NEOLIBERAL CHICKS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE NEOLIBERAL ASPECTS OF CHICK-LIT AND FEMINIST INSTAPOETRY

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Contents

1. Introduction

In *Pain Generation: Social Media, Feminist Activism, and the Neoliberal Selfie* (2021), Saraswati explores "the perils and promise of feminist social media activism" by contemporary feminist icons such as the Instapoet Rupi Kaur (abstract). She rightfully wonders: "[H]ow does such activism reconcile with the platforms on which it is being cultivated, when its radical messaging is at total odds with the neoliberal logic governing social media?" (Ibid.). This thesis aims to scrutinise prominent Instapoets' feminist writing in a similar fashion, and demonstrate that it is often deeply entangled with neoliberal ideas. 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[1] 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).

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[1] 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 (fig. 2). Instapoets often use this space to elucidate the piece's meaning or origin (Kovalik and Curwood 191). 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 13 May 2021, Leav's "Good Enough" post had over 15.000 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).
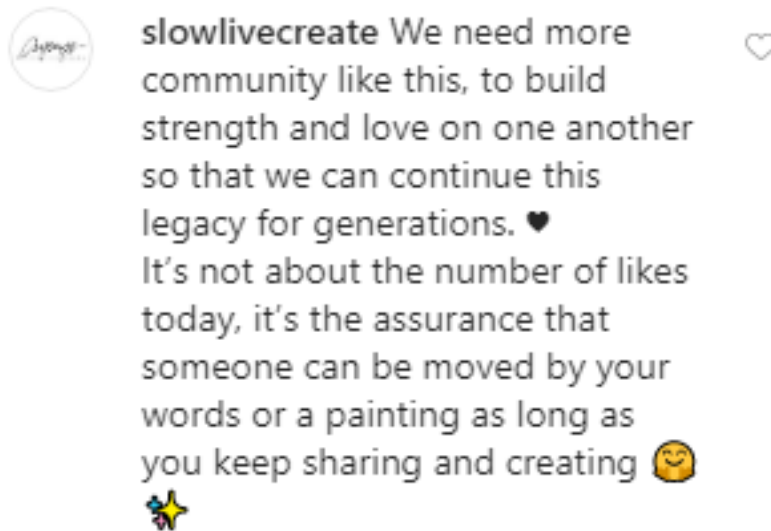
Figure 3. A comment by Instagram user @slowlivecreate which expresses appreciation of the Instapoetry community. @slowlivecreate; comment on "Good Enough" by Lang Leav; *Instagram*, www.instagram.com/p/B9iAdMAhvVv/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 16 Mar. 2020.

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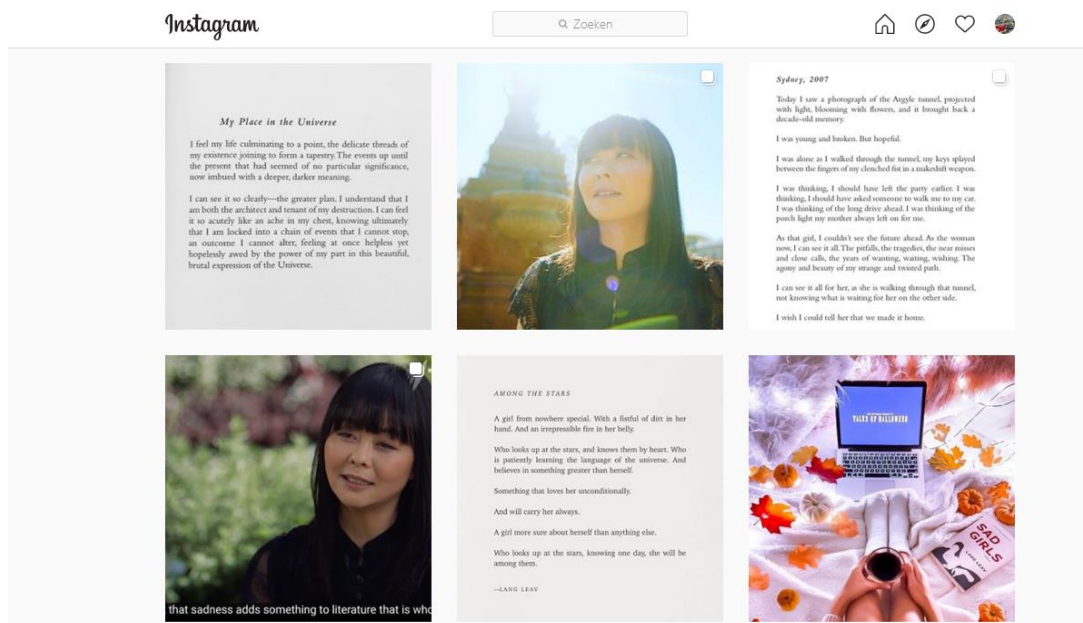
Figure 4. Lang Leav's Instagram feed. Lang Leav; Instagram feed; *Instagram*, www.instagram.com/langleav/?hl=nl, screenshot taken by author; accessed 16 Mar. 2020.
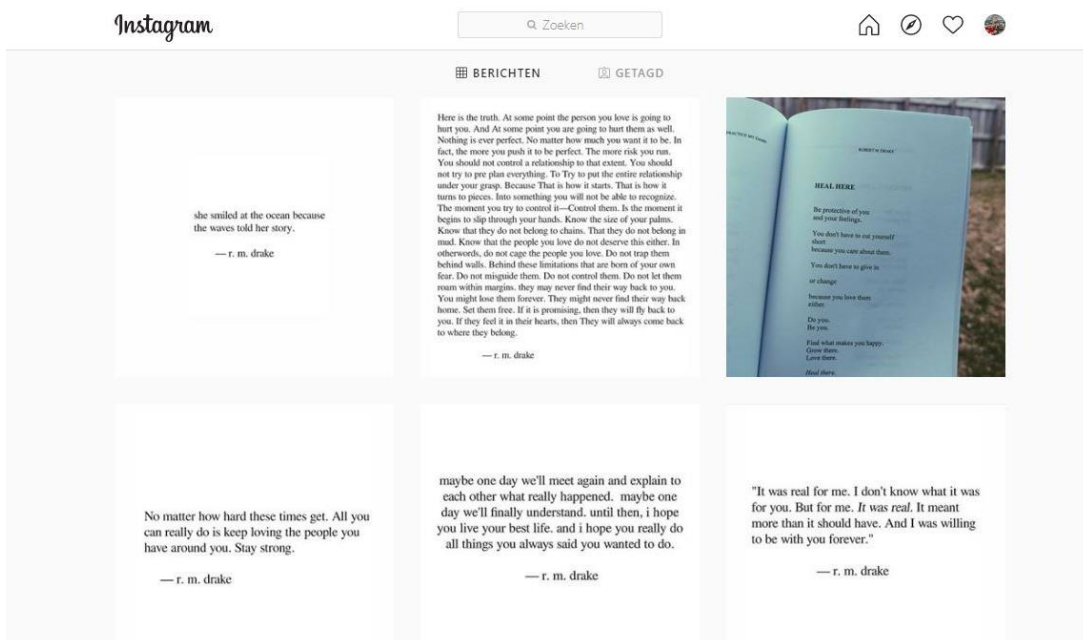

Figure 5. R.M. Drake's Instagram feed. R.M. Drake; Instagram feed; *Instagram,* www.instagram.com/rmdrk/?hl=nl, screenshot taken by author; accessed 16 Mar. 2020.

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[2] (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 migration (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

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

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 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). 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.). 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).

Despite – or perhaps because of – the genre's wide appeal, Instapoetry is a highly controversial genre. Critics consider it as "a lowbrow form that demonstrates little literary merit" (Pâquet 296), "fidget spinner poetry" (Flock) or even an "open denigration of intellectual engagement and rejection of the craft [of poetry]" (Watts 13). 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 (Miller). Additionally, critics find fault with the "lack of editing, lack of craft, or a surplus of affect" (Matthews 404). Aside from criticism aimed at its lack of "literary merit" (Pâquet 296), critics such as Miller and Giovanni have denounced the genre's feminism. As mentioned earlier, Instapoetry often tackles feminist themes. Journalists such as Castle even describe Instapoetry as an inherently feminist form: "In an industry traditionally dominated by men [i.e. the publishing industry], these women [Instapoets] are making their own rules." Nonetheless, the genre – and especially its feminism – has repeatedly been criticised on moral grounds, for its arguably narcissistic focus on the self (Roberts), its tendency to commodify feminist rhetoric and identity politics (Miller, Giovanni), and its strong commerciality (Miller).

As Saraswati demonstrates, many of Instapoetry's controversial features have to do with the genre's implication in "the collusion and collision between neoliberalism and feminism on social media, and the dangers and limitations of this collusion" (19). While Saraswati is one of the first scholars to study Instapoetry through the lens of neoliberalism, there is an extensive body of scholarship on chick-lit's neoliberal feminism. As Butler and Desai argue, chick-lit is "a cultural phenomenon that is immersed in both feminism and neoliberalism" and can thus be considered "as an exemplary site of neoliberal feminist subject-making" (8). In order to further Saraswati's enquiry into "how the neoliberal logic that governs social media shapes and translates how feminist activism is performed in this space" (21-22), this thesis thus seeks to explore the genre of Instapoetry using concepts of neoliberal feminism as formulated by chick-lit scholars such as Harzewski, and Butler and Desai.

After a contextualisation of both genres' commerciality (section 2.1.) and an overview of the scholarship on chicklit's feminism (section 2.2.), this thesis will examine the most significant sites of Instapoetry's entanglement with neoliberal feminism. Section 3.1. is devoted to the neoliberal feminist rhetoric of choice and individual responsibility; after a more general discussion, this section will zoom in on Instapoetry's relationship with the (often neoliberally charged) concepts of body positivity and self-care. Section 3.2. explores the genre's tendency to cater to "the digital gaze" (Jones) or "the neoliberal self(ie) gaze" (Saraswati). Section 3.3., finally, examines the feminist Instapoet as a neoliberal poet-entrepreneur who engages in commercial ventures that often clash with the feminist message that their work intends to send. In doing so, this thesis follows Pâquet's recommendation to not limit itself to Instapoetry 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).

It bears noting that the term Instapoetry is "often confused, used to describe a huge variety of poets, not all of whom use Instagram as their primary dissemination method" (Manning 267). Due to spatial constraints, this thesis will, like Manning, limit itself to the most popular feminist writers of "a cohort of poets writing in a similar aesthetic, using the medium of Instagram, and all presenting a challenge to the performance of selfhood in their work" (Ibid.). Nonetheless, it must be noted that a number of comparable poets – though their aesthetic may be different or they may not use Instagram – engage with neoliberalism and feminism in vastly different (often more radically activist or feminist) ways. Further research is needed to take into account the work of contemporary poets such as Ashanti Wheeler-Artwell, Hera Lindsay Bird or Andrew McMillan.

2. Contextualisation

<u>2.1. "Commercial tsunamis"[3]: chick-lit and Instapoetry as commercial genres</u>

Few critics have pointed out the similarities between Instapoetry and chick-lit: only Spreckelsen and Miller seem to have made this connection in passing. As both of them note, Instapoets and chick-lit authors are generally female, as is their audience. Miller draws another parallel by pointing out that both genres depict "[women's] own experiences." While being extremely popular, both genres have also been met with a striking amount of backlash (Spreckelsen, Miller). For the purpose of this thesis, however, the most significant parallel is the fact that both genres are situated at the crossroads of neoliberalism and feminism, and that this has caused critics to question their ability to send authentic feminist messages. Before moving on to an overview of the body of scholarship on chicklit's feminism (section 2.2.), the following section seeks to briefly introduce the reader to the commercial nature of Instapoetry and chick-lit.

Chick-lit novels are "novels written by women, (largely) for women, depicting the life, loves, trials and tribulations of their predominantly young, single, urban, female protagonists" (Gromley). The genre distinguishes itself from the popular contemporary romance by not centring on one male-female couple (Ferriss and Young 3). Instead, chick-lit arguably "jettisons the heterosexual hero to offer a more realistic portrait of single life, dating, and the dissolution of romantic ideals" (Ibid.). As Harzewski puts it: "Frequently Mr. Right turns out to be Mr. Wrong or Mr. Maybe. Sometimes a [chick-lit] novel chronicles a succession of Mr. Not-Rights" (*Chick-lit and Postfeminism,* 28). Additionally, chick-lit is said to differ from the popular romance on ground of its realism (Ferriss and Young 3): according to Chicklit.us, the genre represents female lives "in all the messy detail" (Ibid.). The genre allegedly responds to "'The Bridget Jones Effect': a syndrome, some journalists maintain, affecting especially thirtysomething women who become consumed with 'dating panic' and strategies for meeting Mr. Right" (Harzewski, *Chick-lit and Postfeminism* 3). In this sense, these (often semiautobiographical) novels

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[3] Quotation taken from Ferriss and Young (2).

"provide an ethnographic report on a new dating system and a shift in the climate of feminism", both of which are strongly imbued with consumerism (Ibid. 4). Montoro summarises the main goal of the average chick-lit protagonist as "happily resolving her quest for a prince charming, in the context of a consumer society which not only invites but even urges these protagonists to overspend, all of it framed as comedy" (3).

In the 1990s, the publication of Fielding's *Bridget Jones' Diary* sparked a chick-lit "boom" ("chick lit"). The genre's global popularity has been described in terms of a "chick-lit pandemic" (Donadio) or a "commercial tsunami" (Ferriss and Young 2). Virtually all resources on chick-lit make note of its "amazing commercial success" (Ibid.) or "exorbitant sales and subsequent profitable figures" (Montoro 3). According to Ferriss and Young, chick-lit is the most lucrative phenomenon the publishing industry has ever seen (2). In 2009, Gromley reported that

> in 2002 chick lit sales in the U.S. grossed 71 million dollars . . . [W]hilst the 'average' novel sells approximately 5000 copies . . ., in 2005 Marian Keyes was placed in the top five of UK The Bookseller's Top 100, with her novel *The Other Side of the Story* (2004) having sold 488,508 copies during 2005, and in The Bookseller's Top 100 for 2007, Marian Keyes reached third place, with her novel *Anybody Out There?* (2006) having sold 585,026 copies.

Moreover, chick-lit has proven to be lucrative beyond its original book format, as many chick-lit books have been adapted into movies (Ferriss and Young 2). According to Harzewski, chick-lit's covers also have an instantly recognisable quality which has turned them into "a new visual contribution to the marketplace" (*Chick-lit and Postfeminism* 46): indeed, advertising and commodity culture were quick to take up chick-lit's visual language (Ibid.). Harzewski cites various examples of commercial objects which have been imbued with designs reminiscent of chick-lit covers, such as Lord & Taylor gift card faces and Victoria's Secret's 'Pink' line (Ibid.).

Articles on Instapoetry likewise tend to contain sales figures. Journalists regularly underscore Instapoets'

commercial success, oftentimes by juxtaposing it with the typically niche status of the poetry genre. *The Cut*, for

example, introduced Rupi Kaur as "The Instagram Poet Outselling Homer Ten to One" (Fischer) and *The Atlantic*

opens an article on Kaur by recounting the financial struggles of T.S. Eliot (Hill and Yuan). The previously ascetic

life of 'the poet' is then contrasted with Kaur's financial success, as always expressed in sales numbers alongside

the oft-cited 'fun fact' that Kaur "[had] st[olen] the position of best-selling poetry book from The Odyssey" (Ibid.).

Journalists are correct in observing that Instapoetry is big business, as its sales numbers are unseen for poetry.

In 2019, Berens reported:

> Year-over-year annual poetry sales indicate a walloping 21% annual compound growth rate since 2013,
>
> . . . Rupi Kaur's . . . *milk and honey* sold three million copies worldwide and has been translated into
>
> twenty-five languages. NPD Group . . . reports 2,067,164 copies of *milk and honey* sold as of 9 January
>
> 2019. This figure does not include Amazon sales, which Amazon never shares. In 2017, Kaur's second
>
> volume *the sun and her flowers* outsold #3 on the poetry bestseller list, Homer, at a ratio of 10:1. But
>
> the hits are not just by Kaur: Instapoets comprised *twelve* of 2017's top twenty bestselling poets.
>
> That's 60% of bestsellers in a publishing field that had been considered moribund. (Ibid. 2)

Instapoetry's commercial success is revolutionary for the otherwise unpopular genre of poetry; digital media

have thoroughly reshaped poetry's production, circulation, and reception (Vickery 80). The responses to this are

twofold. On the one hand, critics worry that Instapoets are "turning an art form into an industry", as "[s]ocial

media seem to have cracked the walls around a field that has long been seen as highbrow, exclusive, esoteric,

and ruled by tradition, opening it up for young poets with broad appeal, many of whom are women and people

of color" (Hill and Yuan). Indeed, Kaur has stated that, for her, being a poet is like "running a business": unlike

traditional poets, she has to spend "time in the office with her team to oversee operations and manage projects"

(Ibid.). Traditional poetry lovers may be shocked to find out that her website has a "Careers" section where job offers for "Team Rupi" are posted:

> We are constantly evaluating talent to join our team. The projects are exciting, our partners are wonderful, and every day is different. We're made up of strategists, designers, art directors, and communications experts from all over the world bringing their specialism & diverse backgrounds. ("Careers")

Hill and Yuan call this phenomenon "the rise of the Instagram poet-entrepreneur." In "The Cult of the Noble Amateur", Watts denounces Instapoetry's commercialism: "Artless poetry sells. The reader is dead: Long live consumer-driven content and the 'instant gratification' this affords" (13). Roberts goes as far as stating that "[Instapoetry] is not art, it is a good to be sold. These are not artists." Others consider this new, commercially successful kind of poet not as a threat to poetry, but as its saviour. As Rupi Kaur's publisher, Kristy Melville, puts it: "It used to be that poetry was down in the back of the store next to the bathrooms, and now it's out front. And that naturally helps sales of all poets. The classics and other contemporary poets are selling" (Hill and Yuan). In a day and age when poetry sales used to be at an all-time low, Instapoetry can be seen as generating much-needed interest in the genre (Ramirez) by functioning as "gateway poetry" (Byager). Dr. Eleanor Spencer-Regan, digital director of the Institute of Poetry and Poetics at Durham University, believes that Instapoets "have in fact reinvigorated and democratised the poetry world" (Ibid.):

> People have for too long had this idea that poetry is a small world, and that poetry is one thing. This is an unnecessary narrowing. . . . We talk about *Harry Potter* as a 'gateway' book, and I suspect that these poems can work in the same way — to make young people curious about Poe. Poetry will no longer be

something remote or intimidating, but an art form that these young readers feel they can claim as their own.

As was the case with chick-lit, Instapoetry's commercial appeal goes far beyond the books themselves, as many Instapoets go on tour or even sell merchandise (Hill and Yuan). Rupi Kaur, for instance, has gone on tour in the U.S., as well as in Canada, Europe, and India. Other Instapoets, such as Atticus, R.H. Sin, and Tyler Knott Gregson have also performed on tour, and the former two also sell merchandise, as does Kaur. On Kaur's website, readers can buy shirts, sweaters, canvas prints, tapestries, and temporary tattoos of her poems, with prices ranging from 18 USD to 100 USD. By selling merchandise, these Instapoets "[build] their own mini brands . . . [and] harness e-commerce to supplement their income" (Hill and Yuan). Furthermore, Instapoets have also collaborated with big brands or celebrities: Hill and Yuan cite the example of Cleo Wade, whose poems have been used in Gucci adverts, and printed on Nike shoes. Instapoet Warsan Shire's *warsan versus melancholy* was famously used in Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade* (McLarney 6). As *Lemonade* "draws on the conceptual and artistic framework of Warsan Shire's . . . *warsan versus melancholy*", one could consider the project as a video adaptation of Shire's Instapoetry, "with Beyoncé's voice reciting Shire's poetry, putting Shire's audio to video, effectively visualizing the poetics" (Ibid.). Like chick-lit, Instapoetry's success thus reaches far beyond its original form.

As this section sought to establish, chick-lit and Instapoetry are both highly commercial genres, and opinions vary about the desirability of this. However, the concerns about their commerciality go deeper than matters of marketing: as will be explained below, neoliberal values are deeply engrained in both genres. After an introduction to the concepts of postfeminism and neoliberal feminism (among others) as articulated in relation to chick-lit, chapter three will examine the neoliberal aspects of Instapoetry's feminism. Section 3.3. will zoom in on the previously discussed commercial ventures by Instapoets, and examine how those communicate with their feminism.

2.2. "Shopping-and-fucking feminism"[4]: chick-lit's postfeminism and neoliberal feminism

As mentioned previously, many scholars have commented on chick-lit's position at the crossroads of feminism and neoliberalism. This section seeks to give an overview of that body of scholarship. Its insights and terminology will then shed light on the feminism of its equally controversial sister genre, Instapoetry.

Like Instapoetry, the chick-lit genre has been described as inherently feminist: "Because of its newness, chick lit is one of the few genres that is completely open to debut novelists and has offered incredible opportunities for young women to make an impact in the male-dominated publishing industry. (If that's not feminist, what is?)," Gelsomino writes (Mazza 25). Nonetheless, the connection between chick-lit and feminism is deeply controversial (Montoro 16): a number of critics have declared the genre to be decidedly unfeminist (Harzewski, *Chick-lit and Postfeminism* 7). On the one hand, chick-lit authors have received backlash from fellow women writers, who fear that this "pink menace" (Ibid. 5) might make "frothiness . . . once again come to seem the hallmark of literary expression" (Ibid. 3) and thus "disqualify aspiring and younger women writers from critical recognition" (Ibid. 2). On the other hand, many chick-lit novels contain "a slightly unorthodox perception of feminist concerns" (Montoro 75): feminism is commonly used as a source of comedy (Ibid.). In *Bridget Jones' Diary* (1996), for instance, the character of Sharon – a friend of Bridget's – repeatedly engages in "full and splendid [feminist] auto-rant[s]" (Fielding 128), making other friends "[go] 'Shhh, shhh,' out of the corners of [their] mouths" as "there is nothing so unattractive to a man as strident feminism" (Ibid. 20):

> 'Ten years ago people who cared about the environment were laughed at as sandal-wearing beardy-weirdies and now look at the power of the green consumer,' [Sharon] was shouting, sticking her fingers into the tiramisu and transferring it straight into her mouth. 'In years ahead the same will come to pass with feminism. There won't be any men leaving their families and postmenopausal wives for young

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mistresses, or trying to chat women up by showing off in a patronizing way about all the other women throwing themselves at them, or trying to have sex with women without any niceness or commitment, because the young mistresses and women will just turn around and tell them to sod off and men won't get any sex or any women unless they learn how to behave properly instead of cluttering up the sea-bed of women with their SHITTY, SMUG, SELF-INDULGENT, BEHAVIOR!' (Ibid. 128)

This mocking tone makes it possible to interpret these works as post-feminist or even anti-feminist (Montoro 76). Harzewski agrees that chick-lit novels tend to communicate a "parodic, if not simply uninformed, representation of older feminists" (*Chick-lit and Postfeminism* 20): traditional feminism is generally depicted as "an outdated style and misread as a bilious monolith, its strident tendencies embarrassing and not fully compatible with chick lit's ties to the values of romance fiction and its embrace of commodities, especially beauty and fashion culture" (Ibid.).

