Introduction: Reading Instapoetry

Not long ago, Uche Jaq, an Instagram user, shared a video clip featuring a young man on a street, typing out tailor-made poems for passers-by who were drawn to the placard modestly declaring: "STREET POEMS / By Donation / *Specialty Poems Upon Request*." Soon after the video went viral, thousands of comments poured in. While some reminisced about the Japanese light novel series *Violet Evergarden* (2015-2020), others compared the performance to a novel by Brian Sonia-Wallace, *The Poetry of Strangers* (2020). Many viewers also agreed that such an act gave "a lesson in this busy world we lose the right way to live" (@jas_queen5). Comments such as these find an assured home in the *Comments* section of performance poetry videos shared on YouTube, Facebook (now called Meta), Instagram, and so on; one only needs to skim through the generous number of *Comments* on an equally popular poetry slam video titled "When Love Arrives by Sarah Kay and Phil Kaye" by Button Poetry. It is not by accident that these supposedly separate mediums should share in common the nature of comments they receive. A cursory experience suffices to mark the two features that stand out in all these works: resonance and immediacy. These expressions are creatively personal as they are influenced by a direct engagement with the audience. Furthermore, they need to be prompt because they are impelled by a short-spanned delivery demand. Consequently, the interaction establishes a spontaneous and intimate connection between the poet and the audience, providing individuals with the chance to directly and tangibly encounter the influence of poetry. This is also the revelation that Brian's journey leads to, i.e., a profound demand for poetry—that speaks personal and collective narratives of desires, affections, and emotions—among people across regions of America.

Alluding to Matthew Arnold in this regard would fall nothing short of a blasphemy for the followers of Touchstones theory; but these instances, in a way, do uphold his rhetorical remark, "Our race... will find an ever surer and surer stay in poetry" (1973, 161). Even though exposure to burgeoning new literatures and world literatures has put to question the concept of standardisation, the stipulated rules for the inquiry relating to the nature of poetry *do not* fall into disarray when popular poetry, such as discussed, is assessed.

"Why?"

The explanation estimates itself in the simplest answer to a perplexing question, "What is poetry?"

"Poetry is an expression of feelings."

Poetry holds significance not just in its capacity to provide aesthetic pleasure, but also in its power to stimulate senses and foster connections with oneself and others (Hughes 2007, 2). Poetry, as an artistic *expression*, is perused for its aesthetic value.[1] which is distinguished from other forms of literature by the interplay of its semantic, syntactic, phonetic, and typographic elements (Alghadeer 87). At the same time, as an expression of *feelings*, it is bound to be examined for its function and effect on society. Moreover, these two facets are only ostensibly autonomous from one another, and the assessment of poetry's function and art is not as detached as it appears from the assertion of social structures.[2] The standards for determining whether a piece of writing qualifies as poetry frequently favour the poetry that *must be* sought out over poetry that one encounters in everyday life. May it be Katya Mandoki's *prosaic poesics*[3] (2007, 80) or *Inspo* poetry on social media, such poetry is often marginalised for defying the contours of 'class' by being easily *accessible*. Besides, it is attacked on the grounds that it does not afford aesthetic experience, thereby keeping it from the purview of "legitimate" criticism that is reserved only for 'Art'.

Nonetheless, an uncompromising view on 'Art' held by such criticism comes to be reinvestigated in the wake of "the present century [that] no longer allows outmoded creative processes to take place again and slowly begins to be replaced by the digitization process" (Adek and Satria). This change is implicated, above all, in the demands of the digital world— transparency, innovative concepts, personal viewpoints, and the global integration of work. As a result, poetry too no longer remains exclusively associated with a religiosity of ritual that is

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[1] Discussing the institutionalisation of aesthetic value in schools, Stratton Brooks in "The Aesthetic Value of Poetry" contends that a poet merely goes for aesthetic and emotional results, but the "school," i.e., academy seizes on these aspects to teach lessons on rhetoric and use of language (686). This is but one instance of how aesthetic value propels in the discussion of poetry.

[2.] The production and reception of poetry is a part of a larger culture where, as Pierre Bourdieu notes, "the socially recognised hierarchy of the arts, and within each of them, of genres, schools, or periods, corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers. This predisposes tastes to function as markers of 'class'" (1984, 1-2). In this sense, poetry, as an art form, must function to appease the taste and purpose of its consumers, to conciliate which even moral values are contrived.

[3] Mandoki (2007) draws out four categories, i.e., *prosaic prosics, poetic prosics, prosaic poesics, and poetic poesics*, which underscore the study of various works of literature. The third category, *Prosaic Poesics*, includes poetry that one regularly encounters in day-to-day life, like rhymed prayers, political slogans, and sports cheers—the poetry of the popular realm (79-80). *Prosaic Poesy* is a poetic art that does not pursue unity and coherence (like most poetic works), but familiarity; and its raison d'être is not to demand a professional audience's attention but to resonate with the masses.

followed by a select group of individuals with great skill and complexity, but rather is seen as a tool to connect across groups and communities. As an art form, it submits to the cultural rationale of the digital age, which Adek and Satria see as the fourth stage of capitalism. Hence, the popularity of poetry is an unavoidable consequence of the convergence between the requirements of the digital era and the presence of poetry as a cultural commodity in the advanced stage of capitalism.

In this light, the present research intends to give popular poetry the attention it deserves for the experiences it offers and the ways in which it engages with its audiences by understanding poetry reading cultures on Instagram—a growing digital platform distinctly known for its "aesthetic visual communication" (Manovich 2017, 41). Since Instagram has developed into a medium that provides space to share poetry and has a significant effect on how it is represented, exhibited, and received, the study of poetry posts on Instagram would better qualify in suggesting the need to contemporise the conception of aesthetic experience pertaining to not just Instapoetry—popular and otherwise—but also other online poetry cultures.

0.1 Background

Instapoetry, a portmanteau created from the words "Instagram/instant" and "poetry," is poetry in verse shared on Instagram as well as various other social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter (now called X), Reddit, Tumblr, Pinterest, and Threads. These poetry posts may appear as an image, video, or microblog. While the definite origin of Instapoetry is neither recorded nor known, it can approximately be traced back to the early 2010s. It is possible to track at least three overlapping events that may have contributed to the currency of Instapoetry. One of the most significant of these is Instagram's introduction of metadata search through *Hashtags* in 2011, which made it easier to look up poetry on the platform, accelerating its spread and reach. Secondly, 2012 Tumblr and Instagram posts by the new-born Instapoets[4]— Rupi Kaur, Lang Leav, and Robert Macias Drake—who turned this (i.e. *Hashtags*) to their advantage to gain momentum on these platforms. Again, print publications of Nayyirah

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[4] The term "Instapoet" is used here only to identify those poets who have chosen social media as a platform to publish their works. However, there is an ongoing debate on whether Instapoets should be called poets at all; see quora.com/Do-you-consider-Instapoets-poets. Again, the term is also used derogatorily to denote poets who write "bad" poetry. Rupi Kaur's reaction to the use of the word in her interview with Sam Rogers is noteworthy in this regard; see vogue.in/content/rupi-kaur-nikita-gill-new-instagram-poets-taking-verse-viral

Waheed's *salt* (2013), Kaur's *Milk and Honey* and Drake's *Beautiful Chaos* (circa 2014) made Instapoetry known to the non-frequent users of social media.

