



Journal of Poetry Therapy

The Interdisciplinary Journal of Practice, Theory, Research and Education

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/tjpt20

“Your voice brings calmness to the chaos in my mind”: exploring the uses of poetry on TikTok

Jeroen Dera

To cite this article: Jeroen Dera (27 Feb 2024): “Your voice brings calmness to the chaos in my mind”: exploring the uses of poetry on TikTok, Journal of Poetry Therapy, DOI: [10.1080/08893675.2024.2323198](https://doi.org/10.1080/08893675.2024.2323198)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08893675.2024.2323198>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 27 Feb 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

“Your voice brings calmness to the chaos in my mind”: exploring the uses of poetry on TikTok

Jeroen Dera

Department of Modern Languages and Cultures, Radboud Institute for Culture & History, Radboud University, Nijmegen, Netherlands

ABSTRACT

This article provides a first exploratory analysis of how poetry functions on TikTok, where the #poetry hashtag has generated tens of billions of views so far. Using three case studies, namely the Dutch poetry account @lotweijers, the English account @marthalilli, and the hashtag #sylviaaplath, it demonstrates the form poetry takes on TikTok and the discourse about the genre that emerges in user comments. The analyses show that the relational aspect of accessible poems plays a significant role in how poetry functions on TikTok. However, while many TikTokers use poetry in an affective, relational, and therapeutic manner, there are also users who take a more cognitive approach to the genre, focusing on interpretations and ideological discussions about poetry. In this sense, the article nuances the idea that literary practices on TikTok are equivalent to instant satisfaction.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 24 July 2023
Accepted 20 February 2024



KEYWORDS

TikTok; #BookTok; poetry;
literary culture; digital
culture

Introduction

If Ana Huang, author of spicy romance fiction, comes to sign her books at a random bookstore in the summer of 2023, there are masses of young people standing in line to get an autograph. Without the popular hashtag #BookTok on the social media platform TikTok, which has been viewed over 200 billion times worldwide, Huang probably wouldn't have enjoyed such success among young readers. Hence, #BookTok is widely hailed in the book world as a phenomenon that can break the negative spiral surrounding the reading behavior of young people.

It is not surprising, in that sense, that #BookTok can count on increasing scholarly attention. The first in-depth studies already appeared in 2021, when #BookTok began to gain influence in many countries. From the perspective of library and information sciences, it has already been argued that #BookTok can make a relevant contribution to the advisory services of librarians (Merga, 2021), while teacher educators have advocated the use of #BookTok and book-related TikTok content in the literacy classroom (Adnan et al., 2021; Jerasa & Boffone, 2021). Furthermore, substantial studies have been

CONTACT Jeroen Dera  jeroen.dera@ru.nl  Radboud University, Postbox 9103, 6500 HD, Nijmegen, Netherlands

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

conducted on the way active #BookTokers discuss books, reading practices, and literature, as well as on the multimodal ways in which they try to convey their experiences to others (Dezuanni et al., 2022; Martens et al., 2022; Reddan, 2022). It has also recently been shown that #BookTok videos are not only appealing to teenagers who can be seen as avid readers, but also manage to excite a significant portion of the so-called book doubters (i.e.: people who, despite a slightly positive attitude towards reading, do not read frequently) (Dera, Brouwer, & Welling, 2023).

Amidst the growing academic attention for #BookTok, one genre, however, shines in its absence. There is no scientific publication yet on the role that *poetry* plays on TikTok. The genre is sometimes mentioned – usually only tangentially – in studies on TikTok and its users and discourses (e.g. Adriaansen, 2022; Bondy Valdovinos Kaye et al., 2022; Milton et al., 2023), but no specific research has been conducted on how poetry functions within TikTok – and this despite the fact that the hashtag #poetry had been viewed 70 billion times globally in February 2024. To fill this gap and to kickstart further research into poetry on TikTok, this article will provide an initial exploratory analysis of how poetry functions on TikTok. More specifically, it questions (a) what form (the discourse about) poetry on TikTok takes, and (b) how poetry is experienced by users of this social media platform. The analysis will pay special attention to the emotional value that the genre often holds for young users. This will involve studying not only TikTok users who actively share content on the platform, but also the reactions of users to videos with the hashtag #poetry. By analyzing content and reactions in concordance, this article will provide a broad picture of the (discourses about) poetry on TikTok, representing both the production of creators and the reception by their audiences.

Literary practices on social media: insights from previous research

Characteristic of social media targeted at young people is the formation of online subcultures around specific themes and trends in youth culture – from makeup and fitness to cottagecore and cosplayers. Therefore, it is better not to speak of a singular TikTok *culture*, but of multiple TikTok *cultures* (Boffone, 2022). When it comes to reading and literature, #BookTok has widely established itself as the leading subculture. Under that hashtag, young readers, usually between 15 and 25 years old, passionately share their reading recommendations and highly personal reading experiences, often sparking lively discussions and engaged comments on the texts that play a meaningful role in their lives. The social network they find themselves in through the hashtag #BookTok closely resembles what is also referred to as an *online affinity group*. Within such a group of like-minded individuals with a shared hobby or passion, members have choices in their level and means of participation, enjoy multiple modes of representation, and have an authentic audience responding to their work (cf. Curwood, 2013).