Nonetheless, chick-lit cannot be done away with as a simply non-feminist genre. As Montoro notes, "the constant references to feminism in the novels seem to indicate that these women have not abandoned entirely all of the conventional feminist preoccupations": their unconventional approach to feminism may merely be symptomatic of contemporary realities, rather than echoing the prototypical feminism of the 1960s and 1970s (134). Harzewski agrees:

> Daughters of educated baby boomers, chick-lit heroines, in their degree of sexual autonomy and professional choices, stand as direct beneficiaries of the women's liberation movement. Yet they shift earlier feminist agendas, such as equal pay for equal work, to lifestyle concerns. Unlike earlier generations, chick protagonists and their readers have the right to choose; now the problem is too many choices. (Harzewski , *Tradition and Displacement* 37)

Ferriss and Young similarly observe that contemporary women like chick-lit heroines inhabit "an ambiguous position: they have indubitably benefited from feminism's push for education and access to the professions, but they still experience pressures from without and desires from within for romance and family" (9). Consequently, they have to navigate competing pressures to be feminine, as well as strong and autonomous (Ibid.).

In order to make sense of chick-lit's complicated relationship with the women's movement, many scholars have turned to the notion of postfeminism, and argued that the genre is built on "an enmeshed post-feminist . . . ideology" (Montoro 120). Like chick-lit itself, the concept of postfeminism is built on tensions, and has been defined in various manners: "Does it mean leaving the feminism and feminist achievements of the 1970s and 1980s behind? Or does postfeminism incorporate emancipatory impulses and aims, at the same time airing problems and unresolved tensions created by those freedoms?" (Séllei 178). This thesis follows Boyd's argument that Gill's (2007) is the most useful definition, as Gill defines postfeminism less as "a body of theory or a reaction to feminisms of old" and more as "a sensibility which emphasizes that through their individual choices and daily practices, women empower (and disempower) themselves, building identities linked to individualistic and consumerist culture" (104). Indeed, Gill conceptualises postfeminism as a set of sensibilities in which "the notions of autonomy, choice and self-improvement sit side-by-side with surveillance, discipline and the vilification of those who make the 'wrong' choices (become too fat, too thin, or have the audacity or bad judgment to grow older)" (163). A core paradox of postfeminism is the fact that it values female empowerment, yet this perceived empowerment often consists of actions and ideals which are in line with traditional expectations of women (Ibid. 152). Moreover, postfeminism tends to present itself as "pleasingly moderated", as opposed to second wave feminism, which is depicted as "rigid, serious, anti-sex and romance, difficult, and extremist" (Negra 2). As Negra points out, irony is central to postfeminism, and frequently serves as a "stylistic alibi" which disguises conservative values (33). Furthermore, postfeminism values consumption deeply, "particularly the ability to select the correct commodities to attain a lifestyle inspired by celebrity culture, such as luxury

weddings, the mainstreaming of the nanny figure, and the routinization of cosmetic surgery and breast implants"

(Harzewski, *Chick-lit and Postfeminism* 7). In this sense, postfeminism can be read as "a mentality conflating

personal empowerment with narcissism code . . . a cross between a lifestyle available for purchase and a

sophomoric dilution of earlier feminism and its idea of 'choice'" (Ibid.): it is "a freedom predicated on desire

rather than politics, a 'liberation' sold to women through the conflation of feminism and consumption" (Harris

167). Goldberg describes chick-lit's postfeminism as "shopping-and-fucking feminism," "easy-to-swallow

feminism," and "user-friendly feminism."

Scholars such as Butler and Desai prefer the notion of "neoliberal feminisms" over "postfeminism" when

discussing the genre of chick-lit (8):

> Instead of "postfeminism" . . . a term typically used by scholars and critics to indicate a lack of interest
>
> in state politics or structural inequalities, we use "neoliberal feminisms" to refer more precisely to the
>
> multiple contemporary feminist discourses that reflect this shift from liberal concern with state-
>
> ensured rights to a neoliberal politics understood through the notion of "choice." (Ibid.)

As will become clear, Butler's and Desai's definition of neoliberal feminism bears strong resemblance to certain

conceptions of postfeminism, such as Gill's, Boyd's, and Harzewski's. Boyd, for instance, states that postfeminism

is deeply intertwined with "the concept of neoliberalism which highlights that the choices women must make

today can easily turn them into consumerist objects who supposedly make 'free-will' choices about how to

represent themselves and their bodies through a makeover paradigm that encourages them to 'buy' a singular

yet supposedly unique identity" (104).

Neoliberalism is commonly defined as "an economic rationality that promotes the ideas of privatisation, the

withdrawal of state support, deregulation, elimination of tariffs and maximisation of competition and competitiveness" (Yoong 28). As many scholars have noted, however, neoliberalism has since spread beyond the economic domain and become "a dominant political rationality or normative form of reason that moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subject, recasting individuals as capital-enhancing agents" (Rottenberg 7). The ideology centres ideas such as "choice" and "consumer sovereignty" (Butler and Desai 7). Under neoliberalism, citizens are understood as rational and self-regulating entrepreneurial actors who are fully responsible for their own successes or failures (Gill 163). Additionally, they are encouraged to see one another as competitors (Duroy 606). Consequently, neoliberal subjects most self-invest in order to heighten their personal value and social standing (Brown 33).

Rottenberg argues that the spread of neoliberalism has resulted in a new form of feminism: neoliberal feminism (7). According to Rottenberg, neoliberal feminism has "eclipsed" postfeminism, which she conceptualises as a separate ideology, although both are products of neoliberalism (Ibid.) [5]. Under neoliberalism, feminist thought has become "mainstreamed" as well as "increasingly compatible with neoliberal and neoconservative political and economic agendas" (Ibid. 11). The neoliberal feminist subject "accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care, which is increasingly predicated on crafting a felicitous work-family balance based on a cost-benefit calculous" (Ibid. 55). Indeed, neoliberal feminism advances ideals such as "balance": women are

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[5] Concepts such as neoliberal feminism and postfeminism have been articulated in various, often overlapping manners. Banet-Weiser et al. have stated: "[E]ach of us approaches contemporary manifestations of feminism through slightly different optics. [Gill], for example, theorises postfeminism as a kind of sensibility . . . [Rottenberg] focuses on a key analytic within neoliberalism, namely, neoliberalism's entanglement with feminism" (4). Due to the slippery nature of these concepts, this thesis will not attempt to delineate them strictly, and seeks to use them more loosely as springboards for reflection on Instapoetry.

encouraged "to invest in and cultivate a career as well as to develop one's sense of self", while also subscribing to traditional ideas about motherhood (Ibid.). In order to achieve this balance, women must engage in constant self-surveillance and self-improvement (Yoong 30). As such, neoliberal feminism turns away from "the public good" in favour of personal, internal change through "individual solutions and smart self-investments" (Ibid.). Empowerment, which was previously always defined as a collective state of equality and power, now comes to centre on "individual power and action as well as self-betterment and self-investment" (Hurt). This rhetoric of individual choice and responsibility has been critiqued by a large number of feminist scholars, as it focusses on the personal, rather than on larger social, economic and/or political inequalities (Butler and Desai 7). Such a framing of women's agency "simply as personal choice" overlooks matters of race, citizenship, economy, and globalisation (Ibid.). Indeed: intersectional thinking is absent within both post- and neoliberal feminism, making race the elephant in the room of both feminisms.

As Butler and Desai have argued, chick-lit's female subject is enmeshed in neoliberalism (2): "As a cultural phenomenon that is immersed in both feminism and neoliberalism, chick lit can be read as an exemplary site of neoliberal feminist subject-making" (Ibid. 8). Hurt refers to the genre as a "neoliberal fairytale", i.e. "a narrative that conveys the challenges that contemporary people face — to readers' delight and pleasure — while also offering solutions to these challenges that are rooted in neoliberal ideology." There is a strong focus on the protagonist's personal choice, which Butler and Desai interpret as "a manifestation of neoliberalism" (7). Indeed, the heroine's agency is commonly defined in terms of choice, usually on the level of her "desires and actions as part of a [global] consumer culture" (Ibid. 8). As such, consumer goods become "signifiers of choice" (Ibid. 13), and the protagonist's liberation is enabled by her cosmopolitan, Americanised lifestyle (Ibid. 8). Moreover, investing financially in the self can be seen as a marker of one's sense of self-worth (Ibid. 13). Gill and Herdieckerhoff agree that chick-lit novels uphold a neoliberal conception of the chick-lit heroine's agency and identity: in chick-lit, "femininity is defined as a bodily property . . . it is the possession of a 'sexy body' that is

presented as women's key (if not sole) source of identity" (21). As mentioned, this body is portrayed as "unruly" and in need of "constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling in order to conform to judgments of normative femininity" (Ibid.), thus echoing neoliberalism's preoccupation with controlling and perfecting the self.

It is true that consumerism is central to the genre of chick-lit. As Harzewski puts it, chick-lit books may come across as "almost caricatured versions of women's lifestyle periodicals, as if chick lit offers the book-length version of a Cosmopolitan fiction feature" (*Chick-lit and Postfeminism* 48): Merrick even dubbed the genre "the stepsister to the fashion magazine" (vii). Indeed, chick-lit heroines and authors repeatedly profess their love for shopping (Harzewksi 50), and many chick-lit novels carry titles such as *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (Kinsella), *Late Night Shopping* (Reid), or *The Secret Shopper Affair* (Harrison). Scholars tend to disagree about chick-lit's complicated relationship with consumerism (Montoro 68): "Is chick lit 'buying in' to a degrading and obsessive consumer culture, or is it ultimately exposing the limitations of a consumerist worldview?" (Ibid. 11). Montoro speaks of a "duality whereby Chick Lit is the consumerism-progeny of its time but still purports to replicate certain values in an ironic, challenging way" (Ibid.). Kinsella's bestselling *Shopaholic* novels, for example, tell the story of Becky Bloomwood, a shopping addict who habitually gets herself into trouble by overspending. As such, the series thematises "the simultaneous pleasures and dangers of consumerism" (Ferriss and Young 11). Consequently, some scholars have argued that "the incorporation of consumerism and 'Cosmopolitan culture' . . . is simply Chick Lit's ironic, playful, even flippant, way of dealing with contemporaneous social messages that Chick Lit authors and/or readers might not necessarily condone or abide by" (Montoro 68). Other critics find this "revelry in consumerism" (Harzewski, *Chick-lit and Postfeminism* 52) to be a cause for concern, especially from a feminist perspective (Ferriss and Young 10). Indeed, "[t]he visibility fashion and consumerism have achieved within – and on – the covers of chick lit has . . . marked it for feminist disapprobation. Fashion has been dismissed by feminists as frivolous, as inculcating women with a debilitating femininity and making them the unwitting

dupes of capitalism" (Ibid.). As Harzewski puts it, the prototypical chick-lit protagonist "can experience romance, desire, or self-esteem only through commodities, particularly small objects such as jewelry and handbags" (*Chick-lit and Postfeminism* 12). The protagonist of Valdes-Rodriguez's *The Dirty Girls Social Club,* for instance, describes (and thus arguably experiences) a romantic trip with her boyfriend through consumer objects:

> I choose a black and white Escada twin set with matching black pants. I add black and white Blahnik
>
> flats and a luxurious alpaca wool black Giuliana Teso cape . . . and my sunglasses. I put on a pair of
>
> black leather gloves, and transfer my wallet and cell phone to a smooth leather Furla, in black and
>
> white. (Valdes-Rodriguez 120)

Van Slooten agrees that these novels "reinforc[e] the luxury lifestyle as a means of creating identity and achieving success in both personal and professional spheres" (220). The heroine's agency is thus defined in terms of her ability to consume, and the genre implicitly suggests that "while indulgence may not always bring happiness, happiness cannot be found without a good dose of indulgence" (Wells 62). Endlessly consuming, the protagonist is "at worst, an addict" (Harzewski, *Chick-lit and Postfeminism* 12). While Ferriss and Young argue that fashion can be considered as a positive way of expressing one's identity (10), Butler and Desai believe that considering the heroine's purchases as a way of feminist identity formation means subscribing to a neoliberal definition of female agency, i.e. "the woman as an individual located in global capitalism, signifying [agency] through the ability both to earn and to spend capital on non-essential goods that are specifically metonymic for feminine sexual and gender agency" (10). However, they also note that certain non-white chick-lit authors produce a critique of neoliberal consumerism (Ibid. 11), or use the heroine's consumption in order to express her struggles with belonging as a racial or cultural other (Ibid. 13): "The 'right to consume' may be of significance to women of color as a way of negotiating racial, class, and gender inequities . . . as well as claiming citizenship" (Ibid. 14).

Complementary to this emphasis on consumption, chick-lit tends to focus on skin-deep beauty, often on women's weight (Ferriss and Young 11). In line with neoliberalism's understanding of the body as in need of "constant monitoring" (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 22), chick-lit novels often revolve around the creation and maintenance of physical beauty (Wells 61). *Bridget Jones' Diary,* for instance, famously opens with a list of Bridget's New Year's resolutions, which include "reduce circumference of thighs by 3 inches . . . using anti-cellulite diet" (Fielding 7). The next page of Bridget's diary contains a list that tracks all "food consumed today", including the number of calories (Ibid. 8). This focus on physical beauty includes even the works' authors: in marketing discourse, "'the gorge factor' (how sexy the writer is) competes with or upstages any substantial literary considerations" (Harzewski, *Chick-lit and Postfeminism* 20). As Wells remarks, "the immense popularity of *Bridget Jones* demonstrates the comic and satiric potential of excessive preoccupation with weight gain and appearance" (59): "A heroine who is completely free of care about her looks and happily self-accepting is nowhere to be found in chick lit, an absence that suggests that such a character is too unrealistic to appeal to image-conscious women readers" (Ibid.). Indeed, when discussing "otherwise serious matters" such as negative body image, chick-lit novels regularly "[resort] to a comedic treatment" (Montoro 75). Nonetheless, chick-lit's tendency to thematise body image can be read in a feminist light. As Ferriss and Young point out, the genre's "focus on weight does not necessarily mean that it endorses cultural expectations of women's beauty" (11). Instead, the protagonists' focus on their physical appearance can also be read as suggesting that their "quest for a partner is entirely secondary to the ongoing battle chick lit's heroines are engaging with themselves" (Umminger 240). After all, these struggles are not chick-lit's prerogative: for women living in contemporary neoliberal societies, "[l]ooks are a form of currency that aid not only one's search for a mate but also one's ability to secure that promotion, get that next job, and become a fully realized human being" (Ibid.).

Despite its controversiality, Harzewksi argues that chick-lit "should not be considered 'antifeminist' but a selective, half-utopian amalgamation of earlier feminist tenets" (*Chick-lit and Postfeminism* 81). Montoro

agrees:

> In so far as these female figures fail to display the type of political commitment of their 1970s counterparts, for instance, Chick Lit's relationship with feminism is, simply, flawed. But inasmuch as this genre attempts a faithful representation of current social concerns, inclusive of the career, relationship and even appearance pressures women are under, the connection of these novels with feminism is atypical but, still, similarly valid. (Montoro 77)

Scholars such as Rivers (74) and Taylor (30) similarly urge readers not to consider popular types of feminism as "impure" kinds of feminism. According to Rivers, "multiplicity of feminist thought is a key strength of the movement" (151), and there is "space within feminism(s) for a wealth of differing feminist expressions", 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).

Moreover, it must be noted that the genre is not a monolith: non-western chick-lit authors such as Cynthia Jele and Anita Heiss have published chick-lit books that send feminist messages which are markedly different from the post- or neoliberal feminism described above. Indeed, certain African feminist scholars (e.g. Tiamoyo Karenga, Clenora Hudson-Weems, Chimbuko Tembo, and Chikenje Ogunyemi) argue that western feminism is "incapable of addressing context-specific concerns of African women" and have therefore developed alternative feminisms (Makombe 110). Jele's chick-lit book *Happiness is a four letter word* (2010), for instance, tells the story of four professional South-African women in a manner that resonates with Nnaemeka's concept of "nego-feminism" or "no-ego feminism" (Ibid.), i.e. "the feminism of negotiation, give and take, compromise and balance" (Nnaemeka 377). Anita Heiss, an Aboriginal Australian chick-lit author, has used the chick-lit genre in order to educate mainstream readers about "the norms, culture, and history of Aboriginal Australians" (Mathew

350). In doing so, these authors subvert the previously discussed postfeminist and neoliberal feminist tendencies within the genre of chick-lit.

In conclusion, chick-lit's relationship with feminism is deeply complicated, largely due to its entanglement with neoliberalism. The resulting debate has led to the creation of a vast body of scholarship on chick-lit's ambiguous position at the intersection of feminism and neoliberalism. Scholars such as Harzewski interpret the genre through the lens of postfeminism; others, like Rottenberg, have used the notion of neoliberal feminism. Chick-lit's depiction of consumerism and body image can indeed be read as complying with neoliberal feminist and postfeminist concepts of choice, personal responsibility, and female identity. Nonetheless, multiple scholars advocate for a recognition of chick-lit's (albeit unorthodox) feminism as feminism, and many non-western chick-lit authors have published books that espouse wholly different feminisms. Indeed, the genre's relationship with feminism is all but straightforward, and can be – and has been – interpreted multifariously.

3. The entanglement of feminist Instapoetry with neoliberalism

As previously stated, many critics have criticised Instapoets' self-proclaimed feminist activism. Dokter sums up their critiques nicely when she describes Insta-feminism as "aesthetical and empowering, but highly individualistic . . . reads more like self-help [than feminism/gender studies]." She continues: "Making existing ideas easily digestible for a new generation is not radical, and neither is marketing individualist self-help advice as feminism." While, at first glance, Instapoets take an entirely different approach to feminism than chick-lit authors – they seemingly embrace it, rather than distancing themselves from it – the genre's feminism is controversial for similar reasons, i.e. its entanglement with neoliberalism. This chapter will examine Instapoetry through the aforementioned concepts of postfeminism and neoliberal feminism. In doing so, the chapter will demonstrate that, whereas Instapoets – and many contemporary young women – have distanced themselves from the chick-lit heroine's need to make herself look traditionally attractive and glamourous by shopping, the Instapoetry genre is surrounded by highly similar neoliberal pressures. Centring one's self – through the rhetoric of choice and personal responsibility, self-care, and body positivity – (section 3.1) and one's digital appearance (section 3.2.), has seemingly merely created new standards for women to comply with. Moreover, Instapoets' feminism is complicated further by the additional commercial ventures they engage in as neoliberal poet-entrepreneurs, such as tours, merchandise, or paid partnerships with multinational companies (section 3.3.).

As established in the introduction, most Instapoetry sends a feminist message. Rupi Kaur, for instance, "seeks to trouble and subvert the limitations placed upon identities of women, often by revelling in subject matter regarded as taboo, including a focus on menstruation, female desire, sexual violence, and abuse" (Miller). Her work pushes back against societal beauty standards, sexist expectations of women's behaviour, and other forms of patriarchal control (Ibid.). Amanda Lovelace also identifies as a "feminist poet" and tackles themes such as "sexism", "slut-shaming", "body image issues, and self-esteem problems" ("Feminist Poet"). Charly Cox similarly told *FGrls Club* that her goal in writing is "to destigmatize mental health and the banalities of growing up as a

young woman in the twenty-first century" (Laws).

Consequently, the genre of Instapoetry does not fully resonate with the aforementioned concept of postfeminism. As Boyd observes, "postfeminism retains second-wave feminism's desire for empowerment while distancing itself from the second wave's rally for collective and public political action" (149), and thus relinquishes "the old polemical edge, argumentative zest, and sense of political seriousness" (Wolcott qtd. in Harzewski, *Chick-lit and Postfeminism* 149) Despite Instapoetry's strong focus on the individual, and the vagueness of its nods at collective action (cf. infra), Instapoets do explicitly engage in feminist activism. While chick-lit novels tend to shy away from the term "feminism" (Harzewski, *Chick-lit and Postfeminism* 153), most Instapoets use the word in their work, and – even more emphatically – in metatextual commentary. Multiple Instapoems by Lovelace (*icy crown* 98) and Kaur (fig. 6, fig. 7, fig. 8, fig. 9) can be read as honouring previous generations of feminists, rather than distancing themselves from them. To an extent, Instapoetry restores the "polemical and manifestolike functions" that are typically absent in chick-lit (Harzewski, *Chick-lit and Postfeminism* 168).

> yes, i am one of those awful bra-burning feminists. no, i do not hate all men. no, i do not want to switch out the patriarchy for a matriarchy. what i do want, however, is complete equality – a fair chance at becoming the best version of myself. no more restrictions. (Lovelace, *icy crown* 98)

i'm not interested
in a feminism that thinks
simply placing women at the top
of oppressive systems is progress

not your convenient figurehead - rupi kaur

rupikaur_ ✓ • Volgend

rupikaur_ ✓ whose system are we trying to fit into 🧕🧕🧕 page 150 from home body #homebody

4 w.

art.bytala It's really sad that people thing that feminism is only for women, no we want equality in this chaotic world. Feminism is humanity, our rights, and our fight ❤️

4 w.   373 vind-ik-leuks   Reageren

——— Antwoorden weergeven (16)

bmmarques 👏👏👏 It's not

ladybookmad en 120.173 anderen vinden dit leuk

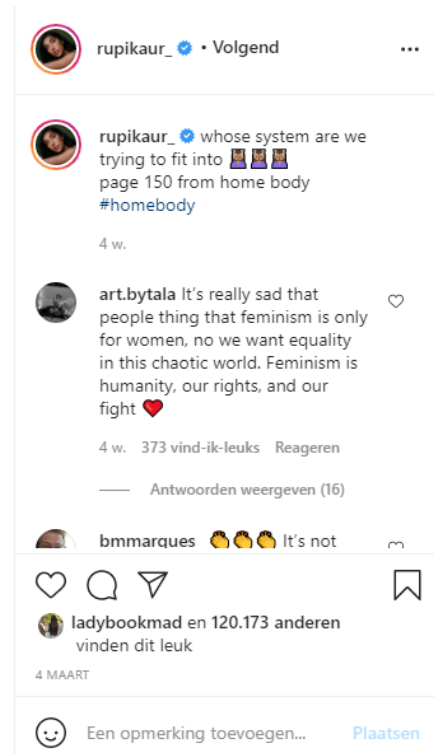4 MAART

Een opmerking toevoegen…   Plaatsen

Figure 6. Rupi Kaur; not your convenient figurehead; *Instagram*, 4 Mar. 2021, www.instagram.com/p/CL-cX7aBt8N/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 25 Mar. 2021.

you look tired he says
i turn to him and say
yeah i'm exhausted
i've been fighting misogyny for decades
how else do you expect me to look

- rupi kaur

rupikaur_ ✓ • Volgend

rupikaur_ ✓ i have had dark circles under my eyes since i was in grade 1 thanks mom and dad i do not forgive you 😂😂 i've done it all. cucumbers teabags potatoes every cream under the sun it's all a scam save your money.

getting told i look tired (especially if i'm fully rested) is one of my biggest pet peeves. i don't know why it triggers me. tbh ask any girl - she will tell you how annoying it is when people- especially men say they look tired.

now. TRUE STORY. i will tell you what inspired this poem. it was 2 years ago. i'm in a business meeting with some

183.707 vind-ik-leuks

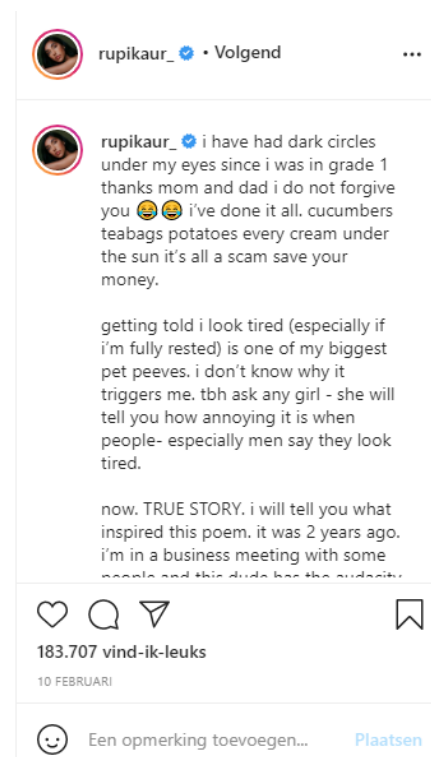10 FEBRUARI

Een opmerking toevoegen…   Plaatsen

Figure 7. Rupi Kaur; you look tired he says; *Instagram*, 10 Feb. 2021, www.instagram.com/p/CLFug98hSm5/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 25 Mar. 2021.
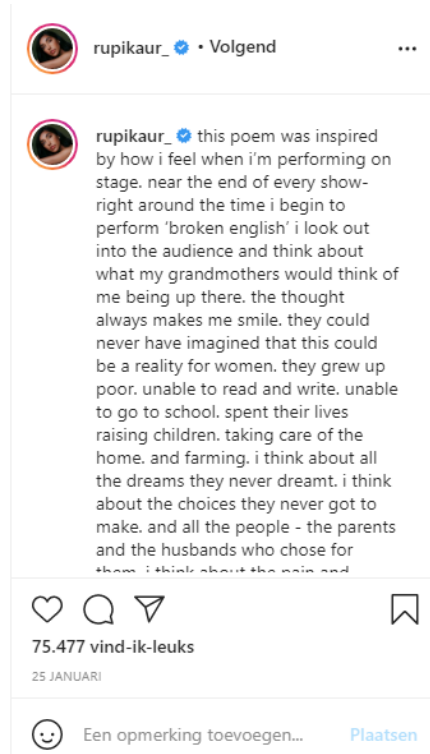
Figure 8. Rupi Kaur; can you hear the women who came before me; *Instagram*, 25 Jan. 2021, www.instagram.com/p/CKcwzqOBsha/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 25 Mar. 2021.
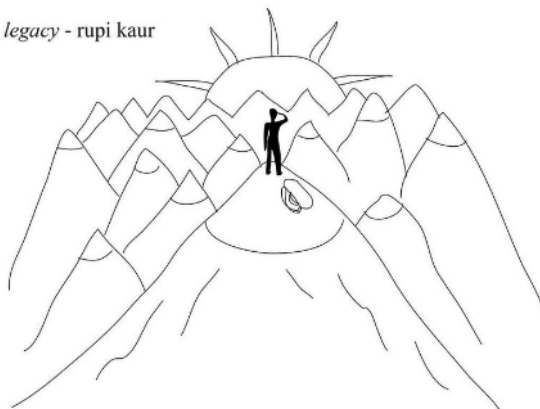

Figure 9. Rupi Kaur; legacy; *Instagram*, 14 Nov. 2020, www.instagram.com/p/CHjO3VshGMd/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 25 Mar. 2021.

