

**PLATFORM POETRY AND RESTORATIVE EXPERIENCE:  
CREATOR, COMMUNITY AND CATHARSIS**

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*Imran Khan*

## **ABSTRACT**

Where poetry on social media is often subsumed under the term ‘Instapoetry’, this study addresses a research gap concerning the particularities of poetry tailored towards the specific technological affordances and communicative cultures of social media platforms. Whilst doing so, it tackles how platform poets respond to the technological and communicative specificities to build communities around their poetry. Between technological affordances and business exploitations, community expectations and author aspirations, this poetry can provide digital bibliotherapy. However, there are trade-offs; authors provide bibliotherapeutic materials, and community participants seek catharsis from disclosing emotional distress, but there are more finely grained details. Platforms vary: Instagram encourages poet-centric linear communication, YouTube facilitates community building but also star treatment, Tumblr prioritises collectivism over individualism, while Facebook is a space where third parties crosspost poetry to articulate aspects of their identities to their connections. An author can be an altruist or a careerist, a detached facilitator, or a community participant. A community participant can be someone needing healing or an exploiter of vulnerable people. Structuring these interactions are corporate forces aimed at profit, maximised by algorithmic efficiencies that echo offline discrimination and contribute to psychological harm. Intersecting social media studies, English studies, digital humanities and communication studies, this interdisciplinary study will unravel these relationships between author, platform and audience. Based on its cases of Instagram and Humble the Poet, r.h Sin’s crossposted material from Instagram to Facebook, YouTube and Clickfortaz, and Tumblr with the profile of Charly Cox, the study finds a system of benefit whereby platform poets, platform poetry consumers and the platforms themselves seek self-interest that, inadvertently, can benefit parties who have a stake in the poetry’s ‘platformity’. Due to its properties and how it is consumed, platform poetry may comprise digital bibliotherapy, but those properties and that mode of consumption means there is

an ambiguity where, in addition to addressing trauma, the platformity introduces exclusions because of the digital setting. Platformity members have contested these exclusions by working counterintuitively, attempting to subvert mechanisms that oppress. This first known study of tensions between self and community in platform poetry will provide new contributions to knowledge concerning the well-being benefits of poetry on social media, the building of therapeutic communities in digital settings, and the agency of these communities to resist the toxic elements of digital platform commerce.

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## AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

Portions of the findings in this thesis were presented at the following conferences:

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**August 2023:** *A Commodification of the Platform Poet's 'Real Self': Authenticity, Assimilation and Adoration*. InMind's 5<sup>th</sup> International Interdisciplinary Conference: Freedom and Authenticity.

## **INTRODUCTION: DIGITAL POETRY, ONLINE COMMUNITIES AND ONLINE TOXICITY**

This study will explore textual and filmic forms of platform poetry that contain themes of recovery and self-acceptance, and which are marketed by the authors as well-being aids. It will emphasise that a key contributor to the well-being function of platform poetry lies in the degree to which authors utilise the specific technological affordances of a given platform to build a community and ensure their poetry reflects how individuals typically consume content in that space. The significance of community is due to a key component of the bibliotherapeutic scope of such poetry residing in users' capacity to narrate their experiences of a poem to a supportive audience. Bibliotherapy is the process of healing through reading and in this thesis is considered a method of self-directed healing. Whilst traditionally administered analogue bibliotherapy facilitates healing through a reader/patient directing their epiphanies to a supportive healthcare professional, bibliotherapeutic platform poetry can potentially instigate well-being benefits such as validation through a reader directing their epiphanies to what they perceive as a supportive online community. Such poetry facilitates personal disclosures as its openness means that consumers can manipulate the content to better align with their own life experiences. Furthermore, due to common themes of self-love within such poetry, consumers are encouraged to positively reframe their experiences and reinforce this new frame through their narrations to a community. The poets who will be studied in this thesis are Charly Cox, r.h Sin, Humble the Poet (HtP) and Clickfortaz because each navigates between pursuing self-gain and enabling community well-being. However, a toxic element exists in platform poetry, which this study will address. The algorithmic systems used to facilitate the flow of content while guarding against user harm have, through both design and fault, impeded the well-being of minority users. Social media algorithms create a marginalising effect which creates or exacerbates forms of alienation; in turn, such alienation has a negative effect on people's mental health. Therefore, there is a connection between marginalisation, due to algorithms, and mental health. Individuals have attempted to counter the marginalising effects of algorithmic systems by using social media counterintuitively. Thus, users assert their agency to articulate themselves and, in the context of platform poetry, narrate their identities whilst enabling other users to experience fellowship. Thus, the study will address how, in a climate where

therapeutic reading groups have become less accessible, individuals have found ways to experience their benefits in a digital setting, through platform poetry, albeit whilst needing to exercise ingenuity to achieve these benefits where they have been restricted by the platforms themselves. This thesis is not concerned with explicitly measuring the benefits; the thesis acknowledges what audience members articulate about their perceptions of benefit. It interprets comments people generate in which they discuss their perception of how beneficial they have found platform poetry.

Therapeutic reading communities have a tradition of encouraging their members to consider the emotional arcs of protagonists and relate those arcs to their own life narratives. Whilst, as Rowley and Walwyn (2011) indicate, discussion may not be focused on the actual text, the text acts as an entry point to members' personal struggles. By internalising the example of a protagonist who has experienced distress but has found a way to cope, thrive and attain consistent emotional well-being, an individual would be better equipped to experience optimism regarding their own emotional well-being. In therapeutic reading communities, a conduit to members internalising the well-being arcs of inspirational protagonists is members narrating their experiences of the text to a supportive community. Furthermore, the narration's well-being scope increases in correlation with its depth and the positivity of its community response. The community element of therapeutic reading groups mobilises the potential well-being benefits within a given literary text. An individual could unpack and gain insight into their difficult thoughts and feelings by identifying with a fictive character and internalising that character's outlook towards their distress, without narrating their reflection to the community. However, the act of narration reinforces an individual's perception that they have undergone a meaningful mental shift regarding how they perceive their circumstances. The experience of partaking in a therapeutic reading group constitutes a form of bibliotherapy, which traditionally refers to the consumption of selected reading materials for therapeutic benefits such as self-insight and catharsis (Mullis et al 1996; Olsen 1975).

### **Transitioning from Analogue to Digital Bibliotherapy**

Bibliotherapy is the process by which an individual gains wellbeing benefit through engaging with a text in a reflective way that facilitates catharsis. The term was coined by

Samuel Crothers in a 1916 article published in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Crothers referred to bibliotherapy as the activity of individuals receiving medical care being given books to read to aid their understanding of their condition. Therefore, whilst bibliotherapy, as a term, was initially used to articulate the process of patients' mental wellbeing being addressed through them being given literature to help them come to terms with their illnesses, it was not perceived as a cure for mental ailments in and of itself. The perception that bibliotherapy improves wellbeing by informing readers, rather than by acting as a treatment to the mental ailments themselves, altered in the 1940s when Dorland's *Illustrated Medical Dictionary* (Dorland 1940) recognised that bibliotherapy constitutes a type of mental health treatment. This shift was furthered by Caroline Shrodes' (1949) research that argues fictional texts can be bibliotherapeutic because imaginative literature frees up emotions to be used productively. She highlights the process of readers identifying with characters undergoing emotional difficulties in a way that allows them to work through their own emotional difficulties. This thesis is interested in the capacity for such processes to manifest in digital spaces without the requirement for an individual to feed back to a psychological expert. Bijal Shah (2024) refers to bibliotherapy as the 'reading cure', whereby people are encouraged to allow suppressed ideas to resurface and can achieve bibliotherapy without conversing with a therapist. As Shah states,

"literature triggers our minds to unearth and reconnect with forgotten memories through the characters and the situations in which they find themselves... without the need for an external therapist" (Shah, pg. 72).

The absence of need for an external source of positive feedback indicates that the individual's mind can function as a platform for the bibliotherapy consumer to reframe their life narrative and to potentially provide the individual with self-directed affirmation that reinforces their newfound agency. Focusing on analogue bibliotherapy, Shah identifies that novels encourage readers to empathise with the protagonist whilst feeling they, in turn, are empathised with by the protagonist. Thus, she identifies a two-way process between the reader and the protagonist:

“I found myself empathising with the protagonists’ experiences of PTSD. Or perhaps it was the other way around – the protagonists were empathising with me and validating my own experience as a story to be examined and resolved” (Shah 2024, pg. 75).

Shah writes of how epistolary novels provide readers with a sense of intimate connection with the protagonist whereby, whilst gaining access to the character’s innermost feelings and motivations, the reader feels connected to that character to the point they feel they would be understood by them. She highlights that the conversational style of such literature feels authentic and realistic, leading to a deeper emotional investment in the narrative and, ultimately, a greater capacity to relate to the protagonist. Reflecting on her own experiences of bibliotherapy through analogue epistolary novels, Shah states she felt as though she was validating and healing her own emotional wounds through engaging with the narratives of the books’ protagonists. The result was the bibliotherapeutic process “relieving me of my pain and kickstarting the recovery process” (pg. 77). The sense of a reader being able to engage with literature on their own terms, consuming as much of a story as they desire in one sitting, is facilitative of the reader feeling safe to explore their innermost feelings. Consequently, the reader can reflect on their thoughts and, in doing so, derive a sense of agency regarding circumstances that have historically caused them emotional distress.

In his analogue poetry collections that seek to help individuals understand their emotional maladies, William Sieghart apportions particular poems to categories of emotional difficulties. His 2017 collection, *The Poetry Pharmacy: Tried and True Prescriptions for the Heart, Mind and Soul*, contains the following poetry categories: Mental and Emotional Wellbeing, Motivations, Self-Image and Self-Acceptance, The World and Other People and Love and Loss. These categories are split up into sub-categories, with Love and Loss containing the most sub-categories (fifteen) and Self-Image and Self-Acceptance containing the fewest (seven). The sub-categories function as more directed methods of locating treatment for one’s emotional maladies. For example, in the Love and Loss category, there are the following sub-categories: Infatuation, Unrequited Love, Seeking One’s Soulmate, Obsessive Love, False Expectations in Love, Rocky Relationships, Romantic Boredom, Complacency in Love,

Losing the Spark, Heartbreak, Divorce, Bereavement, Balanced Grief, Maturing Grief and Loss of Elderly Relatives. In this case, the category includes poems that have been chosen as specific treatment methods for numerous maladies ranging from issues within one's romantic relationships to trauma caused by the loss of a relative. Sieghart has somewhat mimicked the structure of a pharmacy by signposting readers to broad categories of 'illness' before branching into niche maladies, with each of these maladies being accompanied by a recommended 'medication'. In addition to adopting medical vernacular, most notably in the title of the collection, and mimicking a pharmacy setting, he includes a section entitled 'How to Read a Poem.' Therefore, he provides usage instructions in a way that mimics the instructions accompanying medicines in a pharmaceutical setting. He provides his own recommendation on how the poetry might be self-administered where an individual is new to this form of treatment via poems:

“I tell them to read the same poem night after night. Keep it by your bed, and read it before you switch out the lights. Read it five nights in a row, and you'll find you discover a totally new flavour and feeling from it every time” (Sieghart 2017, pg. 34).

Such instructional language aligns with the sort of speech one might expect to hear from a healthcare professional advising a patient on their recommended dose and dosage cycle. As the language is used with regards to poetry consumption, Sieghart reinforces the notion that certain poetry, when consumed in a particular way, can result in wellbeing benefit. His Poetry Pharmacy is an analogue example of poetry being packaged and recommended as a salve for emotional distress. The current research can build from such an example as it is a case of language typically found in the field of medicine (pharmacy, anxiety, emotional repression) being used in a poetry collection. This thesis examines how poetry and such language intersects in the publishing and reception of poetry on social media, whilst considering how the technological infrastructure and communicative cultures of these platforms facilitate and impede the capacity for positive wellbeing to derive from such poems.

When it comes to the consumption of bibliotherapy without the support of a third-party therapeutic guide, compared to analogue bibliotherapeutic resources, bibliotherapeutic

resources consumed on social media carry the additional benefit of the ‘comments’ feature. This feature enables bibliotherapy consumers to narrate their self-reflections to a community. Whilst bibliotherapy can be obtained through the exercise of self-reflection alone, Shah asserts that the act of articulating reflective thoughts can enable an individual to process their observations and reflect in greater detail on how they experienced bibliotherapy. Such articulation is termed ‘active bibliotherapy’ as it encourages an individual to reflect on their circumstances both consciously and unconsciously. As Van Dijck (2009) states, only a low proportion of platform users will be active contributors to the creation, dissemination and online discussion of digital content. However, an individual attains additional wellbeing benefit by narrating their reflections on the past and articulating alternative endings to problems they have previously viewed pessimistically. Such imagining incites the individual to acknowledge their needs and consider positive actions that would enable these needs to be met, while the public articulation of such planned actions facilitates the potential for users to attain encouragement and, thus, a sense of social support. Platform poets typically involve both the processes of ‘acknowledging their needs’ and ‘considering positive actions’ in either their poems or a combination of their poems and comments around the poems.

By indicating the possibility of ‘moving on’ to their followers, such poets encourage these followers to believe a path towards their wellbeing goal is achievable. Anderson et al (1991) propose that an individual who has the capacity to chart a route out of a dilemma is in possession of a ‘hope pathway.’ These pathways are influenced by contextual factors such as socioeconomic status, race, gender and cultural norms. Therefore, whilst analogue bibliotherapy and bibliotherapy facilitated online each encourage individuals to devise pathways to healing, hope pathways are generally less feasible for groups disadvantaged by their marginalisation. In platform poetry, the promotion of a hope pathway is undertaken by a digital poet who generally draws from their continuing struggle with a particular emotional trigger. Shah’s acknowledgement of the benefits of relating to a novel’s protagonist, to the point of one feeling the protagonist could empathise with one’s own experiences, can be perceived in the context of platform poetry. Typically, the platform poet performs their identity through utilising

the technological infrastructure of their chosen platform and adhering to norms around identity presentation on that site. In platform poetry, over time, the poet develops a profile where audiences feel they know the poet given that poet's longitudinal presentation of life events on the platform. This sense of an individual's identity being an ongoing process instead of a fixed ontological state feeds into Judith Butler's (1990) work on identity performativity. Butler asserts that identity is retroactively constituted through a series of acts which, over time, create an illusion of an individual possessing an inner identity core. The platform poet's audience, having felt they have witnessed the poet navigating through life for a sustained period of time, experience a sense of 'knowing' the poet. Given the successful platform poet projects an identity that is coherent and seemingly authentic, their audience are encouraged to view the poet's presentation of life, not as a performance, but an intimate portrayal of their personal lives. Furthermore, the platform poet's performativity extends to a presentation of their innermost thoughts and feelings, leading audiences to perceive they have not only been witness to the poet's navigations through life, but also how the poet has felt during these navigations.

Audiences use the comment sections beneath a platform poet's post to reinforce their perceptions that they have an intimate understanding of the poet's 'personal' life and personal struggle. With the poets having crafted a persona and struggle that is understandable to their targeted audience, audience members experience a sense of mutuality with the poet. As the narrator-figure within the platform poet's poetry is typically framed as an extension of the poet, this sense of mutuality is facilitated within the poems themselves. Returning to Shah's experience of a literary text's protagonist granting her a sense of being empathised with, and validated, platform poetry is written to cultivate the same feelings in their audiences, albeit in a digital domain. This is not a simple shift of bibliotherapy from analogue to digital settings; rather, the bibliotherapy requires the writer to shape the content according to the parameters of the digital platform. Moreover, the audience's reception of the poetry is influenced by the technology the consumer is using to access the content, and how the platform's technological infrastructure manifests on these appliances.



Digital bibliotherapy concerns the intersecting of traditional bibliotherapy tactics with digital technologies. These tactics include the use of texts to encourage the reader to reflect on particular personal life circumstances and emotions, the inclusion of a relatable protagonist and the granting of space to enable the reader to articulate their thoughts on how the bibliotherapeutic text reflects their own life experiences, what they may have learned from reading the text and how they might apply their learnings in their daily life. Digital bibliotherapy in the context of platform poetry typically lends itself to self-prescription as an individual typically searches for the poetry themselves.

Furthermore, the digital bibliotherapy user self-medicates (see Chapter 1) through independently applying the text to their own life circumstances in a way that facilitates catharsis. As Georgiou (2023) states, digital bibliotherapy carries additional aspects that enable immersion; such elements can further the possibility of individuals attaining bibliotherapeutic benefit. She says, “the digital platform allows for the inclusion of interactive elements and multimedia resources, enabling a more personalized and immersive therapeutic experience” (Georgiou pg. 8). Part of such personalisation and immersion is facilitated through the comment sections that form beneath a creator’s post. A commenter may respond to a fellow commenter’s cry for help by including a link to a website they deem relevant and helpful; therefore, the primary commenter perceives they have received bespoke support, and the helper deems they have personally aided an individual in need. As the conversation remains publicly visible following the interaction, there is capacity for future consumers to immerse themselves in the webs of interaction created by their predecessors.

Pearson (2009) uses the metaphor of the ‘glass bedroom’ to capture the process of social media transforming intimate conversations into public artefacts. The continual blending of private and public indicate the wall between the two elements being intentionally transparent. There are differing degree to which these conversations are constructed and deliberate; therefore, the glass bedroom is a liminal space “that is partially private and public, constructed online through signs and language.” Users articulate their self-identities by utilising the different types of discourse facilitated by a digital platform. Such discourse may comprise of photographs, videos and third-party images the user chooses to repost. Whilst staging a portrayal of their daily lives, users, to varying lengths,

carefully use language and select media that presents an idealised self. As Pearson asserts, “users manipulate these communicative codes, with varying degrees of skill and dexterity, to create not only online selves, but also to create the staging and setting in which these selves exist.” Media is used to instigate conversation to garner new relationships and maintain existing social ties. The digital space serves as a platform in which an individual constructs a certain identity that has been created for such purposes. The individual’s online community on a given platform might then anchor the performed identity through providing positive reinforcement through likes and comments. Those who provide such engagement demonstrate indicate that they are symbolically there, present in the experience shared by the poster.

The undermined distinction between the private and the public meant the space provided by digital media did not initially provide the differentiated regions of performance outlined by Goffman in his dramaturgical approach to performativity. Goffman indicates that most behaviour is not caused by individual-specific stimulus-response patterns; rather, it is determined by an individual’s interpretation of a digital setting’s conventional norms and goals. For Goffman, the front region comprises of the space where individuals idealistically convey their personas. Meanwhile, the backstage becomes a space where an individual can knowingly contract their public performance. These regions are bounded in space and time, meaning that only those located in a specific space-time manifold could observe such performances. Goffman indicates that an individual separates their performances according to location, whilst time also enables them to demarcate their different selves, as the performer allows “a few moments in between performances so as to extricate oneself psychologically and physically from one personal front, while taking on another” (Goffman 1959, pg. 138). The discreteness of performative spaces reserved for the personal or private is, according to Pearson, undermined by the glass material of the room that ensures the performer eschews privacy. However, the occupier of a glass bedroom can draw a metaphorical curtain around the room, by modifying their privacy and audience settings on a given digital platform. For example, on Facebook, an individual can choose whether they would like their post to be visible to the public, friends, friends apart from particular individuals, specific friends, or only themselves. The metaphor of the glass bedroom is

valuable insofar as it captures the integration of personal and private in digital space. What needs to also be acknowledged is the scope for platform users to obscure particular areas of their 'bedroom' in a way that more closely reflects Goffman's notion of a front region and back region. In the context of bibliotherapy and, specifically, the value of an individual making sense of their life events through narrating them to an audience, the increasing nuance of the privacy tools available to social media users means there is greater capacity for users to construct the make-up of their audience.

Nevertheless, despite users being encouraged by platform architects to perceive they have a sense of control over their digital environments, the interplay between private and public facilitates particular harms. Lanier and Weyl (2018) assert that the system of creating free digital labour, to be undertaken by platform users, has "flooded the digital world with perverse incentives that lead to violations of privacy, manipulated elections, personal anxiety, and social strife." Therefore, whilst platform technology facilitates a central instigator of bibliotherapy, in the form of individuals being able to narrate their life experiences to an audience, the venue for doing so is inherently problematic given the financial incentives of platform owners. These incentives have led to tech giants, such as YouTube and Instagram, undertaking technological measures, such as algorithms (see Chapter 4) to control the consumption of digital media. Furthermore, users have experienced violations of privacy (Lanier and Weyl 2018) through social media companies profiteering by selling user data to advertisers. Therefore, whilst social media offers potential for an individual to, having engaged with a bibliotherapeutic text, narrate their learnings and reconfigured life narrative to an audience, platform settings are beset by toxic elements. As Lanier states, platforms are now venues that have "been overtaken by siren server systems that are motivated to increase engagement by making people upset." Therefore, to derive wellbeing benefit through performing their identities on digital platforms, users must navigate the problematic terrain of these spaces (see Chapter 4). For now, the chapter will focus on the capacity of poetry on social media to instigate such wellbeing benefit.

## **Bibliotherapy in Practice**

Whilst bibliotherapy has traditionally been associated with the use of analogue texts, Tommy Gustafsson (2019) asserts that bibliotherapy ought to be treated as a broad concept that encompasses any use of literature used to promote well-being. Gustafsson's delineation of bibliotherapy accounts for bibliotherapeutic literature constituting a broad range of textual and audio/visual forms such as analogue literature, ebooks, material on social media, music videos and filmic texts. The form of an individual text is less of a contributing factor to its bibliotherapeutic potential than the reader's/ viewer's ability to identify with a narrator and relate the narrator's experiences to the context of their own life narrative. As William Stewart asserts (1992), a bibliotherapeutic text ought to encourage an interchange between a reader and the content. A complex interplay occurs between the reader and the text, whereby a reader's life experiences shape their reading of the text whilst the teachings within the text shape the reader's perceptions of their life experiences. For Stewart, the bibliotherapeutic process encompasses three stages: identification, catharsis and insight. An initial identification occurs, whereby the reader relates to the narrator. Identification is followed by catharsis, which is derived from an adjustment in an individual's conception of reality. The final, insight, stage is accompanied by a shift in perspective and altered behavioural patterns. In a therapeutic reading group, the facilitator is responsible for choosing material that is apt for leading group members to relate to a character, gain therapeutic relief through applying the character's experiences to their own life, and then obtain an outlook that better equips them to overcome future emotional difficulties. An individual's ability to reframe their perspective, to the extent they can more constructively deal with emotional upset in the future, is furthered through them having disclosed their new outlook to a community and having received support and validation in return.

The perception of mutuality and shared trauma within therapeutic reading communities means there is an onus on community members to demonstrate empathy to those who choose to disclose intimate information about their emotional well-being. The group dynamic is based upon individuals feeling able to disclose, within the limits outlined by the group, and receive support in return. Community members can provide the discloser with the validation that they are justified to have felt a particular way and that they are not alone in their path towards recovery. Through receiving validation, individuals are imbued with the sense that they were correct to perceive and react to experiences in the manner they have outlined. The community members are not simply passive recipients of disclosures – they actively play a part in encouraging disclosures and

contributing to a community of solidarity and well-being. By establishing and reinforcing a non-judgmental communicative atmosphere, community members enable potential disclosers to feel their disclosures would be met with support rather than discrimination. In the United Kingdom, individuals have been able to access therapeutic reading groups through library authorities and local charities. Liz Brewster (2013) asserts that a librarian can cultivate an encouraging environment for discussing literature in the context of community members' well-being. Meanwhile, Anna Goulding (2013) underlines that well-being benefits can be accrued for individuals who are marginalised from the arts due to socio-demographic factors, including age, race and socioeconomic background, when charities and councils provide opportunities for them to engage with the arts in a group environment.

In a climate of austerity and funding cuts to arts and culture, exacerbated by the impact of COVID-19, local authorities have less revenue to spend on facilitating reading groups for marginalised communities. The cuts to local authority budgets have particularly impacted leisure centres, parks, community development schemes and libraries, with each of these services having the scope to positively influence population mental health. Amidst the cost-of-living crisis, libraries provide accessible, warm, safe spaces and can promote experiences of social cohesion through targeted initiatives. In July 2022, Ken Worpole, in the *New Statesman*, reported that more than 780 libraries had closed, in the United Kingdom, since 2010 (Worpole 2022). Concerning therapeutic reading groups, these closures have created a lack pertaining to the ability of individuals to access spaces of community and solidarity that simultaneously enable them to use literature to reflect on their emotional well-being and to experience the benefits of disclosing these reflections to a supportive group.

Alongside the reduced opportunities to access therapeutic reading groups in the United Kingdom, there has been an exponential growth in the proliferation and popularity of poetry written for social media that focuses on themes of emotional well-being and whose textuality enables the formation of reading communities. The relative lack of barriers to publishing poetry on social media, compared to the traditional route of submitting to literary journals and gaining acceptance, has meant that poetry on social media has been perceived as the poetry of the people (Khilnani 2023). Nevertheless, there are barriers to partaking in the creation and consumption of poetry on social media, such as digital literacy and access to technology. These barriers prevent individuals

from accessing, and benefitting from, the potential to read and watch poems that encourage readers/viewers to positively reframe their life narratives. Furthermore, digital literacy and the need to access relevant technology prevent such individuals from engaging with the poetry's associated digital community.

With this poetry designed to promote and validate intimate emotional disclosures, the communities of consumers are encouraged to support individuals who choose to demonstrate vulnerability and trust in the group. Alternatively, an individual may accrue emotional benefits through privately reflecting on a poem's significance to their circumstances and observing the reflections of those who have decided to disclose to the group. A therapeutic engagement with poetry on social media can result in the types of benefits associated with therapeutic reading groups; however, there is an onus on individuals to exert effort to attain these results. In contrast to traditional, analogue therapeutic reading groups that feature a trained facilitator figure overseeing the experience of bibliotherapy, the use of social media poetry as a form of bibliotherapy involves individuals consuming literature without having received literature recommendations from a trained counsellor. Caroline Shrodes (1949) indicates that bibliotherapy cannot be administered by and to the self because an individual is incapable of self-analysis. She asserts that the goal of a bibliotherapeutic text is to facilitate personality assessment, mental adjustment and emotional growth. For Shrodes, bibliotherapy involves an interplay between the reader's personality and the content of the literature, which is overseen by an expert figure who can undertake personality assessment and encourage changes in their subject pertaining to mental adjustment and emotional growth. Contrary to Shrodes, this thesis will argue that an individual is capable of self-analysis and, as such, a bibliotherapeutic text can be self-administered, with the self-medicating individual potentially achieving the outcomes mentioned by Shrodes. The thesis will not argue that the efficacy of self-administered bibliotherapy is of equal or greater value than practitioner-administered bibliotherapy; rather, it will acknowledge that an individual could use the bibliotherapeutic text for each of the purposes outlined by Shrodes.

In poetry that contains bibliotherapeutic themes and has been published on social media, the presence of a symbolic guiding figure, in the form of the poet, and an affective community, may mitigate against some of the lacks caused by the absence of a professional guide. One of the roles of a professional therapeutic guide is to ensure the discloser feels that their experiences are being

accepted with positive regard (Sevinç 2019; Gladwyn-Khan and Morris 2023; Kelley et al 2016). Whilst it cannot be guaranteed that a discloser would receive a visible sympathetic response, this thesis will address whether an individual's belief that they are voicing their trauma to an affective and likeminded community can provide the emotional benefit one might attain through the act of narrating an experience to a therapist-figure.

Regarding how communities engage with emotional disclosures on social media, the communicative cultures of social media platforms are wide-ranging and are a result of platform architecture and how users have negotiated with the particularities of a given platform to attain certain benefits. The technological affordances of different digital platforms inform how content creators present themselves and their content. In bibliotherapeutic platform poetry, despite doing so in different ways according to the specificities of the digital platforms they use, authors focus on demonstrating subject knowledge whilst ensuring they remain relatable. The subject knowledge pertains to mental health, with authors often demonstrating they are qualified to speak about this topic due to personally working through mental illness themselves. The public personas of platform poets are reflective of the conflict between them being both relatable, due to their navigations through common life struggles, and exceptional, due to their creative accomplishments and subject knowledge. Through their poetic output and life narrations, they each encourage their followers to overcome their own struggles by heeding their expert advice. The poets operate as influencers on mainstream digital platforms; albeit whilst amending their identity presentations according to the particularities of a platform's technological interface and communicative culture. For Amanda Alampi (2019), the extent to which followers perceive digital content creators as trustworthy is central to that creator's scope to garner a community around their content.

Alampi highlights that such figures need to establish their credibility within a particular market; platform poets do so by demonstrating relatability and that they have also experienced struggles with well-being. The latter strategy might involve the poet including themselves in the process of change; that is, demonstrating that they are on the same path to recovery as their followers, with their well-being being an ongoing battle. Through demonstrating relatability and intimacy, the poet cultivates a parasocial tie with their followers, whereby a follower attains companionship with the media figure despite that media figure not knowing the follower personally. Thus, amidst

a context of austerity that has led to financial cuts in mental health services and cultural initiatives that has led to a reduction in therapeutic reading groups, the platform poet responds to a lack of emotional support and community belonging.

There is an onus on platform poetry consumers to be agentive if they are to achieve these emotional and community benefits. This need for agency is due to consumers needing to independently navigate digital terrain to locate the types of texts that are apt for addressing their specific emotional struggles. The term ‘digital bibliotherapy’ has been used by Maria Georgala and Eleni Semertzidou (2023) to address the process of individuals using digital texts as therapeutic tools. In this thesis, digital bibliotherapy will be used to refer to the process of an individual obtaining well-being benefits by engaging with bibliotherapeutic platform poetry. This thesis will identify that digital bibliotherapy is positioned between traditional analogue bibliotherapy and self-medication. Whilst digital bibliotherapy, like traditionally administered analogue bibliotherapy, encourages the consumer to positively reframe their life circumstances by actively placing their own circumstances into their consumption of the text, there is an element of self-medication in digital bibliotherapy because of an onus on an individual to independently seek and identify digital resources that might enable well-being benefits. Bibliotherapeutic platform poetry is an apt conduit to such benefit because it provides gaps for consumers to place their own life circumstances into the poetic text whilst, due to its textuality, enabling users to narrate their experiences of the text to a community. How an individual narrates these experiences will be influenced by the specific technological interface and communicative culture of a given platform.

A core argument that will be established in the thesis is that the characteristics of poetry on social media, and how the poetry is treated by its creators and consumers, are reflective of the platform on which it is published. This link between platform and poetry has been previously addressed in the term ‘Instapoetry,’ which has been used to refer to the broader genre of poetry published on social media. The specific mention of Instagram is a result of particular celebrity poets, such as Rupi Kaur, Nikita Gill and Atticus, having used the platform as the initial publishing avenue of their work. A synergy exists between these poets’ work and the communicative culture of Instagram. This synergy concerns the minimalism of the poetry and the emphasis on accessibility and speed of consumption on Instagram. For example, a study by Shweta Khilnani (2021) highlights how the literary aesthetics of Instapoetry, notably a relatable poetic speaker and a clear



addressee, contributes to the form's capacity to elicit emotion in its consumers. Poetry designed for publication on other digital platforms, such as Tumblr and YouTube that share Instapoetry's convention of relatability and accessibility, has tended to be subsumed under the category of Instapoetry. However, such homogenisation of poetry into the label 'Instapoetry' emphasises the history of Instapoetry and the careers of poets who have transcended the form and become prevalent in mass media, whilst undermining the role of other platforms in shaping the content and readerly experience of poetry published on their sites. In this thesis, the term 'platform poetry' will be proposed to refer to poetry that has been written for and published on a given digital platform, and whose platform infrastructure influences how consumers engage with the poetry.

The platform poets who will be studied in this thesis are Charly Cox, r.h Sin, HtP and Clickfortaz, with the study focusing on their output on Instagram, Tumblr, Handsome Friends and YouTube respectively. They have been chosen because they each create opportunities for economic and emotional benefits for themselves and wellbeing benefits for their followers. A wellbeing benefit, in the context of bibliotherapeutic platform poetry, pertains to the increased capacity of an individual to respond to psychological challenges whilst perceiving they have social resources, in the form of an online community, whose members empathise with them, and emotional resources, through being able to attain wisdom through a figurehead who can guide them. Each of the studied poets caters to shortfalls in emotional support and community belonging, firstly by encouraging followers to think they are individually understood and, secondly, by cultivating a community for whom status is predicated on demonstrating a synergy with the poet. Part of bibliotherapeutic platform poetry's appeal is its thematic focus on trauma, recovery and growth. These themes encourage a community to form whose individual members feel they are one of a community of individuals seeking to personally develop in the manner suggested by the poet. Community members perceive similarities between themselves and the community as a whole and experience identity validation and belonging. Regarding individuals using digital material as a marker of identity and community belonging, communication within online communities is influenced by both sociotechnical systems and the specific community norms. Whilst the digital platform provides an infrastructure for community building, groups that form within the platform will cultivate particular communicative conventions. With the technological interface and communicative culture of a platform influencing the communities that develop, the thesis will propose a term that refers to a digital community being reflective of the platform in which it is

situated. This term will be ‘platformity,’ which addresses the embeddedness of platform features in communities that develop on social media. Whilst a platform contains its broad communication conventions that are shaped by its technological infrastructure and communicative culture, platformities form within the broader platform, which, although influenced by the platform’s communicative culture, contain their own rules, spoken or unspoken, about appropriate in-group behaviour.

In the case of bibliotherapeutic platform poetry, the availability of a description box enables the poet to use that space to demonstrate the synergy between the poetry’s narrative and their life narrative, which thereby indicates their poetic narrator is an extension of themselves. The staging of seemingly intimate disclosures from platform poets encourages their platformity to follow their example. Platformities are built whose communicative culture involves the sharing of personal details that facilitate an affective space of apparent openness and support. Whilst the influencer enacts their strategy of platformity building and extends their brand and possibilities for brand endorsement, they simultaneously enable followers to obtain well-being benefits through feeling able to articulate their true selves and receive validation from a supportive platformity.

Meanwhile, consumers typically utilise comment sections to publicly emphasise they possess a similar outlook to the poet, which inadvertently reinforces the feeling of belonging of those who have not contributed to group discussions. Thus, individuals obtain the well-being benefit of feeling part of a community by identifying with the culture and ethos a content creator has articulated within their content and the platformities they have built around their content. The user can obtain a sense of belonging through placing themselves within the imagined community, as first termed by Benedict Anderson (1983), that the content creator has facilitated. In bibliotherapeutic platform poetry, the platformity’s central marker of identity is its communal focus on members experiencing catharsis and facilitating cathartic experiences for other members. Out of the need to find language to refer to such a community, the term cathartic solidarity will be proposed to account for a community whose members perceive mutuality in their experiences of a particular trauma and desire to instigate therapeutic relief for themselves and other members. In bibliotherapeutic platform poetry, cathartic solidarity refers to relationships that are characterised by individuals facilitating catharsis through supportive comments and obtaining cathartic relief either directly from other members or indirectly through feeling they are sharing a space with individuals who would understand them. The experience of cathartic solidarity can also be

obtained by the author, who benefits therapeutically through either feeling able to release emotional conflict to a supportive community or, like their followers, perceiving similarity with group members. Furthermore, cathartic solidarity can be experienced by a follower through their identification with the author.

The feeling of cathartic solidarity is predicated on an individual feeling part of a therapeutic community. Through platform poets using direct address and strategically disclosing intimate information to their viewers, audience members are encouraged to feel part of the community of solidarity without needing to contribute to discussions. Whilst publicly celebrating positive comments and thanking community members for sending them messages of love, platform poets emphasise a community 'oneness' in their content. These poets emphasise that by simply 'being there', an individual is an accepted part of the platformity. Regardless of platformity members contributing to discussions, by the very nature of watching the content, they contribute to its visible metrics. By consuming the content without consciously attempting to leave a digital footprint, they are contributing to the notion that a community of mutuality is forming. In addition to inadvertently contributing to community building, such consumers contribute to economic benefits experienced by the content creator. The very nature of viewing the poet's social media content is enough to contribute to the monetisation of the creator's account. This is where the current research distinguishes itself most significantly from other research in the field: by addressing platform poetry using an approach that intersects with social media studies, English studies, digital humanities and communication studies, it will be possible to discern the relationships that form around platform poetry and how, in pursuing self-interest, various parties inadvertently produce benefits for other parties.

The thesis will demonstrate a series of interchanges that occur between platform poets, platforms, advertisers, and consumers of platform poetry. The benefits for these parties are mobilised through the initial act of a platform poet publishing their poetry on a digital platform. This act sets off a chain of events that produces user data, which platforms can sell to advertisers; furthermore, it produces affective communication, which the poet can harness to build their platformity's identity and grow their brand. Each form of engagement, from views to likes, comments and shares, represents a digital footprint that platforms can monetise. Content creators who obtain sufficient engagement metrics are rewarded by platforms monetising their accounts. By self-

interestedly consuming content, consumers instigate economic and career benefits for platform owners and content creators respectively. However, the thesis will outline how, by publishing poetry that enables them to articulate their emotional struggles, platform poets can potentially enable their followers to feel mutuality and a sense of being understood. Through leaving markers of engagement on the content, consumers simultaneously reinforce their sense of being part of the platformity whilst facilitating financial and emotional benefit for the creator and reinforcing other users' perceptions that they are part of an active community centred around well-being. Therefore, the thesis will highlight that platform poetry instigates a network of interchanges that benefit the self and the collective.

Whilst other studies have identified that Instapoetry can instigate emotional benefits in consumers because of the nature of the content (Khilnani 2023) and that Instapoetry can facilitate communities of healing (Penke 2023), this is the first known study to identify and address how it is the complex interplay between various platforms, advertisers, platform poets and poetry consumers, each acting with various degrees of self-interest, which inadvertently produces economic and emotional benefits for other parties. However, the study will demonstrate that there is toxicity within this set of relationships that has been caused by platforms maximising user attention by using algorithms to control flows of content. It will consider how this toxicity undermines the potential of social media as venues for healing.

Algorithms on social media are computational models that render data into personalised content, which is then used to populate an individual's social media feed according to which content would be most likely to interest the user. However, the presence of recommended, personalised content can cause harm. As stated by Vikram Bhargava and Manuel Velasquez (2020), the use of social media algorithms encourages the psychological disorder of social media addiction, because the algorithms have been programmed to deploy user data to decipher which types of content will be likeliest to prolong user engagement. In the context of bibliotherapeutic platform poetry, the poetry, in union with the paratextual elements around the poetry, such as the adjoined comments section and the creator's framing of the poetry, can provide wellbeing benefits such as internalizing positive messages within the poetry, feeling mutuality, due in part to algorithmic design, with other consumers and feeling understood and able to disclose to an understanding community. However, with this bibliotherapy being situated in a space that is algorithmically

structured to create as echo chambers – spaces whose design causes individuals to continually encounter perspectives that reflect their own – there are risks to accessing platform poetry.