There is a lot to be said for assuming a specific TikTok subculture around poetry, or perhaps even a poetry subculture *within* #BookTok. There is a separate hashtag, #PoetryTok, which had more than 4 billion views in February 2024 and is often used in conjunction with the hashtag #BookTok. Other combinations of #BookTok with poetry-related hashtags (e.g. #poems, #poetry, #poets) also indicate an intertwining of the #BookTok community and the poetry community on TikTok. However, there are also numerous videos about poetry that do not use the hashtag #BookTok, indicating the existence of

two separate subcultures. In the relatively short history of social media, the widespread use of TikTok by young people to express their love for reading is nothing new – although #BookTok's enormous success has come with no precedents (Wiederhold, 2022). Subcultures around literature have also emerged on other social media platforms, usually focused on genres such as young adult literature, where young users attempt to break free from “the isolated and solitary boundaries usually associated with reading”, as Kathryn Perkins (2017) stated based on her study of BookTube. Within such subcultures, there is a significant role for expressions of bookishness, with users focusing on their unconditional love for the book as a material object – as shown, for instance, through highly aestheticized photo collections of bookshelves on Pinterest (cf. Rogers, 2019).

As for poetry on social media, most research has been done on Instagram. In a study on Instagram users who share their poetry online, Kovalik and Curwood (2019) showed that community building and interactivity were of great importance to poets, particularly regarding feedback on their work. Poets also reported that the app's technical functionalities influenced the nature of their writing, especially through the possibilities for photo editing that fostered multimodality. Also, the mobility and accessibility of Instagram as a digital medium were highly appreciated by the users, both in terms of poetry production and reception.

Due to its accessibility, Instagram poetry (and TikTok poetry alike) runs the risk of being seen as a form of lowbrow culture not worth studying, with Instapoet Tiana Stoddart even referring to the genre as “the McDonald's of writing” (Bresge, 2018). However, academic analyses have shown that behind this apparent superficiality, there is a significant sub-genre that “offers a self-help aesthetic that contrasts with the superficiality of the social networking site” (Pâquet, 2019, p. 297). Immensely popular Instapoets like Rupi Kaur, for example, encourage positive thinking through their multimodal poems (ibid.), while also unfolding a feminist and postcolonial agenda from which like-minded readers can draw strength (compare Huggan, 2020). It should be noted, though, that this therapeutic potential of Instapoetry cannot be separated from the capitalist machine that Instagram ultimately is. In order to rise above the millions of competing messages in the algorithm, “Instapoets are just as firmly entrenched in professionalism, no matter how much they believe in their own genuine self-expression and digital autonomy” (Knox, 2020, p. 488).

A similar entanglement of professionalism and autonomy is also evident when considering popular TikTok accounts centered around poetry. For instance, “Mexicana premed poet” Celia Martinez, whose account @powerhouseofthecel has 2.5 million followers (February 2024), actively promotes her paperback *Diary of a Romantica* (2023) on her profile page. Michaela Angemeer (@michaelapoetry, 772,700 followers) offers not only poetry books but also merchandise items for sale, including cotton bags and clothing, while the poetry collection *Lover Girl* (2023) by Raegan Fordemwalt (@raeganspoetry, 2.5 million followers) has received more ratings on Goodreads than Antony Joseph's *Sonnets for Albert* (2022), the winner of the prestigious T.S. Eliot Prize in 2022. Interestingly, all three of the above-mentioned poets are also active on Instagram, where they consistently have fewer followers than on TikTok (Celia Martinez: 865,000 on Instagram; Michaela Angemeer: 281,000; Raegan Fordemwalt: 1.4 million). Hence, the poetry audience on TikTok seems to only partially overlap with that on Instagram.

It is not surprising, in that sense, that the different orientations of both platforms have been emphasized in the literature before. Whereas the aesthetics of Instagram are strongly

determined by the filters that users can apply to their photos, which often leads to picture-perfect views of reality, TikTok can be characterized as messy, campy, chaotic, and even “quirky” (Wang, 2020, p. 2). Young users, therefore, experience a stronger ability to present themselves authentically on TikTok compared to Instagram, allowing TikTok to “present an unfiltered view of the teenage experience today” (Jerasa & Boffone, 2021, p. 220).

It is precisely this unfiltered nature that might have contributed to the great success of #BookTok. On TikTok, readers do not have to pretend to be more glamorous than they are, creating perceived space to present reading as a struggle, even for avid readers (Dezuanni et al., 2022). Furthermore, due to the emphasis on authenticity, #BookTokers can easily build a community because they are quickly seen as relatable by their peers. This also offers emancipatory possibilities for underprivileged groups, such as the queer community, who come together on TikTok in online affinity spaces centered around queer books (Boffone & Jerasa, 2021). Even outside of such specific reader groups, TikTok has proven its potential for reading cultures amongst adolescents. Thanks to its short videos and multimodal nature, the app is highly effective for sharing reading recommendations, with nearly half of the #BookTok videos in a 2019 sample consisting of such content (Merga, 2021).