This difference between chick-lit heroines and Instapoets seems to be directly related to a shift in the way feminism is perceived by the general public: chick-lit's heyday took place during the era of postfeminism, in the 1990s and early 2000s (Harzewski, *Chick-lit and Postfeminism* 8); Instapoetry began appearing on bestseller lists in 2015, during a recent resurgence of feminism in popular media (Rivers 7). Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer use the term "popular feminism" to refer to the fact that "contemporary feminism is [currently being] circulated in mainstream and commercial media where masses of people can consume it" (2). Similarly, Zeisler's neologism "empowertising" indicates the recent phenomenon whereby companies use feminist language and tropes in order to advertise a commercial product. Feminism can not only be used to market commodities; by incorporating feminism into one's "brand message", public figures can nowadays heighten their status, perceived authenticity, and their commercial success (Rivers 61). Whereas Bridget Jones believed that that "there is nothing so unattractive to a man as strident feminism" (Fielding 20) and feminism used to have "connotations of unflattering fashion [for young women]" (Harzewski, *Chick-lit and Postfeminism* 168), Instapoets heighten their fame and fashionableness by integrating feminism into their public image.

Unlike typical postfeminism and neoliberal feminism, Instapoets' feminism does touch upon intersectional issues, particularly those of race, racism, and migration (Pâquet 305). Nonetheless, their activism is not unproblematic, as feminism has now become thoroughly interwoven with "the capitalist aims of self-promotion" (Rivers 41). Since activism has become commercially interesting, Miller worries that Instapoets like Kaur seek to "commodify a politics of inequality", while continuing to appeal to a wide readership with members across the globe. By underscoring "the collective nature of subjective trauma" and adopting a somewhat "vague" tone, the Instapoet manages "[exploit] a market tuned to a very particular style of identity politics, one which enables sympathetic engagement without the specificities of detailed realities" (Miller). Thus, Kaur arguably "utilises sameness to sidestep issues of difference, despite an extra-textual insistence on the nuances of racialized (and radicalised) identity politics" (Miller). In other words, Miller warns that Kaur's Instapoetry is "precarious ground

on which a surface image of affirmative action collides against a poetry that works to appease the values and interests of a Western mainstream culture." The resulting feminism problematically lacks intersectional nuance and is, according to Miller, "painfully superficial . . . devoid of context, political reality, or psychological depth." As Giovanni points out, for instance, Kaur "seems to note little different between her educated, Western, Indian-Canadian self and her ancestors, or even modern South Asian women of a similar age in rural Punjab." Tan and Wee contextualise this aspect of Rupi Kaur's and Lang Leav's Instapoetry within a larger context of neoliberalism: they argue that this kind of writing is merely a response to "the demand for readily consumable art that also touches briefly on — but never incises with — uncomfortable depth into questions of race, politics, or identity", and that critics must take the nuances of this context into account. To do otherwise, would be "to miss the entire ocean for the wave [Kaur] is riding" (Ibid.). They conclude that the success of Instapoets like Kaur thus "demonstrates the extent to which poetry has been monetized and co-opted into the neoliberal system" (Ibid.).

As a result, Miller's observations ring true not only for Kaur: the poet-persona of many other Instapoets also revolves around "a language of trauma and rights", yet one can again argue that these themes fail to materialise in their oeuvre "in ways that extend beyond the general and the cliché." In Lovelace's and Wade's oeuvre, for instance, one can observe a similar tendency to group all women together in order to express a sense of unity. In "A Woman's History" (fig. 10), Cleo Wade writes:

> my power
> . . .
> was passed down to me
> by
> *every* she, her, and they
> that came before
> me
> the spirit of us,
> bound together
> by generational light
> by generational might. (emphasis by author)

Figure 10. Cleo Wade; A Woman's History; *Instagram*, 9 Mar. 2021, www.instagram.com/p/CMLVhuxjMZn/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 23 Mar. 2021.
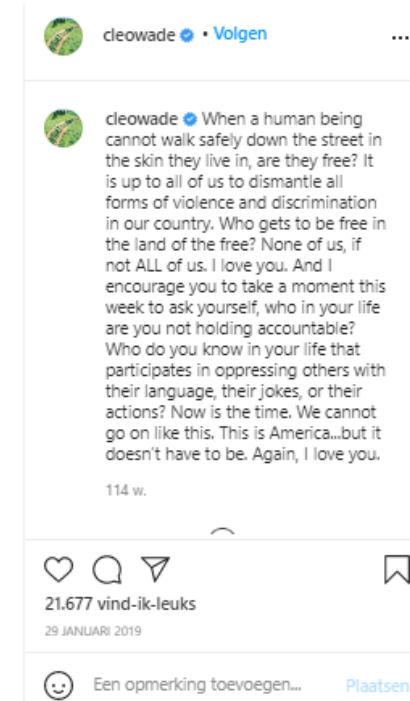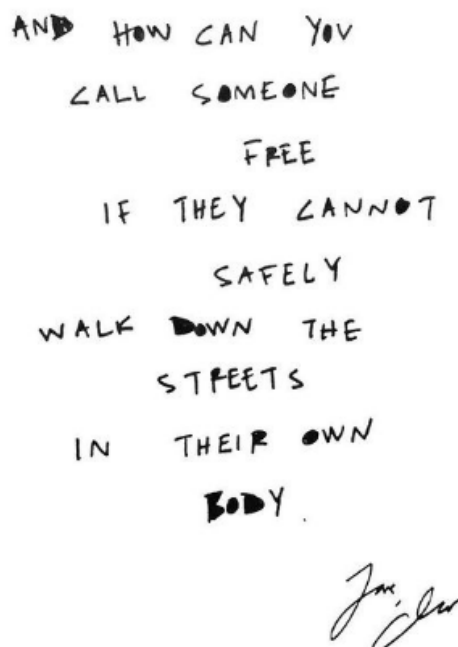

Figure 11. Cleo Wade; and how can you; *Instagram*, 20 Jan. 2019, www.instagram.com/p/BtOyeoQnMwc/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 17 Mar. 2021.

While evoking feelings of community, the poem could also be read as insensitively lumping women's ancestries together, without considering intersectional issues. Wade's "and how can you" exemplifies another kind of vagueness: it remains wholly unclear who or what the poem is about, beyond "someone" who "cannot / safely / walk down the / streets / in their own / body" (fig. 11). While the poem clearly refers to a kind of societal injustice, it can be read as referring to a wide range of issues, from racist police violence to transphobia or cat-calling.

As I previously argued in "Understanding Rupi Kaur's Instapoetry as an Expression of Online and Celebrity Feminism" (2020), Instapoems' typical "vagueness" can be explained in terms of their platform, Instagram. As Pâquet observes, Instapoetry tends to "take on a new communal life" on social media as readers repost the poems to their own accounts, or add their personal experiences to them in the comment section (310). The lack of detail in Instapoems allows a large number of readers to identify fully with them, and to make them their own. As Miller observes, Instapoets' followers indeed praise the genre for "the transformative results of (communal) engagement with such works." From this viewpoint, Instapoetry is not devoid of "the specificities of detailed realities" (Miller); the "specificities" are merely to be found beyond the poem's textual boundaries, i.e. in the post's description or in the comment section.

In conclusion, Instapoetry often contains explicitly feminist and (seemingly) intersectional messages, unlike chick-lit, which distanced itself from feminism. This difference can be understood in light of the difference in status of feminism in the heydays of chick-lit and Instapoetry respectively. Due to feminism's recent popularity, scholars worry that Instapoets may be producing unpolitical, palatable feminism in order to attract large audiences. According to Miller, this is especially the case in Kaur's generalising (and therefore problematic) depictions of the experiences of women of colour. Similarly generalising Instapoems can be found in the oeuvre of Wade or Lovelace. Nonetheless, the imprecise nature of these pieces can be better understood if one takes into account the "communal life" (Pâquet 310) that they lead on Instagram.

<u>3.1. "i can't take my eyes off of me"[6]: Instapoetry's neoliberal notions of personal choice and responsibility</u>

Rupi Kaur has described poetry as a mirror in which she can see herself; R.M. Drake characterises his Instapoetry as a form of "self-exploration and self-therapy" (Roberts). Instapoetry has been denounced for this strong focus on the self, which has caused critics to characterise the genre as "a vapid reinforcement of narcissism" (Miller). Instapoems such as Kaur's "warrior" (fig. 12), which are meant to be empowering, can indeed be read as the product of self-obsession. As in many of Kaur's poems, the speaker professes love for herself: "now that" she finally "see[s] [her]self", she cannot stop looking at herself and thinking of herself in amazement (Ibid.). Nonetheless, one might wonder if it is healthy to be so preoccupied with one's self. From a feminist perspective, this tendency to centre the individual is especially controversial, as it risks depoliticising feminism (cf. section 2.2.). This section will further examine the neoliberal individualist discourse of personal choice and responsibility within the genre of Instapoetry. After a more general discussion, sections 3.1.2. and 3.1.3. will explore the special cases of body positivity and self-care rhetoric.

Figure 12. Rupi Kaur; warrior; *Instagram,* 15 Jan. 2021, www.instagram.com/p/CKDDJ2Eh4_2/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 21 Mar. 2021.

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[6] Quotation taken from Kaur, "warrior".

a. "the master of your life"[7]: Instapoetry's neoliberal rhetoric of personal choice and responsibility

As argued in section 2.2., concepts of personal choice and individual responsibility are central to chick-lit's neoliberal feminism, and neoliberalism in general. In *Pain Generation* (2021), Saraswati highlights the neoliberal nature of Kaur's work. Particularly interesting is her commentary on Kaur's tendency to conceptualise "healing" as "an individual practise, an individual work, and an investment in the self" (41). In other words, Kaur's Instapoetry echoes neoliberalism's sense of individual choice and personal responsibility by emphasising "healing the self" over "changing the structure of violence" (Ibid.). This section seeks to examine further how this language of neoliberalism manifests itself within the genre as a whole.

Firstly, the rhetoric of "personal choice" is central to many Instapoets' feminism, particularly Amanda Lovelace's. Lovelace has published multiple poems that thematise women's freedom to choose, particularly whether to engage in typically feminine behaviours or not. In Figure 13, "big sister" advises her younger sister that she does not have to "shave [her] legs", "wear make-up" or "get dressed up" if she does not wish to. The accompanying drawing depicts a waste basket filled with beauty items. Nonetheless, Lovelace does not readily reject traditionally feminine behaviour: "you are limitless / you can have the sword / you can have the lipstick" suggests that women can be highly feminine and still be powerful (Lovelace, *glass slippers* 47). A similar idea recurs in "there is nothing" (fig. 14): "there is nothing / unfeminist / about the girl / who chooses / the ball gown / & the prince" metonymically represents women who have traditional desires, such as hyper-feminine dress ("the ball gown") or heterosexual marriage ("the prince") (Ibid.). Rupi Kaur's oeuvre contains similar pieces: "you belong only to yourself" thematises the freedom to choose whether to remove one's body hair (*milk and honey* 176), while "covered | uncovered" sends a similar message about wearing "much" or "little / clothing" (*the sun and her flowers* 230).

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[7] Quotation taken from Kaur (*home body* 188).

Figure 13. Amanda Lovelace; if you don't want to; *Instagram*, 22 Feb. 2021, www.instagram.com/p/CLmpL-2J5R-/,

screenshot taken by author; accessed 12 Mar. 2021.

Figure 14. Amanda Lovelace; there is nothing; *Instagram*, 18 Mar. 2020, www.instagram.com/p/CLmpL-2J5R-/,

screenshot taken by author; accessed 12 Mar. 2021.

removing all the hair
off your body is okay
if that's what you want to do
just as much as keeping all the hair
on your body is okay
if that's what you want to do

– *you belong only to yourself* (Kaur, *milk and honey* 176)

how much
or how little
clothing she has on
has nothing to do with how free she is

– *covered* \ *uncovered* (Kaur, *the sun and her flowers* 230)

Thus, the "choice" thematised in Instapoetry often seems to be a choice between typically "feminist" and typically "feminine" behaviours. The poems typically state both "choices", and then declare them to be equal. Sometimes the perceived "feminist" option is defended from patriarchal critique (e.g. choosing not to remove one's body hair); sometimes the more "feminine" option is defended from judgemental "feminists" who judge traditional behaviour, such as "tak[ing] / [one's] spouse's last name" (Lovelace, *icy crown* 100). Thus, many Instapoems seemingly participate in the postfeminist paradox of choice and empowerment, as postfeminism's "empowerment" often consists of behaviours which comply with patriarchal expectations of women (Gill 152). The aforementioned Instapoems indeed suggest that shaving one's legs, marrying a prince, wearing hyperfeminine apparel or taking your spouse's name in marriage can be feminist acts, if women choose them of their own free will. Additionally, while Instapoets present themselves as feminist, Lovelace's poems also suggest the existence of a judgeworthy kind of feminism, which judges the personal choices of more feminine women. Thus, Instapoetry also seems to echo postfeminism's tendency to portray itself as open-minded and welcoming, as opposed to another kind of feminism, which is too "rigid, serious . . . extremist" (Negra 2). As was the case with chick-lit, Instapoetry's "signifiers of choice" are often consumer goods (Butler and Desai 13), such as heels, make-up brushes, lipstick, razors, or clothing.

stop judging a woman on
whether or not she takes
her spouse's last name.
if she changes it,
that doesn't mean she's
suddenly their property.
if she doesn't change it,
it doesn't mean she's
superior to those who do.
her decision,
her business.

- doesn't she deal with enough already? (Lovelace, *icy crown* 100)

Additionally, neoliberalism considers "success [as] the result of competitive self-realization, while any lack of success – by the same logic – is a consequence of individual failure" (Franssen 102). Multiple Instapoems by Amanda Lovelace, Cleo Wade and Rupi Kaur (inadvertently) echo this message: "the only one stopping you" (fig. 15) and "owned by you alone" (fig. 16), for example, suggest that the reader herself is fully responsible for her own lack of success. A failure to recognise one's power (or responsibility) to determine one's success is often depicted as foolish: Kaur's "silly girl" lovingly mocks "you" for being "so oblivious to / being the miracle worker . . . / the master of your life" (*home body* 188).

Whereas the aforementioned poems can all be read as empowering and feminist, as they underscore the reader's agency to control her own life, they also seem to play into a neoliberal rhetoric of personal responsibility: neoliberal feminist subjects "[accept] full responsibility for [their] own well-being and self-care" (Rottenberg 55). As Franssen points out, however, this ethos "is bound to be unhelpful for those struggling with social inequalities, economic disadvantage, or . . . chronic mental illness" (102). Indeed, for readers who are struggling due to structural inequalities, it may be disheartening to read that "the only one stopping you / . . . / is you" (Lovelace, "self-limiting beliefs"). By placing the responsibility with the individual, Instapoetry can be read as problematically directing attention away from larger societal contexts of inequality, and thus presenting depoliticised feminism.

Figure 15. Amanda Lovelace; self-limiting beliefs; *Instagram,* 13 Jan. 2021, www.instagram.com/p/CJ_hM1KpjjW/,

screenshot by author; accessed 17 Mar. 2021.

Figure 16. Cleo Wade; owned by you alone; *Instagram,* 17 Jan. 2019, www.instagram.com/p/BsuK8C_AhXz/,

screenshot taken by author; accessed 21 Mar. 2021.

Furthermore, Instapoetry's focus on self-improvement can be read as subscribing to the neoliberal notion that individuals must continuously self-invest to heighten their personal worth (Brown 33). Under neoliberalism, women are especially "expected to employ micro-techniques for the cultivation, enhancement and maintenance of positive outlooks and self-regard, through exercises like gratitude reflections and repeating affirmative mantras in front of a mirror" (298). As Saraswati demonstrates, Kaur indeed presents "healing" as individual "every day work" or "an investment in the self" (41). Like many Instapoets, Kaur focuses on the individual over societal structures: "it implies that the work of healing is based on going inward and within, which through a neoliberal lens can be seen as accepting 'personal responsibility'" (Ibid). In Kaur's "self-love" (fig. 17), self-improvement is even compared to a household chore: the poetic speaker "wipe[s] her mind clean" and "scrub[s] the self-hate off the bone." The accompanying drawing depicts a female figure kneeling on the floor with a cleaning rag. Whereas the cleaning imagery can be read as literalising the notion of cleansing one's soul, it also suggests that self-improvement is a form of unpaid labour in which women are expected to engage habitually.
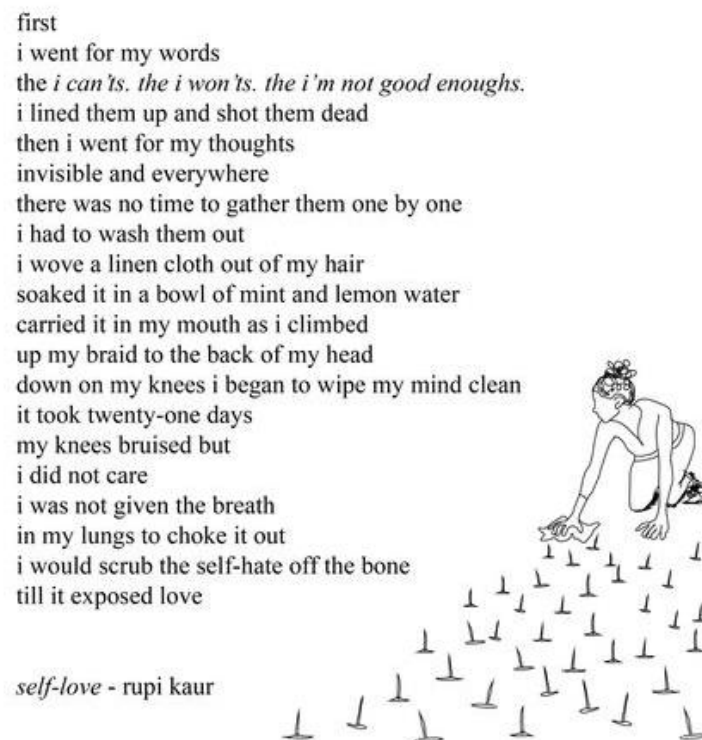

first
i went for my words
the *i can'ts. the i won'ts. the i'm not good enoughs.*
i lined them up and shot them dead
then i went for my thoughts
invisible and everywhere
there was no time to gather them one by one
i had to wash them out
i wove a linen cloth out of my hair
soaked it in a bowl of mint and lemon water
carried it in my mouth as i climbed
up my braid to the back of my head
down on my knees i began to wipe my mind clean
it took twenty-one days
my knees bruised but
i did not care
i was not given the breath
in my lungs to choke it out
i would scrub the self-hate off the bone
till it exposed love

self-love - rupi kaur

Figure 17. Rupi Kaur; self-love; *Facebook,* 22 Apr. 2020, facebook.com/rupikaurpoetry/posts/2987693881324868, screenshot taken by author; accessed 24 Apr. 2021.

Nonetheless, Saraswati states, Instapoets like Kaur "should not be conflated with a neoliberal feminist doing work that solely focuses on individuals or the self", as ideas of female community are central to Kaur's authorship (42). Indeed, some of Instapoetry's tropes reject neoliberal individualism. Firstly, the aforementioned notion of community is strongly present in many Instapoets' oeuvres. Miller agrees that the language of female community is "essential to the positioning of Kaur's work as a form of activism, and key to the coding of *milk and honey* as a manifesto of the feminist self" (Ibid.). Instapoets such as Amanda Lovelace and Cleo Wade frequently mobilise the language of sisterhood, too. Although the language of community can problematically blur "the boundaries between self and other" (Ibid.), as discussed previously, it can also be read as rejecting neoliberal competitiveness or encouraging collective action. Kaur's "stronger together", for example, states that:

women have been starved of space for so long
when one of us finally
makes it into the arena
we get scared that another woman
will take our spot
but space doesn't work like that
look at all the men in the arena getting stronger
as their numbers multiply
more women in the arena means
more room for all of us to rise

- stronger together (Kaur, *home body* 161)

As "the arena" seemingly refers to neoliberal society, the poem can be read as advising the reader not to partake in neoliberally inspired competition with other women. "they threw us in a pit to end each other" invites a similar reading in which "the pit" symbolises neoliberal competition (*the sun and her flowers,* 236). Instead of "compet[ing] with each other", the poem suggests, "we" should "look up look up look up" to recognise "the real monster" who wants to see us "end each other" (Ibid.). Only with combined forces, the last line states, "we" can take "them" down (Ibid.). Nonetheless, Kaur's use of pronouns remains predictably vague:

they threw us in a pit to end each other
so they wouldn't have to
starved us of space so long
we had to eat each other up to stay alive
look up look up look up
to catch them looking down at us
how can we compete with each other
when the real monster is too big
to take down alone (Kaur, *the sun and her flowers* 236)

Whereas this theme is by far the strongest in Rupi Kaur's work, Amanda Lovelace and Nikita Gill have also

published poems that make reference to anti-feminist neoliberal competition among women, or "girl-on-girl

hate" (fig. 18, fig. 19).

