FACULTY OF ARTS AND PHILOSOPHY

UNDERSTANDING RUPI KAUR'S INSTAPOETRY AS AN EXPRESSION OF ONLINE AND CELEBRITY FEMINISM

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[1] Quotation taken from Bresge.

[2] Quotation taken from *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* (0:08-0:10).

1. Introduction

In an interview with *The Guardian,* T.S. Eliot Prize-winning poet Don Paterson reframes the debate surrounding the worth of Instapoetry as follows: "You don't have to like what people do, but I think you [have to] measure it against its own ambitions. Otherwise it's like saying T.S. Eliot was a terrible hip-hop artist. True, but so what" (Flood and Cain). This thesis aims to "measure" Rupi Kaur's feminist Instapoetry "against its own ambitions" (Ibid.) by acknowledging that she is not a feminist scholar but a "social media star" (Giovanni). Instead, it argues that her work can (and should) be considered as an expression of online feminism and celebrity feminism. Before moving on to the focus of this research, this introductory chapter will provide the reader with a characterisation of both Instagram and Instapoetry.

Instapoetry[3] is a type of born-digital literature which takes its name from Instagram, the platform on which it is published (Thomas 124). Instagram is a visually-oriented social network on which users can share pictures with their followers (Pâquet 297). The platform was launched in 2010, and bought by Facebook two years later (Thomas 16). It is free to access, both as a smartphone app and a website (Kovalik and Curwood 193). Although Instagram may seem "ill-suited to an internalized and personal literary form such as poetry" (Pâquet 297), Instapoets are using the social network to compose and share "multimodal poetry, by using images, text, filters, and hashtags" (Kovalik and Curwood 185).

Thus, Instapoetry is presented in the shape of an Instagram post. The following paragraphs will explain the key features of such a post, which consists of an image, a caption, hashtags, likes, and comments. Lang Leav's 10 March 2020 Instapoetry post will serve as an illustration (fig. 1).

[3] In analogy with scholars such as Berens (2019), Thomas (2020), Miller (2019), and Kovalik and Curwood (2019), the author has chosen to capitalise the terms "Instapoetry" and "Instapoet".

Figure 1. Instapoet Lang Leav shares her poem "Good Enough" in an Instagram post. Lang Leav; "Good Enough"; *Instagram*, 10 Mar. 2020, www.instagram.com/p/B9iAdMAhvVv/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 16 Mar. 2020.

Figure 2. The caption to Lang Leav's "Good Enough" post. Lang Leav; "Good Enough"; *Instagram*, 10 Mar. 2020, www.instagram.com/p/B9iAdMAhvVv/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 16 Mar. 2020.

Firstly, Instagram allows users to add a caption to the images they post. Instapoets often use this space to elucidate the piece's meaning or origin (Kovalik and Curwood 191) (fig. 2). The caption is also the space where users can add hashtags to their post (Ibid.). Hashtags are used to categorise one's posts by adding keywords such as "#instapoetry" or "#selfie" (Ibid. 186). As these may help possible audiences find one's pictures, hashtags are strategically used by many Instapoets in hopes of reaching the widest possible readership (Ibid. 187). Lang Leav, for instance, includes "#creativity", "#langleav", and "#books". As a result, users who are browsing or following "#books", may stumble upon her post.

As of 16 March 2020, Leav's "Good Enough" post had over 14.000 likes. Users can express their appreciation of an Instagram post by "liking" it, i.e. tapping the heart button or the image itself (Kovalik and Curwood 190). "Likes" are generally perceived as a quick and shallow type of audience engagement (Ibid.).

Instagram also offers users the possibility to engage deeper with others' posts by leaving a comment. Here, Leav is actively encouraging readers to comment by inviting them to share "[their] experience of being creative in the digital age, and the struggles [they've] come across" ("Good Enough"). In the comment section, Instagram users are indeed discussing their personal experiences with online publishing. Research by Kovalik and Curwood suggests that "Instapoets value [the Instapoetry] community", not only "for the purposes of feedback", but also for this kind of "emotional support and community building" (190). A comment by Instagram user @slowlivecreate makes this community aspect strikingly explicit (fig. 3). Despite @slowlivecreate's insistence that art and community are more important than "the number of likes", however, this may not always be the case. It is unclear whether Leav is genuinely interested in her readers' creative struggles, or whether she is merely attempting to generate comments and likes. As Thomas indicates, "on social media the lines between marketing and mutually enriching social interaction can be hard to define" (102).

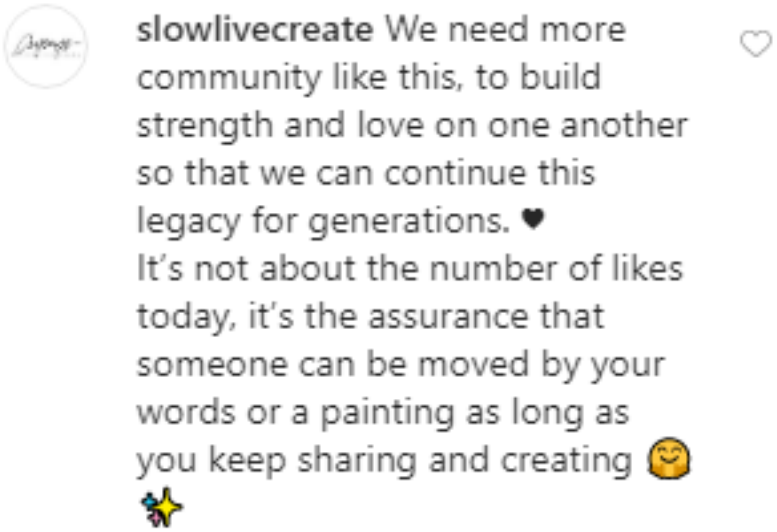


Figure 3. A comment by Instagram user @slowlivecreate which expresses appreciation of the Instapoetry community. @slowlivecreate; comment on "Good Enough" by Lang Leav; *Instagram*, www.instagram.com/p/B9iAdMAhvVv/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 16 Mar. 2020.

Once shared on Instagram, an Instapoem becomes part of the poet's Instagram feed, i.e. "[their] main Instagram profile page and the photos and videos [they] post there" (Hsaio). Nonetheless, there is little uniformity in the manner Instapoets represent their work in their feed. Kaur's and Leav's feeds include poetry as well as photographs (fig. 4). Other poets, such as R.M. Drake, post poetry without other pictures interspersed (fig. 5).

Nevertheless, Instapoetry does display a number of unifying characteristics. A first defining feature of Instapoetry is its simplicity (Pâquet 302). Interestingly, this simplicity of language and imagery mirrors non-poetic communication on social media (Ahsan). As French suggests, Instapoetry may be so "immediately digestible" to fit in with other Instagram content: "[l]ike an image of a friend's face or a beautiful sunset … a comforting affirmation while alone in bed, scrolling your phone." Instapoetry is, in other words, created to be "consumed quickly and simply on a smartphone" (Pâquet 302) and thus to be "little more taxing than reading a meme" (Berens 2).

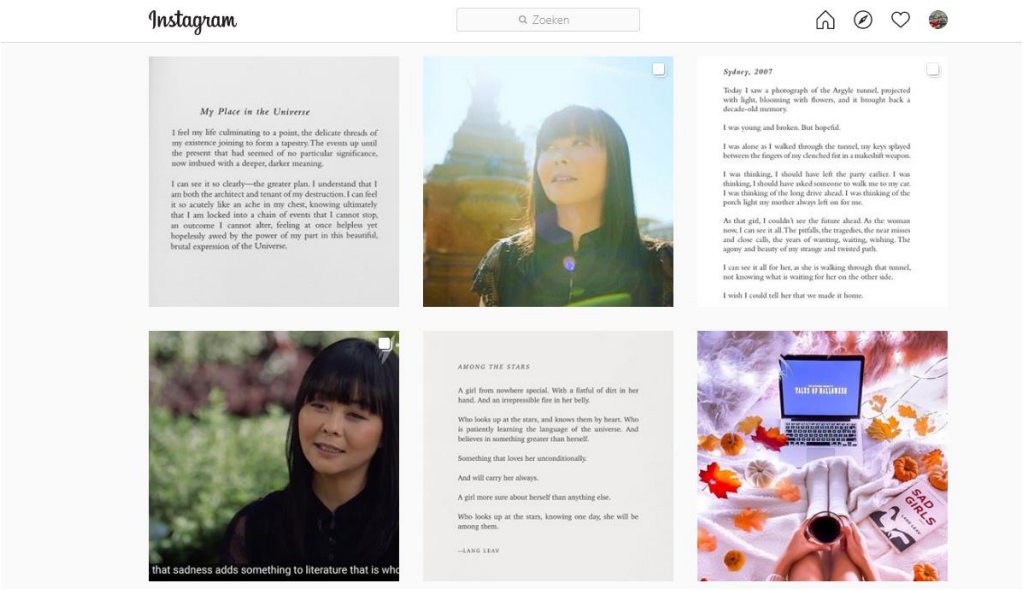


Figure 4. Lang Leav's Instagram feed. Lang Leav; Instagram feed; *Instagram,* www.instagram.com/langleav/?hl=nl, screenshot taken by author; accessed 16 Mar. 2020.

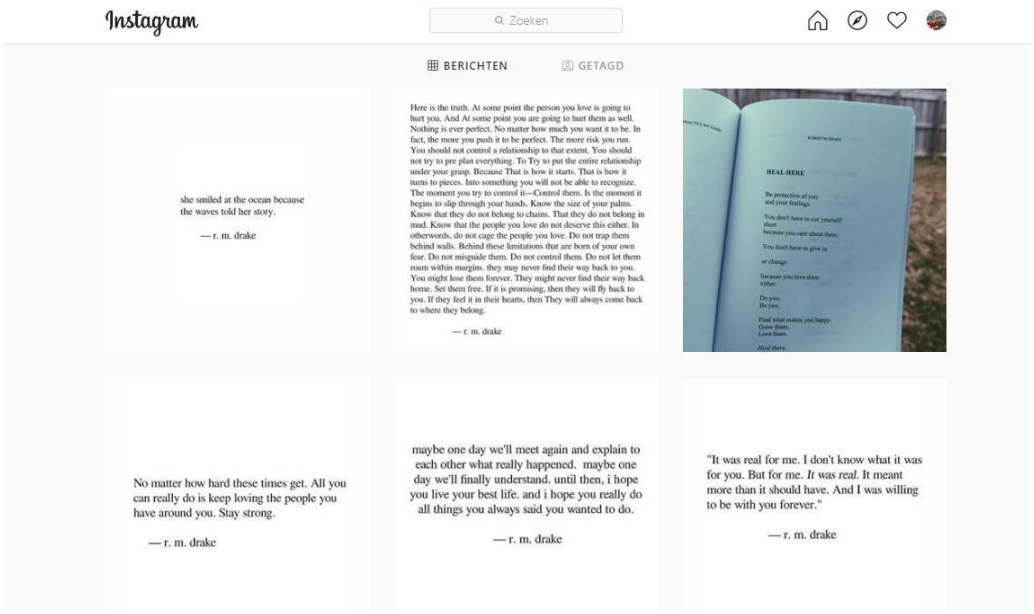


Figure 5. R.M. Drake's Instagram feed. R.M. Drake; Instagram feed; *Instagram*, www.instagram.com/rmdrk/?hl=nl, screenshot taken by author; accessed 16 Mar. 2020.

Secondly, Kovalik and Curwood identify multimodality as Instapoetry's "defining feature" (191). Multimodality is easily achieved – and encouraged – by the abundance of editing tools that can be accessed on a mobile phone (Ibid.). For example, Instagram offers filters which "alter the colouring and appearance of an image" (Ibid.). Besides Instagram itself, Instapoets use supplementary photo editing apps such as PicsArt or Canva (Ibid.). 85% of Instapoets participating in Kovalik's and Curwood's study reported that they included images in their poems (Ibid.). However, not all Instapoems include an illustration. Lang Leav's "Good Enough", for instance, consists solely of text. Still, the co-presence of photography and poetry in the Instapoet's feed creates a multimodal experience for the reader (Kovalik and Curwood 188).

