

УДК 821.111

**ТІЛЕСНЕ, ВІЗУАЛЬНЕ, ЦИФРОВЕ: ДИНАМІКА ТИПОГРАФІЧНОГО ВИСУНЕННЯ В
ІНСТАПОЕЗІЇ РУПІ КАУР**

Ірина Оніщук

студентка 6 курсу Факультету романо-германської філології
Київський столичний університет імені Бориса Грінченка

ironishchuk.frgf23m@kubg.edu.ua

**PHYSICAL, VISUAL, DIGITAL: THE DYNAMICS OF TYPOGRAPHIC FOREGROUNDING IN
RUPİ KAUR'S INSTAPOETRY**

Iryna Onishchuk

6th-year student of the Faculty of Romance and Germanic Philology
Borys Grinchenko Kyiv Metropolitan University

ironishchuk.frgf23m@kubg.edu.ua

У статті проаналізовано феномен Інстапоезії як сучасного прояву візуальної поезії, що функціонує в межах цифрового простору, зокрема на платформі Instagram. Основна увага зосереджена на творчості Рупі Каур, а саме її збірці «Milk and Honey» як яскравому прикладові мультимодального підходу до поетичного висловлювання. Окремо розглянуто типографічне висунення як одну з головних ознак Інстапоезії, що проявляється у просторовій організації тексту, використанні шрифтів, візуальних елементів та відсутності класичних поетичних ознак – рими, пунктуації та традиційної строфи. Рупі Каур вміло поєднує вербальний і візуальний компоненти для посилення емоційного ефекту, створюючи унікальну поетичну форму, яка резонує з молодіжною аудиторією та відображає актуальні соціальні та психологічні теми: травму, любов, самоідентифікацію, фемінність та самозцілення. Також досліджено суперечливе ставлення до Інстапоезії у літературному середовищі, в якому вона часто критикується за поверховість. Водночас постмодерна перспектива дозволяє побачити в ній новий рівень інтеграції мистецтва, особистості та соціального посилу. Виявлено, що Інстапоезія постає не лише як літературна форма, а також як дизайнерське рішення, де поет виконує роль куратора естетичного простору власного твору. Окрім зовнішнього візуального оформлення, досліджено і внутрішню структуру поезії: варіативність шрифтів, відсутність пунктуації, використання курсиву як засобу мовного підкреслення тощо. Інстапоезія у своїй сутності – це глибока емоційна відповідь на цифрову добу, де кожен користувач може стати учасником літературного процесу. Він може не лише давати зворотній зв'язок, а і продукувати власні зразки. Еволюція інстапоезії демонструє трансформацію читачької культури, що переходить від пасивного сприйняття до інтерактивної взаємодії з текстом, зокрема через коментарі, репости та персоналізовані візуальні інтерпретації, а також нові форми читачької рецепції в умовах діджиталізації культури. Визначено перспективи подальших досліджень у площині впливу діджиталізованої культури та гешигетових практик на формування поезії, створеної не лише людьми, а й штучним інтелектом.

Ключові слова: Інстапоезія, Рупі Каур, типографічне висунення, візуальна поезія, сучасна поезія, цифрова естетика.

The article aims at outlining phenomenon of Instapoetry as a contemporary manifestation of visual poetry that functions within the digital space, in particular on the Instagram platform. The main focus is on the work of Rupi Kaur, in particular “Milk and Honey” as a vivid example of a multimodal approach to poetic expression. Special attention is paid to typographic foregrounding as one of the main

features of Instapoetry, which is manifested in the spatial organisation of the text, the use of fonts, visual elements and the absence of canonical poetic features such as rhyme, punctuation and traditional stanza. Rupi Kaur skilfully combines verbal and visual components to enhance the emotional effect, creating a unique poetic form that resonates with the young audience and reflects current social and psychological topics: trauma, love, self-identity, femininity, and self-healing. The paper examines the conflicting attitude to Instapoetry in the literary environment, where it is often criticised for superficiality, while the postmodern perspective allows us to see a new level of integration of art, personality and social message. The findings indicate that Instapoetry appears not only as a literary form, but also as an arrangement solution, where the poet acts as a curator of the aesthetic space of his own work. In addition to the external visual design, the internal structure of the poems is also studied: the variation of fonts, the lack of punctuation, the use of italics as a means of linguistic emphasis, etc. Instapoetry is essentially a deep emotional response to the digital age, where every user can become a participant in the literary process. They can not only give feedback but also produce their own samples. Its evolution demonstrates the transformation of reader culture, which is moving from passive perception to interactive interaction with the text, in particular through comments, reposts and personalised visual interpretations, as well as new forms of reader reception in the context of digitalisation of culture. Identified research perspectives on how digital culture and hashtag practices influence the creation of poetry by both humans and artificial intelligence.

