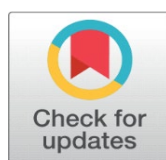


CURATING THE SELF: BODY IMAGE AND THE AESTHETICS OF LANGUAGE IN YOUTH-CENTRIC INSTAGRAM LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intersection of body image, selfhood, and language aesthetics within youth-generated literary content on Instagram, a platform increasingly recognized as a space for digital literature. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks from Judith Butler on performativity and Michel Foucault on discourse and power, the study investigates how young users curate and perform identities through poetic micro-narratives and multimodal compositions. By analyzing Instagram posts that blend minimalist poetry, curated imagery, and strategic paratexts (captions, hashtags), this research reveals how digital aesthetics are used to navigate, affirm, or resist dominant ideals of the body and self-representation. The paper employs qualitative stylistic analysis, supported by critical discourse analysis, to examine how language is used to express vulnerability, resistance, and emotional authenticity. It also addresses the role of visual discourse and ephemeral storytelling in shaping identity construction in online literary spaces. Findings indicate that Instagram literature reflects both a critique of and conformity to prevailing cultural narratives around beauty, gender, and emotional expression, offering a complex field of tension between aesthetic performativity and embodied realities. This study contributes to contemporary literary discourse by expanding the canon to include born-digital youth literature and argues for its legitimacy as a site of serious literary engagement.

Keywords: Instagram Literature, Body Image, Youth Poetry, Digital Aesthetics, Performativity, Visual Discourse

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. CONTEXTUALIZING INSTAGRAM AS A LITERARY PLATFORM

The boundaries of literary production have significantly expanded in the digital age, with platforms such as Instagram fostering new forms of creative expression. Originally designed for image-sharing, Instagram has become a vibrant space for textual creativity—especially short-form poetic writing, also termed Instapoetry. This genre, blending images with bite-sized poetry and typographical aesthetics, has garnered global attention and academic interest (Knox, 2022). Instagram's format—with its immediacy, interactivity, and virality—enables writers to bypass traditional publishing gatekeepers and engage directly with audiences, making it a fertile ground for youth-centered literary innovation. Importantly, Instagram's algorithmic curation and visual-first design influence both the form and reception of literary texts on the platform. Writers often tailor their work not only for meaning but also for aesthetic compatibility with Instagram's visual culture, making literary production both a creative and performative act. As De and Lu (2024) argue, the "attention economy" of Instagram has prompted a shift from purely expressive writing to curated literary

personas that balance authenticity and social appeal. Knox (2022) explores how Instapoetry operates within Instagram's structural constraints, arguing that the genre's aesthetics conform to the platform's demand for emotional resonance and visual immediacy. De & Lu (2024) investigate how novice poets negotiate creative authenticity and platform-specific visibility through hashtags

1.2. RISE OF YOUTH-GENERATED LITERATURE AND DIGITAL SELF-CURATION

In the contemporary digital landscape, the emergence of youth-generated literature marks a significant shift in literary culture. Young individuals, often navigating issues of identity, body politics, and self-worth, are turning to platforms like Instagram not only to express themselves creatively but also to construct and curate their digital selves. Instagram's format—short-form content, immediate feedback mechanisms, and a strong emphasis on visuality—aligns well with the narrative tendencies of Generation Z and millennials, who utilize it as a space for personal and poetic storytelling (West, 2023). The phenomenon of digital self-curation refers to the selective presentation of the self in online environments, where youth writers craft personas that are aesthetically pleasing, emotionally resonant, and socially validated. These literary posts often grapple with themes of mental health, body image, empowerment, and vulnerability, signaling a new wave of autobiographical mini-narratives that blend textual aesthetics with identity performance (Fischer & Petersen, 2022). Through poetic captions, stylized typography, and curated visuals, Instagram poets merge language and body politics, creating a hybrid literary form that reflects both inner consciousness and external validation.

1.3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES

This study is grounded in the intersection of digital literature, youth identity, and visual culture. It aims to investigate how Instagram functions as a literary and performative space for youth-driven content centered on body image and the aesthetics of language.

Research Questions:

- 1) How do young literary creators on Instagram represent body image through poetic language and visual elements?
- 2) What linguistic and rhetorical strategies are commonly used in youth-centric Instagram literature?
- 3) How does Instagram's visual and interactive interface influence literary self-expression and digital identity construction?

Objectives

- 1) To critically examine the thematic and stylistic elements of youth-produced Instagram literature related to body image.
- 2) To analyze the role of platform aesthetics in shaping poetic self-representation.
- 3) To contribute to the growing field of digital literature studies by integrating literary analysis with media and identity theory.