Figure 18. Amanda Lovelace; solidarity; *Instagram,* 25 Jan. 2021, www.instagram.com/p/CKeXpnVpM_7/,

screenshot taken by author; accessed 21 Mar. 2021.

Figure 19. Nikita Gill; If all girls were taught; *Instagram,* 26 Jan. 2019, www.instagram.com/p/BtGk8ljHRrK/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 21 Mar. 2021.

Moreover, multiple Instapoems do point at larger societal problems and the need for collective action (albeit vaguely). Kaur's "imagine what we could accomplish if" makes mention of "society's rapist problem" (*home body* 39), fig. 20 of the "glass ceiling" (*the sun and her flowers* 231), fig. 7 of "misogyny", fig. 6 of "oppressive systems." Amanda Lovelace has published pieces that reference societal issues such as "rape culture" (*the witch* 67) or normalized misogyny (Ibid. 147).

> imagine what we could accomplish if
> we didn't have to spend our energy
> protecting ourselves from
> society's rapist problem. (Kaur, *home body* 39)

there are mountains growing
beneath our feet
that cannot be contained
all we've endured
has prepared us for this
bring your hammers and fists
we have a glass ceiling to shatter
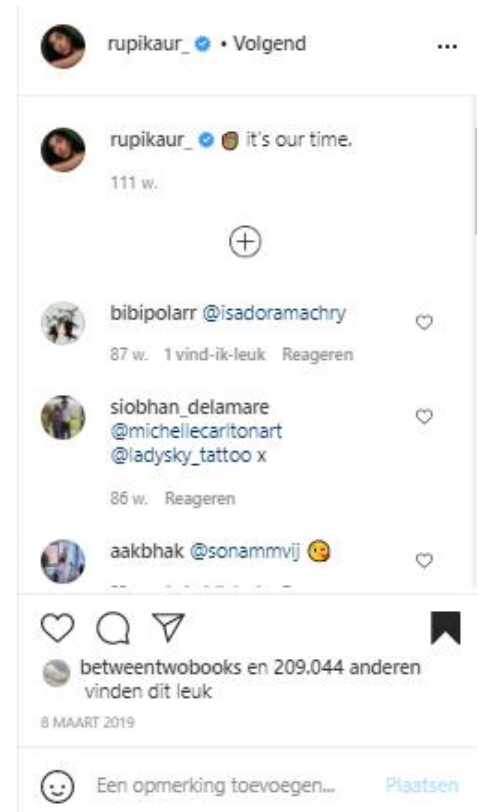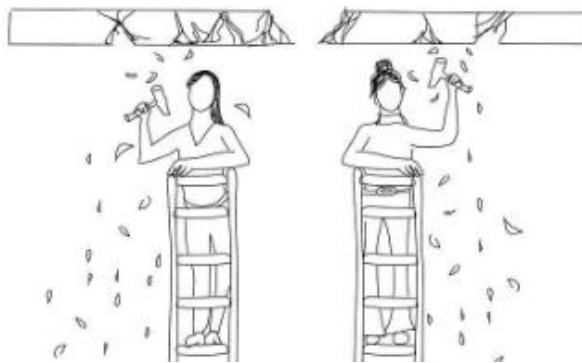
let's leave this place roofless - rupi kaur

Figure 20. Rupi Kaur; let's leave this place roofless; *Instagram*, 8 Mar. 2019,

www.instagram.com/p/BuwfSh3nRyH/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 21 Mar. 2021.

what rape culture does:

fills me with
fleeting relief
when i find out that
i escaped
my ex-boyfriend
before he became
a rapist

& not after.

- *this poison has seeped into everything.* (Lovelace, *the witch* 67)

maybe
i'm not the
"crazy ex-girlfriend"

maybe
i'm just a person
reacting rationally

to the abuse
& disregard
for women

that
society has
somehow

convinced us
is completely
normal.

- *i refuse to pretend anymore*. (Lovelace, *the witch* 147)

Moreover, certain Instapoems do seem to call for political or collective action. Lovelace's "no one will be left in dark, dusty corners" (fig. 21), an Instapoem shaped like a torch, states that "together & only together / shall we finally / RISE" (*the witch* 176), while "the women's marches" commemorates the 2017 Women's Marches, where "more / than 3.3 million women" came together (Ibid. 167). Kaur's "let's leave this place roofless" (fig. 20) depicts women working together to literally destroy a glass ceiling with hammers, "ours must be" calls for "a politic of revolution" (*home body* 142), and "break down" commands: "break down / every door they built / to keep you out / and bring all your people with you" (Ibid. 179). Nonetheless, these poems remain typically vague: in "break down", for example, it is wholly unclear what "door[s]" are being referred to, who "they" are, who "you" is, and who "your people" are (Ibid.). Consequently, the reader can fill the poem's blanks in in political fashion, but also in a comfortably depoliticised manner.

<div align="center">

fat
women,
old women,
poor women,
trans women,
queer women,
jewish women,
women of color,
muslim women,
disabled women,
indigenous women,
mentally ill women,
chronically ill women,
neurodivergent women,
& all the people in
all the margins
of this page.

together & only together
shall we finally

RISE. RISE.
RISE. RISE.
RISE. RISE.
RISE. RISE.
RISE. RISE.
RISE. RISE.
RISE. RISE.
RISE. RISE.
RISE. RISE.
RISE.

- no one will be left in dark, dusty corners.

</div>

Figure 21. Amanda Lovelace; no one will be left in dark, dusty corners; *the witch doesn't burn in this one;*

Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2018, p. 176

january 21st, 2017.
remember the date.

it was the day when more
than 3.3 million women

took the flames
that have licked at

their hard&soft skin
for centuries

& threw barrels of it
at the old house

constructed with packs of
white matchsticks.

- the women's marches (Lovelace, *the witch* 167)

ours must be
a politic of revolution
freedom can't exist
until the most disadvantaged are free (Kaur, *home body* 142)

break down
every door they built
to keep you out
and bring all your people with you
- *storm* (Kaur, *home body* 179)

The fact that Instapoetry somewhat paradoxically reproduces neoliberal ideas while also seeking to criticise

them, can be better understood in light of Saraswati's analysis of Kaur's work. As Saraswati argues, "feminist

activism in online spaces is governed by, and at times has been used to further, neoliberal ideology", even when

those feminists do not consciously advocate neoliberal ideas (24). This is "even and especially" the case in

progressive or decolonial spaces such as Instapoets' accounts (Ibid. 29). While Instapoets do not seek to advocate

neoliberalism, neoliberalism has simply become so engrained in contemporary society (especially in digital

spaces) that it "influences how we do almost anything", including how we engage in feminist activism (Ibid. 40).

This section has confirmed that the individualistic rhetoric of neoliberal feminism is indeed strongly present in

the genre of Instapoetry. Firstly, (the validity of all) choice(s) is a recurring theme within the genre. As many

Instapoems defend women who desire typically feminine consumer goods, the genre seemingly echoes

postfeminist discourse. Secondly, the idea that individuals have full power – or responsibility – over their own

success can also be found in a large number of Instapoems. As observed by Saraswati, Instapoetry thus upholds

the neoliberal feminist idea that women should work continuously on themselves. Nonetheless, other

Instapoetry tropes seem to counteract or denounce neoliberal feminism, as most feminist Instapoets strongly

emphasise the importance of female community. Though in vague fashion, multiple Instapoems can even be

read as rejecting neoliberally inspired competitiveness among women, while other poems nod at the importance

of collective action.

b. "apologise to your body"[8]: neoliberal rhetoric in body positive Instapoems

As was mentioned previously, Instapoets such as Rupi Kaur and Amanda Lovelace seek to write back against racist and/or sexist beauty standards (Berens 89, Kovalik and Curwood 190). This rhetoric is by no means exclusive to Instapoets: feminists have long denounced exclusionary beauty ideals and the objectification of the female body (Darwin and Miller 1). In the 2000s, feminists began using digital tools to fight these forces, and thus the "Body Positive Movement" was born (Ibid.). This Body Positive Movement is not a unified ideology, but "a variety of loosely connected networks and campaigns taking place across numerous cultural arenas, not all of which are in direct dialogue with one another" (Ibid.). Body positive activists seek to "[challenge] the unrealistic standards of beauty present in the media by the promotion and acceptance of diverse body sizes and appearances" (Lazuka et al. 85) in order to spark self-love and/or cultural change (Darwin and Miller 2). More recently, however, the Body Positive Movement has become mainstreamed and co-opted by companies (Gill and Elias 179). Darwin and Miller observe that this has led to the emergence of different types of body positivity:

> [C]onsumer feminism (represented by Dove's marketing approach) obscures the systemic influences that promote idealized beauty typologies. In contrast, grassroots Body Positive approaches encourage individuals to engage in systemic critiques of the power that validates beauty norms. Thus, corporate and grassroots manifestations of Body Positivity work towards markedly different goals: the former encourages women to psychologically adapt to the existing social structure, while the latter emphasizes the need for structural changes. (Ibid. 2)

As underscored by Darwin and Miller (2020), the Body Positive Movement is thus far from uncontroversial, and different subsections of body positive activists have criticised each other's neoliberal and postfeminist ideas. Therefore, body positive Instapoems are a highly interesting site for exploration if one wants to gain insight into

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[8] Quotation taken from Waheed (147).

the genre's neoliberal tendencies. After an overview of Darwin's and Miller's "Factions, Frames, and Postfeminism(s) in the Body Positive Movement" (2020), this section will examine how the neoliberal language of choice and personal responsibility functions in body positive Instapoems.

In an analysis of fifty blog articles on body positivity, Darwin and Miller observed that all of the activists in their sample agreed that "the personal is political", yet they differed in opinion about which of the two should prevail: "the personal (e.g., psychological liberation) or the political (e.g., systemic change)" (14). Consequently, they distinguished four "frames" of body positivity: "Mainstream Body Positivity", "Fat Positivity = Body Positivity", "Radical Positivity" and "Body Neutrality" (Ibid 7). The most prevalent frame, "Mainstream Body Positivity" argues that women must engage in self-love "as a psychological act of resistance against their objectification in society", and is commonly found in advertising campaigns and selfies (Ibid.). In Darwin's and Miller's view, body positive selfies send the message

> that beauty is democratically attainable by all, and that looking and feeling beautiful and sexy is tantamount to empowerment. It is worth noting that the same faction that sends this message [of Mainstream Body Positivity] is often comprised of or supported by powerful actors and corporations who profit from beauty culture. (Ibid.)

Some activists have expressed concerns about this type of body positivity, as it can be understood as "reinforc[ing] a patriarchal value system that assigns women worth based on their bodily appearance" (Ibid. 8). Mainstream Body Positivity also has a strong affinity with postfeminist ideas, as it defines empowerment in terms of individual choice, and positive body image in terms of beauty and sexiness (Ibid. 9). Its emphasis on photoshoots may also invite self-surveillance, self-objectification, and make-over paradigms (Ibid.). As Lazuka et al. observed, 36.2% of their sample of #BodyPostitive Instagram posts were "shot in an objectifying way", e.g.

in sexually suggestive poses (23.2%) or not including the individual's face in the photograph (15.9%) (87). Moreover, scholars have observed that "the traits that achieve the most representation within mainstream formulations of Body Positivity are oftentimes those that pose the least challenge to hegemonic gender ideology" (Darwin and Miller 4), so stigmatised traits such as armpit hair on women largely remain marginalised within the movement. "Fat Positivity = Body Positivity", then, "advocates for a focus on the systemic discrimination that fat women experience instead of the body image issues that women experience more generally" (Ibid. 8). Like Mainstream Body Positivity, this frame is controversial as it excludes e.g. anorexic women or formerly obese women from Body Positivity on grounds of their "thin privilege" (Ibid. 9). Simultaneously, it centres "the concerns of the relatively privileged—in this case, (fat) middle-class white women" (Ibid. 10). "Radical Body Positivity" is also characterised by a focus on systemic instead of individual oppression, but "extends Body Positivity to all axes of oppression" and rejects postfeminist sensibilities (Ibid.). "Body Neutrality", finally, advocates for individual psychological change, but eschews the idea of "self-love" in favour of "body acceptance [or] neutrality" (Ibid.). The imperative to self-love, Body Neutrality activists argue, excludes women who struggle to look and feel sexy, or who do not desire to do so (Ibid. 12). Like Radical Body Positivity, this frame seeks to include "anyone who struggles with body image issues, regardless of their social privilege" (Ibid. 13). Nonetheless, Body Neutrality centres postfeminist and neoliberal sentiments such as choice, personal agency, and self-surveillance (Ibid.).

At first glance, a large number of body positive Instapoems seems to comply with Darwin's and Miller's definition of "Mainstream Body Positivity", and Gill's and Elias' concept of "LYB" or "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). Most body positive Instapoems, like Nayyriah Waheed's "mirror work" or Kaur's "i notice everything i do not have" (fig. 22) indeed suggest that women can reinvent "beauty" and choose to love their bodies.

you
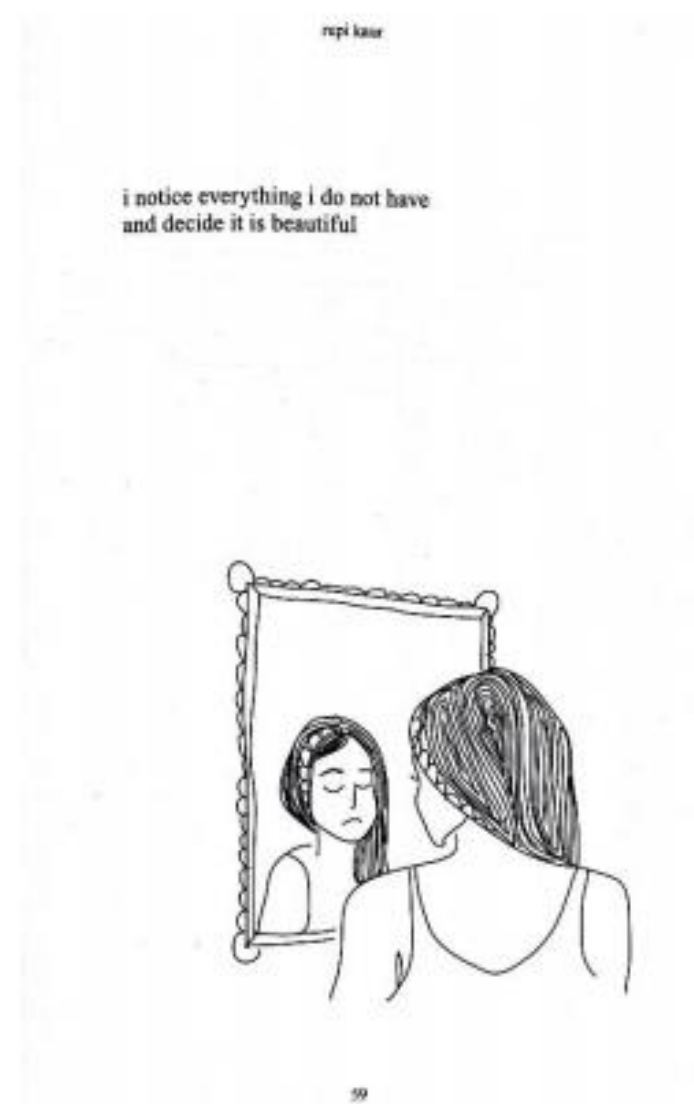are
your
own
standard of beauty

-- mirror work (Waheed 209)

rupi kaur

i notice everything i do not have
and decide it is beautiful

59

Figure 22. Rupi Kaur; i notice everything i do not have; *the sun and her flowers;* Simon & Schuster UK,

2017, p. 59.

While these poems seemingly send a positive message, Gill and Elias argue that such discourse is problematic. In their view, Mainstream Body Positive messages are merely a new manner of regulating women's relationships to their bodies, as they are now pressured to assume an "affirmative confident disposition, no matter how they actually feel" (Ibid. 185). Moreover, LYB portrays body image issues as "self-generated" personal problems (Ibid. 11) that can easily be overcome by "realising" that one is beautiful (Ibid. 5). Thus, both Mainstream Body Positivity and LYB discourse situate the solutions for negative body image on the individual level, rather than advocating for structural change (Darwin and Miller 2, Gill and Elias 185).

The suggestion of personal responsibility is strongly present in a lot of body-positive Instapoetry. As is typical for LYB discourse, the poems hint at "a relationship to the self that has gone bad or been broken" (Gill and Elias 4), yet what has damaged the individual's self-image frequently remains unspecified (Ibid.). In Kaur's "today i saw myself for the first time", for example, the poetic speaker states that she "spent decades living inside [her] body / . . . / yet managed to miss all its miracles" *(home body* 152). Although the speaker's disconnection to her own body is central to the poem, it remains unclear what has damaged her relationship with herself.

> today i saw myself for the first time
> when I dusted off
> the mirror of my mind
> and the woman looking back
> took my breath away
> who was this beautiful beastling
> this extra-celestial earthling
> i touched my face and my reflection
> touched the woman of my dreams
> all her gorgeous smirking back at me
> my knees surrendered to the earth
> as i wept and sighed at how
> i'd gone my whole life
> being myself
> but not seeing myself
> spent decades living inside my body
> never left it once

yet managed to miss all its miracles
isn't it funny how you can
occupy a space without
being in touch with it
how it took so long for me
to open the eyes of my eyes
embrace the heart of my heart
kiss the soles of my swollen feet
and hear them whisper
thank you . . .
for noticing (Kaur, *home body* 152)

Moreover, the speaker's damaged body image is even presented as her own doing: it is the speaker who "managed to miss all [her body's] miracles" (Ibid.). Wade's "all of it" (fig. 23) similarly suggests that women are simply not "let[ting] / [them]sel[ves] / love [themselves]" and Nayyirah Waheed urges the reader to "apologize to [her] body", situating the blame for negative body image with the individual woman (147).
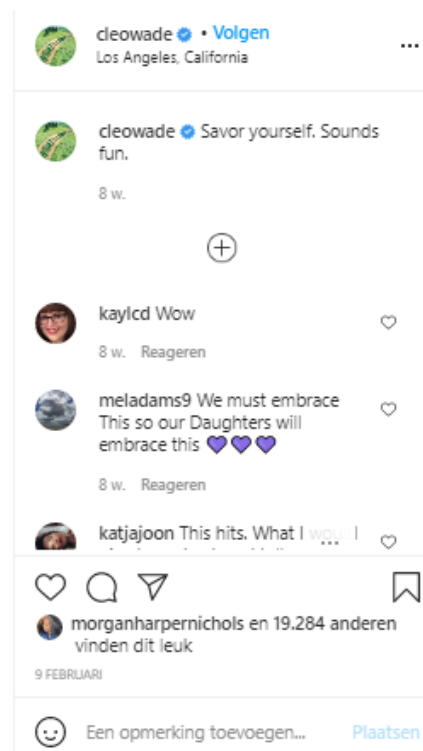

Figure 23. Cleo Wade; all of it; *Instagram,* 9 Feb. 2021, www.instagram.com/p/CLDmf1Ej77h/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 12 April 2021.

apologize to your body.
maybe
that's where the healing begins.

-- starting (Waheed, *salt.* 147)

Instapoetry's proposed solutions for body image issues are always pitched on an individual, mental level, and depicted as simple. In order to overcome negative body image, women only have to "[dust] off / the mirror of [their] mind" and "realize" that their bodies are "a miracle" (Kaur, "i reduced my body to aesthetics"). An inability to recognise one's own beauty is often portrayed as foolish or silly. "today i saw myself for the first time", for example, states that it is "funny" how the speaker somehow "managed to miss all [her body's] miracles" (Kaur, *home body* 152). Consequently, many Instapoems can be read as contributing to the pressure to feel beautiful. Kaur's "you have everything to gain" and "you lose everything" suggest that negative consequences that will follow if one fails to love one's self, and even conceptualise self-love in neoliberal terms of loss and gain:

you have everything to gain
from believing in yourself
yet you spend all your time with self-doubt (Kaur, *home body* 153)

you lose everything
when you don't love yourself

- *and gain everything when you do* (Kaur, *home body* 29)

As most Instapoems prioritise individual, mental change over political change, "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). Indeed, the line drawing that accompanies "i notice everything i do not have" (fig. 22) depicts a girl looking sadly into a mirror, thus implying that body image issues are an individual problem, which plays out on the personal scale of one's bathroom (Kaur). Kaur's "home" similarly sends the message that everything a woman might need "already exists in [her]":

> i dive into the well of my body
> and end up in another world
> everything I need already exists in me
> there's no need
> to look anywhere else
>
> - *home* (Kaur, *home body* 158)

In line with Darwin's and Miller's observations, certain "Mainstream Body Positive" Instapoems indeed play into postfeminist ideas. As argued in the previous section, many Instapoets emphasise the importance of being free to choose how to present one's body. A healthy relationship with the body is commonly defined in terms of individual choice, beauty, and/or sexiness. Charly Cox' "Sexy", for example, states:

> I am not yours
> To be beautiful for
> I do not clothe
> To be adored
> The most finite of knowledge that I can keep steady
> Is that I am mine
> To feel sexy. (*she must be mad* 131)

While dressing one's self in "sexy" clothing or wearing make-up are presented as acts of personal empowerment, they do align with patriarchal expectations of women's appearance (Gill 152). Lovelace similarly depicts "red lipstick" as a means to empowerment, i.e. "an external sign of internal fire" or a "battle cry" (*the witch* 39-40). Lovelace's "a note from me scrawled on your mirror" also presents feminine behaviours, like wearing make-up and taking "so many / selfies", as acts of empowerment (Ibid. 108). On the one hand, these poems suggest a reclamation of things that are commonly considered as frivolous due to their feminine nature. In doing so, Lovelace adds the atypical associations of force and war to make-up; interestingly, she suggests wearing "black" nail polish and "rub[bing] glitter / on your / face" rather than applying it daintily (Ibid.). Alternatively, however, it must be noted that items such as lipstick, nail polish, and glitter are consumer goods. Therefore, these Instapoems can be read as presenting a postfeminist idea of freedom, "a 'liberation sold to women through the

conflation of feminism and consumption" (Harris 167), as make-up is synonymous of a "battle cry" and/or "internal fire" (Lovelace, *the witch* 39-40), and thus also "metonymic for feminine sexual and gender agency" (Butler and Desai 10).

red lipstick:
an external sign
of internal
fire.

- *we tried to warn you.* (Lovelace, *the witch* 39)

red lipstick:
battle cry.
battle cry.
battle cry.

- *we tried to warn you.* (Lovelace, *the witch* 40)

paint
your nails
black,

rub glitter
on your
face,

take
so many
selfies,

. . .

& hex
any
man

who
catcalls
you.