Keywords: *Instapoetry, Rupi Kaur, typographic foregrounding, visual poetry, contemporary poetry, digital aesthetics.*

Introduction. Nowadays, the application of social media is well establishing itself as an integral part of life. This is being experienced by book and other pop-culture media enthusiasts who devote their time online, sharing their reviews and/or making cosplays of their favoured characters, thereby enhancing the surreal. Digital platforms are saturated with the next juxtapositions: hyper-detailed aesthetics coexist with glitches when algorithmic content oscillates between the familiar and the strange. In this online landscape, vibrant communities of book lovers, pop culture fans, and cosplayers become active curators and co-creators of digital dreams (Yip, 2020; Bhattacharya, 2024).

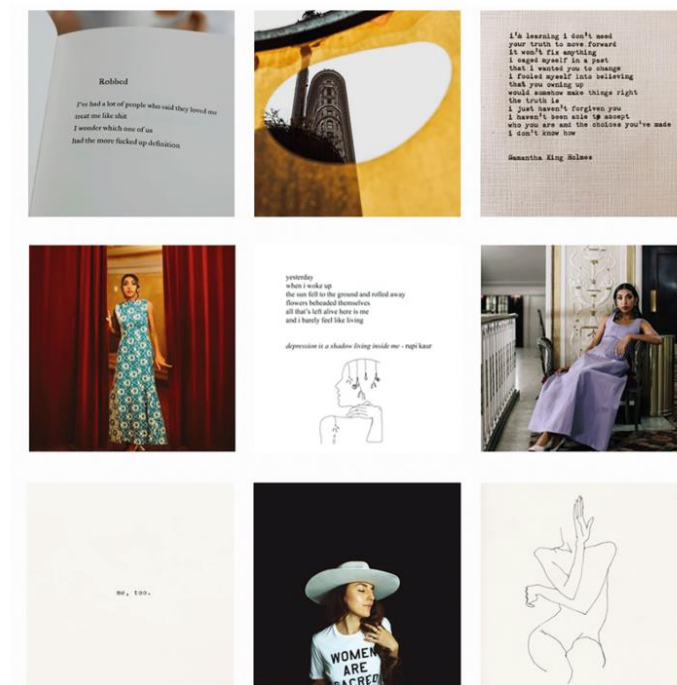
However, some of them opt to pursue the example of their icons or legendary poets in a different way. The latter develop their creations, specifically poetry, by employing literary deviations in layout or design. As a result, this phenomenon is evolving into the digitalisation of literature on well-known social media platforms (Instagram, X, Facebook, Threads, and Reddit). Having chosen one of them, precisely, Instagram, from a purely poetic standpoint, the world obtains Instapoetry.

Literary review. Instapoetry is one of the tendencies of contemporary visual poetry. It implies the presentation of personal works and accomplishments exclusively online via the Meta platform – Instagram. No sole originator of the movement can be identified. The movement has evolved owing to young amateurs who aimed to broaden their reading horizons and, in fact, the audience of similar admirers (“*The Legitimacy of Instapoetry: Why we need it to save poetry publishing*”, 2018). The most outstanding representatives of this poetry movement are Rupi Kaur, r.m. drake, r.h. Sin, Cleo Wade and others.

The particularities of this movement are: 1) conciseness and brevity of expression (straightforward and short lines); 2) lack of rhyme; 3) concerns that are relevant to the present (McElwee, 2017). The third criterion

encompasses the themes of politics, harassment, abuse, military conflict, and LGBTQ issues (The Canadian Press, 2018). Undoubtedly, just like any other form of typographic foregrounding, Instapoetry adheres to the following specifications: 1) the spatial organisation around the text; 2) the use of visual aids such as drawings and icons, at the request of the author; 3) the implementation of fonts as an auxiliary tool for visual impression (Wilson, 2017). The most important postulate of Instapoetry is the dissemination of creativity under multimedia materials or creativity itself as multimedia combined with current trends. Poets often pair their verses with illustrations, photographs, or stylised typography to enhance emotional impact and engagement. This multimedia approach transforms poetry into a hybrid art form, making it more shareable and appealing on social media (Knox et al., 2023). Figure 1 below demonstrates an example of the design of an Instagram profile where Rupi Kaur's photographs are intertwined with her art (Leszkiewicz, 2019):

Figure 1. Instapoetry.



