

Relating to Kaur's relationship with her audience which I discussed in chapter 1, chapter 2 explores her curated Instagram grid and how the social media site's norms affect her online presence and in turn how that affects her poetry. Further, I investigate how instapoetry as a subgenre has been met by critics before analyzing Kaur's use of language in three of her published poems in relation to her cyber-persona.

The work of building an authentic brand that resonates and connects with an audience on a personal level has shifted from a product-based corporate awareness to a "more personalized - though no less corporate-" way (Banet-Weiser 141). Instapoetry is highly dependent on advertising and marketing, and it demands a constant online presence from the poets. However, poets and writers have always been dependent on marketing in order to sell their work, so one could question whether this new subgenre really differs from other types of poetry and literature in this area. Nevertheless, the labor of strategically balancing their brand between authenticity and conforming to the cis-gender norms and practically unattainable beauty standards set by social media and Instagram in particular (Banet-Weiser 142), distinct the influencers and instapoets from 'traditional' poets and affects their every move. Rupi Kaur represents this complexity through the representation of her online 'self' compared to her profound poetry. Her selfies are never less than beautiful, showing off her smooth skin and slim body accompanied with her signature look of inner peace and content. Her Instagram grid conveys the narrative of being able to achieve her level of personal and professional success so long as you buy her books and follow her advice (Pâquet 299). Though Kaur undoubtedly has faced racial discrimination based on her skin color and religious background on social media (Kumar, "Why do we love to hate"), she still fits within most beauty standards and profits off that privilege both directly and indirectly. The paradox of presenting herself as an activist fighting against gender bias while posting nothing-less-than-perfect pictures of herself is striking when we consider the themes of Kaur's poetry. She promotes inner beauty and imperfections through her poetry while upholding unattainable beauty standards through her selfies and portraits.

As Banet-Weiser argues, authenticity for influencers means to "strictly conform to dominant white, cis-gender norms" and because of this firm set of 'unwritten rules', only a very limited

number of influencers can achieve the desired level of authenticity at all (Banet-Weiser 142; 143). Considering Kaur's cultural and ethnic background one could argue that she presumably has faced more obstacles than Caucasian instaartists and -poets to fit into the Instagram aesthetic. Banet-Weiser points out the paradox of, "[t]he more *effort* women make in crafting themselves according to a particular version of apparently effortless authenticity, the more authentic their self-representation" (143, original emphasis). Instagram is known for its edited content, use of filters and chase of validation, all of which upholds the structural white, cis-gender norms (Banet-Weiser 142). As Caldera, De Ridder, and Van Bauwel argue, Eurocentric beauty ideals are undoubtedly celebrated and sought after in society today, with social media as no exception (qtd. in Manning 269). One could argue that Rupi Kaur herself upholds these binaries through her poetry regarding exclusively heterosexual relationships, descriptions of women as solely feminine and exclusion of non-binary and not femme-presenting poetry subjects as well as through her flawless selfies and portraits. Pâquet argues that Kaur "targets" an audience, namely young femme-presenting women, and tailors her online persona around this audience (305), exemplified by the way Kaur refers to her readers as "sisters" in several poems (Kaur 164; 187) and her appealing online persona.

As Pâquet argues, the grids of famous instapoets are often very carefully curated in order to convey a sense of calm and togetherness with the intention of selling books and merchandise (297; 299). Pâquet uses Rupi Kaur as an example, and indeed she is right to as Kaur is the most famous instapoet in the world, holding 4,5m followers and garnering hundreds of thousands of likes and comments on her posts (Instagram/rupikaur_). Her Instagram grid displays a collection of selfies, poems and illustrations interspersed by information about book sales and book tour dates. The layout of her Instagram grid is carefully planned, intentionally presenting poetry and illustrations and selfies every other image, creating an aesthetically pleasing pattern further conveying a sense of togetherness and tranquility. Kaur follows this pattern religiously and has been for the last eight years. While it channels peace and togetherness it simultaneously exudes professionalism. While many of her poems applaud inner beauty and embracing life as it is, her Instagram grid implies a hesitation on her part to post her life as anything less than perfect and successful. In her selfies she is always immaculately stylized and in a full face of make-up, often sporting high end designer clothes. Her posts all seem carefully planned and she never gives off the impression of living in the moment, emphasizing the strict norms the users are subjected to on Instagram.