Jeneen Naji (2018) defines Instapoetry as "poetry that is produced for distribution through the social media platform—Instagram" (1). However, in the initial years, Instagram was not the only platform of choice for these poets (Jain)(Shah). With growing years of Instagram and increasing readership on the platform, the production, reception, and distribution of Instapoetry eventually came to be more aligned with Instagram's platform aesthetics. And for this reason, Instapoetry has become more popularly associated with the platform. Consequently, poets like Arch Hades, Cleo Wade, Hollie McNish, Kate Baer, Nikita Gill, R. H. Sin, Tyler Knott Gregson, and others have popularly been posting on Instagram, and have thus far witnessed a growing number of *Followers* on the platform, where Atticus has become a household name.

With respect to its constantly building corpus, Nilanjana Roy (2018) summarises the style of poetry attributed to these poets as "…few sparse lines, set in an old-fashioned font... the cute drawings and photographs." However, this is hardly an accurate portrayal of style characterised in every other work by these poets. Such an ascertainment overlooks more than half poetry posts on Instagram that do not feature the style described by Roy and yet can be called Instapoetry. Also, similar remarks on the style of Instapoetry do not take into account the parallel set of traits found in poetry existing outside of Instagram or any other social media platforms.

Conversely, one may as well agree with Roy in saying that Instapoetry is marked by its unique style.[5] Nevertheless, this observation cannot decree the examiners the propriety to deride poetry for this aspect. A quick glance into some examples of Instapoetry would evidently be enough to suggest most of its striking features, i.e., brevity, visual engagement, and directness (see fig. 0.1 and 0.2). But they are not independent of their medium. They are so situated in the context of the platform and cannot be disposed of at face-value.

Brevity, as James Rue (2019) points out, is not only a stylistic decision of the poet but also a constraint imposed on the Instapoets to fit their expression into the 1080 by 1080-pixel

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[5] The statement may seem contradictory but is explained in detailed in the section "Poem as Content as Art" of chapter 4

square (6). Adding on, Iulia Ivana observes that in contrast to traditional[6] poetry, which follows set forms, rhythms, and metres, Instapoets place a high priority on making their posts visually appealing, suggesting that the brevity of form could also be a choice to make the poetry post visually more pleasing for the platform. A quintessential example of this visual engagement can be seen in the works of some poets, such as Rupi Kaur who deliberately create the effect with "bite-sized pieces of poetry... with doodles and sketches, giving the poetry a very intimate feel" (Ivana). Again, this intimate connection that Instapoetry seeks with its readers is also the reason why it is concrete, as directness in expression gets the readers instantly connected and released from the experience, catering well to their attention span.
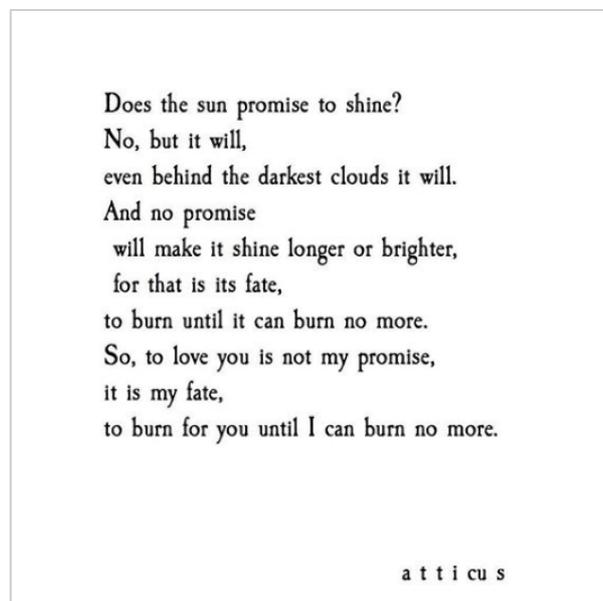
Does the sun promise to shine?
No, but it will,
even behind the darkest clouds it will.
And no promise
 will make it shine longer or brighter,
 for that is its fate,
to burn until it can burn no more.
So, to love you is not my promise,
it is my fate,
to burn for you until I can burn no more.

a t t i cu s

Fig. 0. 1 Poem considered typically as "Instagrammable" shared by Atticus (25 May 2020)

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[6] *Traditional* poetry refers to poetry known in oral tradition and print setup. It also entails technology and gatekeepers pertaining to these traditions as factors affecting the poetics. Subsequently the term *traditional* presupposes difficulty as an identifier of poetry created particularly for these modes. However, the connotation of the term as something obsolete is also to be avoided, because print media is not out of use. At the same time, the researcher eschews the use of the term *conventional* to indicate the same; because when it is pitched against Instapoetry, it would by default label Instapoetry as unconventional, which is not always true.

it is a blessing
to be the color of earth
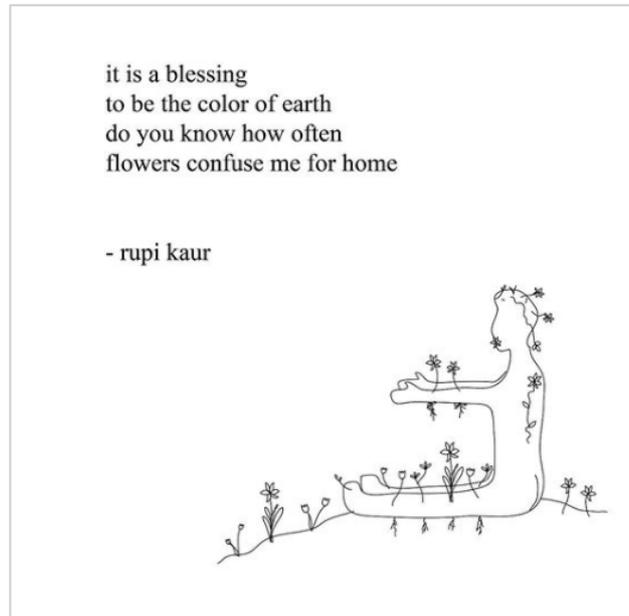do you know how often
flowers confuse me for home

- rupi kaur

Fig. 0. 2 Poem accompanied by minimalist graphic elements shared by Rupi Kaur (4 Feb. 2023)

Furthermore, brevity, visuality, and clarity in expression not only serve the poet's intent of catching the attention of readers in a short span of time, but they also mark the way the poet perceives a subject and, in turn, understand the process of the perceived subject's composition into a poem. Philip Monks (2018) explicates the writing experience of poetry published online. According to him, when one composes electronically in a variety of environments, the setting influences a piece's composition, frequently also making for the subject of the poetry. Talking about the nature of poetry, he says that because poets now have a portable device that provides them with both the facility to capture the moment instantly and the platform for immediate publication, their poetry, even if it may seem otherwise, is less like notes or a draft and more like a finished piece (79). Following this, one understands Instapoetry as poetry designed to suit its medium. And it conclusively appears that, owing to its style specifically designed for the medium, it can rightly be defined as an "internet born sub-genre" (Burnam).

0.1.1 E-Poetry of the Third Generation

Analysing the term "internet born sub-genre" involves considering two facets of Instapoetry. One, that it is internet born, and second, it is classified as a sub-genre. When defining the phrase "internet born," one can consider examples from numerous platforms, websites, and web applications, like Wattpad, Hello Poetry, Poets.org, AllPoetry, Medium, and

so on. Although these platforms offer free publishing without the traditional gatekeepers, the style of poetry produced on them may not necessarily show adaptability with the capabilities of the platform. It is for this reason that poetry on these internet-based platforms is very similar to printed poetry, with no radical or dramatic changes in its style. To rephrase, poetry on these platforms lack a distinct style of their own, making them incompatible with the conventional definition of a sub-genre.

