MLO Modern Languages Open

SPECIAL COLLECTION: NEW DIRECTIONS IN DIGITAL MODERN LANGUAGES RESEARCH

ARTICLES – DIGITAL MODERN LANGUAGES

Instapoesía: A "Prestigious" Literary Practice?

LOUISE EVANS

LIVERPOOL UNIVERSITY PRESS

ABSTRACT

"Can Instagram make poems sell again?" (Maher). Poetry published via social media platforms, namely Instagram, not only provides readers with a "nuevo medio [que] equivale a nueva formación" [new medium and a new form] but one that "a la larga provoca una nueva concepción de lo poético" [forges a new understanding of poetry] (Quinto 198). The poetic phenomenon has sparked an interesting debate regarding its validity and position within the literary field, as critics and journalists alike are beginning to either critique or justify the emerging presence of Instagram poetry (*Instapoesía*) in the contemporary landscape of Spanish literature. This article, in adopting Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework of the notion of prestige, will make critical interventions into this debate, not only in the consideration of the social and communicative aspects of social media, but also in understanding the importance of "reader dispositions" in the online literary space (Shapiro 251). The author focuses on one of the most prominent Spanish-speaking online poets, Elvira Sastre, not only to demonstrate how poets operating on social media dedicate their work to the online space, but also how they appeal to the public in order to gain symbolic capital. By observing how aesthetic expectations of the "field" can be both replicated and rejected by characteristics of the digital medium, this investigation will analyse how this digital poetry is contributing to today's cultural field, while changing contemporary understandings of what constitutes a valued or prestigious text in Spanish poetry.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:
Louise Evans
University of Liverpool, UK
hslevan6@liverpool.ac.uk

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Evans, Louise 2023 Instapoesía: A "Prestigious" Literary Practice? *Modern Languages Open*, 2023(1): 43 pp. 1–15. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.440

In recent decades, digital technologies have "modified our aesthetic expectations and changed the ways in which literary texts [at least, in the Western world] are composed, distributed, and read today" (Schaefer 178). A new generation of Spanish poets are claiming digital media as their writing space, not only to advertise their own poetry but also to publish and share it. The ongoing debate surrounding the validity of digital poetry published in online spaces such as Instagram has witnessed some critics argue that it is "suggestive" and can be likened to "merely window shopping" (Marikar 2), while others view it as an "effective" form of poetic praxis (Riviere 4).

Literary prestige has been defined as "the esteem authors have in the literary field … based on the value that is attributed to their literary work" (Verboord, "Classification" 263). Despite the fact that, according to Maryna Bazylevych, "studies focusing on prestige and social status systems have not been in vogue in the anthropological discipline in recent decades", Pierre Bourdieu pioneered this feature in his work through the lens of the conceptualised *habitus*, *field* and *capital* (76). Marc Verboord expands Bourdieusian theory, emphasising the socially constructed nature of prestige but ultimately recognising it as a worthy way of attributing recognition to artists and cultural products in a specific field. Using Bourdieu's theoretical framework of prestige, Verboord's distinction between quality and esteem, and Diana Cullell's examination of public attention as intrinsically linked to literary prestige, this article examines whether a new understanding of prestige can be reached through the transformation of certain "markers of prestige" (Cullell, "(Re-)Locating" 221). Determining whether cultural or symbolic capital can be reconsidered in order to view this literature as potentially prestigious allows us also to examine whether this emerging genre of literature operates in concert with or autonomously from the Western canon. Ultimately, in experiencing what Carlos Jáuregui calls "the crisis of the literary as a space for cultural production" in the digital age, the apparently "precarious" position of literature – with respect to mass media – must be considered (288).

DIGITAL(ISED) POETRY IN CONTEXT

To effectively discuss the emergence of literature in the digital sphere, it is crucial to note that "beginning with the printing press, technological innovations have enabled the dissemination of more and more media forms over broader and broader audiences" (Mandiberg 1). Charlie Gere's analysis of the rise of digital culture refers to the digital age as "the almost total transformation of the world by digital technology. It is hard to grasp the full extent of this transformation, which, in the developed world at least, can be observed in almost every aspect of modern living" (9). Reaching Mandiberg's "broader and broader audiences" draws a connection with Baron's theory of the "always-on" lifestyle that is afforded to audiences and users by the development of such digital technologies. Access to social media sites via mobile devices is a technological capability that increases the integration of digital media use in everyday life, while intensifying the "always-on" culture that exists for those with access to the required technology.

That digital literature is complex is clear, with significant binaries that often underpin discussions on cultural artefacts forged in the online sphere: digital natives/non-digital natives, new media user/traditional reader, print/digital texts. Considering these binaries, Luís Correa-Diaz's research contemplates digital literature's position within the wider field, leading a discussion on whether it is only literature "que no funciona y no [es] possible en la página, pero sí en la pantalla" [that doesn't function and [is] not possible on the page, but that does on the screen] that can be considered digital (36).[1] The multitude of terms applied to this phenomenon in the field – "poesía digital/electrónica, poesía en la era de la cibercultura" [digital/electronic poetry, poetry in the era of cyberculture] (Correa-Díaz 32) but also electronic literature, digital literature (Pressman), e-poetries (Glazier), social media poetry (Marikar) – serves to underline the need to address this debate through specific examples. Resistance on the part of the academic world is evinced in literary critics' affirmations that contemporary poetry, for example, "is dead" (Sellers) or that it is "pithy and suggestive" (Marikar); a resistance that may, in part, be due to the aforementioned difficulty of categorising and defining such a new genre, as well as what Chris Perriam determines as hesitation due to the "awareness of the open-endedness of these new poetic enterprises" (199). Ultimately, while some envision the digital space as a utopian and democratic venue for the appropriation of "the Literary", others "downplay the Internet's literary system, a resistance grounded in a classic reluctance to accept new technical bases for the 'Word'" (Jáuregui 288).

1 English translations are the author's own.

In a virtual environment that promotes a nuanced freedom of creativity (given that those able to navigate the digital field are at liberty to publish work), Kenneth Goldsmith maintains that contemporary writers are "focused all day on powerful machines with infinite possibilities, connected to networks with a number of equally infinite possibilities" (24). This concept of "infinity" appears extensively in the academic discourse surrounding the digital age; made visible by the plethora of texts already available online and the increased opportunities for writing and publishing work, qualified by the digital medium itself.

While it can be suggested that texts that exclusively function on the screen should form the critical starting point for considering what constitutes a digital text, this article, in line with Correa-Díaz, accepts as digital texts those that "usa el ordenador como herramienta no [solo] de producción en el sentido esencial(ista), sino más bien de difusión/exposición" [use the computer as a tool not [only] for production in the essential(ist) sense, but rather for dissemination/exposure] (39). While some texts discussed in this article could – and do – operate on the traditional printed page, the adoption of the digital medium to publish, disseminate and promote this work must allow for these to be considered as digital texts. Indeed, possibilities for "intermedialidad", for reaching "broader and broader audiences" accentuate this genre of literature as one focused on accessibility, and allow this article's primary case study, Elvira Sastre, to merge visual imagery (photographs and illustrations) to create a "hybridised" literary form that both appropriates print materiality and employs multimedia possibilities offered by the digital space (Taylor and Pitman).

