

MPC MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

IT'S ALIVE:
AN EXPLORATION OF CONTEMPORARY POETRY IN THE DIGITAL AGE
USING RUPI KAUR AS A CASE STUDY

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The Major Research Paper is submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Professional Communication

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20 August 2018

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ABSTRACT

In the digital age, technology and digital media shapes virtually every aspect of our lives. Poetry, which has seen a surprising revival in recent years, is no exception. One of the most popular contemporary poets today is Rupi Kaur, made famous for her verse posted on the social media platform Instagram. This MRP seeks to answer the following research questions:

- 1) In what ways has the digital age effected contemporary poetry?
- 2) What role has digital media played in shaping the success and formal elements of Rupi Kaur's body of work?

This MRP begins by offering a brief history of poetry's relationship with media and an account of how poetry is produced and consumed in the digital age. The core of the MRP is a case study of contemporary Insta-poet Rupi Kaur. Through qualitative visual and textual analysis, the case study considers: 1) Kaur's poetry, 2) her Instagram content, 3) her readership, and 4) the criticisms of her work. As to the discussion, the analysis of the four categories reveals that Kaur's rise to Instagram fame is due to three factors: 1) Kaur's use of social media, 2) her readership's values, and 3) the publisher's motives. To conclude, this MRP offers some suggestions for future research, including identifying poets suitable for additional case studies.

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INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, technology has become a major part of our everyday lives. Digital media changes the way we communicate, travel, work, eat and play. Our entertainment industries, including those that are literary in nature, have changed vastly as a result of advancements in media—from print to radio to television to social media. Poetry is no exception. In recent years, we have seen a revival of poetry’s popularity on social media, in the mainstream media and in book sales (Medley, 2017). In fact, between 2016 and 2017, poetry sales in Canada increased by 154% (BookNet, 2018). Contemporary poetry, it seems, is trending (Medley, 2017).

This MRP will explore the affordances and limitations of media—including print media, social media and visual media—on poetry and will consider the ways in which these media influence how poetry is written and read in the digital age. The overarching question I will seek to answer is: In what ways has the digital age effected contemporary poetry’s consumption and production? I define the digital—or digitizing—age as the period from 1970 to today, and contemporary poetry as poetry produced within this era. To contextualize my research, I will begin by offering, based on arguments by media theorists, a historical account of media’s effect on literacy, on literature and, more specifically, on the poetic genre. Then, I will consider scholarly accounts of the changes that poetry creation and interpretation have undergone as a result of advancements in digital media—including the emergence of new ways of approaching poetry and of altogether new sub-genres. I will focus, in this section, on the significance of semiotic modes—including textual, aural, linguistic, gestural and special modes—to contemporary poetry. These components of my literature review will provide context for the core

of my MRP, which will take the form of a case study of the work of Rupi Kaur, a contemporary poet famous for her widespread success on the social media platform Instagram.

I have selected Kaur for this case study not only because she has successfully made a career as a poet with two bestselling poetry books—*milk and honey* (2014) and *the sun and her flowers* (2017)—but also because she remains active on social media, is based in Canada and is widely recognized as the most popular living poet in the world today (Medley, 2017). To better understand the changing role of poetry in our increasingly electronic world, I will consider Kaur's Instagram content, her method of publication, her readership and the criticisms of her work. While my case study will seek to offer a detailed account of Kaur's impact on contemporary poetry as it relates to the digital age, I must acknowledge that my findings will not necessarily be applicable to the entire poetic genre. However, by conducting this case study, I seek to uncover trends in the use of social media for poetic purposes and the ways in which audiences interact with poetry over digital platforms. Among these trends is the concept of poetry as social media content, a concept which conflates collaboration—something innate to social media as seen in reposting, retweeting and tagging functions—and plagiarism, something traditionally disapproved of in literature. I will consider both Kaur's individual poems on Instagram and the visual and textual composition of her Instagram feed in its entirety; not only will this analysis speak to the poet's visibility and self-presentation on the platform, but it will argue that Kaur's presence on social media is, in its entirety, one digital poem. This MRP will also approach Kaur's work from a marketing perspective; I will argue that Kaur's success, as measured by her book sales, is not necessarily a product of her poetry's literary merit but is rather a result of publication motives and is a reflection of her readership's values—those values

being “relatability” and accessibility. I will also consider pedagogical and generational factors that might affect Kaur’s readership and therefore influence the poet’s popularity.

To better understand how poetry might continue to transform in and be transformed by the digital age, this MRP will consider the affordances (including the engagement of new readers and the emersion of new sub-genres) and the limitations (including the lowering of writing standards, the loss of literary gatekeepers and the risk of digital echo-chambers) of poetry on digital media. To conclude my study, I will acknowledge limitations and will suggest areas of future research. The goal of the MRP is to add to the growing discussion of literature in the digital age (Beals, 2013; Goldsmith, 2012; Stein, 2010).

This MRP sees poetry not as a byproduct of prose or as an inconsequential art form, but as a driving literary force. Poetry’s popularity on social media not only reveals consumers’ values and showcases a society in which marketability is priority, but it also illustrates the existence of a craving for art that, despite debate about its authenticity, has infiltrated our technology-driven lives. In this sense, poetry finds new life on social media, but social media is also made alive by poetry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public Poetics: A Timeline

To begin this study of poetry in the digital age, I will offer a brief history, not necessarily of the literary genre itself (which spans thousands of years), but of poetry's relationship with new media. Poetry is, as is most linguistic human communication, rooted in the oral tradition (Hughes, John, Frey & Gardner, 2009). Ancient cultures composed poems to relay stories, the rhythm and metre acting as an aide to memorization (Hughes et al., 2009). In ancient Roman civilizations, to present a poem orally in a public sphere was to publish it (Habermas, 1974; McLuhan, 1954; Stein, 2010). However, poetry as we recognize it today in its textual form, according to theorist McLuhan (1954), was born of the 16th century invention of the printing press, the effect of which is, he argues, largely misunderstood or overlooked.

Print is a medium that transformed the literary landscape by promoting widespread literacy and by giving voice to artists and scholars (McLuhan, 1954). McLuhan saw print and literacy as an extension of human ability that shaped all aspects of life (McLuhan, 1954; *Playboy* interview, 2009). That's not to say the introduction of print was without its pitfalls, however (Carr, 2008; Beals, 2013; McLuhan, 1954). It should be acknowledged that print media—though it did define how poetry evolved and made literature accessible to the masses (McLuhan 1954; *Playboy* interview, 2009)—is its own medium with its own selective affordances, and a vast number of poems rooted in the oral tradition, like those belonging to the marginalized voices of indigenous storytellers, are not preserved in print (Stein, 2010). Furthermore, philosophers Plato and Socrates saw the development of the printed word as something that would stop people from

learning and would cause people to become forgetful (Carr, 2008; McLuhan, 1954). McLuhan (1954) too was concerned that print would both promote uniformity and subordinate alternative forms of sensory learning and expression. The same concerns are echoed in today's digital age—marked by the introduction of the computer in the 1970s—as people become worried about their decreasing ability to read and to focus as a result of internet and computer use (Carr, 2008). Media-based revolutions have long been a source of contention and, as Hughes (2008) argues, “the shift from text to new media is analogous to the shift we made from an oral culture to a print culture” (p. 154). One difference in the shift from print to digital is that while print promoted conformity, according to Marshall McLuhan, electronic media—because it incorporates multiple semiotic modes—potentially allows for more creative diversity (Hughes, 2008; *Playboy* interview, 2009). Though print is itself a multimodal medium, it is linguistic and visual in nature and not necessarily aural, spatial or gestural (Beals, 2013; Hughes, 2008).