Whilst experiencing mutuality within digital communities can provide identity validation and acceptance, the drive to continually return to the community to receive positive reinforcement, in the form of likes and positive comments, can sometimes be to the detriment of mental health. As Watson (2023) states, the continual search for validation in digital spaces is a product of individuals spending time in echo chambers that present idealized selves and provide scope for individuals to validate those selfhoods through likes and comments. Users want to experience the validation they perceive being offered to others, meaning that “part of our addiction to modern-day social media is driven by how great it feels to get widespread validation” (pg. 17). The dopamine hit that individuals receive when they obtain a feeling of validation means that such individuals may become addicted to uploading content and scrutinizing the likes they receive. Therefore, these individuals become at risk of experiencing invalidation should they not receive the feedback they deem satisfactory. So, whilst the positive wellbeing effect of bibliotherapeutic platform poetry is inextricably linked to the communicative features on social media, these communicative features also bring risk. This form of bibliotherapy can therefore lead to valuable or damaging experiences on platforms beset by toxicity (see Chapter 4); however, as the following chapters will highlight, it would be reductive to blanketly label the wellbeing effects of bibliotherapeutic platform poetry as ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ due to its position on social media. Rather, the bibliotherapeutic platform poetry reader’s experience is mediated through a complex interplay between a platform’s communicative features, the identity alignment a consumer perceives between themselves and the poet, the community’s capacity to elicit and support disclosures from its participants, and the platform owners’ treatment of the platform with regards to advertising revenue.

In addition to facilitating social media addiction, the use of social media algorithms, designed to maximise user engagement, facilitates the proliferation of harmful content. As Evans et al (2022) assert, because social media business models rely on the attention economy, whereby social media platforms’ commercial interests are furthered through users spending more time on the platforms, extreme content is permitted insofar as it facilitates greater engagement. A feedback loop occurs whereby, by viewing harmful content, users are more prone to being exposed to similar content on

their news feeds due to the algorithm having detected that such content will likely be met with engagement. They conclude that social media companies, ultimately, must be responsible for safeguarding the well-being of their platform users. However, the current research will highlight that this viewpoint overlooks the complexities of creating transnational regulation that would bind social media platforms to such a responsibility.

This thesis further distinguishes itself from previous research by demonstrating the tactics marginalised users have deployed in bibliotherapeutic platform poetry communities to assert their agency against the algorithm. Whilst examining the impact of algorithms on user well-being, the thesis will consider the inadvertent exclusions caused by algorithmic systems. Research by Florian Saurwein and Charlotte Spencer-Smith (2021) draws attention to the ability of algorithmic biases to exclude ethnic communities already marginalised offline. They indicate that algorithmic harms are a combination of deliberate programming, based on appealing to mainstream consumers, and an accidental by-product of algorithmic errors. A normative-massification logic is used, whereby the flow of mainstream content deemed most likely to earn high engagement is facilitated, whilst content predicted to be less popular is suppressed. Whilst being designed to protect racial communities from hate speech, overly sensitive algorithms have wrongly censored the speech of such communities. Algorithms shape the visual digital world the social media user inhabits; this visual world potentially reinforces perceptions of being excluded and undermined. The experience of being suppressed by algorithmic technology, either through a post or a comment being censored, can make individuals feel anxious concerning the future behaviours of a platform algorithm. Sensing that the representation of their identity is threatened by algorithms in digital spaces, individuals may associate such spaces with ostracism rather than inclusion and facilitation. Individuals may feel reluctant to exert effort in sculpting a disclosure if they feel that the disclosure might contain certain keywords that put it in jeopardy of censorship. Hence, algorithms can exacerbate existing experiences of marginalisation and negatively impact an individual's well-being.

However, users have not been rendered passive by the algorithm's marginalising tendencies; rather, they have taken it upon themselves to contest the suppressions of their communities. One strategy is the use of 'algspeak' – a language designed to circumvent the language detection systems of digital platforms. An individual adopts new methods of communicating words based

on a history of digital platforms censoring ideas connected to such language; by doing so successfully, they can assert their platformity's identity on the platform. In the use of algospeak, a complex interplay exists between using social media platforms as they are conventionally used, and a counterintuitive way of using them that enables both self-interest and community gains. Conventionally, individuals are encouraged by digital platforms to use the communicative tools available, such as emojis, to communicate quickly and intuitively; these platforms also reassure users that their moderating systems are there to protect user welfare. However, in the context of algorithms censoring user speech, users are engaging with social media against the grain; that is, they are self-consciously and strategically considering how to circumvent the algorithm's logic.

The creation of algospeak requires algorithmic literacy and perseverance; therefore, the option of using the strategy is limited to a select few and those individuals may not wish to exert the effort required to contest the algorithm. The need to adopt algospeak may impede an individual's ability to obtain well-being by self-disclosing their life circumstances to their digital platformity. This is because rather than freely expressing their life circumstances, they must strategically and self-consciously avoid particular words and coin new ones to prevent their comment from being censored. The thesis will address the potential for platform poets to cultivate spaces of well-being in such a climate. It will consider the capacity for platform poets to build affective communities that cater to their self-interests while enabling individuals to disclose intimate information about sensitive topic areas.

An alternative option that platform poets possess, regarding circumventing the toxicity of mainstream social media platforms, is to build platforms of their own design. This thesis will examine how the relationship between self-interest and inadvertent community benefit plays out when the platform poet takes on the role of the platform architect. Given that the platform poet's brand is based on providing opportunities for individuals who are hurting and marginalised by mainstream platforms, it will demonstrate the extent to which the poet's self-interest extends to maximising user attention and repeats the toxic elements of mainstream social media. Returning to the shortfalls in therapeutic self-expression and communities offering emotional support, which have been caused by the closure of therapeutic reading groups, were platform poets able to cultivate new platforms without repeating the harms of mainstream platforms, users will be able to access the benefits of validation, mutuality and support without being threatened by the harms

caused by an onus on attention maximisation, user engagement and platform profit at the expense of user well-being.

Altogether, this thesis will adopt an approach that intersects with English studies, digital humanities, media studies and social media studies to examine how practitioners, consumers and hosts of platform poetry benefit from the form whilst inadvertently facilitating benefits for other parties. The thesis' contribution to knowledge will include the identification of a complex interplay between platform poets, their followers and the platforms on which the platform poetry is situated. Also, it will demonstrate how platform poetry operates as a potential form of digital bibliotherapy. Moreover, this is the only known study to address how, despite the toxic elements of social media, platform poetry followers can attain a sense of community and solidarity that is facilitative of well-being. Given the newness of the field of digital poetry and this thesis' novel approach, there will be a need to develop an academic vocabulary that can be used to refer to the phenomena and relationships that this study identifies.

The research will highlight that a key characteristic of platform poetry is its ability to facilitate individual therapeutic experiences in a space that relies on these individuals contributing to community building. Contemporaneous research has explored the potential of Instapoetry to enable literary production from marginalised communities (Miller 2021; Gallon 2019; Tan and Wee 2019; Bahri and Menozzi 2021), examined how gatekeepers have received Instapoetry in light of its literary qualities (Manning 2020; Kiernan 2021; Ganguly and Ponzanesi 2021) and explored the affective dimensions of Instapoetry without examining how the politics of hatred on digital platforms influences the community building practices of authors of such poetry (Khilnani 2021; Penke 2023; Ford 2022). This thesis will build on such research through demonstrating how bibliotherapeutic platform poetry transcends a particular digital platform and yet is crafted according to the technological affordances and communicative culture of a given platform. It will tackle the research gap regarding how authors of such poetry create opportunities for therapeutic gain among their followers through tailoring their poetry according to the specific functions of a platform. In addition to addressing the interplay between a poet and a given platform, it will underline how poets and consumers navigate between roles as self-helpers and platformity facilitators whilst negotiating with the exclusions perpetuated by the commercial focuses of digital platforms.



Therefore, this thesis will address the dynamic scope of the platform poetry author who crafts their poetry in response to specific platform architecture and communicative cultures, and the necessary navigations poets and consumers must undertake to facilitate and receive the career, economic and emotional well-being benefits of such poetry. Ultimately, this research will confront the complex interplays, exchanges and negotiations that impact the capacity of platform poetry to facilitate commerce, community and, ultimately, well-being benefits.

## Structure of Thesis

The overall aim of this thesis is to delineate the functions of platform poetry for the practitioners, publics and platforms involved. It will highlight that the central value of platform poetry is its community function, whereby various agents benefit from the potential of this type of poetry to facilitate community formation around the author. It will address how the platform focus on building capital, the poet focus on developing a career and the consumer's focus on narrating their own identities to an affective audience, influence how agents within these communities navigate their roles. The study, as a whole, will demonstrate how an agentive platformity, who are experiencing challenges to their emotional well-being, deploy the community-focus of platform poetry to obtain fellowship and catharsis whilst being both suppliers and recipients of support. At the forefront of these communities are the platform poets, who, in part, tailor their performances according to the technological affordances of mainstream digital platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Tumblr. As the technological affordances of these platforms shape the communicative cultures within, in addition to uploading poetry, platform poets benefit from navigating the technological and social particularities of certain platforms and amending their identity presentations accordingly. In digital settings beset by exclusions and facilitations of toxic speech, platformity members can circumvent these problematic platform characteristics by demonstrating algorithmic literacy and ingenuity. Whilst drawing from the social media output of r.h Sin, HtP, Charly Cox and Clickfortaz, the study will indicate that a key area of variance concerns the balance between how each poet negotiates spaces of well-being for their platform communities. The unifying principle of the thesis is the idea of platform poets, platformity members and the platforms themselves obtaining self-benefit whilst inadvertently benefitting other parties.

Chapter One will identify that platform poetry is a kind of digital bibliotherapy, which exists between self-help and analogue bibliotherapy. Whilst the consumer is required to exercise agency in identifying suitable platform poems with which to address their personal traumas, their engagement with the poetry can benefit them in the manner of traditionally administered analogue bibliotherapy. The chapter will argue that as with other bibliotherapeutic materials, the poetry encourages the reader to apply the narrator's teachings to their own life challenges. As the

narrator/ author crafts longitudinal narratives in a manner that provides context to their poetry, it will be necessary to analyse the poetic output of HtP, Clickfortaz, Charly Cox and r.h Sin in combination with their identity performances beyond their poetry. It will be stressed that the user can shift beyond an author's individual poems to connect with the broader messages of hope within the digital poet's output across poems and blog posts. Within the comment sections of individual poems, platformity members may disclose how their relationships with a particular poet have positively impacted their lives. Such a process, the chapter argues, fosters a sense of mutuality and social synchronicity. The chapter will conclude by emphasising that platform poetry can facilitate the emotional well-being benefits of community membership and identity validation for both the author and the consumer. The author can experience well-being through releasing trapped emotions by externalising them in a poem and then receiving validation and support from their platformity. Meanwhile, the consumer attains well-being benefits by experiencing digital bibliotherapy through identifying with a poetic narrator and positively reframing their life narrative by filling in the poem's gaps using their own life circumstances.

The second chapter will demonstrate how platform infrastructure, and the author desire to build a follower community, means the consumer of bibliotherapeutic platform poetry navigates between using bibliotherapeutic platform poetry as self-help and, regardless of their objectives, contributing to the platformity's growth. This chapter will underline how the different communicative cultures of salient digital platforms impact consumer experiences of bibliotherapeutic platform poetry. It will emphasise that the balance between collectivism and individualism differs on Instagram, YouTube and Tumblr and the degree to which the culture of a platform is collectivist or individualist alters the role of bibliotherapeutic platform poetry and how communities operate around that poetry. Due to a platform's specificities impacting the communities that form therein, the chapter will propose the term 'platformity' to account for the embeddedness of platform features in communities that develop on social media. The chapter will draw attention to how a community of cathartic solidarity can be established by a platformity's identity being based upon facilitating and sharing cathartic experiences. Whilst focusing on the example of the Clickfortaz YouTube platformity, it will highlight that cathartic solidarity has three component relationships: creator to audience, audience to audience and audience to creator. Cathartic solidarity benefits from the technological affordances of digital platforms inscribing markers of platformity to individuals who are not necessarily motivated by the notion of

community healing. Chapter Two will conclude by reasserting that the contrasting technological interfaces and communicative cultures of digital platforms call for authors of bibliotherapeutic platform poetry to cater to the specificities of the platform they have chosen as the venue for their work. Chapter Three will examine the motivations for an individual exchanging positions, between being a poetry consumer and platform member in one community, to a poetry facilitator and host in another community. The chapter will address the implications of a third-party shifting the poetry to another platform and having greater control in how others experience the poetry. It will demonstrate the interrelationships between YouTube, Instagram and Facebook and address the implications of a bibliotherapeutic platform poetry consumer taking ownership of their therapeutic engagement with platform poetry by cross-posting it to another platform and engaging with it with a platform of their choosing. The chapter will conclude that the platform poet plays a key role in facilitating a culture of personal disclosure within their platform. Their absence shifts the onus away from community cohesion and well-being. Consequently, an individual exchanging positions from bibliotherapeutic platform poetry consumer to bibliotherapeutic platform poetry host increases their scope to self-interestedly acquire wellbeing benefit whilst undermining the opportunity for others to achieve the same. Having explored how consumers, in using the freedoms they possess to shift poetry from one platform to another, impact the poetry's therapeutic potential for other individuals, the thesis will address how these navigations occur in spaces that drive the need for some users to contest the restrictions imposed on them by discriminatory platform infrastructure.

Chapter Four will address how digital platform owners organise and exploit communities through technology and commerce, whilst simultaneously extolling the opportunity for well-being on their platform spaces; it will then highlight how exploited parties contest their suppressions. The chapter will provide examples of where algorithms have been used to organise information and individuals and how they have harmed the interests of socially marginalised groups. This is because the algorithms follow a normative-massification logic that perpetuates the status quo. The chapter will address the implications of the #FucktheAlgorithm protest made by A-Level students in response to the use of algorithms, by The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual), to predict A-Level results during COVID-19. The protest challenges the link between algorithms and the exercising of toxic power in broader society. Next, the chapter will demonstrate how the #StopHateforProfit movement utilises the platform infrastructure of

Facebook and Instagram to protest against those sites from within and organise a global campaign against the monetisation of hate speech on these platforms. The chapter will shift more specifically onto activism against algorithms within platform poetry communities and address the implications of Clickfortaz donating the engagement proceeds of her YouTube video to the Black Lives Matter cause. These proceeds stem from Clickfortaz's content being monetised due to her favourable engagement metrics; she calls on her platformity members to support the cause by maximising their engagement with her content. However, some platformity members report that they cannot watch advertisements in the video and that their comments supporting the Black Lives Matter cause are prone to censorship. The chapter will demonstrate that given their perception that their scope to participate in driving the video's monetisation benefits was impeded by a flawed algorithm, platformity members take it upon themselves to engage with the platform counterintuitively. That is, they utilise their knowledge of the algorithm to devise ways of circumventing the YouTube algorithm. Chiefly, the chapter will highlight the strategy of algospeak and that because algorithms are becoming increasingly sophisticated at

detecting algospeak, there is a need to consistently coin new algospeak that can be substituted for language rife for censorship. Chapter Four will conclude by reasserting that the lack of sophistication of algorithmic technology, coupled with their drive towards normative massification, has led to the suppression of already marginalised communities. However, there is opportunity for communities to protest against such suppression. Having demonstrated the harms that are partly a consequence of the tension between digital platform owners pursuing self-gain and safeguarding their users, the thesis will consider the implications of the tension between self and community in platform poetry communities.

Specifically, Chapter Five will consider how the platform poet's tension between serving the community and serving the self alters how benefit is derived by the poet and their consumers. It will focus on the navigations made by Clickfortaz and Charly Cox as they shift between citing timely community issues, in social media addiction and COVID-19 respectively, and framing these topics in a manner that prioritises their career building efforts over the capacity for their followers to intimately disclose their experiences. However, the chapter will assert that the pursuit of self-interest, by various parties who stand to benefit from platform poetry, is what sustains the network around platform poetry and ultimately enables each individual party to

potentially obtain benefit. Finally, the chapter will examine the implications to platform poetry consumers when a poet extends his role from platformity figurehead to platform owner. It will use HtP as a case study to address the platformity ramifications of him having responded to hate speech and flawed algorithmic systems on mainstream digital media by creating his own digital platform, Handsome Friends. Whilst examining the tension between self and community in HtP's development of this platform, it will assert that although the platform's technological interface reinforces notions that the platform is an alternative to mainstream alternatives, the interface borrows problematic elements from mainstream digital platforms. Whilst cultivating a space and extolling its departure from the commerciality of mainstream platforms, HtP repeats the commercial prioritisation demonstrated by mainstream platforms and repeats the harms experienced by platform users. These harms are a consequence of his navigations between poet, therapeutic facilitator, platformity builder and platform owner. Such a propensity to shift between roles is, as the previous sections will have stressed, typical of how individuals and platforms function around bibliotherapeutic platform poetry.

The chapter will conclude by asserting that, necessarily, the platform poet navigates between self-interest and community facilitation. The balance between self-prioritisation and community-focus will differ across a poet's oeuvre but is a constant factor. The balance is ever-present because the platform poet appeals to their audience through consistently embellishing their persona by drawing on their personal circumstances, whilst encouraging their followers to view themselves as a community. The network of benefit, for poets, consumers and platforms is sustained by self-interest inadvertently producing rewards for other parties; the caveat is that there are different conclusions to be reached depending on the vantage point of the party assessing their rewards. Regarding HtP, the tension between self and community broadens in scope because the poet's self-interests expand to the platform's growth. The poet repeats the toxic elements of mainstream platforms on a platform he created with the stated aim of growing communities of well-being unincumbered by such toxicity.

Thus, whilst self-interest mobilises the benefits of platform poetry, this self-interest inexorably produces a toxic element that platform poetry consumers must continue to contest to achieve the poetry's potential well-being benefits.

Overall, the thesis will highlight that by considering bibliotherapeutic platform poetry through an approach that intersects social media studies, digital humanities and communication studies, it is possible to discern the relationships such poetry facilitates. Part of this thesis' contribution concerns the academic vocabulary it will propose, which will be necessary given the newness of the field and this study's novel approach to poetry on social media. It will argue that when examining the social functions of platform poetry, a network of relationships become apparent that involves platform poets, their followers, the platforms themselves and companies interested in advertising on the platforms. In pursuing self-benefit, these parties inadvertently facilitate the formation and growth of platformities. It is in these platformities that individuals can achieve digital bibliotherapy by identifying with a bibliotherapeutic platform poet's recovery both in individual poems and across a poet's digital oeuvre on that platform. The thesis will argue that having identified with the poet, the next facilitator of an individual's well-being is their act of publicly narrating their response to an individual poem. With the various parties within this network benefitting from such engagement, individuals are actively encouraged to narrate their emotional reaction to the poetry and, in doing so, potentially achieve well-being benefits. These disclosing individuals contribute to a community of cathartic solidarity whereby members view the core element of the community's identity as an onus on obtaining catharsis and facilitating catharsis for others. However, a toxic element is present in the functionality of platform poetry, which is caused by platforms prioritising user engagement to an extent that threatens user well-being.

By using algorithmic systems to maximise user engagement, platforms further normative, dominant modes of representation that suppress the voices of those beyond its targeted mainstream. The thesis will assert that marginalised groups contest their suppression through using social media against the grain to circumvent the algorithm's logic. In using social media counterintuitively, marginalised users underline their capacity to resist the suppressions that come as a by-product of a system that functions through self-interest inadvertently producing gains for other parties. Ultimately, even though this sometimes comes at a cost of toxicity that requires users to exercise ingenuity and effort to overcome, online digital platforms also produce forms of community and solidarity, which provide potential well-being benefit.

This study will raise several new ideas. Chiefly, it will demonstrate that platform poetry is particularly apt for facilitating communities of solidarity that benefit platform poets, platform poetry consumers and platform owners. The study will focus on the benefits obtained by platform poetry consumers and will also assert that platform poetry, due to its thematic content and its capacity to encourage intimate disclosures, is an apt facilitator of digital bibliotherapy. However, the potential for digital bibliotherapy is furthered by the degree to which platform poets pay heed to the specific technological affordances and communicative culture of a given platform and thereby enable their followers to consume their poetry in a manner that aligns with the platform conventions. The study will identify that the architecture of digital platforms, combined with the particularities of platform poetry communities, means that in pursuing self-gain, platform poets and their consumers, along with the platforms themselves, produce opportunities for each other. It will argue that toxicity is rife in this system, whereby the algorithmic systems platforms use to influence the flow of content and guard against user harm have negatively impacted minority users. However, the thesis will highlight that users from these communities have found ways to resist suppressions caused by digital algorithms by using social media against the grain. Ultimately, it will argue that despite sometimes arriving with costs linked to the toxicity of its setting, platform poetry has the capacity to facilitate forms of community and solidarity which, in themselves, enable well-being benefit.



## **CHAPTER ONE: PLATFORM POETRY AS DIGITAL**

### **BIBLIOTHERAPY: BETWEEN ANALOGUE BIBLIOTHERAPY AND SELF-MEDICATION**

This chapter will refer to digital bibliotherapy to account for the functioning of a particular type of poetry. The particular poetic form is distinguished by its materiality, its propensity to encourage consumers to relate to a narrator figure and confront their own traumas, and its capacity to encourage the formation of affective communities. The chapter will highlight that digital bibliotherapy is a new phenomenon that occupies a position between self-medication and traditional analogue bibliotherapy. Furthermore, it will demonstrate that platform poetry, due to the technological affordances of digital platforms, can function as digital bibliotherapy.

Beginning with attempts to define self-medication and bibliotherapy, this chapter will argue that platform poetry contains elements of both and can be considered to carry the well-being benefits of community inclusion and identity validation. This type of poetry elicits an agentive consumer who therapeutically benefits through engaging with the textual material. The element of self-interest is central to digital bibliotherapy given the process relies on an individual's ability to select texts they can use to reframe their self-conceptions and perspective towards past traumas. The chapter will stress that individuals self-medicating in such a way, are gaining self-knowledge and catharsis through the therapeutic act of reading and are experiencing 'bibliotherapy'. It will argue that bibliotherapeutic platform poetry carries particular potential to enhance well-being due to the onus on the consumer to engage with the life narratives of the practitioners and use these life narratives to navigate particular traumas within their own lives. The communicative practices of digital platform users, particularly concerning the use of comment sections to engage with the content creator and their associated communities, are facilitative of the formation of an affective community. The chapter will argue that the act of narrating one's reframed life narrative, to a community perceived as supportive, is facilitative of wellbeing benefit. Paratextual elements, around the central bibliotherapeutic platform poetry, can be mobilised by poetry consumers to facilitate their cathartic benefit. The chapter will contribute to the thesis' central research question as it

will address how consumers of bibliotherapeutic platform poetry utilise the technological affordances of digital platforms in a manner facilitative of catharsis. Firstly, however, the chapter will draw attention to why bibliotherapeutic platform poetry can be considered a type of digital bibliotherapy and why digital bibliotherapy sits between self- medication and bibliotherapy.

### **Self-Medication: Definition and Context**

In this research, a kind of platform poetry will be identified that occupies a position between self-medication and bibliotherapy. Thus, it is important to outline theoretical understandings of these concepts and how these understandings inform the use of self- medication and bibliotherapy in the current research. Here, self-medication will be broadly taken to entail the act of an individual deciding to take a medicinal treatment of their own accord as well as acting as the agent who administers it. The self-medicating individual discerns a health issue before prescribing themselves a curative substance and administering it to themselves.

Theoretically, definitions of ‘self-medication’ vary in how absent a medical authority needs to be to say that an individual is self-medicating. Arlette Grand- Filaire (1992) views self-medication as an individual imitating a prior prescription within a new health context. Whilst the medication would have originally been prescribed to the individual when their doctor perceived a problem and outlined the medication as the most suitable course of treatment, the self-medicating individual would then use the medication without having been informed by their doctor that they are currently in need of it.

Arguably, Grand-Filaire is restrictive in his definition of self-medication; he does not consider individuals who choose a course of medication that has not previously been prescribed to them in a medical setting. In contrast, Hardon et al (1996) outline that any medication that has not been administered by a medical practitioner is, in effect, ‘self- medication’ as the medical practitioner would not be overseeing whether the medicine is being taken as prescribed. The broad definition of self-medication conceived by this research is in keeping with Hardon et al; however, the current research asserts that the self- medicating individual self-prescribes as well as self-administers. The definition used here is closer to the one outlined by Samrudhi Dash (2019), who asserts that a self-medicating individual diagnoses themselves and administers

their treatment without having consulted a medical practitioner. Individuals have turned to self-medication, where treatments have been independently identified and administered without the consultation of a medical practitioner, because of a hyperregulated health system that has led to the growing inaccessibility of treatment. In addition to impeding access to medical treatment, Jessica Flanigan (2017) argues that the hyperregulation of medicine has impacted the potential for self-medication.

For Flanigan, the medicinal choices of self-medicating individuals have decreased during the 21<sup>st</sup> century, due to pervasive regulation. Such hyperregulation has spread globally, in part through the influence of the US Food and Drug Administration. Flanigan attributes the spread of hyperregulation to the FDA being the model for pharmaceutical regulation that has been most widely mimicked globally. She argues the copying of the U.S. regulatory model has led to a perceived emphasis, from administrative agencies, on making authorization a prerequisite for patients to access pharmaceuticals. Instead of a 'paternalistic' medical culture, she calls for medical autonomy, whereby patients could legally purchase and self-administer dangerous pharmaceuticals without having obtained a prescription from a doctor or receiving regulatory authorization. This autonomous model does not eschew medical authorities altogether; rather, she argues that patients ought to consult physicians about their medical choices but should not be bound by the advice of physicians. Like Flanigan, Fleckenstein et al (2014) identify that regulatory boards have been placed under scrutiny, by an increasingly aware public, to broaden the choices of individuals who wish to self-medicate. Individuals who wish to self-medicate have increasingly fewer choices due to a continued hyperregulation of health services that have been influenced by the U.S pharmaceutical model (Bach 2014).

Given the barriers to medical support, either due to cost or accessibility, individuals have been turning to online media in search of alternative treatment pathways for physical conditions. A perception exists, amongst such individuals, that the onus is on them to play a more agentive role in their recovery by searching for treatments online. Such a perception is not limited to the context of physical ailments but, rather, extends to encompass both physical and mental illness. Achtyes et al (2023) state the heightened inaccessibility of healthcare during and following the COVID-19 pandemic led to the popularity of internet-dispensed treatments for mental health issues. One such treatment is telepsychiatry, which is a form of psychiatric

practice that involves the use of telecommunications technology to deliver psychiatric support. During the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, digital media platforms were utilised to deliver such support. However, the context of individuals increasingly seeking out medical information online, before self-diagnosing a psychological issue, has impacted the delivery of mental health treatments by professional psychiatrists, psychologists and clinicians.

A growing trend exists in individuals basing their self-diagnosis on the content of social media posts. Abi-Jaoude et al (2022) identify that social media platforms are being deployed by content creators as venues for mental health information. Individuals are using misleading content to self-diagnose a mental illness before contacting a digital mental health firm with that diagnosis. Such incorrect self-prescribing can lead to delays in receiving the correct support, thus putting the individual and, potentially, those around them, in danger. For those unable to afford private digital telepsychiatry, there is a danger of individuals using their self-diagnosis to self-prescribe medicines and obtain drugs from illegitimate pharmacies online. These pharmacies do not require consumers to provide a prescription and are rife for the dispensation of counterfeit drugs, with social media platforms regularly deployed to market such products (Kalyanam and Mackey 2017).

Gabriele Baratto (2020) highlights reasons for a subject to purchase medicines illegally. Baratto states that if a drug is not available for purchase without a prescription from a medical practitioner, a subject might pursue illicit virtual channels. He identifies the avoidance of a prescription, low prices and, in the case of illnesses that an individual perceives as carrying certain social connotations, such as sexually transmitted diseases, the avoidance of shame, as the key motivations for individuals to purchase medicines from illegal sources. Regarding individuals seeking out health information online rather than in a face-to-face conversation with a doctor, the lack of a prescription can be desirable given it means subjects do not have to disclose embarrassing information to a doctor. The desire for anonymity is also linked to the explanation Baratto gives about subjects making purchases from illicit channels to avoid shame. He stresses that subjects might be dissuaded from buying particular medicines in person due to the social perceptions of those medicines and the illnesses for which they are used. Finally, he identifies that individuals might be attracted towards illegal sources due to an incorrect perception of them being cheaper than regulated sources. The buying of illegally

sourced medicine is influenced by strong social determinants, such as the desire to avoid embarrassment and shame. Barrato et al (2015) identify four core at-risk digital environments, where individuals might be particularly vulnerable to such social determinants: forums concerning weight-loss supplements, forums comprising bodybuilders aiming to improve their performances, forums concerning sexual problems and forums centred around serious diseases such as cancer. They emphasise that in each of these virtual spaces, users share knowledge on medicines that they seem familiar with. Users might exchange information on side effects, dosages and where to purchase particular products.

Given growing negative perceptions of Britain's healthcare system, individuals are turning to social media as a source of practical advice and emotional support. As Gustafsson et al (2022) identify, such support can provide an emotional buffer against the negative impact of affective illnesses. In response to an increasingly inaccessible British healthcare system, individuals are using social media platforms to cater to their perceived lacks on an emotional and physical level. Through using social media to freely access available public groups that are relevant to their own circumstances, individuals may feel empathized with by individuals who can further assist them by providing practical support. The current research is interested in how, in trying to cater to emotional lacks through social media, individuals are making themselves vulnerable to particular harms. These harms pertain to misinformation, incorrect self-diagnosis, counterfeit treatments and communicative cultures on social media that can lead individuals to feel more isolated after having sought support. Whilst the current economic and social climate, within Britain, has put the onus on individuals to be more agentive in pursuing their well-being, this pursuit contains several stumbling blocks.

What can be taken forward from this section is that self-medication negates the need for a professional practitioner to administer the treatment. However, the options available to self-medicating individuals have been restricted by increasingly paternalistic regulatory systems. This has led individuals to seek other treatment options, with the internet being a key locum for support. Individuals can seek medical information, ascertain treatment options, and obtain a feeling of community support through health forums. The next section will address the mechanisms of digital forums, specifically concerning why individuals are deploying such spaces and how the communicative cultures therein impact an individual's sense of belonging.

## **Self-Medication through Digital Media**

Support-seeking on digital platforms is complicated by platform communicative cultures that are typically focused on self-interest rather than altruism. Wellman (2001) coins the term ‘networked individualism’ to refer to the loosening of social networks, whereby social networks are fragmented instead of tightly knit. Wellman developed the term in the context of individuals being the base for communication rather than households. As technologies developed, such as the mobile phone, to account for more individualised communication patterns, there has become an intense disconnect between communication and geographical location. In social media communication, networked individualism is apparent in individuals being “interconnected through multiple, partial networks” (Harper et al 2020 pg.4). This interconnection comprises social media users potentially crossing paths through accessing content on several channels across digital platforms. Meanwhile, the networks are partial insofar as users have partial commitments to digital platforms.

These commitments are to uphold the platform’s community standards, outlined in user agreements and do not extend to an obligation to communicate directly with fellow members. Digital platforms carry an emphasis on self rather than collective help, with there being a tendency for individuals to solicit information for self-gain or to provide information to further their status within the follower community. However, a degree of sensitivity exists, which will be examined in the next chapter, about the extent to which digital platforms are individual-focused. For now, this chapter will focus on the problematic use of digital platforms as a forum for the acquisition of health-related information for individuals seeking to self-diagnose and self-medicate a health issue.

Regarding individuals monitoring whether they are adopting the correct medicinal practices, online forums have become a prominent resource. Technology has facilitated patient-patient relationships in online forums, whereby emotional support and practical advice can be exchanged. The opportunity to obtain such information might increase the temptation for an individual to self-diagnose. However, this is problematic as patient experiences of a

particular illness can be contrasting. Whilst the advice from one patient to another may be well-meaning, it might not fit the other individual's particular medical profile. Already vulnerable individuals might be persuaded to purchase particular medication due to the feeling of belonging and acceptance in a virtual space. Thus, the treatment-seeking individual might be motivated to take the advice of the online 'expert' due to the interpersonal communication which has taken place and the consequential sense of personal connection.

Whilst informational support on online forums carries risk, the companionship garnered from online forums can offer benefits in terms of emotional well-being. For Claudia Barsottini and Felipe Moretti (2017), interacting within health-oriented social networks can positively impact a patient's sense of optimism. The act of seeking out information alters a patient's relationship with their illness as, rather than passively relying on the actions of health services, such patients actively engage with their illnesses, providing a sense of autonomy and improving mental well-being. Given the capacity they have as community hubs, social media sites, such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) have been used as venues for health-related groups. Yixin Chen and Yang Xu (2021) identify that despite the tendency of digital platform architecture to facilitate networked individualism, communities of affect can develop on such platforms. They found that empathic social support is 'contagious', whereby community responses to a user's first post in a forum strongly influence the subsequent behaviours of that individual within the community. Their study indicates that recipients of empathic support for their first post are more likely to post again and respond to other user posts with empathy. They identify a "chain reaction of social support and empathy" (2021, page 6855), whereby individuals respond to feeling a sense of belonging by passing on a sense of community belonging to other individuals.

They call on platform architects to alter the design of digital platforms in a manner facilitative of the spread of supportive comments. One of their recommendations is the introduction of robots to increase the number of empathetic comments concerning particular posts, such as those that articulate a suicidal tendency. Such a move could guard against individuals, who have disclosed intimate information about their well-being, feeling a sense of rejection at a perceived lack of social support. The third chapter will explore the social and wellbeing

ramifications of a third party cross-posting platform poetry from a digital setting typically marked by weaker ties among members to a platform associated with stronger member ties.

Dick Schoech (1999) found that online interventions have been particularly popular in the field of mental health, whereby services are delivered by therapeutically driven self-help groups in addition to professionals such as psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers. The focus of this thesis is on the scope of digital poetry as an avenue for mental health support and emotional healing, with both the poetry and comment boards being analysed for their therapeutic potential. Given this emphasis on community support, the current research will argue that a key aspect of digital poetry's therapeutic potential is how the communities function as self-help groups.

Emma Watson and Sara Meddings (2019) argue that the approaches of statutory mental health services are oppositional to the philosophy of peer support. They highlight that whilst peer support is becoming more prevalent within mental health services, as the industry seeks to influence a culture change, the peer support standpoint

“values the voice of the non-expert and locates strength within individuals and communities [whilst exploring] experience rather than seeking to ‘fix’ it” (Watson and Meddings 2019, pg.3).

The role of peer support communities is to enable individuals to come to terms with trauma rather than, as in the case of statutory mental health services, directly putting forth solutions. Regarding recovery from emotional distress, peer support can be a solution in itself. Self-medication represents a shift in attitudes about expertise: whilst medical expertise has been traditionally allocated to the healthcare professional, self-medication indicates an individual can direct their treatment path. For Watson and Meddings, peer support

“implies that we have the power to understand our experiences and are best positioned to direct our own path to well-being” (pg.6).

They draw attention to the belief that as the one experiencing the ailment, the suffering individual has an advantage in identifying how to treat the ailment. The process of self-



medication disrupts the notion that an individual in distress requires professional intervention. Moreover, peer support not only benefits the receiver, but also the sender and the rest of the peer community. The act of support contributes to the formation of an affective community, whereby individual members feel they can form relationships with each other based on shared experience, safe disclosures, and a focus on recovery.

The idea that mental health recovery must occur inside the parameters of mental health services and requires a mental health professional to overlook the process, is also challenged by Agnes Higgins and Mike Watts (2016). The argument they put forth is that emotional trauma can lead individuals to lose their connection with life and that peer support can lead an individual to rediscover that connection through rediscovering their own identity. A significant aspect of recovery lies in individuals articulating their lived experiences of distress to an audience they perceive as understanding. Through such articulations and the subsequent receiving of community support, individuals can receive identity validation from people they perceive to be undergoing similar routes towards well-being. This sense of being validated by individuals sharing the same recovery paths provides a sense of fellowship, security and belonging. Social media sites, which facilitate the use of hashtag, tag, share, and hyperlink functions, such as Instagram, X and Facebook, can enable individuals to organise themselves around a particular issue. Research has been undertaken by Natalie Hendry et al (2017) concerning social media sites as hubs for mental health communities. Hendry et al address the contradictory positions individuals are encouraged to occupy in social media spaces directed towards supporting individuals with mental illness. In campaigns targeted towards giving voice to experiences of mental health, whilst individuals are required to challenge stigma through disclosing their narratives about their lived experiences of mental health, they are also advised not to disclose sensitive information. Hendry et al advocate that these campaigns utilise the affordances of social media whilst eliciting and accounting for the social media attitudes, practices and experiences of the participants.

The Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH) and the Young Health Movement (YHM), in Britain, examined the broader ramifications of social media on mental health by exploring the influence of social media sites on fourteen health and well-being-related issues (RSPH, 2017). The report involved the researchers acquiring data through a survey which asked 1479

individuals, aged 14-24, to rate social media sites concerning their influence on anxiety, depression, loneliness, bullying, body image, awareness and understanding of other people's health experiences, access to trustworthy expert health information, emotional support, sleep, self-expression, self-identity, community building and fear of missing out. In the rating system used by the survey, with social media sites being ranked on this range of health factors, a -2 score indicates a social media site makes a health-related factor significantly worse, a 0 score represents no effect, and a +2 score signifies the health factor is made a lot better. Whilst Instagram received the worst net-average score, YouTube was rated as having the best influence on mental health. Furthermore, out of the five social media platforms listed (Instagram, YouTube, Twitter (now X), Facebook, and Snapchat), it was the only one that achieved a net positive score. The ratings, from best average score to worst, are as follows: 1. YouTube 2. Twitter 3. Facebook 4. Snapchat 5. Instagram. It is notable that Snapchat, Instagram and Facebook, three platforms that are particularly image-focused, score worst on their influences on mental health and well-being. The study underlines that each social media site is a discrete entity and the specific characteristics of each need to be considered when gauging their potential for facilitating well-being, which is part of the next chapter's purpose.

The RSPH and YHM report identifies that appearance-based comparisons across social media platforms are exacerbating body insecurities in social media users. Regarding body image specifically, Instagram scored the worst in the survey, followed by Facebook. The influence of social media on body-related insecurities has led to a significant increase in the number of 18–24-year-olds considering having cosmetic surgical procedures (The British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons, 2017). Appearance comparison on social media concerns an individual comparing their appearance with the images of those deemed to reflect body ideals. Dehdashti et al (2017) found appearance comparison positively correlates with body dissatisfaction, the drive for thinness and the internalisation of beauty standards. In addition to body-image insecurities, the RSPH and YHM report highlights social media bullying as a particularly common experience amongst the survey respondents. According to the report, seven in ten young people have experienced cyberbullying, with instant messaging apps facilitating the rapid circulation of bullying messages. Regarding experiences of bullying, Facebook was identified most frequently, followed by Snapchat, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. Here, it is significant that the sites that carry a particular emphasis on personal

messaging are the ones with the worst bullying ratings. Whilst the personal messaging function is facilitative of the strengthening of social ties, it carries jeopardy in the form of enabling users to target each other with toxic communication.

In terms of the benefits associated with social media platforms, YouTube scored highest in the category, 'access to health information'. This score is partly reflective of the growing number of credible health authorities, such as healthcare services and certified physicians, using YouTube to inform individuals about their health choices (RSPH 2017). However, such a benefit ought to be balanced by an acknowledgement that individuals can spread misinformation on social platforms. For example, users may, as Akerley et al identify, consume misinformation that may affect their patient-physician relationship, undermine the delivery of evidence-based medicine and cause unintended health consequences. Hence, there is potential for individuals to use a digital app, such as YouTube, as self-medication for mental trauma; however, the authorities providing the digital material for such self-medication cannot be assumed to be reliable.