Specifically, Spanish-language poetry published via the social media application Instagram is the focus of enquiry, although there is a rich and emerging landscape of literature published via different social media outlets. Instagram, the photo-sharing site, was created by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger and launched in 2010. According to Jon Mitchell, "the point of *Instagram*, just as much as taking photos, is finding new photos" (1). Expanding his argument, Mitchell continues: "the simple mechanisms of liking and commenting provide great fun and feedback. It's a new kind of network that's perfect for the smartphone age" (1). After its launch, Instagram rapidly gained popularity, with one million registered users in two months, 10 million in a year, and 800 million as of September 2017, figures that serve to underline Goldsmith's notion of the "infinite possibilities" of the application in the rapid and continuous growth of users, likes, shares and followers. According to Abram Brown of *Forbes* magazine, the creators' goal became to "transform *Instagram* from a photo app into a media company that communicates through photos" (1). Brown's definition of the social media application as a "media company" is particularly interesting; reminiscent of the medium serving the writer (or in this case the poet) as an agent through which to publish and promote their work. Overall, the fundamental objectives of Instagram, of communication, sharing, providing feedback, are pertinent to understanding the ways in which the contemporary poet employs the digital sphere to exemplify their literature. With terms such as "Instapoetry" and "Instapoet" or, in Spanish *Instapoesía*, added to the *Collins Online Dictionary* in 2017, this technological and literary phenomenon is undoubtedly forming an established entity in contemporary literary discourse.

PIERRE BOURDIEU, PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL – ELVIRA SASTRE, PUBLIC(ISED) POET

Given the uncertain status of digitally mediated poetry, Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualisations of *position*, *disposition* and *position-taking* can provide a theoretical framework for exploring both the positionality of the author in the social media space, and relatedly the literary prestige or value ascribed to texts. These concepts are closely related to Bourdieu's key notions of habitus, field and capital. The habitus refers to the deeply ingrained habits, skills and dispositions that people possess due to their accumulation of life experiences. Bourdieu concludes that, like "second nature" (Grenfell 39), "individuals implicitly and routinely modify their expressions in anticipation of their likely reception" (Bourdieu, "The Field" 53). This is particularly relevant to the act of publishing work through social media, as it can be argued that language is inherently linked to the social situation, or field. In Bourdieu's theory, a field, market or game is a setting in which both agents and their social positions are located. On a structural level, the field is a term used to indicate the conditions in which linguistic utterances take place, including the expectations imposed in this microcosm. In an attack on Saussurian linguistics, Bourdieu

stresses the importance of taking into account the praxis of language, in other words the social conditions of its construction. His theory demonstrates that the habitus is always attuned to the field. Both Bourdieu and Johnson note the tensions that may arise between such positions within the literary field; tensions that exist as a result of an artist's (or poet's) struggle for cultural recognition within the specific field (*Language* 231). Notably, these tensions may also be present within the field structure, as well as between different fields, highlighting how the Bourdieusian reader must deconstruct these ideas (Bloustein).

The perception that the Western canon presents a prescriptive list of "prestigious" literary texts will be discussed later, with specific reference to Verboord's problematisation of the canon itself. However, it warrants brief attention here, given its relevance to the third of Bourdieu's general concepts. Capital, which has been categorised into different tranches such as economic, linguistic, social, political and cultural, refers to the "means to acquire and maintain cultural status among those who enjoy similar status", according to Hermans (131). Bourdieusian scholars (see English; Blackmore) postulate that cultural capital is intrinsically linked to the notion of recognition, which in the case study of this article might refer to being publicly known in the field of digital poetry. It can be argued, therefore, that digital poets aim for a degree of cultural capital by tailoring their poems to the field, in this case the virtual landscape that is social media. Digital poet Sam Riviere writes extensively about the need for this kind of poetry to receive more academic attention, positing that economic capital is not necessarily always a noteworthy factor in the production of digital poetry. "The lack of financial imperatives to remain within a traditional publishing format suggests that [digital] poetry is at liberty to define itself outside such structures" (Sellers 193). The economic element underpins the reception or perception of poetry published online, in that it subverts traditional publishing processes, and therefore the physical, economic capital gained from selling the cultural product (a print publication) is at most, non-existent, and at the very least, less visible.[2] That said, employing social media for advertising and self-promotion can benefit writers financially, especially in the marketing of print publications, therefore there cannot be an absolute divide between the economic underpinnings of these actions. Not only does economic capital function in concert with symbolic capital (prestige), but this kind of poetry is seen to reach "broader audiences" with minimal investment (Sorrentino and Salgano).

Clearly, digitally mediated poetry is "unhindered by the costs and limitations of paper", but this dynamic presents conflicting impulses (Jáuregui 290). In the case of Elvira Sastre, a Spanish poet whose work has been exhibited extensively in the digital sphere, one of her first Instagram poem-posts coincided with the publication of her first print collection (Tú la acuarela/Yo la lírica 2013), the implication of this being that she may also have been "unhindered" economically. That she continues to utilise social media for the publishing and promotion of her poetry, despite having received considerable economic capital through traditional publishing channels, not only makes Sastre an interesting case study for this examination, but also positions digitally mediated poetry as a valid part of the wider literary tradition.

In the case of Sastre, posts published at the inception of her career mainly consisted of photographs of a physical page. In these cases, the text forms a visual image of a printed poem that has already undergone the orthodox publishing process, placing emphasis on the "sharing" capabilities of the application. While this poem (Figure 1) has been published in print, it is nevertheless noteworthy that the haiku form here lends itself well to the spatial limitations of the screen, noted at length by scholars interested in the character limit of social media poetry (as on Twitter) (Bruns et al.) and in David Crystal's *Internet Linguistics*. While this text is not seen to harness the multimedia affordances of the digital space, it highlights the ways in which poets such as Sastre adopt this space to share their work. In the last two years, however, Sastre's posts have come to constitute a "mediamorphosis" (Fidler) of photos of excerpts, posters advertising poetry recitals, newspaper clippings and videos of recitals, a merging of literary, visual and sonic formats that leans towards self-promotion and advertising, a change seen to embody not only Brown's notion of the social media application as a "media company", but the multi-modal possibilities afforded to literature by the digital space.

2 It must be noted here that many Spanish poets operating in the social media space have gone on to publish in print (Elvira Sastre, Irene X, Marwan etc.).