In the digitalised world, it enables creativity to be distributed and reposted to other apps.

Yet, despite all the excitement, the poetic space of Instagram is also criticised. Both the characteristics of the phenomenon itself and the superficial impression of them are being condemned. In particular, Penke claims that Instapoetry eliminates deep reflection, unlike traditional poetry. Rather, online poetry replicates trends that empower everyone to compose, and as a result, poetry as such is depreciated (Penke, 2019). Whereas the fundamental premises of Jean-François Lyotard was that postmodern knowledge is fragmented, multiple, and lacking a single metanarrative framing, provide a way to comprehend poetry as a meaningful text that resides on the intersection of lyrics, visual art, and social message (Lyotard, 1984). Similarly, poetry's increasing entanglement with social commentary transforms it from a static literary object into an interactive dialogue, where themes of identity, justice, and cultural critique emerge through fragmented, non-linear storytelling. In this sense, poetry resists confinement – it is performative, existing not as a fixed text but as an ongoing interaction between poet, reader, and cultural context. By rejecting overarching metanarratives, poetry mirrors

the plurality and instability that define postmodern knowledge, making it an ever-evolving space for discourse, reflection, and reinterpretation.

Aim. This article aims at singling out the dominative features of Instapoetry as a poetic genre as well as its role in the context of typographic foregrounding.

Results of the research. For the analysis, we have selected poetic samples by a contemporary Canadian poet Rupi Kaur, namely from her collection of poems “Milk and Honey”. It is one of the pioneering collections of Instapoetry, which was published in a limited edition and won the favour of numerous readers, notably those who were not interested in poetry as such (Kaur, 2015).

The first poem, which serves as a preface, instantly showcases the principle of straightforwardness inherent in Instapoetry, as it highlights the background of the compilation:

“my heart woke me crying last night
how can i help i begged
my heart said
write the book” (Kaur, 2015)

Rupi, experiencing some psychological trauma, is struggling to cope with the pain she has suffered (“my heart woke me crying last night” (Kaur, 2015)). This forces her to release all her emotional turmoil in the form of verse, which is rooted in one of the aspects of Instapoetry – the contemporary issues.

The example under consideration is “white”, i.e., non-rhymed. The foregrounding in the work is both internal (the absence of punctuation and capitalisation – “i begged” (Kaur, 2015), which in turn resembles the style of youth texting on a messenger, as well as the use of italics as a means of denoting direct speech – “write the book” (Kaur, 2015)), and also external. The poem’s arrangement in the shape of a speaker suggests Rupi’s intention to be heard in the manner in which she listened to her heart (“how can i help i begged” (Kaur, 2015)).

The subsequent contributions of Kaur’s compilation are categorised into four sections, each of which portrays the process of experiencing and transforming the poet’s personality. There is a preface, “hurting”, “loving”, “breaking”, and “healing”.

One of the analysed poems is included in the section “the hurting”. The main focus of the poem is generational trauma and gaslighting, specifically as well as acknowledging how easy it is to stigmatise any person on the basis of their parents’ appearance and temperament. From the viewpoint of the textual organisation, it is likely a dialogue between Rupi’s father and the author herself. The father’s remarks are at the beginning of the line, while Kaur’s remarks are indented:

“you look just like your mother
i guess i do carry her tenderness well <...>” (Kaur, 2015)

Throughout the conversation, it turns out that both Rupi’s mother’s stay in this marriage and the author’s life in such a family are unbearable. In poetry and literature broader authors often try to show the inner world of the character through description of or comment on his/her eyes. Kaur does the same in her poetry:

“<...> you both have the same eyes
cause we are both exhausted <...>” (Kaur, 2015)

It is also evident that the abusive environment has an adverse impact on the women in the family:

“<...> and the hands
we share the same wilting fingers <...>” (Kaur, 2015)