Apart from these, internet born poetry is also encountered on platforms such as Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. Poetry on YouTube typically appears as a video post in the form of spoken word/performance poetry videos and poetry playlists, which are similar to anthologies put together with music. Old poems are occasionally transformed into rap and other performative adaptations, but other platforms that provide space for creating and posting images and videos have a broader range that nearly completely replaces YouTube poetry. While Twitter is not known so much for poetry posts, Tumblr definitely is (and efficiently so), as is Facebook, though it is Instagram that is widely credited with popularising poetry.

Illuminating the multimodality of poetry, Hessa Alghadeer (2014) discusses the re-birth of so many forms of poetry on these platforms. She observes that "among the most remarkable multimodal texts used in active meaning making are Twitter and haiku, Instagram and photograph poems, Prezi and virtual poetry, poetry with Movie Maker, poetry blogs, poetry prompts, digital collage poetry, and online poetry posters" (90). These and many other examples illustrate how some internet born poetry (even *internet reborn* poetry), in adapting to the affordances of the platform, represents a style infused with the aesthetics of that platform. This unique style makes such poetry subject matter to categorisation as a sub-genre.

A sub-genre is characterised by specific features or styles that are exclusively associated with that particular kind of poetry. As mentioned earlier, most poems on Instagram also possess a style distinctly seen on the platform. The style, in turn, is a consequence of internet. And so, these two innately connected factors—internet and style—significantly contribute to the definition of Instapoetry as sub-genre. This also applies to e-poetry as a sub-genre, as it possesses distinct characteristics such as being hypertextual and puzzle-like. These elements are made possible by the internet. For instance, when T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" is composed similarly to how e-poetry is structured, it generates a new text. Although the words may remain unchanged, alterations in textuality result in a completely distinct poem, as the

conditions for interpreting its meaning have shifted. Likewise, when traditionally published poetry is shared on Instagram, it takes on the form of Instapoetry due to the unique qualities offered by the networked logic of the platform. Consequently, Instapoetry is not merely a subgenre; it is "internet born subgenre," where its features and the prevalence of internet simultaneously affect the meaning making process.

Instapoetry's demarcation as an "internet born subgenre" suggests that it broadly aligns with e-literature. Electronic literature stands for literary works that are created and exist in a digital format, with or without the internet, and utilise the opportunities offered by standalone or networked computers (Rettberg 170). While Instapoetry does take advantage of the electronic capabilities and settings of the platform it is hosted on, it does not share all the same characteristics as what is generally understood as electronic poetry. N. Katherine Hayles (2006) notes that digital events in e-poetry are dynamic, visual, written, and auditory. They are typically published in online journals, displayed in art exhibits, and eventually stored in archives (187). Giovanna Di Rosario, in his thesis "Electronic Poetry: Understanding Poetry in the Digital Environment," outlines the sub-categories that e-poetry encompasses:

a) Segments-based e-poetry is constructed using morphological elements and does not rely on a specific rhythm. These poems can be either static or dynamic. In the case of dynamic poems, the reader's action is required to activate the motion.

b) Sequence-based e-poetry: These poems are constructed using morphological elements and have an inherent sense of rhythm. They are always dynamic texts. Due to this internal chronometer, they exercise influence on the duration of reading.

c) Hypertextual e-poetry is a form of e-poetry that is based on links and is taken from the hypertext genre.

d) Hybrid e-poetry: This category demonstrates the attributes of multiple types of e-poetry (105-106)

Following are a few typical examples: Deena Larsen's work titled "Stained Word Window" that includes a piece called "Poemchess", Reinhard Döhl's work "lyrikmaschine", Jim Andrews's "Snapshot in the Continuing Adventures of I," "Jim Andrews: Enigma n," and "Seattle Drift" (see fig. 0.3), etc. Many of these poems present themselves as enigmatic puzzles that are not easily understood, where the concepts of indeterminacy and *différance* pose a challenge to the reader. These arbitrarily created texts deliberately disregard the need for

semantic coherence. The aimless interplay of randomness generated by permutational generators results in a plethora of nonsensical sequences, but even in this chaos, it has the potential to unexpectedly yield a coherent and aesthetically pleasing arrangement (Bachleitner 320) .
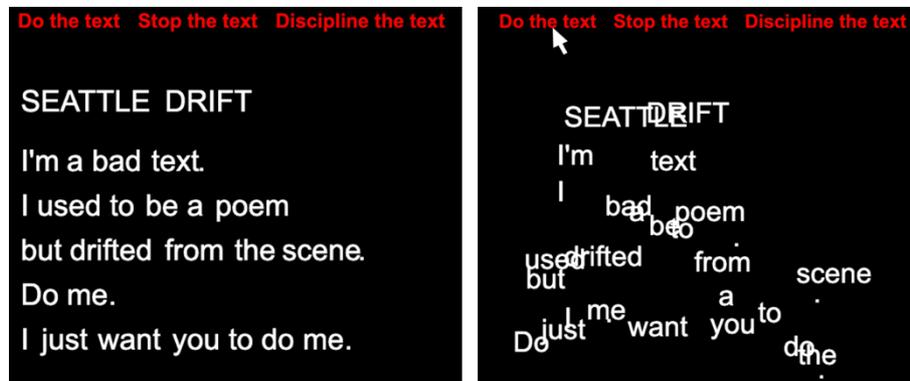

Fig. 0. 3 Kinetic poetry exemplified in "Seattle Drift" by Jim Andrews

Visual and kinetic poetry, also known as holopoetry, can be found on Instagram as well (see fig 1.8). However, these types of poetry posts are precomposed as videos, and readers do not have the advantage of creating their own content and improvising the reading. Even within thematic contexts, Instapoetry may vary from e-poetry. The first generation of digital poetry utilised computer techniques to depict and accomplish postmodern themes such as discontinuity, irregularity, and complexity. Furthermore, this time frame specifically pertains to the years between the 1990s and 2000s, during which new artistic sensitivities were also examined, albeit they were still influenced by the lasting impact of postmodern poetry. Instapoetry is mostly influenced by its medium rather than its themes. However, the themes themselves are also influenced to some extent by the use of the medium. Accordingly, the themes have undergone a noticeable shift in the universe of contemporary culture that may seem secure on the surface but contains intricate problems at its centre. Instapoetry, similar to Instagram, offers a glimpse into the post-2010 cultural landscape.

Moreover, e-literature is inherently a dynamic and ever-changing genre. Leonardo Flores (2019) categorises e-literature into three generations. He points out that Instapoetry does not fit into the category of poetry of the first two generations because the latter's primary focus is centred around formal innovation and the development of interfaces for literary works. In other words, the poetry of the first two generations of e-literature engages modernist and experimental writing styles, emphasising originality, intricacy, global appeal, and ties to

creative and literary customs. Flores places Instapoetry under the third-generation which differs from previous forms by building upon existing structures, employing recognisable interfaces, being distributed in spaces where the audience is active, and embodying postmodernist and pop culture aesthetics such as remix, pastiche, readymade, and adaptation associated with fandom and internet culture.

Kathi Berens's article, "Third Generation Electronic Literature and Artisanal Interfaces: Resistance in the Materials," argues in favour of third generation electronic literature by posing the following questions: 1. "What is the precise focus of e-literature?"; 2. "Is e-literature just about the output and circulation, or is it engaging in code manipulation and authorial intent?"; and 3. "Is it a matter of reception or production?". She accurately settles that computers do not necessarily need to possess qualities such as being kinetic, interactive, multimodal, non-linear, stochastic, or aleatory. However, they are linked with these characteristics to authenticate specific e-literature configurations that are acceptable within institutions, such as aesthetic complexity and manually-developed handcrafted interfaces. Berens recalls how Flores refers to a type of electronic literature that is integrated into everyday life, characterised by its simplicity and lack of extraordinary, startling, or complex elements. This, along with the features of third generation literature, is evident in Instapoetry, which can be concluded to be a product of contemporary culture. However, its everydayness couples Instapoetry with the popular arts and so it is received with a backlash from the critics of 'culture'.