Out of the transition from oral to textual media in Europe came, for example, Elizabethan and Jacobean language (McLuhan, 1954); the former literary era known for its rapid growth and its romantic and pastoral themes, and the latter for its darker themes and for the early work of William Shakespeare. The lyric poetry of the Romantic literary era emphasized the aural over the visual and is therefore closer to song than to print (Beals, 2013). Today, pure expression of emotion, a characteristic of traditional lyric poetry, seems inadequate in a market oversaturated with printed texts (Beals, 2013; Stein, 2010). According to Marshall McLuhan, a text-based society saw books become “portable individual possessions” (*Playboy* interview, 2009). However, as McLuhan (1954) predicted, “book-culture” is now evolving again in the face of new media developments (p. 39).

The emergence of nationalism and industrialism, too, were impacted by the printing press (*Playboy* interview, 2009). The combination of the American Civil War, and of pivotal inventions like the railroad and the lightbulb, brought about a sense of national and regional pride that sparked the development of local papers (Stein, 2010). This movement led to the reign of newspapers and magazines, an industry that had—before the invention of radio, television, the internet and even major sports leagues—a monopoly on literature, news and entertainment (McLuhan, 1954; Stein, 2010). In fact, McLuhan (1954), suggests it was the newspaper industry itself that allowed for the railroad, for cable and for the telegraph to flourish. Poetry columns had long been a staple in newspapers, with themes ranging from humour to the mythic to narrative, and—to appeal to the largely female readership and in keeping with the culture of the era—morally- and ethically-driven themes (Stein, 2010). Although popular amongst readers, only a very small subset of newspaper poets actually reached national fame in the United States (Stein, 2010). Today, the printed newspaper is declining in popularity (McLuhan, 1954; Stein, 2010). Still, Stein (2010) notes the recent push by poets and artists to reinstate newspaper poetry, but suggests their success is dependant upon a web-based counterpart.

Today's poets, to generalize, largely belong to one of two self-defined groups: 1) the academic: a camp that tends to have ties to university institutions and to publish in text-based journals; and 2) the opposition: who tend to favour experimentalism over the traditional lyric voice and who find alternative forums for publishing their work (Stein, 2010). The oppositional group differs in more than just style—they tend toward theoretical, philosophical and sociological themes (Stein, 2010). Belonging to the oppositional group is spoken word, slam poetry, feminist poetry and ethnopoetics, among several other subgenres (Stein, 2010). This binary world of poets, however, is not exclusive to the current era. The beginning of the 20th

century saw poets of the first camp, like T.S. Eliot, expressing “highbrow” culture, rationality and morality, while poets of the second camp, like William Carols Williams, expressing, often with great emotion, a rebellion against art and life (Stein, 2010, p. 6). To borrow from Stein (2010), “the [academic] *imposes* order on what he experiences; the [opposition] *perceives* a pre-existent order with which to align [themselves]” (p. 6). These qualities will prove helpful in determining to what camp, if any, the poet outlined in this MRP belongs.

Contemporary Poetry: Production and Consumption

As new media has developed, more and more people have been afforded the opportunity to become producers and distributors of poetry, rather than simply consumers of the genre (Hughes et al., 2009; McLuhan, 1954; Stein, 2010). This section of the literature review will consider scholarly accounts of both the creation and the interpretation of poetry in the digital age. As Hughes (2008) suggests, “using new media to create poetry is not just about adding pictures to poetry or having more ways of expressing ourselves poetically” (p. 154). That’s not to say that images cannot accompany text or that media should not be used for expression, but rather that new media completely restructures the way we create and think about poetry (Hughes, 2008). In the digital age, a poem and its accompanying images, or alternative media, should be interpreted together, not individually, because only together is the artistic work complete (Hughes et al., 2009). Marshall McLuhan’s famous sentiment, “the medium is the message” (*Playboy* interview, 2009), is reiterated today in Goldsmith’s (2012) assertion that “context is the new content” (p. 3).

Scholars tend to agree that poetry in the digital age is more collaborative in nature and less individualistic, and that this collaboration occurs both between poets themselves, and poets

and their readers, but also between semiotic structures (Goldsmith, 2012; Hughes, 2008; *Playboy* interview, 2009). Society's penchant for collaboration, Goldsmith (2012) argues, is reflected in our apparent fixation with reblogging or retweeting digital information produced by someone else. Our inclination to order and rate information is also evident in our obsession with online top-ten lists that rank the best poems, poets and books, among other forms of non-literary entertainment (Stein, 2010). Goldsmith (2012) advocates for what he calls, "uncreative writing," stating that in an industry abundant with text, poets and readers alike must learn to manipulate what exists, not contribute more. Goldsmith (2012) argues that by collaborating and borrowing, or plagiarising, one's self-expression manifests. To exemplify this concept, Goldsmith (2012) turns to Andy Warhol, the visual artist whose images were both appropriated and distinctly Warholian. However, some scholars disagree with appropriating content in poetry, and instead advocate for originality; Hughes (2008) suggests artists avoid plagiarism by using copywrite-free music and images in digital poetry adaptations. Still, the definition of originality in poetry is today becoming increasingly unclear because most creative ideas have already been conceived and because poetry, by nature of the genre, is cumulative (Goldsmith, 2012). Despite academic aversion due to fear of plagiarism, adaptation is a concept that is not new to poetry—for example, the cento is form of poem completely comprised of lines from other poetic works—and remains significant to contemporary poetry.

Concepts of collaboration and adaptation are perhaps most applicable to digital poetry—often referred to by several interchangeable names, including e-poetry, digital born poetry, electronic poetry and cyber poetry. Scholarship of digital poetry—a sub-genre of poetry which dates back to 1950, but which has evolved rapidly since 1990—is new and limited, but growing (Beals, 2013; Magearu, 2012). Strickland (2009) argues that digital poetry, by definition,

requires a computer program to function and is meant to be read on a screen, suggesting that if the poem is able to be printed out, it is not digital poetry. However, there is some evidence that the definition is even more broad (Magearu, 2012; Stein, 2012) and that digital poetry is simply poetry that “relies on any technical apparatus [other than] books” (Bootz, 2013, p. 41). Scholars agree, however, that digital poetry makes use of several semiotic modes, unlike text-based poetry (Bootz, 2013; Hughes, 2008; Magearu, 2012; Stein, 2010). Digital poetry can range from video-based poetry to programmed computer sequences to gallery-style installation pieces, and can sometimes, but not always, involve networked computers and interactive digital software (Stein, 2010). By offering such differentiated avenues for expression, digital poetry both rejects and challenges the tradition of academic poetry (Stein, 2010). Scholars also suggest that digital poetry finds its roots in concrete poetry, a sub-genre of poetry that is concerned with the structure of and relationship between words, rather than the words themselves or the resulting image (Goldsmith, 2011; Hughes, 2008; Magearu, 2012; Stein, 2010). Some other influences on digital poetry include anything from the Dada art movement to video games (Beals, 2013; Stein, 2010). Digital poetry also routinely deals with the concept of play, not only in the sense that the poem might be playful with diction and semiotic content, but also in the sense that the poem might encourage the audience to play with its content by physically pressing the digital play button (Hughes, 2008; Magearu, 2012; Stein, 2010). Meant to be experienced in the digital realm, digital poetry both transforms the space it occupies and is itself transformed by said space (Magearu, 2012).

Also transformed by the digital age is performance poetry. Magearu (2012) considers the space between writing and audience, making a distinction between transcribed writing and textualized writing. Magearu (2012) suggests that the former style of print acts as a support to

oral performance and that the latter describes the act of writing as a performance itself. Oral poetry, on the other hand, is a direct and immediate transaction between the audience and speaker (Magearu, 2012). Some scholars suggest the concept of the public sphere as a place for democracy and for publication, first introduced by Habermas (1974), is still in practice in online spaces today. Hughes et al. (2009) claim that “YouTube has replaced the public square, but the poets are as active as ever” (p. 21). Gregory (2013) echoes this sentiment by suggesting YouTube as a place both to access spoken word and to engage youth in discussion. However, Goldsmith (2012) does not make the same connection, writing, “democracy is fine for YouTube, but it’s generally a recipe for disaster when it comes to art” (p. 10). Despite the contested existence of the public sphere for poetry publication, McVee, Bailey & Shanahan (2008) note an increasing interest in poetry slams and similar events. Performance poetry—which can be either live or recorded but which typically involves several semiotic modes—can be a forum for self-expression that is particularly important to marginalized voices (Gregory, 2013). The advantages afforded to oral poetry by media, according to scholarship, include aiding the editing and feedback process and closing the digital divide in classrooms (Hughes, 2008; Gregory, 2013).