1.4. SCOPE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This research focuses on literary posts shared on Instagram by young users (typically aged 16–30) that reflect concerns about body image, identity, and aesthetic language. The selected content will include visual-poetic works—Instapoems, captioned images, and hashtag-linked narratives—published in the past three years to ensure contemporary relevance. The significance of this study lies in its interdisciplinary approach, blending literary analysis, digital humanities, and youth cultural studies. As digital platforms increasingly influence literary creation and reception, it becomes essential to understand how these environments reshape authorship, aesthetics, and identity. This research contributes to filling a critical gap in scholarship by focusing specifically on the literary dimensions of youth self-curation through Instagram, a topic often explored in media studies but underrepresented in literary discourse.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. CONCEPTS OF SELFHOOD AND PERFORMATIVITY (JUDITH BUTLER, MICHEL FOUCAULT)

The idea of the self as a constructed, performative identity is central to this study. Judith Butler's theory of performativity posits that identity is not a fixed or innate essence but is constituted through repeated social performances—particularly in relation to gender and the body (Butler, 1990). Instagram literature provides fertile ground for this theory, as young users continuously perform curated versions of themselves through aesthetically framed language and imagery. Michel Foucault's concept of subjectivation similarly informs this research. According to Foucault, individuals become subjects through disciplinary mechanisms, including visual regimes and discursive formations that define norms of behavior and embodiment (Foucault, 1977). On Instagram, users internalize and respond to algorithmically shaped norms of beauty, visibility, and desirability, shaping their literary outputs accordingly. These theories together illuminate how the act of literary self-expression on Instagram becomes both a negotiation of inner identity and a response to external social and visual discourses.

2.2. DIGITAL AESTHETICS AND LANGUAGE ECONOMY

Digital aesthetics refers to the stylistic and sensory strategies employed in digital media to engage audiences. On Instagram, this includes minimalistic typographic designs, pastel color palettes, spatial arrangement of text, and integration of emojis or hashtags—all of which affect how literary texts are read and interpreted (Knox, 2022). The language economy of Instagram—marked by brevity, visual orientation, and emotional immediacy—encourages the distillation of complex themes like body image and self-worth into punchy, digestible content. This phenomenon echoes Lev Manovich's theory of cultural interfaces, where the user experience of media is shaped by both human-computer interaction and artistic choices. On Instagram, the curated "feed" becomes a visual-literary collage of selfhood, designed to evoke affective resonance and social engagement (Manovich, 2013). Moreover, the reliance on algorithmic visibility influences which literary expressions gain prominence, pushing creators toward aesthetically consistent, emotionally accessible content.

2.3. BODY IMAGE AND VISUAL DISCOURSE IN MEDIA THEORY

The portrayal of body image on social media is deeply intertwined with media representations and visual culture. Instagram, as a highly visual platform, reinforces specific norms of beauty, wellness, and desirability that users both resist and replicate. Media theorists such as Rosalind Gill and Susan Bordo have extensively analyzed how the body becomes a site of cultural inscription and self-regulation in digital environments. Gill (2007) introduces the concept of "postfeminist sensibility," which captures how contemporary media encourages women—especially young women—to view their bodies as ongoing projects of self-improvement. This intersects with Instagram literature, where poetic captions and curated images often oscillate between critique and conformity. Bordo (2003) similarly emphasizes the cultural construction of the body, arguing that body ideals are historically contingent and socially enforced through visual culture. These insights are crucial for understanding how young Instagram users use language to grapple with, internalize, or subvert idealized body norms.

3. INSTAGRAM AS A LITERARY SPACE

3.1. MICRO-POETRY AND VISUAL-TEXT HYBRIDS

One of the most prominent literary forms on Instagram is micro-poetry—short, poignant pieces often ranging from a single line to a few sentences. These are typically paired with aesthetically curated backgrounds, handwritten text, or minimalist typographic designs. The constraints of Instagram's format encourage compression and intensity, resulting in emotionally resonant yet concise expressions of love, trauma, identity, and self-reflection (Knox, 2022). Moreover, many creators engage in visual-text hybridity, combining photographic self-portraits, abstract art, or illustrations with poetic fragments. This fusion amplifies the affective impact of the literary content and allows the body to become both

subject and medium. Scholars argue that this hybrid form challenges traditional notions of authorship and genre by allowing poetry to exist in the liminal space between visual art and literary text (Chatterjee, 2021).

3.2. EPHEMERAL STORYTELLING AND CURATED IDENTITIES

Instagram's features such as Stories, Highlights, and Reels contribute to what scholars term ephemeral storytelling—short-lived, serialized narratives that disappear or evolve with time. These features are often used by youth writers to share fleeting emotions, raw thoughts, or "in-progress" works, which builds a sense of authenticity and vulnerability (Leaver et al., 2020). At the same time, the notion of curated identity is crucial to understanding how youth represent themselves literarily on Instagram. Posts are selectively constructed to project particular aesthetics and emotional tones, reflecting what Marwick and boyd (2011) call "strategic self-presentation." This curation includes choices around filters, fonts, tone, and post timing, which collectively shape how a writer is perceived both as an individual and as an artist.