DOI: 10.3828/mlo.v0i0.440

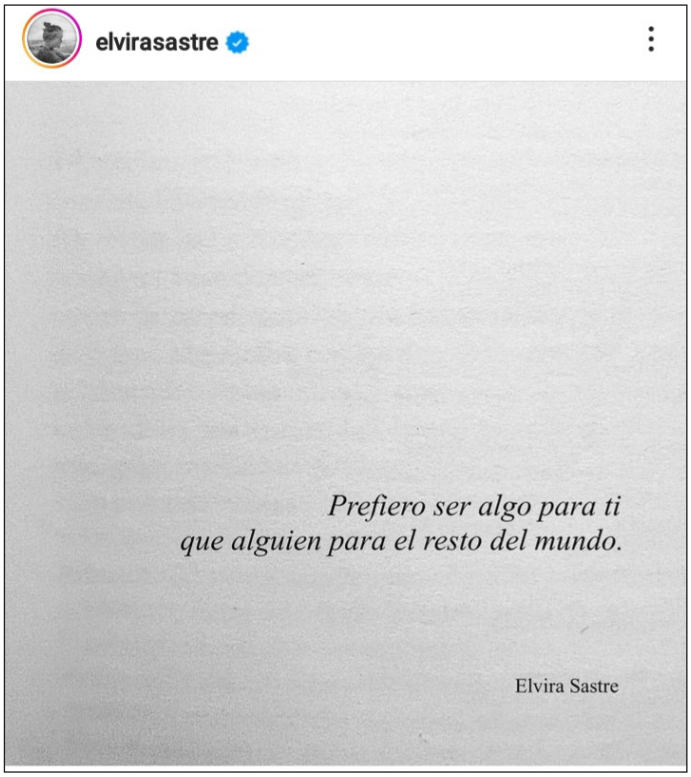

Figure 1 @elvirasastre – Photograph of a printed poem, posted via Elvira Sastre's Instagram. 22 June 2023.

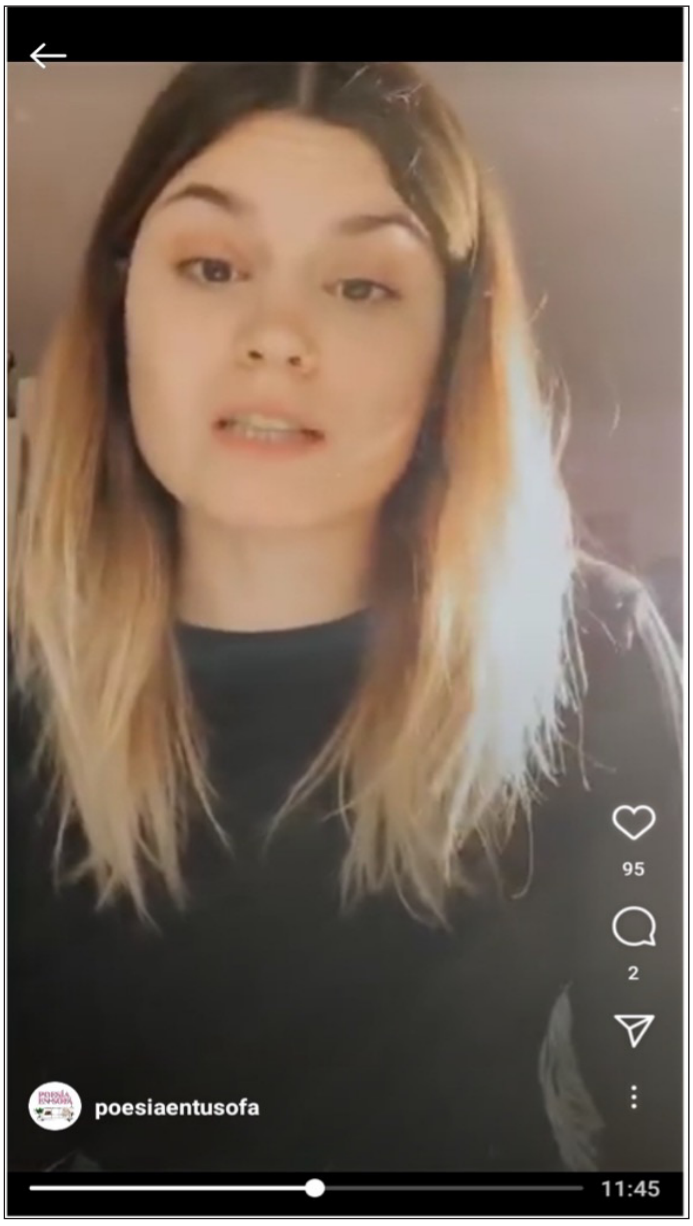

Figure 2 @poesiaentusofa – A still from an Instagram live video recording, Elvira Sastre reciting her poems and speaking with her readers. 27 March 2020.

The digital age is claiming poetry as its own, as Sellers notes that as a field of creative practice, "poetry evolves constantly" (189). As the case of Sastre illustrates, the internet allows for diverse formats specifically because of its inherent tendencies; "it [encourages] eclecticism by the breadth of writing it makes available, taking poetry out of its tradition and theoretical/political context, expanding or breaking open coteries" (Sellers 193). This article will later discuss the ways in which digital poetry is subverting both traditional publishing processes and aesthetic expectations; however, it is meaningful to note here that Sastre's continued employment of the social media space for the publishing of her work poses questions regarding Bourdieu's field. Where the field marks a space of positionalities of "agents" or "players" seeking to possess and mobilise a specific form of capital, we can view Sastre as a writer who operationalises both the online and offline spaces, aided by her position within the online field.

"PLAYING THE (LITERARY) GAME" – A DIGITAL POET'S POSITION WITHIN THE SOCIAL MEDIA FIELD

Returning to Bourdieu's conceptualisation of the terms informing prestige, the first refers to the importance of the poet's position within the aforementioned field. Sastre is a graduate from Segovia, Spain. She started a blog *Relocos y recuerdos* in 2007,[3] where she first began to publish her poetry. Sastre later published her work on Instagram and Twitter. She now has a monthly column in the Spanish newspaper *El País*, has published six print poetry collections, was the principal translator of Rupi Kaur's *Milk and Honey* into Spanish, and has participated in numerous literary festivals and poetry recitals in Spain, the UK, the United States and Latin America. The relevance of these online and offline actions within the literary field is made clear not only in Sastre's engagement with a variety of activities, but also in conjunction with Bourdieu's concept of disposition. Disposition, according to Bourdieu, is also pertinent to this process of possessing and mobilising capital within a specific field, and is a term used to describe the personal characteristics of an "agent" or "player". Sastre is a young Spanish woman who is technologically literate – like her readership – and bilingual in Spanish and English. Finally, position-taking is a notion that informs cultural prestige. Bourdieu summarises that "the degree of an agent's art competence is measured by the degree to which he or she masters the set of instruments for the appropriation of the work of art" ("The Field" 220). Sastre undoubtedly "masters" the online environment effectively, even posting snippets of her newspaper articles to self-advertise. In this way, Sastre is seen to draw on the prestige of established media, for example print, in order to expand her own following and therefore sense of prestige.

Figure 3 @elvirasastre – A photograph of a newspaper clipping. The caption reads "today in *El País* newspaper". 17 May 2019.

3 http://bleuparapluie.blogspot.com.