To better understand readers and writers of contemporary poetry, it is important to take a look at poetry’s place in North American education systems. Scholars agree that students and teachers alike are often disinterested—or even averse—to reading, writing and learning about poetry, more so than any other literary genre (Hughes, 2008; McVee et al., 2008; Stein, 2010). Despite its origins as an aural art form, contemporary poetry—as it is currently taught in school—is largely a text-based experience (Hughes, 2008; McVee et al., 2008). Students are often made to study academic-style poetry from photocopies, which both mute the multimodal qualities of the poems and make learning about poetry seem rather mundane (McVee et al.,

2008). To combat this aversion to poetry, scholars suggest, among other things, integrating creative media—like YouTube videos, PowerPoint, spoken word competitions, drawing and painting—into the classroom to encourage students to interact with, instead of simply observe, poems (Hughes, 2008; McVee et al., 2008). Students' dislike of poetry is not necessarily the fault of educators, because teachers have themselves learned about poetry primarily through print media, apart from the occasional oral work (McVee et al., 2008).

In classrooms, linguistic modes of learning have long been favoured over visual and aural modes, and this emphasis has actually been shown to stunt literacy and imaginative development (McLuhan, 1954; McVee et al., 2008). Alternatively, using various sensory and semiotic modes in poetry studies can, according to McVee et al. (2008), make poetry easier to interpret and make interpretations easier to articulate. Working with poems through different modes—like video, dance, song etc.—can also help to overcome students' epistemological barriers, like those occurring as a result of financial, intellectual, racial, cultural and familial obstacles (McVee et al., 2008). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Gregory (2013) suggests that young people's interactions with poetry in the classroom are largely incongruent with their encounters with poetry outside of the classroom. Today's youth both distrust traditional storytelling forums (Stein, 2010) and are naturally inclined to express themselves through digital media—from browsing the internet to playing video games (Hughes, 2008). Indeed, today's young people are, through digital media, already creating fresh and relevant poetic works; it is up to artists and teachers to encourage, to enable—and to plainly make room for—the new generation of digital poets (Gregory, 2013).

Case Study: Introducing Rupi Kaur

In what follows I will conduct a case study featuring the works of a contemporary poet. To explore the relationship between poetry and digital media, I will analyze the work of Indian-Canadian poet Rupi Kaur. Kaur has made a career as a successful Insta-poet, a term which is derived from her use of the social media platform Instagram (Wilson, 2017). Kaur began her career by posting poems and drawings on Tumblr and on Instagram (Wilson, 2017). In 2014, Kaur self-published her first collection of poetry *milk and honey* which was re-published professionally in 2015 and which has since sold 2.5 million copies to date (Rupi Kaur, 2018; Wilson, 2017). Her second book of poetry *the sun and her flowers* was published in 2017 and debuted as a New York Times best seller (Wilson, 2017). At the time of writing this report, Kaur has 2.7 million Instagram followers, and this number continues to grow. She was even recently interviewed by Jimmy Fallon on his late-night talk show. Kaur's poems are characterized by feminist themes, self-empowerment, sex and sexual violence, immigration and identity (Wilson, 2017). The 25-year-old poet's works often include her own line drawings (Wilson, 2017). Feedback on Kaur's poetry is both widespread and polarized, with some praising the poems for their universality and accessibility (Singh, 2018), while others describe Kaur's work as cliché, superficial, predictable and, in some instances, plagiarized (Bangar, 2016; Giovanni, 2017; Kazim, 2018). Despite widespread criticisms, Kaur is one of the most popular living poets on earth (Medley, 2017).

Although at this time she is probably the most popular, Kaur is not the only poet at work on Instagram. Her cohort includes poets like Atticus, Amanda Lovelace and Nayyirah Waheed, to name a few (Wilson, 2017). Most of these poets adhere to a similar form, which is defined by minimal text and use of image or image-based text. This form appears well-suited to Instagram

because it is an inherently visual platform. Instagram's user demographics show that users of the mobile application are primarily women aged 18–29 with some post-secondary education living in urban settings (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Kaur's readership is defined by the same characteristics (Mzezewa, 2017). With this information in mind, this MRP will consider Kaur's Instagram content, her audience and the criticisms of others to analyze the relationship of digital media and poetry today.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

After consulting media theory and literary theory, I have developed one primary research question and one secondary question. My research questions reflect my research interest and guide the structure of my MRP.

RQ1A: In what ways has the digital age effected contemporary poetry?

This research question seeks to understand how technological developments, including the computer and social media, have impacted the poetic genre, both in terms of the creation and the consumption of poetry. I define the digital age as the era from 1970 to today, and I define contemporary poetry as poetry written during this period.

RQ1B: What role has digital media played in shaping the success and formal elements of Rupi Kaur's body of work?

To answer RQ1B, I will conduct a qualitative case study of the work of contemporary poet Rupi Kaur. My case study will focus on the following categories: 1) Kaur's Instagram content, 2) her publications, 3) her readership and 4) the criticisms of her work.

METHOD

To answer my research questions, I will conduct a case study of Instagram-poet Rupi Kaur. I have selected Kaur as the subject of my study for several reasons. First, Kaur has achieved international success as a poet. Kaur has authored two bestselling books of poetry and is widely recognized as the poet of her generation (Groen, 2016). As such, there is a substantial selection of critical literature on the poet, which will prove helpful in analyzing Kaur's body of work. Second, Kaur has an active presence on social media; she began her career as a poet on Tumblr and on Instagram, and she continues to publish on Instagram. Moreover, Kaur's work originates and proliferates in the digital realm, which makes her a good candidate for this case study. Finally, I selected Kaur for this case study because she publishes in English and is based in Canada.

My study draws, in large part, on literary criticism approaches. All data will be collected manually. I will begin by conducting a combination visual and textual analysis of Kaur's poems on Instagram and her Instagram content as a whole. In doing so, I will also focus on a sentiment analysis of a random selection of her Instagram comments. To follow, I will perform a critical content analysis of digital-born criticisms of Kaur's poetry. With the data collected from the four categories (Kaur's poetry, her Instagram content, her readership and the criticisms of her work), I will provide an inductive analysis of the relevance of Kaur's poetry in the digital age.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Case Study: Instagram Poetry by Rupi Kaur

Rupi Kaur is an Indian-Canadian poet known for her Instagram-based poetry and for her two bestselling books *milk and honey* and *the sun and her flowers*. Perhaps the most notable reason Kaur stands out as a poet is her undeniable and widespread international success, something that is rare and is enjoyed infrequently by poets (Medley, 2017; Wilson, 2017). The 25-year-old poet has made headlines for her record sales numbers—her two books of poetry have together sold over five million copies to date (Toyne, 2018). Due, in part, to her Instagram use, Kaur also finds herself on Forbes’ 2018 “30 Under 30” list under the media category (Berg, Inverso, and Joyella, 2018). I have elected to conduct a case study of Rupi Kaur because she has been credited, in part, with reviving the poetic genre (BookNet, 2018; Toyne, 2018). To analyze the role of digital media in the creation and the interpretation of contemporary poetry, this case study will consider Kaur’s poetic style, her Instagram content, her publications, her readership and the criticisms of her work by others.