0.1.2 Contemporary Poetry

While the dilemma of accepting Instapoetry as 'poetry' persists (Leszkiewicz), it rises in numbers and reach. And while *Views* on Instapoetry grow, multiple viewpoints on it emerge—perspectives that oscillate between two extreme poles.[7] On the one hand, it is valued as much as "greeting card" art (Berens 2019b), where its banality is described as "passing thoughts, hastily expressed, then cut up at random to resemble our conventional idea of poetry" (Hodgkinson). And on the other hand, it is considered as inspirational, designed to reassure its readers, making them feel better about themselves, and is optimistically lauded for presenting aspirational philosophies on a platform that idealises lifestyles and promotes food, fashion, and travel, thus, in turn, saving poetry (Hill and Yuan). In agreement with this view, Susanti Sarkar

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[7] Refer to Alyson Miller's paper "Poetry's Beyonce" (2019) for instances revealing the binary nature of critical views on Instapoetry.

(2021) disclaims the formulaic interpretations, submitting that Indian poets like Rupi Kaur and Nikita Gill focus on everyday issues relatable to a young Indian audience with brutal honesty in their poems. Thus, even though it is only partially accepted as a sub-genre in the long-established tradition of poetry, it becomes significant to study Instapoetry's location in the poetry reading cultures of the day owing to its contribution in snowballing the growth of poetry book sales (Hodgkinson) (Berens 2018). Since it has played an influential role in revolutionising contemporary poetry reading cultures, it is important to know where it stands vis-à-vis other contemporary forms of poetry.

As contemporary poetry, even poetry on Instagram tagged as "Instapoetry"—let alone traditionally printed poems merely posted on the platform—deals with the same set of themes that concern traditional poetry today. So, in content, it does not set out to be unconventional. For instance, like Ocean Vuong, Lang Leav too examines the complexities of personal and cultural identity and how they have affected her life in Australia. Writings of Rupi Kaur, like those by Warsan Shire, deal with intergenerational trauma. Similar to Meena Kandasamy, Priya Malik utilises poetry as a potent tool to highlight gender dynamics and prejudice, which in turn calls forth a celebration of femininity and critical examination within patriarchal communities. Intimacy, longing, and emotional attachments are themes that both Megha Rao and Tishani Doshi pursue in their writing. Poets Rao and Doshi both write from their personal experiences, but Rao's poems mostly deal with love and desire, while Doshi's cover more ground, touching on themes like cross-border identity transition, travel, and love. Like Natasha Trethewey's works, Kate Baer's poetry also examines the complexities of family and personal history in her poetry. Nikita Gill, similar to Sonnet Mondal, focuses on perseverance and survival. She strives to inspire optimism and resilience through her work that deals with post-COVID mental health issues. Ultimately, poets such as Hollie McNish and Nabanita Kanungo write on the theme of displacement. An urgent quest for a feeling of belonging marks both of their works.

In this way, Instapoetry, far from the claims that it creates an alienated world, connects with contemporary audiences. However, it may not be wrong to admit that it serves its audience in its own unique manner. Besides mobile accessibility, it may be the result of this unique treatment that Instapoetry elicits a gracious reception. Lily Paquet (2019) notes how "Instagram poetry combines poetry and self-help literature. Its validity, therefore, derives from its appeal to poetic and broader audiences." But as mentioned above, content may not be the real dispute

among critics; it is moreover targeted for the lack of 'craft' and clichéd language. It is charged, however, not baselessly, to provide its readers with instant gratification, which results instant understanding. Instant understanding is in turn attained as a result of four characteristics central to the reading of Instapoetry. The first is "rinse and repeat templatability," which has come to be adapted by a mass of users on Instagram with growing visual genres as an aesthetic decision because they are easy to mimic as well as simple to engage with (Leaver et al., "Templatability of Instagram"). These repeated templates are what the audiences are accustomed to and are equally comfortable with. The second characteristic is semantic simplicity in the treatment of the content, which is received with mixed feelings. Third is relatability in terms of culture and language and fourth is "short form communication," where Rebecca Watts (2018) draws the line and argues against its definition as poetry. Bypassing the constructive commentaries of the reviewers of Hollie McNish's poetry collection[8] from *The Scotsman* and *The Sunday Times*, Watts's review strongly maintains a contrary opinion.

The vocabulary that predominates the review calls Instapoetry artless and derivative, echoing *The Baffler* article by Soraya Roberts (2018) that claims that Instapoetry is not an art, rather a good to be sold and that its value depends on quantity rather than quality. A similar strain of thought runs in Aarthi Vadde's article (2017), which studies the Hybrid Economy of digital platforms that supports "amateur creativity" on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Tumblr, Twitter, and so on. Deterministically, the article sees the digital space as a site of exploitation of user's data and looks at the poets as manipulative artists learning to "game the system," giving little consideration to the audience's agency in choosing these platforms to read poetry. Intentionally or not, this conception also sharpens the boundaries between high art and low art; as Vadde holds, "Instapoets... tend to be more Corelli than Coetzee... [with] massive followings that operate entirely outside the professional literary circles that dictate prestige" (38).

0.2 Popular Art and Instapoetry

Critics like Watts and Vadde see Instapoetry as exploiting aesthetic taste in readers, whereas Hill and Yuan (2018) construe it as something that democratises art. They understand

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[8] Watts records the following commentaries: Roger Cox (from *The Scotsman*) who writes, "It's not that she doesn't care about things like scansion and simile; more that, in her personal list of aesthetic priorities, immediacy and honesty matter more;" and Jeremy Noel Tod (from *The Sunday Times*) who writes that McNish "can be verbally deft over long stretches and is seriously interested in how language shapes the world and our emotions" (2018).

the phenomenon of Instagram poetry as cracking the walls around esoteric highbrow art, which gives a global platform to people of colour, specifically women, to voice their feelings. Apropos, Hannah Taylor (2021) analyses the work of some Instapoets and argues that the digital medium helps "minor literatures" to spread, which otherwise would not have been possible. Sarkar agrees, and further adds that Instapoetry has brought poetry back from the dead by making it more accessible to potential readers, who are now open to and inclined to read more of classical and contemporary poetry other than Instapoetry. Greeting card or not, it is clear that Instapoetry has driven people from giftshops to bookstores.[9]

As the statistics indicate, Instapoetry has definitely contributed to bringing about a literary sensibility in the poetry reading public in the USA, but it is Instapoetry itself that has witnessed the highest hike in the sales of poetry books (Rogers). Kathi Berens's observation about Instapoetry that it is the only e-literature that could fill a stadium marks Instapoetry's popularity (2019a),[10] and the reason behind it is the increasing interest of youth to participate in the social media cultures.

And as with most other popular forms of art, Instapoetry's world is also debated as being estranged from the world of "serious poetry," which is rarefied and requires sincere effort as well as instruction to read. From this point of view, Instapoetry is merely quasi-poetic, or worse, an indiscriminate profusion (Solway). Thus, conventional criticism[11] creates two worlds in opposition to one another: one with a limited group of niche readers and artists, and the other with a popular following of untutored readers and unqualified poets. The first exists in a minority yet is superior, while the majority of the latter is considered inferior.