The prevalence of social media algorithms, which generate content suggestions based on the engagement history of an individual, furthers the capacity for an individual to be exposed to unreliable information. The viewing habits of social media users influence the digital landscape they are exposed to which, in the context of health-related digital content, means that an individual who has engaged with particular channels is more likely to be exposed to such content. Whilst human users are not rendered passive regarding the content they view, the process of algorithmic selection means that AI has a role in human consumption habits. Whilst YouTube scored above 0.6 for access to health information, Twitter scored below 0.25, as did Facebook and Instagram; Snapchat was the only site to record a negative score.

These results are indicative of the particular communicative functions of different digital platforms. YouTube is an accessible site for community-serving information; although, as D'Souza et al (2021) identify, a significant number of videos exist that contain non-factual information. Meanwhile, the communicative culture of X is based on the consumption of news, rather than health information. Brennan et al (2022) found that the communicative culture of Facebook is largely centred on connecting with personal contacts, exchanging social

support and publicising a desirable identity. Facebook is a domain conducive to the formation of enclaves based on a particular health condition. However, Brennan et al found that such behaviour is atypical, with the platform chiefly used to kill time, with health information usually found by accident. Instagram is chiefly used for self-expression, self- documentation and viewing the lives of influencers for divergence. Finally, Snapchat's score reflects a user focus on deploying the site to be accepted and affiliated within their social circles whilst communicating with friends.

For this thesis, the potential for community building is another important factor to consider about the mental health benefits a social media platform can provide. Peer support can, as Watson and Meddings (2019) have highlighted, offer individuals a sense of validation and a feeling of belonging that is conducive to well-being. The social media app that scored highest in this regard, in Brennan et al's (2022) study, was YouTube, followed by Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat. These findings indicate that the prevalence of how-to videos on YouTube enables communities to form according to shared interests on key issues. Given the subscriber function on YouTube, there is scope for a core group of commenters to emerge across the YouTube videos of a particular creator. In terms of the emotional support provided by communities on each of the social media platforms, the respondents of Brennan et al tended to report they felt most emotionally supported on Facebook, followed by YouTube, Snapchat, Instagram and Twitter. Vikanda Pornsakulvanich (2017) stresses that the specific technological characteristics of social media platforms influence the extent to which an individual might feel emotionally supported. For example, the Facebook platform enables users to demonstrate support through reactions that signify surprise, sadness and love. Users can make their support for the original poster visible with a nuance that would not be possible with the like button alone. These emotionally labelled reactions have the potential to demonstrate empathy for the original poster by highlighting that the emotional content of their message has been understood and has elicited empathy. What the current research can take from the RSPH and YHM study is an understanding that different social media sites have particular patterns of influence on the well-being of their users. It is possible to surmise the reasons for those patterns by recognising the specific characteristics of a given social media platform and evaluating how those characteristics affect the ways users interact on the site. For those who use digital media to attempt to obtain support through the digital content itself, or

the communities that form around that content, the extent to which they feel emotionally supported and part of a community directly influences the emotional benefits they obtain.

The significance that the current research attaches to community and emotional support is due to how the communicative cultures of digital platforms can facilitate and impede the well-being of its users. The current research will focus on the prominence of emotional support within the communicative cultures of Instagram, YouTube and Facebook. This is because the study has identified the central role of these three platforms in the output of platform poetry with an overt focus on emotionally supporting individuals undergoing trauma. The remainder of this section will consider the emotional element within the communicative cultures of Facebook, YouTube and Instagram.

Regarding the seeking of emotional comfort, Emily Buehler (2017) identifies that Facebook users have to reconcile their needs with the implicit social norms that govern behaviour on Facebook. These social norms relate to the undesirability of Facebook posts that are deemed to overshare or demonstrate neediness. An individual who seeks community affirmation must violate norms on personal disclosure and trust the capacity of an online community to provide the emotional support they feel they need. A conflict is present whereby an individual breaks a community norm to appeal to that same community; this conflict has been underlined by the contrasting results of studies examining the scope of Facebook as an avenue for emotional support. Research by McLaughlin and Vitak (2012) has highlighted that a belief abounds amongst Facebook communities that individuals should not use Facebook for comfort but should seek that comfort elsewhere. Nevertheless, there is also research, by Chen et al (2015) that has stressed the desirability of Facebook as a platform on which to seek emotional support.

These contradictory research studies indicate that Facebook is a problematic site to use for obtaining support but is also a space where such support is attainable, with there being specific characteristics that facilitate the support. Aside from the reaction functions that allow communities to demonstrate their support, an individual can alert those communities, in the first place, because of their capacity to broadcast their posts to their entire social network. There are constraints and facilitations on Facebook, which impede and enable individuals to obtain the

support they have identified. The technological characteristics and communicative cultures of YouTube and Instagram mean that they each cater to user well-being differently.

The dynamics of YouTube mean that individuals are most often responding to video content another user has uploaded. Regarding the emotional aspect of the platform's communicative culture, Rachel Berryman and Micha Kavka (2018) identify that there has been a rise on YouTube in affective labour whereby individuals are exchanging tears for sympathy. In such an exchange, content creators direct intimate, emotional disclosures towards their followers, about aspects of their lives that cause them sadness, in exchange for their followers' supportive comments. The expression of negative feelings by YouTube vloggers contrasts with notions of YouTube being a space for positive self-documentation. In disclosing emotional angst to their audience, the discloser achieves self-therapy by putting difficult feelings into words and directing them to an imagined listener. Cuca et al (2015) highlight that the act of disclosing past traumas and feelings of isolation to an audience can lead to catharsis and the feeling of having gained a voice. Similarly, well-being can be obtained through responding to another user's video upload and disclosing an experience that relates, in some way, to the video's content. Whilst the onus is on the YouTube community to respond to a content creator's call for help through providing supportive comments, the consumer can use the content creator's emotional disclosure to articulate their negative emotional state and thereby obtain emotional benefit. Emotional exchange can be achieved through a consumer commenting on the video with a statement of support and a disclosure of a similar experience. Margaret Gibson (2015) identifies that the non-physical nature of the experience, in addition to the experience occurring between strangers online, can facilitate catharsis as the participants do not fear burdening their friends or altering the opinions of their friends towards them, as Caitlin McLaughlin and Jessica Vitak (2012) found can be the case on Facebook. However, Jessica Myrick and Mary Oliver (2015) identify that individuals can obtain cathartic relief by simply viewing a relatable individual self-disclosing their experiences of a health issue, rather than by additionally articulating their own experiences in response. The content creator's intimate display of vulnerability might lead the viewer to feel an affective connection with that content creator, which Andrew Ledbetter and Colten Meisner (2021) identify as being facilitative of feelings of belonging.

On Instagram, visual storytelling can involve numerous topics but, for this thesis, the focus will be on health-focused storytelling. Gurrieri and Drenton (2019) found that emotional disclosures about one's receipt of health care and medication can be part of the ongoing recovery of someone who has experienced a health issue. The Instagram platform enables users to narrate their experiences visually and textually to their audiences. This process of sharing can provide informational support and a feeling of mutual experience and companionship for consumers. The digital characteristics of Instagram, including commenting, tagging and hashtagging, enable other individuals to demonstrate their support and share similar experiences. By posting a personal health experience onto a social media site, such as Instagram, an individual helps to normalise that health experience and enable other users to experience a sense of fellowship. However, as on YouTube, there is benefit to be obtained without leaving markers of engagement, such as likes and comments. Whilst refraining from sharing one's mental health narrative with the original poster and the associated Instagram community can prevent an individual from gaining direct emotional support, they can accrue benefits in other ways. This benefit could be informational, whereby individuals can, due to the technological affordances of Instagram, perceive people's mental health experiences longitudinally by progressing through their posts chronologically. The experience of seeing other sufferers narrate their experiences back to the original poster, in the form of a comment, might lead the individual to reach out to a particular sufferer due to a specific shared experience.

Regarding individuals choosing to observe interactions on social media pages without leaving their own digital trace, research has been undertaken by Grocher et al (2018). They highlight that individuals accessing profiles to obtain specific information may not leave marks of their engagement with the profile due to fear of being identified as a fellow patient or a consumer of a particular medicinal product. This fear indicates that whilst online forums facilitate a degree of anonymity, which face-to-face communication with a doctor does not allow, the threat of a digital footprint leads some individuals to refrain from visibly engaging with the content creator and fellow consumers. A 'digital footprint' is the permanent trail of data that internet users leave online after actively engaging with a web page. On social media, markers of active engagement could constitute liking the health forum, liking a post, sharing a post, commenting on a post or creating a post. Social media sites carry scope to share the web habits of an

individual with their friends and followers, which Anthony Fargo and Jason Martin (2015) identify, can lead individuals to be self-conscious about their online consumption habits. In addition to refraining from leaving markers of engagement behind, individuals might adopt invented names which could lead them to engage with health forums more openly. The adoption of a new moniker might enable users to obtain a degree of the social benefits listed earlier, should it empower them to communicate with the other group members.

### **What is Bibliotherapy?**

‘Bibliotherapy,’ which grew from the librarian tradition of identifying texts that would aid an individual in overcoming particular ailments, is a term now commonly used to refer to the use of books in counselling for instigating psychological change in subjects. To facilitate this change, a bibliotherapeutic text elicits the reader to shape their readings by considering their own relevant life experiences. Sabina Eftimova (2020) identifies bibliotherapy as the meeting point between the text and the problematic life experiences of the reader. Successful bibliotherapy intervenes in the lives of its recipients, leading the recipient to reframe a personal dilemma more constructively and positively.

Negar Jacobs (2009, pg.158), defines bibliotherapy as “the use of written psychotherapeutic self-help materials to solve mental health problems.” The therapeutic aspect of bibliotherapy involves self-help materials guiding individuals on how to behave in difficult circumstances and how having engaged with the bibliotherapeutic material, the individual might mentally frame negative experiences differently. Hence, there is an emphasis on cognitive behavioural techniques in contemporary bibliotherapy. Cognitive behavioural therapy is a psychotherapeutic approach, which was established during the 1960s. It is an approach that enables a subject to explore the maladaptive behaviours that maintain the problems that they experience. The approach is based on understanding the psychological mechanisms that drive the maladaptive behaviours. In traditional conceptions of bibliotherapy, there is a focus on collaboration between the subject and the clinical expert to use the bibliotherapeutic text to identify a patient’s maladaptive behaviours and the psychological impulses that facilitate them.



Jacobs expands on the link between bibliotherapy and cognitive behavioural therapy by stressing the ease with which cognitive behavioural therapy can be delivered through a textual format. Given that cognitive behavioural therapy relies upon the subject self-reflecting and assuming responsibility for applying positive behaviour and thinking to their daily lives, the format of bibliotherapy can, as Andersson et al (2010) assert, function as a self-led cognitive behavioural therapeutic approach. In self-led bibliotherapy, an individual uses the text as a step-by-step method of altering their negative thoughts and behaviours in their daily life, whilst 'reporting back' to the text rather than the therapist. For individuals unable to access help from a psychotherapist, due to reasons such as funding, distance from a psychotherapist or psychological barriers to seeing a psychotherapist face-to-face, bibliotherapy offers an alternative method of tackling psychological problems. The 'expert figure' is present through the bibliotherapeutic text's structure, and any textual guidance given to an individual as they progress through the text. However, traditional conceptions of bibliotherapy assert that the therapy needs to involve a trained psychological practitioner to facilitate a constructive discussion element; this traditional view holds that bibliotherapy cannot be effectively deployed as a form of self-help.

As one of the developers of the practice of 'bibliotherapy', Caroline Shrodes defined it as

"the process of dynamic interaction between the personality of the reader and literature as a psychological field which may be used for personality assessment, adjustment and growth" (Shrodes 1949, pg.28).

The term 'personality assessment' infers that bibliotherapy is linked to a relationship between patient and an expert who possesses the resources with which to carry out the assessment. The need for the administering of a bibliotherapeutic text to be overseen by a trained practitioner is further highlighted by Louis Gottschalk, who states, "the wisest rule for the therapist to remember in using any collection of books for therapeutic reasons is to know each book and understand its actions thoroughly as the physician seeks to know the ingredients and actions of a medical prescription" (1948, pg. 54).

Textual material can, like physical medicine, be accompanied by side-effects. Gottschalk emphasises the need for bibliotherapeutic material to be administered by a trained therapist who

has made themselves aware of how the specificities of books may impact the particularities of their patients.

The absence of a medical professional and the lack of empirical evaluation of bibliotherapeutic texts has led to concerns about the lack of regulation of bibliotherapeutic texts. For Gerald Rosen (1987), this lack of regulation facilitates the sale of untested material that might not meet professional standards. Rosen criticizes the commercialisation of psychology and argues that author-psychologists should narrow the scope of writings to tested programs, whilst ethically marketing their self-help guides. He directs psychologists

“not to sell psychology, but to apply the skills of our profession to the development of self-help treatments to ensure that professional standards, rather than commercial factors, have a bearing on the marketplace” (Rosen 1987, pg. 50).

Whilst criticizing practitioners who utilise the status of their profession to promote untested psychological programs, he indicates there is an inherent link between bibliotherapy and the profession of psychology. The prominence of bibliotherapy within the profession of psychology was more recently highlighted in the 2015 edition of *The Encyclopaedia of Clinical Psychology*. The encyclopaedia, edited by Robin Cautin and Scott Lilienfeld, addresses a range of topics, concepts and prominent psychologists, whilst providing historical and cultural overviews for several psychological approaches.

Regarding bibliotherapy, three core approaches are identified; the first bibliotherapeutic approach includes the use of general self-help materials that do not specify particular disorders but, instead, focus on emotive scenarios and common anxiety triggers. The second approach uses materials that target particular disorders, such as panic disorder or alcohol-use disorders and offers problem-solving techniques. The third approach blends the two approaches by focusing on a particular technique, such as mindfulness, which can be utilised by individuals irrespective of their particular disorder. The development of a range of bibliotherapeutic approaches that systematically treat emotional disorders, stresses that bibliotherapy has been acknowledged, within the profession of psychology, as an effective means of treating subjects with emotional illnesses. The encyclopedia indicates that self-help has been long established as a successful means of treating illnesses such as anxiety disorders

and depression. It also highlights meta- analyses that suggest self-help approaches are an effective method of providing support to individuals suffering from anxiety disorders and depression who would otherwise be on a waiting list for face-to-face treatment. Whilst doing so, it indicates that bibliotherapy can be used as an interim treatment rather than as a replacement for face-to-face treatment.

Franklin Berry (Rubin 1978) indicates that bibliotherapy that involves the face-to-face input of an overseer does not necessarily require that overseer to be a mental health practitioner. Berry departs from notions, put forth by Eleanor Brown (1975) and Charles Cornett and Claudia Cornett (1989) that bibliotherapeutic treatment needs to be accompanied by discussions with a psychologist. Berry identifies two branches of bibliotherapy: clinical and educational/humanistic. For Berry, each strand has its particular advantages: the educational/humanistic strand of bibliotherapy is held in an educational setting that is conducive to the reading and verbalisation of texts as part of a group, whilst clinical bibliotherapy enables a trained practitioner to specifically focus on the needs of an individual with a more severe mental health condition. He differentiates the two by allocating clinical bibliotherapy to mental health practitioners and educational/humanistic bibliotherapy to educators and counsellors.

Clinical bibliotherapy involves the use of literature with patients who display acute emotional problems. Meanwhile, educational/humanistic bibliotherapy concerns furthering the self-understandings of individuals, largely at the school level, regarding integrating into society. Whilst the level of therapeutic involvement differs, as does the qualifications of the agent delivering that input, Berry indicates that some level of involvement is required. For Berry,

“bibliotherapy is a family of techniques for structuring an interaction between a facilitator and a participant, an interaction which is in some way based on their mutual sharing of literature in the broadest sense possible” (Berry 1978, pg.185).

The bibliotherapeutic text’s role is as a resource to aid the interaction between a facilitator and a participant. Thus, he gestures towards bibliotherapy being a tool that is not suitable for administering to and by the self. As the definition of bibliotherapy that he appears to subscribe to is that of a self-help text that requires the participant’s reflection and the

facilitator's analysis, the inability of bibliotherapy being a resource to be delivered to and by the self would indicate an inability of the individual to self-analyse.

The perception that self-analysis cannot be achieved by an individual alone is demonstrated by Robert Gardner (1993) who argues against self-analysis as a term. For Gardner, the term carries

“misleading connotations of a similarity, perhaps identity, between what we ordinarily call psychoanalysis and what we call self-analysis” (Gardner 1993, pg.170).

He indicates that there is a misconceived notion of similarity between the analysis that the detached psychoanalyst is capable of and that which the self is capable of. He states,

“I prefer to reserve the terms psychoanalysis and analysis for the special circumstances and possibilities of the two-party situation and to refer to the climate and procedures of the solo endeavour as self-inquiry” (Gardner 1993, pg.170).

Gardner stresses that psychological analysis requires a two-party situation and cannot be achieved by the self. Instead, he argues that the individual can move beyond ‘ordinary introspection’ and achieve ‘self-inquiry,’ which is a step removed from analysis. For him, self-inquiry concerns an individual asking themselves why something has led them to feel a particular way. However, self-inquiry alone leads to a relatively shallow understanding of the self. Deeper analysis is possible when there is an element of mutuality in the process, which can be achieved by back-and-forth communication with a therapist. This involves a psychoanalyst also aiming to advance their inquiries into the patient's psyche. Both the psychoanalyst and the patient can repeatedly use the input of the other to advance their inquiries into the patient's psychological state, thereby achieving deeper understanding. The argument advanced by Gardner carries implications for understanding bibliotherapy and the effectiveness of a bibliotherapeutic text when it is engaged with, by and to the self, compared to when it is engaged with, by and to the self with the addition of feedback and dialogue with a facilitator.

A 2012 study by Axelsson et al, exploring the efficacy of behavioural self-help treatment alone compared to being used in combination with input from a therapist, found that therapist input increased the treatment's effectiveness. However, the study also found that wellbeing benefits could be attained without the input of a therapist. In this regard, the study's results counter Gardner (1993), as Gardner indicates that the in-depth analysis of an individual, which is necessary for meaningfully improving psychological problems, can only be achieved in combination with a facilitator. The results by Jernelöv et al indicate that an individual is capable of moving beyond self-inquiry in their engagement with a non-fiction bibliotherapeutic text and achieving a level of self-analysis that is capable of alleviating psychological problems to a degree. A study by Veronique Mimeault and Charles Morin (1999), also highlights that wellbeing benefit, in the form of greater optimism and coping skills, can be obtained from bibliotherapy without professional guidance. The study explores bibliotherapy concerning insomnia and establishes that bibliotherapy, with or without professional guidance, improves sleep patterns and quality of sleep. Moreover, Mimeault and Morin suggest that it is conceivable that individuals undergoing treatment without professional guidance took greater responsibility in their recovery process and internalised therapeutic changes to a greater degree than individuals who received guidance from a practitioner. Mimeault and Morin demonstrate that in some cases, the absence of a professional guide may not impede mental health recovery but, rather, be facilitative of a personal agency that enables recovery.

The significance of the Mimeault and Morin study and the study by Jernelöv et al is that they underline that bibliotherapy can be effectively self-administered, which indicates the capacity for the individual to self-analyse, whilst drawing a parallel between self-medication and bibliotherapy. The notion of an individual being capable of self-analysis will be taken forward in the rest of the thesis. The parallel between self-medication and bibliotherapy centres on there not being the need for a facilitator figure in self-administered bibliotherapy if the individual places themselves in a heightened position of responsibility concerning their treatment. In non-fictional bibliotherapy, the reader may be guided through the book's teachings by a narrator figure who provides prompts that may be responded to individually by the consumer, or through the assistance of a therapist. The consumer can draw from the narrator figure's teachings in a non-fiction bibliotherapeutic text without engaging in discussions with a facilitator. Whilst the lack of a facilitator figure removes the ability of an individual to narrate

their reframed life narrative to a supportive figure and can reduce compliance to the bibliotherapeutic treatment, it can increase the feeling of agency in the self-medicating individual, enabling the individual to take ownership of their treatment and more strongly internalise the bibliotherapeutic text's teachings. Whilst an expert practitioner's value should not be overlooked, given the ability of an expert practitioner to judge the value of a bibliotherapeutic text according to their patient's specific needs, the above research suggests that bibliotherapy can effectively occur without such a figure. Therefore, in situations where low availability and financial cost do not allow for a practitioner, given individuals can obtain psychologically relevant meanings from texts and use them, without guidance, to gain wellbeing benefit, bibliotherapy can be used as a form of self-medication. Having emphasised that bibliotherapy can act as self-administered therapy for the individual, the study will move on to address the capacity of creative bibliotherapeutic texts to operate as therapeutic facilitators for the practitioner and consumer.

### **Creative Bibliotherapeutic Texts as Therapeutic Facilitators for the Creator and Consumer**

As Calla Glavin and Paul Montgomery (2017) highlight, creative bibliotherapy typically entails the guided reading of fiction or poetry within mental healthcare settings. The previous section focused on how non-fictional bibliotherapeutic texts can be administered to and by the self. It argued that the self-medicating individual can draw from the guidance within the bibliotherapeutic text in the absence of an external facilitator figure, such as a therapist. This, Chris Fradkin (2021) asserts, is the case when the individual is guided by an internal narrator who provides prompts and activities. The current section will explore the notion of creative texts operating as self-administered bibliotherapy, given that such a narrator is absent and the reader is tasked with discerning the relevance of a narrator's experiences to their own. The section will first explore the wellbeing benefits potentially obtained by the writer of a fictional bibliotherapeutic text, before examining the wellbeing benefits of such a text for the reader. This will lead to the next section, which will look more specifically at platform poetry as an avenue for bibliotherapy.

Gillie Bolton and John Latham (2004) assert that the bibliotherapy content creator, as well as the bibliotherapy consumer, can benefit from the construction of a bibliotherapeutic text. The act of writing a text, whose emotional content stems from the writer's difficult life experiences, can represent a form of self-medication used by an individual to provide themselves with a restorative experience. Such an experience might emerge following the expression of a previously unarticulated emotion, leading to catharsis. Catharsis is the process by which pain can be transformed into pleasure, with the pleasure being derived from the phenomenon of negative emotions that have built up over some time, being released. This sense of emotional discharge has been recognised in the process of poetry writing, highlighting the creative form can facilitate catharsis. William Wordsworth, in his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) defines poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth 1800, pg.475), stressing a historical link between poetry writing and catharsis. Dannie Abse, a physician and poet, writes that "poems profoundly alter the man or woman who wrote them" (Abse 1998, pg.362). Abse indicates this alteration is due to the poet needing to recover and articulate emotionally entrenched experiences. In articulating such experiences, the individual can potentially obtain new insights and thereby achieve catharsis.

For Bolton and Latham (2004), the act of poetry writing is particularly apt for communicating experiences as closely as possible given the scope to redraft the writings. The act of redrafting enables the writer to consolidate their sense of a particular life circumstance. Through articulating the circumstance in their own words, the writer can obtain a measure of control over that circumstance. This measure of control can aid the process of recovery, as

"an issue clarified into words, graphically visualized, and controlled by poetic form is an issue on the way to being dealt with" (pg. 120).

Bolton and Latham assert that cognitively engaging with an issue, before using the structure of poetry to articulate it, enables the writer to gain agency in overcoming the issue. They differentiate redrafting from the initial 'trawling', arguing that a different frame of mind is required for each exercise. Compared to a first draft, redrafting involves greater cognition, whereby the writer is required to recognise the emotional state they were in when writing the piece and apply more order to their writing. Bolton and Latham indicate that an initial draft of

writing is a less conscious process than later drafts. Redrafts require creating order out of writing that is an outpouring of thought and can lead to a sense of emotional clarity and catharsis. The connection between the process of creative writing and the experience of catharsis indicates that an individual engaging in such writing is unconsciously self-medicating. The process of an individual gaining an understanding of the emotional aspects of their writing can make the writer more likely to obtain catharsis.

However, this process of self-medicating for emotional insight and catharsis is contradictory because, for Bolton, for a poet to obtain wellbeing benefit from their writing, they need to approach the act of writing with an open mind that is not focused on a particular goal. The approach needs to encompass an unencumbered spirit of enquiry, where the writer is not burdened by pressures relating to their publishers or readers. To Bolton and Latham (2004), a writer needs to focus on the process of writing, rather than on the product they intend to craft or trying to consciously get to grips with a personal problem through their writing. By adopting an open spirit of enquiry, the writer's work would be more likely to succeed poetically and therapeutically. The benefits of an open spirit of inquiry have implications for career poets who directly focus on helping their readers grapple with their problems. Such a directed writing approach, Bolton and Latham indicate, would be less likely to assist them or their readers in obtaining wellbeing benefit. For them,

“attempting the writing process in a purposive way would be as much use as practitioners deciding in advance what they wanted the client to tell them” (pg.111).

The act of achieving a greater understanding of the self cannot be approached in a focused manner as it would not lead the poet to any new understanding. The focus would foreclose opportunities for the client to engage therapeutically with their writing, as the writing would be too concretely based on the poet's experiences. A purposive approach, they indicate, would not enable the self-conscious to take the lead and the writer would simply be replicating how they have already mentally and emotionally framed traumatic events. In contrast, an open spirit of inquiry allows the writer to lift language out of its everyday condition, enabling the writer and reader to obtain a new perspective on events.

Rose Flint draws a parallel between poets and healers at the level of language. She states,



“the use of and familiarity with the power of imagery and metaphor has always linked poets and artists to healers” (Flint 2002, pg. vi).

The ability of poetry to succinctly communicate experiences in a novel fashion is comparable to how healers use language to differently frame the experiences of their patients. When applied to the idea of catharsis, the re-framing of a traumatic crisis, into new language, might lead to insight and emotional release. Poetry writing and poetry reading can facilitate catharsis, with reading poetry enabling the subject to use the words of a poem to give their feelings form. E. Mansell Pattison, suggests,

“because symbolization is the communicational vehicle for organizing, synthesizing, and representing the self, the poem as a symbolic vehicle is a potent mode of psychotherapeutic communication” (Pattison 1973, pg.212).

Similarly to Flint, Pattison highlights the use of symbolism in poetry as a means for a reader to alter the personal meaning of a particular life event. An individual’s capacity to use a poetic text to change their perspective on a difficult personal experience and, potentially, achieve catharsis, is demonstrative of the aptness of poems as potential bibliotherapeutic texts.

Stewart stresses that an ideal bibliotherapeutic text creates “a psychological interplay between the reader and the material” (Stewart 1992, pg. 58). Stewart shifts the responsibility from the author’s intention, to the particular relationship between the subject and the words within a book. He indicates that for a text to be bibliotherapeutic, it need not be based purely on the author consciously providing problem-solving advice to the reader. Instead of directing a reader to view particular events in a certain way, a bibliotherapeutic text can instigate that change by building a relationship with the reader that leads to individuals using the text to emotionally reconstruct their own experiences. The reader can imaginatively nuance the material in a manner that makes it more closely align with their own lived experience and, consequently, align themselves with the narrator’s growth. As the narrator emotionally reclaims control over difficult aspects of their life, the reader can achieve catharsis through the act of applying the narrator’s emotional learnings to their circumstances and mentally reframing their perception of their personal life experience. Poetry carries particular scope for such wellbeing benefit given the form’s association with metaphorical language that can be

open to numerous interpretations (Bolton and Lathan 2004). The poetry reader can potentially find relevance in the symbolic language of a poem, use that language to reframe their negative perceptions, and potentially achieve catharsis through obtaining new perspectives on previously troubling events.

This process of interplay, between a poetry reader and a poetic text, contrasts with how a psychotherapist might influence a patient to mentally reconstruct their experiences. For Kelly, Constructivism, in psychotherapy, is an approach whereby the psychotherapist actively shifts their mental processes towards those of the patient, demonstrating empathy whilst encouraging the patient to adopt some of the practitioner's positive viewpoints (Kelly 1991). The psychotherapist's move to actively position themselves closer to the patient's mental processes contrasts with how a reader might achieve a transformative relationship with a poetic text. The specific characteristics of every reader of a poetic text would not have been focused on when the poem was written. The onus is on the reader to build their relationship with the poetic text and use it to reframe their particular negative experiences. Nevertheless, there are similarities between psychotherapy and the poetic bibliotherapeutic text as, to achieve therapeutic change in the subject, both methods need to influence change in how the subject perceives their experiences of the world. A schematic template is a web of ideas reflecting how an individual has learned to process particular experiences. Having been developed during an individual's youth, they are taken for granted by the individual and govern the ways they view themselves and their relationships with others. The templates govern what an individual views as the most pragmatic response to a given situation. Where a schema is maladaptive, as Christopher Bass and Paul Salkovskis (1997) state, it can result in dysfunctional behaviours triggered by events relevant to that schema. As a therapeutic approach, Constructivism involves viewing the individual as an architect capable of using experience to alter maladaptive schematic templates.

Psychotherapists assist clients in reshaping their schemas, guiding patients towards interpreting particular traumatic life experiences more constructively. The relationship between the practitioner and patient is transformational insofar as the practitioner intervenes in a particular maladaptive schematic template that has strongly influenced the patient's emotional state. In bibliotherapy, the Constructivist approach is manifested in the relationship between a subject

and a bibliotherapeutic text influencing the subject to emotionally reframe difficult experiences and, by doing so, rework the schematic template that governs their responses to such experiences. Jacob (2017) states the subject achieves cathartic release and the long-term benefits of a schematic template that allows them to respond to similar experiences more constructively. The bibliotherapeutic text that facilitates such schematic readjustment might be a self-help book that gives the reader ideas on how to behave in certain situations and how to emotionally frame particular life experiences, or it could be a fictional piece that might not have been explicitly written to advise the reader on how to act in a given situation. Therefore, bibliotherapy can occur without an intended guided figure, if the reader can discern a synergy with a particular character and constructively follow their lead in their own life.

In guided bibliotherapy, having read a bibliotherapeutic text, the reader would, on at least one occasion, report back to the counsellor and disclose how the text has altered their perception of a particular experience. This act can be defined as narrative counselling, which involves a subject sharing a story, often involving trauma, with a facilitator. Regarding narrating personal stories to a counsellor for self-empowerment, Mark Savickas writes about how, in vocational guidance counselling, individuals might be asked about the types of stories and characters they like as a means of identifying common interests. This activity promotes self-knowledge, which can be re-applied through the act of writing their own career story. This is a story that the individual can ‘live’ so that,

“by holding onto the self in the form of a life story that provides meaning and continuity, they can move on in a way that advances narrative lines and actualises overarching goals” (2019, pg.2).

The self-narrating individual is better able to retain perspective when they experience a discontinuity in their lives. From being something to physically write, the story becomes a way of connecting to a symbolic character whom the subject can imagine overcoming adversity. A life story that starts in a literal sense becomes a metaphorical tool that an individual can use as a reference point. The process reflects the value asserted to a reader identifying with a character or narrator within a bibliotherapeutic text. However, through becoming the writer, the individual can obtain the benefits of articulating their life narrative in a manner that asserts

order to events and facilitates a sense of agency, in addition to being able to imaginatively draw on a character as a role model to symbolically guide them through difficult experiences.

Reporting back to a facilitator might also assist the patient in reinforcing new schematic templates. The facilitator's role resides in the 'narrative questioning' that takes place after the patient recounts their trauma. Within this exercise, there is an emphasis on encouraging the patient to perceive themselves as separate from the problem. Valerie Ross and Johanna Shapiro (2002) identify that externalisation, within narrative therapy, concerns an individual developing the understanding that they are not the problem and that the problem exists outside of themselves. Through focused questioning, the facilitator can help the patient recognise that their maladaptive thought processes are woven into prior experiences and that the thought processes do not need to be taken as unchallengeable. Through narrative questioning, the patient is encouraged to come to these insights themselves with the facilitator acting as an ally. This is a prominent aspect of guided bibliotherapy as it enables the new meanings that might have arisen during the reading and self-contemplative process, to be reinforced and integrated into the subject's long-term thinking.

Cate Howell (2016) advises facilitators, within guided bibliotherapy, on how to help patients through depression, relationship issues, addiction and grief whilst focusing on encouraging the patient to externalise their problems. On using narrative therapy to treat patients with psychological problems caused by such issues, she stresses the impact that social pressures might have on the patient. These social pressures may encourage individuals to develop maladaptive schemas in response to the perception that they are, in some way, inherently unable to match society's standards. Howell advises medical practitioners to

“discuss with the client the influences of society on them, the temptation to measure up to unrealistic ideals, and the impact of these influences on the client's sense of self-worth” (Howell 2016, pg.144).

Societal expectations, around how a client might respond to a particular situation, could lead the patient to question their sense of social worth and cause them to withdraw from their social connections, heightening the severity of depression. Howell encourages practitioners to work with their patients on placing the source of the trauma outside of themselves. This

externalisation might be achieved through an individual being encouraged to speak of their trauma objectively when feeding back to their psychotherapist. Therefore, the approaches of constructivism and narrativism are evident, firstly, through the subject's negative perceptions being broken down by a bibliotherapeutic text and the facilitator, and secondly, through the subject's new perceptions being reinforced through the act of narrating them to the medical practitioner. Through objectively recalling their traumas, patients might identify and undermine the influences that cause them to view themselves negatively.

### **Platform Poetry as a Form of Digital Bibliotherapy**

Bibliotherapy contains aspects that cross over with cognitive behavioural therapy, concerning the need for a subject to investigate their feelings about a particular circumstance. Thus, doubts have been cast, in the discipline of psychotherapy, about the capacity of an individual to self-analyse without guidance. Within guided bibliotherapy, a dichotomy exists between reliance on the professional guide and reliance on the self. It is due to this dichotomy that a perception exists that bibliotherapy cannot successfully take place without the presence of a 'guide'. Unguided bibliotherapy removes the ability of an individual to narrate their refashioned life story to an audience. The individual loses out on the benefit of obtaining validatory feedback from that audience. This section will argue that platform poetry can be used as a form of bibliotherapy and that the characteristics of digital platforms grant the poetry particular scope to function as bibliotherapy for the reader and self-medication for the writer.

As individuals writing poetry as a profession, on platforms that commercially reward high audience engagement and followings, platform poets face pressures other than their followers' well-being. However, whilst writing with the imperative of garnering engagement and, with it, the monetization of their social media account and further commercial opportunities, particular platform poets rely on cultivating an identity as a facilitator of their followers' well-being. For platform poets whose work deals with themes of depression, trauma and recovery, it is a commercially beneficial strategy to articulate concern for their followers' emotional welfare. Through doing so, such platform poets can strengthen the affective ties between themselves and their audiences. As Donald Horton and Richard Wohl (1956) identified, a parasocial tie, which is typically what the relationship between a platform poet and a follower constitutes, is

a one-sided relationship whereby a follower develops an emotional connection with a figure within digital media. The follower emotionally invests in the media figure and can perceive that they have an intimate awareness of their psyche.

In social media-based interaction, as Caitlin McLaughlin and Donghee Wohn (2021) assert, such a perception can encourage a follower to disclose intimate details of their life, in response to content shared by the object of their admiration, to elicit direct interaction. Users may be encouraged, by the appearance of intimate self-disclosure within the platform poem and their drive to elicit direct communication with the poet, to narrate an aspect of their life they have positively reinterpreted having experienced the poem. Even where their disclosure does not elicit a response from the content creator or a fellow consumer, an individual can emotionally benefit from the exercise of crafting a more positive life narrative and feeling they have concretised that narrative by making it visible to a community. This act can partially cater for the lack of a guide with whom the bibliotherapy consumer can discuss their interpretation of the text. The lack can be further overcome if the platform's communicative culture (see Chapter Two) encourages communication between consumers. In addition to the platform's particularities, the platform poet might foster a sense of mutual growth by identifying this feature as a key marker of their community. By instigating this sense of mutuality, the poet encourages affective ties between community members, heightening the capacity for a discloser to receive supportive comments that validate their updated sense of self. Whilst not accounting for the skill or focus of a therapeutic practitioner in guiding the bibliotherapeutic consumer towards self-acceptance, the validating comments, in combination with a bibliotherapy-inspired refashioned life narrative, can facilitate a more positive self-perception.

In platform poetry, the comment threads are fluid interfaces between the poet, the poetry and the readers. Users of digital platforms, such as Instagram, YouTube and Tumblr, can embellish platform poetry narratives through disclosing personal experiences that they deem relevant to the poetic content. Individuals may use the platform poet's associated comment threads to demonstrate to other users how they have empathised with the narrator and used the narrator's perspective to confront particular traumas within their own lives. Thus, the poetry consumer might experience deeper emotional insights and a greater tolerance for uncomfortable feelings they associate with particular aspects of their life. These two themes are, Kirk Schneider

(2015) asserts, aspects focused on by the Existential-integrative approach within psychotherapy. The readerly engagement of a bibliotherapeutic platform poem can take on some of the characteristics seen in guided therapy. Key to this engagement is the relatability of the platform poem's narrative voice, given the onus on the reader to identify with characters and situations similar to the ones they face. Whilst, in guided bibliotherapy, the facilitator will have a role in selecting the text, here, the responsibility is taken up by the individual in need of support.

Stewart suggests that an ideal bibliotherapeutic text creates "a psychological interplay between the reader and the material" (1992, pg.58). He highlights the need for an interrelationship between the reader and the material, whereby the reader becomes a co-creator in the material meaning through applying aspects of their own life to the material. Stewart's notion of 'interplay' acquires new meaning when applied to platform poetry. The relationship between a reader and platform poetry can facilitate interplay because the reader has greater scope to question the author about the poem, and to influence the readings of other individuals who are accessing the poetry at the same time. This provides a more dynamic reading experience, whereby an individual can convey their interpretations of a text and use the interpretations of other individuals to add greater meaning to their own. The features of digital platforms can facilitate interplay between the subject, the poetic text, and the digital community that has arranged itself around the poetic text. With regard to interacting with a creator, a reader of a digital text can leave feedback through 'liking' a post or 'following' the creator. For example, on Instagram, those who wish to be alerted when a particular user has published new content can choose to follow that user.

This process legitimises the relationship between creator and 'follower' given the follower's willingness to have the space on their 'feed' taken up by the creator's posts. Then, when the follower interacts with the creator, either through commenting, liking or tagging other users to the original post, the content creator will be alerted. The follower is granted the ability to contribute to a 'feedback loop' whereby the creator receives an insight into how the audience is relating to their content. The creator can access data directly about how their target audience engages with their material. Whilst digital technology can extend the psychological interplay between a reader and a bibliotherapeutic text, through granting the reader the ability to

articulate their perceptions of the text to a community, it also enables the content creator to perceive signs of this psychological interplay.