- *a note from me scrawled on your mirror* (Lovelace, *the witch* 108)

In this regard, it must also be noted that the vast majority of Instapoets are conventionally attractive. In line with Darwin's and Miller's observations about Mainstream Body Positivity, the manner in which most Instapoets present themselves does not subvert hegemonic gender ideals (4). Marginalised physical traits that threaten gender norms, such as underarm hair or hairy upper lips, are absent from their photographs. Whereas Rupi Kaur has published a poem subtitled "unibrow", in which the poetic speaker states that

> no matter how much
> [she] pluck[s] and pull[s] them
> [her] eyebrows always
> find their way
> back to each other (*the sun and her flowers* 217)

this "unibrow" never features on her Instagram feed: the poet's eyebrows are always perfectly plucked. While these poets should undoubtably be free to present their bodies however they wish to, it is striking that they all happen to be young and conventionally attractive, as well as largely traditionally feminine in hair and dress. Moreover, journalists often emphasise Instapoets' physical attractiveness or "gorge factor" (Harzewski, *Chick-lit and Postfeminism* 20), as was the case with the chick-lit writer. An article about Rupi Kaur in *The Indian Express*, for example, remarks that "the world's most popular 'Instapoet' has tucked her long, straight hair behind her ears, highlighting the sharpness of her nose and her big, expressive eyes" (Majumdar). Cleo Wade, who has a background in fashion, receives even more attention for her "gorge factor" (Harzewski, *Chick-lit and Postfeminism* 20). *Byrdie,* for example, has published an article in which Wade shares some "looks [she] love[s]" and her "best-kept beauty secrets." The article opens with a description that emphasises Wade's attractiveness:

> Cleo Wade arrives at the studio fresh-faced and dressed head to toe in red, white, and blue. . . getting her gorgeous curls wound tightly around miniature curling irons. . . . Wade's style is effortless: cool-girl chic. So much so that she opts for bare nails . . . This laid-back approach to beauty is the goal for today's three looks. (Metrus)

Savoir Flair goes even further:

> The first introduction we have to an individual is usually their exterior and, in Wade's case, the packaging couldn't be more beautiful. As a young woman interning at M Missoni and working as an office manager at Halston, her beauty and self-possessed sense of style made her an alluring figure to brands. Soon, she caught the eye of the right people and landed a coveted consulting gig for Alice + Olivia, and was tapped for campaigns for Armani and Cartier. (Gordon)

Charly Cox seems deeply aware of the often puzzling contradictions of (post)feminism(s), as her Instapoem "Bad Feminist" thematises its complexities (*Validate Me* 49-50). Caught between conflicting expectations and/or wishes – "I need to feel sexy / I need to be strong" – the poetic speaker finds it hard to distinguish between her own desires and societal expectations of women: "Is this my truest self / Or am I just a man-pleasing woman / Exhausted?" (Ibid.).

> Bad Feminist
>
> I need to feel sexy
> I need to be strong
> I need to be assertive
> In my right to be wrong
> I'm confused, I've got lost
> Am I the woman that I wanted?
> Am I hashing out ideals
> All excuses – fair of plaudit
>
> Do I shout the loudest?
> Were these things I had on a list
> That my womanness was afraid to profess
> Because I felt they couldn't coexist
> Or have I passified myself
> By defining my integrity
> As believing that every thought I own
> Is nothing more than internalised misogyny?
>
> I've been angry
>   I've strangled fear
> I've beaten at the ceiling

I've pulled quotes and statistics near
I've fought, I've yelled, I've felt
I've demanded
I've tried to help

But sometimes it all just feels imported
Is this my truest self
Or am I just a man-pleasing woman
Exhausted? (Cox, *Validate Me* 49-50)

In Cox' #spon[9], the speaker similarly "realise[s]" that she is highly susceptible to a sexualised consumer culture

– "sex still sells / But this time to me" – which seeks to sell her the ideal of a "[s]exy and tiny", "[s]oft, lithe and

shiny" woman in "[c]lothes that don't fit" (Ibid. 51-52).

#spon

It used to be tits
Nested in headlines
. . .
It used to be lips
Sucking on Flakes
Want a dose of arousal?
Skip to the ad breaks
. . .
It all seemed so brazen
So obvious, so futile
We gained it all back
I felt so empowered
Until I realised sex still sells
But this time to me:
Young girls –
Vitamins and whey powder
Clothes that don't fit
On the bodies they sit
Cinched in and smoothed
Hungry eye glares removed
Just sexy
And tiny
Sexy and tiny
Soft, lithe and shiny. (Ibid.)

---

[9] The hashtag "#spon" is used on social media to indicate that a certain post was sponsored, i.e. that the post's

creator was paid by a company for publishing the post, which advertises one of their products or services.

Despite the aforementioned postfeminist tendencies, not all body positive Instapoems align with Darwin's and Miller's definition of Mainstream Body Positivity. Firstly, some do suggest that these issues are related to a larger societal context. Kaur's second collection, *the sun and her flowers* (2017), e.g., contains a two-page image of an assembly line which is transporting female body parts, accompanied by two poems that gesture towards the complicity of the beauty industry in generating dissatisfaction about women's bodies (fig. 24). "their concept of beauty is manufactured" implies that negative body image is caused by unattainable societal beauty ideals, although it remains characteristically unclear who "their" refers to (*the sun and her flowers* 225). "it is a trillion-dollar industry that would collapse" explicitly states that a "trillion-dollar" beauty industry profits off of (maintaining or even generating) women's negative relationships with their own bodies (Ibid. 224). Unlike most of the aforementioned body positive Instapoems, this poem is written in the first person plural, rather than the first or second person singular, which suggests that this is a collective issue instead of a personal one. As such, both poems situate the root cause of body image issues in a "trillion-dollar industry" and thus beyond the individual woman (Ibid.). Nonetheless, the proposed solution is still presented as a simple, individual task: women just have to "believ[e] [they] are beautiful enough already" (Ibid.). Moreover, rather than rejecting the importance of physical beauty, the poem continues to express women's worth in terms of being "beautiful enough" (Ibid.). Lovelace's "society" also depicts "normalized self-hatred" as "a corset" that society "wrapped / . . . / around us", rather than a self-generated problem. In order to "discover / who we / truly are", the poem states, "we" must "cut them / away" (*the witch,* 91). Nonetheless, it seems as if every woman will have to "unlearn this normalized self-hatred" individually, and remove their own "corset" (Ibid.):

    society
    wrapped
    a corset
    around us.

     . . .

    & until we
    cut them

away

. . .

we will
never discover
who we
truly are.

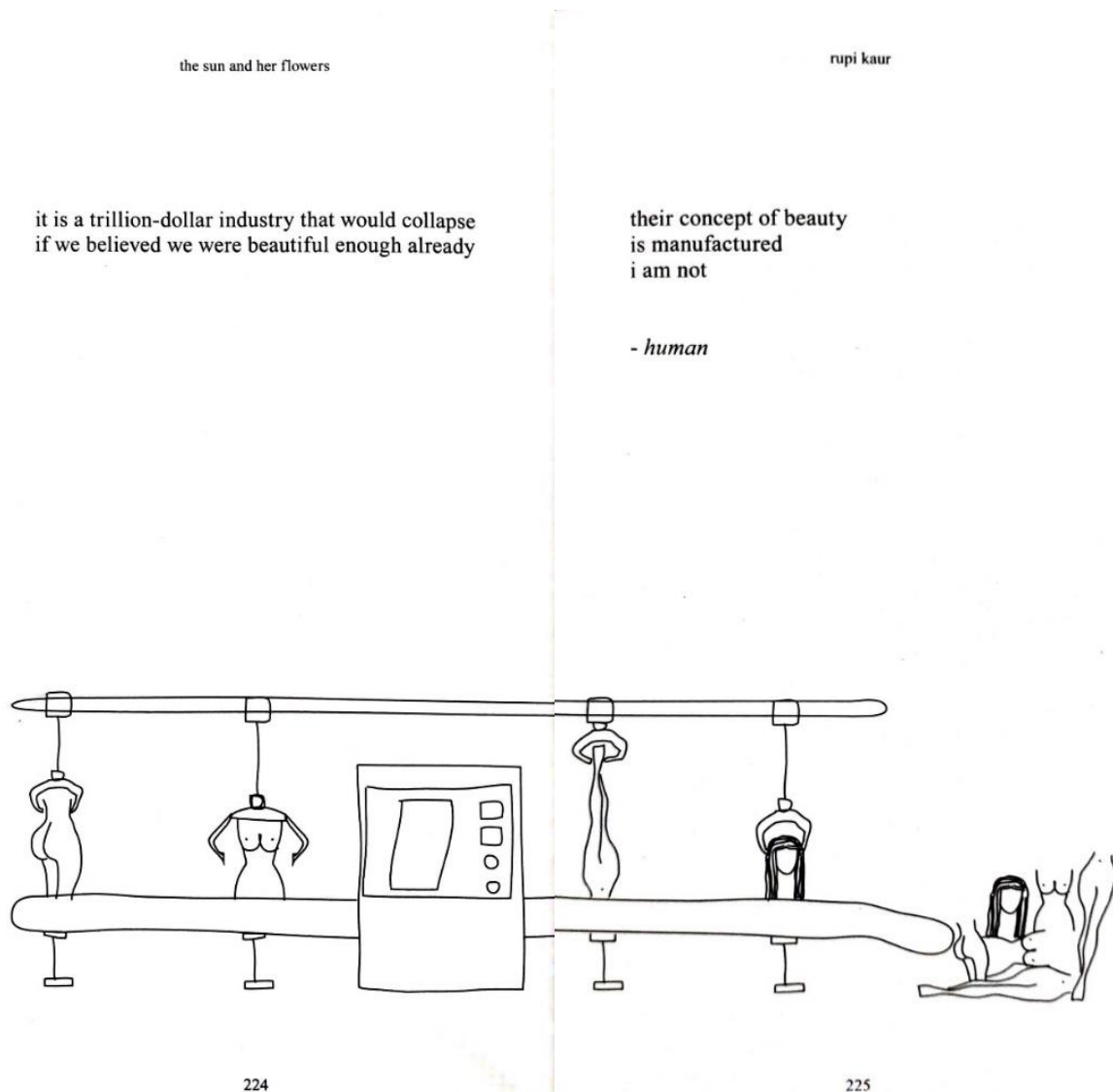 *- unlearn this normalized self-hatred* (Lovelace, *the witch* 91)

the sun and her flowers

rupi kaur

it is a trillion-dollar industry that would collapse
if we believed we were beautiful enough already

their concept of beauty
is manufactured
i am not

- *human*

224

225

Figure 24. 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.

As Amanda Lovelace's body positivity is not restricted to the issue of weight, her work cannot be characterised as "Fat Positivity = Body Positivity" (Darwin and Miller 8). Nonetheless, Lovelace is interestingly one of the only popular Instapoets who has produced body positive messages that are explicitly for and about fat women. In this regard, it must be noted that virtually all famous Instapoets except Lovelace are physically thin to average-sized. Lovelace, who self-identifies as fat, has published multiple poems that thematise having "curves / & fat / & rolls" (*the witch* 50) and has contributed a story to Newbould's *every body shines: sixteen stories about living fabulously fat,* "an intersectional, feminist ya anthology . . . celebrating body diversity & fat acceptance through short stories" ("every body shines"). Lovelace's Fat Positive writing typically sends the message that heavier women should make peace with their bodies rather than trying to change them, and that doing so is an act of resistance against exclusionary beauty ideals, a "'fuck you' to the patriarchy" (*the witch* 50).

they tell us
over &
over & over
again
that women
need
to stay
        small/
        thin/
        skinny/
        petite. . . .
curves
& fat
& rolls
are a
colossal
"fuck you"
to the
patriarchy –

our accidental
rebellion.

- *my body rejects your desires.* (Lovelace, *the witch* 50)

Instapoets of colour, such as Rupi Kaur and Nayyirah Waheed, have published poems that are in closer alignment with Radical Body Positivity, as they present an intersectional view on Western beauty standards, and thus automatically imply that negative body image is closely related to structural inequalities such as racism. Nayirrah Waheed's "by the time we are seven" depicts the poetic speaker's struggle with negative body image, as she "will crawl for white beauty" (34). While the poem focuses on the personal, mental consequences of racist beauty standards, the subtitle suggests that girls of colour are societally taught to hate their non-white features ("skin that . . . drink[s] night", "[angry] hair", "[soil] body", "nose") at an extremely young age (Ibid.).

> i will crawl for white beauty.
> eat my arms.
> barter my legs
> (make my thighs into altars of grief).
> for skin that does not drink night.
> hair that is not angry.
> body that is not soil.
> i place curses on my flesh call them diets.
> tell my ancestors they are ugly.
> howl at my nose until it bleeds.
> run my heart across my teeth,
> repeatedly.
> i am dying.
> to be beautiful.
> but beautiful.
> is something.
> i will never be.
> -- by the time we are seven (Waheed 34)

Rupi Kaur's "my issue with what they consider beautiful" (fig. 25) similarly finds fault with Western beauty ideals, which "[center] around excluding people." Like the previous piece by Waheed, this Instapoem lists non-white physical features which deviate from the racist beauty standards she seeks to criticise, such as thick body hair ("like a garden on her skin") or "skin the color of earth" (Ibid.). Unlike Waheed, who depicted the speaker's despair, Kaur presents these traits as "the definition of beauty" (Ibid.)

my issue with what they consider beautiful
is their concept of beauty
centers around excluding people
i find hair beautiful
when a woman wears it
like a garden on her skin
that is the definition of beauty
big hooked noses
pointing upward to the sky
like they're rising
to the occasion
skin the color of earth
my ancestors planted crops on
to feed a lineage of women with
thighs thick as tree trunks
eyes like almonds
deeply hooded with conviction
the rivers of punjab
flow through my bloodstream so
don't tell me my women
aren't as beautiful
as the ones in
your country

- rupi kaur

Figure 25. 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.

Furthermore, a number of Instapoems depict the body in a manner which is more reminiscent of Body Neutrality. In Cleo Wade's "a love note to my body" (fig. 26), the poetic speaker thanks her body "for the heart you kept beating . . . for waking up." As opposed to many of the aforementioned body positive poems, this piece makes no reference to the body's beauty or sexiness; instead, it centres the body's functionality. Despite its title, this poem is much less impassioned than previous examples, and admits that the speaker previously failed at loving her body.

Figure 26. Cleo Wade; a love note to my body; *Instagram*, 21 March 2018, www.instagram.com/p/BgmPWOyjWbn/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 1 May 2021.

A poem by Nayyirah Waheed, subtitled "emotional nutrition", even criticises the rhetoric of "beauty", as constant affirmations of one's beauty leave one "starved" (89). Thus, "emotional nutrition" can be read as a critique of the prevalence of beauty-centric language in contemporary feminism. Nonetheless, the speaker feels the need to add between brackets that "[her daughter's] beauty is a given. every being is born beautiful" (Ibid.). Thus, the poem upholds the value of beauty, although it suggests a broader definition to include "every being" (Ibid.).

> i will tell you, my daughter
> of your worth
> not your beauty
> everyday. (your beauty is a given. every being is born beautiful)
> knowing your worth
> can save your life.

raising you on beauty alone
you will be starved.
you will be raw.
you will be weak.
an easy stomach.
always in need of someone telling you how beautiful you are
- emotional nutrition (Waheed 89)

Finally, most of the aforementioned Instapoets have published poems that depict negative body image without

presenting positivity as a solution. These poems, which are strikingly different in tone, merely describe the poetic

speaker's distress about and obsession with her physical form. Amanda Lovelace's "a hollow-girl's grocery list",

for example, depicts disordered eating matter-of-factly, in the shape of a grocery list:

I. water.
II. coffee&tea.
III. zero-calorie sweetener.
IV. one-hundred-calorie snacks.
V. a body so weightless no one else can own it.

- *a hollow girl's grocery list* (Lovelace, *the witch* 53)

Kaur's oeuvre also contains a number of uncharacteristically desperate pieces. The poetic speaker in "i wonder

if i am", for example, "wonder[s] if [she is] / beautiful enough for you / or if [she is] beautiful at all" (*the sun and*

her flowers 40). Displaying behaviour similar to that of the insecure chick-lit heroine, the speaker changes her

clothes repeatedly before meeting with her romantic interest, "wondering which pair of jeans will make / [her]

body more tempting to undress" (Ibid.). The poem ends with the speaker's plea for validation: "write [anything i

can do / to make you think / her / she is so striking] in a letter and address it / to all the insecure parts of me"

(Ibid.). In "what draws you to her", the speaker similarly begs "tell me what you like / so i can practise" (Ibid. 43).

These poems stand in stark contrast with the large number of body positive Instapoems in which Kaur portrays

self-love as an instantaneous and simple solution.

i wonder if i am
beautiful enough for you
or if i am beautiful at all
i change what i am wearing
five times before i see you
wondering which pair of jeans will make
my body more tempting to undress
tell me
is there anything i can do
to make you think
her
she is so striking
she makes my body forget it has knees
write it in a letter and address it
to all the insecure parts of me
your voice alone drives me to tears
yours telling me i am beautiful
yours telling me i am enough (Kaur, *the sun and her flowers* 40)

Charly Cox has published by far the largest number of poems that depict obsession with one's body. Unlike most other Instapoets, Cox often strikes an ironically or cynically self-deprecating tone which bears some resemblance to the chick-lit heroine's "humorous self-deprecation" ("chick-lit"). "kale" (fig. 27), for example, reads: "Oh kale leaves / How you depress me / I only eat you / So boys want to / undress me." When Instagram user @tuesdayblues questions the poem's ethics, Cox replies: "its ironic."

Figure 27. Charly Cox; kale; *Instagram,* 11 Nov. 2020, www.instagram.com/p/CHdWVhcs6Pl/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 21 April 2021.

Although Cox' longer poems on body image have a stronger self-help dimension than "kale", most of her depictions of female body image are similarly self-deprecating or ironic in tone. "cellulite (sells you heavy)", for instance, begins with a long, self-deprecating description of the poetic speaker's legs. The poem's tone is ironic and, at times, humorously exaggerated. Additionally, the speaker shares chick-lit heroines' habit of investing in exercise and diet foods:

> Regardless of what weight I shed
> The bicycle motions I do in bed
> Are relentless
> Where is the redemption
> For those who exercise?
> My thighs
> Jesus Christ the size
> It should not be fair. (Ibid. 117)

Near the end of the poem, the speaker seeks and achieves (rather abruptly) a sense of self-acceptance: "My body stretched to make this space / And these tiny imperfections are mine" (Ibid.). Nonetheless, self-deprecation and struggle prevail, whereas many other body-positive Instapoems suggest an effortless, perfect sense of self-love. Cox' "wrigley's extra", which is titled after a brand of sugar-free sugar gum, similarly states: "The comparison's a killer / So much it's gum for dinner / Why didn't god birth me thin" (Ibid. 101).

cellulite (sells you heavy)
There is a fold beneath the crease
That haunts me with trepidation
And despite what preparation
Goes into each breakfast
It seems there is an infiltration
This breeding nation
Of fat
Regardless of what weight I shed
The bicycle motions I do in bed
Are relentless
Where is the redemption
For those who exercise?
My thighs
Jesus Christ the size
It should not be fair.
. . .
And if I could take a biological eraser
Remove these frustrating chubby placers
I thought I would
I tried to tell myself each dimple is a smile along my skin
A lightning bolt breaking from within
. . .
And that's why I why I stopped wishing them away
I can't tell you how free it feels to prod them
And be okay
. . .
My body stretched to make this space
And these tiny imperfections are mine. (Ibid. 117-8)

Like the Body Positivity Movement itself, Instapoetry's body positivity is varied and often even paradoxical in nature. Many body positive Instapoems comply with Darwin's and Miller's definition of Mainstream Body Positivity, and thus also display the neoliberal and postfeminist characteristics associated with it. Whereas none

of the most prominent Instapoets equate body positivity with Fat Positivity, Fat Positivity is central to Lovelace's

work. Instapoets of colour, like Kaur and Waheed, have published poems that gesture towards the intersectional

nature of body image issues with respect to racist beauty ideals. Finally, most Instapoets have also published

pieces that depict negative body image more matter-of-factly, without proposing positivity as a solution. Charly

Cox' ironic take on this is interestingly highly resembling of chick-lit's portrayal of the heroine's insecurities.

c. "practise self-care before, during, & after reading"[10]: neoliberal rhetoric in Instapoems about self-care

Self-care is a recurring theme in the oeuvre of many Instapoets, such as Rupi Kaur, Amanda Lovelace, Cleo Wade, and Nayyirah Waheed. Amanda Lovelace's collection *shine your icy crown* (2021), for example, opens with a "trigger warning" which advices the reader to "practise self-care / before, during, & after / reading" (5), and contains numerous poems which underscore the importance of prioritising one's self. Rupi Kaur, too, emphasises this "ability to attend to the self as central" (Miller), and Cleo Wade has stated that "if self-love means I love you, then self-care says prove it" (Stables). On the one hand, one could argue that poems about self-care send a message of empowerment and acceptance, while also critiquing sexist views of the female body (Miller). As many scholars have observed, however, self-care discourse can also be read as problematically entangled with consumerism and neoliberal individualism. On the one hand, self-care has become a flourishing industry as well as a popular marketing tool. Alternatively, the concept of self-care can be seen as embodying neoliberal pressures to care for and to improve the self (Yoong 28). Therefore, this section seeks to examine the (neoliberal) concept of self-care, and Instapoetry's relationship with it.

Self-care is currently "a trending topic" online and in popular media (Kaltefleiter and Alexander 182). The concept, which is commonly defined as "consciously tending to one's own well-being" (Harris), is used to refer to "nearly any activity people use to calm, heal and preserve themselves in the face of adversity" (Spicer), from meditating or exercising to "having date nights with yourself, . . . crochet, learning the art of saying no, and 'consciously unfollowing' people on social media." The term's popularity peaked in the wake of the 2016 US elections (Kisner), and has since lead to "the proliferation of images of cucumber face masks, self-care tattoos, and calls for girls to 'treat yo' self' to a spa day" (Kaltefleiter and Alexander 182).

Nonetheless, Kaltefleiter and Alexander underscore that the concept of self-care has a long, political history and

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[10] Quotation taken from Lovelace (*icy crown* 5).

thus goes "beyond skin deep", although the Black roots of self-care discourse are often glossed over (182). Most articles on the topic of self-care trace the concept back to the third volume of *The History of Sexuality,* in which Foucault explores Ancient Greek conceptualisations of "the care of the self" (186). In the 1980s, the Black feminist writer Audre Lorde foregrounded self-care in *A Burst of Light.* Having been diagnosed with cancer for the second time, she wrote: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (132). Thus, the notion of self-care was (re)claimed by queer communities and people of colour: in the face of an often racist and sexist medical system which failed to care for marginalised people, self-care was a political act of defiance (Harris). Nowadays, Kaltefleiter and Alexander argue, self-care is still a way for Black girls and women to prioritise themselves, and counteract societal pressures "to nurture others to their own detriment" (191). Like Lorde, the authors conceptualise self-care as "a radical act that creates continuums of resistance for women and girls, especially for Black girls" as they navigate a sexist and racist world (Ibid. 200).