At this point, the contempt for Instapoetry and concerns of conventional criticism can be understood from at least four standpoints: apotheosis, "juvenoia," traditionalism, and class.

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[9] Refer to Jessica Pressman's innovative account of books as an object and symbol in *Bookishness* (2020), where she explains why people are driven to buy printed books in the digital age. So with people turning to bookstores from gift shops, it is also important to ask if bookstores have turned into gift shops.

[10] Popular poetry was earlier thought of as that which is widely read (Leavis 1939, 230). However, here popular poetry is understood as a product of mass culture, trends of which are taken to be temporary. As against classic or elitist poetry "Popular" as Raymond Williams suggests in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* is either something that is "well-liked by many people"; "inferior kinds of work; "work deliberately setting out to win favour with the people"; "culture actually made by the people for themselves."

[11] The term *conventional* is used for criticism that is known by convention. *Traditional* as a term is not used here, which indicates that this mode of criticism still exists among scholars and critics.

0.2.1 Apotheosis, Juvenoia and Traditionalism

It is an exaggeration, though apt, to acknowledge the apotheosis of poetry as a genre with the highest aesthetic value, as Joseph Epstein in "Who Killed Poetry" recalls, "...I was taught that poetry was itself an exalted thing. No literary genre was closer to the divine than poetry; in no other craft could a writer soar as he could in a poem" (13). Poetry, even if it is available to the masses, is only accessible to the arbiters of literature. And the inclusion of poetry among popular/trendy arts is received with much discomfort, where *popular poetry* is an oxymoron that is under constant vigilance. Talking about poetry of the eighteenth century and the shift in reading attitudes of late nineteenth century readers, Q D Leavis (1939) deplores that the poetry of Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden and Pope required maturity of an adult and a state of alertness to effectively comprehend the intended meaning, whereas a certain loss of poise and maturity marks the poetry of "new poets" exemplified by Gray, Goldsmith, Johnson, Cowper, Burns, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Keats, Shelley and Tennyson (230). Thus, poetry is to be treated as something distant from the masses. However, Mike Chasar paradoxically points out that poetry is, in fact, very close to the daily lives of people and is encountered in multiple environments and spaces

> on greeting cards, postcards, calling cards, billboards, breath mint tins, trivets, table runners, stained glass windows, handkerchiefs, pillows, cross-stitchings and wall hangings, subway and bus placards, autograph albums, playing cards, posters, calendars, stickers, event tickets, cocktail glasses, ring holders, souvenir plates, candy bar wrappers and candy boxes, packaging for pet products, cereal boxes, milk bottles, thermometers... (4-5).

Parallelly, "Juvenoia" (a term that has recently gained currency among netizens), the idea that the new generation of young people is somehow inferior and less worthy than the older generation, is also at work here. One can only refer to Thom Young's opinion of the younger generation that is "mostly interested in 'fidget spinner' poetry. Like they're just scrolling on their devices, to read something instantly, while the libraries are empty" (2017). True to a certain extent, these assertions have but a flimsy footing as two pressing assumptions problematise this standpoint: firstly, that it is only the young people who are actively involved in the production, consumption, and distribution processes on social media, and secondly, that social media promotes only popular arts, and both, in turn, are corrupting the young generation.

Lastly, "traditionalism," for the purposes of realising the argument here, is identified as the rejection of newer forms and norms to the already accepted structures of poetry. Norman Podhoretz's criticism of the Beat poets in *Partisan Review* as "The Know-Nothing Bohemians" (1958) is an example worth citing. Podhoretz wrote of the now-revered Beat poets that "the Beat generation's worship of primitivism and spontaneity is more than a cover for hostility to intelligence; it arises from a pathetic poverty of feeling as well" (242). This fear of change again comes up when one looks at how the torchbearers of high art are threatened with losing authority in the wake of the popular arts.[12] Following Rupi Kaur's success in outselling Homer's *Odyssey,* and Adam Hammond's remark on Byron being the first bestseller poet in English literature and how he was not well received by his critics,[13] Ariel Bissett (2018) rhetorically asks in a YouTube documentary if Rupi Kaur is indeed the "new Byron" of contemporary times. While it would be controversial and problematic to call Kaur the "new Byron," one has to accept that the view that "popular literature as bestseller must be dismissed from the tradition of high-brow" is politically charged. This attitude is undeniably set to define class.

A brief history of discussion around popular arts will help understand the cultural concerns associated with class politics that also underline criticism of Instapoetry.

0.2.2 Instapoetry and Class

The term "popular" is generally differentiated from "high-brow"—a term that F. R. Leavis (2006 [1930]) uses to describe literature read by "a very small, specialized public" (17). Leavis's essay "Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture" builds on Matthew Arnold's conception of "Culture" in *Culture and Anarchy* (2001 [1869]) as the study of total perfection and "the best that has been thought and said in the world" (2001, 2). While Arnold's theory does not specify any classification of literature into high or low categories,[14] Leavis's project

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[12] Q. D. Leavis's remark that the huge class that supports cheap literature has achieved great intellectual progress, making it respectable can be cited here (175). The fear is also apparent in Rebecca Watts's address to the "poets" reminding them of their duty to conserve language by innovating and engaging with tradition in a way to render language with more meaning, make it memorable, and avoid promoting amateurism and ignorance in "our poetry." This aligns with F. R. Leavis's vision of the setting of standards by a minority group on whom "discerning appreciation of art and literature depends" (12).

[13] *Hours of Idleness* (1807) was harshly criticised by The Edinburgh Review, in response to which Lord Byron wrote *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809).

[14] Arnold prioritises individual's pursuit of "perfection;" while classifying between Barbarians, Philistines and Populace, he only criticises classes for their shortcomings, and omits determining each class's proper function in achieving this perfection. T. S. Eliot, in "The Three Senses of 'Culture'" (1949), says that arriving at a definition of 'Culture' without coherently considering it from all three contexts (individual, group or class, and society) overshadows the fact that there is a "cultural disintegration" that has come about owing to the separation of classes in the western society. While Eliot

consciously draws out a minority class of people who read and judge what is best suited to be included as 'Culture'. He points out that in Shakespeare's times there was no existence of the "high-brow," but its mention becomes inevitable when a certain "levelling down" of culture accompanies mass production (2006, 14).

Ensuing upon this, Q. D. Leavis, in her quantitatively detailed analysis of the reading public, categorises the levels of reading materials into "highbrow," "middlebrow," and "lowbrow" (20). She compares lowbrow reading with drug habits and argues, with statistics, that it substantially retards the circulation of highbrow literature (7). Continuing F. R. Leavis's proposal on the classification of the reading public, she also maintains that "the sudden opening of the fiction market to the *general public* [my italics] was a blow to serious reading" (161).

There are two broad assumptions that emerge from this approach, which also underscore the reviews of Instapoetry today (as has been delineated so far). Firstly, it ideates that popular literature, discerned as repetitive and formulaic, is a result of the industrial practices of mass production. And art thus produced is harmful to the enhancement of culture. Secondly, it presumes a common audience ("general public"), which is seen as a mass prone to manipulation and exploitation. The audience is assumed to be passive with apathetic sentiment, potentially corrupted by repetitiveness. Accordingly, Leavis (1939) marks, "The public now, perhaps, read a great deal but in such a confused and immeasurable manner that they retain no impressions; it is like an evanescent stamp upon moist sand" (188-189).