Where audience comments have been read and used to influence the future artistic choices of a content creator, the interplay between followers and creator has been particularly direct. When a content creator indicates that their content decisions are influenced by the requests of their followers, audiences are alerted to the value the creator asserts to their comments and the scope for interplay between them and the creator. The audience perception of interplay is heightened when creators interact with a comment, either through ‘liking’ or by commenting in return. On occasion, a creator might publish a post and use the description box to directly comment on the actions of their followers, emphasising the creator’s position as the facilitating presence in their community. For example, the creator may thank their followers for liking their content, subscribing to their channel and providing them with positive feedback in the comment section.

The creator figure’s online presence, allied with their focus on articulating issues about mental health, means that there is, to some extent, a gatekeeper element in platform poetry with bibliotherapeutic themes. Popular topic areas of platform poetry concern problems with self-belief and overcoming guilt and shame. These issues are broad, and a digital poetry reader could likely relate to these difficulties given their generality. As has already been established, poetry enables individuals to reframe their perspective on such difficult experiences. To reframe these experiences through engaging with a bibliotherapeutic text, Stewart (1992) indicates that the reader needs to experience three key stages: identification, catharsis and insight.

Each of Stewart’s stages is built around an individual relating to a character and using the character’s experiences to focus on a particular problem. The first stage, identification, involves the subject relating to the character, who could either be real or fictitious. Stewart argues that a character of similar age is particularly effective because the character and the subject are more likely to be facing similar events. This notion is somewhat reductionist, as the major events that influence a life are not necessarily influenced by age. For example, whilst a middle-aged man may be more likely to be going through a divorce than a twenty- year-old



man, it may be that a shared experience that is less dependent on age leads to a feeling of connection and empathy. The consumer of platform poetry carries a particular ability to choose a relatable platform poet as the poet's identity presentation is often at the forefront of their social media page. Such identity presentations might involve a political stance, a popular culture reference or the performance of a cultural identity. The ability to choose between a range of platform poets aids the process of identification.

The seeker of bibliotherapeutic platform poetry is agentic, given the onus on them to identify platform poetry creators that package their material as emotionally empowering and then selecting particular texts from their oeuvre. The role of digital technology in assisting this process as well as the subsequent processes of poetry consumption and self-narration in the comment section, means such a phenomenon can be considered a type of digital bibliotherapy. Digital bibliotherapy occupies a position between self-medication and traditional, analogue bibliotherapy as the consumer of digital bibliotherapy is required to identify a salient aspect of their identity and select an appropriate bibliotherapeutic text to apply to their circumstances. The act encompasses aspects of analogue bibliotherapy, given the themes of recovery and emotional understanding within the text, and the scope for the consumer to discuss their interpretation of the text, albeit to a digital community that may or may not respond, rather than to a practitioner who is tasked with the role of engaging in such dialogue. Therefore, digital bibliotherapy entails self-interest, which is mediated by the communicative cultures and platform infrastructures of particular digital platforms.

Whilst Gilda Katz and John Watt (1992) highlight that bibliotherapy always has a therapeutic outcome in mind, an individual consuming poetry on digital platforms would not necessarily be consciously aiming for a particular therapeutic outcome. However, after an individual has derived a therapeutic outcome through engaging with digital poetry, it may be that the individual returns to digital poetry with such a repeat experience in mind. This conscious seeking of wellbeing benefit in platform poetry would align the individual's act with the conception of bibliotherapy put forth by Katz and Watt, about the focus on a therapeutic outcome such as catharsis or greater positive self-regard. It would represent self-prescribing, as the individual is placing the onus on themselves to source materials that would benefit their psychological state. Whilst the choice to explore the works of a particular social media

creative might be influenced by more superficial factors, such as dress, demeanour, and age, choosing relevant material for self-administered bibliotherapy requires a deeper understanding of the social media creative and greater effort and agency by the reader. The individual needs an awareness of the types of feelings they wish to evoke about a particular experience, an understanding of the style of writing that generally causes them to experience psychological relief and an identification of the themes explored in the works of social media creatives.

Stewart's second progression stage in bibliotherapy involves the experience of catharsis, whereby the subject feels able to release trapped emotions in an environment they feel is safe and that they have control over. He recommends that this process also involves discussion or art-based exercises; he does not specify whether this process should be overseen by a medical expert and stresses that an individually undertaken art exercise can constitute a source of expression, indicating that bibliotherapy can be administered to and by the self. This capacity for bibliotherapy to be an individual enterprise highlights the capacity for an individual to use platform poetry to self-medicate. Language such as 'self-medicating' is typically used in a medical setting but that line has been blurred with analogue literary texts being marketed as self-medication aids. One analogue example is *The Poetry Pharmacy* series by William Sieghart (2017), with the final edition being released in 2023. Therefore, there is already a precedent for the language of poetry and medicine to intersect in an analogue bibliotherapeutic sense; this thesis focuses on the wellbeing possibilities in digital settings, taking account of the consumption practices and technological affordances of various digital platforms.

There is scope for the individual self-medicating by using platform poetry as bibliotherapy, to use the digital community as a source of expression. The expression could involve disclosing a difficult experience to the digital community constructed around the poem, before engaging in dialogue with those who respond to them. The degree to which such a bibliotherapeutic process would align with Stewart's stage of catharsis would rely upon the nature of the community that has gathered around the poet's work. If an individual's catharsis is reliant on them not only engaging with the text in a manner that causes them to positively reimagine their circumstances and achieve relief but also on them narrating their reimagined circumstances in a digital space where they feel safe, there is a need for the platform poet to

have cultivated a community that is encouraged to support individuals who disclose. As the thesis will demonstrate, whether a digital space is supportive is also reliant on the communicative cultures of a given platform (see Chapter Two) and the algorithmic processes that influence the movement of content and communication on a platform (see Chapter Four).

Given the focus on narratives of healing within platform poetry, community members might perceive a poem as a disclosure by the content creator. Such perceptions, Cardell et al (2018) assert, are driven by digital platforms being typically used as a way of articulating one's life narrative. Due to the technological characteristics of digital platforms tending to facilitate the chronological and longitudinal telling of life narratives, there is an amplification of the role of the autobiographical on social media. In addition to the conventions of social media platforms influencing the perception of platform poetry as a disclosure by the profile owner and content creator, the content creator might further this perception by using the platform's paratextual features to highlight the poem's confessional nature. Such use of paratexts would include using the description feature, typically used to help the content poster contextualise their post, to provide the reader with information about how the poem was inspired by personal circumstances. Where the content creator has cultivated strong parasocial ties with their community, community members are likely to respond with supportive comments, as seen in community responses to Clickfortaz's content regarding her mental health (addressed further in Chapter 5). In addition to community members demonstrating reciprocity with the content creator to support that creator, individuals might perceive the messages of support directed at the content creator as a sign that the community space is a safe place for them to disclose their response to the poetry.

The platform poet can facilitate a space of community affect and disclosure by indicating that they are willing to foster intimacy with the group. Where a digital poem concerns emotive topics such as depression and loss, it might be that the poet is also writing for the self, whereby a form of catharsis is sought. Thus, the writer might obtain catharsis through the act of writing, in addition to the process of intimate disclosure to a community that in response, provides the writer with validation and emotional support. Therefore, while providing bibliotherapeutic opportunities for their community, the platform poet also facilitates self-medication for themselves. Alongside these wellbeing benefits, Aini Manaf and Tengku

Shariffadeen (2017) demonstrate that the writer also benefits commercially from such disclosures by cultivating a relatable persona that leads to increased engagement with their content and thereby furthers the monetization potential of their profile. Where the engagement constitutes comments, the digital poet might act as a reference point for whom an individual directs their epiphanies even though the poet may not respond to the comment themselves. It is not feasible for the poet to engage with the specific emotional journey of each disclosing individual; rather, in the author figure's absence, the onus on supporting an individual, who has offloaded personal trauma, is taken on by the digital community that the poet has built. As the individuals on a digital poetry comment thread are unlikely to know each other's backgrounds, the self-disclosures demonstrate an individual's synergy with the poem's emotional content, the poet's life experiences, and the community's ethos.

The narration of life events has been used in therapeutic disciplines to grant patients a sense of agency over their experiences. Kobus Maree (2017) highlights that one technique used by narrative career counsellors involves asking subjects to narrate their current struggles in story form. Through processing difficult experiences through storytelling, he indicates that an individual would gain perspective through the act of opening up. Hence,

“narrative career counselling empowers clients to heal themselves by changing how they author their lives” (Maree 2017, pg.185).

Individuals may feel able to use a digital space as an alternative to their offline narratives and narrate personal circumstances in a manner they would not in offline spaces. Whilst in the type of therapy Maree alludes to, the patient would gain feedback from the counsellor aimed at reinforcing positive self-conceptions and challenging negative conceptions, in platform poetry communities, the responder may not have the knowledge or intent to provide the discloser with such feedback. The disclosing individual is less likely to receive validation that can address the underlying cause of their emotional pain; even when such support is intended, there are inherent risks within peer to peer mental health support such as triggering language and misinformation which could undermine potential benefit (Aschbrenner et al 2016). Therefore, the disclosing individual has less assistance in shifting from the stage of catharsis onto the stage of insight, where long-term shifts in mental outlook and behaviour are facilitated.

The insight stage - the final progression stage that Stewart identifies - concerns the knowledge the subject obtains following the experience of catharsis. It occurs when the subject understands that an issue is not permanent and that they have the agency to overcome the impacts the issue has had on their mental health and practical circumstances. In literary bibliotherapy, the subject recognises the value of the strategies the focaliser has utilised to conquer their ills. The individual would have reached the insight stage having identified with a character and felt catharsis through realising they are not alone in experiencing what they are feeling as the character has undergone similar difficulties. At the insight stage, an individual can reframe part of their life story and gain an understanding of how the strategies the character adopted might be applied to aspects of their own life. In platform poetry, the poem's focaliser is generally taken as an extension of the author-figure and profile owner. The focaliser becomes the 'implied author' whereby, as Booth (1983) indicates, the readers construct their sense of the author, which may not relate to the actual author. Therefore, readers may use the platform poem to narrow the distance between the focaliser and the author. Hence, having already identified with the focaliser in one poem, and with the author of bibliotherapeutic-themed platform poetry tending to focus on particular difficulties, the reader can perceive how the focaliser/ poet overcomes their issue across multiple contexts. The relationship between the narrator of a poem and a reader is likely to extend beyond a single poem. This relationship might be reinforced through the author directly addressing their followers in a post. Through doing this, the author reinforces the reader's connection of the content creator and their in-poem focaliser, whilst validating the relationship between themselves and their followers by underlining the value of their support.

An example of a platform poet validating their relationship with their digital community occurred on December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020 when Clickfortaz used a post to thank her followers for their positive response to a video she published on YouTube in partnership with YouTubeOriginals – a service that YouTube has initiated to encourage subscriptions to their premium service. Her post included the following tribute to her followers:

“reading all your comments on the #YouTubeoriginal documentary has been so overwhelming, your support means the world” Clickfortaz 2020).

The YouTube video contained a narrative of her life journey, which meant that the positive feedback from her community represented an affirmation of her identity. Figure 1 demonstrates Clickfortaz's utilization of extra textual tools such as the hashtag, tag and emoji functions, whereby she simultaneously thanks contributors to the YouTube documentary and her supportive followers. Her comment indicates how an individual self-medicating through creating digital poetry might not only receive wellbeing benefits through writing the poems but also from the positive feedback received from their followers. The feedback from the reader community might cause the author-figure to reframe their own life story as a reader experiencing bibliotherapy would reframe their life narrative through obtaining identification, catharsis and insight due to their contact with a platform poem. Whilst facilitating the process of digital bibliotherapy for their readers, the platform poet can also experience self-medication through the act of poetry writing and identity validation and belonging through the supportive utterances of their follower community.

Meanwhile, the narrator figure symbolically stepping out of a poem to engage with the readers, as Clickfortaz has, grants realism to the content of the poems. It reinforces the perception that the experiences articulated within a poem have been lived outside of that poem. A sense of realism enables an individual to obtain the insight that, like the narrator/ poet, they can thrive despite their issues. Hence, the process of digital bibliotherapy enables the recipient to experience the sense that the in-text focaliser that facilitates their cathartic experiences is based on an individual who is grappling with their mental health issues in real-time and can be used as a style model for their recovery. Augmenting this process of digital bibliotherapy is the presence of an online community to which an individual can share their thoughts on the poem and the emotional experience they derived through the poem. An individual can instigate a process of companionship by disclosing intimate details that link their lived experiences to those of the focaliser of a poem, paving the way for individuals to respond to them with emotional support and their own intimate disclosure. Therefore, whilst a digital poet self-medicating through the act of writing can obtain emotional benefit, in the form of validation, from engaging with the community around their poetry, a reader can gain wellbeing benefit through community support. In other words, whilst a digital poet can self-medicate through

creating digital poetry, consumers of digital poetry can experience self-medication in the form of bibliotherapy.

The final section has highlighted that digital poetry can function as a form of digital bibliotherapy. For the writer, the act of writing a poem can be self-medicating should it lead to emotional clarity, where putting words to a difficult experience becomes a means of externalising the problem and gaining a new perspective. For the consumer, an engagement with platform poetry can result in digital bibliotherapy. Central to the bibliotherapeutic scope of platform poetry is the ability to narrate one's experience and receive validating feedback from fellow consumers. The chapter has established that platform poetry pages are venues where self-medication and bibliotherapy can manifest, whereby a creator can self-medicate through the act of writing and engaging with comments, and a reader can obtain bibliotherapy and self-medicate through the act of reading and obtaining peer support. The next chapter will demonstrate how the particularities of different digital platforms inform the digital space's communicative culture and influence the potential for a platform poetry consumer to narrate their experiences of a bibliotherapeutic text and obtain empowering feedback in return.

## **CHAPTER TWO: MEDIA AND MOTIVATION: HOW PLATFORM DICTATES SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY**

The previous chapter referred to how digital bibliotherapy can become mobilised through an individual's experience of platform poetry. The current chapter will address how an individual's experience of bibliotherapeutic platform poetry differs across platforms. The logical flow of this chapter will be as follows: an identification of the technological characteristics of digital platforms; a delineation of how those technological features motivate users to engage with the platforms; an examination of how authors of bibliotherapeutic platform poetry acknowledge the technological aspects of the platform and apparent needs of their audience, and the bibliotherapeutic experience that results from the preceding links of the chain.

### **Social Media Platforms: Characteristics and User Engagements**

This section will consider how the characteristics and conventions of particular social media platforms govern the gratifications associated with those platforms. The characteristics of social media platforms shape how individuals behave on them and influence who uses them. Guerrero-Pico et al (2019) identify that the boundaries between media producers and media consumers are becoming weaker; therefore, usage of social media platforms is shaped by what individuals seek to consume and what individuals seek to create. An experience of bibliotherapeutic platform poetry will shift according to which social media platform it is consumed on, given the particular communicative culture and technological interface of a platform. Before exploring the implications of individuals engaging with poetic material on particular platforms, it would be useful to identify the different characteristics of those social media platforms. Without understanding the characteristics of Instagram, YouTube and Tumblr, it would be unclear why particular individuals are motivated to engage with the content on those platforms. The creation and consumption of social media content is, itself, governed by the gains individuals seek to obtain from digital content. According to Anita Whiting and David Williams (2013), such gains include social interaction, the sourcing of information, passing time, entertainment, relaxation, the sharing of information, the



convenience of using social media to fulfil particular errands, expressing opinions and surveillance/ knowledge of others.

Due to Instagram's technological and cultural emphasis on the individual and YouTube's focus on community culture, the two contrasting platforms will be studied to gauge how their varying cultures might impact how authors of bibliotherapeutic platform poetry deploy the technological affordances of the respective sites and engage with the differing gratifications sought by their audiences. Additionally, poetic production on Tumblr will be examined given the platform's scope to be used as an alternative form of production with a particularly strong emphasis on marginalised communities. Through focusing on a platform that has been utilised as an alternative space for individuals to gather and form alternative communities, it will be possible to discern how an author of bibliotherapeutic platform poetry might shape their poetic content and paratextual communication to indicate allegiance to such counterpublics. Altogether, this focus will demonstrate how the poets studied in this thesis amend their output according to the technological and social particularities of a given platform. By identifying how platform poets respond to the specificities of digital platforms, the chapter will contribute to the thesis' overall focus on how such responses facilitate opportunities for catharsis, both for the consumer and the poet.

## ***YouTube***

### *A Brief History*

YouTube is a video-sharing site that was launched in 2005 following the availability of broadband internet at home having reached a critical mass and video content having occasionally garnered more views on the internet compared to on television. Thus, there was an opportunity to meet the demand for video sharing and the building of a mainstream video community that could provide content creators with feedback. Video-sharing platforms were present at the time of YouTube's inception, in the form of Vimeo, Google and Revver, but YouTube differentiated itself from its competitors by presenting itself as a space for DIY amateur practice, before broadening to account for commercial, high-budget video production. The development of YouTube included revenue generation through monetizing connectivity. This entailed

implementing interactive adverts and charging viewers for premium content. Simultaneously, YouTube sought to grow the scope for social interaction and did so through, between 2005 and 2007, including community-activating functions such as, ‘Worst rated’, ‘Community’ and ‘Most Discussed’. These features encouraged users to search for content that was, in some way, significant within the YouTube community and contribute to discussions of that content. While developing the platform’s communicative culture, YouTube has furthered the commodification of its users’ engagement.

The site’s organisation has been altered to facilitate the monetization of user attention, with Patrick Vonderau noting the site’s community-activating functions being jettisoned as part of a drive to implement a “channel and genre-oriented interaction design that centres on recommendation” (2016). The source of recommendation is an algorithm that encourages the flow of videos that have comparatively longer average viewing sessions. Meanwhile, the interaction design promotes the programmed flow of content, with YouTube having been developed into a video streaming service that allows users to upload, consume and share user-generated content in addition to corporate-media content. Since 2007, this service has been financed through advertisements on videos and has been, from 2010, additionally funded through users purchasing pay-as-you-go content and, from 2014, individuals purchasing its YouTube Premium service. Budzinski et al (2021) identify that the platform has applied competitive pressure on streaming services and traditional television whilst furthering the commodification of its users’ creative labour and selling audiences to advertisers. The economic lens with which digital platforms view their users is not new but, importantly, as Benedek et al (2023) indicate, YouTube has managed to commercialise its users whilst maintaining its brand image of being a site that simultaneously encourages amateur-created content. With the professionalisation of content creators, such as Taz Alam and Humble the Poet, aspiring content creators can look to the paths of established creators and work towards deriving an income in a similar way (Vincent 2023).

The site has traditionally been viewed as the host of content whose authenticity resides in its transparent amateurishness, which, as Justine Rogers and Tony Song (2023) assert, contributes to a perception of authenticity in content creators who develop into influencers. Digital influencers on YouTube encourage users to perceive them as authentic by demonstrating aspects of an

‘amateur identity’ such as relatability and a recognition of the role of their supporters in promoting their brand by ‘liking’, ‘sharing’ and commenting on their content. Whilst positioning themselves as subject experts and thereby underlining the professional aspect of their persona, the contemporary YouTube influencer simultaneously pays heed to user nostalgia for the site through positioning themselves as an individual who has not quite ‘made it’. Joseph Jalagat (2022) indicates that the influencer provides their followers with a call to action that would mean their followers are framed as contributors to the influencer’s development. Given the role of followers in elevating amateur content creators during the early iterations of YouTube, whereby followers enabled ordinary people to become celebrities by boosting that individual’s profile, even after the platform’s commercialisation, followers are led to perceive the elevation of an individual as being part of the platform’s culture. The onus is placed on the community, either directly by the content creator or indirectly through their knowledge of the platform’s conventions, to elevate the individual by undertaking particular forms of labour, such as liking, sharing and commenting on the individual’s content.

Due to the relationship between ‘individual’ and ‘group’ on YouTube, the platform’s culture is facilitative of the formation of a particular type of celebrity who is famous to a niche community. YouTube communities situate upcoming creatives at the top of their community structure and assist them on their paths toward celebrity in this niche field. Alice Marwick and danah boyd (2011) term this particular kind of celebrity a ‘microcelebrity’, with the term accounting for individuals who have found fame through using social media and whose fame does not tend to transcend the topic area of their content. A microcelebrity can be characterized as a DIY celebrity who avoids the traditional gatekeeping process within the entertainment industry by establishing themselves on social media. As Graeme Turner reports, the term ‘micro’ has become relevant to this type of celebrity because they “operate within a relatively limited and localized virtual space” (Turner 2014, pg.72). Microcelebrities do not transcend a particular digital space but remain associated with a particular platform. Such success might lead an individual to be described as a ‘YouTuber’, whereby an individual is identified by the platform on which they achieved popularity.

Given its capacity for the creation of microcelebrities, Hou (2018) identifies that one of the motivations for using YouTube is a desire for fame. The individual seeking fame on YouTube

might perceive the platform as a means of circumventing gatekeepers within mass media. Thus, the fame-seeking individual on YouTube would traditionally take on the responsibility of branding themselves and promoting their content to a target audience. Part of this self-promotion would involve the individual typically fashioning a niche following by presenting themselves as an expert on a particular subject. Having obtained a dedicated community of supporters who would demonstrate their support through likes, comments, and subscriptions, the individual would become a microcelebrity. At this stage, the individual might remain a microcelebrity and make aspects of their private life public to cultivate relatability, whilst continuing to appeal to a niche community of dedicated followers. However, whilst the homegrown YouTube microcelebrity might previously have expected to remain within the platform's confines and enjoy a small following within their niche community, a process of institutionalisation has emerged on YouTube, which has facilitated the movement of amateur YouTube stars into professional content creators.

Joanne Morreale (2014) stresses the corporatization of YouTube, whereby user-generated content is being utilized by corporate groups. These corporate groups include brands that sponsor user-generated content, such as Squarespace, Wix and Honey. Morreale indicates that the shift occurred following the purchase of YouTube by Google, which has led to the site shifting from one of amateur videos undisrupted by adverts to a platform that hosts professional videos with commercial interests. Where a content creator is using part of their video to promote their sponsor, YouTube offers them the choice of adding the feature 'includes paid promotion' to their video. Duffy et al (2021) highlight that in this way, a content creator whose popularity relies on their appearance of authenticity can safeguard against their viewers feeling manipulated. For those viewers who have built affective ties with a social media influencer, such as Clickfortaz, who has begun to use their videos to promote content, a tension abounds between viewing the influencer as someone who is publishing content to benefit their community and viewing the influencer as someone who is publishing content to benefit themselves. Therefore, conflict exists between the influencer as a relatable albeit elevated member of a community and the influencer as somebody who has superseded the community and is exploiting that community for commercial intent. The tension between being part of a community and exploiting the community parallels the conflict between grassroots creative facilitation and corporate commercialism on the platform, where there is a coexistence of amateur creatives individually uploading content onto

the site and professionally produced popular culture being distributed by institutions seeking to utilise the platform's social value.

As Morreale emphasises, prosumers, who simultaneously produce and consume content create and disseminate content regardless of capital; meanwhile, capital attempts to derive gains via the resultant production of social and material value (2014). YouTube would have value to prosumers regardless of the capitalist process of commodifying content on the platform. However, as Ashton Southard and Virgil Zeigler- Hill (2016) identify, a proportion of YouTube users use the platform to achieve fame that transcends the platform. For these individuals, the commercial imperatives of the social media site might facilitate their fame aspirations. An individual would not simply be participating in YouTube's culture as a way of expressing their identity and creativity or instigating interactions with others, but to promote themselves as a brand, or the service they are providing that has traits which particular corporations would find attractive. Such corporations might exist within traditional media and identify the YouTuber as a commodity that could prove successful beyond the platform. Other interested parties might have identified the YouTuber as someone who could further the reach of their product given the status the individual has obtained, on YouTube, as an expert in a relevant field and someone whose persona can engage and entertain an audience.

Hason and Haridakis (2019) acknowledge that aside from the search for fame and commercial opportunity, there is the desire to be entertained. Individuals are shifting from using traditional media for entertainment and are now using social media sites, such as YouTube. This shift has led to corporate media groups following mass audiences onto the platform and dissolving the boundary between traditional media and new media. However, whilst the co-viewing of television would have traditionally taken place between family members, the co-viewing of content on YouTube brings together individuals who have no existing social ties. Part of the gratification of co-viewing content on YouTube with strangers lies in it being

“a unique social resource both for enhancing during-viewing interaction and post- viewing social activities” (Hanson and Haridakis 2019, pg.330).

For an individual, the enhancement of the during-viewing interaction involves that individual feeling that they are sharing an experience with a broad social community. The notion an

individual has of being part of a global community, who have a similar sense of emotional commitment to a particular YouTube creative, offers an experience of social integration and collectivity. This sense of shared viewership is then made visible in the form of post-viewing social activities such as liking, commenting, and sharing (Khan 2017). Such participatory acts enable YouTube to function not only as a space on which to consume entertainment and information, but a space where individuals can provide information to other users (Bautista et al 2021). Information-giving can involve individuals alluding to the video's value through liking/disliking and offering a comment, or offering their viewpoints, through comments, on the issues raised by the video. The social aspects of viewing YouTube content and engaging in participatory acts again underline the motive of social interaction in individuals using YouTube.

The capacity for social interaction and information exchange means that vulnerable individuals might gravitate towards YouTube to experience intimate, personal communication (Preece and Rotman 2010). Such communication may be difficult to obtain in offline settings, meaning that YouTube becomes a platform for individuals to get a sense of meaningful connection with other individuals concerning the sharing of experiences that have moulded them and have been difficult to articulate away from the platform (Himmelboim et al 2016). Through YouTube, individuals can firstly share viewpoints that they perceive are of value, secondly use their intimate narrations to create social connections with others, and thirdly perceive that other individuals care about what they are sharing. Jenkins et al (2009) state that when these three conditions are met, a type of culture is achieved whereby individuals believe that their communicative contributions are of significance to other members of a community.

Such types of culture have been termed 'participatory culture' (Jenkins et al 2009) as participatory cultures have low barriers to engagement, provide individuals with the sense that they can contribute, and include meaningful support for those who do contribute. However, Ekant Veer (2013) indicates that amidst such a context of mutuality, trust and openness, there is scope for harm. This is firstly because, whilst these are generally supportive spaces, the ease of access means that some viewers and commenters may not subscribe to the group's general ethos and may attack particular members' expressions. Where commenters intend to express support to the discloser, their perceptions of healthy behaviours may be skewed and could encourage the discloser to perform behaviours that negatively impact their well-being.

### *A contradictory communicative culture*

This subsection will demonstrate how, in providing apt conditions for users seeking to gain information about a medical condition, articulate their own experiences of the condition and gain a sense of belonging within the illness community, YouTube can facilitate well-being and harm. The scope for well-being is facilitated through members obtaining tools, both from the video content and advice within the comment section, which an individual can use to better their health. Well-being benefits can be gotten through an individual perceiving they have found mutuality within a community whose members are experiencing similar circumstances to their own. However, the feedback a discloser receives may not be solely unilateral support or, even when well-intentioned, the feedback may lead to harm where the advice offered is incorrect or does not account for the particularities of the discloser's condition. The next chapter will discuss the third-party cross-posting of poetry to communities whose members are likelier to have a more detailed understanding of the discloser's condition, and the effects of such cross-posting on the bibliotherapeutic potential of that poetry.

The motives for using YouTube are not discrete entities; rather, elements can coexist and influence each other. For example, whilst desiring to be part of a community, an individual might deem it a necessity for that community to be rooted in communal learning about a particular subject, such as the treatment of an illness. As Borgmann et al (2018) highlight, YouTube has been harnessed by communities who share the common experience of having been impacted in some way by particular illnesses. Aschbrenner et al (2014) identify that digital consumers use the platform's comment sections to share their personal experience of an illness or to get information, advice or emotional support from fellow consumers who have been similarly affected by an illness. In addition to an individual seeking community belonging and information, a further motive for accessing a particular video might be the presence of a presenter figure who has an entertaining and engaging persona, which facilitates their position as a potential role model. The desires for community, information and entertainment interweave and impact the content choice of the consumer.

Whilst supportive comments are chiefly derived from other consumers, the content producer, as the subject expert and transcending figurehead of the illness community, typically becomes an

exemplar. Thus, from a therapeutic perspective, the YouTube platform has been associated with charismatic presenters who, as recovering fellow sufferers, fulfil the position of role models. As Sophie Bishop (2018) asserts, whilst support is offered on an individual level by fellow consumers, the content producer emits the qualities that are encouraged in the content consumers. Within the community cultivated by the content creator, there is the capacity for strong relationship ties to be formed given the emphasis in these groups on discussing personal aspects of living with an illness, in addition to the perception of being a member of a broader supportive network.

This network is particularly valuable for those who feel unable to discuss their illness due to embarrassment, fear, or the lack of a confidant. As embarrassment and fear can prevent individuals from seeking face-to-face support, social networking sites, such as YouTube, carry particular importance for those suffering from stigmatising conditions such as mental health disorders. The sense of anonymity on YouTube can lead some individuals to perceive YouTube as a safe space outside of the physical world and the individuals they encounter face-to-face. The controlled and personal environment of using a device at home, to relate emotionally sensitive information, can garner reassurance. M Laeeq Khan (2017) identifies a positive relationship between anonymity and individuals participating in online social forums. Users generally feel more comfortable engaging with content through using likes, dislikes, comments, and shares, if they are not identifiable beyond cyberspace. In support groups, the feeling of anonymity can facilitate engagement and the forming of relationships.

However, Heuvelman et al (2010) highlight that a sense of freedom online, borne out of this feeling of anonymity, can facilitate abusive comments. Anonymity, coupled with ease of access, has enabled users who wish to deliberately affront others. Ashraf et al (2021) report that victims of hurtful comments have experienced mental stress and anxiety and, in some cases, have reported shutting down their YouTube accounts. This experience is not unique to users of YouTube, with individuals also experiencing abusive comments on Instagram (Kristensen 2023), Tumblr (Peebles 2014) and other online platforms. However, as YouTube has been identified as the main platform individuals use to acquire health information pertinent to an illness (Lama et al 2022), the site carries particular value for individuals made emotionally vulnerable through experiences of illness and grief. Khan (2017) indicates that those catering to



their needs through engaging with such content on YouTube may be doing so due to the increased ability for anonymity and may be relying on support online that they do not deem possible offline. As Michael Savage and Vera Woloshyn (2020) stress, individuals who feel their circumstances would render them stigmatised in their communities offline would likely be particularly sensitive to the feedback they receive in a space where they seek validation and belonging. The potential for YouTube to attract individuals whose circumstances and need for support make them vulnerable means that the potential for negative experiences on the platform can be particularly damaging to such users' well-being.

Contradictorily, users may also experience damage to their well-being through other individuals providing them with information that was intended to be supportive. For example, those who assume a knowledgeable stance on a health issue may share unqualified medical advice that is damaging despite their intention to help. Unhealthy influence is particularly rife in affective online communities that provide an alternative space for individuals dealing with concerns that they find difficult to communicate offline. Such spaces contain the element of community-driven validation where individuals feel they can attain belonging by demonstrating their behaviours align with the group norms. Such individuals may be particularly vulnerable to negative peer influence and may perceive that demonstrating their willingness to follow the advice of individuals particularly active on comment boards may bring them greater status within the group. Thus, the drive to please the community and find belonging may lead the individual to follow advice that could negatively impact their well-being.

## ***Tumblr***

### *A Brief History*

Created by David Karp in 2007, Tumblr was designed as a social media platform that centred around microblogging. Microblogging is a practice where users publish brief updates online that are typically less than 200 characters. In addition to textual content, users can upload images, gifs and videos, with other users able to tag and like that content. To further demonstrate support for a content creator, a user can reblog their content and make that content appear on their blog and be visible to their followers. Should a consumer want to be notified when a Tumblr user posts new

content, they can follow that particular user. A follower can view posts from the followed blog, with the posts appearing on their dashboard in real-time. However, as identified by Paul Byron (2019), Tumblr is generally a community space rather than a place dedicated to the formation and growth of celebrity. This is due to the platform's communicative culture generally being centred around individuals curating content that moves them rather than presenting content that they have made. Rather than the site monetising user accounts, users have to independently seek ways to monetise their content, such as by placing advertisements on their accounts. Thus, the platform does not actively monetise user accounts in the manner of platforms such as Instagram and YouTube.

Despite the absence of profile monetisation on Tumblr and a platform onus on the collective over the individual, identifiable professional creatives have built identities on the site to situate themselves and their work in the countercultural ethos associated with the platform. Through doing so, they can promote a non-conforming persona, which aligns them with a market for whom marginalisation is a key component of identity. Furthermore, in bibliotherapeutic platform poetry, where an influencer sets the agenda of discussion, Tumblr can be used to give the reader the impression of 'knowing' the writer/ author. Where Tumblr has a culture of being used to publicly highlight the work that inspires individuals, followers of platform poets may experience a stronger sense of understanding the poet's thoughts and motivations. Later in this chapter, Charly Cox's Tumblr profile will be used to demonstrate the professionalised use of Tumblr to grant the appearance of intimacy to followers. For now, the study will focus on the characteristics that enable Tumblr to be viewed as an alternative space for individuals wanting to situate themselves outside of the mainstream and build social ties with like-minded people whilst experiencing community belonging.

The process of individuals elevating the work of creatives they admire is indicative of an apparent onus on perceiving oneself as part of a community network rather than someone solely seeking to further their creative and commercial practice. If an individual is seeking to extend the circulation of a particular creative, they might reblog that content and thereby promote the creative to new audiences. This means that community members have an impact on the communal discourse within the platform. However, the practice of curation, whilst indicating an outward perspective that takes account of other individuals' work, might also reflect inward-facing motivations. These

include the cataloguing of visual content for personal access and the deployment of another individual's creativity for one's self-expression. Regarding self-expression, users might perceive the posting of content created by other individuals as less of a risk than directly articulating their sense of self, as stressed by Katrin Tiidenberg and Andrew Whelan (2017). The curation rather than the production of content can facilitate individuals feeling a greater sense of freedom to open up about their experiences. In an interview with the BBC, Karp stated "curation is a new, more accessible way to express yourself" (Mason 2012). Karp emphasises Tumblr's scope for self-expression, whereby an individual uses their Tumblr profile to gesture to cultural phenomena that they perceive as part of their identity. An individual might reframe content through the act of posting it on their page and associating it with their sense of self, to articulate their own identity.

As Abidin et al (2021) indicate, the articulation of an individual's identity on Tumblr is not profile-based insofar as it does not present the identities of individuals according to those individuals' answers to questions about demographic criteria. The platform tends to circumvent the process of individuals grouping around the profiles of influential figures rather than around interests. Instead, Tumblr's communicative practice lends itself to individuals gravitating to different silos (Abidin et al 2021) of shared interest and finding belonging in such spaces. Part of the appeal of these silos is the sense that they are discrete from the rest of the platform. This discreteness leads individuals to feel that members within niche hubs have a particularly high level of mutuality and affect. Niche affective communities form that enable people to feel belonging; therefore, the community is emphasised over the individual. The individual dissolves amidst a focus on the social viewpoints and vernacular of the hub. Therefore, individuals can find escapism from everyday stresses by immersing themselves in a community that is structured by feelings of mutuality and support; however, as the following pages will indicate, the Tumblr site is not without its toxic elements.

Cho et al (2020) state the site's emphasis on community has been facilitated by the platform's technological interface, with the platform having "nonintuitive, or even sometimes faulty navigation, search and index features" (pg.2), which are dissuading individuals who do not have sufficient motivation and need to access the site. That the technological interface is not off-putting to some is indicative of certain individuals being particularly motivated to interact with the communities on the site. Hillman et al (2014) suggest that Tumblr has found a 'sweet spot'

whereby communities perceive a particular value of Tumblr being its inaccessibility to newcomers. The learning period that individuals experience while learning how to use the site is a rite of passage. Communities are therefore rendered less penetrable to outsiders, meaning that communities that have faced discrimination offline may perceive they have found a platform to encourage their members to feel a sense of belonging and security. Thus, Tumblr, whether by design or accident, prioritises the collective over the individual.

The extent to which communities oppressed offline have been able to find hubs on Tumblr has altered with the ownership of the platform. Having been launched in February 2007, the platform acquired around 147 million users by 2012. Its success led Yahoo! to purchase Tumblr Inc. from Karp in May 2013, for US\$1.1 billion. Marrison Mayer, the CEO of Yahoo! shifted attention toward the revenue earning potential of Tumblr and, to this aim, merged the ad sales teams of Yahoo! and Tumblr. In June 2017, Yahoo was purchased by the telecom company Verizon and, shortly afterwards, Karp announced his departure from the company. Verizon extended the vision of Yahoo! to increase the revenue earning potential of the platform and, to this end, more stringently filtered sexual content to make the platform more appealing to advertisers. In December 2018, the platform announced its intention to implement an outright ban on sexual content, which, as Morgan Sung (2019) highlights, led to a decrease in site traffic and user engagement. The ban targeted users' proliferation of Not Safe For Work (NSFW) content, which generally refers to media that

“show real-life human genitals or female-presenting nipples, and any content...that depicts sex acts” (support, 2018).

The banning of such media was implemented by an algorithm that flagged up images that fell into these categories. Julia Craven (2018) asserts that artists, sex workers and LGBTQI+ communities, who had benefitted from the platform's previous leniency towards such content, were now experiencing an impact on their livelihoods and capacity to express their identities. In August 2019, Automattic, the parent company of WordPress, purchased the platform for under a third of Yahoo!'s original purchase price (Mims 2019). The issues the platform faced, under its various owners, in attempting to generate revenue through appealing to advertisers, indicates the site's

value to the LGBTQI+ communities, artists and sex workers the platform negatively impacted through the platform's ban of NSFW content.

In September 2022, Matt Mullenweg, the CEO of Automattic, addressed the continued censorship of NSFW content on the site. In a Tumblr post, Mullenweg aligned himself with those critical of Verizon's censorship of such content, highlighting that Tumblr

“instituted an adult content ban that took out not only porn but also a ton of art and artists – including a ban on what must have been fun for a lawyer to write, female-presenting nipples” (photomatt 2022).

Mullenweg infers his opposition to the NSFW ban the previous owners, Verizon, implemented on Tumblr and, in doing so, indicates a difference between Verizon's and his stance towards nudity on the platform. Mullenweg's sardonic comment concerning Verizon's conservatism around female nudity, which Verizon's stance indicates is always sexual, aligns him with those who ridiculed the term 'female-presenting nipples' on Tumblr. The term overlooks cultural sensitivities about the sexualisation of women's bodies, as a male-presenting nipple can also connote sexual behaviour. However, Mullenweg contradictorily asserts the policy is still in place, albeit whilst acknowledging the need to address the gender biases in Tumblr's censorship policy:

“this policy is still in place, though the Tumblr and Automattic teams are working to make it more open and common-sense” (photomatt 2022).

Mullenweg counters an anticipated negative reaction to the policy still being in place, by gesturing towards an ongoing process, by Tumblr and Automattic, to make the site less precarious for content creators. This would entail the algorithms being programmed to enact 'common sense' whereby non-sexual nudity would be distinguished from sexual nudity.