Writing a blog, posting discussion videos, posting poetry via both Instagram and Twitter and presenting this work personally at poetry recitals, Sastre can be viewed as a poet who is dedicated to publishing texts that suit the online space, while understanding how to utilise the social media environment to effectively publish and promote literary works.[4]

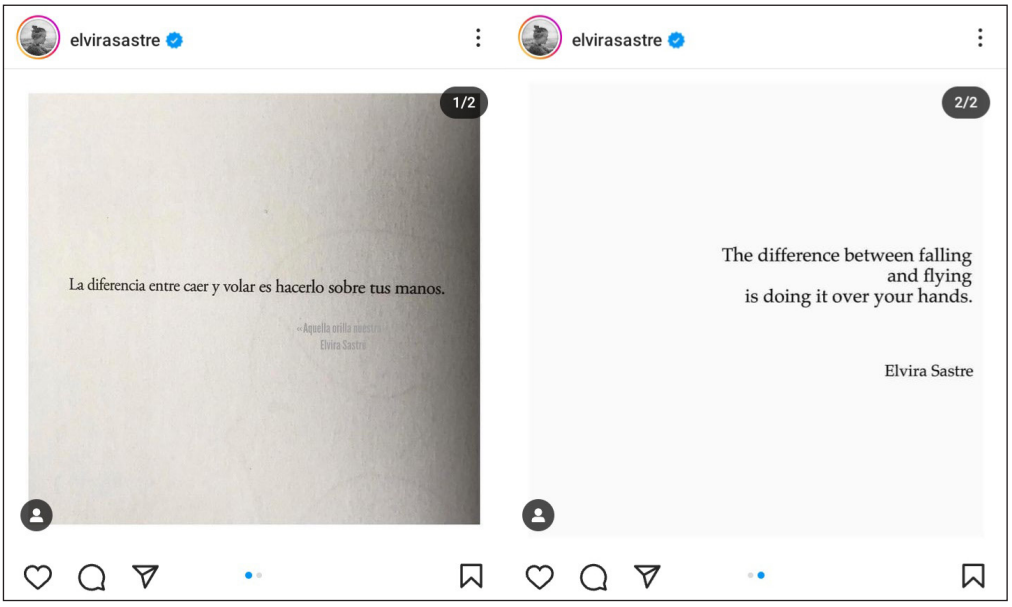

Figure 4 @elvirasastre – A photograph and digitally mediated haiku-esque poem posted on Elvira Sastre's Instagram. 11 December 2018.

For example, Sastre's Instagram poem "la diferencia entre volar y caer"[5] invites the reader to click on the Spanish original text, and then to swipe left to reach her English translation, an option made available by the poet's disposition, or the manner in which Sastre operates in the social world. Recognising that poetic texts in multiple languages have the ability to reach a wider online following, and making strategic use of the affordances of Instagram, she can be seen as subscribing to Bourdieu's proposition about the so-called player: "mindful of the game's meaning and having been created for the game because he was created by it, plays the game and by playing it assures its existence" ("The Field" 237).

Where "playing the game" can be equated to establishing and maintaining capital within a specified field, in this case maintaining an online following in the social media space, we can clearly observe Sastre as "mindful" of these conditions and, as such, taking advantage of the affordances of the digital space. While Sastre's Instagram profile highlights a range of texts that harness the multimedia possibilities afforded by the platform, merging text with illustrations and photographs, or through audio-visual poetry readings, this particular poem evinces her reliance on text. This reliance can be said to be an attempt to "appropriate the signs of prestige" by adopting the same aesthetics as printed texts, a material form seen to inherently hold more prestige (Jáuregui 291). At the same time, the merging of remediated print media with the use of more multimodal formats underlines a "hybridisation" also noted by Taylor and Pitman, an amalgam which partly overturns one's expectations of the field, while propagating the idea of creative liberty that digital culture theory upholds (Stein; Goldsmith). This line of thought is visible in the language of the poem itself, where Sastre is "vola[ndo] sobre sus manos" [flying by her own hands]; perhaps offering a poetic nod to her rising public acclaim and, furthermore, the individual power felt by being "unhindered" by traditional publishing procedures.

However, simple "existence" does not ensure cultural recognition, and neither does Bourdieu's examination of these concepts provide a standardised set of criteria for prestige. Rather Bourdieu's framework allows us to problematise the established notion of prestige. Verboord,

4 It must be noted that Sastre does not necessarily reflect all Hispanic Instapoetas, given the public support she has received from some of the major poets in contemporary Spain. Benjamín Prado wrote the prologue to Sastre's *La soledad de un cuerpo acostumbrado a la herida*, and according to the blurb of Baluarte, for Luis Garcia Montero, "la poesía de Elvira Sastre es una apuesta verdadera, más allá de modas" [Elvira Sastre's poetry is to bet on, above any fad]. Although support from Verboord's "significant others" ("Classification" 261) affects the context of prestige in Sastre's work, this can still be considered to be public recognition and therefore still allows for the adaptation of the traditional notion of prestige.

5 The posts referred to in this article were accessed from Elvira Sastre's official Instagram page, https://www.instagram.com/elvirasastre/, between 2018 and 2023.

expanding on Bourdieusian theory, draws connections between literary prestige and perceptions of the Western canon. In his "Classification of Authors by Literary Prestige", he considers the canon to "lack clear theoretical and empirical grounding" ("Classification" 259). Critics refer to the canon in the sense of an unspecified "list of high-quality works we all agree about" (Sinclair 260). This element of "agreement" is inherently impressionistic and is reinforced by Verboord's affirmation that scholars (those deciding if a text is prestigious or not) "usually make subjective evaluations" ("Classification" 263). Despite the fact that Harold Bloom has defined what he considers the canonical texts of Western literature, Verboord claims that the canon is "never defined and its content remain[s] unexplicated" ("Classification" 263). This is undoubtedly paradoxical given its multi-dimensional and subjective nature, supporting an argument to reconsider or (re)locate prestige, given its supposed lack of grounding. The dichotomy surrounding the canon, that a text is either a part of it or not, that a writer is indeed prestigious or not in the literary field, also serves to justify the search for an alternative framework. This brings us back to Bourdieu, as he not only affirms the existence of a tension or struggle within and beyond the literary field, but also questions the dichotomy between supposed "bourgeois" art (reminiscent of Marikar's reference to "The Odyssey") and "low-brow" or "vulgar literary practice" (DiMaggio). The following citation not only exemplifies this cultural binary, but also highlights the inextricable link between capital and "dominance" of the field (prestige):

> The literary or artistic field is at all times the site of a struggle between the two principles of hierarchisation: the heteronomous principle favourable to those who dominate the field (e.g. bourgeois art) and the autonomous principle (e.g. art for art's sake), those of its advocates who are *least endowed with specific capital*. (Bourdieu, *Rules* 40)

Paul Blackmore conceptualises cultural capital or prestige as "a social phenomenon, conferred by those who hold something in esteem" (3). A social constructivist theory shared with Verboord, attributing literary recognition via prestige to an artist is "dependent upon how (s)he is perceived by significant others" ("Classification" 262). The inclusion of the word "significant" is politically charged, implying the existence of a criterion which marks those possessing the cultural capital to confer esteem, and appearing to perpetuate this hierarchisation within the literary field. As digitally mediated poetry is largely published on social media, the link between recognition in the literary field and audience/public attention is undeniable, especially given that critics' preferences as the basis for classification "are losing ground to audience's preferences" (Verboord, "Classification" 261). This complements Cullell's theory that "public attention and taste must be clearly recognized as an unambiguous marker of prestige" ("(Re-)Locating" 557).

