# INSTAPOETRY: CHARACTERISTICS, THEMES AND CRITICISMS

# A review of recent scholarship

Rebecca Charry Roje, RIT Croatia (rebecca.charry@croatia.rit.edu)

Anamarija Vojnović, RIT Croatia (av4207@g.rit.edu)

## Abstract

This study provides a review of recent scholarship on the genre of Instapoetry, exploring its emergence, defining characteristics, audience dynamics and themes. Starting with a brief historical overview, the study discusses scholarly attempts to define instapoetry as distinct from traditional poetic forms. Additionally, the paper investigates prevalent themes embraced by Instapoets, analyzing the subjects and motifs that dominate their creative expressions. Criticism of Instapoetry is explored, including responses to concerns about artistic quality, commercialization, and the impact on literary standards. Finally, the research reviews studies on the potential uses of Instapoetry in educational contexts and implications for literacy development. By synthesizing existing scholarship, this paper aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of Instapoetry and its evolving role in contemporary literature.

## 1. Introduction

Instapoetry, a portmanteau of "Instagram" and "poetry," describes a genre of short, visually impactful poems created specifically for consumption on social media platforms. Its origins can be traced back to the early 2010s when Instagram, with its emphasis on visual content and succinct captions, became fertile ground for creative expression. Writers recognized the potential of this platform to reach diverse audiences instantaneously, through no-cost self-publishing that circumvents traditional editors and publishing houses. These digital writers are to be distinguished as a separate phenomenon from traditional print writers who later post on social media, or social media posts promoting traditional poets who first published in print. Rather, Instapoets rely on digital self-publishing as their primary dissemination method.

In the past 15 years or so, Instapoetry has become an undisputed commercial and popular success, with leading Instapoets amassing millions of dedicated followers. Probably the

most well-known Instapoet is Canadian Rupi Kuar, who was proclaimed "Queen of the Instapoets" by Rolling Stone magazine in 2017 and "The Writer of the Decade" by The New Republic magazine in 2019. Born in India, Kuar rocketed to literary stardom with her short-form, feminist-themed poems accompanied by simple line drawings, and has collected more than 4.5 million followers on Instagram. After publishing exclusively online for years, she achieved commercial success with her first printed volume, Milk and Honey, published by Andrews McMeel Publishing in 2015 and a follow-up volume The Sun and Her Flowers in 2018, reached the top of bestseller lists.

Other leading Instapoets include the anonymous Canadian poet Atticus (who appears publicly in a mask) with over 2 million Instagram followers, American Instapoet R. M. Drake with nearly 3 million followers, and New Zealand-based Lang Leav, who has over 500 000 Instagram followers.

At the same time, in addition to garnering widespread readership and lavish attention from mainstream media, Instapoetry has also become a subject of fierce debate, parody and ridicule. Many critics question the genre's artistic value and point out the commercialism inherent in the social media platform itself, where competition for likes and followers, as well as product placement, branding, and shopping opportunities are not only inevitable but in fact desirable.

Before examining the arguments both for and against the value of Instapoetry, it is important to establish the characteristics and themes of the genre.

## 2.  Characteristics

While the variety of texts within the genre of Instapoetry resist strict definition, the genre has been distinguished by several consistent characteristics, including brevity, simplicity of language, and visual impact.

The most important defining characteristic of Instapoetry is brevity. Most Instapoems are fewer than 20 words long, often consisting of just a few lines of several words each (Rue, 2019; Knox, 2022). This brevity may be less the writer's artistic choice, than a logical consequence of the technical constraints of the format, since each poem must be easily viewable on a smartphone screen, in its entirety.

In addition to conciseness, Instapoetry is characterized stylistically by nonrhyming free verse. Eschewing traditional poetic forms, and formal constraints altogether, Instapoetry can be described as minimalistic "micro poetry," in which even capitalization and punctuation are avoided (Paquet, 2019).  Traditional literary devices such as rhyme, meter, alliteration, metaphor, image and figurative language, are avoided, in favor of simple, direct statement and the more universal and immediate language of everyday life (Alfano, 2023). Meanings are straightforward and direct, requiring little to no interpretation, and posing little ambiguity.