Mullenweg then alludes to the community labels feature as a step towards this stage, with post creators having the option to add one of four community labels to their post: Mature, drug and alcohol addiction, violence, and sexual themes. Post creators can use these labels to flag to other users that their post contains one or more of these aspects, whilst Tumblr users can select whether

they wish to view content that contains one of these labels. A user can select that they want such content to be blurred or omitted entirely from their dashboards. As Filiz Mustafa (2022) reports, some Tumblr users interpreted the community labels feature as a sign that the platform would relax its ban on pornographic content. However, rather than representing a return to the previously allowed NSFW content on the platform, the community labels feature is a method of somewhat appeasing those who feel the current moderation system is too stringent, whilst reassuring others who may be concerned that the new censorship practice may enable content to be displayed that they find offensive. Hence, the platform continues to marginalise sex workers and LGBTQI+ communities who previously used the platform to acquire a sense of belonging, mutuality and expression that is at odds with their experiences offline. Therefore, whilst Tumblr has historically been perceived by marginalised groups as a more inclusive alternative to other mainstream digital platforms, this inclusivity has been undermined in recent years by censorship practices that have been altered to appeal to mainstream audiences. Consequently, to avoid censorship on the site, particular individuals need to amend their communications on the site, which has impacted their scope to experience belonging and, in some cases, their ability to perform work tasks.

*An Alternative, But Not Wholly Inclusive, Space...*

Tumblr is a contradictory space whose communicative culture and tradition reflects an onus on assisting marginalised groups in expressing themselves and finding belonging, but whose recent and current censorship practices have undermined the causes of these groups. The culture of individuals adopting pseudonyms on the site continues to facilitate anonymity that enables individuals to manage their visibility; this has meant that Tumblr users who wish to disclose information that renders them emotionally and socially vulnerable can do so without fearing recrimination away from their online network. However, once on the site, particular groups, such as sex workers and LGBTQI+ communities, must tailor their use of the site according to censorship practices that no longer assist them. As Capello et al (2021) assert, an alteration in Tumblr's policy towards 'adult' content has undermined the platform's capacity as a space for identity exploration for trans and LGBTQ+ communities, in addition to impacting the social media practices of sex workers and queer and alternative porn consumers. Nevertheless, the culture of anonymity that continues to differentiate Tumblr from other social media sites, such as

Facebook and Instagram, means that Tumblr offers benefits, albeit reduced in scope, to individuals facing marginalisation in other spaces, digital or offline.

Regarding the distinctiveness of communities on Tumblr, the communities are based on shared interests and common purposes, which contrasts with Facebook where users generally communicate about experiences grounded in the physical world with family and friends. Instead, the flexibility of Tumblr's personal profile section enables users to experiment with identities that they would otherwise want to keep private, and to connect with other individuals doing the same. The absence of networks of friends has made the identification of Tumblr users particularly difficult. Nevertheless, research from Craig Smith (2017) has found that adults under the age of 35 are the core audience of Tumblr. Smith's study found that approximately 69% of Tumblr's 550 million monthly users identify themselves as millennials who were born in the 1990s. A proportion of these individuals use the site to perform identities that are different to their identities in the physical world and to experience fellowship with those who have encountered similar difficulties in performing certain identities in the physical world. Whilst other platforms, including Facebook, can be used for these purposes, the flexibility of Tumblr's profile section and the culture of anonymity is particularly facilitative of such ends.

However, the Tumblr community is not limited to individuals experiencing feelings of societal marginalisation outside of the platform. It has been used broadly by groups that flourish through a sense of common purpose, with one notable example being fandoms. A fandom refers to a community that has formed about a fictional text. Hillman et al (2014) identify that fandom communities are key contributors to Tumblr's culture, with the participants of fandoms using Tumblr to discuss the plots of television programmes, movies, or books. The absence of a need to put out a public image of oneself, and the opportunity to be free to engage with a community based specifically on a shared fandom interest are key benefits for fandom members on Tumblr. The sense of shared interest is heightened through jargon that has been influenced by both the fandom text and the Tumblr platform. Tumblr users also play a significant role in the culture of collectivism on the platform. In particular, this is through users contributing to a community vernacular that is unlikely to be understood away from the platform. The use of language as a means of inclusion and exclusion recalls the term 'anti-language' (Halliday, 1976), which encompasses the varieties of language that are adopted by marginal groups with the intention of

that language being incomprehensible to other speakers of the mainstream language. Like marginalised communities seeking a safe linguistic space to experiment with their identity presentations, fandom participants are also attracted to being part of a discrete community.

This overview of the technological aspects of Tumblr, and the types of individuals and groups to whom the site appeals, has highlighted that a significant proportion of Tumbler users appear to be attracted by the potential for anonymity on the site. By Tumblr dissolving the individual into the collective, the platform's emphasis appears to be on instigating a sense of belonging over individual stardom. Later in this chapter, the study will draw on the emphasis on community in Tumblr whilst using the example of Charly Cox to demonstrate how it is possible to establish an identity as an exceptional individual on Tumblr, whilst aligning oneself with its culture of community.

## ***Instagram***

### *A Brief History*

Launched as an application in October 2010, Instagram was originally exclusive to iOS users. At its inception, it served as an online platform that facilitates mobile phone photo sharing and social networking. The service appealed to the creative motivations of its users by providing those users with filters that alter the colouring and resolution of their photographs. In April 2012, the application launched an Android version and, later that month, was purchased by Facebook. In June 2013, Instagram enabled its users to share video content and in 2016, the platform released its call to action (CTA) feature to direct the engagement behaviours of its users and, as Chen et al (2021) identify, facilitate e-commerce. The latter feature emphasised the platform's visible shift towards corporatisation rather than as a space aimed towards garnering user creativity through photo filters, photo sharing and instant audience feedback. In June 2016, the platform departed from chronologically displaying material on its users' content feeds and instead adopted an algorithmic approach to making content visible. This meant that the content an individual Instagram user views on their feed is based on categories of interest (the extent to which Instagram senses a user would engage with a particular post based on their record of viewing similar content), recency (the newness of a post) and relationship (the perceived closeness of a user to the poster of the content as determined by past liking behaviours,



comments and their record of being tagged in posts together). This strategy was designed to further the appeal of Instagram as an advertising platform, with the algorithm programmed to enhance user engagement with posts and, therefore, time on the site. The implementation of an algorithmic timeline has led to particular groups being marginalised and responding to their marginalisations by finding ways to counter the algorithms. This will be explored further in Chapter Four.

In 2016, alongside the reorganisation of content on user feeds, Instagram launched its Stories feature, which allowed users to create temporary content. Up until 2016, users could only share persistent content that would remain on their profile until they undertook the labour of deleting that content. In contrast, the Stories feature enables a user to post content that is only briefly available and accessible. Instagram combined two effective social media approaches in the form of Facebook's permanent user profile and Snapchat's focus on ephemerality whereby users' snaps last up to 24 hours. Whilst drawing on the success of other platforms and implementing their versions of successful features, Instagram continued to further its facilitation of commercial operations. In 2016, the platform launched its Instagram-for-business feature, which enabled content creators to gain an insight into how users are engaging with their accounts and posts. Following its move to incorporate successful elements of other platforms into its platform architecture, in 2017, Instagram implemented a feature that mimics Twitter's focus on allowing users to follow hashtags as well as other users. Then, in 2018, Instagram launched its video-sharing feature, IGTV, which draws from the success of YouTube as a facilitator of video content creation and consumption. Abdullah et al (2023) assert that the feature has been deployed by influencers to speak directly to their followers and enhance the scope for strong parasocial ties. Influencers may upload a stream whereby they respond to their followers in real time. The relationship between influencers and their followers has also been impacted by a 2023 update that enables users to pay to become verified. The service, named 'Meta Verified', provides its customers with a verified badge that authenticates their user account with a government ID, in addition to proactive account protection and enhanced visibility and reach. The symbolic marker of elevated status furthers the dichotomy between 'successful' and 'ordinary' individuals. Since its inception in 2010, despite the developments of the platform, one of the constants has been the platform's encouragement of comparisons between an individual and users they perceive as socially desirable. As Leanne Chang and Trudy Chua (2016) state,

such comparisons are particularly rife in areas of body image and lifestyle given the popularity of selfie culture and the deployment of the Instagram platform to visually depict one's persona idealistically.

### *A Communicative Culture of Comparison*

The encouragement of visual-self presentation on the platform, allied with consistent exposure to idealised selves, has led to a culture of comparison on Instagram, between oneself and other users. This culture of comparison, in combination with the use of filtering apps on the platform to aid users in their endeavours to idealistically alter their appearances in photographs, has, according to Rowland (2022), led to the maladaptive internalisation of unrealistic appearance standards. Given the thesis' focus on the potential for consumers of bibliotherapeutic platform poetry to enhance their well-being through engaging with such poetry, a platform's capacity for harm must be considered. This section will consider how Instagram's facilitation of harmful social comparisons impacts its users. In addition to the propensity for individuals to maladaptively internalise body standards, Sarah-Rose Marcus (2015) asserts that the communicative culture also draws users away from the maintenance of social relationships due to a focus on self-promotion. Therefore, this section will additionally explore how the communicative culture of Instagram facilitates the formation and following of influencers rather than the formation of strong ties between users.

Marcus (2015) distinguishes between a person's identity, which involves an individual's internalisation of labels that the individual perceives defines them, and a person's relational identity, which involves an individual's perception of how their back-and-forth interaction with other people defines their identity. A relational identity includes a person's identifications with other people, whereby an individual perceives positive traits within another individual and seeks to sustain a meaningful relationship with that individual. The communicative culture of Instagram tends to involve the furthering of an individual's personal, rather than relational, identity. Consequently, on Instagram, self-promotion tends to take precedence over the building and maintenance of social relationships. In addition to using the platform to idealistically present oneself, the seeking of information about the lifestyles of particular individuals has also been identified by Katherine Bryant and Pavica Sheldon (2016) as a motivating factor for using the

platform. Gathering knowledge about other individuals is facilitated by Instagram being a platform that encourages identity presentations. Hence, information about social status, economic status and relationship status is often identifiable through exploring an individual's profile, should that individual have decided to make that profile public to strangers. Due to Instagram's communicative culture being focused on idealistic self-presentation, a toxic element exists in Instagram usage. This toxicity pertains to the scope for appearance comparisons and resultant body- image concerns that undermine well-being on the platform.

Using Instagram for self-presentation can be categorised as visible engagement, whilst using Instagram to get knowledge from the self-presentations of others can be categorised as invisible engagement. The visibility/ invisibility dichotomy does not relate to whether an individual's engagements can be tracked on the platform because, as Ai et al (2023) identify, the user does leave behind data that can be analysed. Rather, the visibility/ invisibility dichotomy concerns whether a user explicitly communicates their identity to producers and consumers of digital content. Invisible engagement on Instagram concerns the reading of profile information and user comments, whilst visible engagement constitutes a user publishing their post, sharing another user's post on their story page, and writing comments in response to another user's post. Whilst invisible Instagram consumption reflects the need to acquire information concerning other individuals and groups, visible consumption reflects the need to perform one's identity.

Regarding invisible Instagram consumption, trends have been recognised, by Ahadzadeh et al (2017), concerning individuals using Instagram to habitually monitor the appearance of other individuals' bodies. This phenomenon can be defined as body surveillance, which involves individuals who, having internalized a notion of an 'ideal body', then compares their bodies to those of peers whose bodies they deem to be representative of contemporary beauty standards. The individual undertaking body surveillance correlates the appearance of the idealistic body with positive social outcomes, such as a high number of friends, a more exciting lifestyle and greater career success. Chatzopolou et al (2020) highlight that this perception of there being a correlation between appearance and success then manifests in a desire to imitate the bodily appearances of 'successful' peers to replicate their level of success.

As Boardman et al (2019) state, Instagram users make their success visible through deploying lifestyle imagery, which involves a social media user presenting themselves and their surroundings in a way that is deemed socially desirable. The perception of success on Instagram pertains to the apparent social worth of a user and is gauged through the lifestyle that the user demonstrates and the number of likes, followers and shares the individual's posts gain. Margo DeMello (2021) asserts that due to users' digital consumption being geared around comparing oneself to individuals of perceived high worth, the Instagram platform is aspirational. Aspiration is apparent in the media use of those who seek to gain social worth by mimicking the habits and characteristics of the Instagram users they deem to be successful. Whilst this desire to mimic the positive habits of 'successful' Instagram users can be beneficial to the well-being of the aspirational Instagram user, comparisons between oneself and those perceived to be experiencing fuller lives can, as Davies et al (2023) highlight, lead to maladaptive thinking. Such maladaptive thinking stems from upward life comparisons and involves the perception that one is not enjoying the financial situation, social life or travel activities of another individual because of an inherent deficiency on their part. The psycho-emotional outcomes of such thinking, such as lower self-esteem and a low sense of agency, are indicative of the negative effects on well-being caused by social comparison on Instagram.

Those who possess sufficient social and cultural capital to position themselves as aspirational ideals for their followers, might use Instagram as a means of self-presentation and generating financial capital through the monetization of their account. Such individuals can be regarded as social media influencers, with the term referring to users on social media who have a record of content creation and have established credibility in a particular domain. Whilst digital precursors to social media influencers existed in the form of online bloggers who built followings through publishing content and facilitating affective ties with their followers, the ways individuals consume social media are linked to the particularities of a platform and requires content creators to amend their content accordingly. For the Instagram influencer, there is a need to negotiate a tension between presenting a persona and lifestyle that cultivate aspiration in their viewers and presenting a persona that is, in some way, relatable. Given its focus on the social function of bibliotherapeutic platform poetry, the interest of this thesis is in influencers who upload content that references their expertise in mental health. Influencers who demonstrate that they have experienced the effects of poor mental health, within their own life, would further their

relatability. Later in this chapter, the term ‘cathartic solidarity’ will be proposed to build on and add to critical understandings about content creators and content consumers experiencing a sense of fellowship through mutually overcoming traumas.

The potential for influencers to garner affective ties with their followers has led to brands seeking out influencers, whose content indicates knowledge within their brand’s field, to endorse their brand. As DeMello (2021) recognises, although social media influencers diversify and expand where they can, they tend to upload content related to a niche area of expertise such as beauty, fitness, photography, and travel. Through doing so, an influencer can demonstrate subject knowledge to their followers, who learn to associate them with that subject. An influencer’s opinion on a product related to their subject area is likely to hold value to their followers. The brand recognition of influencer appeal has facilitated influencers being able to use their content creation to garner brand sponsorship opportunities for themselves and thereby use their social attractiveness for financial benefit. A tension is apparent between Instagram being a site that exacerbates body and lifestyle insecurities through appearance comparisons, and influencers benefitting, financially and in their careers, from the scope for such comparisons.

Whilst influencers benefit from depicting an aesthetic and/or lifestyle that consumers view as aspirational, as Abid et al (2022) assert, influencers enhance user engagement with their digital content by demonstrating relatability. Consequently, influencers encourage parasocial ties to develop between themselves and their consumers because consumers would be able to identify a synergy between their experiences and those of the influencer’s. A consumer is more likely to feel that through adopting some of the behaviours of the influencer, they too could thrive. Regarding mental health, there is a particular capacity for influencers to demonstrate subject knowledge whilst simultaneously demonstrating relatability. Influencers can construct a public profile that blends subject area expertise with the intimacy of selfies and insights into their personal lives. An influencer, in the context of well-being, can depict a life narrative that features themselves referring to issues they have overcome whilst simultaneously depicting a happy personal life where they are thriving. Hartung et al (2022) acknowledge that an influencer might make a story of the ordinary by uploading images of themselves experiencing mundane events. Whilst placing themselves in a position of expertise concerning knowledge about a particular subject, the influencer can pay heed to Instagram’s social conventions by uploading selfies and capturing moments from

their everyday life, which positions them back into the crowd and cultivates relatability. In digital bibliotherapy, this relatability means that the consumer is more likely to identify with the influencer and, by extension, the influencer-as-focaliser within their platform poetry.

Whilst drawing on the aspirational element of Instagram consumption, brands have deployed influencers to endorse their products. Having highlighted their relatability to a general audience, influencers are tasked with identifying their use of a particular product as being transformative to either their physical appearance, social status, or career. If the product is in the same domain as their apparent subject specialism, the influencer carries scope as an authority on the subject. Hence, the paradox between an influencer simultaneously being a subject expert and an everyman/everywoman has led to them being recruited by businesses as brand ambassadors. As argued by Azlin Bahtar and Mazzini Muda (2016), the commissioning of social media influencers as advertisers is advantageous because user-generated content is perceived as possessing greater integrity than advertisements that appear to have been directly produced by the brands themselves. The influencer is deemed by followers to be a step removed from the commercial intentions of the manufacturer. Using Instagram influencers as brand sponsors enables companies to ascertain consumer opinions by exploring comments on the influencer's profile page. In addition to individuals using Instagram to self-present or for the surveillance of those whose self-presentations they admire, Instagram is utilised by companies seeking to take advantage of the connection between influencers and their followers.

This section has identified the main technological characteristics of YouTube, Tumblr and Instagram. On YouTube, a conflict exists between perceptions of YouTube as a site for authentic, grassroots creative production and the corporatisation of the platform. On Tumblr, there is a prevailing sense of community being valued over the individual; however, the platform's censorship of NSFW material has meant that particular communities have experienced marginalisation on the site. Meanwhile, Instagram, due to its appeal to those aspiring to societal standards of ideal selves, is apt for beauty and lifestyle subject experts and for those who wish to use such experts as role models. Through ascertaining information relating to user bases and the fulfilments that individuals from those user bases seek, the findings of this section can be used in the following section, which will consider the interrelationship between poetry and the technological features of different social media platforms.

## **The Purpose of Poetry: The Influence of Platform on User Engagement**

The study will now focus specifically on platform poetry as digital bibliotherapy and address the interrelationship between poetry and the particular platform structures of YouTube, Tumblr and Instagram in addition to their user norms. It will consider the interactions that take place around poetry on these platforms whilst focusing on the poetic output of Clickfortaz on YouTube, Charly Cox on Tumblr and r.h Sin on Instagram.

### *Clickfortaz and YouTube celebrity as a community artefact*

The formation of an authorial persona on YouTube relies on fostering a supportive community that feels invested in the author's career. As a platform associated with celebrity-making, a culture of self-celebrification exists on YouTube, which, contradictorily, positions the follower as an integral part of the celebrity-making process. The role of the supportive follower involves sharing time and labour in an attempt to help disseminate the creator's content. Specifically, this may be through liking, sharing and watching the content multiple times, which, while testifying to the quality of the content and circulating it amongst new audiences, also alerts the YouTube algorithm to the content. The YouTube algorithm, as Sérgio Tavares (2015) asserts, responds favourably to content that has a relative advantage over other content in terms of its number of likes and views. Supportive YouTube users take responsibility for helping a creator 'beat the algorithm' and stimulating the algorithm into publicising the creator's content. The focus of this section will be on the sense of community identity that Taz Alam fosters on YouTube through her Clickfortaz persona, the investment of the community into Clickfortaz's career, and how the behaviours of Clickfortaz and her community link into the motivations for using YouTube identified earlier in this chapter.

Although social media carries the scope to publish new work and provide a public for that content, as Bronwen Thomas (2020) states, it brings with it a reliance on social networks to support the creator and amplify their works. Taz Alam has adopted her moniker 'Clickfortaz' on Instagram where she has accrued 155,000 followers (as of 27/04/24) and on TikTok, where she has obtained 160,800 followers (as of 27/04/24).

However, her most followed account is on YouTube where she has gained 1,530,000 subscribers (as of 27/04/24). During different stages of her career on YouTube, Clickfortaz has called upon, and celebrated, her network's support. Alam's first YouTube post as Clickfortaz, which was published on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2012, is entitled "Introduction to my channel" (Clickfortaz, 2012), and contains the caption: "Follow me! Twitter: [https://twitter.com/Clickfortaz.](https://twitter.com/Clickfortaz)"

As figure 2 indicates, Clickfortaz signposts consumers to performances of her persona on other platforms, such as (then) Twitter and Instagram. Through encouraging her YouTube viewers to visit her profiles on multiple platforms, there is greater potential for Clickfortaz's visible markers of engagement, such as subscriber numbers, view counts and likes, to increase across digital platforms. Clickfortaz can get profile monetisation benefits on multiple platforms, and appeal to potential sponsors of her content. Those who wish to support Clickfortaz's efforts to grow her brand and reinforce their position as a Clickfortaz follower would be particularly drawn towards engaging with Clickfortaz's content across multiple platforms; this will be addressed in the following chapter.

For supporters of Clickfortaz, the first YouTube video is the symbolic starting point of the Clickfortaz journey, which has been shared by the producer and her followers. All ten of the most popular ten comments on the comment section of the video were posted at least five years after the video was published. Of these comments, six state that Clickfortaz's persona has not changed, thereby alluding to the authenticity of Clickfortaz's identity performance. Given it is inevitable that an individual would change, to some degree, over five years, such comments are idealistic and gesture to the value placed on an influencer presenting their 'true' selves. In digital content creation, such an idealistic perception of authenticity is significant given cynical attitudes, as identified by Douglas Holt (2016), towards marketing tactics that overtly manipulate the consumer. Consequently, the appearance of authenticity reaffirms to the consumer that the content Clickfortaz has been publishing reflects her 'true self', thereby legitimising the cathartic experiences gained through experiencing that content, which, in the process, raises Clickfortaz to a transcending figurehead.



On September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Clickfortaz alerted her followers to her having achieved the milestone of one million subscribers. Clickfortaz entitled the video *thank you for a million subscribers*, with the lack of capitalisation signifying an informal and personal approach that is consistent with her relationship with her followers. Additionally, Clickfortaz addresses her followers by posting a user comment and pinning it to the top of the comments page, rather than using the description section, which is reserved for content producers. By doing so, Clickfortaz situates herself amongst her audience and heightens the visibility of her message. The comment reinforces the alignment between Clickfortaz and her followers through the creator referring to herself as a ‘bean’ - a term of endearment she usually uses to address her followers:

“thank you for making me the happiest bean and changing my life for the better. I owe all of this to you. <3” (Clickfortaz 2019).

Through labelling herself as a fellow ‘bean’, Clickfortaz dissolves the power hierarchy that situates the creator at the summit and the followers at various levels beneath. Instead, she infers a new model of power and indicates to her followers that they are responsible for her happiness and, therefore, belong at the top of the hierarchy.

In one sense, the online production and consumption of poetry represents an economy to be monetised – not only by the poet but by the platform companies harvesting that online traffic. However, in another, qualifying sense, the online space is a venue where a creator can produce content for a community, for which the public reimburses that act through providing support and ‘happiness.’ The concept of a ‘gift economy’, explained by David Cheal (1988), concerns the exchanging of gifts that are redundant transactions, whereby the importance of the gift itself is relegated in importance, whilst the moral economy of the giving of gifts takes precedence. In relationships between a creator and their followers on social media, the presentation of the gift imposes on the online and real-world identities of both the giver and the receiver. This is because of the significance placed on likes, shares and subscriptions by the givers and receivers of such gifts. To the receiver, these gifts become self-tracking tools that can be measured against other social media users operating in a similar subject area. Meanwhile, on YouTube, the giver is provided with a history of their liked content, which enables them to reflect on the information they have decided to validate and collect. Mai-ly Steers (2016) asserts that for both parties, the

scope to self-track such information elevates the significance of videos that have been liked and becomes something by which their identities can be gauged. Thus, gift behaviour, in social media communities, influences the virtual and physical worlds of the participants. Such real effects are at odds with the intangible nature of a 'like' or 'share,' which, when detached from the virtual economy they have spawned from, become redundant.

Elmira Djafarova and Natasha Matson (2021) maintain that whilst the receiving of a like or share is not an immediate necessity in material terms, there is cultural value to such gifts due to the correlation between favourable metrics (previously unstructured data, which has been organised to gauge audience engagement) and the consumer's perception of a creator's credibility. This cultural value can then, over time, translate into material value through the YouTube creative attracting commercial deals and being able to pitch their merchandise to a larger consumer base. Thus, as Clickfortaz acknowledges in her message to her followers, an engaged social media follower base can contribute significantly to the career of the creative through actions that whilst initially symbolic, can influence the reputational and material success of the recipient. Numerous responses to her message indicate that Clickfortaz is worthy of support and emphasise the role that the specific respondent and the broader Clickfortaz community have had in her career trajectory.

Additionally, individuals have disclosed and celebrated the duration they have spent following and supporting her work. Given the fundamental role of markers of audience engagement in the success of a social media creative, such disclosures of support indicate a sense of partial ownership of Clickfortaz's success. Clickfortaz's community members indicate pride in what is happening to her career now and refer to earlier stages of her career where markers of her more recent success, such as the reaching of a million followers, were lacking.

The sense Clickfortaz's followers have of playing an active role in the development of her career is, partly, a consequence of YouTube's identity as a platform that acts as a conduit for the stardom of grassroots creatives. There is an onus within the Clickfortaz community on emphasising Clickfortaz's arc from humble beginnings to the focal point of a thriving community. This onus reflects the existing sense, among the platform's users, that YouTube, despite its commercialism, remains a site that enables communities to elevate an amateur towards

professionalisation. Given the role of a platform's architecture, public ethos, and communicative culture in the types of communities that form therein, there is a need to form language that accounts for such a process. This thesis proposes the term 'platformity' to refer to the inextricable link between a community and the site on which it has been built. A given digital platform will have a certain brand identity, which will reflect why users engage on that platform. The brand identity of a digital platform will influence the extent to which an individual's communicative habits are focused on self-promotion or altruistic behaviours aimed at supporting other users and developing community bonds. Furthermore, a platform's ethos of self-promotion or community formation will influence whether the ties between members are strong or weak. Whether an individual has strong or weak social ties on a given platform will shape the disclosures an individual makes and affect whether they choose to support the disclosures of other individuals. An individual might find it easier to disclose in a platformity where a greater degree of anonymity exists due to the ties between members typically being weaker; alternatively, an individual might prefer to disclose amongst stronger ties who they feel have a better understanding of the context in which they are posting. A platformity's scope to elicit the well-being effects of disclosing to a supportive public is influenced by the platform's brand identity, ethos and communicative culture.

Chapter Five will examine the implications of a platform poet cultivating platformities on two separate platforms; it will underline the need for a platform poet to perform a coherent persona across the multiple platforms. With a bibliotherapeutic platform poet's output and success being linked to whether they can cultivate a persona that appears relatable and authentic, the platform poet's success will be undermined were their followers to perceive ruptures in that persona. If a platform poet seeks to establish platformities on multiple sites to appeal to a broader market, they need to exercise sensitivity in the extent to which they depart from the communicative strategies they deploy within their primary platformity. As a shift in their communicative strategy will be required to tailor to the technological affordances and ethos of the secondary platform, the platform poet will require a nuanced understanding of the platforms, their persona and their target markets.

However, rather than exploring a platform poet's cultivation of multiple platformities (see Chapter Five), the ongoing scope of this chapter will be narrower, focusing on how the different

technological characteristics of a social media platform influence the communicative habits of the platformities that form on the site in relation to platform poetry. Specifically, it will focus on how platformity members align themselves with the platform poet and offer support to both the platform poet and fellow followers.

Reflecting a platformity focus on reinforcing the notion that Clickfortaz's journey reflects positive moral traits typical of the grassroots YouTube creative, of the top ten highest-rated follower comments a year after Clickfortaz uploaded the video, eight explicitly highlight that Clickfortaz is worthy of the engagement she has received. Specifically, these comments position her as humble, authentic and community oriented. One such comment was published by vMitchell on 17th September 2020:

“can you find a more pure soul in this world than this girl ? me personally i don't think i can”  
(vMitchell 2020).

This supposition of the purity of Clickfortaz's soul is indicative of a focus on karmic reward as, now that Clickfortaz has reached the milestone of a million followers, an argument is voiced concerning her being deserving of it on a moral and spiritual basis. Meanwhile, seven of the top ten highest-rated comments refer to the length of time they have spent supporting Clickfortaz. This focus on duration of support is exemplified by the following comment by Bella Love:

“I AM GENUINELY SO PROUD OF HER AND HOW FAR SHE HAS COME, I  
LITERALLY CRIED WHILE WATCHING THIS, THIS IS SO WONDERFUL, I LOVE  
YOU TAZZZYYY , BEEN HERE SINCE POETRY DAYS AND WILL CONTINUE TO  
SUPPORT YOU AND BUY YOUR MERCH!!!! (Bella Love 2020).

In social media posts, the use of capitalisation, the repetition of particular characters and the absence of correct punctuation implicitly indicate an overwhelmed emotional state. As Heath (2018) indicates, the use of language tools, such as ‘caps lock’, are harnessed by social media users as emotive strengtheners. In this post, Bella Love also emphasises an emotional state through phrases such as “genuinely so proud” and “literally cried”. She indicates an emotional outpouring, and the validity of the emotional excess, through the words ‘literally’ and ‘genuinely’. Thus, Bella Love demonstrates a recognition of performances of emotion being

common on the platform, whilst indicating that her emotional excess can be distinguished from superficial emotional outpourings. In other words, she stages her response as authentic and distinguishable from the typical superficiality of YouTube comments. Her performance of emotion indicates an emotional investment in Clickfortaz's career, thereby raising Bella Love's status, within the community, as a Clickfortaz supporter.

Bella Love's comment refers to the narrative arc of Clickfortaz, from her beginnings as solely a poetry performer on YouTube, to her current iteration as a performer whose creative oeuvre is wider-ranging, comprising poetry, personal vlogs and advice about emotional wellness. In combination, these topics reflect the common motivations for using YouTube: the consumption of subcultures, such as bibliotherapeutic platform poetry, is a key motivator for individuals to engage with the platform; moreover, as Morreale (2014) states, vlogging reflects the motivation for personal expression and creativity, and advice videos respond to the consumer need to get information and share experiences about a particular ill (Aschbrenner et al, 2014; Borgmann et al, 2018). Furthermore, whilst Clickfortaz's channel embodies several of the themes associated with the platform, Clickfortaz's narrative arc aligns with the ideal that YouTube promotes. The narrative arc of the creator's amateur beginnings, and her subsequent growth into a creator whose oeuvre responds to the multiple needs of her market, enables the market to view her as an ongoing YouTube success story that is reassuringly familiar and morally unproblematic. Given that contemporary culture can be distinguished by a preference for ongoing stories rather than stories that have already happened, the social media profiles of public figures, whose stories are being updated in real-time, are viable outlets for such a preference.

Meanwhile, this sense of narrative can be participated in through consumers offering support that whilst appearing symbolic, can contribute to the career arc of the producer. The producer's celebrity becomes a community artefact insofar as the platformity gets a sense of having contributed to the success of a producer whose personal experiences reflect their own. Regarding Clickfortaz, mental illness is a common theme within the output of the channel, with a channel search for 'mental health' listing 164 out of the 312 videos Clickfortaz has published (as of 26/07/2023). Additionally, Clickfortaz is affiliated with *Better Help*, an online database of counsellors whose stated ambition lies in

“making professional counselling accessible, affordable, convenient - so anyone who struggles with life’s challenges can get help, anytime, anywhere” (Better Help, 2021).

The affiliations that social media influencers make indicate the identity that they intend to present, whilst reinforcing the salient themes within their work. Through promoting *Better Help*, Clickfortaz reiterates the mental health focus of her content, which reaffirms the Clickfortaz platformity as a space where individuals can experience catharsis as part of a group, concerning their different personal experiences of mental illness. Therefore, I propose describing it as a form of cathartic solidarity.

The term cathartic solidarity will be used to address a relationship that has been distinguished by a shared understanding of the experiences and consequences of trauma, which has led to an emphasis on individuals providing catharsis to those who have experienced traumatic circumstances similar to their own. The element of cathartic solidarity is lacking in professional individual-focused therapy, where the clinician’s task involves the interpretation of the patient’s narrative rather than sharing their narrative with the patient. In the case of the Clickfortaz platformity, cathartic solidarity has three component relationships: creator to audience, audience to audience, and audience to creator. Clickfortaz provides support to her audience through curating content that addresses the issues that audience members have raised, such as lack of confidence and difficulty maintaining healthy relationships. This material enables audience members to relate their experiences to those of Clickfortaz and, by doing so, achieve catharsis through internalising the helpful behaviours she demonstrates. Meanwhile, the focus on well-being within the Clickfortaz videos, and the affective community such a focus encourages, leads to disclosures of emotional distress and subsequent messages of support to the disclosers. Such supportive messages can act as conduits to catharsis because catharsis represents a symbolic act of departure from a particular frame of perception and there is scope for the emotionally distressed individual to identify with the supportive messenger and internalise the support that has been directed towards their circumstances.

A key aspect of cathartic solidarity, as highlighted by Clickfortaz’s allusions to her community’s support in her video *thank you for a million subscribers* (Clickfortaz 2019), is the

capacity for followers to send messages of unity to an influencer. Within the video, Clickfortaz states,

“all the messages from you guys, all the love and support, all the kind words, just broke me down. I think that’s what made it real...It feels like there are people out there who care”  
(Clickfortaz 2019).

She indicates that her followers have had a psychological effect on her life, whereby her perceptions have altered concerning the way that others perceive her, and the social support that is available to her from strangers. During the first thirty seconds of the video, Clickfortaz displays crying-related catharsis, which takes place whilst she attributes her tears to the social support she has received. Thus, a performance aspect is apparent in cathartic solidarity, whereby members demonstrate the extent to which they identify with the platformity whilst asserting its strength as a site of affect and belonging. As Clickfortaz indicates that the crying has stemmed from the realisation of the empathetic behaviours in others, her apparent catharsis relates to the discharging of tension concerning belonging. The visibility of Clickfortaz’s cathartic moment reinforces the sense that the platformity has contributed to transformative processes in the life of the influencer, both professionally and personally because the online persona merges both.

To summarise, the ability to engage with a poetic creator over time and the culture of celebrity-making on YouTube imbues a platformity with the sense of having contributed to the success of a creator. In bibliotherapeutic platform poetry on YouTube, the case study of Clickfortaz indicates that an emphasis is placed on the poetic material as a conduit for discussion of mental health, and where the writer is part of the community of cathartic solidarity, the broader platformity focuses on not only supporting the creator through likes and shares but also through supportive messages. The popularity of authors of bibliotherapeutic platform poetry on YouTube becomes a community artefact, whereby the audience helps further the reach of the author in addition to supporting the author on an emotional level, with the latter potentially resulting in catharsis.

### ***Charly Cox and Representations of the Self on Tumblr***

As a central organising platform for marginalised communities, Tumblr has been associated with social progressiveness and consciousness-raising. Furthermore, as stressed by Carolyn Bronstein

(2020), the site has traditionally been harnessed for political ends whilst its users retain their anonymity. However, the emphasis of the site has recently shifted towards authorship, with authors of bibliotherapeutic platform poetry amongst those deploying Tumblr professionally. One such author is Charly Cox, whose Tumblr profile both departs from and aligns with Tumblr conventions, by displaying an identifiable authorial identity whilst adhering to the culture of collectivism on the site. This section will highlight that Cox does this through sporadically disseminating her poetic content within a broader focus on work by other creatives. The section will argue that Cox positions herself as a Tumblr member who is community-oriented and willing to align herself with the platform's conventions.

Charly Cox has 45,100 followers on Instagram (as of 27/04/24), does not have a channel on YouTube (as of 27/04/24) and has 113 followers on TikTok (as of 27/04/24). Whilst being latterly most active on Instagram, this thesis will focus on her output on Tumblr due to her visible strategy of engaging with users on the latter platform. On Tumblr, Cox demonstrates a dual identity as a professional content creator and a community member who enjoys consuming material created by other individuals; she exhibits a tagline that reads: "It's your favourite poet to write shitty goodread reviews about! Pictures I wish were poems I'd written" (charlycox, 2021).

Figure 3 highlights how Cox has used the profile feature of the site to foreground her identity as a poet ("it's your favourite poet") and to align herself with the fan culture of the site ("pictures that I wish were poems I'd written"). She indicates that the images she intends to reblog on her page are ones that she has not created but which have, as a fan, caused her an emotional response. The contrast between self-publicization and paying homage to the works of other Tumblr users suggests a focus on respecting the culture of Tumblr whilst using the platform professionally to publicise her authorial identity.

By using the majority of her blog to reblog work by other artists, Cox responds to the platform's tag-based architecture and sharing-centred culture. The focus on tagging other artists is indicative of Tumblr deviating from YouTube whereby, whilst the architecture of YouTube facilitates the creation of microcelebrities, the architecture of Tumblr prioritises the curation of other artists' work. However, Cox also makes use of Tumblr's affordances to promote her own identity and demonstrate a relatable persona. She does so by presenting conversations between



her and her followers on her blog. One such message was between her and an anonymous follower who messaged:

“Hello :-) have you had breakfast in the hilton hotel this morning? I saw you, I was the girl with black sweatshirt, but I was to shy to ask you for a photo. I didn’t want to disturb you. I just love you and your accent...” (charlycox, 2015).

Through publishing this fan interaction, Cox underlines her celebrity status and the esteem with which she is held by her followers. Figure 4 demonstrates how Cox utilizes the communicative scope of the platform to make how she responds to followers visible. In her response, the informality of the slang term ‘owh’, in addition to an absence of apostrophes, and the presence of kisses to sign off the message, breaks down the boundary between Cox and her followers whilst marketing Cox as a relatable person. Given that the commodification of real-self authenticity is a prevalent strategy in garnering a marketable celebrity persona on social media, Cox’s approach is in keeping with the professional deployment of social media platforms.

More specifically, how Cox responds to followers aligns with interactions between authors of bibliotherapeutic platform poetry and individual followers. In addition to demonstrating a relatable persona, Cox occasionally provides emotional support to followers in a manner that reflects her own authorial persona. For example, an anonymous poster sent the following message to charlycox, which Cox chose to publish: “I just got my...results and I basically failed everything, I don’t think I can go to the uni I wanted anymore which is making me question what I want in a wider sense...how did you figure out what you wanted to do and how to get there at such a young age?” (charlycox, 2016).

The poster alludes to Cox having built a significant social media presence, as a digital poet, in her early twenties. As Cox has cultivated a digital persona that alludes to her professional success whilst presenting her as an altruistic and relatable individual, she is recognised by her followers as an individual willing to grant time to supporting strangers practically and emotionally.

Whilst recognising Cox’s achievements as a digital influencer and poet, the writer uses the latter part of her message to mirror Cox’s tendency to express herself using colloquialisms:

“you’ve achieved so much and I wish I had half the balls you do to go out and find my career path x x x” (charlycox, 2016).

The use of a loaded sexual reference, and one that utilises stereotypes about masculinity, to refer to courage, counters the feminist arguments that Cox presents on her Tumblr blog. For example, in an earlier reblog, Cox displays a picture of a torso featuring a tattoo containing the words “Girl Almighty,” which reverses the gendered stereotype of masculine strength. However, whilst indicating that Cox is a role model, the writer deploys a similar vernacular style to Cox, which is reinforced by the kisses at the end of the message. The writer indicates an understanding of the group language style and that the colloquialism ‘balls’, in spite of its loaded gendered meaning, would not break the group norms of those who interact with the charlycox Tumblr page.