Ultimately, the very concept of poetry published online relies upon its readership, followers, people who click "like" and "share". This is especially interesting in the consideration of Bourdieu's position-taking, as Janssen found that the more authors are engaged in what Verboord calls "sideline activities", such as publishing in channels other than books, serving as editors, interacting with the readership and so on, the more public attention they are likely to receive. Of course, these secondary activities would undoubtedly supplement economic capital, which would subsequently allow for poets to work in the social media space without financial imperatives. In this way Verboord's adoption of "sideline activities" becomes problematic, suggesting by association that publishing in print is the "main" activity. If engaging with social media may be considered a "sideline activity", then these actions are nevertheless embarked upon to garner economic capital. As previously mentioned, if social media are employed for the promotion of one's print publications or live recitals or, in Sastre's case, merchandise printed with her verse, then these endeavours cannot be divorced from financial capital. Ultimately, public attention in the social media space serves to furnish writers with both recognition and potential economic gain; a "game" played better by writers with the requisite position-taking.

"ALWAYS ON" – THE STATUS OF THE *INSTAPOETA*

Stephen Shapiro analyses the relationship between "status stratification" and "consumer dispositions" (251). Viewing the personal information section of Sastre's Instagram page allows us to reconsider the notion of public attention as a more refined or adapted marker of prestige. The blue tick next to Sastre's name highlights that she has a "verified status" from Instagram, a feature that is usually only granted to those with a high level of cultural capital, whether from online or offline activities: to those who know how to navigate the field effectively to gain maximum recognition.

DOI: 10.3828/mlo.v0i0.440

Figure 5 @elvirasastre – Profile page. 1 February 2023.

Moreover, the high number of followers (613,000 at the time of writing) indicates that this poet is reasonably well-established with her readership, in which case Shapiro's concept of "status" relies upon the "consumer". Again we see the relevance of Baron's conception of the "always-on" lifestyle propagated in the smartphone age, visible in the pressure on poets to produce, post and publish so as to remain in favour with their followers and to maintain this "status" (Quinto 198). This is seemingly at odds with traditional conceptions of prestigious or canonical texts as being considered and formed through slow contemplation (Taylor and Pitman). We can apply José van Dijck's term "dataism" to considerations of the author in the smartphone age. Dataism, understood as "the common assumption that people and behaviours can be adequately represented by quantitative means and 'big data'", is applicable to the case of social media poetry, if we understand "followers", "likes", "shares" and comments to be a means of quantifying the renown of the author (Walker Rettberg). While Walker Rettberg's understanding of dataism as an "assumption" is disconcerting, it is nevertheless germane to the common question: are we reducing our contemporary poets to data? This theory not only makes our understanding of authorship in the digital field more complex, but also nods to the democratisation of renown. The digital space has been seen to have a partly democratising effect on poetry itself, where those with Internet access have the freedom to become creator or "coautora", and certain digital affordances allow for reader participation through the comment and direct messaging features (Vilariño Picos). But it is also the conceptualisation of literary fame or renown that can be democratised in this realm. If we incorporate the idea of dataism within this concept, literary repute can be conceived as directly correlative to quantitative measures; the more followers a poet has, the greater the literary eminence.

However, over the last decade the algorithm has emerged as a key player in the flow of information and communication in these spaces, one that plays with power dynamics and visibility in a constraining rather than empowering way. Through content prioritisation based on signals such as number of followers, likes, shares and saves (the types of content that users decide to bookmark), as well as taps on profiles and engagement factors such as time spent on specific posts or profiles, seemingly invisible gatekeepers control and mediate information that readers see, or inform what the writer might do in the future, depending on what is deemed "successful". With this in mind, the aforementioned concept of the "democratisation" of renown in the social media space does not wholly align. Not only do *Instapoetas* have to appeal to the tastes of their readers (to increase and maintain their online following or public attention), but they also have to overcome the technological barriers imposed by the algorithmic structure. Existing economic capital continues to hold significance here, as previously mentioned, since dedicating time to honing one's profile and social media posts – as well as so-called "sideline" activities listed against Sastre's position earlier – requires existing economic capital.

In the context of dedicating time to one's profile, when considering social media and self-expression in this realm, critical discussion typically turns to notions of authenticity and exhibitionism. Alice Marwick's seminal work on publicity and branding in the social media age acknowledges that "becoming a micro-celebrity requires a degree of self-commodification to

create a 'publicizable personality'" (117) or what Sergio Fanjul notes as "ser creador en la vida instantánea" [being a creator in the smartphone age] (12). Likewise, in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman considered "life as a stage on which people performed for social audiences" (cited in Sanderson 914). Although Sanderson's study examines self-presentation through a sportsperson's blog, it is nevertheless compelling to apply the dialogical self-theory to the context of Web 2.0. Hermans's dialogical self-theory viewed the self, the (authorial) I, as an identity fluctuating between different positions – an individual adapting to change. In the context of this article's primary case study, Elvira Sastre's disposition, position and position-taking allow her to not only, in a Bourdieusian world, "master the game" of using social media to garner public attention and potentially by association literary renown, by presenting herself as a young, technologically literate and bilingual woman living in contemporary Spain, but also to present snippets of her personal life, merged with her *Instapoemas*. Through this element of self-representation, Sastre both harnesses Marwick's "publicizable personality" and encourages "broader audiences" to join her readership.