The idea of self-care has since reached the general public, and consequently lost most of its political implications (Spicer). As the general public currently uses self-care as a synonym for 'me time', Lorde's "invitation to collective survival" has become deeply individualist, as well as unpolitical (Ibid.). According to Spicer, this is problematic, as the concept may now be misperceived as "just another brand of self help" or even as a cheap substitute for professional care. Moreover, many popular self-care activities have become enmeshed with consumerism. Whereas Kaltefleiter and Alexander (194) cited free activities as examples of self-care acts for Black women (e.g. leisure activities, spiritual or cultural rituals, nature walks), self-care has become a veritable industry. Gwyneth Paltrow's welness brand Goop is an oft-cited example (Carraway). One of Goop's articles on self-care merely consists of nine products one needs to buy for a self-care routine (fig. 28). With prices ranging from $20 to $235, Goop sends the message that women need to make substantial financial investments to practise proper self-care, and echoes chick-lit's message that "happiness cannot be found without a good dose of indulgence" (Wells 62).
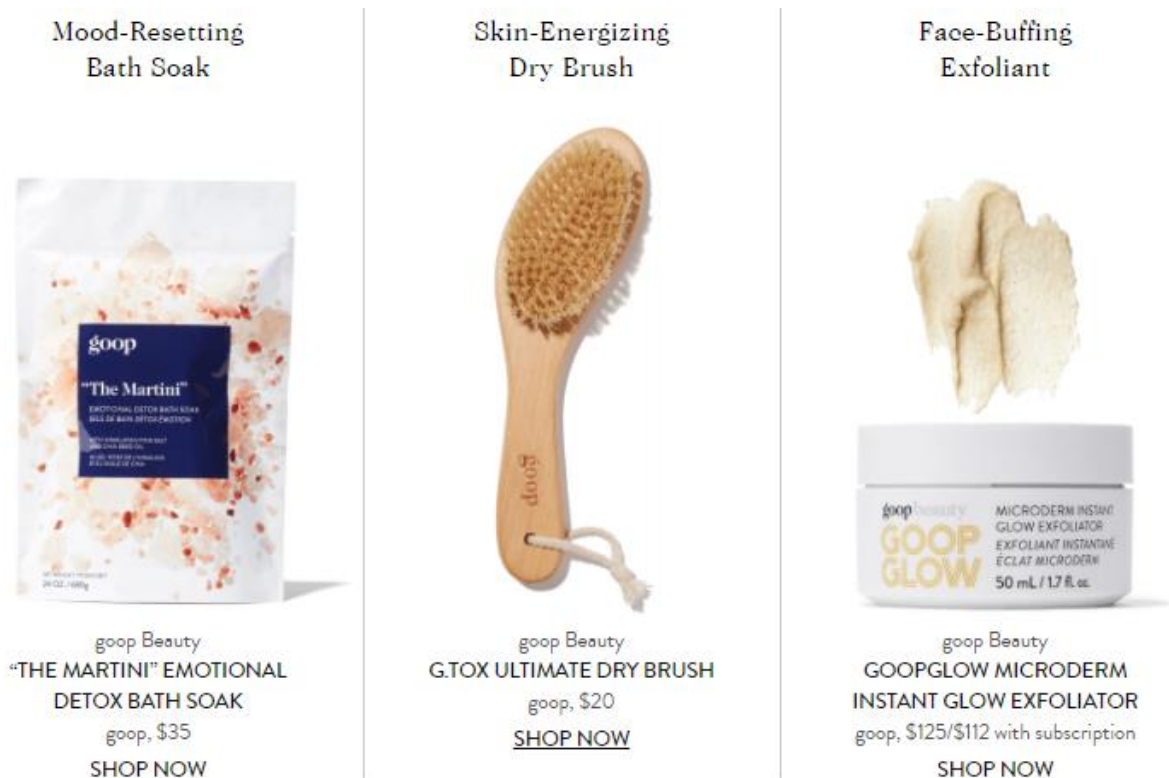
Mood-Resetting Bath Soak	Skin-Energizing Dry Brush	Face-Buffing Exfoliant
goop Beauty	goop Beauty	goop Beauty
"THE MARTINI" EMOTIONAL DETOX BATH SOAK	G.TOX ULTIMATE DRY BRUSH	GOOPGLOW MICRODERM INSTANT GLOW EXFOLIATOR
goop, $35	goop, $20	goop, $125/$112 with subscription
SHOP NOW	SHOP NOW	SHOP NOW

Figure 28. "Hibernation Mode: Sleep In, Moisturize a Lot, and Recharge Your Spirit, Skin, and Hair"; *Goop*, n.d., goop.com/beauty/bath-body/winter-self-care-ideas/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 12 April 2021.

In 2020, The NPD Group reported that U.S. consumers are increasingly investing in self-care and stress-relief tools such as "self-help books, candles, and massaging appliances", as well as "pampering" beauty products, such as home fragrance, skincare products, and nail care tools (NPD). Sandler agrees that "[s]elf-care is selling." Consequently, beauty brands are incorporating the concept in their marketing (Sandler). Randi Christiansen, the CEO of beauty brand Nécessaire, states that brands "have to step up their storytelling, their imagery and change the dialogue it is asking its influencers to have" to include the notion of self-care (Ibid.). On Instagram, the company publishes weekly #selfcaresunday posts, as well as self-care advice and quizzes (fig. 29). Self-care themed advertising increased their sales by an additional 20% in comparison to advertisements which focus solely on the product's effectivity (Ibid.).
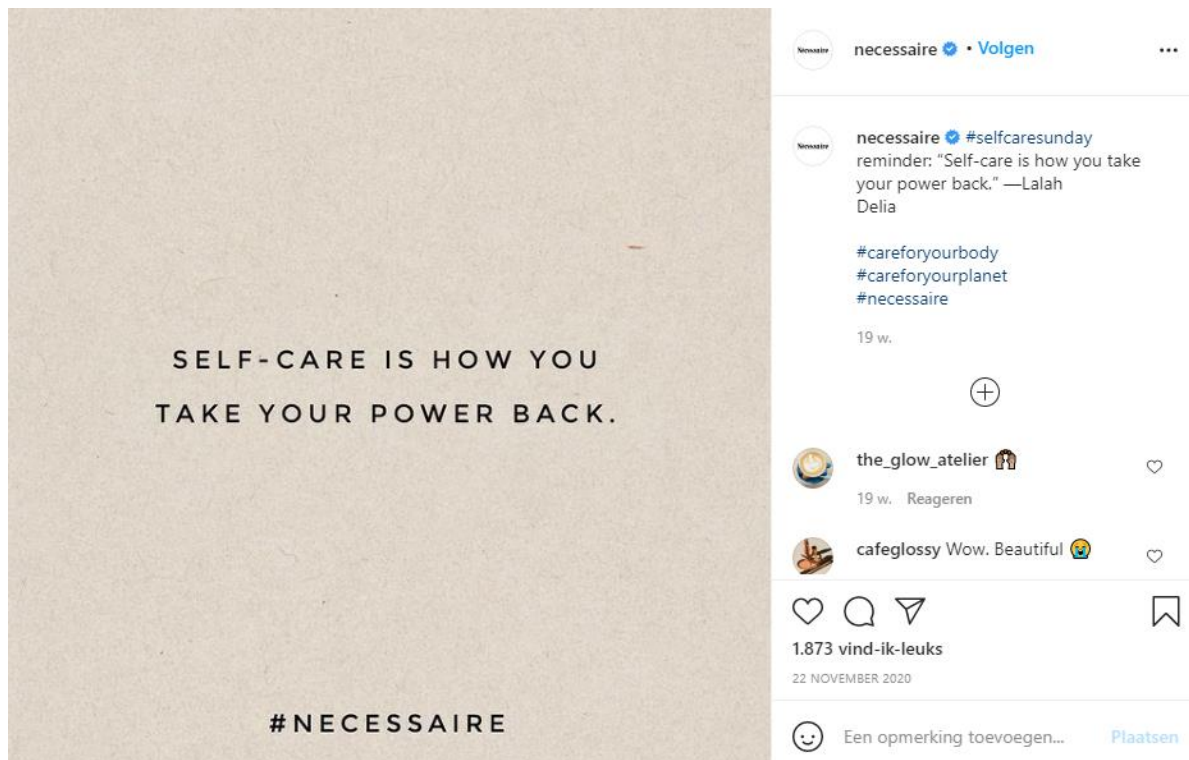
Figure 29. @necessaire; #selfcaresunday reminder; *Instagram*, 22 Nov. 2020, www.instagram.com/p/CH5bex5joUw/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 12 April 2021.

At times, the acts of self-care suggested in Instapoems are consumerist in nature, too. A poem by Lovelace, subtitled "i vow to", lists ten "witchy" acts of "self-care" and "self-love", according to the Instapoem's hashtags (fig 30). While some acts are purely spiritual in nature – "I. breathe . . . IX. let no one invalidate me" – most self-care themed poems do suggest that one must buy certain products in order to care for one's self successfully. This poem, specifically, mentions "crystals", "bubble bath", and "spearmint tea" (Ibid.). Kaur's "to do list (after the break-up)" (fig. 31) similarly contains the idea of "treat[ing] yourself" – to ice-cream, in this case – because it "will calm your heart" and "you deserve [it]." Additionally, the reader is encouraged to "buy new bedsheets" and "take a trip."

Figure 30. Amanda Lovelace; i vow to; *Instagram*, 2 May 2020, www.instagram.com/p/B_seq4Dp_hQ/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 22 March 2021.

to do list (after the breakup)

1) take refuge in your bed
2) cry. til the tears stop (this will take a few days)
3) delete his number from your phone even though it is memorized in your fingertips
4) don't listen to slow songs
5) collect all the gifts, t-shirts, and everything with his smell on it to drop it off at a donation centre
6) start a new project
7) find the closest ice-cream shop and treat yourself to 2 scoops of mint chocolate chip. the mint will calm your heart. you deserve the chocolate
8) buy new bedsheets
9) perfect the art of smiling and nodding when someone brings his name up in a conversation
10) watch foreign films
11) hug everyone you see
12) learn to be alone at some point. allow yourself to feel foolish for believing you could've built the rest of your life in someone else's stomach
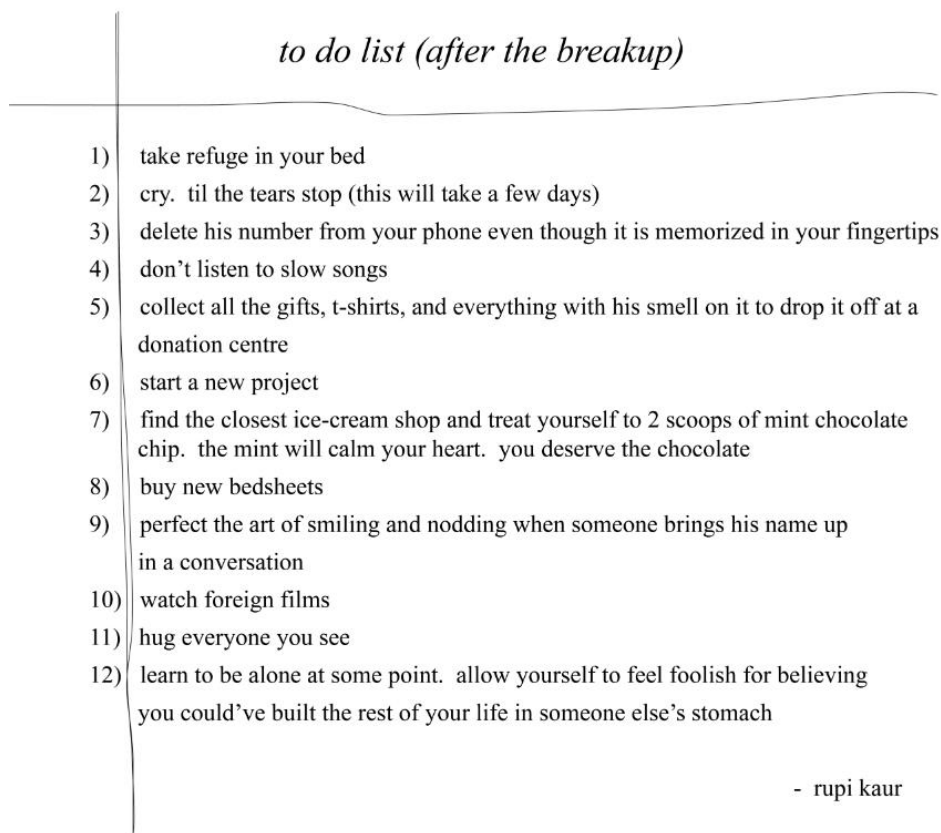
- rupi kaur

Figure 31. Rupi Kaur; to do list (after the breakup); *Rupikaur.com*, n.d., www.rupikaur.com/tagged/mypoems, screenshot taken by author; accessed 12 April 2021.

In this respect, Lovelace's seemingly innocuous suggestion to "take more bubble baths" can be read as part of a capitalist trend whereby consumers are encouraged to splurge on products under the guise of self-care. Similar mindsets can be observed in chick-lit novels, in which the protagonist is often encouraged "to treat herself, to indulge, to subscribe to that consumerist mentality that you only live once, and that all beautiful women are, to paraphrase the famous L'Oréal commercials, worth it" (Umminger 243). As Saraswati argues, "[n]eoliberalism teaches women that to feel good they must take care of themselves first (i.e. self-love, self-care) by getting a massage treatment (a commodity), for example" (60). From this perspective, self-care themed marketing such as Nécessaire's can be read as urging or even brain-washing women to consume through repeated promises that consumption will leave them fulfilled (fig. 32, fig. 33).
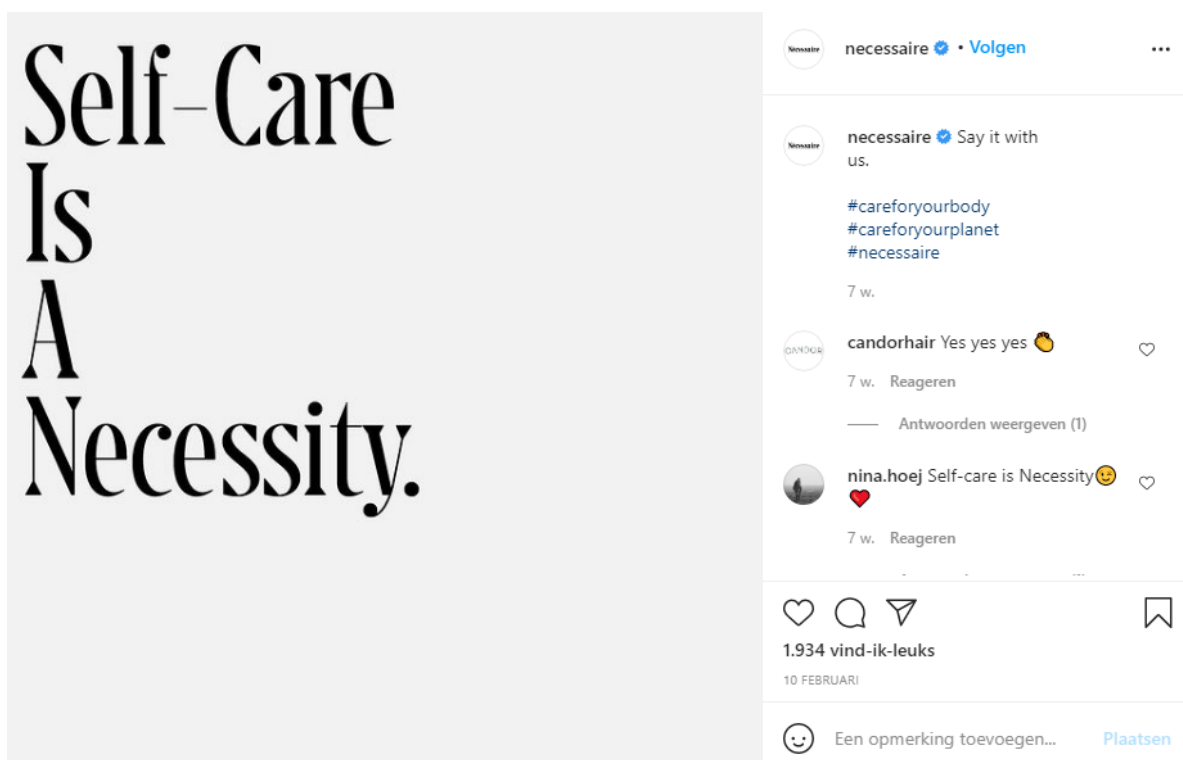

Figure 32. @necessaire; self-care marketing; *Instagram*, 10 Feb. 2021, www.instagram.com/p/CLlDWtahub7/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 17 March 2021.
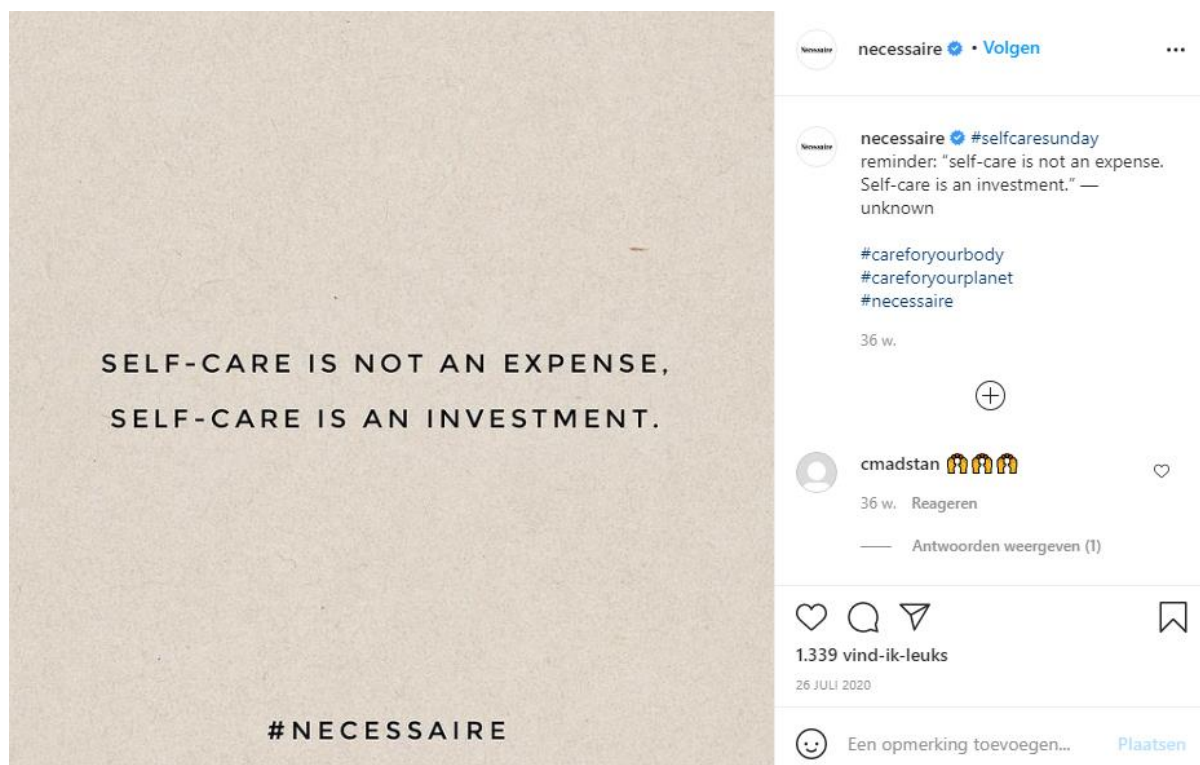
Figure 33. @necessaire; self-care marketing; *Instagram*, 26 July 2020, www.instagram.com/p/CDG6e4Tn1KZ/,

screenshot taken by author; accessed 17 March 2021.

Instapoets' commercial endeavours can be considered in a similar light. Amanda Lovelace, for example, has

created *slay those dragons* (2019), "a self-care journal" which readers can buy and use as "a place to heal, reflect,

and finally take control of their own narrative." According to the blurb, the journal seeks to "encourag[e]

[readers] to cultivate acts of self-love, self-kindness, and of course, to slay any dragons who try to burn their

castle down" (Ibid.). Whereas Lovelace's journal will undoubtedly have a positive impact on certain buyers, it

must be noted that *slay your dragons* is not simply "a gift for her readers", as the blurb suggests, but a

commercial product which can be obtained for 15 USD (Ibid.). This phenomenon can be understood as part of "a

broader strategy [in marketing] to promote celebrity merchandizing as a therapeutic instrument" through a

"blurring of boundaries between merchandising strategies and therapeutic discourses" (Franssen 103-104).

Instapoetry collections are similarly marketed as self-care tools that will spark self-love in their readers

(Millner). Nonetheless, one must recognise that Instapoetry books remain commercial objects that are sold for monetary gain. Lovelace's *women are some kind of magic boxed set* (2019), for example, – which sells for 45 USD – promises buyers that it is "a beautiful & empowering trilogy guaranteed to awaken your inner goddess" ("women are some kind of magic series"). Albeit in an entirely different manner than chick-lit, the commerce surrounding Instapoetry can be read as suggesting that women cannot "awaken [their] inner goddess" without investing financially (Ibid.).

Paradoxically, some Instapoets have written in rejection of "commercialised self-help" (Kaur, *home body* 112). In "Self Care", Charly Cox criticises the therapeutic quality which is ascribed to "[aesthetic]" consumer goods (*Validate Me* 37). The poetic speaker posits that true healing can only be found in less aesthetically pleasing manner, through "muddled despair ... hurting ... muddied soul searching ... pulling it all out of mind" (Ibid.).

> Self Care
>
> There is only a trace of anaesthetic
> In the aesthetics
> There is no truth, no freedom
> No Holy Spirit's leading
> In the clang of rose-gold copper self care
> There is only growth in muddled despair
> There is help in the hurting
> In the muddied soul searching
> In pulling it all out of mind for your eyes to see
> It's mad – a cruel charade
> For anyone to sell back your sanity
> In bubble baths
> Face mask
> And breakfast in a bowl from
> Anthropologie. (Cox, *Validate Me* 37)

In one of Kaur's Instapoems, which is subtitled "empty promises", the speaker similarly claims to be "throwing the whole concept of / commercialised self-help out altogether / i'm tired of buying products and services / that don't make me feel any better" (*home body* 112). The accompanying image depicts a clothing rack and a dressing

table strewn with beauty products, jewellery, a handbag, a mirror, and a stack of books with "self help" on the

cover. Below the table, Kaur has drawn a shopping bag with illegible handwriting on it, which is likely meant to

suggest a brand name, and two parcels that seem to be the result of online shopping. There is a deep tension

between the poem's message and the fact that it is itself a product of "commercialised self-help" (Ibid.): as

mentioned in the Introduction, Instapoetry is closely related to the genre of self-help (Pâquet 306). In this sense,

the poem is denouncing a trend it participates in: Kaur's own *home body* (2020) may very well be one of the

"self help" books displayed on the dressing table.

i'm throwing the whole concept of
commercialized self-help out altogether
i'm tired of buying products and services
that don't make me feel any better

- *empty promises*

Figure 34. Rupi Kaur; empty promises; *home body,* Simon & Schuster UK, 2020, p. 112.

Interestingly, the drawing in Figure 34 is reminiscent of typical chick-lit imagery. Abundant consumer goods and shopping bags can, for example, also be found on the covers of Kinsella's *Shopaholic* novels. Self-care's connection with consumerism uncovers a (perhaps surprising) parallel between Instapoetry and chick-lit. This connection runs deeper than an accidental shared habit of consuming, as both genres' consumerism is propelled by neoliberalism. Like chick-lit, Instapoetry can be read as participating in a culture which demands from women that they continuously improve themselves by investing in themselves (often financially), thus trapping them in a state of "constant self-fixing" (Franssen 104). As mentioned previously, the concrete form of self-improvement is becoming "ever more materialistic and aesthetic" (McGee 22): "the incentive to continuously self-invest is harnessed in the service of the market: the consumption of lifestyle products becomes the preferred technique of self-improvement" (Franssen 100).

As O'Donnell concedes, however, the neoliberal co-optation of Lorde's commentary does not render the original idea worthless (323). *Feminist Killjoys* agrees that it is deeply problematic to denounce all forms of self-care as apolitical neoliberal individualism:

> If you have got a model that says an individual woman who is trying to survive an experience of rape by focusing on her own wellbeing and safety . . . is participating in the same politics as a woman who is concerned with getting up "the ladder" in a company then I think there is something wrong with your model. Sometimes, "coping with" or "getting by" or "making do" might appear as a way of not attending to structural inequalities, as benefiting from a system by adapting to it, even if you are not privileged by that system, even if you are damaged by that system. . . . [But e]ven if it's system change we need, that we fight for, when the system does not change, when the walls come up, those hardenings of history into physical barriers in the present, you have to manage; to cope.