The practices and content of active #BookTokers have been extensively studied by Martens et al. (2022), who identified five patterns in their activities in relation to TikTok’s affordances and algorithms. On #BookTok:

1. Reading is presented as a sensory and haptic experience, with users emphasizing the colors, scents, and tactile aspects of the books they discuss.
2. Users actively highlight their readerly identity, for example through the use of hashtags (e.g. #booknerd, #bookworm, #bookish).
3. The book reviewing style is strongly affectively oriented, with an emphasis on emotions during and after reading.
4. Users’ passion for reading is integrated into broader social media trends, such as hashtag challenges and soundbites.
5. “Connected learning” takes place, combining interest-driven, peer-supported, and academically oriented learning.

These patterns provide a useful starting point for an exploratory study on how poetry functions within TikTok, as they can also serve as guidelines for analyzing the content of poetry videos on this social medium.

Methodological considerations

To explore how poetry functions on TikTok, this article examines three case studies in more detail: an example of a TikTok user who actively shares her own poems on her profile, a creator who produces content *about* poetry as a literature student, and a hashtag associated with a canonical poet. This differentiation covers both the production of TikTok poetry and the discourse surrounding poetry on TikTok, allowing for an investigation of both the form poetry takes on this platform and how users experience it.

Because the hashtag #poetry is used internationally and the reading culture on TikTok transcends geographical boundaries, the case studies deliberately include examples from

languages other than English. Moreover, to keep the analysis of user responses manageable, the selection of case studies specifically avoids accounts with hundreds of thousands or even millions of followers, instead focusing on accounts with several thousand followers.

For the case study of a TikToker who actively shares her own poetry, the Dutch poet Lot Weijers (@lotweijers, 15,200 followers as of February 15, 2024) has been selected. She regularly shares her texts on her account, which consists of over 25% poetry and also showcases Weijers' daily activities. She has used the available profile space designed for biographical information to share a slogan that summarizes her content: "words and positivity".¹ Partly because her content is quite popular among Dutch TikTok users, Weijers, who is only 21 years old, has recently self-published her poetry collection *Hersensoep* (*Brain soup*, 2023). The analysis conducted here will specifically focus on the 28 videos containing original poems published by Weijers between April 19, 2022, and May 4, 2023. The analysis will also consider the reactions to these videos. Excluding reactions consisting solely of emojis (such as a heart or a thumbs-up) and reactions that only contain a short expression (e.g. "Wow!", "Beautiful!"), this concerns a total of 1263 interactions between TikTok users and Weijers' poetry.

The second case study features Martha Lilli from the UK (@marthalilli, 15,800 followers as of February 15, 2024), a 22-year-old English literature student who describes herself on her profile as an "English lit nerd, basically". Her content primarily revolves around student life in the United Kingdom, covering not only the struggles of writing papers and theses but also highlighting the authors and literary works she studies. Many of her contributions revolve around poetry, either based on her personal reading experiences within the genre or through her academic knowledge of it. The analysis for this article is specifically based on the 37 poetry-related videos that were published on the @marthalilli-account between January 29, 2020, and April 13, 2022. User reactions are also included in the analysis, particularly those where users expressed specific emotions or discussed the use of poetry in various contexts (218 in total), as well as reactions where users commented on poetry in school, with a focus on the subject of English (192 reactions).

The final case study focuses on the hashtag #sylviaPlath, accounting for over 150 million views on February 15, 2024. To narrow down the vast amount of content related to this author, the research specifically examined the 40 most viewed poetry-related Plath videos as of July 1, 2023. Content related to Plath's prose, such as her novel *The Bell Jar* (1963), was not included, despite frequent references to its poetic style of writing. For the analysis of the discourse surrounding this poetry, particular attention was given to reactions in which users explicitly expressed the significance of Plath's work for them (or the lack thereof). In total, there were 109 such reactions.

The video corpus in the research first underwent a thematic analysis to identify the themes addressed in the videos. Additionally, the five identified patterns from Martens et al.'s study (2022) were used as a framework to examine the material: to what extent were these findings applicable to poetry videos in the corpus? In the case of Lot Weijers, the poems were also formally studied to identify dominant poetic techniques.

The reactions to the videos were also subjected to thematic analysis, focusing on identifying recurring patterns of argumentation. Special attention was given to the balance between cognitive and affective-oriented responses. This was done not only because previous research has shown that online responses to literature often have a strong affective

component (e.g. Driscoll & Rehberg Sedo, 2019; Wang et al., 2019), but also because poetry has been described as a genre with the ability to “connect people’s cognitive and affective responses, mind and body, experiences and memories’ (Simecek & Rumbold, 2016, p. 310).

Because of ethical considerations – TikTok users in the study are likely to be young and vulnerable – this article will treat all reactions anonymously. In case of @lotweijers and @marthalilli, informed consent was obtained before publication of this article.