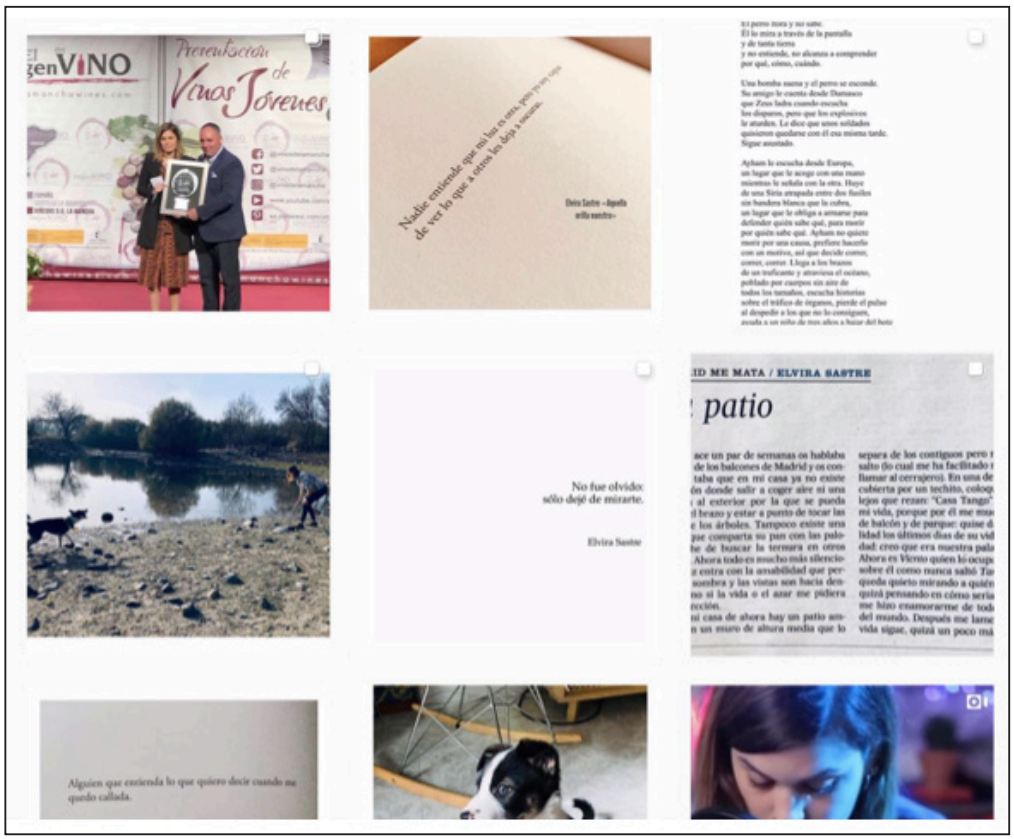

Figure 6 @elvirasastre – A screenshot of Sastre's Instagram profile, highlighting the merging of poems with photographs of her daily life. 1 February 2023.

If such public attention could indeed be considered a marker of prestige, then the proliferation of followers (from 280,000 in 2019 to 580,000 in 2021) and the rapidly increasing level of reader interaction in comments and shares would allow scholars to contemplate these digital texts as holding literary merit. However, it should be acknowledged that, traditionally, Sastre's disposition and position-taking would not have necessarily permitted her to carry literary prestige, as a young woman – especially during the period when Bourdieu posited his framework for literary prestige. While we can see the social structures of Bourdieu's theory as legitimate ways in which writers might gain prestige within the literary field, it is nevertheless the reception of these characteristics that is important (i.e. that a multilingual text might have a wider reach). This intersection between the literary field and social media not only highlights the change in positionality of the author, but also underscores that there are different conceptualisations of prestige and of mastery, leading to a required rethinking or reconceptualising of the traditional concept of prestige itself.

Another Instagram post by Sastre shows that a group, "Poetic Action" Colombia, painted a verse of her poetry on to a mural in their city. This example points to alternative ways of achieving public attention that potentially subvert traditional publishing processes and have the capacity to transform Bourdieu's field. Raúl Quinto agrees with this line of thought, in that in digital poetry, "se suprime(n) la dictadura de las editoriales y los intermediarios que deciden que es digno de ser leído por un público" [the dictatorship of publishers and intermediaries who decide

DOI: 10.3828/mlo.v0i0.440

that they are worthy of being read by an audience is ultimately suppressed] (199). The adoption of the word "dictadura" is interesting, and undoubtedly relates to Stein's conception of the "constraints" of the printed page, and relatedly established publishing protocols (88). Figure 7 also becomes a visual representation of Kevin Stein's conception of the Web as a "wilderness … unbroken by notions of hierarchy" (96). The *Instapoema* has literally been taken off the page (or, in this case, screen) and reproduced in the physical world. Not only does this serve to evince the capacity for digital poems to reach and impact "broader audiences", but it also points to the ways that social media might transform Bourdieu's field, market or game, establishing the need to reconsider how the Academy therefore judges the texts operating within this field.

Figure 7 @elvirasastre – A photograph of a wall on which a verse from one of Elvira Sastre's poems is painted. The caption includes a "thank you" to the organisation that painted the verse. 16 October 2018.

Returning to the previous discussion on the "publicizable personality", it must be recognised that this idea of "status" is connected to the emergence of Celebrity Studies in academic discourse. Marwick's conception of the "micro-celebrity" underlines the reliance on a large online following as a means of raising and maintaining status. This forges a link with Cullell's argument that public attention should be recognised as a more refined marker of prestige. Furthermore, Figure 8 demonstrates a level of "status" and thus cultural recognition and capital conferred on Sastre.

Figure 8 @elvirasastre – A photograph of Elvira Sastre holding up a sign "Sastristas" emblazoned with hearts. 14 October 2018.

In an appropriation of the poet's surname, digital poetry readers (her Instagram followers) have created a "fandom", as the word "Sastristas" represents semantically Sastre's community of followers (Lezcano). Culturally speaking, this usually indicates "celebrity status" as a result of the Sastristas' "consumer dispositions" (Shapiro 251). However, conferring celebrity status is just as problematic as conferring prestige, given the complex power dynamic surrounding the authority of the conferer and Verboord's distinction of quality from prestige. Decidedly, the number of followers a digital poet has does not affirm the quality of the cultural product itself, yet given Bourdieu's aforementioned concepts, it *can* be used as a marker for granting prestige. For example, James English postulates that the conception of "artistic achievement [is] measured *only* in terms of stardom and success" (3). Studies on user engagement in relation to giving "likes" on social media applications would make an interesting project for further study in relation to this line of thought. Notably, a study conducted by Harrison et al. found that "public visibility and constructive conversation on social media networks" are the most effective forms of user engagement (245). However, the study also recognises that posts continue to be exhibited "whether we engage or not" (245). Moreover, while Aggarwal et al. understand that the "follower count and crowdsourced ratings give an OSN user a sense of social reputation", their study also concludes that the number of followers and likes does not guarantee "authentic engagement" with the post or text at hand (1748). Again, although success might not necessarily always equate to cultural recognition within the field, stardom can, through Bourdieu's position, disposition, and position-taking, nevertheless be considered a "token of esteem" (English 8).

By potentially transforming what can constitute the field, and thus what can constitute the literary in the contemporary digital age, this article posits that Sastre and her peers are challenging the "elitist hierarchy" of the Western canon, a process that in turn has been seen to spark this validity discussion (Stein 7). However, Stein also theorises that "this hierarchy is frequently determined … by one's access and proximity to art" (89). Where the "hierarchy" symbolises the prestigious texts within an established canon, Stein suggests that the more esteemed texts are those which Verboord's "significant others" may easily access. *Instapoesía*, although not wholly accessible given its reliance upon economic means and Internet access, is increasingly available in the smartphone age.[6] Moreover, with the rising ubiquity of social media and the increasing number of poems published through such outlets (Goldsmith), scholars interested in digital literary culture such as Gere would argue that *Instapoesía* is seemingly both accessible and physically proximate to many contemporary readers. Despite this, digital poetry remains a discursive literary product that is challenged and satirised, leading to the "death" of poetry (Sellers; Tension). However, Cullell theorises that contemporary poetic trends "not only promote poetry amongst a wider public – raising its profile and rendering the genre more *alive* than it has ever been in recent memory – it also forces critics and academics to defer to popular opinion and approach a product that they would habitually disregard due to lack of proper literary authority and credentials" ("(Re-)Locating" 554). In the case of Elvira Sastre, she maintains a considerable online following of readers who regularly "like", "comment" on and "share" her work, while also achieving more conventional forms of literary success (e.g. sales, recognition by other authors), indicating that popular opinion should not be disregarded in the contemporary field.