Kaur's *the sun and her flowers* coincidentally contains a poem that describes "an individual woman who is trying

to survive an experience of rape by focussing on her own wellbeing and safety" (Feminist Killjoys), thus depicting

self-care as survival. The poem, "at home that night", opens with the poetic speaker engaging in typical self-care

behaviour, i.e. bathing in scented water (*the sun and her flowers* 76). On line 10, the poem's focus shifts from the

seemingly whimsical bath to a deeply unsettling description of the speaker's distress after being raped: she is

"desperate to wash the dirty off", "pick[s] pine needles from [her] hair", investigates her body for "bits of him

on bits of [her]", and finally "pray[s]" (Ibid.). Although the poetic speaker is focussing strongly on herself, rather

than the systemic inequalities surrounding rape culture, it would indeed be misguided to denounce her self-care

behaviour as an example of neoliberal individualism. In *Feminist Killjoys'* words, the speaker is "not . . . trying to

move up" but "simply . . . trying not to be brought down." As such, the poem depicts self-care as an act of self-

preservation, much in the spirit of Audre Lorde. As Kaur writes from the perspective of a young woman of colour,

the decision to engage in self-care can even be read as a form of resistance: in "directing [her] care towards

[herself]", that is, a person from marginalised communities, the speaker is "redirecting care away from its proper

objects", and thus "not caring for the bodies deemed worth caring about" (Ibid.). As *Feminist Killjoys* concludes,

"[f]or those who have to insist they matter to matter: selfcare is warfare" (Ibid.).

    at home that night
    i filled the bathtub with scorching water
    tossed in spearmint from the garden
    two tablespoons almond oil
    some milk
    and honey
    a pinch of salt
    rose petals form the neighbor's lawn
    i soaked myself in that mixture
    desperate to wash the dirty off
    the first hour
    i picked pine needles from my hair
    counted them one two three
    lined them up on their backs
    the second hour
    i wept

a howling escaped me
who knew girl could become beast
during the third hour
i found bits of him on bits of me
the sweat was not mine
the white between my legs
not mine
the bite marks
not mine
the smell
not mine
the blood
mine
the fourth hour i prayed. (Kaur, *the sun and her flowers* 76)

Thus, we must be careful not to let "neoliberalism [sweep] up too much" (Feminist Killjoys) when exposing self-care's entanglement with neoliberal consumerism. As many Instapoems are infamously vague, one might too readily interpret a self-care aphorism as a symptom of neoliberal consumer culture, while it may actually seek to depict a manner of coping with extreme trauma. As Kaltefleiter and Alexander observed, many young Black girls turn to social media for self-care advice (197). Consequently, Instapoems about self-care may be truly helpful for young women of colour who are trying to preserve themselves in racist and sexist societies.

As previously established, the idea of self-care is strongly present in the work of many Instapoets. Although the concept, as formulated by Audre Lorde, used to be political in nature, it has recently become a consumerist trend and a lucrative marketing tool. Instapoets profit from this self-care industry, too, as their publications and merchandise are often marketed as self-care tools. In this sense, Instapoems that denounce the commerce surrounding self-care are somewhat ironic. Like the chick-lit heroine's shopping sprees, self-care-related consumerism is propelled by neoliberal ideas, such as individual responsibility for one's wellbeing and the obligation to invest in the self. Nonetheless, critics have rightfully argued against a wholesale rejection of self-care rhetoric, as the idea continues to have political relevance in certain contexts.

<u>3.2. "validate me"[11]: Instapoetry's relationship with social media's neoliberal nature</u>

While Instapoets' use of Instagram as a platform can be understood as empowering, Saraswati convincingly argues that social media simultaneously functions as a "neoliberalizing machine" (42). Therefore, a discussion of Instapoetry's neoliberal aspects must take into account the neoliberal nature of the genre's platform. According to Beeston et al., Instagram and Instapoetry "[play] into the perfect image of a perfect life, which is, of course, a dangerous neoliberal fantasy" (7). Roberts similarly describes Instapoetry as "a boutique of perfectly curated objets de commerce . . . selling a sanitized unreality . . . pruned of that which is not nice." Consequently, Roberts argues, "Instapoets have become [young people's] bards, reinforcing narcissism, offering a filtered reflection of an anxious generation scrambling for distraction . . . this is the poetry of capitalism." It is true that many Instapoets create a highly stylised image of themselves on Instagram – a platform "which is particularly identified as narcissistic through its focus on physical perfection, advertising, and selfies" (Pâquet 304) – by catering to "the digital gaze" (Jones) or the "neoliberal self(ie) gaze" (Saraswati 34). As such, a seemingly simplistic genre turns out to be deeply complicated: "How do we begin to separate life from art from performance and to what extent can these ideas be defined as authentic?" (Manning 276).

Unsurprisingly, most Instapoets are highly active on social media. As Manning points out, however, not all Instapoets engage with Instagram in the same manner (Ibid.): Waheed, for example, has deleted all of her poetry Instagram posts, and now only uses her profile for the promotion of her print publications. Nonetheless, most Instapoets adhere to a formula similar to Rupi Kaur's, which alternates poems with photographs that correspond to what Roberts calls "the minimalist curated aesthetic of lifestyle Instaporn—a hand holding a flower, a hand holding a camera."

---

[11] Quotation taken from Cox (*Validate Me* 23-24).

Manning argues that Instapoets' use of social media is to be understood (at least in part) in positive terms, as Instagram "empower[s] and enable[s]" people to "represent themselves" (269). This is significant, as many Instapoets are women of colour, "who would usually be underserved or misrepresented by traditional publications" (Ibid.), and have historically been denied the power to represent themselves (Ibid. 273). Through the use of Instagram, female Instapoets disrupt patriarchal norms: "firstly, and simply, by placing their interior lives into a public sphere ... and secondly, [by placing] their work into the typically white male-dominated sphere of the internet" (Ibid. 270). As Matthews argues, new media cannot and must not be rejected as "solely oppressive, neoliberal, capitalist institutions" as they are also being used as tools for Black (and other non-white) feminist activism (395). Saraswati, too, underscores that scholars must acknowledge the value of Rupi Kaur's decolonial feminism before scrutinising its neoliberal complexities (40). Indeed, it matters that Kaur and other young female poets from marginalised backgrounds are "occup[ying] these transational public spaces of theatre, cityscape, and digital phantasmagoria", often challenging "the invisible whiteness" that is normative in digital spaces, and providing much-needed positive representation (Ibid. 39). Nonetheless, scholars (and even a number of Instapoets) agree that social media also comes with a significant number of risks, largely due to its entanglement with postfeminism and neoliberalism. Without seeking to invalidate Instapoets' activism, this section will explore the aforementioned entanglement and reveal how neoliberalism complicates the online content generated by feminist Instapoets.

As previously mentioned, critics have interpreted Instapoets' feeds as catering to neoliberal ideals (Beeston et al. 7) or even encouraging narcissism (Roberts). Jones agrees that the digital invites narcissism, as it "places us at the center of our world": "the personal feeds of social media are designed to converge upon us so that we become the ideal viewer. . . . Partiality becomes a normalized condition, and it is easy to forget that our curated timeline is unique to us" (Ibid.). Simultaneously, social media platforms like Instagram are highly competitive: users may fear that other users "have more followers, get more likes, have more content to share" (Ibid.). To

become popular on Instagram, users must give their audience "the perception of access" to their personal life (Manning 267). In doing so, however, many Instagram users employ "life-perfecting hacks and self-optimization techniques" to portray their lives and bodies as desirable (Ibid. 266). Consequently, the platform has been criticised "for the mask it places over the true interior lives, for unregulated advertising, and for the complete manipulation of one's face and body [through Photoshop]" (Ibid.). Therefore, Instapoets' platform unsettles the boundaries between the personal and the public (Ibid. 267), and between the authentic and the performed (Ibid. 264).

For Manning, the tension between Instagram's inclination towards artifice and Instapoetry's self-proclaimed authenticity is one of the central paradoxes of the genre (275). After all, the use of social media requires Instapoets to engage in self-branding, which entails "the creation and presentation of an 'edited self'" (Ibid. 256). Blain agrees that Instapoets subscribe to the neoliberal vision of the individual as "a form of investment, a form of social capital": "successful Instapoets understand the importance of constructing a certain identity, and the intrinsic connection this identity has to their value." Consequently, their Instagram accounts are "somewhere in between a business and personal profile" (Manning 275), and authenticity, then, becomes a central aspect of this constructed identity. Therefore, Miller has argued that Kaur's authenticity "is also a highly specific and often problematic performance." Manning rightfully wonders: "How can we begin to tell authentic stories on a website that so privileges constructed and perfected narratives?" (265).

According to O'Donnell, this pressure to "perform [one's] life . . . [e.g.] on Instagram" can be harmful as it is "disruptive to any sense of acceptance of the deeply flawed human existences we carry" (317): online, many young people find themselves "liv[ing] out a fantasy under the public eye" (Ibid.). In an article entitled "Social Media and the Digital Gaze" (2018), art historian Christopher Jones discusses this "digital gaze" as an initially

"flattering invitation": "It beckons us to create a feast of our own lives, as if everyone else is hungry for what we might serve. . . . It's our best image served on a plate for open consumption." He continues:

> [t]o be successful on social media, one has to learn to exist with an audience in mind—and the greatest reward granted by this audience is the prize of attention. We are encouraged to put on a show, to create something celebratory (or sympathetic) from our opinions, tastes, and experiences. To elicit a response is to accrue a tiny portion of the capital that social media pretends to dole out.

In doing so, the chasm between one's "online and offline selves" becomes ever wider (Ibid.). Like "the male gaze", Jones argues, the digital gaze implies that "[w]e watch ourselves being watched . . . and thereby hand over power to those who survey us." Thus, technology becomes an intensified form of social surveillance (O'Donnell 317).

Instapoets are by no means exempt to this digital gaze. While Kaur follows zero other Instagram accounts and claims that she does not read the comments on her posts, she does have over 4 million followers (Schioldager). Saraswati argues that Kaur caters to what she terms "the neoliberal self(ie) gaze." Within such a "neoliberal self(ie)", the self must be "turned into a spectacle, which . . . then becomes phantasmagoria" in order to gain any currency on social media (34). Saraswati cites attractive positioning, backgrounds, accompanying narrative, and filters as examples of this neoliberal self(ie) gaze (Ibid.). Furthermore, the neoliberal self(ie) "always projects a 'positive affect'" in compliance with the neoliberal pressure to present a happy self (Ibid.). Consequently, neoliberal subjects depict themselves as "happy, entertaining, or successful, no matter what happens to them (even sexual harassment, violence, and abuse)" (Ibid.). Kaur's Instagram pictures (e.g. fig. 35) are indeed carefully arranged, against backdrops, from angles and in clothes that suggest her to be a "glamourous" and "successful cosmopolitan woman who travels the globe and is empowered, confident, and strong" (Ibid.). These neoliberal self(ie)s depict her as "appealing, inspiring, and entertaining, projecting an image of a successful, glamourous

self that holds economic currency in the visual digital market place" (Ibid. 38). Pâquet similarly observes that the "flattering images" on Kaur's Instagram feed often depict her as having reached "an inner peace that she can pass on to [the viewer], if only they buy her books of poetry" (299).

Figure 35. Rupi Kaur; photograph of Kaur advertising Inkbox tattoos; *Instagram*, 15 Jan. 2021, www.instagram.com/p/CKFDSM6BB8a/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 13 April 2021.

Instapoets' seeming desire to please the digital gaze or the neoliberal self(ie) gaze sometimes clashes with the messages that their poetry seeks to send. In November 2020, for example, Charly Cox posted images of herself posing in lingerie (fig. 36). Added onto the photographs is one of Cox's own poems, which reads:

> I am not yours
> To be beautiful for
> I do not clothe myself
> To be adored.
> The most finite of knowledge that I can keep steady
> Is that I am mine
> To feel sexy.

Figure 36. Charly Cox; photo collage with Instapoem "Sexy"; *Instagram,* 9 Nov. 2020, www.instagram.com/p/CHYOR4RsTSi/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 14 April 2021.

Nonetheless, the images clearly "[turn]" Cox' self "into a spectacle" (Saraswati 34) through apparel, poses, collage, filters, text, caption et cetera, and portray her as "happy, entertaining [and] successful", i.e. as an empowered and confident yet sexy woman (Ibid.). In neoliberal self(ie)s, it eventually becomes unclear "what is sold or considered a commodity" (Ibid. 35): Cox' picture can be read as advertising her poetry, her lingerie, the photo editing software she used, or Cox herself as "a neoliberal subject [with her] own brand on social media" (Ibid.). While Cox' poem sends a valuable message – that women should be able to interact with their bodies for their own pleasure, rather than the approval of others – its message resonates oddly with Instapoets' tendency to self-brand. Indeed, Cox' decision to share "sexy" images of herself can easily be understood as an act of neoliberal identity construction, and therefore more complex than the poet simply wanting "[t]o feel sexy" solely for herself.

While most Instapoets frequently express gratitude for the social media platforms that allowed them to garner a following, many of them have also commented on the downsides of social media usage. In 2016, for example, Kaur stated that without social media "the publishing world wouldn't have cared about this young, brown woman", yet she added that, "like most people", she has "[her] own personal, multi-dimensional battles with social media": "It can also swallow you up" (Schioldager). In 2018, Kaur posted on her Facebook account:

> [social media] gives us a space to carve a reality of ourselves by selectively choosing what we want people to see. so we share the good. the funny. the sexy. the inspiring. but rarely the ugly. the lonely. or confused. believe me. someone's profile could look like the most perfect thing- but no one's life comes close to perfect. . . . sometimes we have to logout to take care of our mental health. (Kaur, "sometimes you log onto social media")

Unlike other famous Instapoets, Charly Cox has thematised the dangers of digital life in her works. Her second collection, *Validate Me: A Life of Code-Dependency* (2019), centres around the idea of code-dependency, Cox' neologism for a habit of seeking validation online. The blurb reads:

> What is love? Baby don't hurt me… but please like my Instagram post.
>
> Hello, my name is Charly and I am code-dependent, so would you please, please just validate me?
>
> . . .
>
> This is an account of a life lived online. Swiping for approval. Scrolling for gratification. Searching for connection. From the glow of a screen in the middle of the night, to the harsh glare of the hospital waiting room, *Validate Me* is a raw and honest look at the highs and the lows of a digital life.
>
> The new voice of a generation, Charly's words have the power to make us all feel less alone.

Validate Me thematises the aforementioned disparity between one's "online and offline selves" (Jones). In "Click to Accept the Terms and Conditions", the poetic speaker invites the reader to sign up for social media, and thus to "Come be a person / That you never knew / Feel grand and feel gorgeous / Then feel worthless through and through" (18-19). "filters" similarly describes the experience of altering one's appearing through the use of Photoshop and VSCO (*she must be mad* 107-108). In her search for validation – "I feel pretty when I'm told I am" – the speaker deepens the divide between her true appearance and "Instagram's required / Mask": "My eyes a little brighter / My teeth a little whiter / My skin a little clearer / And my hair / ...accidentally a little greener" (Ibid.). The result leaves her feeling anxious, psychologically "confined . . . / Into an ugly 4x4 square of imprisonment", and commodified: "since when did I become an image to sell of a millennial with scraps of sanity as its price?" (Ibid.). As "filters" suggests, one's social media presence is often motivated by a desire for approval. In *Validate Me*'s titular poem, the poetic speaker repeatedly – and thus seemingly desperately – wonders "Do you like me? / Do you like me? / . . . / Please, would you just validate me?" (Ibid. 23-24). In this sense, code-dependency seems to refer to a state in which one defines one's worth and agency entirely in terms of the likes and views one receives online.

       Click to Accept the Terms and Conditions

       Shout a little louder
       Come a little closer
       Let me lead you into the void
       The blank expanse
       Let yourself fly in a seat
       That is pants
       Boom across a room
       That cares for you little
       Wipe off a slick
       Of your new hungry spittle
       That we'll sell you as gold
       Come grab a feel
       Of a hand you can't hold
       Come be a person
       That you never knew
       Feel grand and feel gorgeous

Then feel worthless and though
Take a trip down the tubes
Get settles in
Welcome, you're signed up
It's all about to begin. (Cox, *Validate Me* 18-19)

Filters

My eyes a little brighter
My teeth a little whiter
My skin a little clearer
And my hair
…accidentally a little greener
The contrast of the exposure
Is not one that's clearer
The definition of the portrait
Is one of a heavyweight
Photoshopper
VSCO-er
I feel pretty when I'm told I am
I feel pretty when it's as cold as
I'm a barefaced liar
#NoFilter filter
A scared-faced beauty in disguise
A normal looking human being
But my profile picture has you surprised
As though it's an image I'd been dreaming
The resemblance is close
My jawline is still mine
And my nose is still my nose
But would I still be of anyone's desire
If I wasn't hidden behind Instagram's required
Mask?
The mask of a fool
The mask of the twenty-first-century cruel world
Or the mask of a self-conscious tryna be cool girl
Does it matter?
I still sit and pixelate
Digitally deliberate, cut into an aesthetic looking ball
Until my anxiety is a candidate for Britain's Next Top face of the intimidated
My idea of beauty was once so different
So why have I confined that wonder
Into an ugly 4x4 square of imprisonment?
That has parameters smaller than the size of my thighs and is duller
Than the natural gradient of my eyes.
I sit back so often with a chest thudding sigh
Scrolling

Refreshing
Relentless tapping
All down to an art
And think
Since when did I ignore my own heart to hack at my own life?
And since when did I become and image to sell of a millennial with scraps of sanity as its price?
(Cox, *she must be mad* 107-108)

Validate Me Part 1
…
Is this what we'll die of?
Vapid monsters in a sea of breeding nonsense, jealousy
Portraits of unfulfilled and pretty
Best lives of misery
Rooted to mis-sold faith in a downloaded commodity
Do you like me?
Do you like me?
I don't know who I am anymore
I don't know who you are
Fascinate me as I fabricate me
Castigate me as I congratulate me
Salivate as I let you navigate me
Masturbate at how inadequate I find me
I'm putting it all out to see
No idea of what I want or who I am sans vanity
No idea of how to please our grumbling society
No idea of where I can slip off silently
I'm in halves with who I'm wholly miscalculating
Please, would you just validate me? (Cox, *Validate Me* 23-24)

These critical poems about social media inhabit a complicated position in Cox' oeuvre, as the internet is central

to her authorship: she uses it to disseminate her poetry, and promote her books and herself. Moreover, her habit

of thematising internet culture makes her work even more inextricable from the Web. Finally, as Swain notes,

"[a]lthough *Validate Me* is hyper-aware of what it calls its own 'code-dependency', it still seeks validation [in]

admitting its addiction to the quick hit of online, click-bait 'fame'" (852): paradoxically, poems like "Validate Me

Part 1" are posted on Cox' social media, where they become a means of garnering likes. Cox herself commented

on this paradox when she posted "Validate Me" to her Instagram feed, captioned: "Every time I post on Instagram

I remind myself I wrote this poem and then hate myself a bit more. #VALIDATEME." (fig. 37).

Figure 37. Charly Cox; Validate Me; *Instagram*, 30 July 2020, www.instagram.com/p/CDRNlausAjT/, screenshot by author; accessed 12 Apr. 2021.

As Cox has confessed in interviews, her relationship with social media is deeply conflicted, and she has suffered from severe "digital burnout", "a type of exhaustion that can arise from overuse of digital technologies" (Thompson):

> Very similar to everyone, I have lived my life on my phone. Since the first book came out, I suddenly realised that everything that I was doing was orchestrated for an audience and the digital gaze that wasn't real and wasn't my own. . . . I suddenly felt this increase of pressure and anxiety and nervousness around who I was, what I was doing, what I was saying, and what I was thinking all the time. I realised that it was this constant outsourcing of validation that was in no way coming from an internal desire of wanting to be loved. It was like this machine-bred fear of what people I don't know and don't care about think of me. (Thompson)

Despite Cox' poetic and meta-textual critiques of social media, she remains active on platforms such as Instagram and Twitter, where she seemingly continues to feed the digital gaze (Jones) and the neoliberal self(ie) gaze (Saraswati 34) photographs that present her as attractive and interesting.

Figure 38. Charly Cox; self-proclaimed thirst trap; *Instagram,* 15 Dec. 2020, www.instagram.com/p/CI1IDdrM_iY/, screenshot by author; accessed 12 Apr. 2021.

In the caption of a December 2020 portrait (fig. 38), Cox even adds: "I don't have a caption this is just a thirst trap[12] because I feel unattractive today not even sorry x", thus affirming (albeit ironically) her problematic desire for validation. Interestingly, many commenters do tell Cox that she is "beautiful."

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12 "Thirst trap" is a slang term for "a social media post, especially a selfie or other photo, intended to elicit sexual attention, appreciation of one's attractiveness, or other positive feedback" ("thirst trap").

Figure 39. Charly Cox; black and white photograph of Cox in lingerie and a shirt; *Instagram*, 30 March 2021, www.instagram.com/p/CNC42uMMHLp/, screenshot by author; accessed 12 Apr. 2021.

When posting pictures of herself on Instagram, Cox habitually mocks social media's curated authenticity through the use of irony. Under a black-and-white photograph of Cox fixing her hair in an unbuttoned shirt (fig. 39), the poet wrote:

> A gratuitous pick of me being caught having ˜ accidentally ˜ left my shirt unbuttoned and ˜ candidly ˜ fixing my hair being TOTALLY unaware there's a photographer in the room. Afterwards, I drifted off into the bedroom and put on a silk négligé and recited poems to my lover as he sipped whiskey and drew on a roll up from our bed. He took a pause, bathed in the moment and uttered 'Charly, it's very important everyone who follows you buys both She Must Be Mad and Validate Me'.

While Cox is clearly mocking some of social media's hypocrisies – its faux authenticity, the suggestion of perfect lives, shameless self-promotion – she is simultaneously engaging in them, which makes it difficult to demarcate

which parts of her Instagram feed are meant to be read as parody, and which parts show Cox truly catering to the digital gaze. In a sense, she seems to be doing both at once: through mocking captions, Cox positions herself as superior to social media's pressures, while simultaneously still adding a photograph to her feed that qualifies her as attractive, glamourous, and (faux-)authentic. Cox' use of filters is similarly puzzling. In many of her Instagram stories, the poet is wearing a filter that makes her look made-up and conventionally beautiful (fig. 40) – and thus brings to mind the Instapoem "filters." Nonetheless, Cox' use of the filter is tinged with irony, as she remarks "what the fuck is this filter, no wonder we're all messed up." In this sense, her use of the filter can be read as commentary on Instagram's extreme filter culture. Simultaneously, however, the filter is still a way of enhancing her appearance. In April 2020, Cox similarly posted an image of herself in an obvious filter (fig. 41). The caption, which ironically states "no filter", mocks and exposes the fabricated nature of authenticity on social media – yet simultaneously, her ironic commentary can be read as a manner of justifying her use of the filter.
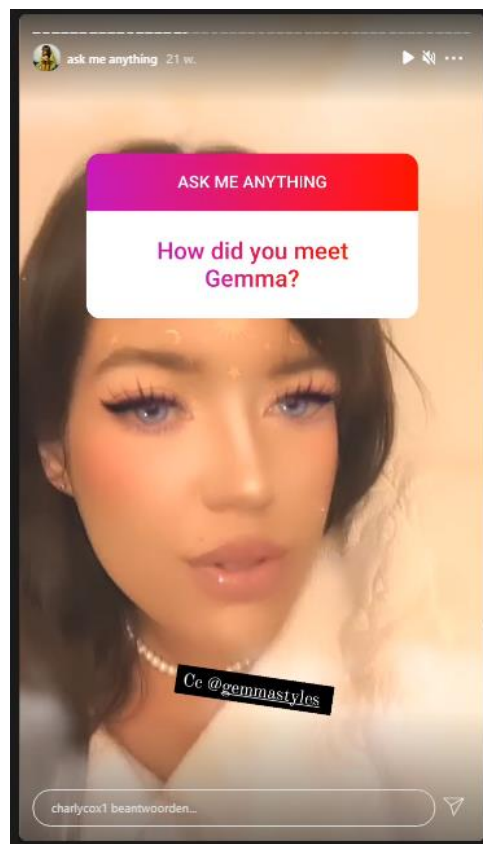

Figure 40. Charly Cox; Instagram story; *Instagram,* Nov. 2020, www.instagram.com/charlycox1/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 9 Apr. 2021.