To exemplify Kaur’s distinct style, I have selected a poem for a brief analysis of its components. The selected poem “celebration” combines linguistic and visual modes by presenting both text and line drawing. As Hughes et al. (2009) argues, the components of a multimodal poem cannot be interpreted separately; therefore, I have elected to reproduce the poem in its entirety, instead of just the text-based components. In my analysis of the poem, I will characterize Kaur’s signature style and demonstrate how the two modes of presentation inform

one another. The following poem, represented by Figure 1, can be found both in print in Kaur's second poetry collection *the sun and her flowers* as well as online on Kaur's Instagram profile.

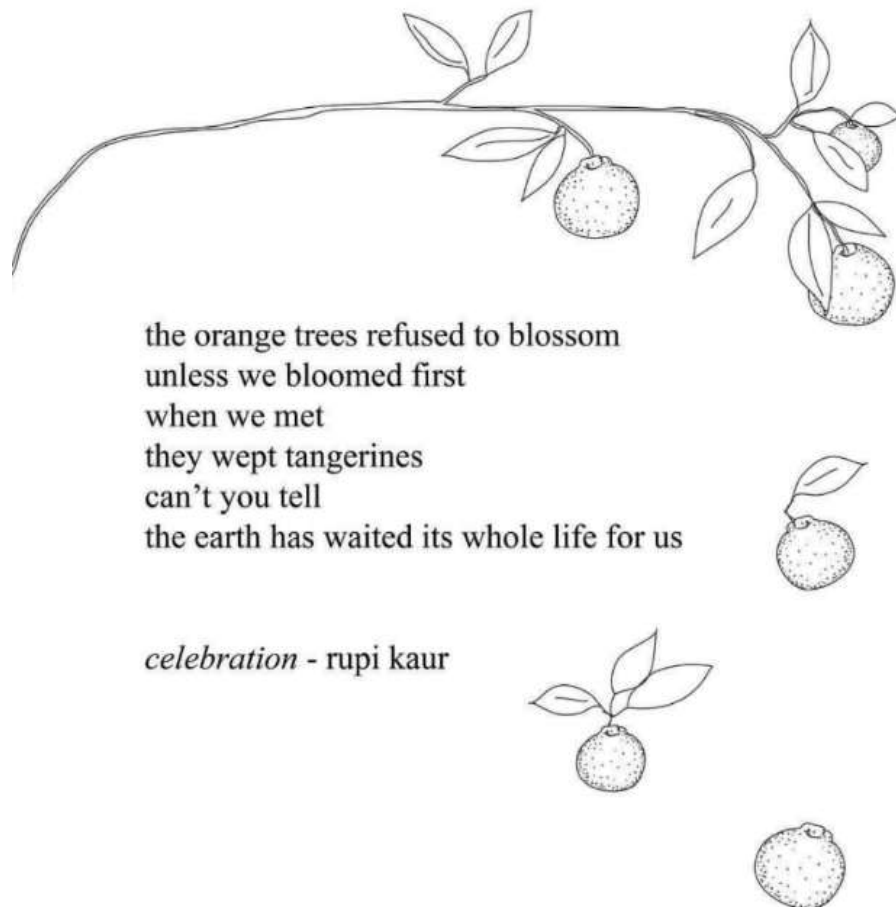


Figure 1. Rupi Kaur's "celebration." From Instagram, by Rupi Kaur, 2018,

https://www.instagram.com/rupikaur_/

As depicted in Figure 1, from a textual perspective, Kaur's poetry is characterized by lower-case letters, little to no punctuation and a sign-off that reads, "- rupi kaur." Visually, Kaur's poetry is characterized by black serif text on a white background, with an accompanying line drawing. The text and the line drawing are not necessarily competing components; rather,

they work together to convey the same message. In keeping with Kaur's typical style of line drawing, the image of the orange tree remains black and white, therefore allowing the diction to be the only source of colour in the poem. The drawing also surrounds the text of the poem, both visually sheltering it—which mirrors the personification of the earth as our guardian—and indicating a cyclical pattern. This cyclical pattern is echoed in other parts of the poem, including in the images of circular fruits, the assonance of the letter “o,” and the theme of nature's growth cycle. I suggest that the image informs the reader's interpretation of the text, and the text does the same to the image; therefore, the poem is only complete when both components are present. The interdependency of text and image—a concept that lends itself to concrete poetry (Goldsmith, 2011; Hughes, 2008; Magearu, 2012; Stein, 2010)—supports McVee et al.'s (2008) assertion that layering various semiotic modes gives a poem more clarity and power.

Based on Figure 1—and because she self-publishes, lacks academic credentials and sometimes writes about issue-driven content (Wilson, 2017)—Kaur could be said to fit into the oppositional poet category. In addition, I find that the consonance of “we” and “wept” in lines two to four suggests a oneness between the reader and the speaker, something that is not necessarily found in traditional lyric poetry, which emphasizes the “I” (Beals, 2013). However, Kaur still adheres to some traditional poetic conventions such as left-alignment, which makes her poem more conservative in its formatting than some concrete poetry, like Mary Ellen Solt's 1966 *Flowers in Concrete*—a collection which uses typography to depict floral images—for example (Fox, 2007). Kaur's free verse form, which lacks caesuras and which uses seemingly random enjambment, is easily digestible. The poem's length and its straightforward content reflect modern technology, which prioritises short chunks of information over longer narratives (Carr, 2008), because they make the reading of the poem quick and easy to understand (Wilson, 2017).

Perhaps simple poetry is attractive to readers in the digital age because readers are, as Carr (2008) argues, already prone to skimming longer material. I will also acknowledge that while “celebration” does support the efficacy of multimodal poetry for conveying a message to the reader, and despite the fact that Kaur creates her poems and drawings digitally (Kaur, 2018 May 9), the combination of linguistic and visual modes is not necessarily a product of digital media. In fact, the marriage of text and image can be traced back to the Romantic era, the period in which radical artist William Blake produced his colourfully illustrated poems—like those in his 1789 collection *Songs of Innocence* and in his 1794 collection *Songs of Experience*—using an “illuminated printing” method (William Blake, 1999). Therefore, I argue that it is the way in which the audience encounters and interacts with Kaur’s work that really reveals the role of digital media to poetry.

More significant than Kaur’s poetry itself, I argue based on both McLuhan (*Playboy* interview, 2009) and Goldsmith’s (2012) studies of media, is the medium through which the poem is delivered to the reader. Kaur built her following on Instagram, and she continues to be active on the platform, regularly offering her poetry to followers. First, I will consider the visual layout of Kaur’s Instagram profile, then I will address the text-based components of her profile. Kaur’s posts on Instagram are multimodal, as they make use of photo, text, illustration, video and sound (Kaur). Kaur manipulates the platform’s three-column design by alternating her posts’ content between image- and text-based posts (Kaur), a pattern that both gives Kaur’s feed a uniformity of style that is characteristic of her poems themselves and creates a contrast between post content and style. The image-based content, which includes photos and videos of Kaur, are usually, but not always, in colour, while the text-based poetry posts are black and white (Kaur). Below, Figure 2 shows an example of the visual composition of the poet’s Instagram feed.