Case 1 – drawing positivity from Lot Weijers’ TikTok poems

“Words and positivity”: these are the words used by Lot Weijers to promote her TikTok account. “Positivity” is indeed an apt thematic frame for the videos she shares under the hashtag #poetry (#poëzie in Dutch). Weijers’ videos are presented as numbered installments within the broader series #foryou (#voorjou), with the hashtag almost functioning as a virtual title of a poetry collection. In Weijers’ poems, the aforementioned positivity takes shape against the backdrop of a broader theme of uncertainty. Many of her texts revolve around subjects such as personal growth, self-acceptance, and the realization of one’s worth. In that sense, they align with the trend identified by Pâquet (2019) regarding Instagram poetry, associating poetry production on this social platform with discourses surrounding self-help.

The format of Weijers’ videos strengthens this thematic orientation, as the TikTok poet typically recites her texts in her bedroom, with her bed visible in the background. This performative context creates a highly intimate viewing experience: Weijers basically invites her audience into her private space. She reads her texts, which also appear on the screen during the recitation, from a red notebook, further enhancing the sensation that we are glimpsing into someone’s personal realm of thoughts. The music accompanying the videos, often featuring calm piano sounds, reinforces this intimate impression. As a result of these non-textual elements reinforcing the poet’s words, the lyrical self that appears in most of Weijers’ poems seems to be deeply interwoven with the performing TikToker, undoubtedly contributing to the perceived authenticity of the poet in relation to her audience.

Not only thematically, but also linguistically, Weijers’ texts are accessible to a poetry audience that is not overly familiar with the genre. Occasionally, they contain words that are not regularly used in Dutch, such as *statelijke* (regal) and *canvas* (canvas), but for the majority of readers, these words will likely not pose significant interpretation difficulties within the context of the poem. In terms of complexity, there are no neologisms, derailing syntax, mixed metaphors, blending of registers, or other hermetic textual features. In terms of figures of speech, most of the poems include several enumerations and comparisons using “as”, allowing for a straightforward connection between tenor and vehicle. Sometimes Weijers employs clichéd imagery, for example, when comparing a body to a temple. Phonologically, it is noteworthy that she writes in free verse, frequently utilizing sound equivalences, whether in the form of full rhyme, assonance, or alliteration.

An exemplary poem is “Voor haar” (“For her”), the twelfth installment in the #foryou series, which has garnered over 375,000 views as of February 15, 2024, making it Weijers’ most widely viewed text on TikTok to date. The poem begins with a listing of

characteristics of the girl to whom the poem seems dedicated. It describes a young woman who “unreservedly spreads her feelings like a wildfire and then extinguishes the fire herself”, in other words, a girl who can experience intense emotional outbursts but is capable of regaining control independently. She perceives her body as a temple, “not one with stately pillars and sumptuous ballrooms, but one with damage, fractures, wounds, and blisters, and that’s why it’s so beautiful”. In these phrases, which explore self-acceptance regarding one’s body, the Dutch text features significant wordplay: *s*-alliteration in the words *statelijke* (stately), *smakelijke* (sumptuous), and *schade* (damage); *b*-alliteration in *balzalen* (ballrooms), *breuken* (fractures), and *blaren* (blisters); and *a*-assonance in *pilaren* (pillars), *balzalen*, *schade*, and *blaren*. Towards the end of the poem, Weijers connects the described girl, who is at peace with herself, to the lyrical I-figure. She arrives at a conclusion that underscores her program of positivity against a backdrop of uncertainty: this poem is “for the girl I don’t know yet, am not yet, but can become.”

When applying the five trends as identified by Martens et al. (2022) to the case of Lot Weijers, they appear to be difficult to reconcile with the content of her videos, which, after all, are not about reading but about writing and performing arts. While the red notebook might be interpreted as a manifestation of the haptic nature of poetic production as mediated through TikTok, the other trends are difficult to apply to this profile. After all, Weijers does not share videos in which she discusses poetry collections, nor does she embed her performances within broader trends such as hashtag challenges. Also, there is no focus on reading for school, and thus no “connected learning”, as Martens et al. (2022) phrase it. Moreover, her account does not explicitly convey a readerly identity, although the profile does include a linktree where Weijers has added her Goodreads account.

A different picture emerges when we consider the reactions to Weijers’ videos in the analysis, especially regarding the role of affect. In each video, the majority of the comments consist of likes, emojis, or enthusiastic exclamations (“So beautiful!”). However, there are also numerous references to physical sensations such as goosebumps, tears (“Who is cutting onions?”, jokes a user), and a feeling of relaxation. Concerning the latter, this feeling is often associated with Weijers’ voice, which is repeatedly described as “calming” and, in some cases, even therapeutic: “Your voice brings calmness to the chaos in my mind”.

Such a therapeutic sensation, which demonstrates that the thematic focus of the poems on personal growth and self-acceptance strongly resonates with some viewers, is also evident in users’ reflections on their own mental health issues (“this reminds me of my time in the clinic”; “Stop reading my mind, ma’am”) or their strong emotional connection to the poem: “On the day I felt unseen, I see this’. These types of sensations even seem to transcend language barriers, with comments in English, Spanish, French, and German emphasizing that although the users didn’t understand Weijers’ text, they found the listening experience “so relaxing”. Notably, there are also comments where users express a desire to permanently ink specific lines from Weijers’ poem on their bodies, so that they can draw strength from them.