For example, one of Kuar's most popular poetry posts reads simply:

*"fall/in love/with your solitude."*

Others include *"you've touched me/without even/touching me"* and *"she was music/but he had his ears cut off"*.

Consistent with social media's orientation towards visual rather than textual content, a second characteristic of Instapoetry is visual impact (Paquet, 2019). Use of white space, attention to fonts and colors are key features of the genre. Instapoems are usually accompanied by (or overlaid upon) simple drawings or photos created by the poet or others (Rue, 2019).

Instapoetry is recognizable not only for its (lack of) formal characteristics, but also by a fairly consistent set of themes. Instapoets focus on what Paquet (2019) has called "a self-help aesthetic" revolving around self-love, empowerment, trauma recovery, mental health and personal development generally (Soelseth, 2023; Trajkovic & Andeljkovic, 2022). In addition, issues of social justice, identity politics, rebellion or resistance to perceived social oppression, with particular attention to the concerns of women and minorities.

With Instapoetry now more than a decade old, a broad consensus has emerged, identifying Instapoetry through these fundamental characteristics (brevity, simplicity of language, and specialized themes). However, it is exactly these defining characteristics that have sharply divided scholars and critics over its value. First, we examine the perceived benefits of Instapoetry, before turning to critics.

## 3.  The Value of Instapoetry

As Instapoetry's popularity suggests, millions of readers have found specific poems and poets personally inspiring, comforting, and meaningful (Yi, 2023; Plummer, 2018). In addition, academic and cultural proponents of Instapoetry argue that the genre offers powerful benefits for authors, readers and society in general. As a democratizing force in literary expression, they argue, Instapoetry is making poetry more accessible and relevant to a wider audience.

### 3.1. Physical and intellectual accessibility

Because of Instapoetry's digital format, the genre has been seen as a breakthrough in physical accessibility. Infinitely portable, mobile and accessible from nearly anywhere, social media brings the act of reading poetry closer to everyday life. In this view, poetry reading is not a separate endeavor, but integrated into the familiar daily routine of communication and information gathering. Poetry does not need to be sought out but can be easily stumbled upon. Because social media is available free of charge for both readers and writers (barring the cost of a smartphone), anyone can access or publish (Rue, 2019). The digital nature of instapoetry also allows for immediate feedback and engagement from a global audience, creating an interactive global community (Kovalik & Curwood, 2019).

Furthermore, Instapoetry has been praised for its cognitive accessibility. With its straightforward language, simple vocabulary, and rejection of ambiguity or the need for interpretation, it has been seen by some as an antidote to overly intellectual, academically oriented poetry of the past (Hein, 2020). Instapoetry has been acclaimed for attracting new

young audiences to poetry overall, a genre that seems to suffer from a reputation as intimidating, obscure or elitist (Alfano, 2023; Trajkovic and Andeljkovic, 2022; Rue, 2019).

The widespread popularity of Instapoetry has been credited for a noticeable rise in poetry readership, particularly in the US and the UK (Mattix, 2023). In fact, The Atlantic magazine proclaimed in 2019 that "Instagram Saved Poetry," crediting the genre at least in part for the resurgence among poetry reading found in a widely cited study by the National Endowment for the Arts in 2018, which showed increase in poetry reading in general and a marked increase among 18–24-year-olds, which had more than doubled since 2012. According to the NEA report, poetry readership was noticeably increased among women, minorities, and those without a college degree.

### 3.2. Diversity and authenticity

In line with the above view of Instapoetry as a democratizing force within poetry, proponents also laud Instapoetry for providing a platform for diverse voices and perspectives that may have been traditionally marginalized in the literary world. While traditional poetry studies tend to focus on the works of Anglo and European men, Instapoetry gives voice particularly to women and historically marginalized minority communities. Boqo (2023), for example, investigates the work of Malawian storyteller and Instapoet Upile Chisala as a force of anti-colonialism for "reimagining the being of black women and girls."

Emphasis has been placed on the importance of authentic expression and storytelling as part of sharing and examination of cultural identity, particularly among women. Instapoetry in this view plays an important social role in addressing issues of gender inequality, sexual violence, and cultural heritage.  Kuar in particular has been studied as a pioneer in authentic female self-expression and storytelling which fits within the scope of confessional poetry (Manning, 2020; Gawrieh, 2019; Danne, 2023).