Figure 41. Charly Cox; selfie with colourful filter; *Instagram*, 21 April 2020, www.instagram.com/p/CNC42uMMHLp/, screenshot by author; accessed 12 Apr. 2021.

Thompson characterises *Validate Me* as "a book for anyone who's ever swiped to feel less alone, felt the sting of self-comparison when they scrolled through their timeline, or only liked their own body when others tapped 'like' on a two-dimensional image of it." Such a relationship with the internet calls to mind the chick-lit heroine's relationship to fashion: on the one hand, social media can be seen as positive self-expression, yet it can also problematically come to define one's self-worth and agency. Whereas Harzewski remarked that typical chick-lit protagonists "can experience romance, desire, or self-esteem only through commodities" (*Chick-lit and Postfeminism* 12), The poetic speaker in Cox' Instapoetry can only experience the aforementioned through sharing and being liked. Like Kinsella's shopaholic, the poetic persona, who largely seems to overlaps with Cox herself, is "an addict" (Ibid. 12), albeit a self-aware one. In September 2020, Cox – again paradoxically – posted the following on Instagram:

[t]he Royal Society Of Public Health has found that social media is more addictive than smoking and alcohol and that using social media for more than two hours per day is associated with poor self-rating of mental health, increased levels of psychological distress and suicidal ideation. As well as young people rating 4/5 most popular platforms increasing anxiety. Take a day off, do something instead that will positively impact you. Dare ya. #iamwhole (Cox, "Digital Detox").

Social media is central to the definition of Instapoetry as a genre, and as a feminist genre: platforms such as Instagram have empowered Instapoets to share their writing and create an audience for themselves in spite of an unwelcoming publishing industry. Nonetheless, social media comes with new difficulties. Online, Instapoets exist under the digital gaze and the neoliberal self(ie) gaze. Consequently, they are forced to construct and commodify themselves to comply with neoliberal expectations. Extratextually, Rupi Kaur has acknowledged these pressures, yet the concept of social media is strangely absent from her poetry. Unlike other popular Instapoets, Charly Cox has published pieces about social media's complexities. However, these poems stand in a complicated relationship with the ongoing activity on Cox' social media accounts, which often critiques social media, yet simultaneously continues to suggest a form of "code-dependency." As Manning concluded in "Crafting Authenticity" (2020), Instapoetry "complicate[s] our understandings of how female poets tell their stories, interrupting easy classification of authenticity as well as presumptions about who digital cultures serve" (276).

As Bartels points out, neoliberal competitiveness has "resulted in people trying to monetize on any and everything": "This mentality has given rise to 'influencer culture' where the reputation and perception of an individual can become an entire business" (Hamar). Consequently, Instagram is "one of the most significant advertising locations to exist" (Manning 265): "The ability to curate the perfect reality and silence detractors creates fertile ground for advertisers", and consequently, "any user with even a moderate following is almost certain to be selling something" (Ibid.). Instapoets are clear examples of this: besides book sales, many Instapoets gain income by "harness[ing] e-commerce" or by collaborating with big companies. Therefore, Hill and Yuan have described the Instapoet as a poet-entrepeneur. While these poets should not be denounced for attempting to earn money off of their work, such commercial endeavours are sometimes at odds with their self-proclaimed feminist activism. Besides the fact that the perception that these poet-activists are "raking it in" complicates the authenticity of their activism (Pitt) – Sizemore even refers to Rupi Kaur as "the Instagram Influencer equivalent of Scrooge McDuck" –, Instapoets sometimes end up advertising products that go against the values communicated in their poetry. Therefore, this section will examine the complexities of Instapoets' commercial activities in the shape of personal merchandise or collaborations with brands.

As mentioned previously, many Instapoets have published some form of merchandising. This ranges from typical merchandise, such as T-shirts or prints, to more unexpected items, such as Kaur's pens or Lovelace's tarot decks. According to Saraswati, the production of merchandise may complicate Instapoets' feminism. She argues that Kaur's poetry prints "exemplif[y] the workings of neoliberalism as an alchemy that turns feminist healing poetry into a product that can be hung in one's home" (43). Kaur's clothing lines can be understood in similar fashion, as her feminist messages become domesticated on consumer items such as T-shirts or sweaters. From this perspective, pieces such as Kaur's "tear it down" T-shirt become highly ironic (fig. 42). While the shirt states that

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[13]Quotation taken from Kaur (*home body* 86)

"the future / world of our dreams / can't be built on the / corruptions of the past" (Ibid.), Kaur's merchandise turns the feminist into "an entrepreneur whose existence further legitimizes capitalism and capital accumulation" (Saraswati 43). Consequently, the very existence of this T-shirt is deeply entangled with "the / corruptions of the past", although it must be noted that most of Kaur's merchandise claims to be "ethically sourced and sustainably manufactured" ("tear it down' T-shirt").

Figure 42. Rupi Kaur's 'tear it down' T-shirt; *Rupi Kaur,* n.d., www.rupikaur.com/collections/clothing/products/ tear-it-down-t-shirt-in-white, screenshot taken by author; accessed 13 May 2021.

Besides their own merchandise, many popular Instapoets earn money off of paid partnerships with brands. At times, such partnerships clash with the message their oeuvre sends. Charly Cox, for example, has published Instagram posts that advertise products from brands as diverse as Bentley Motors, Garden of Life, Lelo, DuoBoots, Dell, and Trip Drinks (e.g. fig. 43). Such paid partnerships again stand in odd contrast with Cox' cynical poems about social media's inauthenticity or self-care as an advertising strategy.

Figure 43. Charly Cox; advertisement on Instagram for Bentley Motors; *Instagram*, 21 March 2021, www.instagram.com/p/CMrawq7MERS/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 13 Apr. 2021.

Even more puzzling are some of Cleo Wade's paid partnerships. Wade frequently collaborates with big brands, such as Nike or Gucci (Gordon). Her Instapoetry "promotes female solidarity, self-empowerment, kindness, and well-being mantras in broad-stroke terms" (Vickery 80). As mentioned previously, Wade has written multiple body-positive pieces that push back against societal beauty standards, as is the case in "it's all beautiful" (fig. 44).

it's all beautiful

why should I
believe in
flaws?

because there is one way that we are all supposed to look?
because someone is selling me something to make me look
more like someone else?

so a company can profit off of not only my money but also my
self-esteem?

because as long as there is a standard of beauty, one type of
person can be celebrated while the rest of us are left out?

wanting, starving, shaming and hating our beautiful bodies.

why should I
believe in
flaws?

whoever created the concept
does not believe in
me.

let us no longer "embrace our flaws"; we have none. I am me
you are you.

it's all beautiful.

Figure 44. Cleo Wade; it's all beautiful; *Facebook*, 9 Dec. 2019, www.facebook.com/cleowadeofficial/photos/a. 543763129386812/823170988112690/?type=3, screenshot taken by author; accessed 12 April 2021.

On 11 March 2021, however, Wade posted a selfie to her Instagram account, in which she is holding a bottle of Estée Lauder Advanced Night Repair (fig. 45). The post's description reads:

> I am so glad the conversation on beauty continues to shift so that women are free from the idea that there is a right or wrong way to look or feel as we go through the many phases of our lives. I partnered with @esteelauder on their #AdvancedNightRepair campaign to change how we look at and talk about aging, and thank goodness for that. I am grateful that phrases/concepts like "act your age" or "look your age" are becoming a thing of the past and women can simply be themselves. No matter where we are in our life, we are right on time. We are perfectly age appropriate whenever we are being fully ourselves. Be you. Do what feels good. #EsteePartner #GenerationANR

Figure 45. Cleo Wade; Estée Lauder advertisement; *Instagram*, 11 March 2021, www.instagram.com/p/CMSxl0 pjUaV/, screenshot taken by author; accessed 12 Apr. 2021.

As indicated above the description, this post is the result of a paid partnership with Estée Lauder. In an Estée Lauder commercial, Wade shares that she

> tr[ies] to contribute to the beauty conversation by reminding people that this idea that there are certain
>
> standards is so outdated, and what's so excited about the time that we are living in, is that we are
>
> defining and redefining it constantly. We are for the first time defining beauty in a way that feels so
>
> right and … good … and free, and I just hope to contribute to that freedom. ("Beauty in Me" 0:05-0:47)

Nonetheless, the product line she is advertising, is one of anti-aging serums. Under "benefits", the company's website states that the serum "fights the appearance of key signs of ageing around your eyes" ("Advanced Night

Repair"). The product's description, as well as its very existence, suggests that "fine lines, wrinkles, dark circles, and dryness" must be 'fought' (Ibid.). In order to recover a "youthful look of light", women are encouraged to buy the serum, which costs £105 for a 75ml bottle (Ibid.). In this sense, the campaign seems to contrast starkly with the message that speaks from Instapoems like "it's all beautiful": by using terms such as "fight[ing]", "reduc[ing]" and "reset[ting]", Estée Lauder's serums suggest that female consumers should "believe in / flaws" ("it's all beautiful"), and invest in making them disappear. Put cynically, one could consider Wade's advertising of anti-aging serums as a way of helping "a company . . . profit off of not only [women's] money but also [their] self-esteem" (Ibid.).

Poets like Wade are attractive advertising tools for companies, since "authenticity" is increasingly becoming a major marketing tactic, as Goldston reported in an article on the New York Fashion Week's changing marketing strategies (4). As an increasing number of attendees had begun to "skip shows . . . because, heck, they could just watch them online", brands are now striving "to create intimate scenarios with influencers, buyers, and the press" (Ibid.). Goldston cites the example of Roland Mouret, who introduced his new perfume line with a personal appearance and a performance by Cleo Wade (Ibid.). Such events are "intended to build more authenticate consumer connections in less manufactured environments" (Ibid.). Cameron Silver agrees: "Today's designers and brands must personally attend to their clients which will result in strong bonds. Consumer interface can be both physical and digital, but it has to be honest and emotional" (Ibid.). This authenticity tactic can be observed in "brands everywhere" (Ibid. 2). Indeed, Wade's Estée Lauder post can be understood as a form of "honest and emotional" digital consumer interface, as it strongly emphasises Wade's feelings of "grateful[ness]" and the importance of "being fully ourselves" (Ibid.).

The tension between Wade's feminism and commercialism has not gone unnoticed: interviewers, such as Bauck for *Fashionista,* have wondered if there is "any tension for [Wade] in walking the line between art, activism and

commerce." In response, Wade habitually frames her partnerships with companies as a form of activism or "contribut[ing] to the social causes that are important to [her and her business partner]" (Ibid.). When discussing her partnership with Aerie, for example, Wade underscores that she decided to collaborate with the company because it is "fun and morally and ethically aligned with things that [she] believe[s] in" (Ibid.):

> I started looking at the company and the training they do . . . and how inclusive their sizing is and how they don't use retouching. I had a big crush from afar. And then when I actually got to work with them, I fell so madly in love with everyone . . . they were so passionate and proud to be a part of creating a new way for young girls to look at images of themselves. (Ibid.)

One may argue that Wade, too, is using authenticity as a marketing tool: by underscoring honesty and emotions – in this case, her "crush", "love", "[passion]", "[pride]" (Ibid.) – Wade portrays herself as authentic and non-commercial. In 2018, the Instapoet stated: "My business partner and I never say yes to any project where we don't see the impact. I would never do something for my own personal visibility alone. I would never do something for money alone" (Bauck). As Wade's commentary suggests, however, it must of course be taken into account that paid partnerships do provide "personal visibility" and "money" for Wade, and one might wonder how big the societal impact of her Estée Lauder selfie was, exactly.

Nonetheless, Wade seems to be deeply aware of the tension between commercialism, art, and activism. To Bauck's aforementioned question specifically, the Instapoet replied:

> I'm a kind of progressive person, tried and true, and I will never say no to being able to gain 20 feet, even if I want 40 feet. . . . I think that we get into a really dangerous space when we think that if we want to make any type of change, that it can only look this one way that is perfect across the board. I think we're all fighting the good fight for a better world, or at least I try to align myself with people

who I know are doing that. . . . I obviously don't think we need to betray our moral compass to do that, but . . . I don't think that standing on a moral high ground makes that possible because it's a refusal to acknowledge the way the systems are working, and I think it's also a refusal to acknowledge that people and structures are imperfect.

Albeit somewhat vaguely, Wade makes the point that collaborating with multinational companies may not be the most "perfect" form of activism, but that it is naïve to denounce such activism from a moral high-ground, as all "structures are imperfect" (Ibid.). She adds that "[e]very industry has political power because anything that has organized groups of people has the ability to challenge the status quo" (Ibid.). Additionally, brand collaborations can be seen as a means of building a platform for one's activist writing:

Back in the day, you'd just have your show and hopefully get signed to a gallery . . . Now you do a partnership with Armani where you align your messaging for both of your audiences. You attract the people in the world who feel or believe the same things with you at the same time, and want to create a space to further that messaging. (Ibid.)

Indeed, it must be noted that Wade has done activism beyond her collaborations with big companies: she has been active on the boards of non-profit organizations such as the Women's Prison Association, Free Arts, the National Black Theatre, and Emily's List ("Cleo Wade Editorial"). As of March 7th 2021, her website's homepage was replaced by a list of source materials "about ways to stand in solidarity with Asian Americans in our communities", in response to a recent surge in hate crimes (fig. 46). Nonetheless, the commercial and digital nature of Wade's brand continues to complicate her activism, as one might argue that Wade's non-profit work directs attention to her Instagram account and poetry, thus heightening her fame and financial income.

Figure 46. Cleo Wade; Cleo Wade homepage; _Cleo Wade,_ n.d., www.cleowade.com, screenshot by author; accessed

13 May 2021.

i was trying to fit into a system
that left me empty

- _capitalism_

Figure 47. Rupi Kaur; capitalism; _home body,_ Simon & Schuster UK, 2020, p. 104.

To complicate matters even further, certain Instapoets have published poems that reject capitalism. Rupi Kaur's third collection, *home body* (2020), contains a section entitled "rest", which thematises the neoliberal pressure to be perfect and productive. A poem subtitled "capitalism" (fig. 47) states: "i was trying to fit into a system / that left me empty" (*home body* 104). The accompanying image depicts an unhappy human figure running in a hamster wheel, sweating and holding a briefcase. As has been sufficiently made clear, however, Kaur's Instapoetry is – and continues to be – a highly commercial business, which is thoroughly entangled with capitalism and neoliberalism. "productivity anxiety", one of Kaur's longer poems, thematises the neoliberal pressure to continuously self-improve, or:

> the sick need
> to optimise every hour of my day
> so i'm improving in some way
> making money in some way
> advancing my career in some way. (*home body* 89)

The poem continues: "i excavate my life / package it up / sell it to the world / and when they ask for more / i dig through the bones / trying to write poems" (Ibid.), seemingly reflecting on Kaur's own authorship. As was the case in some of Cox' poems, this adds a paradoxical layer of self-awareness to her work, since the Instapoem "productivity anxiety" itself is also a means of "making money [and] advancing [Kaur's] career, as well as a part of her life "package[d] up / [sold] . . . to the world" (Ibid.).

> i have this productivity anxiety
> that everyone else is working harder than me
> and i'm going to be left behind
> cause i'm not working fast enough
> long enough
> and i'm wasting my time
>
> i don't sit down to have breakfast
> i take it to go
> i call my mother when i'm free—otherwise
> it takes too long to have a conversation

i put off everything that
won't bring me closer to my dreams
as if the things i'm putting off
are not the dream themselves

isn't the dream
that i have a mother to call
and a table to eat breakfast at

instead i'm lost in the sick need
to optimize every hour of my day
so i'm improving in some way
making money in some way
advancing my career in some way
because that's what it takes
to be successful
right

i excavate my life
package it up
sell it to the world
and when they ask for more
i dig through bones
trying to write poems

capitalism got inside my head
and made me think my only value
is how much i produce
for people to consume
capitalism got inside my head
and made me think
i am of worth
as long as i am working

i learned impatience from it
i learned self-doubt from it
learned to plant seeds in the ground
and expect flowers the next day

but magic
doesn't work like that
magic doesn't happen
cause i've figured out how to
pack more work in a day
magic moves
by the laws of nature
and nature has its own clock
magic happens

when we play
when we escape
daydream and imagine
that's where everything
with the power to fulfill us
is waiting on its knees for us

- productivity anxiety (Ibid. 88-90)

As this section has demonstrated, Instapoets' commercial endeavours often complicate the activist messages that their work seeks to send. Their own merchandise arguably domesticates and deradicalises feminist messages by transforming them into consumer goods (Saraswati 43), and paid partnerships sometimes stand in odd contrast with their oeuvre's central values, e.g. when the body positive Wade collaborated with the beauty industry. Instapoets are prized marketing tools due to their curated authenticity, which Wade herself uses to portray her commercial ventures as genuine feminist activism. Nonetheless, it must be recognised that Instapoets like Wade do engage in impactful activism through or alongside their paid partnerships – although this activism can again be understood as a means of gaining personal visibility. Due to the genre's deeply commercial nature, Kaur's critical poems about capitalism contrast oddly with her merchandise lines, as well as the previously discussed sales figures, tours, "Team Rupi", and the deeply neoliberal ideas that underlie many of her poems.

4. Conclusion

In *Pain Generation: Social Media, Feminist Activism, and the Neoliberal Selfie* (2021), Saraswati devoted a chapter to the "neoliberal logic" of Rupi Kaur's depictions of pain and healing. This thesis sought to identify and examine the neoliberal aspects of popular feminist Instapoetry more broadly. As Saraswati is one of the first scholars to study Instapoetry through the lens of neoliberal feminism, this thesis used the vast body of scholarship on chick-lit's neoliberal and consumerist (post)feminism as a stepping stone. Both genres are largely by, for, and about women (Gromley), as well as highly commercial: alongside unprecedented sales figures, the success of both genres has translated into screen adaptations, merchandising, and performances. While both genres have been termed inherently feminist, they are also deeply controversial from a feminist viewpoint. Despite chick-lit's often unorthodox portrayal of feminism, though, the genre is not simply non-feminist. Therefore, scholars such as Harzewski and Montoro use the idea of postfeminism to make sense of chick-lit's complicated relationship with the women's movement. This "shopping-and-fucking feminism" (Goldberg) centres ideas of empowerment, choice, and consumerism while continuing to comply with patriarchal expectations of women. Scholars like Rottenberg and Butler and Desai use the notion of neoliberal feminism, which revolves around ideas of personal choice, personal responsibility, and continuous self-investment.

Although Instapoets embrace feminism while chick-lit authors distance themselves from it, Instapoetry's feminism is controversial for similar reasons, i.e. its entanglement with neoliberalism. Although Instapoetry does not share chick-lit's preoccupation with diets, clothes, and make-up, the genre is still highly self-centered: the poetic speaker cannot seem to "take [their] eyes off of [them]sel[ves]" (Kaur). From a neoliberal feminist viewpoint, these Instapoems seem to be echoing the neoliberal rhetoric of personal choice and responsibility. Firstly, the idea of "having choices" is very present in the oeuvres of Instapoets such as Amanda Lovelace and Rupi Kaur. Their tone is oftentimes postfeminist, as traditionally feminine choices are often defended from "bad feminists" who denounce femininity. Secondly, many Instapoems implicitly place the responsibility for one's

success with the individual, thus directing the attention away from structural inequalities. Simultaneously, however, most Instapoets do underscore the importance of female community, and reject neoliberal competition among women. Moreover, certain poems gesture towards the existence of structural issues and the importance of collective action.

The neoliberal rhetoric of personal responsibility is especially present within body positive Instapoems, as the Body Positivity Movement itself has become mainstreamed and commercialised. Mainstream Body Positivity (Darwin and Miller) or LYB discourse (Gill and Elias) – the type of body positivity which predominantly features in Instapoetry – emphasises personal responsibility and glosses over the structural causes of negative body image, suggesting that the solution is individual and mental in nature. Due to the emphasis on empowering "sexiness" and make-up (which even extends to the authors' "gorge factor"), Instapoetry's body positivity also veers into postfeminist territory. Some Instapoems contain traces of other strands of the Body Positive Movement, such as Fat Positivity, Radical Body Positivity, and Body Neutrality, with the former two emphasising the systemic nature of body image issues. Nonetheless, these poems typically remain vague in tone, and the proposed solutions for structural problems are often pitched on a personal, mental level. Finally, most Instapoets have also published pieces that portray negative body image without attaching a body positive message. Interestingly, Charly Cox' especially ironic take on this calls to mind the insecure chick-lit heroine.

A second exemplary site of neoliberal entanglement is the trope of self-care, which recurs in the work of most Instapoets. Although self-care used to be a radical and political concept (as formulated by Audre Lorde), it has since become mainstreamed and co-opted as a marketing tool. Self-care Instapoems, as well as Instapoets' merchandise and poetry collections, can be read as participating in this capitalist hype which promises women that they will feel fulfilled if they buy certain consumer goods. Paradoxically, Charly Cox and Rupi Kaur have both

published Instapoems that reject commercial self-care. Despite this neoliberal co-optation, the idea of self-care continues to be a valuable political concept to some, and should thus not be denounced too readily.

Subsequently, this thesis examined Instapoetry's relationship with the "neoliberalizing machine" (Saraswati 42) that is social media. While it must be recognised that Instagram is a powerful tool for feminists of colour, the individualistic, competitive and curated world of social media does come with certain risks and complexities. While Instapoetry revolves around the suggestion of authenticity, social media forces Instapoets to self-brand by constructing an identity that hold social capital. In doing so, they have to cater to the digital gaze (Jones) or the neoliberal self(ie) gaze (Saraswati), which demands that they present themselves as "appealing, inspiring, and entertaining, projecting an image of a successful, glamourous self that holds economic currency in the visual digital market place" (Ibid. 38). Instapoets like Kaur and Cox have commented on these digital pressures. Cox' *Validate Me* (2019) even revolves around the dangers of online validation-seeking. Simultaneously, of course, the poet continues to cater to the digital gaze and the neoliberal self(ie) gaze, which makes her critical commentary about social media highly paradoxical.

Finally, one must also take into account the fact that Instagram is rife with advertising and commerce (Manning 265). Many Instapoets gain income by selling merchandise and having paid partnerships with brands. According to Saraswati, however, selling feminist messages in the shape of decorative items problematically neoliberalises and depoliticises them. Furthermore, certain brand partnerships – such as Wade's with Estée Lauder – resonate oddly with and raise complex questions about the poet's feminist writing and activism. The same can be said of Rupi Kaur's poems that denounce capitalism, as her authorship is deeply neoliberal and commercial in nature.

Instapoetry has often been ridiculed for its perceived simplicity (Miller). Hopefully, this thesis has demonstrated that the genre is, in fact, highly complex due to the often paradoxical interplay between commerciality and

authenticity, truth and artifice, activism and neoliberalism that the previous chapters sought to reveal and examine. As was noted in the introduction, this thesis presents a limited sample of highly popular "Instapoets", all of which "[write] in a similar aesthetic, [use] the medium of Instagram, and [present] a challenge to the performance of selfhood in their work" (Manning 267). Thus, the findings presented in this research cannot and should not be generalised to a broader definition of Instapoetry. Further research is needed to examine how the work of other (less popular, more radical) contemporary (Insta)poets might unsettle and counter this neoliberal logic.

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