Alongside previously discussed stylistic and formal features, Instapoetry also seems to incline towards certain themes. Firstly, Berens (89) and Kovalik and Curwood (190) identify body image and mental health as common Instapoetry themes. Secondly, Instapoems are nearly always female-oriented or about the female experience[4] (Pâquet 305). They are often feminist, and tackle themes such as sexual violence and female sexuality (Ferguson). Additionally, Instapoets such as Rupi Kaur and P a v a n a thematise race, racism, and immigration (Pâquet 305). Finally, Pâquet argues that Instapoetry is closely related to the genre of self-help literature (306). Many Instapoets – most notably Kaur – advocate healing and positive thinking in their works, suggesting that "change emerg[es] from the mind" (Ibid.).

Certainly, Instapoetry shares with self-help literature the fact that it is "inherently social" (Pâquet 309). Like the self-help author, the Instapoet attempts to share an approach with the reader by reducing the felt distance between them (Ibid.). Additionally, Instapoems also serve a social function between their readers, as they assume "new communal life" on social media (Ibid. 310). Pâquet demonstrates how Instapoetry is picked up by its audience and subsequently reposted in various

[4] It must be noted that not all Instapoets are female. Nonetheless, many male Instapoets write about women's empowerment. This is, however, not uncontroversial: Sweeney argues that their feminism is profit-oriented, insincere, "condescendingly cheap, and insultingly empty".

contexts (310-311). When shared by charities or between friends, Instapoems may become expressions of solidarity or encouragement (Ibid.). Moreover, the comment section of an Instapoetry post is "a site of live debate and cultural interpretation" (Berens 5). Thus, Instapoems are "part of an online medium that allows instantaneous community feedback, collaboration, sharing, inclusivity, and aid" (Pâquet 310).

Lastly, Pâquet names the curation of an "online human brand" as central to the genre of Instapoetry (311). As "self-portraits … take up half the real estate on [Rupi Kaur's] Instagram page", for example, Tan and Wee conclude that Kaur is selling her persona as well as her poetry: "Kaur the poet is Kaur the poetry". Through photography, poetry, and metacommentary, Instapoets create a carefully curated brand to sell to their readers (Pâquet 299). Pâquet cites the example of Atticus, who posts photographs in which he can be seen riding a motorcycle or wearing a Guy Fawkes mask (Ibid.). According to Thomas, this type of brand-building, "self-mediation" and "self-curation" is deeply interwoven "with the activity of producing literature in the digital space" (100).

Perhaps surprisingly, however, the Instapoets in Kovalik's and Curwood's sample express little attachment to Instagram: all of their survey participants described the platform as a stepping stone to print publishing (192). The online popularity of Instapoets such as Leav and Kaur has indeed "spill[ed] over … into the real world … their follower counts … translat[ing] into bestselling sales" (Tan and Wee). Instapoetry books made up a striking 47% of poetry sales in the U.S. in 2017 (Berens 1). Interestingly, these print versions of Instapoets' oeuvres collect the same content which is accessible for free on Instagram, and remove its social aspects such as reader comments (Ibid. 1-2). Berens compares the (perhaps surprising) appeal of Instapoetry in print to that of concert merchandise: although such merchandise lacks liveliness, fans still desire to purchase "mementos of pleasurable live experience" (7).

The 27-year-old Rupi Kaur is arguably the most successful of Instapoets. Kaur was born in India in 1992; her family moved to Canada when she was four years old (Fischer). She rose to fame in 2015, following an incident where Instagram

repeatedly censored her menstruation-themed photography project for "violating community guidelines" (Tolentino). She protested the decision, arguing that it was sexist for Instagram to remove images that depict menstruation, yet leave pornographic posts undisturbed (Pâquet 298). Her mediatised protest supplied her with a growing fan following and the reputation of being "a cultural producer who appeals to women (particularly women of color) who are suppressed, shamed, and silenced" (Ibid.). Currently, Kaur has over 4 million followers on Instagram. Her 2014 print debut *milk and honey* sold over 3.5 million copies (Alam) and has been translated into more than thirty languages ("books | rupi kaur"). *the sun and her flowers,* her second book, similarly became a NYT bestseller (Kaur, *the sun and her flowers*). In December 2019, an article in *The New Republic* declared her to be "the writer of the decade" (Alam).

However, the article sparked much heated debate (Weaver). The genre of Instapoetry, with Kaur as its figurehead, has always been controversial: critics consider it as "a lowbrow form that demonstrates little literary merit" (Pâquet 296) or even "the McDonald's of writing" (Bresge). Their criticism is generally aimed at the genre's superficiality, i.e. its simplistic, cliché style, its alleged lack of depth, and its focus on aesthetics and commerciality (Miller). Kaur's work is often the target of such criticism. Reddit user @Bigmethod, for example, started a discussion forum about whether the Instapoet deserves to be considered "the writer of the decade" (fig. 6). They write:

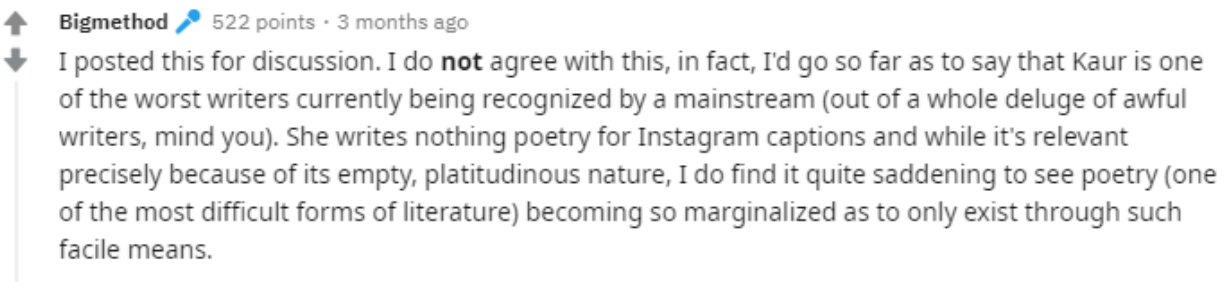


Figure 6. The first post in a Reddit thread which discusses whether Kaur deserves to be "the writer of the decade". @Bigmethod et al; "Rupi Kaur is the writer of the decade – Newrepublic.com"; *Reddit,,* www.reddit.com/r/literature/comments/ef75c2/rupi_kaur is_the_writer_of_the_decade/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 20 Apr. 2020.

Another user agrees, setting Kaur's work aside as "babby's [sic] first poetry collection" (@Bigmethod et al.). Twitter user @deemaslovely mocks Kaur's "writer of the decade" status in a similar manner (fig. 7). Their tweet, which dismisses Kaur's writing as artless and childlike, has been liked over 30.000 times.

Figure 7. A tweet which mocks Kaur's "writer of the decade" title. @deemaslovely; "if rupi kaur is poet of the decade than my notes app from when i was 13 is also poet of the decade"; *Twitter,* 30 Dec. 2019, www.twitter.com/deemaslovely/status/1211689715264561164, screenshot taken by author; accessed 3 May 2020.

According to critics such as Miller and Giovanni, however, the debate should not be "about those impossible questions … concerning what constitutes 'good' or valued art" (Miller). Instead, they express deeper concerns about Kaur's work, arguing that it commercialises feminism and the immigrant experience. Her Instapoetry, which is predominantly aimed at a young female audience, indeed thematises the experiences of women of colour, and advocates "both self-love and the support of a female community to heal body image problems" (Pâquet 309). As a result, Kaur has gained the reputation of being an authentic "voice of diversity" (Giovanni). However, according to both Miller and Giovanni, her Instapoetry problematically shies away from detail in order to "[exploit] a market tuned to a very particular style of identity politics, one which enables sympathetic engagement without the specificities of detailed realities" (Miller). Miller argues that the absence of detail in Kaur's work and her tendency to "emphasis[e] … the collective nature of subjective trauma" serve to

"commodify a politics of inequality" while also causing her poetry to lack "in the nuances of intersectional thinking". While Kaur's Instapoetry promises to thematise trauma and the experiences of women of colour, it arguably "fails to echo such sentiments in ways that extend beyond the general and the cliché" (Ibid.).

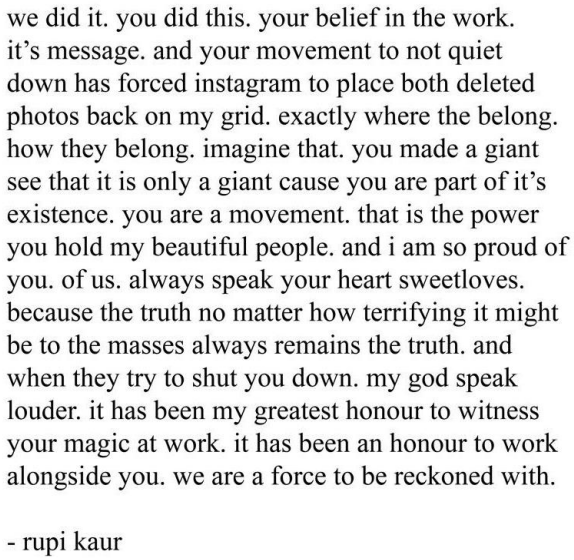
Although the commercial nature of Kaur's work cannot be denied, it seems superficial to reduce her activist writing to merely "playing upon a language of equality in order to capitalise on audiences aligned with both the centre and the margins" (Miller). Arguably, Kaur's Instapoetry is not "faux feminism" (Ibid.), but instead highly representative of the complexities of present-day feminist activism. As Householder argues, feminism "in the 'selfie' generation" is rife with contradictions and potential for confusion, as it intersects with matters of neoliberalism and commodification (19, 21). Therefore, this thesis argues that Kaur's Instapoems (and the criticism they receive) need to be examined as part of two strands of current-day feminism, both of which are inherently controversial due to their entanglement with neoliberalism. First and foremost, Kaur's Instapoetry constitutes online feminism (see 2.). Secondly, her self-branding as a pop star invites an analysis of her work as celebrity feminism (see 3.). Aligning Kaur's work with bigger trends in contemporary feminism may deepen our understanding of her feminism (and its perceived shortcomings), and reveal how it reflects the complexities of present-day feminist thought.

In order to do so, this thesis will examine Kaur's feminist Instapoetry (and the criticism that it receives) in dialogue with scholarship on (the controversial nature of) online and celebrity feminism. The following chapter focuses on digital feminism; chapter three is devoted to celebrity feminism. Before juxtaposing criticism of Kaur's Instapoetry with literature about the complexities of these particular strands of feminism (see 2.2. and 3.2.), both chapters will first demonstrate in what manner her work constitutes online or celebrity feminism (see 2.1. and 3.1.). As Pâquet recommends in "Selfie-Help: The Multimodal Appeal of Instagram Poetry" (2019), this thesis will not limit itself to Kaur's poetry in print; instead, it will examine "the entirety of the poet's [Instagram] page", as well as various commercial endeavours such as tours and interviews (311).

2. Online feminism

2.1. "Verse goes viral": Kaur's Instapoetry as online feminism

When Instagram removed Kaur's infamous menstruation-themed photograph, she called on the internet for help, asking her readers to "'at' [address a message to] Instagram … [o]r even share the photo on whatever social media platform" (Kaur qtd. in Tolentino). She concluded: "Their patriarchy is leaking. Their misogyny is showing. We will not be censored" (Ibid.). Indeed, Kaur succeeded: Instagram reversed the censorship and Kaur thanked those who helped her via Twitter (fig. 8).


we did it. you did this. your belief in the work.
it's message. and your movement to not quiet
down has forced instagram to place both deleted
photos back on my grid. exactly where the belong.
how they belong. imagine that. you made a giant
see that it is only a giant cause you are part of it's
existence. you are a movement. that is the power
you hold my beautiful people. and i am so proud of
you. of us. always speak your heart sweetloves.
because the truth no matter how terrifying it might
be to the masses always remains the truth. and
when they try to shut you down. my god speak
louder. it has been my greatest honour to witness
your magic at work. it has been an honour to work
alongside you. we are a force to be reckoned with.