3.3. ROLE OF LIKES, CAPTIONS, AND HASHTAGS AS PARATEXTS

The digital affordances of Instagram—likes, captions, hashtags, and comments—function as paratexts, a term Gérard Genette (1997) used to describe materials that surround and extend the meaning of a text. In the Instagram literary ecosystem, these elements play critical roles in shaping the reception, interpretation, and dissemination of literary works.

- **Likes and Comments** act as social validation, influencing visibility through platform algorithms and motivating content creation through affective feedback loops (Zulli & Zulli, 2022).
- **Captions** often serve as poetic spaces themselves, either expanding upon the image or offering standalone micro-narratives.
- **Hashtags** like #poetrycommunity, #instapoet, or #bodypositivity are used strategically to align literary texts with specific thematic or ideological communities, functioning both as classification tools and community markers (Page, 2018).

4. BODY IMAGE NARRATIVES IN YOUTH LITERATURE

4.1. REPRESENTATION OF IDEALIZED VS. SUBVERSIVE BODIES

On Instagram, idealized body imagery often aligns with dominant beauty standards—thinness, clear skin, toned physique, and Eurocentric features. These representations are frequently normalized through filters, curated photography, and the aesthetics of minimalism. Such portrayals echo neoliberal ideals of self-regulation and bodily discipline, reinforcing what Bordo (2003) identifies as "cultural anxieties" embodied through surface perfection. Conversely, a growing segment of youth-generated literature on Instagram subverts these norms. Writers and artists intentionally present non-normative, disabled, fat, queer, or racialized bodies as sites of poetic reclamation. These subversive bodies become political texts in themselves, challenging algorithmic invisibility and beauty-centric biases on the platform (Tiidenberg & Cruz, 2022).

4.2. LANGUAGE OF VULNERABILITY, AFFIRMATION, AND RESISTANCE

Youth-centric Instagram literature often foregrounds vulnerability as both theme and rhetorical device. Through confessional micro-poetry and expressive captions, creators open emotional dialogues about anxiety, body dysmorphia, trauma, and mental health. This performative vulnerability is not just self-expression—it becomes a curated ethos that garners empathy and algorithmic engagement (Abidin, 2021). Affirmative language, frequently conveyed through mantras, free verse, and minimalistic statements (e.g., "You are enough", "Stretch marks are stars"), circulates widely within body positivity and self-love communities. Such texts act as resistance against internalized shame and heteronormative ideals, creating discursive spaces of healing and self-empowerment (Gill & Orgad, 2018). This interplay of vulnerability and resistance aligns with Ahmed's (2014) theory of affective economies, wherein emotion circulates across networks, attaching value to particular bodies and identities. Hashtags like #selflovepoetry and #healingwords crystallize these emotional economies into searchable, semiotic performances.

4.3. GENDERED EXPRESSIONS AND PERFORMATIVE AESTHETICS

Instagram literature is deeply gendered in its stylistic and thematic tendencies. Female and queer creators often use pastel aesthetics, floral motifs, and handwritten fonts, while the content explores issues like menstrual shame, relationship trauma, or gender dysphoria. Such literary visuals enact what Butler (1990) calls gender performativity—stylized repetition of acts that construct gender identities. Male creators, though fewer in literary circles on Instagram, often lean toward minimalist or urban aesthetics, with language that either reproduces traditional masculinity or subverts it through introspective softness. In queer literary spaces, the performative aesthetic blends irony, sensuality, and emotive rawness, queering both form and content. Importantly, these gendered expressions are not static. Many creators use aesthetic pastiche—a blend of harsh language and soft visuals or vice versa—to contest binary frameworks. Such stylistic hybridity destabilizes fixed readings of gender and identity, marking Instagram literature as a key site for feminist and queer expression (Miller, 2023).

5. AESTHETICS OF LANGUAGE: FORM, TONE, AND VOICE

5.1. STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF SELECTED POSTS

Stylistic scrutiny of popular Instagram-based writers—such as Rupī Kaur, Nikita Gill, and emerging micro-poets like Yrsa Daley-Ward and Nikita Banerjee—reveals a pattern of condensed emotional expression. These creators rely on brevity, semantic openness, and strategic lineation to evoke complex affective states. Posts typically consist of 3–5-line poems paired with a monochromatic or pastel-toned visual background. A hallmark of these pieces is their accessibility and universal resonance (Al-Mahadin, 2021). A representative post by Rupī Kaur reads:

“i want to apologize to all the women / i have called pretty / before i’ve called them intelligent or brave.”