The first assumption (about receptiveness), which stems from concerns pertaining to the quality of art and its function, assigns a value to it, giving art the status of a cultural artefact bearing a vital position in the refinement of society. While Walter Benjamin (1968 [1935]) attributes the reproducibility of art in the age of mechanical reproduction to the loss of "aura"[15] and authority of the artwork, politicising it, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (2002 [1947]) argue otherwise. In "The Culture Industry," they criticise the sameness of reproducibility and refute the view that cultural chaos of any kind can be created by reproduced artworks in the technological age. These artworks hardly pose a challenge to the real forms of existing order because "all mass culture under monopoly is identical... [and] the standardized

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tries to understand culture in a coherent manner, he holds on to the separation of the classes and the respective values attached to them; and also maintains Arnold's idea of 'Culture' leading people towards "perfection."

[15] According to Benjamin, "aura" signifies mystical qualities helpful in appreciating art. An artwork's aura is a result of its unique presence in time and place. It also relates to the notion of authenticity.

forms... were originally derived from the needs of the consumers: that is why they are accepted with so little resistance" (95).

"Homogenous culture" problem was raised by Frederic Jameson. In "Mass Culture as Big Business" he distinguishes between amusing and authentic art, whereby he criticises the "sameness" that governs the workings of the former. He uses the Kantian concept of "schematism" and the Marxist concept of "equivalence" to look at this "sameness" as perpetuating conformity (149). This view holds that popular literature is not only responsible for stalling the growth of culture, but it also proves harmful to the enterprise of serious literature. Remarks on the "levelling down" of literature and "middle-brow" art are echoed in Dwight Macdonald's critique of "Masscult and Midcult," where he asserts that lower arts, especially Midcult, abuse the techniques of avant-garde for their success (50). Adorno and Horkheimer also claim that under the guise of style, "aesthetic barbarism" only imitates the contours of great works of art, creating an impression of truth (103).

Exploring the phenomenon of repetition and iteration in Chinese and English-speaking cultures in his book *Make it the Same*, Jacob Edmond concedes that repetitiveness is not inherently negative, artificial, or a sudden phenomenon that has emerged in the 21st century. By examining the concept of turn to iteration in poetry, one gets an insight into the recurring patterns that shape their existence. Various institutions, ranging from states to hospitals, schools, and jails function and persist through the use of regulations, standards, and other mechanisms of recurrence. Iterative poetry has the ability to expose the patterns of repetition that create established norms inside institutions, while also providing methods to challenge, modify, change, or substitute those current patterns of power. Focusing on form in this context enables one to consider the temporal patterns of art and life not only as organising and shaping, but also as multiple and intersecting, with one entity relying on the others to establish its own dominant structure. In other words, poetry elucidates the societal manifestations of repetition and replication, while also presenting its own rhythmic patterns that occasionally resonate with and occasionally contest the prevailing repetitions of social milieu (Edmond 11-12).

In addition to this, popular art like Instapoetry does not seem to vex its audience with repetitive poetics; rather, it stays with them like "peanut butter" (Jenkins et al., 2013, 9) (Berens 2019a). But to say that the reading of the popular grows like a drug habit is instrumentalised to mould the masses into conformity is supposing a malleable, mindless audience. Audience is otherwise also generalised as a non-thinking mass in the "cult of personality" argument on

Instapoets (Watts), which understands them as "brands" with the aim to sell their poetry like merchandise, only manipulating their audience (Fallon) (Yu). Representing Leavis's second assumption, Macdonald considers Masscult as non-art or a mere distraction supported by the masses, which, according to him, are "non-man" crowd that promotes "homogenized culture" (11-12). Such a perspective restricts the formation of a practically applicable and multidimensional perception of a mass audience in contemporary times where social media platforms serve as an intersection of same/different kinds of art with same/different kinds of people at the same/different points in time, depending on the platform algorithm.

0.2.3 Grounded Aesthetics

Studying the reception of popular culture in new media, Paul Willis (1998) refuses the possibility of a passive audience when using cultural commodities. He classifies young people's use of cultural commodities into three categories: *symbolic work*, *symbolic creativity,* and *symbolic extension*. He argues that the reception of cultural media and commodities requires individuals to engage in *symbolic work*, challenging the notion that they are only meant to pacify the audience. This work involves selecting from a range of options and exercising control over the circumstances and specific conditions of consumption. Further, the 'reception' involves the application of *symbolic creativity*, encompassing the psychological, emotional, and semiotic assimilation of given data to generate new associations and significance for the individual. Ultimately, this *symbolic work* and *creativity* generate *symbolic extension*, a process of creating meaning that is more wide-ranging and less influenced by the production conditions and social dynamics of consumption as dictated by the overarching capitalist social structure. Elsewhere, Willis also explains this process through the distinction between 'made message' communication and 'sent message' communication (164). Thus, grounded aesthetics would refrain from presuming a poor audience based on their reading styles—such as that which does not retain impressions (Leavis188). The theory rather suggests interpreting the aesthetic position of art, and not its value, through the examination of its reception by a particular audience located in a particular context of a medium.

Because the aesthetics of poetry too change with its specific location in media and function, contextualising poetry, poet, and reader in the medium of its dissemination aids in reading poetry as marked not only by its aesthetics but also by its economic and institutional context (Yu) (Chasar 4). Alyson Miller's paper on the commodifying effect of Rupi Kaur's poetry (2019) is as accurate a portrait of Instapoetry as it can get to grounded aesthetics. Miller

talks about the contribution of poet's paratextual performances and audience's exigencies in the process of commodifying confessional poetry. It balances the media aspect on the one hand and poetry on the other. Though it is a comprehensive critique, it does not represent the heterogeneous terrain of Instapoetry in its entirety.

0.3 Perspectives and (Re)-Reading

The trouble with viewpoints of cultural vigilantes regarding the proper form of poetry is their negligent disregard for the fundamental purpose of reading poetry. Latter inquiry is vital in creating a room for admitting readers' agency in deliberately choosing to read in a certain environment over others and in picking certain works over others—not considering contributing to any refinement of the culture, but just experiencing the beauty for its sake. And, notwithstanding the purpose of the poet, it still remains a domain of the readers, actively participating in its propagation, to make Instapoetry popular.

Before concluding how the present thesis proposes to study Instapoetry, three patterns of approach, around which the majority research work (mentioned so far) revolves will be identified.

Firstly, Instapoetry is discerned as 'popular' and so prejudged as artless. This view erroneously compares Instapoetry with poetry in print media, applying the denominator of same aesthetic parameters for both. It mainly focuses on the lowering quality of art in absence of gatekeepers, whereby Instapoetry is suspected of being detrimental to the culture. Falling into an axiological fallacy, the view refrains from a sincere deliberation on the artwork's instrumentality, i.e., what Instapoetry attempts to do through its thematic and stylistic preferences, thus, not adequately explaining why Instapoetry sells even in print. Moreover, the context of media is partially avoided in such an estimation.[16]

Second approach is exemplified in Muhammad Adek and Dadi Satria's study, "Courage to be Dislike: Strategies and Approach of Insta-Poetry in the Digital Era," where they adopt a formalistic approach to compare Lang Leav's poetry to other forms of poetry. They conclude that it is not very different from the latter, only more accessible and honest, adjusting to the spirit of the age. Analytic lenses like this assess the thematic and stylistic aspects of Instapoetry

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[16] See Thom Young [2017]; Rebecca Watts [2018]; Soraya Roberts [2018]; Thomas Hodgkinson [2019]; Cecily Fasham [2019]

to assert that its themes represent the anxieties of the youth, while its style deliberately resists categorisation under traditional poetry.[17] Just as in the first approach, the aesthetic frame employed in this fashion for comparison is still barely sufficient. Although Instapoetry's location in the medium is mentioned, medium specificities are not dealt with in detail. Again, the study of thematic and stylistic aspects, so unconcerned with the probable effect of the medium's demands, becomes problematic because a certain set of themes and styles are particularly chosen by Instapoets keeping in mind the influence of media. Moreover, the hierarchies in art are not radically opposed by this approach.

