

(RE)-READING POETRY: THE QUESTION OF ART AND
AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE IN INSTAPOETRY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Introduction

Given its origins on social media platforms and popularisation on Instagram, Instapoetry is synonymous with not only Instagram poetry but necessarily instant poetry. In that respect, Instagram itself is a blend of "instant" and "telegram," where the former stands for the speed at which it aims to make information accessible to its users, and the latter, a metonymy for the aspect of communication it affords in its capacity as a social media platform. Despite its prominent presence across online poetry reading cultures, and the attention it receives from scholars in various fields, Instapoetry is not accorded the degree of legitimacy that characterises traditionally printed poetry.

The possibility of questioning the status of Instapoetry arises as a response to several conjectures. Firstly, as a form of digital poetry, Instapoetry is presumed to be antithetical to the antecedent that print poetry appears to be. If this claim is refuted owing to the coexistence of both print and digital poetry today, then Instapoetry is more so dismissed as a special case of popular poetry on which the excesses of cultural studies have not been duly exhausted. Secondly, the theories under the philosophical discipline of Aesthetics that define art based on the aesthetic experience it allows, necessitate endurance as a prime quality, transposing the "high v/s low" debate into another impasse staged by the critical discussion on "art v/s non-art" as ephemerality of Instapoetry diminishes the possibility of a sustained aesthetic experience.

In spite of Instapoetry gaining traction in the wake of online social communication, it is often charged for usurping the *art* of poetry by critics like Rebecca Watts (2018). However, this presumed demise of poetry is mistakenly attributed to its disuse; the autopsy suggests that the uncommon exaltation of its aesthetic experience and emphasis on its form engenders irregularities in the appreciation of the art form of poetry. In other words, the axiomatic understanding that accessible popular poetry does not afford an aesthetic experience and so is not furnished with the sincerity of *art*, and upholding inaccessibility as a defining characteristic of poetry, nudges the art form of poetry towards obsolescence.

If art is to be appraised at all by its aesthetic experience, modern aesthetics dictates that this experience must be disinterested and that art should be appreciated for its own sake—that is, not for its moral goodness or pleasing qualities, but merely because it is beautiful in itself. However, postmodern thought asserts that art is inherently intertwined with the immediate circumstances in which it originates and the effects it generates. Art should be

examined based on the emotional response it elicits in an individual within a specific temporal and spatial framework. Therefore, the everyday experience of Instapoetry cannot be misconstrued as inherently lacking or dissociated from concerns related to aesthetic experience or art. John Dewey's theory of aesthetic experience may be evoked in this light to support the foundation of such a submission. In his consideration of the popular arts in *Art as Experience* (1980 [1934]), explicates that experience of any work of art in question must be put under the lens of contextual inspection to see what environment the work is borne in. Dewey notes that the broad and subtle ideas that elevate art to a pedestal are so prevalent that many individuals would be embarrassed, rather than pleased, to discover that they enjoy their casual pastimes solely for aesthetic pleasures. The arts that are generally overlooked by these individuals are actually the ones that hold the greatest significance for them (1980, 6).

By conceiving of art as “consummatory experience,” he is able to bridge the gap between the *popular* and the *art*. According to him, consummation of experience is the *raison d'être* of any work of art, therefore, the environment in which art is experienced must be equally considered along with its content. Thus, the present research proposes to first re-position the definition of art and aesthetic experience itself and then configure the core of this experience, specifically in the case of Instagram.

Since Instapoetry, being popular, presents a site suggesting the need to contemporise the conception of aesthetic experience, this research reads Instapoetry by resituating it in its respective aesthetic field, i.e., in the context of its medium. Followingly, the thesis also attempts to read poetry in contemporary reading cultures by attending to and analysing the paradigms introduced by Instapoetry as a representative specimen of third-generation e-literature. In doing so, the research work sets out to establish that poetry too adapts to the affordances of the platform, similar to other content that floods the *Feed* of Instagram, resulting in a significant shift in the production, distribution, and reception of any form of poetry on Instagram.