Outside of this affective-therapeutic context, however, a more cognitive, literature-focused group of reactions is emerging around Weijers’ videos. There are frequent requests for the texts to be available in book form, but also suggestions to submit certain texts for writing contests, expressions of surprise at how good Dutch poetry can sound, and attempts to network with Weijers in order to collaborate. Furthermore,

some users do not hesitate to associate Weijers' texts with the work of other authors, ranging from Anne Frank to Adam Silvera, and from Charles Bukowski to V.E. Schwab. Although these literature-oriented reactions are certainly in the minority compared to instant likes and fleeting praise, they demonstrate that highly relatable poetry videos on TikTok are being embedded within a broader intertextual network by the #poetry community on the platform.

Case 2 – oscillating between schoolwork and solace through Martha Lilli's videos

On February 24, 2020, English student Martha Lilli posted a frequently viewed video on her channel @marthalilli (over 185,000 views as of February 15, 2024), in which she humorously contrasts a frustrated influencer with her own TikTok activities. Using a shaky screen effect, she first portrays an angry representative of "people with over a million followers stressing about not being verified". She then smiles, holding a bundle of W.B. Yeats' works in her hand, to show what she herself does: "teaching my lovely little TikTok family all about poetry and sharing my passion for literature". This video represents one of Martha Lilli's early posts and seems to encapsulate her purpose: not to gain as many followers and impact as possible, but to engage in cultural mediation around poetry and literature within a community of like-minded individuals.

In addition to sharing experiences from her life as a student, such as reflecting on lectures or providing essay writing tips for university, she also uses the hashtag #BookTok, for example, when showcasing the shelves in her bookcases. When examining Martha Lilli's videos in light of the patterns described by Martens et al. (2022), it is evident that she represents a different type of #BookToker than previously described in the literature. Only two of Martens et al.'s (2022) trends convincingly reappear in Martha Lilli's content: the marking of a readerly identity and the integration of reading into broader phenomena on TikTok. Martha Lilli unmistakably marks her identity as a reader by describing herself as an "English lit nerd" in her bio, with the pejorative term "nerd" being used as a badge of honor, as is often seen on TikTok (cf. Merga, 2021). She also participates in broader social media trends, such as *challenges* (e.g. a "decade challenge" where she names her favorite poets from different eras), *pose striking* (where she dresses up as Lord Byron), and *matching outfits* (in Martha Lilli's case, matching outfits to book covers). Also, she frequently incorporates lip-syncing and is often seen dancing in her videos, which, while not unique to TikTok, are closely associated with the platform.

However, in contradiction with general trends on #BookTok, Martha Lilli's presentation of reading, and poetry in particular, is not primarily sensory or haptic. Although the materiality of poetry books prominently features in her videos (e.g. showcasing physical books and leafing through them), Martha Lilli does not give much attention to material aspects in her discourse on poetry. Instead, she focuses more on providing literary-historical information and the perspectives of the poets she highlights, or on using poetry analytical terminology. Moreover, in her videos, there is hardly any discourse oriented towards affective experiences. Martha Lilli primarily translates the academic insights she gains during her English studies into the lighthearted format of TikTok.

Those who follow her, though, do get a sense of how much poetry, in particular, is intertwined with her personal identity on an affective level. For example, one of Martha

Lilli's videos lists the poems for which she would *sell a kidney* to experience reading them for the first time again, underscoring the intense sensation that poetry can evoke for her. The poets who achieve such sensations are not the accessible TikTok authors who cover their personal growth or adolescent struggles in relational poems, but rather canonical authors from English poetry history, such as Keats, Yeats, Eliot, Shelley, Plath, and international modernists like Lorca. In some cases, Martha Lilli's viewers must have knowledge about such authors to fully understand her videos, for instance, when she simulates a funny conversation between Byron and Shelley through Whatsapp or when she playfully criticizes the prominent role Carol Ann Duffy plays in the academic poetry curriculum.

On account of Martha Lilli's somewhat academic approach to poetry, especially by TikTok standards, something interesting occurs in terms of "connected learning", the final pattern identified by Martens et al. (2022) in relation to #BookTok. While Martens et al. speak of the *integration* of interest-driven, peer-supported, and academically oriented learning, these three pillars fundamentally *overlap* in Martha Lilli's account. However, the comments reveal that her content also reaches TikTokers who are not necessarily interested in poetry, but use her videos for educational purposes. For example, one comment reads: "this just reminded me how much I despise English, but it was very helpful thanks lol". Such comments often praise Martha Lilli's videos at the expense of negative experiences with their English teachers (e.g. "took my teacher 3 months to get this message across"; "y'all English teachers ain't teach you this?"). Furthermore, reactions to videos in which Martha Lilli provides more in-depth analyses of specific poems indicate that students actually use them as part of their English lessons. For instance, comments like "honestly i think im going to get a 9 just because of your videos sis i love this" and "I said this today in English when we were studying Exposure and my teacher literally had to Google it (I'm in yr9), thank you for making me seem smart" appear when Martha Lilli applies the concept of the "psychoscope" to Keats' poem "La Belle Dame".