In response to the anonymous message, Cox begins: “I find things like these difficult to answer. I’m ill equipped to give structural advice” (charlycox, 2016). Cox sets parameters on the scope of her therapeutic input, indicating that the focus of the question elicits a problem-solving approach from Cox that is not in keeping with her therapeutic style. As highlighted in Chapter One, bibliotherapy need not be based around problem-solving; rather, bibliotherapy can instead involve a reader being encouraged to identify with a narrator and gain insight into how the narrator approaches a challenging situation in a constructive and logical manner. In the latter part of Cox’s approach, she aligns with this therapeutic method through using herself as a character with whom the questioner might identify. This identification would then increase the possibility of the questioner adopting the same psychological approach as the character/ Cox. Advising the questioner, Cox states: “The way I went on was ignoring grades and forcing myself to be bigger than them” (charlycox, 2016). Cox indicates that she, like the questioner, received unsatisfactory grades and is, paradoxically, an appropriate role model. Cox ends by stating:

“build your resume on experience, sneak into clubs you don’t belong to, tell yourself you’re as important as your grades on crack. You’ll get there. X” (charlycox, 2016).

Despite indicating reluctance to do so, Cox offers practical advice and does so in a manner that aligns with her public persona. The allusion to ‘crack’ indicates anti-establishmentarianism, which is reinforced by Charly Cox’s disavowal of the importance of the grading system in

British schools. Such a representation of an anti-establishment selfhood is echoed in another interaction between Cox and an anonymous poster whereby, in response to the question: “What do you think about drugs?”, Cox replies: “Damned if you do, damned if you don’t” (charlycox, 2015). The response situates ‘you’ as heroic in each case, indicating an affinity towards individuals with personal leanings towards such non-conforming behaviours. As Matthew Eastin and Jung Lee (2020) indicate, given the impact on audience engagement of an influencer being perceived as sincere on social media, an influencer is required to communicate with followers in a way that reflects the identity they have portrayed on their social media channels. Thus, Cox communicates as a high performing individual who is, simultaneously and paradoxically an ‘everywoman’.

Cox demonstrates her own issues with everyday issues such as relationships and the education system whilst, simultaneously, indicating an ability to transcend these issues to attain career success and have the credentials to pass on her insight to her followers. Through using her Tumblr page to reblog content that is in keeping with her identity presentation and publishing conversations between herself and individuals that reflect her portrayal of selfhood, Charly Cox constructs a coherent identity that enables individuals to feel that they ‘understand’ her, which allows individuals to relate to the identity she projects. This sense of relatedness can be observed in the following anonymous message that Cox publishes on her profile:

“I relate to you in every aspect of yourself you have put across online. How do I become your bestest friend?” (charlycox, 2015).

The anonymous writer indicates that parasocial interactions, made possible by Cox presenting a coherent identity across different platforms, have led to individuals experiencing a sense of social bondedness with Cox. Cox responds with the following:

“Please, please do. We can eat pancakes and drink coffee and talk about how unhealthily obsessed I am with Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes relationship” (charlycox, 2015).

Through publicly responding to a fan message that indicates an affective bond to the charlycox persona, Cox indicates that parasocial relationships between charlycox and individual followers can become more reciprocal, albeit whilst remaining public and digital. The

presumption of intimacy, which Chris Rojek (2015) identifies as a characteristic of parasocial relationships, is also facilitated through Cox reblogging material that reflects her identity. Cox's blog content largely consists of fashion photography, predominantly featuring women. Stylistically, numerous photographs included on her Tumblr blog are inspired by Bohemian counterculture and contain iconography from the Beatnik movement, such as the smoking of drugs and the appearance of sexual freedom through semi-nude models and models dressed in sheer clothing. Cox's interest in Beatnik culture is reinforced through her quoting of Jack Kerouac in a post in January 2020. Through her fidelity to a particular cultural style, she furthers the scope for individuals to feel they 'know' her interests, which enables individuals to validate their parasocial bond. This ability to 'know' Cox as part of a one-sided relationship, which is controlled by Cox, shifts to the possibility of a reciprocal relationship through her publishing interactions she has had with followers. Such reciprocity is symbolic, whereby the Cox-fan relationship does not extend to interactions in physical space but contains characteristics, such as direct interaction, that imbue the relationship with a sense of realism and meaning.

The topic of 'Charly Cox as poet' occupies a subordinate position in the charlycox Tumblr profile. In addition to giving space to content that Cox admires, and which grants her followers the sense of 'knowing' her, the lack of emphasis on her own authored content means that she is aligning with the conventions of the Tumblr platform. As Cho et al (2020) highlight, on Tumblr, the emphasis on curation supersedes the emphasis on creation. Cox presents her identity, as a content consumer, through curating the works of other individuals whilst using her profile to signpost individuals to her creative work away from the platform. Cox uses the accepted vernacular of the site to share her identity and cultivate interest in her work outside of the site. She establishes her brand across a range of platforms, whilst using Tumblr to signpost an audience to those sites and grow her community. This use of Tumblr, as a vehicle for engagement with her works on other platforms, can be observed in the following Tumblr post: "I write a lot of poetry but never really post it. I thought instead of boring you with reams of writing I'd read it to you like a bedtime story. This is my voice talking about why I no longer care about cellulite. Glamorous" (charlycox, 2015).

The post includes a link to a recording of her poem on soundcloud, a social audio sharing platform that became established in Germany in 2007. Through demonstrating self-deprecating humour and presenting her poetry writing as a hobby rather than a profession, Cox fosters a sense of relatability, which facilitates the types of one-sided relationships addressed previously. Therefore, how Cox treats her profession, as a published poet, aligns with how Cox uses her blog to curate the work of others rather than simply presenting her own work. Whilst publishing conversations between herself and her followers, to highlight her celebrity, Cox abstains from explicit self-promotion and creates the impression of relatability and authenticity.

### ***r.h Sin and cultivating an expert persona on Instagram***

The task of creating poetic content on Instagram involves adapting to the platform's conventions. In part, as Gunther Kress (2010) states, this concerns acknowledging the resources available to the creator of digital content, which, on Instagram, include the tools that can publicise the creative post. On Instagram, the creator relies on the consumer to use such tools, which means that the process of the creator promoting their work is a collaborative task undertaken with their audiences. To motivate their followers to share their creative content, the producer of content needs to address the reasons why individuals might use Instagram. As Marcus (2015) identifies, one common reason for individuals to use Instagram concerns the motivation to self-present to a community. r.h Sin's central digital presence is through Instagram, with a YouTube channel entitled 'r.h. Sin' having a minimal following of 12 subscribers and his TikTok account having 21,700 followers; in contrast, his Instagram account has 2,100,000 followers (as of 27/04/24) and is his most active source of creative output online. On Instagram, r.h. Sin's poetry contains characteristics that heighten its ability to be shared: brevity and a thematic concern with demonstrating strength amidst relationship issues. Sin targets heterosexual female readers through a range of poems that confront the ill-treatment of women by men, in romantic relationships.

In some cases, platform poets on Instagram provide additional meaning through an accompanying comment. The use of an introduction or preface to contextualise poetry is not unique to platform poetry, given a history of prefatory materials in literature. However, the use of comment sections to preface poetry on a digital platform is an example of how digital poets

are deploying the paratextual features of platforms to make space for their creative expression. In traditional poetry, the rules of reading do not encourage readers to derive either the community or the therapeutic effects to the same extent as poetry on social media. Readers and writers of poetry on social media reject the former and turn to the latter and in the process, a new form of writing is created: platform poetry. In the case of r.h Sin's works, a reading of his poems alone does not provide clarity about the gender of the target audience, with this information being inferred by his comment alongside the poem. This lack of context is apparent in a poem published by Sin on June 4th, 2021:

“He says you're beautiful, but  
how could he be so ugly  
toward you. He says he  
misses you, but he's the  
reason you're apart.

He claims to love you, but why do  
you always feel like he hates  
you...” (r.h. Sin 2021).

In this poem, the ‘problem’, in the form of the hypocritical actions of a romantic partner, is not met with a solution until the comment section where r.h. sin states,

“I hope you find your way out of this prison. I hope you find the courage to begin choosing yourself because you deserve so much more” (r.h.Sin 2021).

Sin uses the paratextual element of the caption feature, provided by Instagram, to extend the meaning of the apparently central poetic artefact. He utilises a central communicative feature of the platform to ground his work in contemporary communicative culture. He uses the Instagram caption feature to infer a synergy between himself and the narrator within his poem. In the caption section linked to the poem, Sin begins by expanding on the faults of the hypothetical man in the poem: “His empty promises weigh heavily on your heart, and maybe that's why you feel stuck” (r.h.sin 2021). Sin's use of a second-person narrative style reinforces his identity as an expert figure. Through directly addressing the reader, he infers that

he understands the trauma of his reader to an extent that allows him to represent that trauma in poetic form and comment on the broader implications of that trauma.

Leigh Gilmore identifies an increase in personal accounts of trauma at the beginning of this century. Gilmore refers to the formation of “aesthetic forms and cultural practices of self-representation” (2001 pg.16), which have stimulated such an increase. By ‘cultural practices of self-representation,’ she refers to the greater scope of marginalised groups to give voice to their experiences. In this set of marginalised groups, she alludes to women, people of colour, gay men and lesbians, the disabled, and survivors of violence. Individuals from such groups might combine to articulate non-dominant forms of knowledge about their experiences of social exclusion. Through these articulations, counterpublics may emerge, whereby communities strategically set about challenging dominant knowledge. As a style of poetry that enables its practitioners to express their own suffering and path to recovery, bibliotherapeutic platform poetry can be categorised in Gilmore’s ‘aesthetic forms of self-representation’. Furthermore, the poetry can facilitate the formation of a counterpublic by legitimising the experiences of those who might perceive themselves to be socially stigmatised due to their suffering.

In the above poem, r.h Sin is not commenting on his trauma pertaining to toxic relationships, but on the trauma of a hypothetical reader. He indicates that the solution to the hypothetical reader’s trauma does not reside in a societal shift facilitated by a counterpublic but, rather, a shift in the subject’s mental processing which can be achieved through the subject reading one of his books.

Having identified and built upon the problem that the hypothetical reader is experiencing, he asserts a possible solution in the form of a book he has written specifically for that hypothetical reader:

“I wrote something to you in a book called ‘she fits inside these words’ (link in my bio), and hopefully, you get the opportunity to read it when you can” (r.h Sin 2021).

Sin indicates to the hypothetical female reader that he has written a book that tells the story of her selfhood. The implication is that through being told her story, the reader could derive a form of well-being benefit.

However, whilst, as highlighted in Chapter One, an individual can attain catharsis through identifying with a narrator and gaining insight through the positive actions they exhibit, the title of the book is problematic. The title, ‘she fits inside these words’, symbolically traps the female reader in a frame of representation seemingly designed to encompass her experience. Thus, Sin homogenises his audience within a representative structure that enables one narratee to stand for the lives of many. Through doing so, he infers a desire to articulate the experiences of a group he perceives as lacking the agency to do so themselves. To infer a persona that has the sensitivity to perform such an undertaking, he encourages the conflation between himself and his poetic narrators, imbuing his narrators with the qualities the consumer perceives in his profile. For example, he depicts his healthy relationship with his wife through her being the single Instagram account that he follows. Thus, he presents himself as the ideal male partner, aligning himself with his calls for how a man ought to behave in a heterosexual relationship by symbolically elevating his wife to a position not occupied by anyone else on his Instagram channel. Through presenting himself, out of his poetry, as an ideal, he invites his consumers to view his poetic narrator/ relationship expert figure as an extension of himself.

Instagram’s conventions encourage conflations between a platform poet and the in-poem narrator because Instagram content creators often use their profiles to document aspects of their personal lives in addition to publishing their creative material. For the platform poet seeking to encourage consumers to develop affective relationships with the narrator figure of their poems, this necessitates identity performances that encourage consumers to perceive them as possessing positive traits that align with the content of the poetry. In the case of Sin, these socially positive traits may include putting one’s partner first. Through synergising the narrative voice of the poems with the poet’s persona outside of the poems, consumers would be more likely to trust in the sincerity of the poet and be more likely to build an affective relationship with the narrative voice that is taken to represent the poet. Regarding the affective relationship between Sin and his audience, there are indications, within the comment section of the aforementioned poem, that audience members positively conflate him and the narrative voice. On June 4<sup>th</sup> 2021, lovely.beauty96 comments:

“It’s like you’re talking directly to me. May God help any woman in this situation”  
(lovely.beauty96, 2021).



That lovelybeauty96 feels directly spoken to is indicative of the relationship of affect and understanding that Sin has portrayed towards his followers.

Of the opening hundred comments of the thread, fifteen were met with replies from other consumers. The absence of replies to the majority of comments indicates that the poem encourages the relationship between the writer and the reader. On social media platforms, such as Instagram, the emphasis on the author-reader relationship leads to user comments directly addressing the author rather than fellow content consumers. As Simone Murray (2018) contends, web 2.0 technologies have facilitated interactivity between producer and consumer that fosters the impression of an “‘up-close-and-personal’ sense of relationship to an esteemed author” (pg. 49). She draws attention to a sense of proximity between an author and consumer in a digital setting. On social media, this perceived proximity is aided through the author indicating intimacy with the consumer by revealing aspects of their day- to-day lifestyle. Therefore, the culture of social media encourages consumers of influencer- created content to perceive they are emotionally close to that influencer.

Whilst Sin uses direct address and emotive language in his poetry and captions to infer an interest in the particularities of an individual follower’s experiences, he does not tend to publicly respond to comments. For example, for the duration that *He Says You’re Beautiful...* (r.h. Sin 2021) was visible on his profile, he did not use the comment thread to respond to a single user comment to reinforce an individual’s perception of them sharing an affective relationship with him. The absence of author responses indicates towards a largely parasocial relationship between Sin and his platformity because the term ‘parasocial’ refers to the one-sided relationship between celebrities and their admirers (Horton and Wohl, 1956). The absence of responses from r.h Sin to individual members of his platformity indicates that he relies upon his poetry and captions to drive the perception of him being close to his platformity. Given the reader of the poem has been directly addressed within the text, the reader becomes imagined into the poetic text and becomes the writer’s ‘other’. The reader fills in the gaps of the circumstances implied by the writer, which, in this poem, involves the emotional discomfort created by a romantic partner unable to reconcile their actions with their words. In the absence of concrete information, the reader commits their energy to placing their own experiences into the poem, thereby creating a personalised reading of the post. The reader can reframe their life

experiences according to the platform poem's narrative arc and potentially attain a greater sense of perspective that can act as a gateway to catharsis.

Whilst using r.h. Sin's platformity on Instagram as a case study, this section has identified the scope for platform poets to infer affective relationships between themselves and their poetry consumers. The feeling of being directly spoken to by r.h. Sin and being granted access to aspects of his personal life facilitate a sense of intimacy with the author, which contributes to individuals feeling understood and accepted. Overall, this chapter has stressed that for authors of bibliotherapeutic platform poetry, the benefits of YouTube, Tumblr and Instagram vary and require different types of engagement. The technological characteristics of each platform influence the platformities that develop, which impact upon how 'star' posters interact with their audiences. Those seeking to establish themselves as influencers on these platforms benefit from being flexible to the communicative cultures established on the platforms. By aligning their communicative habits with the platform's conventions, such individuals are less likely to alienate potential followers. Conversely, these individuals would be more likely to inspire a perception of mutuality in their audiences, which would encourage stronger parasocial ties and heightened contributions on the platformity comment boards. Such contributions would further facilitate a communicative culture and the formation of a group identity and subsequent community solidarity. The next chapter will explore how consumers alter the meaning of poems and impact the scope for community experiences of catharsis concerning the poetry, through shifting poetry from one platform to another.

## **CHAPTER THREE: NAVIGATING THERAPEUTIC COMMUNITIES: QUOTING BIBLIOTHERAPEUTIC PLATFORM POETRY IN NEW ONLINE SPACES**

The last chapter dealt primarily with the different technological characteristics of Instagram, YouTube and Tumblr, and how these characteristics influence how authors of bibliotherapeutic platform poetry engage with them. This chapter focuses on the interrelationships between social media platforms and how poetic meaning shifts when a third-party cross-posts bibliotherapeutic platform poetry from Instagram to Facebook.

When such a transfer occurs, the meaning of a platform poem is altered. As an individual commits the act of sharing a platform poem authored by somebody else, their community are encouraged to deduce the relevance of the poem to the third-party's own circumstances by mediating their reading of the poem through an awareness of their post history. Due to readers being focused on considering the poster's personal circumstances and feeling obliged to provide support for the poster, there is less onus on them to use the poem in a bibliotherapeutic manner and narrate their own reading of the poem to a community. Therefore, the chapter will argue that by resituating and reframing a bibliotherapeutic platform poem to suit their own purposes, third-party posters undermine the poetry's scope to facilitate the well-being of its new audience.

### **Cross-posting**

The sharing of a social media post, from one platform to another, is known as 'cross-posting'. Creators of content may choose to cross-post to achieve 'spillover effects,' which involve the creator benefitting from additional engagement on a different social media platform. Alternatively, followers of the content poster might take it upon themselves to share their content with new audiences as a form of follower labour, whereby the follower is attempting to contribute to the fame of the creator. Furthermore, a follower might perceive a text, or a specific section of a text, as representing their specific practical circumstances or emotional state. In this case, the cross-posting of content enables an individual to either bring their

circumstances or emotional state to the attention of a community, via the text or enable an already knowledgeable public to gain a more intimate understanding of such circumstances and emotional states through mediating them through the poetic text. The focus of this chapter concerns the latter as Chapter One underlined that the generality of bibliotherapeutic platform poetry increases its therapeutic scope because a higher number of individuals would be able to apply the meaning to their circumstances.

The last chapter established that the diversity of cultures across different social media platforms means that influencers benefit from accounting for these differences when constructing their personas and engaging with their audiences. This chapter will build on these findings by highlighting that when a platform poetry consumer shifts the poetry to a new platform and becomes the poster of that new material, the platform poetry is no longer contextually framed by the author and the readership do not benefit from the author playing a facilitator role. In addition to the platform poem itself, the paratextual element of the caption feature facilitates bibliotherapeutic benefit because the caption is typically used by bibliotherapeutic platform poets to encourage consumers to apply the meaning of a poem to their life circumstances. Where a poetry consumer chooses to take up the responsibility of framing a platform poem by reposting it in a new context, but uses the caption feature to encourage their audience to offer them support rather than to encourage their audience to disclose their own stories of how the poetry is relevant to their lives, the poem's capacity as a resource to therapeutically help individuals other than the poster becomes undermined.

Particular social media sites have facilitated the cross-posting of information across platforms. For example, the Tumblr dashboard contains a setting whereby users can choose to automatically share their posts on X and Facebook. Additionally, Instagram has facilitated an option for users to share their Instagram photos on X via the Instagram app. With Tumblr owned by Automattic, X owned by Elon Musk, and Facebook and Instagram owned by Meta, the links between platforms with different owners indicate an acceptance, by these platform owners, that individuals would likely own multiple profiles across different platforms and facilitating a network of cross-posting would further the engagement on their platforms. Through furthering engagement on their platform, the platform owners would enhance their platform's attractiveness to advertisers, thereby increasing revenue. However, given the

contrasting interfaces of X and Instagram, with X being text-based and Instagram being image-based, there are incompatibilities between the platforms. In the case of sharing an Instagram post to X, this results in the image not being attached; rather, a link to the image would be provided instead. Furthermore, Instagram has enabled users to link their Instagram accounts and Facebook profiles, which grants users the option to share a post to Facebook. As Abidin et al (2020) note, the digital tools provided by these social companies, to enable users to share content between platforms, have encouraged a climate of cross-posting. Given that, as indicated by Thomas (2020), Facebook and Instagram are key platforms for the spawning and proliferation of creative works and cross-posting is particularly prevalent across these two platforms, this chapter will focus on cross-posting between Instagram and Facebook. Furthermore, as Instagram, rather than Facebook, is one of the platforms most closely linked to new poetic voices (Thomas, 2020), the chapter will consider the movement of poetic content from Instagram to Facebook.

Sarah Frier (2020) notes that having been purchased by Facebook in 2012, Instagram has been used strategically as a means of aiding the growth of the former. This strategy involves functionalities that enable crossovers between the two platforms. For example, in September 2020, Facebook announced cross-app communication between the Facebook Messenger service and Instagram. In an advertorial on the Facebook webpage, Adam Mosseri (Head of Instagram) and Stan Chudnovsky (Head of Messenger) asserted:

“we’re connecting the Messenger and Instagram experience to bring some of the best Messenger features to Instagram - so you have access to the best messaging experience, no matter which app you use” (Chudnovsky and Mosseri, 2020).

Facebook’s move to enable Instagram users to use the Facebook Messenger app serves to entice such users to commit to being part of the Facebook universe. Such a feature, accompanied by other moves to technologically link the two platforms, furthered the Facebook strategy of creating a family of apps (Frier 2020).

Frier identifies that “Zuckerberg wanted to create more navigation between the apps so that their users could switch between them easily. He gave the integrations a friendly term: “family bridges”” (pg. 255). She highlights the strategic moves that Mark Zuckerberg has made to

further the growth of Facebook, including the acquisition of Instagram. She analyses how Zuckerberg's subsequent ownership of Instagram has influenced its technological interface and compatibility with Facebook. The Facebook hierarchy has made several moves to technologically blend the interfaces of the apps under their ownership. Through terming these blendings 'family bridges', an impression is given that these apps ought to be used in conjunction, which thereby further encourages users to cross-post between the platforms. As highlighted in the previous chapter, the cultures of different platforms are highly varied and, as a consequence, individuals choose to utilise particular platforms to gain certain benefits. Despite the aforementioned moves to connect Instagram and Facebook, the cultures of the two platforms are contrasting. Whilst both platforms facilitate the presentation of an individual's identity, Facebook emphasises existing social ties whilst Instagram emphasises connections between strangers. The content that a user posts on Facebook is mediated by the prior understanding that their community has of their personality and circumstances. Bareket-Bojmel et al (2016) identify that the combination of a prior understanding of an individual, and stronger social ties, means that the sharing of a post on Facebook will have a greater likelihood of resulting in personalised comments from their network. In contrast, as Paramboukis et al (2016) assert, responses to an Instagram post tend towards narcissistic comments focused on the self rather than the original post. As such, how audiences tend to approach posts and respond to posts differs across the two platforms. The previous chapter emphasised that given bibliotherapeutic platform poetry thematically concerns the process of self-recovery, individuals respond to the author by highlighting a link between the poetic content and their circumstances.

Through narrating their life story and mediating it through bibliotherapeutic platform poetry, an individual has greater scope for achieving a cathartic experience. Contrastingly, when a third party uses bibliotherapeutic platform poetry to narrate their trauma, through sharing the poetic text on Facebook and including a caption that details the significance of the poem to their circumstances, they narrow the ability for other individuals to narrate their personal stories and attain catharsis through the act of articulating their trauma. The normative response to a poster disclosing trauma is for the responder to either ignore the post or focus on the poster's circumstances and attempt to make a meaningful difference through engaging with the poster and indicating a willingness to provide concrete support.

## **Re-framing Bibliotherapeutic Platform Poetry**

As highlighted by John Timpane and Maureen Watts (2001), part of the benefit of poetic texts resides in the ability of the text to focus the reader's attention onto their own circumstances, to "notice more of their own lives, sharpen their awareness, pay attention to things they'd never really considered before" (pg. 1). They indicate the scope of a poetic text to alter the psychological perspective an individual has towards their life. The notion of an individual engaging with a text and subsequently applying the insight of that text to their life links to theory concerning the cathartic release provided by bibliotherapeutic materials (Hynes and Hynes-Berry, 1994; Pehrsson and McMillen, 2005; Shrodes, 1950). The potential for cathartic release from platform poetry decreases when a third party shares the poem in a new digital space because, in the domain of platform poetry, the author's presence plays a key role in encouraging consumers to consider their life circumstances when reading the poetry.

The author's facilitator role involves them contextualising the poetry by indicating it is an opportunity for consumers to narrate the life circumstances that mark them as similar to the author. Those disclosing their life stories can gain the well-being benefit of having disclosed to a community they perceive as like-minded, whilst getting validation through supportive responses from the community. For example, disclosers may particularly value the community's feedback given the perception that community members have shared similar experiences. Conversely, where a third-party poster has cross-posted the poem, their readership is encouraged to look outwards at the experiences of the third-party poster rather than self-reflectively apply the poem's teachings to their own lives. Certainly, the potential for individuals to read beyond such instructions should not be foreclosed, but the evidence suggests that individuals tend to read texts in communication with the frameworks they possess at the beginning of the reading process and that these frameworks can be influenced by the sharer of the text.

Whilst the presence of the poster's life circumstances and upload history would influence the reader to interpret the text in a particular way, each interpretation would be unique. The above scenario would not lead to a monolithic process whereby every reader responds to the bibliotherapeutic text identically. As Stuart Green and Isabelle Marc (2016) identify, the extra-

textual elements potentially alter how the poetic text is interpreted. Therefore, there is a difference between platform poetry made available to a social network by an author or a third-party poster that centres on how that network is encouraged to respond. In cross-posted bibliotherapeutic platform poetry on Facebook, the salient extra-textual elements might be the poster's history of presenting poetic material on their profile page, the life events of the poster, knowledge of the poster's emotional reactions to those life events and an awareness of the author's creative oeuvre and what that author's work might represent.

The extra-textual elements, which concern the personal history of the poster, do not necessarily need to be articulated in an accompanying message, as the platform encourages individuals to mark critical moments publicly and selectively. The technological features of the Facebook timeline, the Instagram wall and the ability, on Tumblr, to see the post history of a given user, enable the reader of a new post on one of these platforms to place that post alongside such extra-textual elements. Specifically, these functions enable the users of these platforms to locate posts from a particular period. In the third-party posting of platform poetry, user profiles become longitudinal narrative texts that readers can bring into communication with the platform poetry. Even in the absence of an adjoining message, a reader might possess a sense of the relevance of the poetic text to the individual displaying it to them.

As the poetic text becomes inextricably linked to the personal history of the poster of that text, the poetic text functions differently. Rather than the text being singularly linked to its author, it is granted a plurality and becomes a community artefact. Therefore, material previously published on another digital platform becomes repurposed. Kathleen Fitzpatrick (2011) argues that digital technology prioritises the sharing of information over individual authorship. Focusing on the nature of publishing scholarly material online, she asserts that academic authors are encouraged to

“think about the ways that open technologies might lead us to open our texts - to understand them as always potentially in process, and always in conversation with other texts and authors” (pg. 7).

The identification of open technologies reinforcing the sense of a text being “always potentially in process” highlights how digital technologies intervene in the social treatment of texts. Whilst



Fitzpatrick applies ideas concerning authorship to scholarly material, these ideas have relevance to bibliotherapeutic platform poetry because of the poetry's capacity to be reoriented in several ways, depending on how a user of that poetic text intends to relate the text to their circumstances whilst presenting both to a community. Where the user shares the poetic text without drawing on its relevance to their own life, their Facebook community are left to infer the relevance of the poetic text. A digital poetic text carries particular opportunity to be repurposed according to the circumstances and intentions of the adopter of that poetic text, which influences how that poster's community engages with the poetic text. The importance that Facebook friends assert to an apparent call for help by another user depends on the user's history of such posts. Jelenchick et al (2013) assert that the more calls for help a user is perceived to have posted on social media, the less impact a future call for help would have.

Regarding an individual re-posting platform poetry to their social network, the information that a poster has selectively offered their community intercedes on the relationship between members of that individual's network and the platform poem. The reader comes to a cross-posted poetic text with a cognitional point of reference that not only includes their perceived knowledge of the author but also the poster. Previous research has argued that the bringing forth of such perceived knowledge, during the moment of reading a text, presents an undesirable obstacle between the individual and the text. For Flowers et al (2009), this undesirability is due to the belief that bringing prior knowledge to a poetic text will compromise the potential for an individual to appreciate the aesthetic aspects of the text. Whilst they focus on the aesthetic characteristics of poetry, arguably, the cross-posting of bibliotherapeutic platform poetry, in the manner that has been described in this chapter, relegates the importance of the aesthetic value of a text beneath its social value. Having read the poetic text and perceived the text's relevance to their own life, the reader would have furthered their potential for a cathartic experience. However, through cross-posting the poem and presenting it to a community, the reader indicates that another, social, experience is being sought. Clues about the desired social response can be gauged if the sharer has provided an accompanying message beside the cross-posted poetic text. Social media disclosure might, as indicated by Buehler (2017), represent support seeking or the desire for others to change their behaviours. Both of these desires are relevant to this study, as the goal of a therapeutic

outcome is implicitly linked to the posting behaviour, either for the individual posting or for the recipients of the message.

The individual seeking social support through social media displays an attempt to alter a situation that they perceive as stressful. Lawrence Cohen and Susan Roth (1986) refer to this type of behaviour as ‘active coping’ as the individual is demonstrating agency through undertaking steps to alter a situation that is perceived as an ongoing source of negative well-being. Through indicating the stressful situation to their online community, whilst seeking social support, an individual is demonstrating active efforts to seek social support and address stressful situations. Kenneth Nowack (1989) refers to such action as an adaptive mode of coping, as the individual is dealing with emotional trauma through constructively planning steps to overcome that trauma. Through the use of adaptive coping strategies, individuals are more likely to experience positive outcomes, such as the reduction of distress. Contrastingly, Ryan, et al (2013) highlight that maladaptive coping mechanisms are based on the avoidance of support and instead involve rumination and acting out. An online equivalent of such maladaptive coping behaviours may involve individuals seeking out online resources that reinforce their negative worldview. Such behaviour is captured in the notion of doomscrolling whereby social media users consume multiple negative news stories to the detriment of their mental well-being. Doomscrolling is facilitated by platform architecture whereby users are provided with content related to the video they initially consumed. Individuals experience an ongoing loop of negative information that they continue to consume despite its disheartening nature.

Chou et al (2003) found that those adopting maladaptive coping strategies are less likely to be recipients of social support and are more likely to experience negative well-being. Rather than seeking out social support that could lead to positive and motivational comments, which could encourage positive cognitive framing of situations that were previously viewed negatively, the individual undertaking maladaptive coping behaviours is more likely to isolate and seek out information that reinforces their stance towards stressful circumstances. Individuals who re-post platform poetry, as a means of using the poems crafted by another individual to articulate their emotional circumstances to their network, are enacting an adaptive coping strategy. This is because they are signalling to their network that they need emotional or practical support, thereby increasing the opportunity of them getting such support. Whilst linking the poem to

their circumstances and inferring their need for their network's support, the poster limits the potential for other individuals to utilise the poem as a means of narrating their own identity to the community and thereby gain their well-being benefits.

The following two sections will confront the different social responses, on Facebook, to an individual posting content that focuses community attention on themselves, and an individual posting content to facilitate well-being in their audience.

### **Facebook: The Scope for Therapeutic Responses to User Posts**

What has been established is that when platform poetry is cross-posted across platforms, it becomes reframed according to the motivations of the poster. The platform poem can be used as an adaptive coping strategy whereby the poster uses the words of the author to signpost to their network that they are going through a personal struggle. Facebook is not typically used as the platform poet's primary publishing site; rather, it is a site that individuals might cross-post the poetry onto in order to use the poetry to narrate an aspect of their identity to their network. Due to Facebook typically being used to maintain contact with friends and family (Joseph et al 2015), its onus is not on developing parasocial ties with influencers. Rather, platforms such as Instagram and YouTube are more apt for influencers given the latter's focus on building up grassroots creatives into stars and the former's focus on self-branding. The flow of platform poetry begins on sites such as Instagram and YouTube before, due to individuals seeking to express themselves to their social network, being shared on Facebook. This section will explore how the communicative culture of Facebook impacts how such individuals receive support from their networks.

As maintained by Barash et al (2010), the status updates of Facebook users typically involve individuals attempting to present a positive image of themselves to their network. The user emphasis on impression management is reinforced by the platform's technological features. Users can express themselves to their followers by posting personal photographs and video content and sharing the material of others. The shared material may have originated on the platform or have been cross-posted from another platform. Tools that facilitate the creation and sharing of content enable Facebook users to present their identities to their digital community

and potentially gain validation. An individual's ability to manage their self-presentation on Facebook is furthered through being able to edit and delete previous posts. If an individual has attempted to elicit a particular response from their followers through publishing particular content but has observed that the content has not had the desired response, that individual can remove or alter the content. These affordances encourage users to pursue an 'optimal' self-presentation that includes individuals only keeping posts on their profile, which have been met with what they perceive to be an acceptable response, such as a desirable number of likes. Carr et al (2018) found that the association between likes and social acceptance, reinforced through likes catering the dopamine reward circuit, has meant that a feeling of social marginalisation may occur when an individual has not received the expected or desired feedback. A sense of ostracism can exacerbate symptoms of negative well-being, whereby such individuals are more prone to perceive themselves as lacking a healthy social support network.

Despite the scope for individuals suffering from negative well-being to perceive their digital networks to be less supportive than they are in reality, self-disclosure in online contexts can be an effective way of getting beneficial social support. Facebook friendships tend to consist of relationships of varying depth and significance. Whilst personal networks contain numerous clusters, such as family, neighbours, work colleagues, school friends and networks from another person, Facebook initially homogenised all of these categories into the single cluster of 'friends'; however, users can now organise their friends into categories. In addition to being able to create custom lists, users have been provided with three friend categories: close friends, acquaintances and restricted. A Facebook user can control which of their content gets shared with whom. Friends put on the restricted list will still carry the title of Facebook 'friend' but will only be able to view the user's public information and posts that the user has tagged them in. Users can limit their disclosure of emotional trauma to their 'close friends', meaning that they do not have to break the social rule of oversharing with those they share weak ties. Oversharing on social media is the phenomenon of an individual being deemed to have provided their network with an excess of self-disclosure. The oversharing individual, on social media, transgresses the typical sharing behaviours within a particular digital community.

For Amanda du Preez (2018), the immediacy of digital technology has led to a tendency of oversharing: "the pressure to share in real-time means we are plunged into a flow of affective

intensities” (pg.90). Through highlighting the role of intensity, she draws attention to an excess of affective encounters, which, due to a sense of ‘ubiquitous connectivity,’ leads to fatigue amongst the recipients of affective disclosures. The phenomenon of a digital community being home to a high proportion of affective communication that are deemed, by a consumer, to have been published on social media with a high frequency, has been termed affective intensity (Döveling and Giaxoglou 2018). Affective intensity, which has spawned from a culture of emotional disclosure online, is when the combined weight of affective disclosures has created a communicative environment where individuals feel driven to frequently engage with affective sharing. On Facebook, individuals have access to a self-updating news feed that contributes to the near- constant connection to information and communication experienced by users of social media platforms. The culture of affective sharing has been influenced by the technological architecture of digital platforms, rather than simply by human agency. The commercial interests of the social media company and the drive for affective encounters felt by its users has led to “the intermeshing of the human and the nonhuman” (Hilis et al 2015, pg.2), whereby the content consumed is dependent on both human agency and the technological environment of the social media platform. A central component of such a technological environment is algorithmic design, which facilitates the flow of particular information to particular users who are judged to be the likeliest to engage with such information (see Chapter Four).

Thus, whilst the information Facebook makes available to a user about friends and interests is, to an extent, influenced by the choices of that user, corporate interests and digital algorithms also influence the technological environment a user experiences. As profit-seeking entities, social media platforms, such as Facebook, generate economic value by encouraging their users to engage with their sites for longer periods. Users of commercial social media generate data commodities and profit for social media companies. Modern society has been shaped by the motivations of these social media companies, with the tempo of life being altered by technological developments in social media. The result, as identified by Christian Fuchs (2014), has been that social media platforms are being used for both labour and leisure. Time spent outside of traditional workspaces, such as shops, offices, and factories, is being monetised by digital platforms.

The therapeutic implications for those seeking emotional support, in such a complex network of technology, corporate interest and community, involve a compromise whereby the digital discloser forgoes some of the intimacy they seek. The partial reversal of intimacy is due to the socially entrenched penchant for instantaneous interaction that takes place on social media. Paul Virilio (2012) states that instantaneous interaction online has altered the nature of human interaction and has resulted in individuals entering the responses suggested to them by systems programmed to generate automated replies. The drive to make expedient responses, either through utilising automated responses or devising a quick reply, means there has been an alteration in the relationship between human interactions and the time individuals reserve for reflection before making responses. For Virilio, the condensing of time, due to the demand for instantaneous responses on social media, has led to a compression of emotion whereby individuals feel unable to dwell on the emotional state they are experiencing in response to the disclosure of an individual in apparent need. Whilst emotion plays a key role in supportive responses on social media, individuals are relying on instinctual replies that have been borne out of a period of meaningful reflection. Consequently, supportive messages on social media, which have resulted from a prolonged consideration of the discloser's emotional state and personal circumstances, are being replaced by instantaneous messages that whilst indicating an emotional reaction to the discloser's message, are relatively superficial given the felt need to respond quickly.

Contrastingly, face-to-face conversation, whilst being instantaneous, allows for the communication of hesitance and looking away. As addressed by Mardziah Abdullah and Tanimu Jibril (2013), in face-to-face interactions, individuals can convey additional meaning through non-verbal signals, which social media emojis, despite their increasing sophistication, cannot fully replicate. Emojis are contrived and strategic, whilst facial expressions are more spontaneous representations of an individual's internal state. Whilst emojis can now imitate positive, neutral and negative facial expressions and can, therefore, improve digital communication, they cannot mimic the nuance of facial expressions that indicate a blending of emotional states. Given the importance of two-way emotional communication in therapeutic interaction, as evidenced by Alvandi et al (2019), therapeutic encounters online are disadvantaged in this regard when compared to face-to-face communication. The lack of scope for individuals to receive authentic presentations of empathy through facial expression is

salient in individuals cross-posting bibliotherapeutic platform poetry whilst alluding to their challenging circumstances, because the implication is that they are seeking an emotionally restorative encounter. Whilst pursuing such an encounter online grants access to a network of individuals, and possible facilitators of catharsis, who otherwise might not have been reached, Alvandi found that the lack of physical presence can impair the therapeutic potential of computer-mediated-communication. Even so, meaningful interactions can take place in computer-mediated environments, which, as addressed in the opening chapter, can grant individuals, who otherwise might be socially marginalised, the ability to narrate their experiences to a community.

The likelihood of an individual receiving a response to an apparent call for emotional support depends strongly on the level of closeness between themselves and their Facebook friends. Where the content of a status update infers that the poster is eliciting emotional support, close friends would be more likely to check on the well-being of the poster. Egan et al (2013) indicate that such responses would typically be delivered through a phone call, email, or meeting in person rather than through a public response to the Facebook status update. Rather than operating as a direct source of support, Facebook acts as a means of publishing adversity and alerting friends to the need for their support. As meaningful support tends to derive from friends who share close ties with the poster, the capacity for such support to increase in correlation with a wider network of connections is undermined. The decreased likelihood of an individual sending a text-based response to a poster, when that individual perceives their relationship to the poster as distant, is because, as Egan et al assert, they are more likely to view such a response as an invasion of privacy.

Nevertheless, ‘likes’ and other one-click communications, which individuals sharing weak ties with the original poster are more likely to deliver, can still lead to an individual’s perception of having been supported. Peggy Thoits (2011) argues that a causal connection exists between well-being and social support and that minor demonstrations of social support can contribute to well-being. For Thoits, there is wellbeing benefit in interactions that

“are so minor, so commonplace, and so taken for granted as to be virtually invisible as support provisions” (pg. 150).