Unlike the former approaches, the third approach notes the nuances affected by a particular media platform, however, not forgoing the discussion on poetry's cultural value. Studying the digital publishing scene, Aarti Vadde propounds that poetry on social media flourishes like popular fiction in a gift economy that marks the medium (38). She keeps from holding a strong opinion like Watts (2018), yet it is safe to conclude that her article is filled with the overtones of assessment of cultural change brought in by Instapoetry that is criticised for making poetry less intimidating and reaching out to more people than highbrow poetry.

A constructive counterpart of this defends Instapoetry, evincing it as an object important to register the changing technology and, in turn, culture itself. Though it appreciates the presence of Instapoetry, the focus of such an approach is to explore culture through poetry. For instance, Kathi Berens (2019a), who sees the algorithm affecting Instapoetry's reach as something that helps one read the reader; or James Rue, who embarks upon a journey to read Instapoetry as "a social phenomenon rather than a cultural one" (1), attempting to search for value (cultural, social, or otherwise) it holds for society (4); or Curwood and Padgett (2015), who deal with adolescent poetic literacy in online affinity spaces, focusing on how teenagers engage with poetry in the digital age.

Using Bolter and Grusin's *The Digital Plenitude: The Decline of Elite Culture and the Rise of Digital Media*, Rue correctly argues that analysing Instapoetry requires the context of both media and culture. He discusses two concurrent phenomena here: 1. the degree to which new media networks structure people's lives, and 2. elimination of "culture with a capital C" (4). While his evaluation of the media's relationship with people is accurate, there are three fundamental problems with his view on Instapoetry as a cultural site. Firstly, his claim that

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[17] See Carl Wilson [2017]; Faith Hill and Karen Yuan [2018]; David McQuillan [2018]; Kate Waldman [2018]; May Hathaway [2019]; Laura Gallon [2019]; Susanti Sarkar [2021]

there is a shift in understanding culture today is contestable since critics (like Watts) continue to hold up the traditional hierarchies in the name of seeking "Culture." Secondly, he tries to look for value in Instapoetry. This may lead to creating hierarchies within Instapoetry, lowering those works that exist solely for their aesthetics and do not have any particular function to fulfil. Lastly, Rue posits cultural significance without reviewing the aesthetics, thus separating aesthetics from the discourse of culture.[18]

So, the critiques deriding Instapoetry are equally limiting towards the considerations of media and audience as those hailing it for saving poetry. What they share in common is that both are embedded in the good v/s bad debate, analysing Instapoetry for its supposed capacity to appraise or degrade the culture. In reinstating the validity of popular arts like Instapoetry by saying that it plays a crucial role in tracing the cultural change, one re-establishes the popular in the same discourse that it tries to depart from, governing indispensability of function in estimating a cultural value. What follows is an overinterpretation of art, seeking that value. Then begins the exhaustive project of interpreting meanings, either advocating the author's intention over the reader's rumination or vice versa.

0.3.1 Research Gap

Today, reading cultures and poetic sensibilities are undergoing a prominent shift where temporality distinguishes the construction of new codes from old ones. As a result, these new codes require new ways to address and read them[19]; as Ariel Bisset remarks, "the young generation is reading, but not in a way that we consider reading" (00:08:25). In this regard, Instapoetry too, as popular social media poetry, needs a (re)-reading to reach a proper understanding of what makes Instapoetry what it is. Condescending view holding audience's behaviour responsible for altering the aesthetic quality of art overlooks the nuanced relationship between audience's aesthetic experience and their agentic participation. Here, since reading is determined by the engagement logic of the platform, the grounds of experience are radically diverse from the traditional mode of experience. So, a broader outlook has to be adopted based on the purpose of poetry on the platform—an outlook that allows for not one

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[18] Rita Felski in "The Role of Aesthetics in Cultural Studies" (2004) particularly discusses this fallacious formulation. She contends that "Cultural studies... did not seek to destroy aesthetics, but to broaden the definition of what counted as art by taking popular culture seriously. It was always as much about form as about content, as much about pleasure as about ideology" (32).

[19] Naomi Baron probes into the nature of reading in the digital world. Refer to "Redefining Reading: The Impact of Digital Communication Media" (2013) for further discussion.

but many possibilities to study Instapoetry. Imogen Wallersteiner (2019) gives a plausible but not an elaborate explanation.

> These poems are often not traditionally, or especially artfully, crafted but there might be something artful about the form of Instagram itself. An explore page scattered with typeface poems and accompanying images recalls the collage artworks of the Cubists. Just as the modernist avant-garde responded to twentieth-century industrialisation and machine power, Instagram poetry reflects our own *zeitgeist* and is symptomatic of the fast-paced, ephemeral times we live in. Short and simple poetry is not innovative in itself but, by adding the element of the digital interface, Insta-poetry is arguably, in the words of Ezra Pound, 'Making It New'. The composite, hybrid format of Instagram requires us to read text alongside art, transforming our traditional experience of reading poetry on the physical page as we are hit with a visual *bricolage* of popular culture and mainstream tastes.

Hence, to arrive at a balanced position on the aesthetics of Instapoetry (since exact and all-determining position cannot be achieved), the hierarchies built on this binary understanding of aesthetics and culture must be problematised. For this, poetry has to be appreciated for the overall (yet not complete) experience it affords, not leaning towards either 'pop culture utopia' or 'overinterpretation'.[20]

0.3.2 Research Questions

The instant reaction to the double-edged sword of Instapoetry criticism is to examine how Instapoetry is distinct from traditional poetry. Moreover, if it is obvious that social media changes the experience of art and so also of poetry, the study looks to investigate the factors responsible for the same. Following this, the study aspires to find out if it is possible, through the knowledge of affordances of social media, to enhance the experience of Instapoetry by aptly working its aesthetic parameters according to the medium, without imposing a stipulated formal structure to it.

As popularity and accessibility of Instapoetry bring poetry to wider audiences, sparking a renewed interest in the art form, the study proposes to answer how Instapoetry affects the form of contemporary poetry that exists in print? At the same time, the study also attempts to

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[20] 'Utopianism' and 'overinterpretation' here are a reference to the erroneous applicability of other potential theories like Reception Theory and Social Sculpture Theory that are prone to these respective reading anomalies.

discover what happens to the reading of traditionally published poetry when it appears on Instagram.

While social media platforms provide unprecedented opportunities for artistic expression, they also present challenges such as algorithmic biases and the pressure to conform to trends. In the context of discussions about inclusivity, authenticity, and the commodification of creativity, the study is compelled to answer how Instapoetry and Instagram art contribute to the debate on democratisation of art on the Internet.

Lastly, in responding to what "(re)-reading poetry" can mean in the particular case of Instapoetry, present research reveals the factors involved in the mutual success of the relationship between poetry and digital culture.