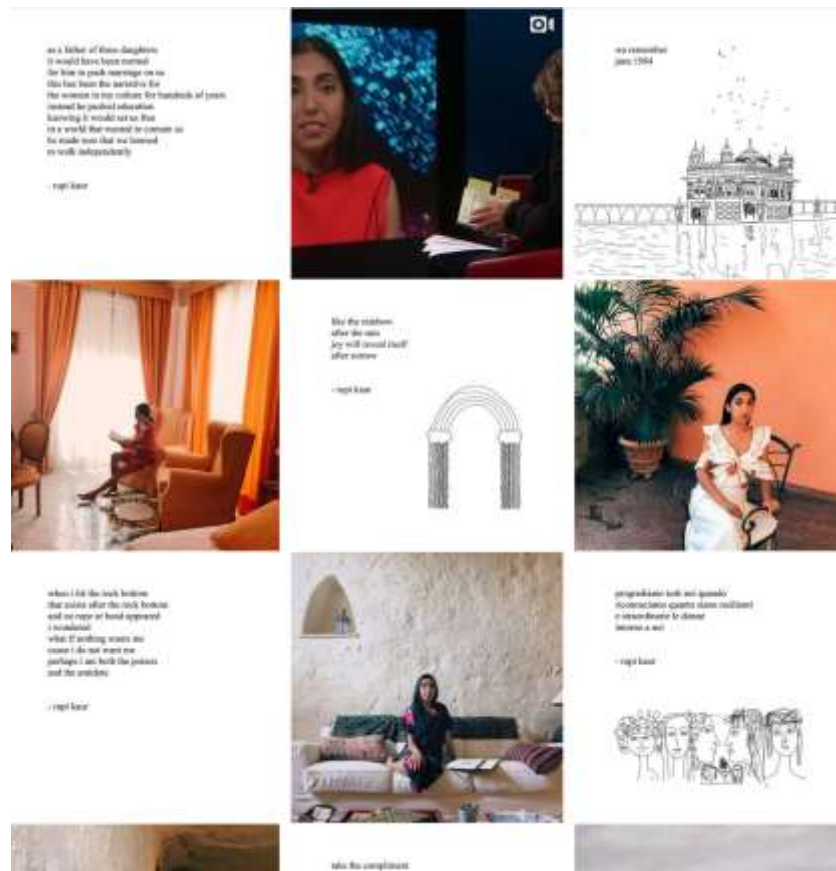


Figure 2: Ruhi Kaur's Instagram Feed. From Instagram, by Ruhi Kaur, 2018,

https://www.instagram.com/rupikaur_/

The contrast in colour and mode on Kaur's Instagram feed emphasizes her poetry. Kaur has struck a balance between posting "glamorous shots of herself" (Wilson, 2017)—the composed photos, according to studies of Instagram, might indicate to young female followers that Kaur leads a "perfect" lifestyle (Chae, 2018; Kleemans, Daalmans, Carbaat, & Anschütz, 2018)—and posting images of her poems. It is significant that Kaur's Instagram feed features images of herself, including photographic portraits, video interviews and even selfies, because Kaur's followers are able to see and hear the poet, without leaving their homes. Save for letter-writing and book tours, this direct, albeit mediated, connection to her readers would be virtually

impossible prior to the digital age (Lea, 2015). For Kaur, Instagram is a stage on which she is performing not only her poetry, but also herself to her followers (French, 2017).

Some contemporary authors have recently noted a changing relationship between reader and writer as a result of social media (Flood, 2015; Lea, 2015). Both Flood (2015) and Lea (2015) agree that contemporary authors feel pressured to be available and accessible to readers online. While some authors have dismissed or downplayed the importance of social media in favour of putting pen to paper (Lea, 2015), the success of Kaur's work is completely dependant on the platform. Furthermore, Kaur's visibility on Instagram is positive for poetry and for marginalized voices because it shows viewers a woman of colour who is succeeding in a literary industry that is, according to Wilson (2017) and Khaira-Hanks (2017), historically dominated by white and more often than not male voices. Kaur's visibility humanizes her and makes her accessible to her readers and is amplified by the support of others on social media, including celebrity figures, like singer Ariana Grande and reality star Khloe Kardashian, who both follow and repost Kaur's content (French, 2017; Wilson, 2017). In support of Stein's (2010) argument that society has a fascination with lists and ranks, I suggest that as Kaur's follower count grows, so does her authority as a pop-poet.

However, according to writer AL Kennedy as quoted by Lea (2015), having a high-profile social media presence does not necessarily garner higher sales numbers; instead, followers and readers alike might be put-off by an author who reveals their political or religious views, or who tries to misrepresent their marketing tactics as authentic conversation, or even, activism. This sentiment is supported by scholarly research, like that by Kapitan and Silvera (2016), which agrees that as celebrity figures reveal more about their personal views, they become less likeable to consumers. As it applies to Kaur's work, this concept is of interest

because the poet has several times been accused of being too general in her poems' content (Giovanni, 2017). Although her Instagram profile does feature original content, and assuming her poems are original despite accusations of plagiarism, thematically her poetry is universal (Bangar, 2016; Giovanni, 2017; Kazim, 2018). The contents of her Instagram page are not radical or provocative—save for a 2015 image depicting menstruation which, arguably, launched Kaur to Insta-fame (Giovanni, 2017)—but are actually quite conservative in their curation and aesthetic. Kaur's ability to play it safe in her poetry is what allows her to be universally appealing but is also why she faces so much criticism (Giovanni, 2017). Her poetry is about connection and inclusion, and not necessarily about the individual experience.

As for the text-based components of the platform, Instagram affords Kaur the ability to directly address her followers in the post captions. Although she often captions photos with emojis, there are instances in which Kaur writes directly to her followers. Based on scholarship of parasocial interactions on social media by Brown (2015) and Lueck (2015), I argue that Kaur's Instagram profile strengthens her connection to her readership because her visibility, which is both image- and text-based, encourages her readers to believe they personally know Kaur in ways that exceed what she shares in her poetry and drawings. In her captions, Kaur uses a personal address to her followers. For instance, in the caption of a portrait, Kaur asks followers: "brampton !!! you ready for the show tmw??? who's coming hands up" (Kaur, 2018 April 25). As Lueck (2015) finds in her study of parasocial interaction, a personal address and the sharing of intimate details increases a consumer's perception of closeness with the persona. With Lueck's (2015) findings in mind, I suggest that Kaur's address is significant because she asks her followers a question that a real friend might pose. Furthermore, her reference to her audience as "brampton," the place in which Kaur resides, validates her audience by singling out

followers who identify with the city. There are also instances in which Kaur has paired a photo with a caption that reads as a poem. The photo and the caption inform one another; therefore, Kaur's caption essentially transforms the post from an image into a poem in its entirety. In this way, and because of her deliberate curation of text and image on the platform, Kaur's body of work as it exists on Instagram becomes, in its sum, one interactive digital poem.

Furthermore, the comment sections of Kaur's Instagram posts act as a forum, not only for immediate feedback from readers, but also for readers to interact with one another. This concept supports studies by Lee and Lee (2017) and by Lueck (2015) which both indicate that community is integral to social media and that consumers' interaction with other consumers strengthens relationships between followers and celebrities. In the comments section of the "celebration" poem in Figure 1, I noted conversations between followers who spoke to one another instead of to Kaur. For example, @mothergooseandgrace (2018) writes "aww this is beautiful. have you started reading yet? @cormeegs", to which @cormeegs (2018) replies, "@gradualgram it sits on my nightstand and I read a few poems here and there...." This conversation, I argue, not only suggests that Kaur's digital followers are also her print readers—a concept I will later discuss—but that people are using Kaur's platform as a space to publicly discuss literature and reading. Some comments on the same post are critical of Kaur's poem, like that from @jerryovad (2018) who writes, "@rupikaur_ wait ... the orange tree 'wept tangerines'? #botany." Not only does Instagram afford @jerryovad the ability to publicly criticize Kaur's poetry, but it also affords him the ability to directly and immediately address the poet. For these reasons, I consider Hughes et al.'s (2009) assertion that YouTube is a public sphere, and I argue that Instagram is also a contemporary evolution, or version, of Habermas' (1974) public sphere. As Stein (2010) points out, in self-publishing, the need for an editor is

moot, and the readers truly become the judge of poetic quality. Despite @jerryovad's criticism, the majority of the 647 comments on the post in Figure 1 have a positive sentiment (Kaur, 2018 January 20). I argue that the comments section of Instagram, because it acts as a forum for discussion and interaction, effects a reader's interpretation of the poem; in this way, Kaur's Instagram followers exercise a degree of influence on the content and style of Kaur's poetry, and essentially also become part of her poetic oeuvre.