- rupi kaur

Figure 8. An image which Kaur shared on Twitter to thank the supporters of her anti-censorship action. Rupi Kaur; "we did it. you did this sweetloves"; *Twitter,* 26 Mar. 2015, 4:08 p.m., www.twitter.com/rupikaur_/status/581110491520495616; accessed 7 Apr. 2020.

As Kaur's first experience in the public eye illustrates, the Instapoet employs digital tools for the purpose of feminist activism: she explicitly identifies her online anti-censorship action as "a movement" where she "work[ed] alongside" many other women, making them "a force to be reckoned with" (Kaur, "we did it"). After the incident, Kaur has continued to be an "unapologetically feminist and loud" presence on the internet (Pâquet 298). Using Instagram, she shares poems which often carry a feminist message, "[e]xtolling women's inner strength, calling for self-confidence and bodily autonomy,

celebrating histories of struggle, decrying abuse" (Tambe).

Due to the central role that digital tools play in Kaur's activism, she can be considered as part of a burgeoning branch of present-day feminism: online feminism. Scholars agree that feminism is becoming "increasingly visible and consumable" in popular media cultures (Mendes et al. 1). On the Internet specifically, there has been "an explosion of feminist blogs, e-zines, newsletters, YouTube videos, and social media accounts" (Ibid. 11). Contemporary feminists are using digital tools to create feminist debate, networks, and activism (Ibid. 2). This digital turn has urged critics to claim that we are witnessing the birth of a fourth wave of feminism (Ibid. 11; Rivers 107). This fourth wave has sprung from "a growing disillusionment with the rhetoric of postfeminism and a dawning realization of the social, political, and cultural inequalities still faced by many women" (Rivers 135). The use of the Internet seems to be its defining characteristic (Munro 23; Blevins 101). According to Rivers, this digital resurgence of feminism has subsequently "spilt over into more traditional media forms" such as newspapers (107). Mendes et al. claim that fourth wave feminism has also added new concerns to their agenda, such as workplace practises and reproductive technologies (11), whereas Blevins argues that the return of "consciousness-raising groups" is an important distinguishing factor (101). However, there is no consensus on how this new wave should be defined, and whether it truly exists. Some scholars find the use of the Internet an insufficient argument to posit a separate wave (Munro 23). Blevins, on the other hand, suggests that its existence must be acknowledged because young people are self-identifying as "fourth wave" (106). Regardless of terminology, however, it cannot be denied that feminists like Kaur are currently employing digital tools for feminist purposes.

In "'Woke' and Reading: Social Media, Reception, and Contemporary Black Feminism", Matthews observes that black feminists are using social media in order to "create an empowering space of their own, subject to neither racist nor sexist institutions" (391). She argues that such online spaces can be defined as counterinstitutions, or "loosely self-organizing assemblages … that defy institutionalization partly by reproducing it cacophonously" (Gitelman 149). Kaur's account of what urged her to turn to Instagram is strikingly similar to the situation that Matthews describes: in 2016, she told *The*

Guardian that *milk and honey* was initially rejected by several publishing houses, which claimed that "[t]here was no market for poetry about trauma, abuse, loss, love and healing through the lens of a Punjabi-Sikh immigrant woman" (Kassam). Kaur explained that this prompted her to start publishing on Instagram: "While everybody else is saying, 'We're not going to publish this because no one wants to read poetry about domestic violence' … social media allowed me to find the readers" (French). As Instapoetry is per definition (originally) published online, it largely manages to bypass the publishing industry, including the racism and sexism that may come with it (Matthews 400). The use of Instagram allowed Kaur to write of topics for which publishers saw no place in mainstream discourse. Firstly, it offers a platform for the marginalised voice "of a Punjabi-Sikh immigrant woman" (Kassam). Secondly, Instagram enables her to speak of "unspeakable things" such as abuse (Keller et al. 22). The paragraphs below examine how Kaur employs her Instagram account as a platform (or counterinstitution) where she may speak more freely. Interestingly, many of her readers use the comment section of her Instapoems as a space to share their own experiences. In this sense, Kaur's Instapoetry can be compared to feminist hashtags like #MeToo.

First and foremost, digital tools such as Instagram can be used to amplify marginalised voices like Kaur's (Mendes et al. 11). As Oluo puts it, "thanks to the power and freedom of the Internet, many … people of color have been able to speak their truths" (4). Thus, Instapoetry has managed to become a "microphone to poets who are diversifying the metrical discourse by speaking directly to marginalized communities whose tastes have historically been dismissed as trivial or niche" (Bresge). Multiple of Kaur's poems thematise the experiences of immigrant women of colour. In "my issue with what they consider beautiful"[5] (fig. 9), for instance, the persona criticises Western beauty standards, which fail to see the beauty in the women from "[her] country" (Kaur). "i am the first woman in my lineage with freedom of choice" (fig. 10) puts the persona's life in perspective to the lives of her Asian foremothers (Kaur). In this respect, Instagram has

[5] This thesis will refer to Kaur's (untitled) poems by their first line.

"democratis[ed] the right to speak" (Miller)[6]. Following her online success, the Instapoet was taken on board by Andrews McMeel Publishing (Mzezewa). In other words, Kaur's clever use of a digital platform has facilitated her work's entrance into bookstores, and thus into mainstream culture. Accomplishments like this are what cause Mendes et al. to wonder if "the digital media praxis of women of color, their hashtag feminism and tumblr activism, their blogging and live journaling" will "broaden and radically redefine the very field of feminism" by entering into mainstream discourse (19).

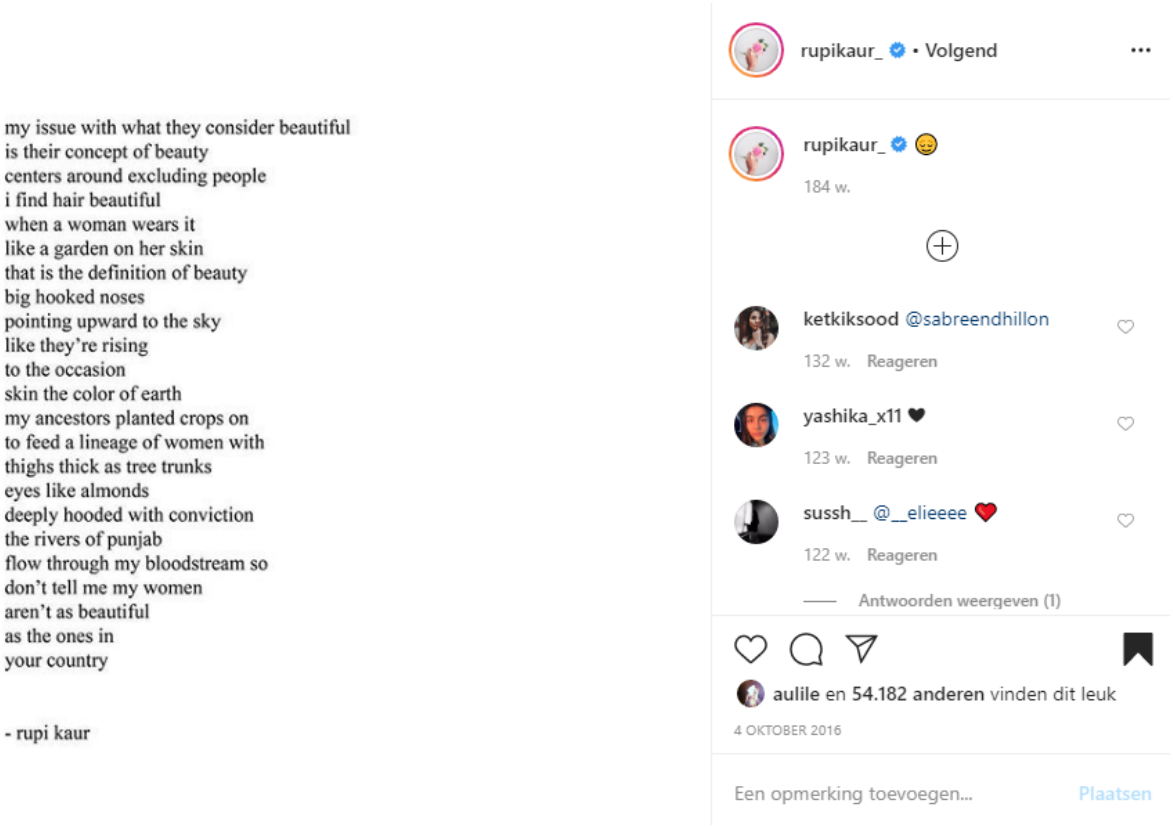


Figure 9. Rupi Kaur; my issue with what they consider beautiful; *Instagram*, 4 Oct. 2016, www.instagram.com/p/BLIFpWOAeoT/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 19 Apr. 2020.

[6] Interestingly, multiple poems in Kaur's oeuvre thematise the power of speech, and "the imposition of female silence … as a violence of patriarchy" (Miller).

Figure 10. Rupi Kaur; i am the first woman in my lineage with freedom of choice; *Instagram,* 23 Feb. 2020, www.instagram.com/p/B869Bxghz78/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 19 Apr. 2020.

Secondly, the use of digital tools enables feminists like Kaur to discuss topics which are generally excluded from mainstream culture. As was mentioned above, Kaur turned to Instagram after traditional publishers proved unwilling to publish poetry about domestic abuse (French). Platforms such as Instagram, on the other hand, do provide people with a space to share personal experiences with sexual abuse (Mendes et al. 5). Indeed, many of Kaur's Instapoems thematise domestic violence. Some are brief, such as "you break women in like shoes" (Kaur) or "the rape will / tear you / in half / but it / will not / end you" (Kaur, "the rape will"). Other poems are longer and more graphic, as they include specific references to paedophilia or physical violence (fig. 11, fig. 12).

Figure 11. Rupi Kaur; the therapist places the; *Instagram,* 7 Sep. 2015, www.instagram.com/p/7T-7wsnA_o/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 21 May 2020.

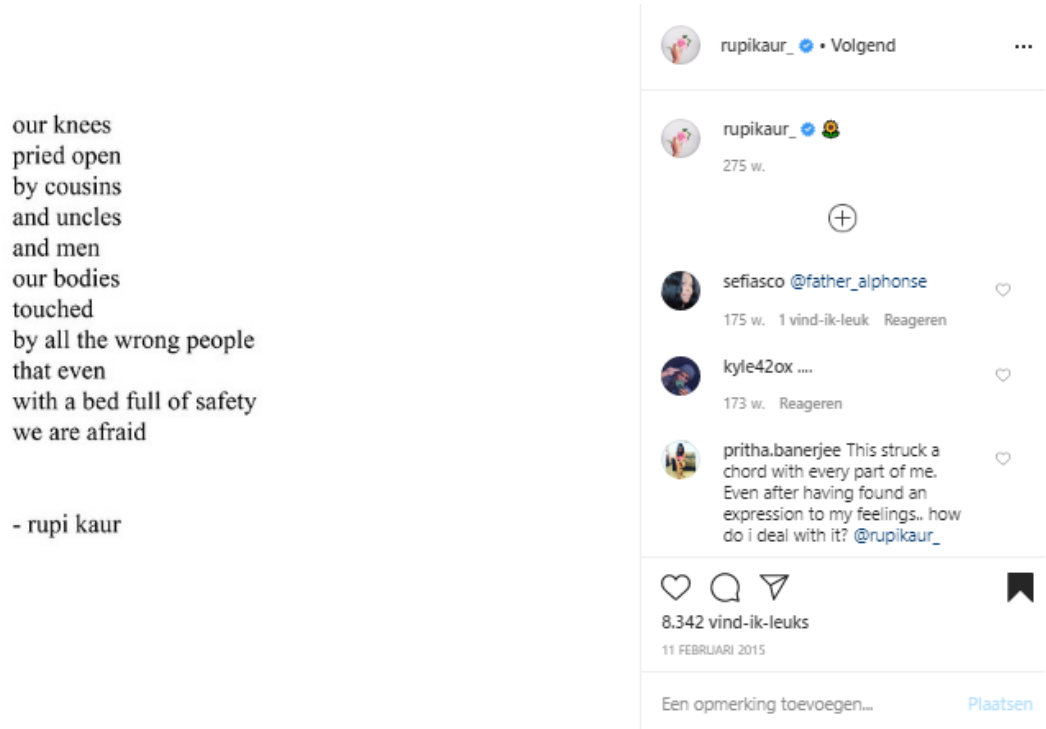


Figure 12. Rupi Kaur; our knees; *Instagram,* 11 Feb. 2015, www.instagram.com/p/y8Q_ZOnAz_/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 21 May 2020.