Hence, in this case study, we observe that an account with a strong focus on poetry (partly intentionally) serves an educational purpose, which could raise interesting questions concerning the use of digital literacies in language education (compare, for instance, Bluijs et al., 2021; Dera, Gubbels, Van der Loo, & Van Rijt, 2023). Yet, Martha Lilli's videos also help to popularize the genre, at least among some members of the TikTok community. For example, one TikToker writes: "I've never really cared for literature and poetry, but I'm just gonna follow you because this made me go", and this is certainly not a unique response. Additionally, Martha Lilli *herself* is sometimes the reason why people watch her content (e.g. "The first person I know to dance about poetry", "Your passion for poetry is so nice I wish I could share in this happiness lmao"). Like with Lot Weijers, there are followers who explicitly point out the therapeutic effect of following the account, with one comment stating: "i don't even like poetry (i do like reading though), but your videos give me calming energy and I need that".

This therapeutic and relational aspect forms an important discursive link between the reactions to Lot Weijers' TikTok poems and Martha Lilli's videos discussing poetry. Although Martha Lilli primarily focuses on canonical texts that have little in common with the type of poetry Weijers writes, the same mechanisms occur among their followers in response to poetic texts. The most striking recurring themes are the strong emphasis on emotions and the desire to share these with like-minded individuals. For example,

in response to Martha Lilli's analysis of Keats, someone writes ecstatically: "Oh my god I'm so glad you know la belle. It's one of my favorite poems I studied in lit, and I can't share my love with anyone". And when Martha Lilli mentions her favorite poetry collections, someone asks: "I haven't read them. Is it okay if I do and then send you a PM of how I am feeling after reading them? So I can share my first time emotions with you (heart emoji)". Furthermore, like in Weijers' case, this sense of deep connection is not limited to national borders, as evidenced by a follower who writes: "I just discovered your account and it's amazing! I'm from Italy and I love poetry too (heart emoji)". Taking all of this in account, then, the @marthalilli account serves a dual audience: those who seek content about poetry for school purposes and sometimes realize that the genre is less boring than they initially thought, and like-minded individuals who recognize in this TikToker nothing less than a kindred spirit.

Case 3 – being affected by #sylviaplath

There are few English-language poets who have acquired such a cult status as Sylvia Plath – so much so that Marianne Egeland dedicated an entire study to the matter, titled *Claiming Sylvia Plath: The Poet as Exemplary Figure* (Egeland, 2013). Against this background, it is not surprising that the hashtag #sylviaplath also has a wide reach on TikTok. The 40 most popular contributions about her poetry present a mixed picture: there are videos where users praise famous poems such as "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus", but also videos of sad-looking actresses with the text "#sylviaplath I miss you", and odes to the poet in rap form ("she's the baddest witch in the oven"). Also popular are videos showing quotes from Plath's body of work, often combined with background music to which users lip-sync.

In these diverse videos, many of the trends described by Martens et al. (2022) can regularly be observed. Regarding the reading experience as a sensory and haptic one, it is noticeable how often the materiality of Plath's poetry is showcased in the videos: physical poetry collections are frequently shown, often including older editions, while Plath's handwriting also features in many videos. Here, the materiality of the book is seemingly used to portray this poet as a representative of a belletrist literary culture. In many of these videos, this process is explicitly linked to the readerly identity of the creators, who, besides the hashtag #sylviaplath, liberally use hashtags such as #reader, #booknerd, #bookish, and #booktok.

The affective nature of TikTok is also evident in the videos about Sylvia Plath, although it should be noted that there are also widely viewed videos that focus more cognitively on her poetry, discussing the literary-historical importance of *Ariel* (1965), for example, or providing an interpretation of Plath's recent popularity among Generation Z. Representing the affective reaction are, amongst others, videos in which a TikToker reacts emotionally while reading a poem by Plath, and a nostalgic reflection from a user who imagines encountering Plath's texts as a sixteen-years old again, celebrating this poet as the one who "really set the vibes for the rest of my life". In that specific case, Sylvia Plath appears to possess the capability not only to deeply touch people but also to shape their identity – at least in their own perception.

Broader TikTok trends are evidently visible in the Plath case, as she is frequently incorporated into hashtags like #booksiloved and #bookrecommendations. However, just like

with the canonical poets Martha Lilli discusses, there are also people struggling with poetry for school assignments, and the didactic ideal of “connected learning” is not a given. For example, there is a popular video of a TikToker frustrated because they have to present a poem by Plath at school while barely understanding the text. The responses to this video are indicative of how the TikTok community seems to experience Anglo-Saxon poetry education (e.g. “I forgot this is how poems are supposed to be read”; “I HATE HATE interpreting and analyzing poems, and this is what we do every single day at my school ...”).

Nevertheless, the reactions under various Plath contributions confirm once again how deeply poetry on TikTok can touch, shape, and support people. Some readers consider the poet almost an intimate friend – with phrases ranging from “I have all her books in order to have an older sister” to “I don’t care to be right all the time, I want to feel seen, and Sylvia Plath is one of the few writers that have that effect on me”. In some cases, the identity-building effects of specific poems are mentioned (“lady lazarus shaped my little ginger me”, writes a user with a nod to Plath’s line “Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair”), while others use words that suggest they have personally met Plath (“Sylvia was bad ass. She turned me on to poetry”).