Kaur's publication history, because it involves self-publishing, is also symptomatic of the relationship between digital media and poetry. After being rejected by several literary journals, Kaur, using Amazon's CreateSpace platform, self-published her first body of work *milk and honey* in 2014 (faq). Kaur describes, via her website, the "full creative control" afforded to her by Amazon's self-publishing platform (faq). Save for oral publication—Kaur does have a history in spoken word, and she continues to perform her work (French, 2017)—in the literary industry, self-publishing has long been considered amateur and unprofessional (Barber, 2016; Kaur). A writer who self-publishes, argues Barber (2016), must almost completely forgo writing for marketing. Kaur challenges traditional thinking about publishing by finding success in self-publishing; however, without the following she amassed on social media, her collection would have, arguably, not been such an international success. A year after she first published *milk and honey*, the book was picked up by Andrews McMeel Publishing and was re-released (Rupi Kaur, 2018; Wilson, 2017). Kaur's second and most recent collection *the sun and her flowers* was published, also via Andrews McMeel, in 2017 (Wilson, 2017). Therefore, it should also be noted that self-publishing served Kaur as an avenue to traditional publishing. Traditional print publishing is still conventional and desirable, even to oppositional poets, in the digital age.

Despite her collections having been published by a traditional print outlet, Kaur still self-publishes content on Instagram regularly, which begs the questions: If Kaur is giving away content for free, why do people still buy her book? This question is echoed in Kaur's Instagram comments; for example, on the poem "celebration" (Figure 1) commenter @cardiac_chic writes "just realized that I don't need her book I just need her insta," indicating low purchase intentions given the availability of free content (@cardiac_chic, 2018). While this is just one of 647 comments, it does suggest that Kaur's Instagram followers are not necessarily her readers. Professional marketers suggest, despite concerns that offering free content online is counter-productive to sales, free online content actually builds brand loyalty and leads to greater sales (Jafri, 2016). Followers like @cardiac_chic, despite their apparent disinterest in buying Kaur's book, are still valuable to Kaur because they raise her follower count, making Kaur both more likely to be noticed and more authoritative in her field. Kaur's popularity is due to her Instagram following, so her posts on the platform, whether or not they divulge the contents of her books, support her personal brand.

I will also add that Kaur herself views her poetry as a collection, meaning "all the dozens of poems together [are] themselves one poem" (faq). Although she self-publishes poems on Instagram, her complete body of work—arranged as a collection of poems which both inform one another and form one larger poem—is only available in print (faq). To build upon Kaur's thoughts and on Goldsmith's (2012) ideas about collaboration, I suggest that Kaur's poems are themselves collaborating with one another. In this sense, Kaur's poems take on a different meaning when they are retweeted singularly online versus when they are presented together in book form. While this dichotomy might, at first, appear to do a disservice to the poem, I argue that this multiplicity of meaning is really part of the appeal of having numerous platforms on

which to offer one's poetic works. Regardless of whether her followers are purchasing her book, her social media channels have undoubtedly contributed to discussions of poetry in online communities. There's also something to be said for the accessibility of Kaur's poetry on Instagram; not only are the poems free for those who might not be able to afford the book, but—despite concerns that social media is diminishing our interest in reading (Carr, 2008)—they appeal to and capture the attention of readers who might not otherwise engage with poetry, thus expanding the reach of the poetic community.

In addition, Kaur's sales might indicate that social media increases interest in reading. Both *milk and honey* and *the sun and her flowers* are bestsellers (Wilson, 2017) which leads me to conclude that readers in the digital age—despite their ability to access poetry on their tablets, computers or smart phones—still value the tactile page. This conclusion echoes McLuhan's earlier sentiment that books are like “portable individual possessions” (*Playboy* interview, 2009). Even though readers can access much of Kaur's work for free online, sales numbers indicate that they choose to purchase her books to read, to have as keepsakes or to simply support the content creator with whom they might feel they have a personal relationship (Brown, 2015; Lueck, 2015) and who has provided them with so much free content (Jafri, 2016). With this relationship in mind, I argue that the traditional book is not overrated in the digital age, but rather that it can coexist productively with digital media.

Just as everyone can be a poet or poetry reader in the digital age, according to scholars (McLuhan, 1954; Stein, 2010), anyone can also be a critic. Criticisms of Kaur's poetry are widespread, with some claiming her work is cliché and predictable (Bangar, 2016) and even plagiarised from Tumblr poet Nayyirah Waheed (Dabiero, 2017). For the purposes of this MRP, I've chosen to focus primarily on the digital-born criticisms, those responses which have taken

on a digital life of their own. For example, one website offers an interactive game entitled, “QUIZ: Is this a Rupi Kaur poem or some shit we made up?” in which the user must identify Kaur’s work amongst fragments of nonsensical free verse poetry (Dabiero, 2018). Although it is blatantly mocking the poet, the quiz—which delivers on its promise to be challenging—does force the reader to assess the efficacy of Kaur’s poetry. The format of this criticism demonstrates that the digital age has afforded critics new ways to respond to works. The mere concept that poetry games exist online, especially if they are critical in nature and not designed for educational purposes, suggest that poetry is very much alive in the digital age. In addition, critics of Kaur’s work also take to Twitter to express their discontent with her poetic style (Khaira-Hanks, 2017). Figure 3 depicts one of many tweets that mock Kaur’s writing:



Figure 3: Critical tweet. From The Guardian, by Guy Mizrahi, 2018,

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2017/oct/04/rupi-kaur-instapoets-the-sun-and-her-flowers>

Undeniably, the tweet depicted in Figure 3 emulates Kaur's signature style. The form of the response to Kaur's poetry, which draws connections to the haiku, brings to question whether tweets are themselves poetry or are, at least, contain poetic qualities. After all, there are several cases—including that of Twitter user Brian Bilston, who has been dubbed “the unofficial poet laureate of Twitter” after his playful online verse went viral—in which social media users find themselves, unwittingly, engaged in poetic communities online (Bilston, 2016). Indeed, the medium of tweets, because they limit users' character count, force users to be succinct (Bilston, 2016); in a tweet, every word counts, just as it does in poetry. The concept of tweets as poetry is not entirely new, however, as there now exist poetry bots on Twitter, like @Pentrametron, an algorithmically programmed account that retweets content in rhyming iambic pentameter (Kalinovski, 2016). The account stands as a form of digital poetry, one that blurs the line between creator and creation, because although the content of the poem is technically written by various twitter users, the tweets are curated by an algorithmic program, which was written by artist Ranjit Bhatnagar (Kalinovski, 2016). Although these cases do not, perhaps, directly pertain to Kaur's poetry, they do illustrate the existence of a very active poetic community on twitter. Therefore, while Kaur's critics may be responding to her work in an effort to troll her, an online behaviour described by Baym (2015), they are themselves, perhaps unintentionally, adding to the growing interest in and the discussion of poetry online. Not only do the tweets mocking Kaur stimulate interest in her body of work, but they exist as poetry in and of themselves.