The emergence of the content capital

Instagram is a social network where ‘consistency is key’ - and even vital. In order to uphold their status, influencers and instapoets are dependent on, and practically duty-bound, to post content regularly in order to keep their audience and with them, their livelihood. Interaction such as likes and comments directly correlate with the value of the influencer, which in turn affects how marketable and profitable they are to collaborators. An influencer or instapoet is only as appealing to potential collaborators as how ‘hot’ their interaction is. Because they post their poems online for free, instapoets are dependent on interaction on their grids in order to profit, which underlines their need for self-branding and use of marketing strategies to profit financially. The capitalistic society we live in can make all humans profitable and exploitable, and as Eichhorn argues this challenges established ‘rules’ of the requirement of celebrity status (“The rise of Insta-artists”). There is no real need for social or cultural capital anymore, as long as you have *content capital* and are capable of increasing that capital as the world of social media develops (Eichhorn, “The rise of Insta-artists”). Unlike social and cultural capital, content capital is easier to acquire because it depends entirely on your work rather than your economic status, class or social networks (Eichhorn, “The rise of Insta-artists”). As Eichhorn argues, this new rise of instartists and -poets illustrates the rise of a more democratic way of acquiring success and celebrity status (“The rise of Insta-artists”). The level of success that is achieved is solely based on the social media presence and how frequent the content is posted, thus opening up a world of possibilities so long as you have a camera phone and a wifi-connection. The emergence of this whole new poetic subgenre could then be seen in the light of this new route to literary success facilitated by social media and thus prove Instagram fulfills the much needed role of an alternative publishing platform to discover and facilitate new literary talents.

Instapoetry as a subgenre has been dismissed and discredited by literary scholars ever since it first originated a decade ago (Pâquet 311; Manning 264). Leading UK poetry periodical *PN Review* expressed discredit to the subgenre through a 2018 article by poet and literary critic Rebecca Watts titled “The cult of the noble amateur” (Kiernan, “Insta poetry”). In the article she accuses instapoets of writing “artless poetry” that prioritizes feeding the masses with input over creating true art in the form of poetry (Kiernan, “Insta poetry”). She criticizes the poets for playing into buzzwords like “honesty” and “accessibility” through their poetry, which in

her opinion is done for financial profit (Kiernan, “Insta poetry”). However, poetry scholar Jeremy Noel-Tod has previously defended Rupi Kaur’s poetry by calling it “artless and therefore sincere” (qtd. in Pâquet 305), thus using the same argument of the poetry being artless in her defense rather than as criticism. It is interesting to consider the polarizing effect instapoetry has had within the literary, and specifically poetic, community. As with all other art, poetry is polarizing and meant to invoke feelings and reactions. Media and communication and literary scholar Simone Murray argues that the print industry upholds the notion of the “loser wins” mentality in terms of mainstream success (Kiernan, “Insta poetry”), meaning the market value decreases as the commercial success rises, sustaining the highbrow belief of ‘gatekeeping’ poetry for the rich and educated. The idea of ‘not being appreciated in your own time’ is upheld and promoted by these conservative beliefs which concurrently reduces and undermines instapoetry’s impact on its audience. This elitist and conservative view on poetry and literature as a whole has directly influenced instapoetry as a genre and instapoets as artists (Pâquet 311). By dismissing the subgenre as a whole and disregarding its impact, both the poems and their readers are reduced to unintelligent, simple and unsophisticated (Pâquet 311), and one could link this to the popular conception of all things loved and appreciated by young girls and women being viewed as ‘less than’ and discredited (Rohr, 5). A famous example of this is the popularity and success of The Beatles, originally loved mainly by a young female audience and disregarded as ‘bad music’, but now widely considered one of the greatest bands of all time (Rohr, 5). It was only when an older male audience accepted The Beatles as worthy musicians that they gained real recognition and critical acclaim (Rohr, 5). One could question whether instapoetry suffers the same dismissal because of its young female audience and the superficial reputation of its publishing platform. While poetry is seemingly suffering under the arrival of technology and social media according to critics, this new subgenre has actually proved to popularize poetry again and introduce poetry to a whole new generation (Pâquet 311). Timothy Yu, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, points out the role of the press in this ‘revival’ of the poetry genre (qtd. In Kiernan, “Insta poetry”), inextricably linked with social media and instapoetry. Every post published by Rupi Kaur generates interaction in the form of hundreds of thousands of likes and comments, seemingly disproving the ‘death of poetry’ (Pâquet 311). Despite the poetry being posted online for free, instapoets still sell millions of copies of their printed works (Pâquet 311) arguably proving the continuous demand for poetry. The new poetic subgenre has disproved critics, at least in terms of audience attraction, by dominating best-seller lists (Manning 164). As Manning argues, the instapoets actually challenge the

elitist view on poetry by publishing it on Instagram, proving it reaches millions of consumers (265).