As in the previous two case studies, emotional and relational arguments dominate the reactions to Plath’s poetry (e.g. “that was striking, made me tear up”; “Everything I’ve read of hers is something I’ve felt or thought before”; “She puts my feelings into such perfect words; it’s sad yet beautiful”). References to (intended) tattoos are also frequent, and several users emphasize that they think about Plath’s verse in their daily lives (“I think about it on the bus ride home sometimes, and it always gets me”). Furthermore, in this case as well, a promoting effect of reading can be observed, evident in responses like “I’ve never read anything from her or know anything about her. I will now ... thanks for the inspo”.

At the same time, the Plath case reveals a more critical and sometimes even activist discourse about poetry on TikTok. Multiple users express their dissatisfaction with the way Plath uses the Holocaust to reflect on her own suffering. Regarding “Lady Lazarus”, for instance, someone writes: “Every time I read this I just have to ignore the n*zi part”, while another user does not want to reread this poem at all: “Plath’s obsession with characterizing herself as a Jew undergoing her own personal Holocaust turned me off of her poetry”. The highly complex relationship between Plath’s literary works and the Holocaust has been a subject of ongoing discussion in literary studies (compare Gubar, 2001), but TikTok does not leave room for the nuances found in those hermeneutical reflections. This is also evident in other strong reactions that Plath’s texts elicit regarding controversial themes. For example, the famous lines “Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / and I eat men like air” from “Lady Lazarus” are reduced by a user to “this line is about her sewerslidal intention, please stop romanticizing this’. While indeed there are interpretations of “Lady Lazarus” that read the text in light of the author’s suicidal tendencies, such claims about the definitive meaning of poetry overlook the openness of literary texts. Moreover, a reading in terms of “sewerslidal intentions” seems to contradict the three quoted lines, which rather portray a powerful resurrection after a difficult period. The latter is also how most TikTok users seem to experience Plath’s quotes: as support, as feeling seen, and sometimes even as therapy. One reader summarizes this evocative feeling, referring

to the power of the digital community: “it’s beautiful how I feel this so deeply but so do 16k people. No one’s alone”.

Conclusion

This article aimed to provide a first exploratory analysis of how poetry functions on TikTok. Based on three focused case studies, it revealed how the hashtag #poetry, on the one hand, serves as a haven for videos in which users perform their own poems, blending recitation, textual presentation, and background music. Based on an analysis of Lot Weijers’ account, this type of TikTok poetry aligns with what research in literary studies has already established for poems on Instagram. It involves accessible texts in free verse with few grammatical deviations and occasional sound equivalences, focusing on themes of personal growth. On the other hand, TikTok allows space for content related to canonical poetry and for accounts where users try to convey their love for poetry, sometimes using a culturally mediating approach applying academic knowledge. Unlike some prominent poetry accounts with original texts, such content-oriented accounts do not attract hundreds of thousands of followers, but they hold great relevance for the community that engages with their videos.

The reactions to TikTok videos with/on poetry unmistakably indicate that the discourse surrounding the genre is strongly affectively oriented. In their comments, users frequently express what poems do to them, focusing mainly on the therapeutic, relational, personally meaningful, and nostalgic aspects – characteristics that are typical of heteronomous views on poetry (compare Dera, 2021). At the same time, there is a group of TikTokers active around the hashtag #poetry who approach the genre more cognitively. These users, for instance, share interpretations of the poems or verse lines they encounter on TikTok, place what they find in intertextual networks, or engage in an ideological discussion about the worldview expressed in poetic texts. Seen in this light, this exploratory study of poetry on TikTok shows that the image constructed by previous researchers of #BookTok needs some nuance. The existing secondary literature on the phenomenon has placed so much emphasis on TikTok’s culture of experience – where reading is predominantly sensory, haptic, and affective – that more content-oriented reading experiences risk being overlooked. Based on the case studies in this article, however, it is evident that interpretive-oriented readers also form part of the literary community on TikTok. Sometimes this inclusion is somewhat involuntary, as seen with the many students who end up at the #poetry hashtag for school assignments or presentations, but it also involves enthusiastic intermediaries who, on one day, adjust their outfit to match the cover of a poetry collection and, on another day, analyze a poem by Keats.

Whichever approach a PoetryToker chooses, it seems that somewhere in the virtual community, there is someone to whom the performed or discussed poem resonates. In that sense, poetry on TikTok is capable of bringing young people together, creating what Martha Lilli calls a “lovely little TikTok family”.

Note

1. All quotes from and about Lot Weijers’ poetry are presented in English instead of Dutch. The author of this article is responsible for all translations.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This study (publication) is part of the project *Uses of Literature in the Classroom: Legitimizing Literature in Upper-Secondary Education* (with project number VI.Veni.201C.046 of the research programme VENI- SGW) which is (partly) financed by the Dutch Research Council (NWO). Special thanks go to Femke ter Haar for her assistance during data collection.