Such texts derive power from their syntactic parsimony and emotive charge. Their visual accompaniment—often hand-drawn sketches or faded portraits—enhances interpretive openness, inviting followers to map the text onto personal experience. The coupling of visual and textual minimalism supports an ethos of approachability and vulnerability (Huang, 2022).

5.2. MINIMALISM, FRAGMENTATION, AND EMOTIVE SYNTAX

Minimalism in Instagram poetry is both aesthetic and ideological. Inspired by confessional poetry and Japanese haiku traditions, many Instagram poets employ fragmented grammar, absence of punctuation, and lowercase syntax to signal informality, authenticity, and emotional rupture. This mirrors the visual minimalism of Instagram’s UI design and reinforces the illusion of spontaneous intimacy. The poem:

“you left / and i / remained / broken / but breathing”

conveys trauma and resilience through fragmented lineation. The broken structure becomes a visual metaphor for the fractured psyche (Papacharissi, 2020). Here, form mirrors content—form becomes feeling. This tendency toward fragmentation aligns with what Sianne Ngai (2005) terms the “ugly feelings”—affects like awkwardness, ambivalence, or discomfort that are often linguistically elusive but viscerally potent. Instagram poetry, by embracing such feelings, reclaims what traditional literature marginalizes.

5.3. INTERSECTIONS OF TEXT, IMAGE, AND SELF-PRESENTATION

Instagram literature uniquely blends Para textual elements—fonts, layout, color schemes, selfies, and video loops—with language to construct a coherent online persona. This fusion blurs the lines between poetry and performance, author and avatar (Highfield & Leaver, 2021). Hashtags like body positive poetry, healing words, and soft aesthetic serve dual purposes: they function as categorical indices and community signals, embedding the post into broader emotional and ideological networks. These curated intersections produce a visual-literary self that is both artistic and algorithmically strategic. Additionally, the integration of body imagery (stretch marks, acne, scars, trans bodies) with vulnerable text challenges the aesthetic expectations of platform-based beauty. Creators curate a self that is not merely seen but read—a readable body interwoven with poetic text (Nemer, 2022).

6. CONCLUSION

6.1. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

This study has demonstrated that Instagram, as a youth-centric literary platform, functions as a dynamic space where body image and language aesthetics intersect to produce complex modes of self-curation. Through a nuanced stylistic and theoretical analysis, the paper reveals how Instagram literature leverages minimalism, fragmentation, and multimodality to express vulnerability, affirm identity, and resist dominant cultural norms around idealized bodies.

- Youth poets and writers employ performative language influenced by theories of selfhood (Butler) and power (Foucault) to negotiate their embodied experiences.
- The aesthetic economy of Instagram—characterized by visual-text hybrids, ephemeral storytelling, and Para textual devices like hashtags—redefines traditional literary boundaries.
- Representations of body image oscillate between idealization and subversion, with language functioning as a site of resistance and affirmation, particularly around gendered and vulnerable identities.
- Stylistic features such as fragmented syntax and emotive minimalism echo larger digital cultural tendencies and underscore a postmodern subjectivity shaped by social media.

These findings align with and extend recent scholarship emphasizing the fluidity of identity in digital literary practices (Murray, 2021; Kovalik & Curwood, 2019), and foreground Instagram literature as an emergent form worthy of serious academic consideration.

6.2. CONTRIBUTION TO CONTEMPORARY LITERARY DISCOURSE

This paper contributes to contemporary literary discourse by:

- Expanding the scope of literary analysis to include digital and social media texts, thereby bridging the gap between classical literary studies and emerging digital humanities.
- Situating Instagram literature within theoretical frameworks of performativity, visual culture, and body politics, enriching understanding of how language shapes selfhood in mediated environments.
- Challenging traditional notions of authorship and textuality by demonstrating how Instagram posts operate as hybrid literary-visual artifacts that disrupt conventional reading practices.
- Providing empirical grounding for the often-theoretical claims about digital aesthetics, especially in youth literature, thus contributing to ongoing conversations about how social media reshapes literary production and reception.

6.3. FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR DIGITAL LITERARY STUDIES

Building on these insights, future research should consider:

- Longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of digital self-curation and aesthetic strategies over time to understand shifting cultural norms.
- Comparative analyses across different social media platforms (e.g., TikTok, Tumblr) to explore how platform affordances shape literary expression.
- Intersectional approaches that examine how race, class, and disability intersect with body image and language aesthetics in Instagram literature.
- Employing mixed-methods research, combining digital textual analysis with audience reception studies to capture how youth readers engage with and interpret these literary texts.
- Investigating the impact of algorithmic curation on the visibility and dissemination of youth-centric Instagram literature, considering issues of gatekeeping and cultural capital.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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