Kaur's 'dog whistle' poetic language

In 2015, a contributor for a blog on the online version of the *Huffington Post*, content and marketing specialist Erin Spencer, described Kaur's debut poetry collection *Milk and Honey* as a "poetry collection every woman needs on her nightstand" ("Rupi Kaur: the poet"). Spencer described the reading experience as a journey in which Kaur ends up "becoming the sister she never had" ("Rupi Kaur: the poet"), demonstrating my earlier point on Kaur's online persona. Kaur's social media presence evidently influences her audience's readings of her work, exemplified by this rather uncritical reading. Her self-branding resonates with her target audience to such an extent they will buy her poetry collections even though the poetry is available online for free. Kaur has hosted a number of book tours where she reads her poems and offers advice to her followers and fans, further emphasizing the link to self-help literature and thus understating her role as guru or life coach. Furthermore, the way that she reads her poems aloud ties in with how the structure of instapoetry resembles slam poetry, exemplified by videos from her book tours posted on her Instagram grid (Instagram/rupikaur_). Kaur's use of the 'her' and 'you' pronouns in her poems emphasizes her connection with her readers. Her untitled poems on page 150 and 151 in *Milk and Honey* exemplifies this use of the 'you' pronoun which underlines her intent of promoting self-love and inner healing (Kaur line 1; Kaur line 1 & 5). The use of personal pronouns furthers the notion of sisterhood between Kaur and her audience, subsequently reaffirming her role as a uniting figure amongst young women of color on social media. As Pâquet points out, the instapoetry audience is largely female (305), which legitimizes and explains Kaur's use of the 'her' pronoun and the centering of women in her work. Thus, her self-branding as a virtual older sister solidifies her role as the current dominating instapoet by assuring a direct connection with her audience.

In the untitled poem on page 187 in *Milk and Honey*, Kaur refers to women as "sisters" (Kaur line 1), exemplifying my earlier point of promoting sisterhoods through her poetry. She writes that her "heart aches for sisters more than anything" (Kaur 187 line 1), promoting platonic love and female friendship over romantic love with men. This resonates with her readers who

have proven to value female friendships with other women in her Instagram comment section, even when they are strangers on the internet. The strong bond between women healing from the same trauma plays out in real time online, facilitated by Kaur’s poetry and her use of unifying language. Further, she uses nature metaphors which are often found in instapoetry. She writes that her heart “aches for women helping women / like flowers ache for spring” (Kaur 187 lines 2-3), comparing herself to mother nature by the use of simile. In poetry and literature, flowers represent growth, healing and beauty, all of which are themes Kaur and



Figure 5

other instapoets refer to in the vast majority of their work. In this short 19-word poem, Kaur conveys the idea of sisterhoods as well as promoting the general themes of instapoetry, and in doing so effectively fulfills her role as an instapoet as well as a virtual older sister. The poem’s accompanying line drawings further underline the ekphrastic nature metaphor of the flower, thus furthering the notion of self-invention and inner healing expressed through Kaur’s use of language.

On page 158 Kaur addresses her audience directly in her poem *To the reader*. One could argue this clever way of centering her readers underlines Kaur’s role as an influencer and her marketing strategy. The implementation of her readers ensures they can relate and feel heard, subsequently leading to them supporting her financially by following her on social media and buying her books. However, Kaur’s choice of implementing her readers could very well be out of love and gratitude. In the poem she encourages her readers to stay strong because they

have helped her “grow flowers out of” her pain (Kaur 158 lines 3-4), again using the metaphor of the flower as a symbol of inner healing. Nature metaphors and similes are often found in instapoetry because the symbolism allows the poets to write short and concise poems with implied meanings, rather than spelling out the meanings. Naturally, this is true for many subgenres of poetry and literature, but even more so in the world of instapoetry. As Eichhorn points out, instapoetry needs to be short and concise because it is meant to be consumed on a small screen in a short amount of time (“The rise of insta artists”). The poets need to capture the readers’ attention just long enough for them to read the poem and interact with it either in the form of likes, comments, or shares (Eichhorn, “The rise of insta artists”). As French argues, these little bit-size pieces of cultural input are “immediately digestible” and serve as “comforting affirmation” alongside pictures of friends and acquaintances in the news feeds of Instagram users all over the world (qtd. in Pâquet 302). This stream of compassionate and comforting content (French qtd. in Pâquet 302) contributes to the creation of virtual sisterhoods because the poets’ selfies and their poetry are consumed in the same way content from the followers’ actual friends are.