0.3.3 Hypotheses

There are several hypotheses that precede the performance of the study. The study means to argue that 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. Further, the second argument governs that Instapoetry must not 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. In line with the second argument, the study further maintains that the functions, features, tools, and affordances[21] of a medium/platforms permeate the processes of production, reception, and distribution of art on these platforms. They are conducive even to giving art on Instagram the kind of reading experience it offers. Accordingly, discerning this experience as instant and shallow would be a hasty conclusion when one considers the paratextual qualities of art on Instagram. Finally, these arguments contribute to the central thesis of this research that all poetry on Instagram is

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[21] These terms are interchangeably used, however they hold different meanings. While *function* of a platform stands for the service provided by the platform that has a stipulated protocol of use intended and set by the makers of the platform, *feature*s provided by a platform determine how and in what ways the *functions* will be fulfilled. At the same time, tools are material means by which *features* can be accessed and *functions* can be performed. Lastly, Affordances indicate a number of possible outcomes a platform can be used for (not stipulated) that can be achieved by using and experimenting with its *tools* and *features*.

necessarily and experientially Instapoetry because of some common features that underline the presentation of poetry on the platform.

0.3.4 Aims and Objectives

The main objective that leads the study is to communicate the significance of Instapoetry, not for the sake of culture but to determine a major shift in the way art is experienced (online as well as offline). Consequently, it is directed towards examining newer ways in which the aesthetic outlook can be attuned to the existing state of art.

The research is set to contextualise the practice of reading Instapoetry amidst the debates around value judgements on the art of poetry. It aims do so by assessing the available aesthetic frameworks for studying contemporary art forms in new media and adopting an appropriate framework to study Instapoetry. The secondary aim of the study is to understand the ways in which social media platforms (especially Instagram) work, and to configure the affordances of the platform. Thereby, it also aims to acknowledge the ingredients introduced by the participatory culture of Instagram and study their effect on the overall experience of poetry on the new media platform. As a part of this, it seeks to understand the roles of reader, poet, and poem in an online social media environment.

0.3.5 Methods and Methodology

To be able to answer the research questions and attain the aforementioned aims, the current study employs a mixed methods approach 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 independently of each other. Their analysis is carried out separately, results of which then converge in the overall analysis. Again, these are embedded within theoretical frameworks that guide the study, i.e., 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 art form. 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 platform specificities are taken into consideration.

The thesis proposes to depart from the conventional Anglo-American criticism applied in analysing Instapoetry, and it does so by suggesting that the aesthetic lens on which this criticism relies has been wanting in contemporising art theories. 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, which was influenced by his pragmatism. Pragmatism is a philosophical school that holds that the worth of ideas, policies, and proposals should be determined by their usefulness, workability, and practicality. The concept emphasises that concepts derive their meanings from their outcomes and their truths from their verification (Rosenthal and Thayer). Thus, Dewey's pragmatist approach to aesthetics in *Art as Experience* (1980 [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" (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 (1970), 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 aesthetic field of Instagram, is explored using some New Media theories like remediation, convergence culture, and 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. While "Type of Poetry Profile", "Type of Post", "Themes", and "Hashtags" are independent variables, "Nature of Comments" and "Engagement Rate" are dependent variables. These variables are partly derived from researcher's personal experience of poetry on the platform and partly from the available literature on the subject. The data is collected on the basis of a naturalistic observation method, relying on Instantaneous sampling within a targeted timeframe of two years (June 2021 to May

2023). The selection of 115 sample profiles 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. Since the analysis limits itself to the description of data and finding primary correlation between the variables, no particular method has been used for guiding its analysis that provides a larger picture of poetry-reading behaviour. The result of this analysis is supported by the interview data, which 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, an asynchronous mode of interview has been chosen for the task. As mentioned above, the interviews are not influenced by or embedded within the results of quantitative data. The questions formed for the interview are independent and based on the researcher's experience as a reader of Instapoetry. A total of thirty-six participants are selected, among whom 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 *Followers* (from 500 to 50k). The age range of the interviewees is between 18 and 30, as statistical data suggests that people in this age range form the largest number of Instagram users. Further, the data is processed, organised, and analysed through different types of coding (open, thematic, and analytic), forming concepts, resulting in wider categories as recommended by Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss (2015). The results that closely capture (on an individual level) the manner in which Instapoetry is engaged are then merged with quantitative data results and comprehensively presented to attain a coherent picture of the aesthetic experience of Instapoetry.

These are the main methods that are employed in the study.

0.3.6 Chapter Summary

The thesis is divided into four core chapters, excluding introduction and conclusion. The first chapter focuses on tracing the evolution of Instapoetry as a subgenre, for which it also

uses the history of the platform. It disclaims the opinion that all Instapoetry is the same by cataloguing the different types of Instapoetry that have come up corresponding with the upgrades of the platform. Further, a formalistic comparison is made between the different forms of traditional poetry and various forms of Instapoetry to see if there are any major differences between the two. The exercise attempts to answer the question of semantic complexity and intensity that predominates most criticism of Instapoetry and calls for a reassessment of Instapoetry as an art form. Thus, it concludes as it heralds the necessity to bring forth the aesthetic discourse to inquire about the constituents of art.

The second chapter of the thesis engages with a discussion on Aesthetics to reach the most appropriate aesthetic framework for studying art on Instagram. In order to locate the discourse in the contemporary art scene, the discussion meanders across theories of modern aesthetics and postmodern aesthetic philosophy. The theory of aesthetic experience by John Dewey, principally appearing in his book *Art as Experience* (1934), and the theory of aesthetic engagement by Arnold Berleant in *The Aesthetic Field* (1970) and *Art and Engagement* (1991) are determined to be the most accurate for the investigation of art on Instagram. The chapter stands on the postulation that the existence of Instagram art compels aesthetic discourse to broaden its boundaries, and the theories thus derived in turn help to appropriate this new-age art form.

To initiate a discussion on contextual aesthetic experience, the third chapter relies on macrocosmic view of aesthetic medium—social media. Firstly, it differentiates between artistic medium and aesthetic medium and then establishes a connection between aesthetic medium and "aesthetic field," as discussed by John Dewey and Arnold Berleant. Following this, researcher uses the framework of New Media Studies to establish the prerequisites of platform attributes to understand new media platforms (with a special focus on social media) and eventually the aesthetic field of Instagram. The broad theories that inform the analysis of art in new media are: Marshal McLuhan's "Medium as Message" in *Understanding Media* (1994 [1964]), Henry Jenkins's "Participatory Cultures" in *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era* (2016), "Remediation" as explained by Bolter and Grusin in *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (2000). Further assistance in understanding Instagram as a medium has been taken from the following works: *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* (2020) by Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield and Crystal Abidin; *Digital Life on Instagram* (2018) by Elisa Serafinelli; and *Art*

After Instagram: Art Spaces, Audiences, Aesthetic (2021) by Kylie Budge and Lachlan MacDowall.

Theories discussed in the third chapter culminate in the fourth, which provides a closer glance into the event of Instagram experience. Combined with an understanding of media specificities on Instagram, this chapter attempts to track the shifts in the roles of three components of poetry: poet, reader, and poetry. By intersecting the results of quantitative data (from 115 Instagram poetry *profiles*) and qualitative data (comprising interview responses of twenty-nine readers and seven poets) with the theoretical frames, the researcher has attempted to present the factors governing poetry reading experience on Instagram and how that changes the definition of poetry itself. Thus, the main objective of this research is achieved through the fourth chapter, which is also the final submission towards the central thesis: any poetry on Instagram—may it be that which is specifically composed and designed for the platform or that which is originally published in print—is Instapoetry.

Thus, this research intends to locate and map Instapoetry, the subject of the study, by addressing the question of art through the estimation of the aesthetic experience it affords. Such a (re)-reading not only offers a new perspective to accurately and comprehensively study poetry but also looks to augment the relevance of aesthetic discourse vis-à-vis the contemporary art landscape, particularly in the context of online poetry reading cultures.