On social media, one-click communications, such as the ‘like’ and ‘care’ symbols, have become a commonplace and minor mode of demonstrating support. Furthermore, it is an instantaneous, straightforward and non-invasive manner of indicating support and can be used by weak ties who might feel uncomfortable providing textual support. Sigal Brandes and David Levin (2013) identify that whilst individually invisible, the cumulative effect of social media likes can be taken as an indicator of social belonging. Thus, although strong ties, in contrast to weaker ties, are willing and able to provide more effortful support in response to a cry for help and are more able to instigate a reduction in stress in the emotionally distressed individual, the cumulative one-click support offered by weak ties can provide validation to the individual when the individual perceives that support to be numerically healthy. Whilst having a broad network of weak ties does not further the potential for individually meaningful acts of support, it does facilitate individuals receiving a greater number of low-effort supportive acts that can cumulatively provide that individual with the sense that they have received validation.

What can be taken from this section is firstly, the sense that the technological features of Facebook enable users to meticulously manage their online identities and gauge the cyber-social response to their status updates. Secondly, the potential for peer comparison means that significance is attached to the number of comments and likes that a user receives in response to their manner of self-presentation. The section identified that whilst Facebook is a platform that can be used to announce a personal emotional struggle, it is the response of strong ties, away from the platform, that is best placed to meaningfully intervene in that individual’s struggle. Having considered the potential for a Facebook community to provide therapeutic support to an individual poster, the study will now consider the ability of a Facebook community to receive a restorative therapeutic experience through engaging with crossposted bibliotherapeutic platform poetry.

### **Digital Material Re-Used by a Third-Party for Community Therapeutic Relief**

One of the key aims of this study is to discern the scope for restorative experiences to be achieved through bibliotherapeutic platform poetry. Having already examined how platform



poetry can be cross-posted to produce benefit specifically for the cross-poster, the chapter will now consider how cross-posting platform poetry can facilitate community benefit.

#### Self-transcendental media experiences

“occur when audience members recognise in themselves elements of shared humanity, as well as the potential for moral beauty, hope and courage” (Clayton et al, 2019).

Through engaging with inspirational social media content, individuals can experience a sense of self-transcendentalism that cause them to experience a feeling of awe that shifts them away from self-concern. This is allied to a perception that they are not alone in experiencing this feeling. A sense of social synchronicity ensues, which means the individual perceives that other people are partaking in the same actions, and experiencing similar feelings, in real-time. Mary Chayko (2018) highlights the role of digital unity through simultaneity, whereby individuals separated in space can experience feelings of intimacy by engaging with the same digital content at the same time. Synchronous social media use, according to Chayko, instigates “the temporal coordination of individuals’ streams of thought and internal rhythms [which] can result in interpersonal similarity, like-mindedness, shared identities, and social synchronicity” (pg.63).

The digital realm can coordinate thought and action through individuals viewing the same content and experiencing similar responses. Social synchronicity arises as individuals perceive their inner states to be in sync with fellow consumers of the digital content. A feeling of social synchronicity can then lead to a state of togetherness where individuals experience unity despite not sharing the same physical space. Chayko indicates that the popularity of social media platforms is partly due to the desire for simultaneous communal experiences and “for the synchronicity of internal rhythms and states that can result” (pg.64). This sense of interpersonal connectedness, is felt through believing that one is sharing an experience that transcends time and space, recalls the feeling of shared humanity in self-transcendental experiences. As Janicke-Bowles et al (2018) indicate, a feeling of shared humanity involves experiencing a sense of commonality with other individuals around the world. Social synchronicity, derived through an individual believing their internal experiences, in response to digital content, are simultaneously being felt by other individuals around the world, provides

an experience of communion with others and, therefore, the central component of ‘shared humanity’.

The role that feelings of belonging and shared identity play in social synchronicity grants significance to an individual’s belief that their internal response to content matches the responses of fellow consumers. Therefore, whilst Clayton et al (2019) demonstrate that the content of digital material has a core role in generating self-transcendental feelings and experiences of shared humanity, here it is argued that the social mechanisms around the content play an equally important role in generating a feeling of social synchronicity and shared humanity. In other words, whilst Clayton et al (2019) stress the importance of contemplative reflection towards digital content, and gaining experiences that are “meaningful, poignant, or touching” (pg. 360) when engaging directly with that content, this thesis asserts that the social function of the content, as a means of generating interpersonal unity with fellow consumers, also plays a facilitative role in self- transcendental feelings and experiences of shared humanity.

Given the emotional and psychological benefits of experiencing community, whether in physical or digital settings, individuals benefit from feeling part of a community with which they sense connectedness and solidarity. Meddings and Watson (2019) highlight that communities can facilitate self-acceptance and hope, which leads individuals to reframe the narrative of their lives more positively. Whilst the material within social media posts can lead to experiences of shared humanity, so too can tech-enabled feelings of social connectedness. In addition to the content of the social media post, there are other, social, elements to consider. These elements are, firstly, the extent to which an individual believes that their response to digital content aligns with those of other consumers and, secondly, whether this sense of social alignment leads the individual to experience a sense of interpersonal unity and social synchronicity between themselves and the online community.

### **Reblogged Bibliotherapeutic platform poetry: An Imperfect Conduit to Wellbeing Benefit**

This section will now consider the capacity of reblogged bibliotherapeutic platform poetry to provide consumers with a sense of shared identity, which would facilitate feelings of intimacy

and validation. It will utilise these ideas whilst considering the social function of r.h Sin's cross-posted bibliotherapeutic platform poetry. It will draw attention to why a sense of community is lacking around r.h Sin's reblogged content by alluding to the importance of the moderating role of the bibliotherapeutic platform poet.

On September 20<sup>th</sup> 2023, when the words 'r.H Sin' were typed into the search function on Facebook, of the five publicly available Facebook posts containing bibliotherapeutic platform poetry by r.h Sin, three directed attention to the third-party cross-poster's life narrative either through uploading a photograph of themselves or writing an adjoining caption. Both of the remaining posts relied on their network's existing knowledge of their life circumstances. Thus, all five of the third-party posters deploy r.h Sin's poetry to draw attention to how the poetry aligns with their life narratives.

One of the two third-party posters of r.h Sin's poetry who has not included a caption or photograph of himself is Israel Anon 5. Rather, on 13<sup>th</sup> September 2023, Anon 5 simply used the description feature to post 'rh-Sin' and included a photograph of a printed version of r.h Sin's poem 'you, royal'. The poem reads:

“today, just like any other day/ you'll rise from the ashes/ a fire set by those who wish/ for you to fail/ and the prayer in your heart will remain stronger/ than the words of your enemies/ you are mighty/ and your strength/ is your crown” (r.h Sin 2017).

As of 20<sup>th</sup> September 2023, the post has garnered 49 single-click responses, such as likes, hearts and cares, as well as nine comments and two shares. The disparity between single-click responses and comments is indicative of the process mentioned in the last section, whereby those connections who perceive their tie with the poster to be weak are more likely to adopt less invasive modes of support. Single-click responses are less invasive than comments because they do not encourage a response from the initial poster. Rather, they add to the cumulative effect of posters feeling that their content has garnered attention and approval. In contrast, responding through a comment demonstrates greater effort because the individual spent time formulating the comment. Bazarova et al (2015) assert that publicly publishing a comment can be perceived as a challenge to one's identity presentation as the individual considers how their comment might be perceived by the initial poster and their network. Due to this consideration

of how a comment might impact their desired self-presentation and because the comment can be face-threatening to the original poster, longer responses tend to be provided through private messaging rather than public commenting.

The tendency for brief public responses on Facebook is reflected in the brevity of the replies to Anon 5's post. Of the nine comment responses to the post, two contained more than eight words, with one of those consisting of an extract from Psalms 17:5. In her response, Irene Medina included the words, "let my steps stay on your tracks so that my feet will not stumble" (Medina 2023). That an individual chose to respond with a Biblical passage is indicative of their belief that the passage, and the Bible more broadly, is representative of a significant aspect of their identity. Whilst the r.h Sin poem alludes to a deity, it does not specify that this is a Christian deity; the prominence of Christianity in Anon 5's life has not been deduced by Medina from the content of the shared poem but from her prior knowledge of Anon 5. Furthermore, r.h Sin's poem only has tangential religiousness in imagery, such as its allusions to prayer and rebirth. The poem has been repurposed by Anon 5's network to more strongly reflect the role of religion in Anon 5's life and the lives of the network more broadly. Medina's response indicates that a Biblical allusion would be treated favourably by Anon 5's network and would not be face-threatening to Anon 5. This belief is validated by Anon 5 through him responding with a heart icon and thereby recognising the supportive sentiment behind Medina's message. Anon 5 demonstrates his approval of the message and infers that he perceives value in the support Medina has shown.

Bazarova et al (2015) term poster perceptions of value in responses to their posts as 'reply satisfaction'. Reply satisfaction involves posters feeling the response aligns favourably with the life circumstances that they have previously revealed to the poster. That Medina has mediated her reading of the poem through her prior knowledge of Anon 5 is reflective of an argument put forth earlier in the chapter. Whilst using a platform poem to narrate one's life circumstances to a supportive public is central to the well-being benefits of platform poetry, this element of life narration is impeded for the network by the third-party poster where the third-party cross-poster directs the network's attention onto the cross-poster's life narrative instead of using their post to facilitate the disclosures of their network.

Like Medina's comment, the other relatively long comment repurposes the poetry to reflect the religious identity of the network. On 15<sup>th</sup> September 2023, Villareal Norma responded to Anon 5's post by stating,

“We are kings and queens of an almighty God..Who can come against us..our strength is our way of showing who we have by our side..Wonderful words of wisdom..” (Norma 2023).

Norma indicates that Anon 5 is enacting a form of adaptive coping (Nowack 1989) insofar as he is dealing with hardship through deriving insight from a source that is highly valued within the network that Norma and Anon 5 share. Norma links the poem to the act of showing resilience in hardship as a means of demonstrating faith in God. Her final statement, “wonderful words of wisdom”, indicates approval of Anon 5's selection of digital content due to its scope to elicit contemplative reflection (Clayton et al 2019) from its consumers. Thus, Norma draws attention to the poem being facilitative of self- transcendental emotions given her perception that it causes consumers to turn their attention outwards.

As with the individuals who submitted relatively longer responses, those who submitted responses of less than eight words tended to demonstrate sensitivity to Anon 5's life circumstances. Leticia Torres Paree, Maritza Monrreal, and Yolanda Guajardo each responded with ‘Amen,’ thereby inferring that there was a social function to Anon 5's post, which was to spread the wisdom of God. As ‘Amen’ is typically used as part of a call and response in Christian churches during communal worship, the act of entering ‘amen’ into a comment section emphasises the digital space of Anon 5's profile as a site apt for community worship. Whilst using the poetic content of r.h Sin to refer to aspects of his life circumstances, the public response to the message is centrally focused on repurposing the poetry to make it appropriate for the act of communal worship. Of the nine responders, a single user, Peggy Trout, did not include religious language in her response. Simply responding with ‘absolutely’, Trout uses her comment as a quick, low-effort means of validating Anon 5's decision to upload the poem. Simultaneously, Trout adds to the sense of community engagement with Anon 5's post, with comments typically indicating greater engagement than likes and thereby providing content posters with greater reply satisfaction (Bazarova et al

2015). In response, Anon 5 clicked the heart emoji icon on Trout's message to signal his appreciation of Trout's input and infer he has gained reply satisfaction.

Whilst the other responders partake in the repurposing of the poetry according to the network's religious identity, a single responder uses their post to demonstrate concern for Anon 5's well-being. Margarita Perales includes the comment, 'bless you my friend' above a gif she has uploaded containing the words 'sending you big hugs' (Perales 2023). The two elements of Perales' post indicate her perception that Anon 5 is experiencing negative well-being and needs both human empathy and spiritual guidance. The latter is apparent in the religious language of 'bless you', whereby the semantic meaning of Perales' statement represents an invocation to God to support Anon 5 in his perceived state of negative well-being. Badarneh et al (2010) propose that religious language, which has spread into everyday interactions, are religious formulas. Through such language spreading into everyday communication, Badarneh et al argue that the semantic content becomes peripheral while the pragmatic illocutionary force becomes central. In other words, the traditional religious meaning of the language is overshadowed by the apparent intention of the communicator. Through deploying such language, Perales aligns with the communicative culture of Anon 5's network and demonstrates her empathic response to the meaning she perceives behind Anon 5's post. Perales further demonstrates her empathic response by implying a 'virtual' physical connection in her statement 'sending hugs'. Whilst the other responders deviate their attention away from the potential negative well-being of Anon 5 to instead contribute to the religious repurposing of Sin's poetry, Perales focuses her response on the perceived ill Anon 5 has suffered. In keeping with his other acknowledgements of the comments his post has garnered, Anon 5 responds to Perales' message by clicking on the emoji love heart button. Therefore, he does not publicly infer that he has received a greater or lesser amount of reply satisfaction from any of the individual responses; rather, he adopts a strategy of responding uniformly.

When individuals cross-post platform poetry onto their social media platform and emphasise the link between the poetry and themselves by either including a contextualising caption or a photograph of themselves, they encourage their network to take heed of the circumstances of the poster rather than their own, thus impeding the well-being benefits of the poetry for their network. By not including a contextualising message, Anon 5 encourages his network to take

heed of his previous post history. By using language with religious associations, such as ‘amen’, ‘bless you’ and ‘God’, responders indicate that religious-themed posts are typical of the content uploaded by Anon 5; therefore, responses that feature religious vernacular are likely to be met with approval. Given the lack of comments referring to Anon 5 possibly experiencing negative well-being, despite r.h Sin’s poem containing language such as ‘you’ll rise from the ashes’ (r.h Sin 2017), is indicative of his network having experienced him upload similar posts previously and, on those occasions, not having had further cause for alarm.

The phenomenon of individuals using a digital platform to send and receive messages from a network of people, with the communicative styles of those individuals being shaped by the platform’s technological affordances and their network’s posting histories, means that communities on social media are shaped by the technology and cultures of a given platform. Whilst all of the users of a platform are shaped by its technological affordances, and the general communicative cultures that have been established, niche communities can develop within the broad community of a given social media site. Communities that contain users with strong social ties might contain a sense of social synchronicity through its members adopting similar communication patterns such as shared syntax and vocabulary. This is evident in the example above, whereby members of Anon 5’s network use vocabulary and syntax of communal worship. Such language would have been established over time, whereby the history of language use within a community encourages the future actions of community members. Furthermore, the technological features available on a digital platform shape the communicative habits of members. This can be perceived in Anon 5 uniformly using the Facebook heart emoji button to signal appreciation to those who responded to his post. Individuals typically use their responses to commend the r.h Sin poem and its Christian themes, and to validate Anon 5’s decision to share the poetry, rather than to express interest in the life circumstances that might have encouraged him to share poetry that allude to a desire to rise out of adversity. The lack of concern indicates the community having experienced similar actions by Anon 5 that have not been accompanied by causes for alarm. Given the influence of platform infrastructure on the communicative practices and organisations of communities that are situated that reason, the term ‘platformity’ is suggested here, to address the influence of a digital platform on the communities that form therein. Actions within platformities are

mediated by the technology available, post history, and knowledge of individuals' offline circumstances.

Of public posts featuring r.h Sin, available on 20<sup>th</sup> September 2023, Sarah Hill was the only other poster to quote r.h Sin's poetry without including a contextualising caption or a photograph of themselves. Like Anon 5, Hill uploads a poem that infers a journey from negative well-being to positive well-being. However, whilst the poem that Anon 5 uploaded inferred that the positive arc of the journey was yet to occur, Hill's infers that she has already acquired its benefits. The poem, taken from r.h Sin's collection *We Hope This Reaches You in Time* (r.h Sin Sin 2018), refers to an individual experiencing a healthy romantic relationship in contrast to one beset by toxicity:

“There is nothing wilder than finding a love that feels free. A love that feels pure. A love that doesn't cause you to compromise your peace of mind and emotional health. A love that doesn't require you to feel lost and neglected. A love that only demands that you grow strong enough to conquer the pains that come from existing in a chaotic world” (r.h Sin 2023).

Figure 5 shows that, in response to her suggestion that such a love as r.h Sin describes has been found, Anon 1 has received three likes, three loves and one comment (as of 26<sup>th</sup> September 2023). The comment, made by Anon 2 on 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2023, simply states “Love you!” (Anon 2 2023). Scarski uses his comment to reflect the theme of supportive love within Anon 1's post. In response, Anon 1 reflects Anon 2's emotional expression and indicates a reciprocal relationship: “Love you too babe...Ride or Die” (Anon 1 2023). In addition to matching Anon 2's affective statement, she alludes to a particular aspect of their relationship in the form of their shared enjoyment of motorcycle riding. Therefore, she validates the affective bond she shares with Anon 2 by drawing attention to the strength of feeling they each feel about their shared interest. Furthermore, by including a slogan without explanation, she indicates that the two have previously exchanged the slogan and that it is a recurring theme within their friendship. That no one else has commented on the post (as of 28/09/2023), increases the visibility of the exchange between her and Anon 2 and elevates their relationship above those Anon 1 shares with other members of her network.



The lack of visible community engagement with the post may, in part, be due to Anon 1 not having overtly linked the textual material to her circumstances. Thus, her network may generally infer that the post does not directly apply to Anon 1's self-worth and does not call for emotional support. Nevertheless, one individual commenting on the post and six individuals using one-click communications to demonstrate empathy, is indicative of the importance granted to markers of social support. As highlighted by George Brown and Tirril Harris (2012), getting few likes or comments on status updates is associated with being left out and can lead to psychological maladjustment, whereby an individual feels socially marginalised. Whilst the act of narrating one's identity to a community can be empowering if met with support perceived by the poster as high, an individual can experience negative well-being where they feel a disclosure has not been met with sufficient feedback from their network.

The lack of visible engagement with Anon 1's post may be due to her network generally perceiving, except for six dedicated supporters, that the post does not call for their support. The lack of importance given to validating this particular post may be because it does not contain a photograph or caption that explicitly links it to Anon 1's circumstances. In the week preceding the post, Anon 1 made a total of thirteen posts, with an average of six one-click responses (as of 26<sup>th</sup> September 2023). Therefore, the engagement for the studied post aligns with that of Anon 1's contemporaneous posts. However, it falls short of the two posts that garnered the most one-click engagements, with 26 and 25 respectively. These two posts were the only ones, during the given period, to feature photographs of Anon 1. These two posts are explicitly underlined, by Anon 1, as reflections of her selfhood and elicit her network to validate that selfhood. Furthermore, given the lack of frequency of posts that feature photographs of Anon 1 in addition to directly commenting on her self-worth, the network is particularly encouraged to respond with supportive actions. The post with the highest number of one-click responses contained a caption stating,

“when you photograph in color you capture the surroundings, but when you photograph in black and white...you capture the soul (Anon 1 2023).

Having inferred that she is revealing her soul to her digital audience, Anon 1 encourages her network to respond with support. This support both validates her sense of self and the strength of tie she shares with individuals from her network. Similarly, the other post containing a photograph of Anon 1 also contains a caption, thereby encouraging her network to link the two parts of the post. The caption includes,

“she dances in the rain, she snorts when you make her laugh, and she will always love through her pain. They don’t know what to make of her, because she is like no other. Although she isn’t always accepted, she loves being one of a kind! She is herself, she always will be, take it or leave it” (Anon 1 2023).

In using the photograph to infer that the caption links to herself, Anon 1 again uses her post to draw attention to her selfhood. Again, her network responded by demonstrating support using one-click communications as a means of validating Anon 1’s identity and their connection with Anon 1. The two posts that overtly signpost that they are about the selfhood of Anon 1 have received the highest visible engagement from the sample. This reflects research, by Burke and Develin (2016), which found that social media posts that refer to the poster’s self-worth lead to more supportive responses from the poster’s network. The contrasting feedback garnered from Anon 1’s posts containing selfies and Anon 1’s posts lacking selfies reflects the value placed by Facebook users on supporting connections that overtly refer to their self-worth in their status updates. Whilst individuals might use platform poetry to infer a link between the poetry and their life, support, in the form of post engagement, may be limited unless the poster makes this link explicit either by alluding to the link in their caption or by including a selfie. The remaining three posts that will be studied in this section each include a selfie in addition to poetry by r.h Sin. Each of these content posters make the link between themselves and the poetry clear and infer that the post refers to their selfhoods.

On 18<sup>th</sup> September 2023, Anon 3 uploaded a post that contained a selfie of herself and the following caption: ““Sometimes an angel, sometimes a hell raiser, always a strong woman!” – RH Sin Xo” (Anon 3 2023).

Anon 3 uses these words by r.h Sin to narrate her perception of her identity and calls on her network to indicate the value of this identity by responding with post engagements. Figure 6

highlights that Anon 3 has received a variety of one-click supports in return, such as hearts, likes and cares. These shows of support reflect the tendency for Facebook friends to respond to emotional expression by providing digital markers of support, as identified by Burke and Develin (2016). However, the language of the comment signals value in Anon 3's physical appearance, which is perhaps encouraged by the elements of the photograph. In the photograph, Anon 3 is lying down, in evening wear, whilst gazing upwards beyond the camera. Furthermore, soft lighting has been used to further distinguish Anon 3's face; the properties of the photograph indicate a desire to portray a seductive persona. Amsterdam Bryson, the single commenter (as of 26<sup>th</sup> September 2023), states "Gorgeous", indicating that they perceive Anon 3's self-worth is linked to her body image. That the comment focuses foremost on the physical characteristics of Anon 3 indicates that Bryson perceived that Anon 3 chiefly sought validation for her physical appearance rather than for her character. This highlights that where platform poetry has been posted by a third party and accompanied by a selfie, the poster's followers might attach greater importance to the selfie over the platform poem's content. Therefore, the platform poem's importance may be reduced, relative to the adjoining selfie. This demonstrates that whilst a platform poem might be apt for narrating aspects of the self, where the poster includes additional visual media, the contents of the poetry may be overlooked in favour of the more quickly and easily consumed visual media.

In contrast, when Anon 4 uploaded a post that included r.h Sin poetry, her single responder gestured to both Anon 4's physical appearance and the strength of their relationship. On 9<sup>th</sup> September, Anon 4 wrote, "At some point in Life, you're going to have to start demanding what you deserve and be willing to walk away if what you require can't be provided – r.h Sin" (r.h Sin cited in Anon 4 2023).

The poetry is accompanied by a selfie, with Anon 4 dressed in casualwear, sitting in a car. As can be seen in figure 7, the selfie represents authenticity, given the apparent lack of stylisation via photograph editing tools, and the subject wearing everyday clothing. Anon 4's community has responded through twelve one-click communications (seven loves, four likes and one care as of 16<sup>th</sup> September 2023) and one comment, albeit uploaded in two parts. As with the networks of Anon 5, Anon 1 and Anon 3, Anon 4's network has deployed one-click communications to expediently convey support. While the one-click reactions are expedient,

there is an element of nuance because the user has to actively consider which of the three emotional responses to select.

However, even with users being able to convey an emotional response to content more accurately since the additions of the love and care buttons, as acknowledged by Ferall (2013), the range of interpretations of these reactions means that the use of a one-click reaction is inherently vague. For example, in this particular post, the use of the ‘like’ button might signify approval of r.h Sin’s poetry, the selfie of Anon 4 or the perceived sentiment behind Anon 4’s post. Meanwhile, the use of the care icon might represent an emotional connection with the themes of the poetry or the strength of sympathy for Anon 4’s circumstances. It is perhaps significant that the majority of responders selected the option (love) that most strongly signifies affect. The option indicates a desire by Anon 4’s network to demonstrate a strong sentiment either towards her decision to share her selfie and r.h Sin’s poetry or towards the persona of Anon 4. The latter option would represent a move, by Anon 4’s network to respond to the themes of self-worth in her post by signalling, in the strongest emotional terms facilitated by the reaction options, that Anon 4 is right to demonstrate self- worth.

The final example of r.h Sin’s poetry being used by a third party on Facebook to encourage support from a network is a post by Anon 6. On 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2021, Anon 6 uploaded a post where she first includes a line of poetry by r.h Sin: “two damaged people trying to heal each other, is love – R.H. Sin” (r.h Sin cited in Anon 6 2021). In contrast to the other content posters studied in this section, Anon 6 includes a contextualising message beneath the poetry:

“this kinda relationship is difficult to sustain but if they’re able to heal from their trauma (try to help each other out through their issues). Then yes it becomes a beautiful intimacy of understanding...” (Anon 6 2021).

The last element of Anon 6’s post is a selfie of her in the passenger seat of a car with sunlight pouring in behind her as she stares into the distance. Together, these elements create a narrative of her life that allows her network to contextualise the poem and better gauge the most helpful way to respond.

The caption, whereby Anon 6 expands on the central ideas of the poem, draws attention to the relevance of the content to her personal experiences. Her contextualising caption mimics the narrative progression of r.h Sin's poetry. r.h Sin first alludes to individuals having undergone trauma, before shifting perspective to the process of these individuals attempting to heal one another, before underlining that such a relationship is indicative of love. Similarly, she first alludes to experiences of trauma, before noting the process of individuals helping one another recover from traumatic experiences and finally highlighting that such an experience can achieve a beautiful intimacy. Both the poetry and the contextualising caption follow the pattern of trauma, unity and emotional healing. The endpoint of emotional reward is symbolically referenced in the accompanying selfie.

Altogether, this chapter has addressed the scope for third parties to attain support by linking the emotive content of platform poetry to their life narratives. It has been argued that through the act of publicly using platform poetry to narrate their lives, third parties change the function of the poetic text. Whilst the platform poem's author would typically encourage the broad audience to apply the poem to their lives, the third-party poster focuses attention on their selfhood. The degree to which the third-party poster does this depends on whether they included other elements to their post that call further attention to the link between themselves and the poem. The next chapter will expand on the ability of individuals to use platform poetry to narrate their selfhood by focusing attention on groups who face barriers to articulating their selfhood on social media, and how, in platform poetry communities, individuals contest their community's suppressions.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: INSTIGATING BENEFITS FOR THE SELF AND THE COMMUNITY IN TOXIC TERRAIN**

The previous chapter detailed how third-party re-posting between Instagram and Facebook enables new contextual meanings to be generated through the new circumstances in which they are posted. This chapter will build on the scope of self-articulation on social media by addressing the implications of platform architecture on the identity performances of particular groups. It will consider how mainstream social media sites, driven by an economic drive to maximise user attention, share platform architecture characteristics that negatively impact the well-being of its users. Through this focus, the chapter will address how platform capitalism affects how individuals form communities and perform their identities on social media. It will consider how the consequences of platform capitalism negatively impact the ability of social media platforms as sites of wellbeing benefit. With this idea in mind, the chapter will finish with an examination of how individuals within the platformity that Clickfortaz has built, and is at the forefront of, utilise the technological affordances of YouTube to assert their voice, and other voices within their platformity, in spite of the platform's exclusionary algorithmic element.

### **Platform Capitalism and Conflict Preservation**

The process of social media platforms being structured and policed to derive capital from user data has been referred to as 'platform capitalism' by Alexander Cho (2017). The focus on maximising profitability leads to a mainstream focus that repeats

“a long history of raced and sexualised normative assumptions of who and what kind of behaviour is assumed in public” (pg. 3184).

Cho identifies that the link between profit-making and mainstream appeal excludes the sociological interests of communities marginalised on the basis of race and sexuality. Internet technologies have repeated sociohistorical conceptions of racial hierarchies, acceptable sexualities and appropriate gender roles. The technologies have proven apt for the movement of capital, through their expansion of existing markets and creation of new markets. However,

this comes with the shifting of unequal social relations from the physical world onto digital space. As Tressie Cottom (2020) argues, internet technologies “have facilitated, legitimized, and transformed states and capital within a global racial hierarchy” (pg. 442) whereby dominant cyberculture excludes marginalised people. She indicates that the extraction of profit, from user data on social media, is a privilege for those occupying favourable racial positions in existing social relations. Whilst the accessibility and usage of data might appear racially neutral on the surface, advantaged whiteness is often situated within different levels of data collection and data usage.

Stephen Cave and Kanta Dihal (2020) identify that professional status, concerning the scope to contribute to the formation of digital technologies, reproduces racial hierarchies, with user experiences of these technologies being tailored towards white attributes. Whiteness as a “power to exclude” (Bhandar 2018, pg.7) is present in the technological interfaces of digital platforms. With the emergence of social media platforms came new tools to perform racist speech, such as the covert use of racist memes and the deployment of emojis. Safiya Noble (2018) identifies that this technological extension of sociality reflects the continual interaction between humans and new technology, with social media companies indirectly spawning new ways of performing and amplifying discrimination. As noted by Johan Farkas and Ariadna Matamoros-Fernández (2021), social media platforms and their associated paralanguages have been weaponised by far-right leaders and white-supremacists. The forms of racism practiced on different social media platforms, such as Instagram, Tumblr and Facebook, are reflective of the technological interfaces of the sites. Simultaneously, as Mattias Ekman (2019) argues, the racist attitudes themselves are reflective of the growing influence of far-right politics within Europe, America and beyond. Commercial platforms provide means for the amplification of such discourse and the organisation of anti-immigration groups within and beyond online spaces. Furthermore, they normalise racist attitudes through the process of individuals providing personal contexts for mainstream news stories (Ekman 2019).

The act of drawing from personal contexts, whilst expressing sentiments that are reflective of a particular group identity, means that social media communities that are built around racist expression are avenues that can be used to circulate and reinforce negative affect. As Margreth Lünenborg (2019) indicates, such communities are not solely defined by its members’

dedication to displaying solidarity and empathy. Rather, these communities can become, what Ausserhofer et al (2016) term, ‘networks of outrage’, whereby there is an emphasis on disseminating information, in the form of personal narratives and right-wing discourse, for fellow members to self-educate themselves. This emphasis on education within the group increases a sense of collective empathy whilst reinforcing the parameters of inclusion and exclusion. Therefore, in digital spaces, rising rates of affective discourse around social issues that have been weaponised to incite racial hatred have created conditions that query the parameters of publicly acceptable communication.

### **The Regulation of Hate Speech on Social Media**

In the absence of any transnational regulator, countries have differed in how they regulate hate speech on social media, with Germany having enacted particularly stringent laws about how social media platforms treat hate speech. NetzDG, the German Network Enforcement Act, specifies that digital platforms will be fined €50 million should they fail to delete ‘obviously illegal’ hate speech more than 24 hours after being notified of its presence. This concrete regulatory approach contrasts with the discretion afforded by the government of the United States and the legal position of the United Kingdom (Johnson 2018). In the United Kingdom, self-regulation has traditionally been privileged over state regulation, with Section 5 of the 2013 Defamation Act stipulating that for operators of websites,

“it is a defence for the operator to show that it was not the operator who posted the statement on the website” (Defamation Act, 2013).

To avoid liability, a digital intermediary is required to prove it was not culpable for the posting of a defamatory statement. This means the liability is solely placed on the individual who posted defamatory content online, with the digital platform that facilitated the defamation avoiding liability. An exception arises when the claimant alleging defamation is unable to identify the individual who posted the defamatory material or, when

“the claimant gave the operator a notice of complaint in relation to the statement, and...the operator failed to respond to the notice of complaint in accordance with any provision contained in regulations” (Defamation Act, 2013).



Digital platform operators are afforded a statutory defence with the caveat that they remove the defamatory material within a reasonable period. The length of time that constitutes a ‘reasonable period’ has not been legally defined given this period varying from case to case.

In 2020, the Online Harms White Paper was issued by the government of the United Kingdom with the aims of providing social media users with safer digital environments and building public trust in digital platforms amidst rises in harmful content on social media. Whilst emphasising the need to regulate speech that falls within the remit of hate speech, this regulatory framework was designed with a view to not impinge upon freedom of expression. Section 5.12 of the Online Harms White Paper states,

“it will ensure that the new regulatory requirements do not lead to a disproportionately risk averse response from companies that unduly limits freedom of expression” (Online Harms White Paper 2020).

This indicates an ambition to simultaneously encourage an open digital environment with the caveat that the space removes harmful material to a proportionate extent. As Almeida et al (2022) argue, the tension between facilitating expression and reducing harmful speech was not adequately addressed in the White Paper as the infringement of the users’ rights to freedom of expression was not offset by the extent to which the regulation could reduce hate speech on social media. For example, the Bill did not address private communications on social media and did not tackle harmful comments sent to the inboxes of a social media user. Therefore, the regulatory realm of the Bill did not extend to Facebook Messenger, Direct Messages on Instagram or Fan Mail on Tumblr. This was a significant regulatory gap, as a significant proportion of cyberbullying occurs in private messages.

The absence of private communications in the Bill was largely because it would have interfered with the communicatory rights of individuals, highlighting the crossover between public policy, modes of platform governance, and human rights law. Further complicating this relationship was, as Victoria Nash asserts, the central presence of “an unhelpful elision between illegal and legal-but-harmful-content” (2019, pg.18). The allusion to ‘legal-but-harmful-content’ was unhelpful as, given its breadth, harm warrants an interpretive element. Whilst the focus on ‘harm’ justified the need for regulatory intervention, the Online Harms

White Paper did not adequately expand on how the presence of the legislation would have specifically decrease the severity of the harms experienced. Without a significant evidence base, which was contextualised to provide clarity about how the regulation would have concretely decreased harm, it was unclear how the regulation would have satisfied its broad ambitions.

In September 2023, the U.K government's Online Safety Bill, which confronts a previous lack of onus on making social media companies legally responsible for user safety on their platforms, passed its final parliamentary debate. This means that the legislation is ready to become law, which the technology secretary, Michelle Donelan, states, marks

“an enormous step forward in our mission to make the UK the safest place in the world to be online” (Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and Donelan 2023).

Donelan makes this statement about the Bill's stated focus on stronger protections for children, greater control for adults and increased clarity for digital platforms. The Bill indicates a requirement on online services to be proactive when managing the risk of negative user well-being. This involves the regulator, Ofcom, being granted the power to decide the Code of Practice digital platforms must follow. It will be enforced through the regulator, Ofcom, being granted the power to hand out fines of up to £18 million or 10% of their global annual revenue, depending on which is larger. The Code of Practice will involve several measures targeted towards protecting the safety of children. As specified by the press release authored by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), and Donelan (2023), these include preventing or, where this is not possible, quickly removing illegal content, such as content promoting self-harm, preventing age- inappropriate content being accessed by children, enforcing age limits on social media users and implementing age-checking measures, publishing risk assessments to make publicly transparent the risks and dangers faced by children on mainstream social media platforms, and ensuring children and parents have accessible means to report harms they have experienced on social media platforms.

In addition to the protective measures that social media companies will be bound to put in place for children, the press release outlines that the Bill will also empower adults to have greater control of the content they view. The press release specifies that social media companies will

need to ensure illegal content is removed, before stating that social media platforms will have a legal responsibility to enforce the promises made to users in the terms and conditions offered to users before they sign up. The press release also asserts that social media platforms will be required to give users the option of filtering harmful content. Within the updated Bill, the previous requirement on social media platforms to implement measures against actions that are ‘legal but harmful’ has been removed. This move lessens the potential for social media platform designers to discriminate against particular forms of content that are not illegal but go against a particular ideological leaning.

The legislation guards against the lack of transparency and scope for misuse that would be facilitated by social media companies being called on to censor legal but harmful content. However, the legislation itself contains a clause that is problematic insofar as it encourages social media platforms to enforce the censorship of previously legal content created by sex workers. At the time of writing, the clause (16 of section 7 priority offences) introduces an offence to be charged at website platforms for “inciting or controlling prostitution for gain” (Home Office 2022). This clause is targeted towards stopping traffickers from exploiting victims through using social media platforms to advertise sexual services. However, greater nuance is required in the wording of the clause to safeguard independent sex workers, whose work remains legal in the United Kingdom. In response to the clause, the English Collective of Prostitutes stresses that regarding criminal action, migrant and women of colour are particularly targeted (English Collective of Prostitutes 2022). This is partly due to the disproportionate policing of racial minorities and the lack of access to state support faced by migrant communities. Therefore, the Online Safety Bill will exacerbate the legal and social inequalities faced by migrants and women of colour undertaking sex work. Thus, whilst the Online Safety Bill provides a greater degree of protection for children and adults on social media platforms, regarding hate speech, it has increased the likelihood of social media platforms marginalising vulnerable people and facilitating their harm offline.

### **Marginalised Communities and Algorithmic Bias**

Whilst the previous section explored the forthcoming Online Safety Bill as a driver of further exclusion for certain communities, this section will demonstrate how social media platforms,

themselves, exclude already marginalised communities. The central driver of this exclusion is algorithmic technology, which hinders the flow of content that is not deemed to carry appeal to mainstream audiences.

Angwin et al (2016) state algorithmic functions have enabled advertisers to exclude ethnic minorities from viewing advertisements for accommodation. As part of their study on Facebook's efficiency at preventing advertisers from excluding users by race, the investigative newsroom, ProPublica, purchased dozens of rental housing advertisements on Facebook. They requested that the advertisements be invisible to particular demographics of users, such as African Americans, Jews, expats from Argentina, Spanish speakers and people with an interest in Islam, Sunni Islam and Shia Islam. All of these requests were approved in less than three minutes aside from the request for the advert to be invisible to people interested in Islam, Sunni Islam and Shia Islam, which was approved after 22 minutes. What Angwin et al emphasise is the potential, firstly, for Facebook users to take advantage of the capacity of social media algorithms to marginalise particular users and, secondly, for these wilful marginalisations to be overlooked by those tasked with preventing marginalisation. Whilst, in 2017, Facebook confronted these issues by removing the technological capacity of advertisers to exclude ethnic minorities from viewing adverts for housing, the incident highlighted how algorithmic technology can be used to decrease transparency and exacerbate social ills.

Brooke Duffy (2020) draws attention to how platform architects can play primary roles in particular content producers being marginalised on social media. There might not be an intention to marginalise such users but in censoring particular content, platform moderators inadvertently censor particular content makers. She underlines that as a byproduct of such censorship, content creators experience insecurity about how their future work will be treated by the algorithm. Through using the term 'algorithmic precarity' to account for this insecurity, she asserts that algorithms on social media can impact the livelihoods of certain content creators. Furthermore, the sense of 'precarity' indicates how, having been censored, particular creators would experience anxiety knowing that their work, because of its very nature, is under threat from the algorithm. She uses the term to refer to the controlling role of algorithms within the labour market, whereby social media content creators experience the impact of algorithmic systems. These individuals, since digital technologies became broadly socially relevant, have

relied upon metricized markers of success to justify their products. These success-markers include evidence of engagement, in the form of subscriptions, likes and content view counts.

To generate these success-markers, a social media influencer requires their persona to be visible to potential consumers of their content. With algorithmic software being able to alter the visibility of their content, influencers on social media, whose income is predicated on engagement with their digital content, need to understand how algorithmic feeds detect what content to make visible and what to obscure. As Erin Klawitter and Eszter Hargittai (2018) observe, when discussing how algorithmic software has impacted on the practices of content producers using Pinterest, social media influencers

“likely exert more time and effort on getting to know these systems than average users” (pg. 3504).