Others argue that the inspirational messages in instapoetry make it a potential gateway to political action and social change in the real world.

Knox et al. (2023) point out that the majority of new Instapoetry is no longer written in English, but in Urdu, Spanish, French, Polish, and several other languages. These international writers create communities and focus attention on important events around the world.

According to Knox et. al (2023), "While serving to focus attention on international events such as the invasion of Ukraine, Instapoetry's blunt and confessional tone… has paved the way for more open discussions of rape and sexuality and given poets forums for immediate resistance to events such as the Russian war… in Ukraine, or the Battle of Kabul."

Similarly, Evans (2023), studying the use of the geographical hashtag among feminist Instapoets in peninsular Spain, concluded that "where the poetic content, visual imagery and captioned employment of hashtags are seen to perpetuate the work of offline, feminist activism, Instapoetry can be seen as an assistant or a "valid contribution" to collective action."

These and other studies of Instapoetry focus on the social, cultural and political implications of the messages and voices represented in the genre, as forces for positive change on the personal and collective levels.

### 3.3. Educational implications

The brevity, simple language, and visual appeal of Instapoetry make it ripe for inclusion in educational settings, with some educators incorporating it into the curriculum to engage students in reading and writing activities. Barbosa and Sales (2022) report positive results in an EFL classroom assignment sequence to engage students in reading poetry and writing their own, using Rupi Kaur's poem, "Broken English."

Investigating digital literacy practices of young writers, Kovalik and Curwood (2019) argue that the portability, accessibility and multimodality of the genre make it an important resource for teaching and learning. "Implications of Instapoetry on English pedagogy include the increased exposure and relevance of poetry writing and appreciation, a space for student-centered writing, reading, and analysis of poems, as well as a relevant method of peer review and collaboration."

Although many educators note that the language of Instapoetry can seem simplistic, Alfano (2023) argues that a positive experience reading Instapoetry in the context of an academic course can serve as an encouraging gateway to exploration of poets with a more challenging style, particularly when students are engaged with themes that speak to their lived experiences.

## 4.  Criticism of Instapoetry

Despite (or perhaps because of) its meteoric rise, Instapoetry has provoked a wave of harsh criticism, ridicule and parody. Criticism focuses primarily on two areas: lack of artistic and literary merit and the commodification of poetry into a commercial product. Detractors argue that the genre's emphasis on brevity and simplicity of language and narrow focus on confessional, self-help motifs undermine the depth and complexity inherent in traditional forms. Critics also point to the commodification of poetry on digital platforms, where popularity, virality and product sales often take precedence over artistic merit.

### 4.1. Lack of artistic and literary value

As discussed previously, Instapoetry in general eschews traditional poetic conventions such as rhythm, meter, rhyme, enjambment, metaphor and figurative language, in favor of straightforward language of everyday life. While supporters see this style as "accessible," detractors claim that the directness of meaning without need for interpretation, precludes Instapoetry from being considered poetry at all (Furilla, 2023; Green, 2019; MacKay & Mackay, 2023). They argue that the genre is more accurately described as cliche, self-help aphorisms, or as Hodgkinson (2019) describes them, "passing thoughts, hastily expressed, cut up at random." Yavanda (2018) calls Instapoetry "a plague of cliches."

A good deal of concern has come from traditional poets and their readers, who evaluate Instapoetry in light of traditional poetic standards. Texas-based poet and educator Thom Young, himself nominated for a Pushcart Prize, was so concerned about the quality of

poems online, that he intentionally started writing the most vapid, trite poems he could think of and publishing them online under a false name (Flock, 2017). To his chagrin, he earned tens of thousands of followers.

In a widely read and controversial critique of Instapoetry, Watts (2019) criticized the genre as a "cult of the noble amateur" that prioritizes authenticity over skillful craftsmanship. She claims that 'honesty' and 'accessibility' – have become "buzzwords for the open denigration of intellectual engagement and rejection of craft." She argues that the genre prioritizes self-expression and emotional catharsis over artistic quality and depth of meaning. Watts suggests that the popularity of Instapoetry diminishes the standards of poetry by promoting a culture of instant gratification and oversimplification. She critiques the genre for its tendency towards superficiality, emphasizing that poetry should demand more from both its creators and its audience. Watts contends that Instapoetry's focus on personal narratives and easily digestible messages undermines the complexity and power of the poetic form.