Research Methodology

The current study employs a mixed methods approach, using multiple methods to produce reliable results. In order to provide a more thorough grasp of the issue, both qualitative and quantitative methods have been applied. Under the mixed methods approach, a “convergent mixed method” design as suggested by John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell (2018) has been used. Thus, quantitative data and qualitative data have been collected independent of each

other. Their analysis is carried out separately, results of which then converge in the overall analysis of the experience. Again, these are embedded within theoretical frameworks that guide the study – Aesthetics and New Media Studies. On the one hand, the discipline of Aesthetics is necessitated as a lens to look at Instapoetry and inquire about its status as an artform. On the other hand, New Media Studies as a framework is also indispensable, as art on social media undergoes some fundamental shifts that can only be recorded accurately if the platform specificities are taken into consideration. Quantitative data analysis is undertaken following Donal J. Treiman (2018), while qualitative data is analysed based on the various approaches to analysis suggested by Alan Bryman and Robert Burgess's (2002).

The thesis proposes to depart from the traditional criticism applied in analysing Instapoetry, and it does so by suggesting that the aesthetic lens on which this criticism relies have been wanting in contemporising art. The primary aim of this research, therefore, is to identify a theoretical approach that can minutely study the subject matter under discussion. For this, the thesis turns to John Dewey's foundational work in the field of aesthetics that was influenced by his pragmatism. Pragmatism is a school of Philosophy that is "based on the principle that the usefulness, workability, and practicality of ideas, policies, and proposals are the criteria of their merit. It stresses the priority of action over doctrine, of experience over fixed principles, and it holds that ideas borrow their meanings from their consequences and their truths from their verification" (Rosenthal and Thayer 2017). Thus, Dewey's pragmatist approach towards aesthetics in *Art as Experience* (1934) makes discrimination and hierarchy underpinning the consumption of traditional poetry and Instapoetry questionable. He argues that "the actual work of art is what the product does with and in experience" (Dewey 1), and aesthetic experience must be examined in its contextual environment – the aesthetic field.

The composition of this aesthetic field is discussed in further detail by Arnold Berleant (1994), as he understands aesthetic experience as an "engagement" with art which necessitates the consideration of the components of the aesthetic field – material resources, technology, socio-cultural factors, psychological factors, artist, audience, performer, and art. The digital aspect of the concerned aesthetic field of Instagram, is explored using some new media theories like remediation, convergence culture, participatory culture. These theories suggest that, the shift from print to digital not only changes the work of art but also the entities involved in creating and experiencing the work. However, to closely examine these shifting roles of artist, audience,

and art, this research is also supported by the analysis of qualitative and quantitative data, before making any final conclusions based on the said theories.

Quantitative data consists of information related to themes and types of poetry posts from 115 poetry profiles (all “Public”) on Instagram; engagement received on these posts in terms of *likes* and *comments* are also taken into account, where “type of poetry profile”, “post type”, and “themes” are independent variables and nature of engagement is the dependent variable. These variables are partly derived from researcher’s personal experience of poetry on the platform and partly from the available literature (mentioned in ROL) on the subject. The data is collected on the basis of naturalistic observation method, relying on Instantaneous sampling within a targeted timespan of two years (June 2021 to June 2023). The selection of 115 samples is done on the basis of cluster sampling method, where the samples are randomly selected through probability sampling and are repicked according to the number of followers on the profile (so that only popular profiles do not crowd up the sample, making the analysis erroneous). This data is analysed using MS Excel tools and SPSS to comprehend the experience of poetry on Instagram. The analysis also provides a larger picture of poetry-reading behaviour. The result of this analysis is supported by the interview data, which also provides a closer view of the experience on an individual reader/poet level.