Nevertheless, Rupi manages to confront her father and protest in a way that she could not inherit anything good from her father except rage:

“<...> this rage is the one thing
i get from my father <...>” (Kaur, 2015)

Another sample of Instapoetry originates from the series “The loving”, in which Rupi makes no attempt to embrace the construct of love for both herself and her partner. The focus is not on material values, but on spiritual ones. For her, one of these values is the smell of her significant other:

“my favorite thing about you is your smell...” (Kaur, 2015)

Moreover, it is noteworthy that this verse is an instance where typographic foregrounding creates a suggestive effect, which comes at play when poetry is treated foremost as an experience of the reader (for more, see van Peer and Chesnokova, 2022). The arrangement in the form of a spice container emphasises all the potential notes of the scent, distinguishing each word with a separate line, allowing the reader to both imagine and experience the smell simultaneously, thus enhancing the poetic sensibility:

“<...> you smell like
earth
herbs
gardens <...>” (Kaur, 2015)

The final lines below allude to the dark nature of humanity. Modern society has a strong fixation on money and power and their subsequent abuse. In contrast, for Rupi, her beloved is a symbol of humankind merely for the fact that she is alive and connected with Mother Nature through her scent, associations with which is aforementioned:

“<...> a little more
human than the rest of us <...>” (Kaur, 2015)

Kaur’s example addresses the issue of modern relationships and the notion of affection: genuine romance is grounded in spiritual principles and unity with the universe, not in commercialism and payments. From the perspective of the foregrounding, there is no alteration of the font or the background in this stanza. Instead, the non-rhyming phrasing is attempting to immerse the reader into the setting, in which the author is constantly appealing to someone, conveying a sense of being “here and now”.

From the same series, the subsequent poem is both shaped as a tower and accompanied by a similar drawing. Because of its form, it is perceived as a kind of manifesto. At the beginning of the poem (the lines below), the author disguisedly addresses the matter of the woman’s objectification. The allusion to a city where you might stay for a week is reminiscent of most of the egregious cases of contemporary men seeking a relationship without commitment, treating women frivolously or as objects of pleasure:

“did you think i was a city
big enough for a weekend getaway <...>” (Kaur, 2015)

The subsequent lines disclose Kaur’s forthright insights about being a calm and family-orientated person whom men might pass by, interested in a more flamboyant appearance:

“<...> i am the town surrounding it
the one you’ve never heard of
but always pass through <...>” (Kaur, 2015)

The symbolism of urban distinctiveness involves an emphasis on neon lights (outrageous makeup) and statues (perfectly moulded parameters):

“<...> no neon lights here
no skyscrapers or statues <...>” (Kaur, 2015)

Unlike others, though, the female poet possesses charisma and a profound feeling of love:

“<...> there is thunder
for i make bridges tremble <...>” (Kaur, 2015)

The lines below highlight the point that “women may be bought with money”. Rupī accurately underscores that she is not a “street meat that may be used numerous times, nor a depreciated tissue whose decision has no significant bearing”. Kaur compares herself to a homemade jam that is both unique and special, just like any woman who cares about her family’s well-being:

“<...> i am not street meat i am homemade jam <...>” (Kaur, 2015)

And yet, there is a nuance: this unique “fruit” is unattainable for people who have abandoned morality and instead elevated their egos to tremendous scales:

“<...> thick enough to cut the sweetest
thing your lips will touch <...>” (Kaur, 2015)

The poet is not the one to live for the moment and take risks on a daily basis. We are aware of Bonnie and Clyde, the infamous outlaw couple whose lives were defined by rebellion, danger, and a relentless pursuit of freedom – often at great cost. Their story, immortalised in history and popular culture, represents a life of risk and unpredictability, where each day was a gamble against fate. That is why Rupī is preferring to enjoy relaxing evenings with her family:

“<...> i am not police sirens
i am the crackle of a fireplace <...>” (Kaur, 2015)

Rupī is the eternal flame of the household, which causes the men around her to be wounded not only by their deeds but also by Kaur’s magnetism:

“<...> i’d burn you and you still
couldn’t take your eyes off me <...>” (Kaur, 2015)

Several male representatives, despite their immorality, are inclined to adopt the most decent image of a family man and adhere to it, attempting to sit on two chairs:

“<...> cause i’d look so beautiful doing it
you’d blush <...>” (Kaur, 2015)

And again, the stanza underlines the humanity and self-worth of women. Not everyone is an easy prey, and true tough nuts are the rarity:

“<...> i am not a hotel room i am home <...>” (Kaur, 2015)

At the end of one’s exploits, every man desires a serene and stable family life, and this is one of the reasons why Rupī Kaur is the most desirable:

“<...> i am not the whiskey you want
i am the water you need <...>” (Kaur, 2015)

To summarise the above, the poem exemplifies that male nature is ambiguous. In pursuit of an easeful life without obligations, sooner or later men wish to switch their role to that of a model householder, leaving behind all their misdeeds and the pursuit of an easy prey. On the other hand, female nature raises a crucial idea: self-value and fulfilment are the key to finding a healthy relationship and a partner. A woman who is objectified by her partner will never prefer being in such an environment.

Examining the piece from the perspective of foregrounding, the visuals in the form of illustrations manipulate the audience quite easily and mislead them superficially: speculations that the poem is strictly urban and describes the flow of life in the city are shattered as one gradually delves into the lines.

The “healing” section is distinguished by its appeal to the concept of self-recovery and the revival of self-love. One of the stanzas below is also “white”, yet it is presented as a fountain, which most young people consider a place of refreshment, cleansing of thoughts and rethinking of their own and others’ actions, a place where people can be alone:

“fall
in love
with your solitude” (Kaur, 2015)

As of today, falling in love with one’s solitude is a challenging step in self-love. Representatives of Instapoetry actively promote this issue, as the youth is a dopamine generation that, not having learned self-love in loneliness, is unable to discover another person without attracting old triggers that destroy relationships later on without thorough working through. Therefore, it is vital to have a place where one can be by themselves, recharge and restart, so that others can love them as well.

The closing poem in this paper is Kaur’s message to aspiring poets. In fact, the signature is in italics, which gives the impression of handwritten letters and secret notes:

“- to all you young poets” (Kaur, 2015)

As we may observe, Rupi Kaur has a mastery of typographic foregrounding. The work below features a remarkable form as well. The vase shape is a symbolic reminder that every young person is a vessel that ought to be refilled with light and proper values, not trauma or judgement. The internal component contains the repetition of the lines “<...> your art is about <...>” (Kaur, 2015), which reinforces the necessity of bearing in mind the actual intentions of young and contemporary artists – to create at the call of the heart, not at the request of others. Therefore, this anaphora encourages us to reconsider art *per se*. Contemporary art ought to distinguish between sincerity and falsehood.

Primarily, it is worthwhile to self-reflect: “Do I love anything?”, “Do I feel comfortable in this or that environment?” The same is for art. Initially, the artist is supposed to master for himself, and only then pay attention to the views of others. These are the meanings that Rupi elaborates on in the following lines:

“<...> is not about how many people
like your work <...>” (Kaur, 2015)

Through the use of the following metaphors, Kaur insists on the intrinsic connection between art, heart and soul. At the beginning, the artist conducts a self-assessment, and then the audience:

“<...> if your heart likes your work
if your soul likes your work <...>” (Kaur, 2015)

These two metaphorical domains, heart and soul, are the driving force of creativity, which refers us to the opening of the collection, where the poet outlines the background of her poetry. The contrast between the multiplicity of the audience and the shaping of individuality is at the core of the work.

The lines further down expose the duality of human existence: one must be sincere with oneself, even in an artistic environment, even in solitude. Each person has only one companion – himself or herself and his or her “I”:

“<...> it’s about how honest
you are with yourself <...>” (Kaur, 2015)

The particularity of the subsequent lines is the presence of modern vocabulary common to social media culture – the noun “relatability”. Just like all Instagram or X users, it is valuable to receive posts and news that are relevant to our preferences and needs. But this does not work in the artistic dimension. Therefore, it is critical not to lose integrity and authenticity in the pursuit of likes, views, and engagement in general:

“<...> never
trade honesty
for relatability” (Kaur, 2015)

Conclusions and perspectives for the further research. To conclude, Instapoetry is a specific branch of contemporary poetry that combines the modernity of existence with typographic foregrounding, the postulates of which remain true until now. The movement provides an opportunity for poetry amateurs and supporters to explore their potential and develop their audience of admirers, as Rupi Kaur has done in her compilation “Milk and Honey”, a collection of poems categorised into four groups under different titles. Juxtaposing “Milk and Honey” with the five stages of grief, we discover the following: a) the preface resonates with depression; b) the section “hurting” is reflected in anger, while “loving” seeks a compromise in love; c) “breaking” is levelled with denial, and d) “healing” is, in fact, acceptance.