Similarly, Leszkiewicz (2019) decries a lack of artistry, subtlety and challenge, claiming that within the digital poetry landscape, "genuinely insightful or distinctive work is the exception, not the rule."

Those who compare instapoetry with traditional poetry seem to clearly favor one over the other. But a growing number of critics suggest that the two forms cannot and should not be compared. Green (2019) claims that "poems and Instapoems are different objects on a fundamental and irreconcilable level. They're different actions, in different directions, with different motivations."

Traditional poetry, he argues is "a door to new meaning," while Instapoetry is "a mirror held up to the reader, reflecting and rendering beautifully back what the reader already knows."

He uses the following poem by Atticus as an example:

*If I conquered all my demons*

*there wouldn't be much left of me.*

Green describes this poem as a "memorable re-articulation of a cliché that we can all relate to and appreciate."

### 4.2. Commercialization

A second criticism of Instapoetry is over-commercialization. Instapoets engage in a variety of profit-making endeavors, as is common and practically inevitable on social media, selling branded merchandise from clothing lines to wine, and endorsing third-party products (Green, 2019). They have been accused of being driven by financial rather than artistic motives. In short, there is widespread resistance to seeing "poetry as a commodity, that feeling and artistic expression can and should be sold and shared in re-tweetable, accessible bite-size pieces" (Yavanda, 2019).

The genre is seen as built upon the "entrepreneurial attitudes of contemporary Instapoets, many of whom acknowledge their personal brand as a contributing factor in their commercial success" (Kiernan, 2021).

Connecting the lack of artistic complexity with commercialization, Mackay and Mackay (2023) argue that today's Instapoetry has more in common with historical antecedents such as greeting cards, self-help inspirational quotes and other short-form aphorisms than poetry.

They claim that the genre reflects "a growing cultural obsession with self-empowerment and personal trauma healing," and that Instapoets "are not artists, but rather content creators who are meeting this demand with mass-produced commercial products."

"The major Instapoets should, therefore, be separated from the mass of social media poetry, and instead be considered as professional writers producing content for this self-care publishing industry. Instapoetry's lack of metrical control or linguistic complexity can be attributed to consumer preferences for short-form commercial aphorisms that can appeal to a wide audience."

## 5.  Conclusion: A Way Forward

The debate over Instapoetry, both in the popular imagination and in scholarly circles, echoes previous controversies over many previous innovative artistic techniques and technologies. Instapoetry has become a cultural flashpoint. On one hand, many argue that "artistic value" is an entirely subjective judgement, and no standards can be applied other than individual preference and taste. For this camp, the judgement is ultimately left to the reader. In this market-driven, reader-centric philosophy, engagement with the text is sufficient proof of its effectiveness. In other words, poetry has value as long as readers believe it has value. This view welcomes Instapoetry as a democratizing force that counters longstanding cultural elitism. As Rue (2019) puts it, "traditional hierarchies of cultural value are being eroded and this erosion has finally caught up to poetry."

On the other hand, traditionalists such as Watts and Hodgkinson argue in favor of objective standards of quality and are loathe to see the complex and sophisticated works of the past be passed over by a world focused on instant gratification that has neither time nor patience for interpretation or nuance. This camp sees Instapoetry as a potential threat, both a symptom and a cause of weakening intellectual and artistic capabilities in society in general.

In recognition of the fact that reconciliation of these two camps is nearly impossible, and that Instapoetry is here to stay, and does, in fact, resonate with millions of readers, perhaps the best way forward would be to recognize Instapoetry as a separate genre, with its own purposes, techniques, and audiences. In this view, comparison of Instapoetry with traditional poetry is neither necessary, possible or useful. Instead, those who hope to preserve traditional poetic forms and encourage new audiences to engage with their challenges, might do well to consider Instapoetry as a potential gateway to additional artistic experiences. It seems that a new generation of (digital) readers also longs for the kind of inspiration and solace that poetry, in its many forms, can bring.

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