Qualitative data is collected through semi-structured interviews conducted through email. Since the researcher required a detailed and introspective response from the interviewees, asynchronous mode of interview has been chosen for the task. As mentioned above, the interviews are not influenced or embedded within the results of quantitative data. The questions formed for the interview are independent and are based on the researcher’s experience as a reader of Instapoetry. A total of thirty-six participants are selected, among which twenty nine are readers of Instapoetry and digital literature and seven are poets on Instagram. Sample selection of readers is done on the criteria of availability; while the decision on the selection of poets is based on the types of profiles and number of followers, where seven poets represent each type of profile (personal, strictly artistic, curative, and so on) and have a wide range of following (from 500 followers to 50k). The age range of the interviewees is between 18 to 30, as statistical data suggests that persons between this age range form the highest number of Instagram users. Further, the data is processed through different types of coding (open, thematic, and analytic). The results that closely capture (on individual level) the manner in

which Instapoetry is engaged with are then merged with quantitative data results and comprehensively presented to attain a coherent picture of aesthetic experience of Instapoetry.

Key Findings

1. The definition of Instapoetry needs a re-inspection in terms of its form. Since Instapoetry shares features with other pre-existing subgenres of poetry in formal terms, it cannot be said to be completely diverse from traditional poetry. And in itself Instapoetry with its 'quintessential' features is not always the same; not only exceptions, but also those posts branded as "Instapoetry" are of diverse kinds.
2. Defined in terms of its experience, Instapoetry cannot be misconstrued as nonreflective, shallow, and insignificant because experience is not something that is separate from its context. Since art forms afford different experiences in their respective environments, there is a need to change one's concept of aesthetic experience bearing in mind contemporary art forms, not following the conventionally known theories with rigidity to conceive of art.
3. The functions, features, tools, and affordances of a medium/platforms permeate the processes of production, distribution, and reception of art on these platforms. These paratextual qualities are conducive to giving art on Instagram the kind of reading experience it offers.

Following concerns govern the production, distribution and reception of poetry on Instagram:

- Production

Concerns	Details
	Personal Sharing
Purpose of Posting	Creating Repository Publishing
Profile Identity of the Poet	Professional Personal

	Professional in Personal
	Personal in Professional (distanced intimacy)
	Predetermined (Close friends)
Community	Initiated (Fanbase)
	Built (Peer Group)
	Subscribed (Mass)
	As Platform Affordance
Visuality	For Aesthetic Appeal
	For Relatability
	For Identity
	Relatability
Audience Interest	Familiarity
	Brevity
	Diversity

-
- Distribution

Concerns	Details
	Time of Posting
	Consistency of Posting
Algorithm	Networking
	Other Promotional Activities (Hashtags and Sponsored Promotions)
Hashtags	Engagement Boost Relatable Tags
	Poetry Related Tags

Graphics And Craft Tags

No Hashtags

Art Related Tags

Unrelated Tags

- Reception
-

Concerns	Details
Purpose of Use	Updates Networking Community Art and Entertainment
Poetry as Everyday Art	Community Relatability Audio-visual appeal Brevity of Experience
Patterns of Engagement	Like Share Comment Save

4. All poetry on Instagram is necessarily and experientially Instapoetry because of the common features that underline the presentation of poetry on the platform.

Conclusion and Scope

Thus, the thesis attempts to constitute an excursion towards establishing poetry as an aesthetic experience, whereby the study registers the cruciality of the context of encounter. Moving further, the conclusion of the thesis considers even the non-literary concerns that pertain to this reading context. These concerns are addressed, not as a way to validate art for the sake of recording cultural development, but as a way to locate the discourse around aesthetic experience of Instapoetry into larger implications that bear on bodies beyond just poets and readers of Instapoetry to attain a comprehensive understanding of the convergence of aesthetics, ideology, and technology within the domain of social media platforms.