Kaur’s untitled poem on page 164 approaches the popular theme of love, an inexhaustible theme frequently discussed in instapoetry and other forms of literature alike. This poem addresses the need for sisterhoods in combating misogyny and toxic masculinity, and the call



Figure 6

for women supporting other women, echoing her untitled poem on page 187. Instead of being flattered by a man's approving comments, Kaur takes offense by his disregard of other women (164). Again, she uses the word "sisters" when referring to other women (Kaur 164 line 6), further underlining the fluid, international sense of sisterhoods she has created within her follower base and in her Instagram comment sections. One could raise the question to whether this is cynical and executed in order to profit financially, as it certainly strengthens her relationship with her followers. On the other hand, it is quite common for writers to write from their own experiences and seeing as Rupi Kaur is a female, first generation Sikh immigrant (Pâquet 297), she has undeniably faced both sexism and racism. In this poem Kaur interestingly uses the pronoun 'you' (164) again, although in a different way than in the poem on page 158. She attributes the pronoun 'you' to a man from a previous romantic relationship, rather than a 'you' embodying a 'sister'. Thus, Kaur's appropriation of the personal pronouns shifts, but who she addresses stays the same, namely her young, female audience. By playing with the use of personal pronouns, Kaur effectively centers her audience in her poetry, strengthening her relationship with them and subsequently strengthening her role as the dominating instapoet. This direct implementation of her readers is interesting to consider if we circle back to the point of cultural representation. Through her poetry and social media presence, Kaur gives a voice to an entire marginalized group, and young women of color feel seen and heard in a society where they previously have been silenced. Her poetry illustrates the complex relationship between the superficiality of Instagram and the vulnerability of its users who do not fit into its norms and beauty standards.

Conclusions

Kaur is currently the most famous and successful instapoet in the world, and through her additional role as an influencer, holds vast power within her sphere of young users of color on the social media site. She functions as a voice for that entire demographic and provides them with safe spaces for them to heal their past collective traumas. Her poetry approaches themes of love, gender bias and racial injustice which resonate with her target audience of young women of color as well as other minorities. Whether her poetry is written with the intent of creating such spaces and cyber-sisterhoods or for financial profit it has brought healing and support for her readers, as evident from her Instagram comment section. Kaur has filled a need for young female voices of color and her online presence has undeniably been a piece in the diversity puzzle in the world of social media. By representing Sikh immigrant women, she has served as a face for Brown women on social media where they have previously been underrepresented. However, Rupi Kaur still fits into most societal beauty standards and profits off so-called 'pretty-privilege', 'skinny-privilege' and educational and financial privilege. Her curated Instagram grid depicting perfect images of herself in expensive clothes with flawless make-up alongside her profound poetry and minimalist illustrations underline her paradoxical relationship with the social media site. While her poems promote self-love and acceptance of imperfections, her selfies and portraits tell a different tale. She ironically demonstrates a reluctance to show her own imperfections, perhaps as a direct consequence of the strict white cis-gender norms and unattainable beauty standards of Instagram. The creation of instartists and -poets as a phenomenon has opened up opportunities for people who previously have been restricted by financial, societal or class limitations. With the rise of content capital, financial and societal capital have taken a back seat and content creators can now depend solely on their own person and not their assets. This has resulted in the emergence of new literary talent within marginalized communities, opening up discussions on topics that have previously been underrepresented in mainstream literary discourse. Kaur frequently implements her audience in her poetry, further strengthening her relationship with them. Her clever use of personal pronouns continuously centers her target audience and solidifies their role as muses. Kaur's Instagram grid and social media presence are arguably influenced by Instagram's norms, and she illustrates this juxtaposition through the use of language in her poetry. Kaur's online persona can then be said to have a direct effect on

instapoetry as a subgenre in the same way Instagram as a social medium influences Kaur's social media presence and in turn her poetry.

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