Overall, Rupi Kaur’s Instapoetry is a multimodal product as it comprises visuals (black liner doodles), verbalism (language and organisation of the space around it), and digitalisation (use of specific vocabulary and further promotion of the poetry in the posts). The internal typographic component is distinguished by the absence of rhyme, which suggests an arbitrary flow of thoughts. The capital letters add a conversational style to Kaur’s writing, and punctuation marks, as well as the presence of italics, personify thoughts or provide a reference to whom the poet is addressing. The simplicity of the external typographic foregrounding allows for a supplementary visualisation of the author’s intentions. It provides an enhanced experience of the provided poetry due to the surrounding textual space and additional figures that intersperse allusions to the provided poems, evoking a diverse range of thoughts. The analysis above demonstrates that the poet is at the same time a designer and curator of his own aesthetic space, who determines how his text ought to look to produce the intended effect on readers.

Research perspectives can focus on pedagogical implications of using Instapoetry, or multimodal poetry in general, in an EFL class (Чеснокова 2011; Chesnokova 2016). Additionally, it seems worthwhile to explore the influence of hashtag culture on poetry created by AI.

REFERENCES

1. Чеснокова, Г. В. (2011). Як виміряти враження від поезії або Вступ до емпіричних методів дослідження у мовознавстві. К.: Ленвіт.
2. Bhattacharya, S. (2024). Digitalising Surrealism: A Pathway to New Humanities. *bpasjournals.com*. <https://doi.org/10.48165/bapas.2024.44.2.1>
3. Chesnokova, A. (2016). Empirical Stylistics in an EFL Teaching Context: Comparing Virtual and Face-to-Face Reading Responses. In M. Burke, O. Fialho and S. Zyngier (eds), *Scientific Approaches to Literature in Learning Environments*. Amsterdam / Philadelphia: John Benjamins, pp. 105–124.

4. Kaur, R. (2015). *Milk and Honey*. https://imp.dayawisesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Milk-and-Honey-by-Rupi-Kaur-z-lib.org_.epub_.pdf
5. Knox, J., Mackay, J., & Nacher, A. (2023). Global Instapoetry. *European Journal of English Studies*, 27(1), 3–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13825577.2023.2206452>
6. Leszkiewicz, A. (2019, March 6). *Why are we so worried about “Instapoetry”?* New Statesman. <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2019/03/why-are-we-so-worried-about-instapoetry>
7. Lyotard, J.-F. (1984). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*.
8. McElwee, M. (2017, October 25). INSTAPOETRY – The Age of Scrolling Literature. *The Gibraltar Magazine*. thegibraltarmagazine.com/instapoetry-age-scrolling-literature/
9. Penke, N. (2019). #instapoetry. Populäre Lyrik auf Instagram und ihre Affordanzen. *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik*, 49(3), 451–475. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41244-019-00143-1>
10. The Canadian Press. (2018, June 6). Verse goes viral: Instagram poets shake up the literary establishment. *National Post*. <https://nationalpost.com/pmn/entertainment-pmn/books-entertainment-pmn/verse-goes-viral-instagram-poets-shake-up-the-literary-establishment>
11. *The Legitimacy of Instapoetry: Why we need it to save poetry publishing*. (2018, October 1). PUB800. <https://web.archive.org/web/20190410072727/https://tkbr.publishing.sfu.ca/pub800/2018/10/the-legitimacy-of-instapoetry-why-we-need-it-to-save-poetry-publishing/>
12. van Peer, W. and A. Chesnokova (2022). *Experiencing Poetry: A Guidebook to Psychopoetics*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
13. Wilson, C. (2017, December 15). Why Rupī Kaur and Her Peers Are the Most Popular Poets in the World. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/15/books/review/rupi-kaur-instapoets.html>
14. Yip, D. K. (2020). Cinematic surrealism of the interactive virtual space. In *Digital culture and humanities* (pp. 53–71). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-4642-6_4