The very first question that arises is how bodies beyond those directly associated with Instapoetry—such as poets and readers in their capacity as users of the platform services—become involved. The answer is in the etymological premise of *Insta* poetry. Instapoetry can be understood as any poetry post—traditional or otherwise—that is "Instagrammed" for the platform. And thus, one may infer that it is the reading experience, not the content or the form, that keeps print media and Instagram apart. However, these are not exclusively defined experiences. They imprint on one another due to the fact that readers and poets are not discreetly discriminative in choosing a particular platform, as they freely choose both print and Instagram to read both traditional and "Instapoetry." In such a case, while the traditional reading experience extends and impacts Instagram reading experience, the latter also partially influences the former. But more or less, because these reading experiences are broadly diverse from one another, an individual who reads or writes on Instagram is considered a reader or poet of Instapoetry, while the same person reading or writing the same piece in print media is not. By this logic, then, entities not directly and exclusively engaged as poets and readers of Instapoetry come to be involved.

Besides, the contention that the "Instagram experience" influences the reading of traditional poetry is founded on two underlying assumptions: firstly, that the instantness of the experience does not just stem from its presence on Instagram but also extends beyond the platform in the wake of digital reading cultures, and secondly, that the residual experience of Instagram's visual reading and algorithmic effect has a certain grasp over how the traditional mode of reading is conducted by the same set of readers. Thesis is thus concluded with a cursory examination of these assumptions, meandering through the questions on *(re)-reading* of poetry, possibility its

criticism, its position in the wake of democratisation of art in new media, and accordingly, the future of poetry.

- **Future of Poetry**

Kathi Berens, in her discussion on the future of Instapoetry, cites Scott Rettberg, the inaugural director of the Electronic Literature Organisation. Rettberg asserts that despite the brief life span of many electronic literature works, the genres within electronic literature persist and do not diminish over time. It is more suitable to contemplate how genres and forms function as fundamental elements for subsequent forms that derive from them (Berens 2019b). The developmental history of any art form, for that matter, is a witness to the fact that art flourishes on this principle. But when it comes to Instapoetry, one of the primary causes of disagreement to this principle stems from the conjecture that Instapoetry is likely to exert a detrimental influence on traditional poetry. Conservative advocates of traditional poetry express concerns about the future of poetry, worrying that it may undergo changes, lose its significance in society, or even disappear entirely (Rue 15). This is comparable to the criticisms expressed against hyper reading, which warn that such reading methods may ultimately eliminate reading as a practice altogether. However, this statement does not hold strong ground. One must only observe that it is not the act of reading itself that comes to an end, but rather the manner in which reading is conducted that undergoes a transformation.

Moreover, if, by detrimental effect, one means impact on the distribution of poetry, it can be argued that in the majority of instances, traditional media is not adversely affected by emerging media. Kevin Stein's book *Poetry's Afterlife* (2010) explores the coexistence of popular poetry with mainstream genres, which is evidence enough to suggest that the former rarely affects the production, distribution, and reception of the latter. Instapoetry's experience is different as afforded by the platform and its algorithm, not because of something that is innately different in its form or content. Therefore, it does not pose a significant challenge to contemporary traditional poetry and has minimal impact on its aesthetics. Instead, it exists alongside traditional poetry as a complementing presence, not as something foreign, merely preferred due to its accessibility on a different medium.

While this remains, it is timely to take note of Jeneen Naji's accurate observation that Instapoetry, with its ability to transcend boundaries between the human and cyborg realms, will have significant impacts on human subjectivities (2018). And so, Instapoetry may not displace

traditional forms of poetry altogether, but it will definitely revolutionise the perception of poetry as an art form due to its reconstitutive nature towards the aesthetics of poetry. It can be concluded, by the same currency, that Instapoetry will not be the sole potential future of poetry, though it will undoubtedly be one of the poetic forms that holds great promise for the future and has a long way to go. This is apparent in how the presence of this phenomenon, as well as the subsequent discussions it generates, have created opportunities for research in various other domains. These include investigating the impact of community on aesthetic preferences in the formation of a collective aesthetic, exploring how aesthetics contribute to community development, and examining the role of aesthetics in the posthumanist reading of texts.

Thus, the present research, in its pursuit to revive the discourse on aesthetics and in its aim to keep the tradition of poetry buoyant in the wake of rising online activities, has congruously attempted to engage with the fundamental queries on art and aesthetic experience concerning Instapoetry, which serve as a point of departure for further research on the subject.

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