The fact that Kaur speaks candidly of sexual abuse, aligns her work with one of the central aims of online feminism: to render inequality visible by speaking the unspeakable (Keller et al. 22). Interestingly, numerous readers seem to be sharing their own experiences of sexual violence in the comment sections of Kaur's poems about abuse (fig. 13, fig. 14, fig. 15). In this respect, her Instapoems serve a function similar to feminist hashtags such as #MeToo or #BeenRapedNeverReported, which allow and invite women to voice their personal experiences with harassment or sexual abuse (Mendes et al. 2). Instagram user @_witchybooboo_ even includes #MeToo in her comment, making explicit the similarities between Kaur's Instapoetry and the famous activist hashtag (fig. 15). Significantly, Kaur herself has also expressed her affinity with #MeToo in interviews. She told *Scroll.in:* "I think the #MeToo movement is so important and I stand by it. … To see this conversation being pushed into the mainstream – it is so amazing" (Gill). Voicing experiences of sexual abuse in a feminist context, and having others acknowledge them, may help survivors heal from their trauma by giving them a sense of justice, or even the confidence to report the assault (Mendes et al. 176).

Figure 13. A reader shares their personal experience with sexual violence in the comment section of Kaur's Instapoem "the rape will". @colleen1mccready; comment on "the rape will"; *Instagram,* www.instagram.com/p/BGcBwdCHA_a/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 21 May 2020.

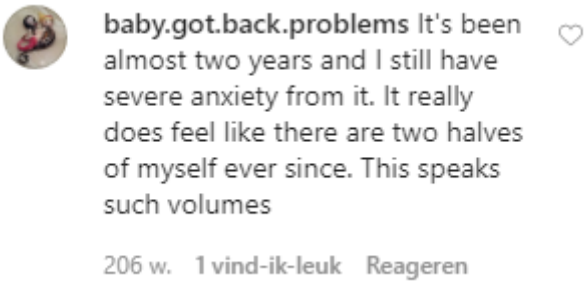


Figure 14. A reader shares their personal experience with sexual violence in the comment section of Kaur's Instapoem "the rape will". @baby.got.back.problems; comment on "the rape will"; *Instagram,* www.instagram.com/p/BGcBwdCHA_a/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 21 May 2020.

Figure 15. A reader shares their personal experience with sexual violence in the comment section of Kaur's Instapoem "the rape will". @_witchybooboo_; comment on "the rape will"; *Instagram,* www.instagram.com/p/BGcBwd CHAa/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 21 May 2020.

In many cases, other users have replied to these comments to add words of encouragement (fig. 16, fig. 17). Mendes et al. remark that feminist hashtags "discursively [connect] all users who include [them] in their tweets [or Instagram posts]", thus creating a space where e.g. sexual abuse survivors can come together over their shared experiences (16). Arguably, the comment section of Kaur's Instapoems functions in a similar manner. Research by Mendes et al. confirms that online feminism creates interpersonal connections and communities of solidarity (5). It enables feminists from different

backgrounds to connect "across time and space" (Ibid. 176), and allows them to form "global communities of like-minded people [who] … otherwise would not have met" (Ibid. 5). Interestingly, "the need for women to unify … and to refrain from the destructive competition instilled by patriarchy" is a recurring theme in Kaur's work (Miller). Her advocacy of female community seems to be put into practise in the comment section of many of her poems, where female readers come together over shared experiences.

Figure 16. Kaur's readers express solidarity with one another in the comment section of her Instapoem "the rape will". @love_music_roses and @xhollyhenderson; comments on "the rape will"; *Instagram,* www.instagram.com/p/BGcBwdCHA_a/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 21 May 2020.

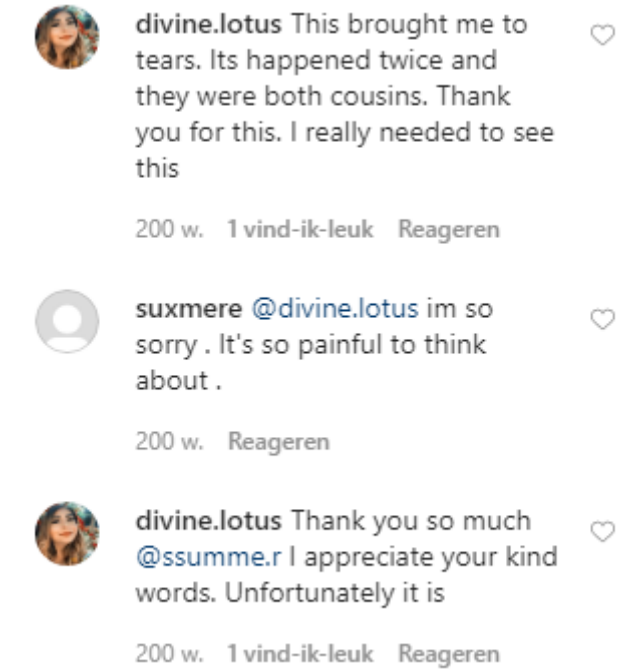


Figure 17. Kaur's readers express solidarity with one another in the comment section of her Instapoem "the rape will". @divine.lotus and @suxmere; comments on "the rape will"; *Instagram,* www.instagram.com/p/ BGcBwdCHA_a/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 21 May 2020.

Hashtags such as #MeToo adhere to the traditional feminist idea that "the personal is political" (Mendes et al. 17). The collective sharing of one's experiences with sexual violence reveals that these are more than isolated incidents; taken together, they constitute a structural issue (Ibid.). The writings of Kaur and her readers similarly expose "the pervasiveness of such practices, while sparking dialogue and debates about how to challenge them" (Ibid. 2). Instagram user @kyliemackenzie_ references "the need to do something to shed light on this topic", i.e. by sharing her personal experience (fig. 18). @kazuri_ similarly uses her own story to educate @hamreen, who wondered whether "[sexual abuse] actually happen[s] often in our communities" (fig. 19). As such, the stories shared online become "a mass of experience in a form of public pedagogy that becomes difficult to discount and silence" (Mendes et al. 187).

Figure 18. Kaur's readers educate others on sexual violence in the comment section of her Instapoem "the rape will". @kyliemackenzie_; comment on "the rape will"; *Instagram*, www.instagram.com/p/BGcBwdCHA_a/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 21 May 2020.

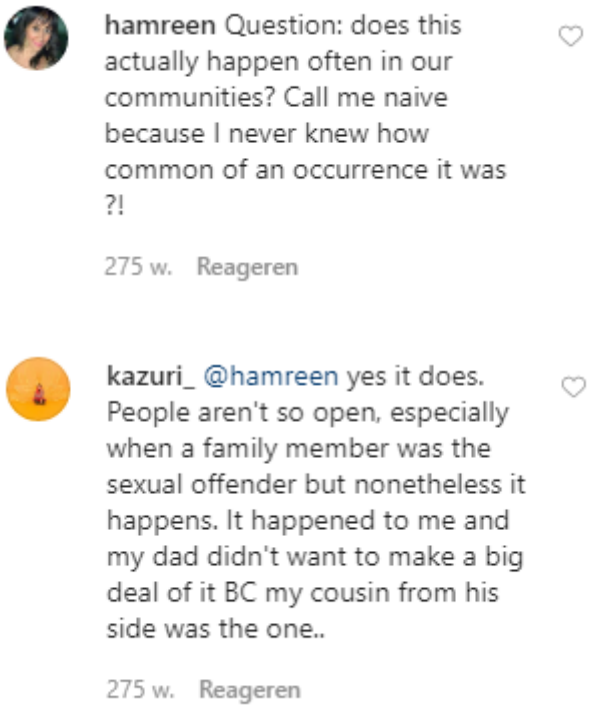


Figure 19. Kaur's readers educate others on sexual violence in the comment section of her Instapoem "the rape will". @hamreen and @kazuri_; comments on "our knees"; *Instagram*, www.instagram.com/p/y8Q_ZOnAz_/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 21 May 2020.

This social and activist function of Kaur's poems may explain why her pieces are so devoid of "the specificities of detailed realities" (Miller). Miller argues that this unspecific, collective tone is problematic: she contends that Kaur seeks to create art which promises to thematise the experiences of women of colour, yet does this in a purposefully vague and superficial manner so as not to disturb her white readers. However, Kaur's generalising style also makes poems such as "the rape will" applicable to the lives of women (of colour) in various circumstances. This allows them to make the piece their own, e.g. by adding their own experience or by reposting it on their own account. Pandey, for example, describes how a friend put one of Kaur's poems about body hair as her profile picture after being bullied for her unibrow. Numerous charities have similarly shared her Instapoetry to promote their causes (Pâquet 310-311). Arguably, this "applying" of the Instapoem to a specific situation is its exact purpose – either by reposting it in a specific context or by commenting on it to add one's own experience as a woman (of colour). Giovanni points out that Kaur never speaks of her poetic practice in the first person singular: instead, she claims to write about the experiences of a plural "we". In an interview with *HuffPost*, for example, she explained: "I want to put words to feelings *we* have trouble putting into words" (Spencer, emphasis by author). In this sense, it seems as if Kaur desires to speak not for herself, but for her readers. Thus, her Instapoems might indeed be intended to serve a communal function. Aforementioned unspecific tone may be what allows them to "take on" this kind of "new communal life" on social media (Pâquet 310).

2.2. The controversiality of Kaur's Instapoetry and online feminism

Like Rupi Kaur's Instapoetry, digital feminism also has its critics. It is often characterised as "slacktivism", i.e. "feel-good" online activism that does not have an actual political impact (Munro 24). According to Skoric, however, slacktivist actions, such as liking or sharing a post about a feminist issue, are not to be seen as negative at all: "Even a small effort helps, whether [it] is about creating awareness, raising funds, or stimulating interests in issues, which over time may lead to more substantive political action" (87). Mendes et al. agree that online feminism constitutes activism rather than slacktivism: "digital platforms … offer women a platform where they can communicate, form communities of support, engage in consciousness-raising, organize direct action, disrupt the male gaze, and collectively call out and challenge

injustice and misogyny" (16). Rivers concurs that online feminism has an impact on "'real'-world politics", especially as the Internet has become increasingly "embedded in our offline lives" (127). Interestingly, these accusations of slacktivism bear some similarity to criticism that Kaur's feminism has received for arguably being inauthentic and thus apolitical (Miller).