References

- Adnan, N. I., Ramli, S., & Ismail, I. N. (2021). Investigating the usefulness of TikTok as an educational tool. *International Journal of Practices in Teaching and Learning*, 1(2), 1–5.
- Adriaansen, R.-J. (2022). Dark academia: Curating affective history in a COVID-Era internet aesthetic. *International Public History*, 5(2), 105–114. <https://doi.org/10.1515/iph-2022-2047>
- Bluijs, S., Dera, J., & Peeters, D. (2021). Waarom digitale literatuur in het literatuuronderwijs thuishoort. *Tijdschrift Voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde*, 137(2), 150–163. <https://doi.org/10.5117/TNTL2021.2.003.BLUI>
- Boffone, T. (Ed.). (2022). *Tiktok cultures in the United States*. Routledge.
- Boffone, T. & Jerasa, S. (2021). Toward a (queer) Reading community: BookTok, teen readers, and the rise of TikTok literacies. *Talking Points*, 33(1), 10–16. <https://doi.org/10.58680/tp202131537>
- Bondy Valdovinos Kaye, D., Zeng, J., & Wikström, P. (2022). *Tiktok: Creativity and culture in short video*. Polity (Digital Media and Society Series).
- Bresge, A. (2018, June 6). Verse goes viral: Instagram poets shake up the literary establishment. *The Canadian Press*.
- Curwood, J. (2013). “The hunger games”: Literature, literacy, and online affinity spaces. *Language Arts*, 90(6), 417–427.
- Dera, J. (2021). Evaluating poetry on Covid-19: Attitudes of poetry readers toward corona poems. *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, 34(2), 77–94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08893675.2021.1899630>
- Dera, J., Brouwer, S., & Welling, A. (2023). #BookTok’s appeal on ninth-grade students: An inquiry into students’ responses on a social media revelation. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 67(2), 99–110. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.1303>
- Dera, J., Gubbels, J., Van der Loo, J., & Van Rijt, J. (2023). *Vaardig met vakinhoud: Handboek vakdidactiek Nederlands*. Coutinho.
- Dezuanni, M. L., Reddan, B., Rutherford, L., & Schoonens, A. (2022). Selfies and shelfies on #bookstagram and #booktok – social media and the mediation of Australian teen Reading. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 47(3), 355–372. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2022.2068575>
- Driscoll, B., & Rehberg Sedo, D. (2019). Faraway, So close: Seeing the intimacy in goodreads reviews. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 25(3), 248–259. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800418801375>
- Egeland, M. (2013). *Claiming sylvia plath: The poet as exemplary figure*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Gubar, S. (2001). Prosopopoeia and holocaust poetry in English: Sylvia plath and Her contemporaries. *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 14(1), 191–215. <https://doi.org/10.1353/yale.2001.0007>
- Huggan, G. (2020). Re-evaluating the postcolonial exotic. *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 22(7), 808–824. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2020.1753552>
- Jerasa, S., & Boffone, T. (2021). Booktok 101: TikTok, digital literacies, and out-of-school READING practices. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 65(3), 219–226. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.1199>
- Knox, J. (2020). United we ‘gram: Scrolling through the assimilated aesthetics of instapoetry. *Poetics Today*, 43(3), 479–532. <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-9780403>
- Kovalik, K., & Curwood, J. S. (2019). #Poetryisnotdead: Understanding Instagram poetry within a transliteracies framework. *Literacy*, 53(4), 185–195. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lit.12186>

- Martens, M., Balling, G., & Higgason, K. A. (2022). #BookTokMadeMeReadit: Young adult Reading communities across an international, sociotechnical landscape. *Information and Learning Sciences*, 123(11/12), 705–722. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ILS-07-2022-0086>
- Merga, M. K. (2021). How can Booktok on TikTok inform readers' advisory services for young people? *Library & Information Science Research*, 43(2), 101091–10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2021.101091>
- Milton, A., Ajmani, L., DeVito, M. A., & Chancellor, S. (2023). "I See Me here": Mental health content, community, and algorithmic curation on TikTok. *CHI '23: Proceedings of the 2023 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3544548.3581489>
- Pâquet, L. (2019). Selfie-help: The multimodal appeal of Instagram poetry. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 52(2), 296–314. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.12780>
- Perkins, K. (2017). The boundaries of BookTube. *The Serials Librarian*, 73(3–4), 352–356. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0361526X.2017.1364317>
- Reddan, B. (2022). Social reading cultures on BookTube, Bookstagram, and BookTok. *Synergy*, 20(1), <http://slav.vic.edu.au/index.php/Synergy/article/view/597>
- Rogers, N. (2019). From bookshelf porn and shelfies to #bookfacefriday: How readers use Pinterest to promote their bookishness. *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, 16(1), 473–495.
- Simecek, K., & Rumbold, K. (2016). The uses of poetry. *Changing English: Studies in Culture and Education*, 23(4), 309–313. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684X.2016.1230300>
- Wang, K., Liu, X., & Han, Y. (2019). Exploring Goodreads reviews for book impact assessment. *Journal of Informetrics*, 13(3), 874–886. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joi.2019.07.003>
- Wang, Y. (2020). Humor and camera view on mobile short-form video apps influence user experience and technology-adoption intent, an example of *TikTok (DouYin)*. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 110, 106373, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2020.106373>
- Wiederhold, B. (2022). Booktok made me do it: The evolution of reading. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 25(3), 157–158. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2022.29240.editorial>