I'm also interested in Kaur's own interpretation of her poetry, particularly in her evaluation of the relationship between text and image in her work. She describes her creative process in an Instagram post, writing “the poem always comes first!! the illustration is an afterthought” (Kaur, 2018). To refer to the textual components of the work as “the poem,” I

argue, not only shows that Kaur prioritizes text over image, a tendency of traditional academic poets (Hughes et al., 2009; McLuhan, 1954; *Playboy* interview, 2009), but also shows that she does not consider the image a part of the poem at all. This sentiment indicates Kaur's belief that her poems are complete without illustrations; however, I contend, based on research by Hughes et al. (2009), that the images and the text in Kaur's poetry are equally as important to the poem and to artistic interpretation. Kaur's explanations of her own work do a disservice to the significance of multimodal poetry, and they reflect Kaur's unwillingness to push the boundaries of the poetic form or accept image as a legitimate form of poetic expression. Her emphasis on text is interesting considering that she attributes much of her success in books sales to her cover design (Adler, 2017). Furthermore, Kaur's intent, although it offers insight into her creative process, might not actually be relevant to her poetry. When they are published in the public sphere, Kaur's poems are a multimodal art, despite the order in which the components were created. I also argue that the images hold the same weight as the text, if not more, because of the nature of the platform on which the poems are published. Instagram is undoubtedly an image-based media and Kaur's works are successful on the platform, in part, because they include images. To exemplify this point, Figure 4 shows one of Kaur's untitled poems, published both on Instagram and in *the sun and her flowers*.

i want to honeymoon myself

- rupi kaur



Figure 4. Rupi Kaur untitled poem. From Instagram, by Rupi Kaur, 2018,
https://www.instagram.com/p/Bg715pSjIyQ/?hl=en&taken-by=rupikaur_

Despite its provocative subject matter, the text alone in this poem is not enough to convey its message; instead, the poem is only complete when both text and image are present. The image might have been created after the words, but it is only when it is paired with the image that the text takes on meaning—as well as shock value, which has proved valuable in gaining Instagram followers (Giovanni, 2017). To echo McVee et al.’s (2009) findings, Kaur’s diction is less powerful, and can hardly be considered a poem, when stripped of its images. Still, despite its multimodality, the poem by no means achieves Kaur’s goal of causing an emotional reaction in the reader or causing the reader’s “stomach to turn” (CBS News, 2018). Of course, not all of

Kaur's poems include images; however, to dismiss the images as secondary or "afterthought" is to negate entirely their significance to and function in the poem.

Kaur is also acutely aware of the negative connotations that come with being an Insta-poet. Of her Instagram fame, Kaur explains that "within the literary world there's of course downsides, because you have that label attached to your work and then, for some reason, that means you aren't a credible literary source" (Mzezewa, 2017). Kaur is probably right. By bypassing the literary gatekeepers, primarily by means of self-publishing and by building her readership online, Kaur has opened herself up to a world of criticism. According to Kaur, her blending of old and new traditions, being poetry and social media respectively, is groundbreaking and has therefore resulted in "confusion" from both groups (Edes & Martin, 2017). Still, Kaur has advocated for Instagram as a viable literary platform, one which makes her simple poetry accessible to the masses (Edes & Martin, 2017; Edwards, 2017; Wilson, 2017). More recently, however, Kaur seems to have changed her tune. In her June 2018 interview with Jimmy Fallon (Tonight Show, 2018), Kaur does not once mention Instagram. To distance herself from Instagram appears like an attempt to come across as a more credible and authoritative voice in the literary industry, but it also reads as a disowning of the platform on which Kaur built her success and on which her loyal followers reside. Kaur's strategic omission of Instagram, in the televised interview (Tonight Show, 2018), is one which makes her previous support of the platform read more like a plea for acceptance and legitimacy amongst traditionally published writers than a genuine advocacy for Instagram's literary merits. In what is a disjointed ideology, Kaur, it seems, only references Instagram when it is convenient for her, particularly in instances where her credibility is questioned. For Kaur to discredit Instagram for its role in her success would be to discredit her entire body of work. Because her poems virtually do not stand alone

outside of the platform, it is still much too early for Kaur to remove the “Insta” from her “Insta-poet” label.

Furthermore, the comments on Kaur’s Instagram posts reveal her readership’s values and, perhaps unsurprisingly given the age of the majority of Kaur’s readers, many of the comments praise Kaur’s poetry for being “relatable.” For example, on Kaur’s untitled one-liner about domestic abuse—a poem which reads “you break women in like shoes - rupi kaur” (Kaur, 2018)—commenters write, “your words are so painfully relatable” (@jjazzw, 2018) and, “its so sad how relatable these words are” (@mhairi212, 2018). The quest for relatable content is one which is often found amongst high-school students and those with little experience in literary studies, and is typically dismissed by scholars, writers and experienced readers alike (Onion, 2014). The word “relatable,” according to authors and educators, is a “critique-killer” because it does little to contribute to, and often simply silences, critical interpretation of literature (Onion, 2014). It is evident, in the comments of Kaur’s Instagram page, that Kaur’s readership does seek to find themselves and their own experiences reflected in her poetry. However, Kaur’s poetry is so straightforward and her content so generalized—Kaur herself acknowledges this when she calls her poetry “direct” (Edwards, 2017)—that it would almost be impossible for readers not to recognize themselves in her work. I argue that it is not, despite the assertions of the above commenters, Kaur’s poetry that is profound or innovative, but rather it is the poem’s topic, domestic abuse, that resonates with readers. There is nothing inherently wrong with this understanding, but the real purpose of reading, I argue, is not necessarily to find one’s own life reflected in print, but to encounter through word alternative experiences (Onion, 2014). But, in the digital age, a time in which we encounter between 3,000–5,000 advertisements per day (Kapitan & Silvera 2015) and feel lonelier than ever as a result of digital technology (Allen,

2017), maybe we read for different reasons, one being recognition. Nevertheless, using the word “relatable” to describe Kaur’s work does stunt the ability of the reader to evaluate the poem by considering its structure, its rhetorical devices, or the poem’s general lack of substance. Because of their unwillingness or inability to engage critically with Kaur’s work, I conclude with Wilson (2017) and Watt (2018), that Kaur’s readers are not conventional consumers of poetry, and for many of them, Kaur’s work might be their first experience with poetry outside of the classroom.

Still, engaging these types of readers is presumably advantageous to the literary community because it not only suggests that poetry is thriving in the digital age, but it implies that readers might get a taste of poetry and might continue to seek more. In fact, Kaur has been credited with the recent rise in poetry book sales, which increased 154% between 2016 and 2017 in Canada (Booknet, 2018; Maher, 2018; Reichley, 2018; Toyne, 2018). By measure of units sold, Kaur’s *the sun and her flowers* was the second-most popular title in Canada in 2017 (Booknet, 2018), but the year also saw an increase in book sales of more traditionally established poets like Maya Angelou and Mary Oliver (Reichley, 2018). Reportedly, teachers might also use *milk and honey* and *the sun and her flowers* as gateway poetry, recommending to students alternative, more challenging titles as they progress (Maher, 2018; Reichley, 2018). However, these assessments of Kaur’s effect on the genre’s readership might be optimistic. Sure, those who might not otherwise encounter poetry are now exposed to the genre, but there is little evidence to suggest that these readers are actually consuming work authored by anyone other than Kaur. Instead, the rise in book sales can be attributed not to an upsurge in readers’ interest in poetry, but to new strategies in publishing and in marketing made possible through digital media (Maher, 2018). In what probably reflects her readership, Kaur is reportedly a non-reader herself (Adler, 2017). In her writing, Kaur seeks to simultaneously express several perspectives: “1) her

own experience, 2) the woman experience, 3) the minority experience, and 4) universally-held experiences” (Batalvi, 2018). Of course, Kaur cannot seek to represent all of these groups—the perspectives of which are both overlapping and polarized—and still appeal to her largely white, Western audience without producing poetry that is vague and, in essence, extremely safe (Batalvi, 2018; Giovanni, 2017; Roy, 2018; Watt, 2018). What results is over-simplistic, “stagnant” poetry that, while it might be “relatable” to readers, is ultimately without substantial literary merit or noteworthy content (Batalvi, 2018; Watt, 2018).

Despite the contested quality of her poetry, Kaur’s popularity is undeniable. Watts (2018), in her scathing and controversial essay on pop poets, likens the success of Insta-poets like Kaur to that of Donald Trump, arguing that the ability of personas to use social media to draw a large following does not necessarily mean that their content is fundamentally “good.” I agree with Watts (2018), in part. Of course, Kaur’s content is not remotely as problematic as that of Trump; however, she has achieved success by appealing, through her art, to the “lowest common denominator” (Roy, 2017). Reader quantity, therefore, is not necessarily synonymous with the poetry’s quality (Livni, 2018). Still, Kaur’s readership has the right to read and enjoy whatever they want. To dismiss Kaur’s work because of her readership is unfair; this is especially true given that art made for and consumed by young female readers has historically not been taken seriously (Mzezewa, 2017). Kaur’s readership is not guilty of anything other than enjoying Kaur’s poetry—and, arguably, of being ignorant to the existence of other, perhaps more skilled, poets. Though the readers are not to blame for Kaur’s uninspired poetry, they are still part of a host of factors, including Kaur herself and the publishing industry, that have catapulted Kaur to fame. Her readership exercises a degree of authority over Kaur’s poetry and over poetry in general because they decided to make Kaur relevant (Batalvi, 2018).