Due to the fact that digital feminism is often subject to criticism, it may be enlightening to place the perceived shortcomings of Kaur's work in light of its status as *online* feminist activism. As explained in section 2.1., for example, the lack of detail that Miller and Giovanni see as an attempt to commodify trauma can also be understood as enabling the poems to take on "new communal life" on Instagram (Pâquet 310). In this sense, it may be useful for critics to consider Kaur's activist writing against the backdrop of its original, online context, as many particularities of her poetry seem to be prompted by this digital environment. This is not to subvert all criticism about Kaur's Instapoetry, but rather to get a better understanding of why it may display certain controversial features. As her work is designed "to be consumed quickly and simply on a smartphone" (Pâquet 302), it is perhaps not surprising that her poetry and feminism take a vastly different shape than their traditional counterparts. This section will explore how Kaur's stylistic choices and self-representation are impacted by the online context of her feminism. On the one hand, her simplistic style and imagery may be prompted by the digital environment in which her poetry reaches its audience. Additionally, the simplicity of her pieces may also stem from a desire for accessibility which lies at the core of digital feminism. Kaur's tendency to self-brand, on the other hand, can likely be understood in light of the fact that online feminist activism necessitates self-branding (Pruchniewska 3).

Firstly, Kaur's writing is notoriously simplistic, causing critics to characterise her work as "babby's [sic] first poetry collection" (@Bigmethod et al.). However, it seems more than likely that this simplicity stems from the fact that Instapoetry has to be attuned to the practicalities of Instagram, and to the needs of an online audience. In the first place, the work of an Instapoet has to fit in Instagram's digital infrastructure. Most significantly, a user who browses through Instagram will be seeing multiple smaller pictures in rows of three, rather than one page-filling picture. As figure 20 illustrates, images which are less text-heavy function better in such a context, as they remain legible even when scaled

down. This may explain why most of Kaur's poems are under twenty lines long (Tan and Wee) or "small enough to fit inside a fortune cookie" (Bahuguna). The accompanying black-and-white illustrations are similarly minimalistic, allowing the reader to understand what is pictured when they encounter her piece in a mass of other posts.

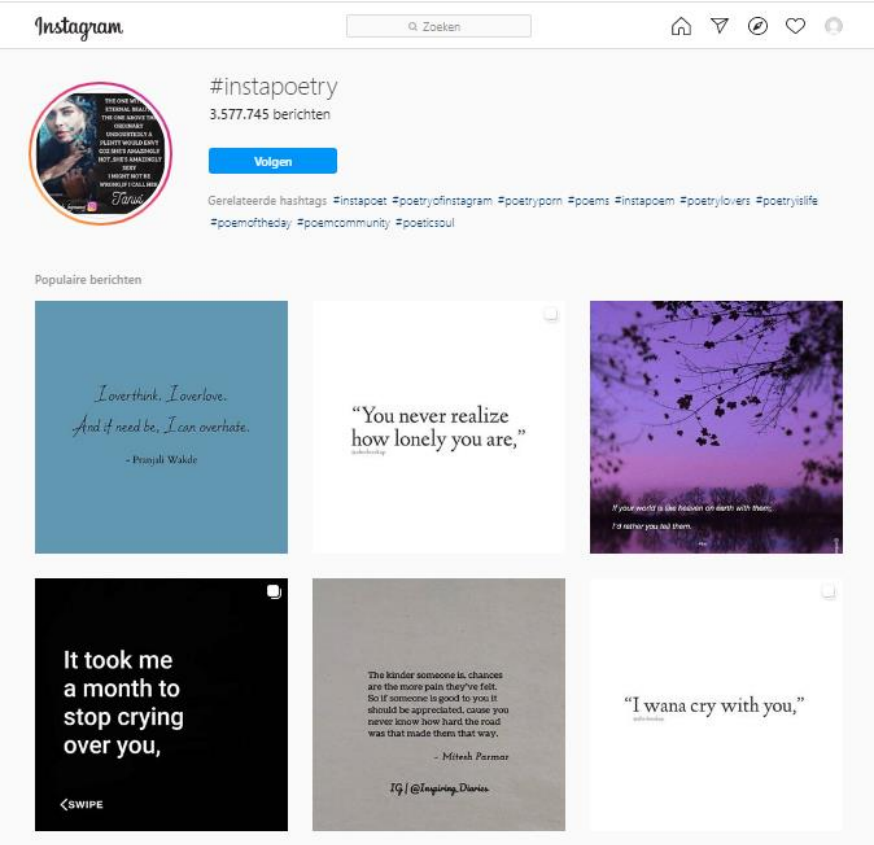


Figure 20. The page which collects all Instagram posts that contain #instapoetry. "#instapoetry"; *Instagram*, www.instagram.com/explore/tags/instapoetry/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 21 May 2020.

Apart from these practical spatial restraints, the brevity of Kaur's work may also have to do with the fast-paced social media context in which it is read. In an article which aims to explain why Kaur's writing should not be considered as poetry, Paik writes:

> Kaur's work provided all of the answers for us: her intentions were clear, her issues clarified, her answers determined. … [P]oetry is not like this. It takes time. It takes work. It takes an emotional toll. It requires

> unanswerable questions and ruminations that haunt. Poetry should not feel like an easy read but an intellectual and emotional journey, one that has checkpoints, setbacks, riddles.

Inadvertently, Paik's description of "real poetry" illustrates wonderfully why Kaur is not writing in such a manner. Her audience consists of "people who are always claiming to be busy" (Livni); they encounter her poems while scrolling through Instagram, possibly while they are commuting or watching television in the background. Such a readership may not have time for "an intellectual and emotional journey … that has checkpoints, setbacks, riddles" (Paik). Kaur's "[clear] intentions", "[clarified] issues" and "[determined] answers" (Ibid.) seem much more tailored to "our increasingly frantic quotidian, and Instagram's youthful metabolism" (Roberts). Many critics of Kaur's Instapoetry find the success of such writing concerning, as they interpret it as an indication that a new generation of readers values the convenience of "a poem that makes you feel deep without requiring much difficulty to digest" over quality writing (Woods). From a feminist viewpoint, her minimalist style may also be problematic, as it arguably removes much-needed nuance and historical background. Rivers indeed observes that "complex modes of analysis and activism" have been flattened out "for easy use in the limited confines of Twitter conversations or social media memes" (127). She notes, for instance, how the concept of intersectionality has come to be misinterpreted as Twitter's 280-character limit does not allow for much nuance (123). As a result, e.g. Muslim women are "homogenized as a singular group with a single and fixed experience of oppression" (Ibid.). Giovanni expresses similar concerns about Kaur's work, arguing that she speaks in a harmfully generalising manner about the trauma of Indian-Canadian women, contemporary Indian women, and even colonised Indian women. Miller agrees that Kaur "fails to echo [a language of trauma and rights] in ways that extend beyond the general and the cliché". As has been explained above, this may be partially due to the Instagram context of her work. Regardless of whether Kaur's simplistic, generalising style actively seeks to commodify trauma or if it merely aims to be attuned to an online readership, Giovanni is right to point out that it can be read as (problematically) suggesting "that the way all South Asian women move through life is universal".

Secondly, Kaur's style may also be so minimalistic because it aims for accessibility, a key characteristic of online feminism (Matthews 390). In an *NPR* interview, Kaur explains that she does not react when reviewers criticise her style "because [she] think[s] there's no problem with [her] poetry being too accessible" (Martin). She continues:

> "Art should be accessible to the masses, and when we start to tailor it in a way that keeps people out, then there's an issue with that … I think about who I was creating art for from the beginning — it was for myself, and for people that didn't have access to certain types of English language. I couldn't speak English until I was way into elementary school, and so my choice of diction, all the accessible choices that I make, it's to make sure that it's tailored to the person that I was when I was growing up" (Ibid.).

Tambe notes that the resulting "accessible verse" would indeed be well-suited as a non-academic reader's first introduction to feminism. She writes that Kaur's poetry may not end up "in literature curricula because of its rough edges", but that it may still "be intensely moving – and even illuminating – for those who wouldn't ordinarily think of taking a women's studies course". Kaur's accessible, simplistic style enables her writing to take on this democratising function (fig. 21). It allows her audience to discover feminist thought and history "sans classroom, degree, or benediction from some expert" (Matthews 406). As such, online feminism like Kaur's may serve as "a low-barrier entry point" for feminism more general (Mendes et al. 186). In this manner, online feminism may open the doors to feminist activism for large numbers of people who are typically excluded e.g. because they do not have access to the world of academia (Ibid. 19)[7]. From this

[7] Nonetheless, it must be noted that online feminism is not accessible to all. Mendes et al. identify multiple "barriers" which may impede people from participating in online activism, e.g. "confidence, technological savviness, emotional resilience, and social status" (5). Those who do not have access to digital tools are, of course, wholly excluded (Ibid. 20). Additionally, inequalities which exist in the offline world, leave their mark online, too (Ibid. 19). For example, white feminism remains more visible online than initiatives by women of colour (Ibid.).

point of view, Kaur's work may be said to align with the activism of black feminists in the 80s and 90s, who demanded and produced texts which were accessible to women who did not have access to higher education (Matthews 394). According to hooks, feminism "has to rescue itself from the ivory towers of academia" in order to become relevant to the average black woman (76). In the late 1990s, black feminism found this non-academic outlet in the world of hip-hop (Matthews 394). Instapoetry – which is, like hip-hop, a low-brow art form – may serve a similar democratising function.

Figure 21. An Instapoem by Kaur which expresses a feminist sentiment in a brief manner, using simple vocabulary and an illustration. Rupi Kaur; our work should equip; *Instagram,* 7 March 2017, www.instagram.com/p/BRUkUs-ggR7/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 20 Apr. 2020.

Finally, critics like Watts denounce Instapoetry for being "the product not of a poet but of a personality" (15). Indeed, Kaur has been criticised for seemingly being "more businesswoman than poet, carefully crafting an image through social media" (Flowers 38). Less sustained criticism can be found in the comment sections of Kaur's selfies, where users such as @nobrahnotevenonce question her motivations behind sharing photographs of herself (fig. 22).

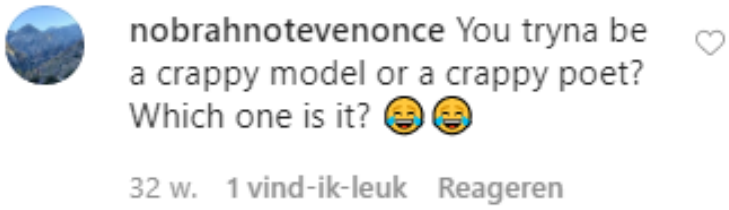


Figure 22. A comment on a photograph of Rupi Kaur. @nobrahnotevenonce; comment on photograph of Rupi Kaur; *Instagram*, www.instagram.com/p/Bur2YlQHLgU/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 21 May 2020.

As the introduction explained, self-branding seems to be inherent to the genre of Instapoetry. Rather than setting these young, mostly female authors aside as narcissistic, however, one must acknowledge that online feminist activism and writing necessitate self-promotion, e.g. in the shape of selfies. As Pruchniewska observes, writers who publish online are working in "an increasingly precarious neoliberal environment" (2). To ensure future job possibilities, freelancers must engage in self-promotion, self-branding, and audience building (Ibid.). Feminist writers such as Kaur are not exempt from this, and must find a way to balance individualistic self-promotion with their collective feminist aims (Ibid. 3). In other words, it is imperative for her to sell herself alongside her poetry: "Kaur the poet" has to be "Kaur the poetry" in order to secure a readership (Tan and Wee). In order to be commercially interesting, a self-brand must paradoxically evoke a sense of authenticity: it "must appear genuine at the same time as it is carefully constructed" (Pruchniewska 4). In highly similar words, Miller notes that "[t]he 'effortless authenticity' (Giovanni) offered by Kaur is also a highly specific and often problematic performance". She recognises that "social media platforms offer an ambiguous and troubling borderline between truth and artifice", yet fails to examine Kaur's "performance" as necessitated by the digital context of her feminism (Miller). Interestingly, many of Pruchniewska's participants underscore that writers should not self-brand as feminists when they do not identify as such in their day-to-day lives: they find inauthentic use of feminism as "a cheap way to brand yourself" morally wrong (7-8). Their comments reveal anxieties about the possible discrepancy between the author as a person, and the author's self-brand. Miller raises similar concerns about Kaur by arguing that she "play[s] upon a language of equality" in order to "exploit a market tuned to a very particular style of identity politics, one which enables sympathetic engagement without the specificities of detailed realities".