CONCLUSION

Although Bourdieu's framework of prestige can be aligned with the characteristics of *Instapoesía* to a certain extent, it may be the case that more refined markers of prestige or "tokens of esteem" are required (English 8). Public attention in the digital literary field is clearly pertinent, quantifiable in the number of followers, likes, comments and shares enjoyed by the digital poet; however, this arguably does not indicate the quality of the literary product. Regardless of the critical debate surrounding the literary merit of digital poetry, it is nevertheless beginning to receive journalistic acclaim and academic attention in both the Anglophone and Spanish-speaking worlds, as

6 Given that, according to Thumim, the Internet is "global in its structure", this enquiry narrows its scope to readers in Spain. In 2020 96% of Spanish households had access to the Internet, with 39.14 million smartphone users, a figure estimated to have risen to 72.96% of the population in 2021 (Statistica). According to Statistica's study of individuals in Spain of any age who own and use at least one smartphone, between 2018 and 2024 the number of users is predicted to grow by nearly three million to 40.33 million.

evidenced in this article's primary case study. During the recent Covid-19 pandemic, readers across the world took to social media for the consumption of literature, when lockdowns and enforced confinement privileged digitality for interaction and media.[7] The effect of wider cultural events on social media and its users is particularly potent; this period arguably positioned digital literature such as *Instapoesía* at centre stage, underlining the importance of social media as a contemporary publishing forum, as well as posing questions regarding the future of (digital) poetry.

Furthermore, uncertainty surrounding the longevity of these social media platforms as spaces for literary creativity raises questions about the future of this form. Laurence Lerner affirms that the traditional way to attribute value to literature is not only acceptance by the reader – a criterion that can be examined in the social media space, quantified in number of followers and "likes" – but also whether it "stands the test of time" (83). Not only have scholars not arrived at a consensus on how to define and name digitally mediated or electronic poetry, but we also have no evidence as to whether the medium, and, in turn, this literary phenomenon will "speak to us across the centuries" (Lerner 83). Upgrades in software, competition between platforms, changes in user behaviour and the economics of such quickly evolving actions present challenges for both academic scholars and the Instagram poets in question. Elvira Sastre, for instance, continues to engage with traditional, print publications. In publishing and advertising print publications, as well as merging print texts with her Instagram posts (posting photographs of her books or coupling verse with images from her print collections), Sastre demonstrates an awareness of the ephemerality of the social media field and that this literature has not yet been able to prove that it "stands the test of time".

That the social media realm bestows a kind of precarity to writing in the contemporary field also makes complex the notion of literary prestige. While these issues merit further exploration, this article is intended primarily as a call for the reconsideration of our understanding of literary prestige; not only in considering the materiality and content of a digitally published text, but in a transformation of the aesthetics and expectations of the field. In problematising the positionality of the contemporary author, the social media space poses questions regarding the future of (digital) poetry, a future that scholars can better examine by reconceptualising the structures by which literary texts are ascribed value or prestige today.

FUNDING INFORMATION

Louise Elizabeth Evans is in receipt of E. Allison Peers funding, administered by University of Liverpool.

AUTHOR AFFILIATION

Louise Elizabeth Evans orcid.org/0000-0003-1633-1413
University of Liverpool, UK

REFERENCES

Aggarwal, Anupama, Saravana Kumar, Kushagra Bhargava and Kumaraguru Ponurangam. "The Follower Count Fallacy: Detecting Twitter Users with Manipulated Follower Count." *Proceedings of SAC 2018: Symposium on Applied Computing, Pau, France, April 9–13*. 2018, pp. 1748–55. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1145/3167132.3167318

Baron, Naomi. *Always On: Language in an Online and Mobile World*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195313055.003.0002

Bazylevych, Maryna. "Prestige Concept Reconsidered: Hybridity of Prestige in Post-Socialist Biomedical Profession." *International Journal of Social Inquiry*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2010, pp. 75–99.

Blackmore, Paul. *Prestige in Academic Life: Excellence and Exclusion*. Abingdon, Routledge, 2015. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315715780

Bloustein, Geraldine. *Girl-making: A Cross-cultural Ethnography on the Processes of Growing up Female*. New York, Berghahn Books, 2003.

7 Tejedor et al.'s comparative study of the rise of smartphone use by students in Spain, Italy and Ecuador during the Covid-19 pandemic not only cites OECD data to demonstrate that young people "felt lonelier and sadder during this period increasing their exposure to technology and the consumption of digital media", but also highlights increased use of smartphones during the period March–May 2020 (2). The use of social media by Instapoetas to share experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic is explored further in Evans.

Bourdieu, Pierre. "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed." *Poetics*, vol. 12, nos. 4–5, 1983, pp. 311–56. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-422X(83)90012-8

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Language and Symbolic Power*. London, Blackwell, 1999.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Rules of Art, Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*. Cambridge, Polity, 1996. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503615861

Brown, Abram. "Kevin Systrom in His Own Words: How Instagram was Founded and Became the World's Favorite Social Media App." *Forbes Magazine*, 2018, https://www.forbes.com/sites/abrambrown/2018/09/25/kevin-systrom-in-his-own-words-how--instagram-was-founded-and-became-the-worlds-favorite-social-media-app/#:~:text=In%20201o%2C%20Kevin%20Systrom%2C%20then,Under%2030%20list%20in%202011.

Bruns, Axel, Jean Burgess, Merja Mahrt, Cornelius Puschmann and Katrin Weller, editors. *Twitter and Society*. New York, Peter Lang, 2014.

Correa-Díaz, Luís. *Novissima verba: huellas digitales/electrónicas/cibernéticas en la poesía latinoamericana*. Santiago de Chile, RIL Editores, 2019.

Crystal, David. *Internet Linguistics: A Student Guide*. Abingdon, Routledge, 2011. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203830901

Cullell, Diana. "(Re-)Locating Prestige: Poetry Readings, Poetry Slams, and Poetry Jam Sessions in Contemporary Spain." *Hispanic Research Journal*, vol. 16, no. 6, 2015, pp. 545–59. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/14682737.2015.1129837

Cullell, Diana. *Spanish Contemporary Poetry: An Anthology. Hispanic Texts.* Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2014.