As Stevenson (2018) explains, Kaur herself is not necessarily to blame for writing what has been described as “bad poetry.” Classifying Kaur’s work as such is reductive and is counterproductive to criticism because poetry, like all art, is in large part subjectively experienced. Kaur’s work reads as an unfinished draft or a diary entry that has been made accessible by means of digital media (Edwards, 2017). However, where Kaur does incur fault, according to several critics, is in both the treatment of cultural and minority issues within her poems and in her relationship with literary gatekeepers. For starters, Giovanni (2017) criticizes Kaur’s themes and motives by accusing the poet of “blurring individual and collective trauma in her quest to depict the quintessential South Asian female experience.” This sentiment is echoed by several other literary critics, who each tend to conclude that Kaur capitalizes on the experiences of minority groups and of marginalized peoples by generalizing their experiences and by passing them off as her own through her poetry (Giovanni, 2017; Jain, 2017; Mzezewa, 2017). In defence of Kaur, I will note that poetry as an art form does not inherently require honesty or autobiographical elements (Mzezewa, 2017). Often one of the first things taught in literary criticism is the distinct difference between the author and the speaker of the poem. When writing about experiences that aren’t hers, Kaur reportedly “tries to understand” (Mzezewa, 2017). Kaur’s presence on social media, however, does make it hard for readers to separate Kaur’s poetry from her persona. The concern of some critics is not necessarily just that Kaur is writing ineffectively about immigration and trauma—both of which are lived experiences of the author—but that her widespread success has left other, perhaps more deserving poets in the shadows (Jain, 2018; Stevenson, 2018). This argument is inconclusive given the aforementioned claims that Kaur’s success might also be helping the sales of other poets’ books (Reichley, 2018). Nevertheless, Batalvi (2018), Jain (2017) and Stevenson (2018) suggest that the simple

solution to combat Kaur's problematic expressions of generational trauma and the minority experience is not to ask more of Kaur, but to seek out and bolster other artists—like Morgan Parker and Warsan Shire, for example—who are engaging more transparently with issues of culture and identity.

Kaur also receives criticism for her relationship with literary gatekeepers. Gatekeepers—which can include editors, publications and scholars—have a controversial reputation; by some accounts, they are associated with rejection and by other accounts, they preserve the quality and promote the accessibility of literature (Gardner, 2018; Stein, 2010). As Stein (2010) notes, literary gatekeepers have become less relevant in the digital age because writers can increasingly turn to self-publishing. Presumably, Kaur would have been unwise not to take advantage of the affordances of digital media to market her poetry. However, Kaur not only bypasses the gatekeepers, but, according to Batalvi (2018), she completely ignores the literary community altogether. The problem with doing so is that literary gatekeepers are credentialed; they are there for a reason, and oftentimes their feedback is legitimate and meant to improve the writing. Batalvi (2018) sees that Kaur does not respond to criticism or engage in the feedback process so integral to artistic growth. As a result, Kaur's work exists in an echochamber, both in the sense that her readership is consuming only Kaur's poetry, and in the sense that Kaur herself is simply releasing her work into the world without addressing feedback. "Art created within an echochamber," explains Batalvi (2018) "is self-idolizing." For starters, Kaur, whose poetic form is strikingly similar to that of Nayyirah Waheed, refuses to address accusations of plagiarism (Dabiero, 2017; Khaira-Hanks, 2017; Stevenson, 2018; Giovanni, 2017). In defense of Kaur, Instagram is a platform that "encourages mimicry" (Edwards, 2017). Goldsmith (2012) might even advocate for this mimicry as a way to tap into one's creative voice. Then again, it is easy

for Kaur's work to appear plagiarised because of its non-specific subject-matter and its use of clichés. Insta-poetry has become so distinct in its form that it has itself become a literary sub-genre. Nevertheless, Kaur's refusal to even acknowledge the plagiarism accusations, one of which was made by Waheed herself, reads as an assertion of superiority over her literary counterparts. Furthermore, Kaur follows zero accounts on Instagram. For reference, she is herself followed by 2.7 million Instagram accounts. What is seen as "the ultimate power move" by French (2017), is actually a glaring example of Kaur's disinterest in engaging with her contemporaries (Batalvi, 2018). In my own examination of Kaur's Instagram content, I found that Kaur did not respond to any comments or interact with her followers in any way, which further supports the idea that Kaur simply releases her content into the world and does not participate in reflection or in the feedback process. At the same time, as much as Kaur is motivated by profit (Batalvi, 2018), so too are literary gatekeepers. A publisher's main priority is selecting books that they believe will sell (Gardner, 2018), so because of Kaur's large readership, Andrews McMeel Publishing saw Kaur's work as an opportunity for profit regardless of its quality. No one party is responsible for the "perfect storm" that is Kaur's success. Instead, it is Kaur herself, her readership, and her publishing house who have together launched Kaur to social media and literary stardom.

Despite its polarizing effects, Kaur's work certainly gets people talking about poetry. At best, Kaur's poetry sparks an interest in the genre in readers who might not otherwise seek it out. At worst, her poetry contributes to a "dumbing-down" of the genre and of literature in general (Roy, 2018; Watts, 2018) while all too often generalizing minority issues (Giovanni, 2017; Jain, 2017; Mzezewa, 2017). It is probably true that, as an artist, if you're not receiving rejection and criticism, you're not taking risks or pushing the boundaries of your craft. Historically, artists who

push the boundaries of their medium receive pushback from scholars and consumers alike; that is how art forms develop and evolve. Despite her success, Kaur certainly is receiving criticism. Of her oeuvre, Kaur says that “good art will always break boundaries, and that’s what the gatekeepers are also seeing” (French, 2017). However, what Kaur fails to realize is that criticisms of her poetry do not actually chastise her for taking risks or for experimenting with the poetic form; rather, they renounce Kaur for not taking *enough* risk, for not being innovative and for disregarding feedback and literary conventions altogether. It is as if Kaur has achieved success as social media poet both because of and in spite of her poetry.

CONCLUSION

Limitations

While writing this MRP, I encountered a few limitations. Firstly, I will acknowledge that I could only conduct a case study of an English-speaking poet, so my findings do not reflect global trends and my conclusions might not apply to poetry written or performed in different languages. Secondly, my MRP is limited by its scope, both in terms of time and size. Although my MRP does uncover themes regarding the relationship between digital media and poetry, because it is a case study solely of Rupi Kaur's work, it is not comprehensive in its account of the overall growth of contemporary poetry. Because of the defined size of the MRP, I was unable to conduct thorough case studies of other contemporary poets, poetry or spoken word performances, as was my initial attention.

Suggestions for Future Research

While conducting research for this MRP, I encountered several contemporary poets other than Kaur who would be suitable for case studies. Of these poets are Sarah Kay, a spoken word artist on YouTube; Stephanie Strickland, a digital poet and scholar; and Jenny Zhang, a poet who writes about the immigrant experience. Conducting studies of the works of these poets might add to our understanding of the role of poets and poetry in the digital age and might also help to expand and round-out the findings expressed in my study of Rupi Kaur.

Based on the themes revealed by my study, I have also identified three major areas of interest for continued research: the digitalization of the publishing industry, expressions of identity in contemporary digital poetry, and the efficacy of Instagram and other social media as a platform for art. Finally, I suggest that future research continues to follow Rupi Kaur and poets of her cohort to better understand where the future of poetry is headed in the digital age.

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