2.3. Conclusion

As has been explained above, Kaur uses Instagram as a platform for her feminism. Thus, she can be considered as part of a digital feminist renaissance. Section 2.1. explored in what way her Instapoetry constitutes online feminism: much in the same manner as the contemporary black feminists described by Matthews, Kaur seems to be employing Instagram as a counterinstitution (391). Whereas traditional publishers refused to give her a platform, Instagram provided her with a space to write of her experience as an immigrant woman of colour, and of taboo topics such as sexual violence. Online feminism often aims to combat injustice by addressing (and thus exposing) it on public channels (Keller et al. 22). The feminist hashtag #MeToo is perhaps the most obvious example of this. Interestingly, Kaur's Instapoems seem to function in a highly similar fashion: many readers consider her poems as prompts to voice their personal experiences. As such, her Instapoetry provides victims of sexual abuse with a space to share their stories, and bond over them with other Instagram users. Furthermore, the resulting "mass of experience" in the comment sections of Kaur's poems arguably constitutes "a form of public pedagogy that becomes difficult to discount and silence" (Mendes et al. 187). This communal function of Kaur's poems may shed new light on Miller's criticism of her Instapoetry: Miller interprets the absence of detail in her work as a problematic attempt to make the experiences of women of colour sellable to the broadest possible audience. Alternatively, however, one might argue that this lack of detail is needed in order to allow women (of colour) to apply the poem to their own lives. This already points us to the fact that some particularities of Kaur's work may be related to their online context. Therefore, section 2.2. examined controversial aspects of her Instapoetry in light of its digital platform. Both its simple style and self-promotion are features for which Kaur's poetry is criticised. However, the fact that both are key features of Instapoetry as a genre (see Introduction), seems to suggest that these are not personal flaws in Kaur's writing style and approach to authorhood. Rather, simplicity and self-branding seem to be imperative for poets who use Instagram as a platform. Kaur's minimalist style allows for her pieces to function on the social media site, and caters to the needs of an Instagram audience. Additionally, it makes her work accessible, which Kaur claims to find highly important (Martin). Finally, acts of self-promotion are needed to secure a readership (Pruchniewska 2). Thus, it must be acknowledged that Kaur's feminism is *online* feminism, and that this may impact the shape that her activism takes.

3. Celebrity feminism

3.1. "Poetry is the new pop": Kaur's Instapoetry as celebrity feminism

In 2018, Kaur appeared on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon.* As the Instapoet herself notes during the interview, she is sitting in a spot which is generally reserved for pop stars or actors, "[b]ut somehow poetry is getting [her] into all this" (*The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* 0:01-0:08). In response, Fallon exclaims that "[p]oetry is the new pop" (Ibid. 0:08-0:10). Their exchange describes Kaur's singular celebrity status strikingly well. Despite being a poet, she has (quite literally) come to occupy the space of a pop star. As mentioned in the introduction, Kaur carefully constructs a persona for herself, "not merely as a poet, but also as feminist, minority figure, and celebrity" (Tan and Wee). The first section of this chapter (3.1.) demonstrates how Kaur shapes a celebrity identity through TV appearances, magazine covers, and references to going on tour. As a result, her feminism can (and arguably should) be considered as celebrity feminism. Section 3.2. examines criticisms of Kaur's feminist Instapoetry in light of the controversy surrounding celebrity feminism. This reveals that much of what is controversial about Kaur's feminism is controversial about celebrity feminism more general.

Figure 23. Kaur shares her *Cosmopolitan India* cover with her fans via Instagram. Rupi Kaur; Cosmopolitan India Cover; *Instagram,* 9 Oct. 2018, www.instagram.com/p/BosZcmNHOOm/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 7 Mar. 2020.

In October 2018, Kaur appeared on the cover of *Cosmopolitan India* (fig. 23). Her Instagram post about the occasion illustrates how she self-positions as a celebrity. First and foremost, the cover of *Cosmopolitan India* is (like *The Tonight Show)* generally reserved for actors and musicians. The magazine's main topics include "celebrity news, fashion, beauty, [and] relationships" (@cosmoindia). It is, in other words, not a literary magazine. Significantly, Kaur is not presenting as a poet either: she is not depicted alongside one of her books, nor is her poetry mentioned on the cover. Instead, she is pictured glamorously dressed and posing as a model might. This aligns her with other stars who have appeared on the magazine's cover, much as her appearance on *The Tonight Show* put her in the same category as previous show guests. Thirdly, her autograph can be seen on the right hand side of the cover. As handing out autographs is typical of big stars with large fan followings, the presence of her signature implies that she is extremely famous. Finally, the caption of her post also contributes to this impression of fame and glamour. Kaur uses this space to thank "the entire team". As Tan and Wee observe, Kaur's team-thanking habit evokes a sense of celebrity: it implies that she travels with so many assistants that she simply cannot thank them by name. The caption also includes references to her photographer, stylists, producer, and even the designer of her clothes. Again, this mirrors celebrity rhetoric. When pop star and actress Selena Gomez posts her *Harper's Bazaar* cover, for comparison, she adds a highly similar caption (fig. 24).

Figure 24. Selena Gomez shares her *Harper's Bazaar* cover with her fans via Instagram. Selena Gomez; Harper's Bazaar Cover Caption; *Instagram,* 7 Feb. 2018, www.instagram.com/p/Be6Xe34APor/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 11 Apr. 2020.

Figure 25. Kaur advertises tickets for her America Tour via Instagram. Rupi Kaur; America Tour Announcement; *Instagram,* 8 Sept. 2018, www.instagram.com/p/Bncb_Esg1u1/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 12 Apr. 2020.

Figure 26. Pop star Doja Cat announces her Europe Tour Dates via Instagram. Doja Cat; Europe Tour Announcement; *Instagram,* 26 Feb. 2019, www.instagram.com/p/BuXL-yrjdGZ/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 20 Apr. 2020.

Lastly, Tan and Wee identify Kaur's many references to "going on tour" as one of her key strategies to create an impression of fame. Her performances are indeed clearly conceptualised as a tour, rather than being presented as a number of poetry readings in different locations. Again, this aligns her with famous musical artists. The same can be said of the promotional material for her 2018 America Tour (fig. 25), as it mimicks the lay-out of pop star tour itineraries (fig. 26). Alongside the tour dates, Kaur is pictured in one of the evening gowns that she typically wears during performances. Again, her manner of dress reminds of what a celebrity might wear during a performance or an award show. Not only do her tour announcements exude fame, the images Kaur posts of past performances also "telegraph glamor, celebrity, and fame to anyone viewing her account" (Tan and Wee). In a post which marks the end of a tour, she shares an image which paints such a picture of "glamor, celebrity, and fame" (Ibid.): she is again wearing a gown, and posing in an ornate venue (fig. 27). In the caption (fig. 28), she strongly emphasises "the stage. the performance. the glam. the lights" (Kaur, "reflecting back on finished tour"). She details how spectacular this tour was – "our biggest production yet" – and references living life on the road as a touring celebrity (Ibid.).

Figure 27. Rupi Kaur; reflecting back on finished tour; *Instagram,* 3 Nov. 2018, www.instagram.com/p/Bpsr34FHUvx/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 12 Apr. 2020.

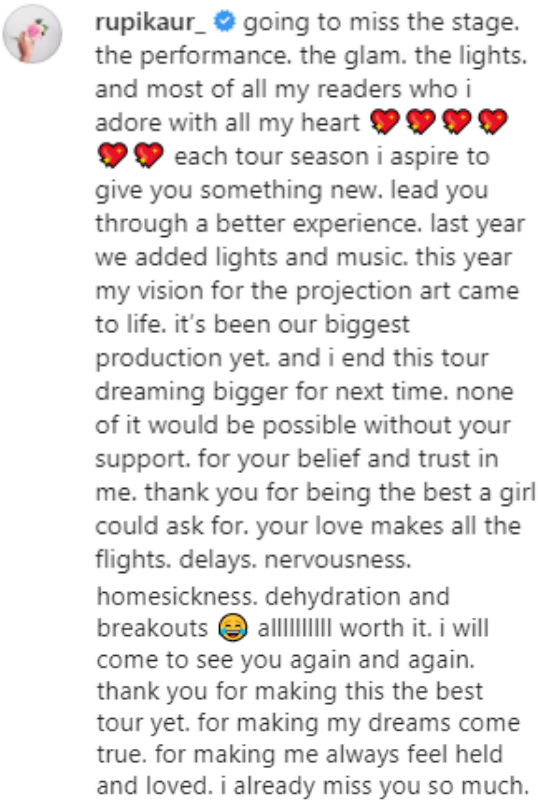


Figure 28. Rupi Kaur; reflecting back on finished tour; *Instagram,* 3 Nov. 2018, www.instagram.com/p/Bpsr34FHUvx/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 12 Apr. 2020..

3.2. The controversiality of Kaur's Instapoetry and celebrity feminism

Since fame is so central to Kaur's persona as a poet, the concerns about her feminism need also be considered in light of her celebrity status. Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer conceptualise celebrity feminism as a subtype of "popular feminism", a term they use to indicate the fact that "contemporary feminism is circulated in mainstream and commercial media where masses of people can consume it" (2). Rivers agrees that there has recently been a resurgence of feminism in the media and in popular culture (7). Consequently, Zeisler has coined the term "empowertising" to refer to the phenomenon whereby advertising agencies use feminist tropes to sell a product (*Empowertise Me!*). Now that feminism sells, it is perhaps unsurprising that celebrities are proclaiming themselves to be feminists, oftentimes after having previously rejected the label (Rivers 58). Kaur likewise positions herself "as the pop-feminist, self-love champion of her

time", and even "a spokesperson for women, women's trauma, and the South Asian diaspora" (Tan and Wee). According to Rivers, integrating feminism into one's "brand message" contributes to celebrities' status, authenticity, and commercial success (61).

Thus, feminism in the spotlights is deeply entangled with "the capitalist aims of self-promotion" (Rivers 41). As a result, celebrity feminism is not uncontroversial. Critics argue that pop stars are "depoliticizing feminism and using it as simply a means to further their own success or develop their own brand" (Rivers 58). Kaur is one of many celebrities who have been accused of producing "disingenuous" feminism for publicity or monetary gain (Giovanni). Tan and Wee, for instance, suggest that her allegedly feminist call to share her censored "period." photograph across social media really may have been a clever (and successful) attempt to generate a fan following for herself. In this sense, "we might see Kaur's feminism as not so much a stance she propagates through her celebrity as much as a means towards celebrity" (Ibid.).

Critics such as Miller and Giovanni believe that Kaur is strategically creating a commercially interesting "feminism 'lite'" (Rivers 3). Celebrities often propagate such 'lite' feminism, which tends to be unthreatening, simple, individualist, and inclusive towards men (Ibid. 64-72), Arguably, this description is highly applicable to Kaur's work. Miller, for instance, argues that Kaur problematically "play[s] upon a language of equality in order to capitalise on audiences aligned with both the centre and the margins". By writing about the experiences of women of colour in a generalising, cliché manner, Kaur manages to be exactly "exotic enough to be attractive without making white Western readers uncomfortable" (Giovanni). Tan and Wee similarly observe that her Instapoetry is "progressive, yet infinitely consumable". They argue that Kaur appeals to the masses because she refrains from graphic detail: "even when engaging with themes such as sexual assault, racism, or bodily functions, the engagement is accomplished in an unobtrusive, inoffensive manner that never risks truly offending her Instagram followers". One may argue that this imperative for "tiny neatness" (Ibid.) or "feminism 'lite'" (Rivers 3) makes powerful activism impossible.