DiMaggio, Paul. "Social Structure, Institutions and Cultural Goods: The Case of the United States." *Social Theory for a Changing Society*, edited by Pierre Bourdieu and James S. Coleman. New York, Westview Press, 1991, pp. 133–55. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429306440-5

English, James F. *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards and the Circulation of Cultural Value*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2009.

Evans, Louise. "Tears on a Mask: In the Time of Covid-19." *Modern Languages Open* .... 2022, https://modernlanguagesopen.org/articles/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.404. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.404

Fanjul, Sergio. *La vida instantánea.* Madrid, Círculo de Tiza, 2018.

Fidler, Roger. *Mediamorphosis: Understanding New Media.* Thousand Oaks, CA, Pine Forge Press, 1997.

Gere, Charlie. *Digital Culture*. London, Reaktion, 2002.

Glazier, Loss P. *Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries*. London: University of Alabama Press, 2002.

Grenfell, Michael. "Bourdieu, Language and Linguistics." *Bourdieu, Language and Linguistics*, edited by Michael Grenfell. London, Continuum, 2010.

Goldsmith, Kenneth. *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2011.

Harrison, Judith R., Joseph F. Hayes, James Woollard and Derek. K. Tracy. "#BJPsych and Social Media – Likes, Followers and Leading?" *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, vol. 214, no. 5, 2019, pp. 245–47. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.2019.6

Hermans, Theo. *Translation in Systems: Descriptive and Systematic Approaches Explained*. Abingdon, Routledge, 2019. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429285783

Janssen, Susanne. "Side-roads to Success: The Effect of Sideline Activities on the Status of Writers." *Poetics*, vol. 25, 1999, pp. 265–80. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/S0304-422X(97)00018-1

Jáuregui, Carlos. "Writing Communities on the Internet: Textual Authority and Territorialization." *Latin American Literature and Mass Media*, edited by Edmundo Paz-Soldán and Debra. A. Castillo. New York, Garland, 2001.

Kaur, Rupi. *Milk and Honey*. London, Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2014.

Lerner, Laurence. "Poetic Value." *The Quality of Literature: Linguistic Studies in Literary Evaluation*, edited by Willie Van Peer. Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 2008, pp. 83–94. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1075/lal.4.07ler

Lezcano, Walter. "Elvira Sastre, When a Poet Goes Viral." *Worldcrunch*, December 2017, https://www.worldcrunch.com/culture-society/elvira-sastre-when-a-poet-goes-viral

Maher, John. "Can Instagram Make Poems Sell Again?" *Publishers Weekly*, vol. 265, no. 6, 2018, pp. 4–9.

Mandiberg, Michael. *The Social Media Reader*. New York, New York University Press, 2012.

Marikar, Sheila. "The Life of an Instagram Poet." *The New Yorker*, 8 March 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-life-of-an-instagram-poet

Marwick, Alice E. *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity and Branding in the Social Media Age*. New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2013.

Mitchell, Jon. "What is the Point ... of Instagram?" *ReadWrite*, 2012, https://readwrite.com/what_is_the_point_of_instagram/.

Perriam, Chris. "Poetry and Culture, 1975–1996." *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Spanish Culture*, edited by David T. Gies. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521574080.015

Pressman, Jessica. *Digital Modernism: Making it New in New Media*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199937080.001.0001

Quinto, Raúl, "La poesía después de Internet." *Malos tiempos para la épica: Última poesía española (2001–2012)*, edited by Luis Bagué Quílez and Alberto Santamaría. Madrid, Visor, 2013, pp. 195–206.

Riviere, Sam. "'Unlike': Forms of Refusal in Poetry on the Internet." 11 July 2011, https://pooool.info/unlike-forms-of-refusal-in-poetry-on-the-internet/

Sanderson, Jimmy. "The Blog is Serving Its Purpose: Self-Presentation Strategies on 38pitches.com." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 13, 2008, pp. 912–36. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2008.00424.x

Sastre, Elvira. *Baluarte*. Granada, Valparaíso Ediciones, 2014.

Sastre, Elvira. *La soledad de un cuerpo acostumbrado a la herida*. Madrid, Visor Libros, 2016.

Schaefer, Heike. "Poetry in Transmedial Perspective: Rethinking Intermedial Literary Studies in the Digital Age." *Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies*, vol. 10, 2015, pp. 169–82. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/ausfm-2015-0033

Sellers, Bridget. "Millennial Poetics: A Study of Contemporary Poetry and Its Developing Trends." *Pursuit: The Journal of Undergraduate Research at the University of Tennessee*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2016, pp. 189–97.

Shapiro, Stephen. "Intellectual Labor Power, Cultural Capital and the Value of Prestige." *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 108, no. 2, 2009, pp. 249–64. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-2008-032

Sinclair, John, editor. *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary*. London, Collins, 1987.

Sorrentino, Pasqualina, and Massimo Salgaro. "How Much Does the Symbolic Capital of Books Cost? Operationalizing the Prestige of Books in the Digital Age." *Consumerism and Prestige: The Materiality of Literature in the Modern Age*, edited by Bernhard Metz and Anthony Enns. London, Anthem Press, 2022, pp. 229–38. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2rr3hhq.17

Statistica. https://www.statista.com/aboutus/, 2 November 2022.

Stein, Kevin. *Poetry's Afterlife: Verse in the Digital Age*. Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan Press, 2010. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/book.68

Taylor, Claire, and Thea Pitman, editors. *Latin American Cyberculture and Cyberliterature*. Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2007. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5949/UPO9781846313462

Tejedor, Santiago, Laura Cervi, Ana Peréz-Escoda and Fernanda Tusa. "Smartphone Usage among Students during COVID-19 Pandemic in Spain, Italy and Ecuador." *Association for Computing Machinery. TEEM'20: Eighth International Conference on Technological Ecosystems for Enhancing Multiculturality*, October 2020, pp. 571–6. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1145/3434780.3436587

Tension, Anita. *#poetryisnotdead: A Parody on the State of Poetry*. London, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017.

Thumim, Nancy. *Self-Representation in Digital Culture*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137265135

Verboord, Marc. "Classification of Authors by Literary Prestige." *Poetics*, vol. 31, 2003, pp. 259–81. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/S0304-422X(03)00037-8

Verboord, Marc. "Cultural Products Go Online: Comparing the Internet and Print Media on Distributions of Gender, Genre and Commercial Success." *Communications*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2011, pp. 441–62. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/comm.2011.022

Vilariño Picos, Maria Teresa. "Tecnologías literarias: la oralidad en la poesía digital." *Pasavento: Revista de Estudios Hispánicos*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2013, pp. 217–29. DOI: https://doi.org/10.37536/preh.2013.1.2.636

Walker Rettberg, Jill. *Seeing Ourselves Through Technology: How We Use Selfies, Blogs and Wearable Devices to See and Shape Ourselves*. London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137476661

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Evans, Louise 2023 Instapoesía: A "Prestigious" Literary Practice? *Modern Languages Open*, 2023(1): 43 pp. 1–15. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.440

Published: 18 December 2023

Modern Languages Open is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Liverpool University Press.