In addition, Miller claims that Kaur's feminism is "lacking in the nuances of intersectional thinking" due to its tendency to generalise trauma across racial or national backgrounds. She argues that Kaur's Instapoetry caters to a white audience, thus marginalising women of colour by commodifying their experiences. Rivers concurs that popular feminism lacks intersectionality and has a strong focus on white middle-class womanhood (11). Nonetheless, it must be noted that many readers exult Kaur's "praiseworthy advocacy for intersectional feminism" (Manosh). Minhas, for example, describes her as "a fierce, Brown woman who continues to inspire women of color to take on the world in a truly intersectional feminist way". Kaur also characterises her own feminism as "very intersectional" (RU Student Life 0:33-0:37). Thus, despite Miller's compelling argument about the possibly problematic execution of Kaur's intended intersectionality, it must be acknowledged that she is nonetheless a highly visible feminist of colour, whose activism many readers of colour claim to appreciate.

Scholars such as Rivers and Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer express further concerns about the nature of celebrity feminism, as it is often thoroughly infused with neoliberalism and postfeminism: it is a feminism "of personal achievements, and in turn, personal responsibility" (Rivers 25). Therefore, popular feminism is generally individualist in nature, and heavily influenced by neoliberal consumer culture (Rottenberg 2014). Correspondingly, it often takes the shape of "messages about self-making, self-love, and selfcare … on social media and in corporate campaigns, messages mostly aimed at privileged white women" (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2). Indeed, these concepts are central to Kaur's image as "the self-love champion of her time" (Tan and Wee) or "one of the top influencers on social media promoting body positivity" (Kukreja). It is true that many of her poems contain what Gill and Elias call "love your body discourse", i.e. "positive, affirmative, seemingly feminist-inflected media messages, targeted exclusively at girls and women, that exhort us to believe that we are beautiful … and that we have 'the power' to 'redefine' the 'rules of beauty'" (180). LYB discourse[8], which originated in the world of advertising, seems to spread a positive message which goes against "the almost entirely normalised hostile judgment and surveillance of women's bodies in contemporary media culture" (Ibid.): rather than

[8] 'Love your body discourse' will henceforth be referred to as 'LYB discourse'.

zooming in on what needs to be corrected about the female body, it aims to generate positive affect by encouraging women to feel beautiful (Ibid. 181). Nonetheless, Gill and Elias find LYB discourse problematic. They argue that the imperative to love one's body is simply another manner of regulating women and their relationships to their own bodies: they are demanded to assume an "affirmative confident disposition, no matter how they actually feel" (185). This type of popular feminism places the responsibility with the individual woman, thus discouraging collective or political action (Ibid.). It is also deeply entangled with neoliberalism, as LYB discourse is often employed by companies who profit off of women's negative body images, such as Weightwatchers or make-up brands (Ibid. 180).

As Gill and Elias observe, LYB portrays body image issues as "self-generated" personal problems (11) that can easily be overcome by "realising" that one is beautiful (5). This idea recurs in Kaur's poetry. In "i notice everything i do not have" (fig. 31), for instance, the persona simply "decide[s]" they are beautiful (Kaur). While "a relationship to the self that has gone bad or been broken" is a common trope for LYB discourse, it usually remains unclear what has damaged the individual's self-image (Gill and Elias 4). In Kaur's "we are all born" (fig. 29), it indeed remains unspecified who or what "convinced" the poem's subjects that they are less than beautiful. In another poem (fig. 30), the broken relationship with the self is presented as the speaker's own doing: "/ reduced my body to aesthetics / [/] forgot the work it did to keep me alive / … / [/] declared it a grand failure" (Kaur, "i reduced my body to aesthetics", emphasis by author). It is their responsibility to merely "realize" that their body is "a miracle" (Ibid.). In this manner, LYB discourse implicitly puts the blame as well as the responsibility for overcoming body image issues on the individual woman: as such, "women's difficult relationships to their own embodied selves are both dislocated from their structural determinants in patriarchal capitalism and shorn of their psychosocial complexity" (Gill and Elias 11). Thus, women are encouraged to solve this problem within themselves, rather than seeking political change (Rivers 63). The illustration of "i notice everything i do not have" (fig. 31), which depicts a girl looking sadly into the mirror, similarly implies that this is a problem which plays out on a personal scale, within the boundaries of one's bathroom (Kaur).

Figure 29. Rupi Kaur; we are all born; *Instagram,* 18 Jan. 2020, www.instagram.com/p/B7eeVoBBzIb/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 19 Apr. 2020.

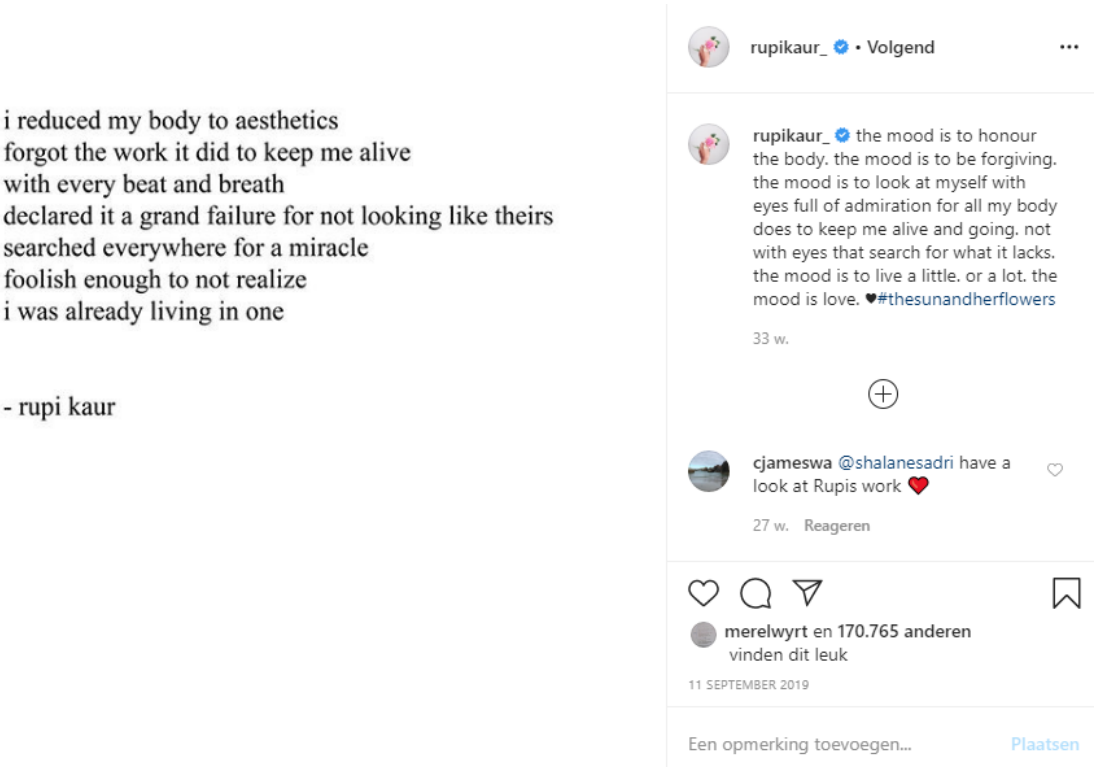


Figure 30. Rupi Kaur; i reduced my body to aesthetics; *Instagram,* 11 Sept. 2019, www.instagram.com/p/B2P165LBkg-/ screenshot taken by author; accessed 19 Apr. 2020.

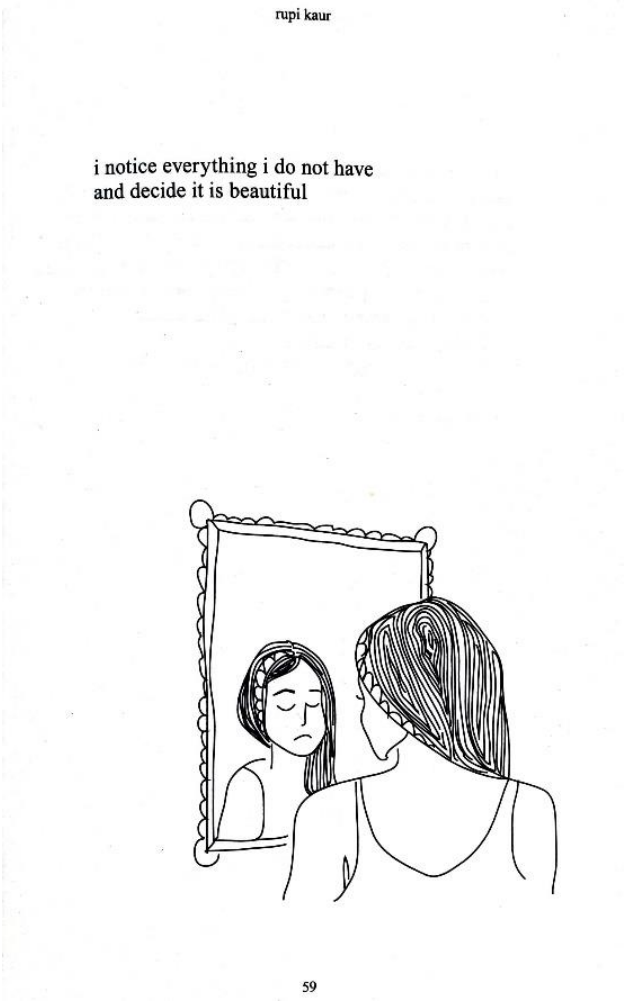


Figure 31. Rupi Kaur; "i notice everything i do not have"; the sun and her flowers; Simon & Schuster UK, 2017, p. 59.

Still, certain poems by Kaur do put the blame for negative body image beyond the individual woman. Lines such as “their concept of beauty is manufactured” (fig. 32) imply that dissatisfaction about one’s body may be caused by unrealistic societal beauty standards (Kaur, *the sun and her flowers* 225). The problem, then, becomes bigger than individual women’s failure to realise that they are beautiful. Still, it remains unclear who “their” refers to. Perhaps Kaur is referring to the beauty industry here, as the poem on the previous page reads “it is a trillion-dollar industry that would collapse / if we believed we were beautiful enough already” (Ibid. 224). Again, these lines acknowledge that female body image issues may not be entirely individual problems: Kaur points out that the beauty industry benefits from (maintaining or perhaps even generating) women’s insecurities. The use of the first person plural evokes the sense that this is a collective issue rather than a personal one. The illustration that accompanies both poems depicts an assembly line which transports parts

of the female body (Ibid. 224-225). The factory imagery (which is echoed in "their concept of beauty is manufactured") further associates the problem with matters of capitalism and neoliberalism. Taken together, these pages seem to suggest that the root cause of negative body image lies beyond the individual, in a "trillion-dollar industry" (Ibid. 224). Still, the proposed solution is again pitched as an easy task for the individual woman to fulfil: it is her responsibility to "believ[e] [she] [is] beautiful enough already" (Ibid.).

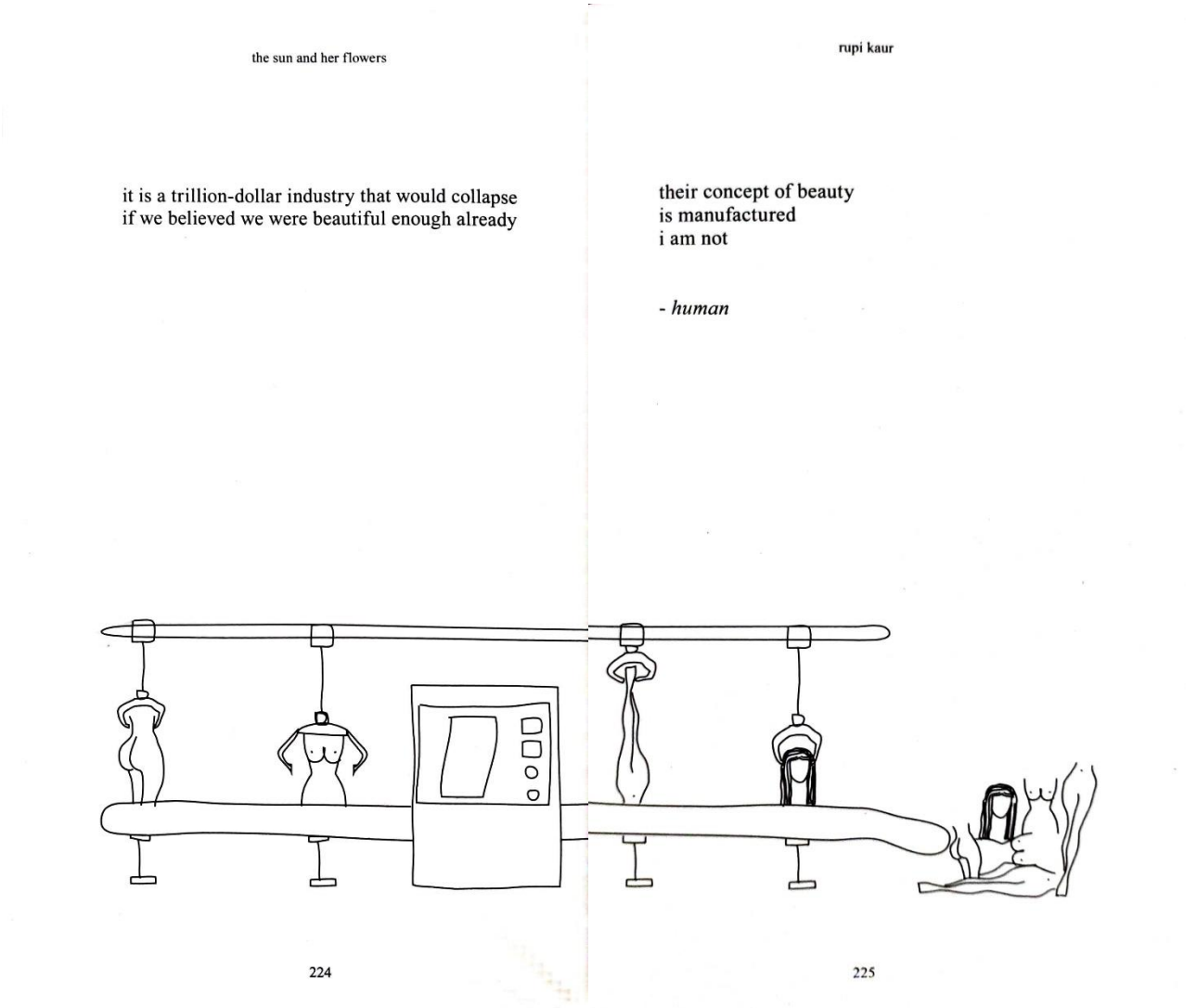


Figure 32. Rupi Kaur; "it is a trillion-dollar industry that would collapse" and "their concept of beauty"; *the sun and her flowers*, Simon & Schuster UK, 2017, pp. 224-225.

Although Kaur's LYB poetry indeed advocates individual solutions rather than collective political action, Gill's and Elias' criticism about LYB discourse thus does not wholly apply to her work. The reason for this may be the fact that Gill's and Elias' research focuses primarily on advertisements by diet food brands or make-up manufacturers. From this point of view, it is not surprising that their LYB messages put the blame for body image issues with the individual, rather than exposing complex questions of structural sexism. As mentioned above, it is beneficial for these companies that women feel the desire to change their own bodies, as it may cause them to spend money on certain foods or beauty products. While Gill's and Elias' theory about LYB discourse is certainly relevant to Kaur's Instapoetry, it must be noted that Kaur is writing from a different standpoint than advertising agencies are. As she is not associated with a beauty company, she is free to raise questions about the responsibility of the beauty industry in cultivating negative body images. Kaur's work explores "the ways in which the bodies of women are surveilled and policed" and rejects "forms of patriarchal containment and control, such as Western beauty myths" (Miller). In doing so, she goes beyond Gill's and Elias' definition of LYB discourse. Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that Kaur is making money out of her LYB poetry: although she is not using LYB discourse to sell a product, she is selling LYB discourse itself.

Despite concerns about commerciality and individualistic undertones, Rivers advises against a wholesale rejection of celebrity feminism (74). Despite (or perhaps because of) its unacademic background, she argues that it must be acknowledged as a valuable expression of feminist thought in itself (Ibid. 73). Taylor, too, urges us not to consider feminist activism which is not "implicated in systems of celebrity and commodification [as] morally superior to [feminism] that more blatantly exhibit[s] this investment" (30). She demonstrates that neoliberal self-branding and commerciality have been part of feminist activism for decades, and that this is not necessarily limiting (Ibid. 292). Mainstream feminist icons such as Kaur have always played a key role in sparking feminist debate, and educating the general public about feminist ideologies (Ibid. 3). Zeisler believes that celebrity endorsement of feminism may convince audiences of its legitimacy and necessity "in a way that feminist movements themselves may never be able to do" (*We Were Feminists Once,* 132).

3.3. Conclusion

As section 3.1. demonstrated, Kaur self-represents as a celebrity through TV-appearances, magazine photoshoots, and posts about her tours. Therefore, the previous chapter examined her controversial feminism in light of its status as celebrity feminism. Much in the same way as online feminism, contemporary celebrity feminism is part of a recent resurgence in popular feminism (Mendes et al. 1). As a result of its newfound commercial appeal, celebrities like Kaur are utilising feminism for the purpose of self-promotion (Rivers 58). Due to this commercial use of feminist language, celebrity feminism has been under much scrutiny. Critics observe that celebrity feminists like Kaur create a sellable, inoffensive "feminism 'lite'" (Ibid. 3). Furthermore, scholars also express concerns about the lack of intersectional thinking within celebrity feminism (Ibid 11) such as Kaur's (Miller). Nonetheless, both Kaur herself and many of her readers consider her to be a prime example of intersectionality. Lastly, celebrity feminism oftentimes has a neoliberal or postfeminist tone to it, in the sense that it emphasises individual responsibility at the expense of political change (Rivers 25). In the case of Kaur, this is most clearly visible in her "love your body" poems, which depict negative body image as a self-generated problem which is easy to solve by the individual woman (Gill and Elias 185). However, certain poems in her oeuvre do conceptualise body image issues as a structural problem which is rooted in capitalism. Despite aforementioned concerns, Rivers (73) and Taylor (30) underscore that celebrity feminism should be considered as a valid branch of feminism.

As we conclude this chapter, it becomes clear that there are many parallels between online and celebrity feminism. Both strands of popular feminism are subject to much criticism due to their involvement with neoliberalism, commerciality, self-branding, simplification, and so forth. Despite these possibly problematic characteristics, scholars such as Rivers (74) and Taylor (30) urge us not to consider popular types of feminism as "impure" versions of "true" feminism. Rivers argues that "multiplicity of feminist thought is a key strength of the movement" (151), and that there is "space within feminism(s) for a wealth of differing feminist expressions, whether these take the form of celebrity feminism … or online feminism", although she underscores that these should be seen as "a feminist call to arms", "rather than as reassurance that feminism is active and … no longer needed" (152). In other words, Rivers believes that popular feminist activism such as Kaur's

Instapoetry is a valuable expression of feminism, which can (and should) co-exist with academic feminist thought. Kaur agrees that there is not one "correct" version of feminism: "My feminism is … not about being perfect. … [We experience pressure] to be the perfect feminist. But I think … there is no actual definition of what the perfect feminist looks like, but the best we can do is our best, and the best we can do is listen to one another and open up space for more dialogue" (Gill 2:37-3:05)

4. Conclusion

As has been explained in the introduction, Instapoetry is a controversial genre. Rupi Kaur, the most-followed Instapoet, has received especially harsh criticism, some of which is directed towards her feminist activism. Critics such as Miller and Giovanni interpret the particularities of her Instapoetry – such as her simplistic and generalising tone, lack of detail, and tendency to self-brand – as a problematic attempt to commodify the lives of women of colour. Although both scholars refer to Kaur's role as a "social media star" (Giovanni), they devote little attention to the ways in which her feminism is shaped by its online context, or by her celebrity status. As Paterson suggested, however, it may be necessary to "measure" Kaur's feminist Instapoetry "against its own ambitions" (Flood and Cain). In the end, Kaur does not claim to produce feminist scholarship; as chapters two and three have made clear, her feminist activism and Instapoetry can be situated in a recent resurgence of popular feminism which is noticeable on the Internet as well as among celebrities. Aforementioned chapters have shown that both online feminism and celebrity feminism are controversial. As a result, it seems necessary to pay attention to the particularities of digital feminism and celebrity feminism more general when interpreting the criticism that Kaur's Instapoetry receives.

In order to "measure" Kaur's feminist poetry "against its own ambitions" (Flood and Cain), this thesis examined how her work can be seen as digital and celebrity feminism. After exploring how her Instapoetry constitutes online and celebrity feminist activism, chapters two and three assessed its perceived shortcomings in dialogue with scholarship on (controversial aspects of) digital feminism and celebrity feminism. In doing so, this thesis aimed to deepen our understanding of Kaur's extremely popular feminist poems, and why they might display certain much-criticised features. As feminism becomes "increasingly visible and consumable" in popular media (Mendes et al. 1), it also becomes increasingly important that literary and feminist scholars strive to understand expressions of popular feminism, rather than setting them aside as "faux feminism" (Miller).

Chapter two demonstrated that Kaur uses Instagram as a platform to write about her experiences as a woman of colour,

and to speak the unspeakable (Keller et al. 22). The comment section allows her audience to participate in her feminist activism, and voice their own experiences with sexual abuse. This associates Kaur's Instapoetry with feminist hashtags such as #MeToo. Multiple perceived flaws of Kaur's work seem closely related with its digital context. Her generalising, undetailed style may be what enables her readership to apply her poems to their own lives. The simplicity of her style and imagery also seem to be prompted by their Instagram reading environment. Critics who find fault with Kaur's many selfies may not be aware that digital feminist activism requires acts of self-branding (Pruchniewska 2).

Chapter three examined the ways in which Kaur occupies spaces which are generally reserved for pop stars or movie stars. In doing so, she creates a celebrity image for herself. This aligns her activism with celebrity feminism, which has always been a controversial strand of feminist activism. Again, many questionable aspects of Kaur's work seem to be related to the fact that she is navigating a complicated branch of feminism, in which activism and commercialism collide. Kaur is certainly not the first celebrity to be accused of misusing feminism for fame or profit, nor is she the only one who seems to be creating a commercially interesting "feminism 'lite'" (Rivers 3). The lack of intersectionality and the sense of individual responsibility which arguably speak from her Instapoetry are also recurring issues for celebrity feminism in general.

As this thesis has shown, "measur[ing]" Kaur's feminist Instapoetry "against its own ambitions" (Flood and Cain) reveals that certain controversial aspects of her work stand in close relationship to the digital and celebrity context of her work. In doing so, this paper does not intend to deny or excuse possibly problematic aspects of Kaur's poetry; rather, it seeks to understand them as part of bigger trends within contemporary feminism. This knowledge may help us move beyond personal attacks directed at Kaur herself, towards a more nuanced understanding of the bigger picture in which her Instapoetry functions. Therefore, future research should take careful attention to contextualise Kaur's work and activism as an expression of online feminism by a celebrity figure.

Due to lack of space, this thesis has focused solely on Kaur's feminist poetry, which often thematises the experiences of women of colour. However, it must be noted that her oeuvre also contains multiple activist poems which are not feminist in nature, but tackle topics such as immigration, racism, or South Asian culture. Further research is needed to examine whether the perceived shortcomings of these poems can also be understood in terms of their status as online and celebrity activism. Future studies may also consider how other Instapoets, such as Warsan Shire or Nikita Gill, engage in feminist activism. The matter of "faux feminism" (Miller) by male Instapoets like r.H. Sin or Atticus seems especially interesting in this respect.

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