For digital content producers, skills in algorithm gaming are increasingly viewed as a key component of the job. However, the benefit of being adept at navigating algorithmic biases is limited to those whose socioeconomic status does not act as a barrier to achieving such skills. They identify a positive correlation between socioeconomic status and possessing the internet skills to recognise algorithmic behaviours and leverage that knowledge when producing content for a public. Having overcome the socioeconomic barriers to attaining these skills, individuals face further barriers to making their work visible to a public due to digital platforms organising content curators according to their own value metrics such as view counts, comments and shares. Chloé Nurik states,

“motivated by profit generation, platforms are incentivized to segment users and treat them differently based on their perceived social or economic value to the site” (Nurik 2019, pg. 2890).

Algorithmic programming enables such platforms to make design decisions that are assumptive of which identities will best expedite flows of capital. Cho argues that the use of a white, heteronormative algorithmic lens, “the globally preeminent public vehicle for capital for centuries – is not a coincidence” (Cho 2018 pg. 3185). As a mechanism to sort and classify, algorithms are not neutral; rather, algorithmic technology, on social media, is

grounded in the predicted value of groups split along lines of race, sexuality, language and age. Information is selectively exposed to particular groups, leading to polarizations that reflect social hierarchies whilst leading to disparities in the social and material resources available to dominant and marginalised groups, whilst negatively impacting their scope as social actors. This experience of undermined civic participation, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section, impacts on the well-being of individuals who may already be experiencing the adverse effects of marginalisation in offline settings. The marginalising effect of digital algorithms can exacerbate already existing mental health issues experienced by some members of these marginalised communities.

Brooke Duffy and Colten Meisner (2022) demonstrate that the practice of applying different rules to different users, based on the hierarchies set up by platform architects, is apparent across different digital platforms. The systems of governance that social media platforms adopt carry implications on which social media creators experience visibility, and greater opportunities for career success as social media influencers, and which communities can consume content that they feel represents them. The threat of invisibility to the livelihoods of content creators disproportionately affects individuals from groups that have traditionally occupied marginalised positions offline. For Bucher (2017), the impact of regulation, conducted through algorithmic technology, extends beyond the creative economy on social media. Bucher identifies that as algorithmic technologies develop and become more adept at quantifying patterns of engagement and human interaction, the digital actions of users become more reflective of algorithmic patterns, as these users develop a more thorough understanding of how algorithms operate. A feedback loop occurs whereby particular identities are promoted by an algorithm whilst groups based on gender, sexuality and race experience marginalisation and alter their habits to cater to the apparent preferences of the algorithm. Hence, as Florian Saurwein and Charlotte Spencer-Smith (2021) argue, algorithms can reinforce pre-existing social inequalities and exacerbate the harms associated with them. Historically marginalised identities are subjected to a process of digital social ordering, which economically impacts content producers whilst undermining the proliferation of cultural expressions considered non-normative and reinforcing feelings of social exclusion. Ultimately, these processes alter how individuals from marginalised communities engage with digital media.

Duffy and Meisner (2022) examine perceptions of algorithmic discrimination amongst individuals from historically marginalised identities, including black and Asian social media users. Their data consists of interviews with 30 social media users from such backgrounds and evidences the users' experiences of censorship across digital platforms. The type of censorship utilised is 'shadowbanning', which is a light censorship technique that restricts the flow of a certain type of content across a digital platform. Duffy and Meisner identify that the unequal treatment of digital content published by social media users has led to some individuals from marginalised groups experiencing feelings of anticipatory anxiety that leads to a logic of risk aversion. The anticipatory anxiety is driven by a fear that content that references the experiences of non-normative identities will be censored should the individual choose to upload it. A second aspect of this anxiety is the anticipation that such censorship, given the proliferation and apparent popularity of hate videos that target their non-normative identity, may exacerbate already existing feelings of social marginalisation.

Instagram has been accused by users of playing the role of moral arbiter regarding the content it makes available to broader audiences on its platform. In her article on Mashable, Anna Lovine (2023) highlights that users uploading content that does not warrant banning, but that Instagram chooses not to visibilise for users outside of their personal network, have been told that their accounts are 'non-recommendable'. The term 'non-recommendable' marks a move by Meta to rebrand the user-generated term 'shadowban'. By doing so, Meta have moved to shift attention from the connotations associated with shadowban, which signify a platform actively choosing to censor particular content. Instead, non-recommendable places the onus onto the content creator, with the implication being that the platform user has created material that the platform are unable to make visible for other users. Nevertheless, Lovine states that for those who experience their content being marked as non-recommendable by the platform, there is an accompanying feeling of having been subjected to an aggressive act of silencing.

Black creative output has, as Ball-Burack et al (2021) have identified, been disproportionately censored. Moreover, Cotter (2023) highlights that some individuals from black communities experience a sense of being undermined by Instagram's algorithmic technology. In the context of the Black Lives Matter protests, after expressly communicating their racial identities, using #black, content creators noticed that their posts had lower engagement than usual. The

monitoring of racialised hashtags and the blanket flagging of them as harmful and in need of censorship, underlines the biases that can be present in automated systems. Social media is an important space for black activism given the potential for hashtags to signify a movement and spread its reach. The ability to broaden a movement, away from mainstream news outlets, is an important resource for communities whose own narratives have been marginalised by mainstream broadcasters. The Black Lives Matter movement deploys online media to publicise police brutality against black groups in Western societies, with, as highlighted by André Brock (2012), black communities using digital platforms as an alternative public sphere. Brock indicates that social media enables black youth groups to become participants in society where traditional civic and political institutions have underserved them. Thus, a dialectic is apparent whereby what enables participation also shuts it down; racial minorities experience discriminatory censorship on an alternative civic space that has previously offered an experience of agency and voice to racial minorities.

### **Posting Back: User Resistance to Social Media Policies**

Having stressed that platform moderation systems can inadvertently sideline already marginalised communities, the chapter will now shift focus to examining challenges to power in sociotechnical systems. This section will explore how the #FuckTheAlgorithm chant has become semantically loaded with the frustration of marginalised groups at the capacity of an algorithm to define the social and financial success of a user. It will highlight that the resistance communicates user unease at how algorithms feel. The section will therefore examine the affective dimension of protests against social media algorithms. Next, it will consider the #StopHateforProfit campaign against the stances of digital platforms towards hate speech on their sites. The section will consider how the protest embeds broader narratives of political marginalisation and resistance into the hashtag, widening its relevance and encouraging celebrity figures to endorse the cause. Finally, the section will consider the role of platform poets in facilitating spaces of resistance against algorithmic exclusions and oppressions. Through focusing on user articulations of opposition to algorithmic decision-making, the section will further the chapter's foremost focus on the potential of social media platforms, of which algorithmic decision-making is a key component, as sites facilitative of increased user well-being.



### *#FuckTheAlgorithm as a challenge against silencing on digital platforms*

Garfield Benjamin (2022) identifies the earliest, still accessible, use of #FucktheAlgorithm being in a Twitter post in 2011, whereby the poster referred to an article concerning the control of human behaviours. The hashtag has a tradition of being used in resistance to powerful actors being granted the opportunity to control the flow of information. The exclamation was deployed by content creators, on digital platforms, whose daily lives were impacted by algorithms that negatively affected the visibility of their content. In this context, the cry challenges the scope of algorithms on YouTube, Facebook and Instagram to impact the financial and emotional well-being of users whose business success relies upon leads generated on social media. Semantically, the term has become associated with a marginalised individual protesting against their position outside of the meaning-making prioritised by social media platforms. The domination and aggression associated with the term ‘fuck’ indicates a personal sense of having been antagonised by the algorithms used on social media. With algorithms being associated with techno-social regimes of oppression (Noble 2018) and algorithms reinforcing unequal conditions in offline society, #FuckTheAlgorithm represents broader unease with hegemonic power. The hashtag implies that algorithms are not neutral and subverts the notions of meritocracy that those in power, at least ostensibly, espouse. Whilst digital platforms, and particular prominent influencers on such spaces, indicate that social media fame is the result of a meritocratic system, the hashtag indicates algorithms are antagonistic to particular social groups.

The #FuckTheAlgorithm chant garnered mainstream attention when, on a weekend in August 2020, students protested outside the Department for Education. Their protest centred on the use of algorithms, by The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) to predict A-Level results. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the capacity for secondary schools to administer exams was a concern. Teachers were grading students based on their online and face-to-face achievements in class, but there were governmental fears that such a process would inflate results. Consequently, OfQual, as the national administrator for qualifications, designed an algorithm based on past patterns of achievement nationwide. Consequently, universities based their decisions on whether to grant spots to students

according to the algorithmically predicted grades. As the score was based partly on the historical performance of a certain school, the strategy disadvantaged students performing well in underachieving schools. The move by Ofqual to delegate decision-making to algorithmic software was greeted with contestation. This contestation spawned from a lack of trust, from students in marginalised geographical communities, in algorithms to serve the interests of the socially disempowered. The algorithmic model used by Ofqual furthered historical discrimination of students from less affluent areas, whilst encouraging the movement of students from affluent private schools into universities. This is an example of an algorithm furthering unequal power relations and giving rise to historical discriminations. The #FuckTheAlgorithm exclamation's use in the protest about predictive A-Level results highlights its scope to be broadened to challenge the link between algorithms and toxic power in wider society.

With algorithmic media being used as a time-efficient means of organising data in line with the aims of the algorithm users, Ofqual's decision to use this software aligns with temporal logic rather than moral logic. However, this temporal logic reflects a drive towards quick decision making rather than on a more sophisticated notion of how subjects see themselves. There was a significant extent to which the power of the algorithm was perceived by the students to impact their existences. The algorithm's lack of nuance, regarding gauging the specific academic success of individual students, was felt to have had serious consequences for those whom it misrepresented. The negative affective influence of the algorithm and the urgency to confront the felt injustice wrought by algorithmic misuse, influenced the behaviours students deployed to challenge the algorithm. For Bucher, the experience of algorithms is context dependent and is not driven by its 'mathematical recipe' alone:

“what people experience is not the mathematical recipe as such but, rather, the moods, affects and sensations that the algorithm helps to generate” (pg.32).

Bucher indicates the scope of algorithms to elicit affect in its subjects given the emphasis on algorithms 'seeing' user behaviours and, therefore, 'knowing' the user. The algorithm can influence the moods of an individual in relation to particular contexts. Concerning A- Level exam results, where students require particular grades to be accepted to their desired university,

and the decision has family, social, financial and career implications, there is high potential for the algorithmic decision to impact mood. This is an example of the relationship between an algorithm and its subject being mediated by the contextual situation. The contextual situation is significant in imbuing the relationship with an affective dimension, with the affective dimension then influencing the behaviour of the subject in response to the algorithm.

The algorithmic facilitation of meaning-making in social media involves the key element of attention maximisation. Emotionally divisive content is particularly apt for stimulating engagement and is, therefore, a type of content that algorithms prioritise. For Arora and Chowdhury (2021), digital platforms have facilitated a “battlefield through online misogyny, cyberbullying and ‘slut shaming’” (pg. 4). The word ‘battlefield’ is apt, as platforms profit through creating spaces of contestation that provoke site engagement. That such algorithms give increased voice to gendered cyberhate (Jane 2017), whereby online aggression is targeted against girls or women in a technological manifestation of historical oppressions against females, is an example of social media platforms putting financial imperatives above user well-being. The scope for individuals to self-publish, aligned with the networked design of digital platforms and an ethos on engagement over user well-being, has led to groups experiencing offline aggressions having their experiences of marginalisation extended to online spaces.

Users who deem algorithms disruptive to their everyday lives, due to algorithmic behaviours not correlating with their personal interests and circumstances, might, as Patrick Kapsch (2022) indicates, interact purposively with algorithmic systems or move to challenge the algorithm by building social pressure through protest. These antagonistic responses are dependent on the extent to which users perceive harm in the reality-making scope of algorithms, and the immediacy of the harm to their daily lives. There is a correlation regarding the feeling of time-pressure, the perception of harm caused and the subsequent protest action. Part of the logic of algorithms concerns temporality, whereby value is placed on presenting digital content to users at the ‘right’ time. The personalisation of content available to users involves relevance and timeliness, whereby algorithms are designed to make visible the correct content at the optimal time.

Bucher (2017) acknowledges that the temporal logic of algorithmic organisation on social media relies on organizing content to make news feeds ‘feel right’. Algorithms organise information in a way that facilitates user attention, whilst appearing intuitive rather than contrived. Social media platforms use probabilistic projection to further their aim of providing particular users with the right content at the right time. To do this, these platforms analyse user data and usage patterns whilst asserting particular behaviours to demographic categories pertaining to age, gender and geographical location. The jeopardy concerns users who do not align with broad generalities concerning how people within such demographic groups behave. Nevertheless, Bucher highlights that an advantage of working on such probabilities is that

“improvement of those probabilities can be continuously achieved, in the sense that every time the platform is wrong, it can learn to get a little better” (pg. 1706).

Bucher indicates wrong predictions do not, for the system and its operators, contribute to harms that justify its removal, particularly as the system can update its set of probabilities. However, users are deploying antagonistic behaviours that disrupt feelings of being dominated by algorithms on social media. Algorithmic antagonisms are behaviours that disturb the operations of algorithmic systems, meaning that users can counter moves by large companies to shape user behaviours online. For example, in response to Facebook using algorithms to arrange content according to its attention maximisation strategies, users have devised a keyboard shortcut to display content differently. To counter the structural power of Facebook to shape user experiences, users have deployed a ‘h\_chr’ command to force content on their timeline to be ordered chronologically. This marks a departure from the Facebook algorithm organising posts through prioritising content that appears emotionally divisive. Such tactical politics have been deployed against copyright regimes (Riehl 2020) and the perceived infiltration of Zoom into everyday life (Lavigne 2021), with groups responding to the perceived structural holds that are indicative of the power of the state and large organisations. Rather than overtly protesting against algorithmic governance and the structural holds of particular organisations on everyday life, these strategies aim at disturbing the power flows of state power, legislation and the scope of large technological organisations. These subversive behaviours challenge the technologically mediated aggressions of power structures through developing their own ways of enacting technological aggressions. Heemsbergen et al (2022) refer to such behaviours as ‘fucking with

algorithms' whereby subversive technological actions are undertaken to challenge the scope of algorithms to govern behaviours in society.

*These subversive actions are centred on opposing state and corporate control of time, with deployers of antagonistic technological behaviours challenging the power of organisations to map out when user-made content is viewed and how technologies become embedded in daily work practices. In the case of the offline #Fuck the Algorithm protests, undertaken in response to the perceived misuse of algorithms by Ofqual, more overt action was deployed. This was due to the harms attributed to government's use of algorithms being perceived as severe and warranting a more aggressive, higher profile form of dissent. Algorithms have affective dimensions whereby those affected by algorithmic use experience emotional responses linked to their subjective perceptions of how the algorithm has influenced their personal circumstances. When multiple individuals experience a tension between how they identify themselves and how they are identified by the algorithm, communities may form around a shared feeling of algorithmic misjudgement. These groups may then organise dissident behaviour, which will be reflective of the ill-feeling the perceived algorithm misuse generated and the capacity of this misuse to alter the circumstances of the individuals.*

#### ***#StopHateforProfit as a Response to Toxic Speech on Social Media***

The #StopHateforProfit movement was an Instagram boycott, on September 16<sup>th</sup> 2020, that was arranged as a protest against the perceived inaction of its parent site, Facebook, towards hate speech. The move indicated the diminishing trust of social media users in the motivations of digital platforms to structure an inclusive and amicable communicative environment. It responded to rising levels of social media-based discrimination experienced by individuals concerning their religion, race, or sexual identity (ADL 2020). Through boycotting digital platforms, individuals also called attention to the role of advertising revenue in strengthening and validating the business models of social media companies. With the commercial models of digital platforms being driven by user engagement, social media companies profit through the affective labour of their users.

Negative affective labour that concerns hate speech, conspiracy theories and incitements of violence, is particularly apt for driving engagement. Roger McNamee, an adviser for the

#StopHateforProfit campaign, highlights that systems built upon user engagement rely upon tactics of fear and outrage, which means that hate speech, disinformation and conspiracy theories feed the commercial models of digital platforms (Smalley 2020). Digital platforms grant high visibility to such speech, thereby encouraging high user engagement that, although being largely superficial and not conducive to inspiring individuals to look deeply into the issues, serves to further this visibility. Thus, McNamee states that low numbers of individuals with extreme views own a disproportionately large voice in digital society.

Digital communities, based on vocalising the perceived hateworthy qualities of targeted groups, perform hatred as a habit; the habit is then reinforced through the attention such speech generates and the support gotten from those with a shared commitment to the habit. Thomas Szanto (2020) indicates that the extreme affective nature of hate, when made visible on social media, creates a community of hatred where individuals share their commitment to demonstrating contempt for people deemed members of vilified groups. Commitment to hate reinforces itself and is embedded as part of a shared social consciousness. Szanto stresses that hatred becomes repeatedly performed and entrenched as a social identity. These social identities are validated through algorithmic technologies that favour attention over civic value, whereby the depth of engagement is relegated in importance by engagement in and of itself. Regardless of their capacities to undermine or reinforce the world views of fellow users, these identity performances are furthered by social media platforms whose chief concern is generating capital through the attention economy. These digital platforms overlook the well-being of individuals subjected to posters who perform hatred. The specific response of users is not of concern; rather, the scale of the response is prioritised. On an individual level, platforms customise content to cater to the past engagement habits of users. The specific nature of engagement is not considered when platform algorithms are curating individual feeds. Jaron Lanier (2018) states digital platforms have a default aim towards increasing the lengths of time individuals spend in the system and encouraging users to engage with the material in a manner that improves the metrics of the post. A high amount of superficial engagement, through one-click reactions and many brief comments, is favourable, at the level of metrics, to a small amount of in-depth engagement. Social media sites rely upon the habituation of users to digital content as it alters the daily rhythms of individuals and places digital media at the centre. Elinor Carmi (2020) states

“media companies render people, objects and their relations as rhythms and (re)order them for economic purposes (pg.119).

Carmi indicates that digital platforms manipulate the attention of individuals until paying attention to digital content becomes part of their daily routine. Such a daily routine enables social media users to participate in the attention economy and generate capital for digital platforms. The rhythm of their participation becomes a means of control, with advertising revenue at the centre of the benefits digital platform users offer the platform owners. Viewing habits lead to metrics, which lead to algorithms creating individualised news feeds.

Consequently, consumption of digital content increases and, with it, the data available to advertisers and the profits accrued by digital platforms. The #Stophateforprofit digital boycott was partly designed to impact on engagement with advertisements on social media, whilst indicating to advertisers that their associations with digital platforms may be disadvantageous. As Chang Liu and Jianling Ma (2018) argue, the boycott highlighted that some users are aware of how intermediaries benefit from a platform-user relationship that has negatively affected user well-being.

With digital platform users having threatened the commercial logic behind the relationship between digital platforms and advertisers, companies joined the #Stophateforprofit boycott to safeguard their reputations as socially conscious organisations. In July 2020, over 1,200 U.S and European companies participated in the boycott, with a number pausing advertisements on all digital platforms during that month (Forbus 2021). This indicates that the political benefit of joining the boycott outweighed the financial costs of losing out on sales driven by social media-based advertising. The act of business-to-business boycotting indicates a felt need for brands advertising on Facebook to match the consumer response to the transgressing company. With Facebook’s transgression having been deemed salient by news companies, and the company subsequently been publicly criticised for placing profit generation over social welfare, the boycotting brands would have likely seen their consumer support enhanced. This support would be augmented by the boycotting brand demonstrating a corporate social responsibility that counters the perceived social irresponsibility of the transgressor. The actions of Facebook indicate a prioritisation of the economic interests of the company over the welfare of their users and broader society. The subsequent actions of the boycotting companies demonstrated a will,

albeit one which may have been cynically motivated by the opportunity for advantageous personal relations, to support altruistic initiatives.

To the boycotting brands, there was a sense of temporal logic to their decision to remove their presence from Facebook. The brands' relationship to the digital platform was interwoven with a sense of timing, whereby it was perceived that an association with the platform, at the particular time of its moral ethics being subject to user protests, would lead to negative associations between the brands and Facebook. The focal social issue, concerning Facebook's perceived immoral treatment of hate speech, had been concentrated into a particular window whereby the advertising brand's action during that window could impact consumer trust in the brand, as indicated by Gustafsson et al (2021).

Particular celebrities, for whom prosocial behaviours are part of their public identity, joined brands in boycotting Facebook and Instagram. For celebrities who had championed social responsibilities relevant to the scope of the protest, declining to join the protest would have potentially caused the negative perceptions of Facebook and Instagram to be associated with the celebrity figure. Amidst the growing popularity of the movement, celebrity human rights activists were alerted to the campaign, leading to numerous high-profile figures taking part in a 24-hour Instagram boycott on Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> September 2020. The boycott was arranged to protest against the perceived inaction of its parent site, Facebook, regarding hate speech. Mathieu Deflem (2022) highlights that the symbolic value of celebrities participating in a public-led protest raises awareness of the event whilst legitimising the movement. However, the authenticity of celebrity participation is complicated through celebrities needing to manage their personas in a manner similar to brands. This similarity concerns celebrities, like brands, managing their identities through obscuring calculated artifice and emphasising sincerity. Concerning celebrities aligning themselves to activist causes, sincerity might be achieved through drawing attention to the personal costs they have faced due to the misuse of power. As argued by Jennifer Whitmer (2021), celebrities who have not faced such personal costs, might feel the need to rationalize their participation as an ally or sympathiser. The process of celebrities explaining their allegiances to a cause further justifies the cause whilst demonstrating the affective ties high profile individuals have to the movement.



On her Instagram profile, Kim Kardashian-West directly addresses her public whilst justifying her participation in the Instagram boycott:

“I love that I can connect directly with you through Instagram and Facebook, but I can’t sit by and stay silent while these platforms continue to allow the spreading of hate, propaganda and misinformation” (Kardashian-West 2020).

Kardashian-West personally appeals to her audience to understand her reasoning for joining the protest. The personal appeal enhances the relational aspect of her Instagram presence, whereby she demonstrates respect for her individual followers through addressing them directly. She further facilitates the relationship she shares with her followers, as her communication strengthens the illusionary intimate relationship between her and her followers. Such a relationship can be described as parasocial as fans of Kardashian-West perceive a two-sided relationship with the celebrity, but that sense of intimate connection is imagined rather than grounded in reality. The performance of relatedness between herself and her fans furthers the scope for Kardashian-West to be a role model who motivates followers to take similar action.

Kardashian-West’s personal motivation for action is further contextualised in her following sentence: “misinformation shared on social media has a serious impact on our elections and undermines our democracy” (Kardashian-West 2020). The possessive pronoun, ‘our’, indicates that Kardashian-West and the intended reader each share a stake in the U.S elections; thus, the statement is excluding in its own way. Kardashian-West directs her attention at those members of her fanbase who are U.S citizens and, consequently, are facing individual costs due to the toxic role of social media on U.S elections. In her celebrity activism, Kardashian-West highlights the individual emotional losses faced by those who, like her, identify as a U.S citizen. The emotive argument made by Kardashian-West is transformed into emotional capital, given that she assumes the role of custodian of her fellow U.S citizens’ emotional stake in an imagined U.S national identity. Kardashian-West implies that she and her U.S followers are undergoing a shared experience of injustice due to the actions of powerful social entities, such as governmental figures and global businesses. She creates what Jutta Weldes (2019) terms ‘solidarity capital’, which is a particular form of social capital that marks

community members as contesting a shared position of marginalisation. This has been termed solidarity capital because members of the community feel a sense of unity that is driven by a shared focus on challenging their marginalisation. Community members articulate solidarity as it grants meaning to their actions and thereby reinforces their own sense of identity.

Kardashian-West claims solidarity capital through taking on the role as political spokesperson for impacted individuals.

In contrast to Kardashian-West, whose emotional work places her at the centre of the activist response, Katy Perry positions herself as a sympathetic agent, albeit whilst also producing an individualist ethos. Perry states,

“I love sharing my music and my life with you on Instagram and Facebook, but TBH I can’t sit idly by while these platforms turn a blind eye to groups and posts spreading hateful disinformation and intentional confusion. I’m standing with @naacp, @colorofchange, and @adl\_national” (katyperry 2020).

Perry draws attention to her peripheral position in the #StopHateforProfit activist cause, as a supporter of civil rights organizations that aim to disrupt inequalities in online and offline settings. The three organizations Perry cites are the *National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People*, *Color of Change* and Anti-Defamation League, with the first two organisations focusing on racial discrimination and the latter contesting the defamation of Jewish people. Perry presents a persona as an authentic ally who, whilst not indicating direct experiences of racial discrimination, demonstrates an emotional connection to those directly affected by such behaviours. Through opening her post with a statement that elevates her position as an agent of justice, unwilling to ‘turn a blind eye’, before demonstrating allyship with organisations supporting the causes of minority groups, Perry, like Kardashian-West, references both individualism and solidarity. Both Kardashian-West and Perry use Instagram posts to publicise their stances against Instagram. These protests against the platform, from within, underline the capacity for community building centred around individuals sharing a sense of altruistic purpose amidst the questionable ethics of moderation on digital platforms. The process of presenting individualism and solidarity confers visibility to both the celebrity and the activist cause.

Kardashian-West and Perry, as a spokesperson and a sympathiser respectively, each accrue forms of capital through their activist stances. By acting as focal points for the stance against Instagram and Facebook, Kardashian-West and Perry gain solidarity capital as users demonstrate support for the celebrity and associate the celebrity with the broader stance against power. Simultaneously, through indicating altruistic personality traits, the celebrities elicit emotional engagement from followers who perceive them as kind and charismatic. Through this follower lens, activist celebrities achieve emotional capital, whereby the parasocial relationship between fans and a celebrity influencer is marked by affect, on the part of the fan, which, as asserted by Helga Nowotny (1981), is usually reserved for the private, instead of the public, sphere. It is the presentation of individualism and solidarity that contributes to the capital obtained by the activist celebrity, given that the celebrity becomes a focal point that fans can claim allegiance to, whilst the celebrity constructs a persona of kindness and charisma, which facilitates affective connections to the celebrity.

In representing groups of individuals who feel unable to flourish in mainstream society, either due to personal circumstances or the broader structural oppressions they face, platform poets form personas that navigate between individualism and community solidarity in a manner similar to the aforementioned celebrities. The platformity building endeavours of the platform poet might be directed towards harnessing individuals experiencing internal battles such as challenges overcoming social anxiety, relationship trauma or feelings of inadequacy regarding career progression. Alternatively, or additionally, the platform poet might build an affective community in response to feelings of marginalisation stemming from broader social issues concerning the treatment of individuals based on gender, race or sexuality. In either case, for the platform poet, the act of platformity building promotes their own brand as someone who sympathises with, and speaks for, marginalised individuals. The offshoot benefit of the platform poet's promotion of self is the formation of an affective community whereby marginalised individuals gain a sense of mutuality. Similarly to Kardashian-West and Perry, the platform poet achieves emotional capital by being identified by their followers as someone who has knowledge, understanding and empathy towards their individual dilemmas. The platform poet synergises their poetic content, which concerns advising readers on how to overcome life obstacles, with their community-building work outside of their poetry. Chiefly, this is achieved through the platform poet using captions to draw further attention to their

moral efforts or, as will be highlighted in the next section, through the platform poet aligning themselves with a particular social cause.

The moral component of emotional capital is alluded to by Maeve O'Brien (2008) who indicates that

“emotional capital is a resource that specifically involves mothers in performing what they identify as the ‘moral work’ of being a good mother through caring for their children” (pg. 138).

O'Brien infers that the resource of emotional capital is limited to mothers given the aspect of care that is inherent within the role. However, as the aspect of caregiver can be detached from the role of mother so too can the emotional capital that is linked to the ability to perform a caring role. As mentioned earlier with regard to activist celebrities, an individual can exhibit emotional capital through demonstrating an ability and willingness to engage with, and support, the needs of others. A platform poet might highlight that their desire to spend time and energy catering to the well-being of their followers reflects their broader focus on helping the causes of certain marginalised groups. By doing so, the platform poet emphasises their exceptional moral character and, consequently, their capacity to be trusted by their followers. The followers might demonstrate their commitment to their platformity by performing their commitment to the causes championed by the platformity figurehead.

However, due to a combination of social media algorithms following a normative massification logic and being ill-equipped to censor hate speech with sensitivity, a perception exists among individuals from marginalised communities that their efforts to support particular causes are being undermined. Far right rhetoric that incites violence utilizes coded language that circumvents digital algorithms, making such posts and comments difficult to identify and censor (Ganesh 2018). With platform poets typically using their poetry to address the causes of historically suppressed groups, the causes they champion beyond their poetry similarly address such suppressions. They are the types of causes that address issues that have, through design or fault, been suppressed on digital platforms.

Consequently, platformity members, suspecting that they have been, or will be, censored for using comments to support the platform poet's cause, undertake strategies that circumvent the social media algorithm. Platformity members contribute to the resistances of those whose cause has been acknowledged by the platform poet, in addition to resisting their own suppression caused by the algorithm. Through undertaking strategies to resist the algorithm and sharing them with fellow platformity members so that they might follow their lead, platformity members reinforce the notion that the group space is one of facilitation, both for their own needs and the needs of other groups whose identities have been suppressed. Consequently, individuals experience stronger ties with fellow platformity members due to them jointly participating actively in a shared cause. Therefore, although not directly participating in the resistance against social media algorithms, the platform poet plays a facilitative role in building a community of solidarity, where members feel obliged to support the minority causes championed by the poet and, in doing so, resist the platform's tendencies to undermine such causes.

### **Clickfortaz, A Platformity Cause and Circumventing the YouTube Algorithm**

This section will provide an example of a platformity protesting against a social media platform's moderation system from within. The platform poet, Clickfortaz, inadvertently instigates this process through championing a social movement, Black Lives Matter, whose members have faced censorship on social media; therefore, her followers surmise that the Clickfortaz platformity will face censorship when they try to support the cause. On 5<sup>th</sup> January 2020, Clickfortaz uploaded a video on YouTube and declaring that the proceeds of the video will be donated to Black Lives Matter causes. The video is entitled *i wore a different aesthetic everyday for a week* and, in the caption beneath the video, Clickfortaz states "All the money made from this video will be donated to BLACK LIVES MATTER causes. Please share this video" (Clickfortaz 2020). Through calling her community to action, by encouraging them to share the video, Clickfortaz incites them to perform an act of labour rooted in the digital realm. This labour involves individuals utilising the platform's technological interface to select 'share' and post the content on their own feed to visible the content to their own followers. However, some of her followers have stated that there is an inherent bias against the Black Lives Matter

cause that has meant YouTube's algorithm has prevented them from undertaking the task she has outlined. In response, these followers have sought to circumvent the algorithm's control by undertaking particular strategies of resistance. Later, this section will stress that in using the platform to protest against its properties, the protestors inadvertently reinforce the platform's properties; nevertheless, this does not mean the resistance is meaningless.

Regarding furthering the Black Lives Matter campaign, Clickfortaz shared a link to an educational resource pertaining to how individuals can assist different aspects of the campaign. Through following the link, individuals access a site entitled 'Ways you can Help', which is part of a website called [blacklivesmatter.carrd.co](https://blacklivesmatter.carrd.co). Readers can learn of how they can donate to different parties within the Black Lives Matter movement, including victims, protestors and black owned businesses (blacklivesmatter 2023). These parties, and the Black Lives Matter movement more broadly, benefit from the visibility that her act of sharing grants them. Furthermore, they benefit through Clickfortaz indicating, by her act of donating the monetization proceeds of the video to Black Lives Matter causes, that she values the work that the causes are undertaking. Given her position at the forefront of the platformity she has built, wherein she occupies the position of role model for followers who identify with her persona, Clickfortaz has particular ability to influence her followers. Her scope to influence is furthered through her content historically being focused on guiding users to make positive, wholesome life choices.

However, the respondents to Clickfortaz's video do not solely comprise of individuals who predate her alignment to the Black Lives Matter cause. In using the description section to underline the video's connection to the cause, Clickfortaz flags to the algorithmic system that the content is relevant when an individual searches for 'Black Lives Matter.' Clickfortaz 'games' the platform's technological infrastructure to serve her purposes; she demonstrates her capacity to act agentively in response to a technological setting that focuses on guiding the actions of users. Nevertheless, her action simultaneously benefits the platform as the act of increasing her viewer count increases platform engagement, which heightens the platform's attractiveness to advertisers. In demonstrating knowledge of how the YouTube algorithm works, Clickfortaz does not challenge but, rather, assists the platform.

Through Clickfortaz's hashtagging of Black Lives Matter, her viewing population comprises of individuals who, having searched for Black Lives Matter, have been recommended her video. One such individual is Leo-yx9xm (2020) who, on 9<sup>th</sup> June 2020, stated

“this is such a cute video. i came here from the blm movement and never watched a video from you before but i think i might stay. :) also thank you so much for donating!”

Having had his attention directed to the video through YouTube's algorithmic system, Leo-yx9xm indicates a desire to remain within the Clickfortaz platformity. Furthermore, Leo-yx9xm reinforces his position as a representative of the Black Lives Matter movement, rather than as an established part of the Clickfortaz platformity, by thanking her for her contribution to the cause with which he identifies. Whilst Clickfortaz's call for action encourages her followers to become supporters of the Black Lives Matter cause, it simultaneously facilitates the movement of Black Lives Matter supporters into Clickfortaz's video content and enlarges her platformity. However, whilst assisting her platformity building efforts, the platform algorithm has also, according to some members, hindered her ability to carry out her aims concerning the Black Lives Matter movement.

Platformity members have indicated that despite their desire to assist the platformity cause of raising money for Black Lives Matter, the technological systems of YouTube have prevented such action. These members state that their inability to view advertisements on the Clickfortaz video is due to an ideological leaning, by YouTube, that favours the suppression of black voices in favour of right-leaning politics videos. Bryant (2020) argues that whilst the algorithm has not been programmed with an alt-right agenda in mind, it is the unintended consequence of a focus on maximising user attention in an attempt to appeal to advertisers. She posits that the YouTube algorithm

“may have found an unexpected relationship between racism and the right amount of curiosity that prompts a person to watch YouTube videos” (pg. 87).

The algorithm has identified a tightly-bound relationship between right leaning content on the platform, meaning that when a user pursues right-leaning content, they are more likely to gravitate to make leaps from one video to another. As Jonas Kaiser and Adrian Rauchfleisch

(2018) identify, a close link exists between right-leaning content on YouTube such as ‘Fox News’, ‘Alex Jones’, ‘white nationalists’, conspiracy theories and anti-political correctness content. With the algorithm facilitating the linking of such content and encouraging the consumption of far-right videos, there is an accompanying perception that the platform is biased against the political alternative, of which the Black Lives Matter movement is representative. This perception is strengthened by research indicating that content and account removals, across social media, reinforce the silencing of racial communities regarding speaking out against racial injustice. In their research into which types of social media users experience content and account removals with the greatest frequency, and what types of content cause these users to be censored, Delmonaco et al (2021) found that the censoring of conservative content creators pertained to attempts by platforms and moderators to garner safe digital spaces that contained accurate information; however, censored content made by black individuals tended to pertain to their attempts to articulate their personal identities concerning racial justice. This last point is salient to purposes here, given that consumers of Clickfortaz’s video have stated that their attempts to support a cause that confronts the silencing of black people have been blocked; later, this section will highlight how some individuals have strategically subverted the algorithm’s censorship practices through adapting their use of language.

On 18<sup>th</sup> November 2021, finidabrah maintained,

“no way. I can’t see any ads. This is crazy. YouTube are stopping us from raising money. NJNP. this will get moderated mark my words” (finidabrah 2021).

finidabrah infers a lack of consumer trust in the YouTube brand that is based partly on the belief that the platform oppresses the viewpoints and interests of particular communities. Whilst using his agency to publicly confront the perceived oppression of the Black Lives Matter cause, finidabrah simultaneously predicts that this agency will be removed through YouTube’s algorithmic systems of censorship. Such a viewpoint indicates that YouTube users have identified the suppression of black identities by the platform. finidabrah alludes to a disproportionate experience of social media content moderation for individuals who align with left-wing causes, with the YouTube algorithm limiting the capacity for such individuals to represent voices supporting the rights of racially oppressed communities.



The experience of racial groups being suppressed on social media, and the fear regarding repeat experiences of such suppression, is a consequence of flawed algorithmic design. As indicated by Delmonaco et al (2021), a lack of nuance is apparent in social media algorithms regarding content pertaining to race; content algorithms face difficulties in distinguishing hate speech from discussions about racial prejudice. Therefore, the algorithm often reprimands the community that it has been designed to protect. The experience of being reprimanded, as a community, has led individuals to perceive the platform is wilfully seeking to derail the aims of left-wing campaigns. This is apparent in finidabrah linking his inability to view advertisements with a deliberate attempt by YouTube to prevent Clickfortaz from generating revenue for the Black Lives Matter cause. The experience of persecution at the level of content censorship has led individuals, such as finidabrah, to perceive that YouTube have identified other ways to undermine initiatives seeking to address the oppression of racial minorities. In their study, Delmonaco et al identified that the removal of content addressing racial injustice has led to users from the black community perceiving that those digital platforms are strategically countering efforts by race equality groups to derive benefit via YouTube. Having followed YouTube's community guidelines and sought to produce identity-related content, to then face the censoring of that content and thus the silencing of one's voice, individuals might deploy covert means of enacting identity performances.

In his comment, finidabrah includes the acronym NJNP, which stands for 'No Justice No Peace' – a slogan that was used during the protests against institutional racism in the U.S.A following the murder of George Floyd. The slogan functions as a transnational claim addressed to organisations that exercise racism in their policies and/or practices. The use of the acronym might stem from finidabrah seeking to quickly articulate the claim; alternatively, it might reflect a concerted effort to communicate a message of resistance to fellow platformity members. If the latter is true, the comment is reflective of a practice of subversively deploying language to disrupt the control the algorithm exerts on the communicative practices of marginalised communities. Thus, finidabrah may be demonstrating algorithmic literacy through indicating awareness of how YouTube's algorithm functions and using language less likely to be flagged by the algorithm. A performative element is apparent in finidabrah's resistance to the YouTube algorithm because, as the resistance takes the form of a comment, it publicly demonstrates finidabrah's strength of commitment to devising ways to counter the suppression

of the Black Lives Matter cause and minority voices in general. finidabrah uses the platform's architecture to articulate his resistance to the oppressions of that architecture. Therefore, finidabrah reinforces the platform's properties, such as its capacity to be deployed to communicate ideas to a public, whilst simultaneously subverting these properties through highlighting the embeddedness of racial discrimination in an algorithm that decides whose voice gets to be amplified.

Contesting how social media works, from within, is a complicated process whereby subjects can become situated in contradictory positions between participation in the public sphere and encouraging interpellation. The interpellation constitutes the subject contributing to the system that has been identified as diminishing the voice of that subject. The contribution to YouTube's economic system involves the protesting subject delegating their resistance to YouTube and, in doing so, furthering engagement on the platform. As argued by McNamee, the articulation of hate and conspiracy feeds the commercial logic of social media platforms (Smalley 2020). Hate and conspiracy theories are, as McNamee states, drivers of engagement; content that contains rumours and conspiracy encourages particularly significant engagement. This means that viewers of such content are more likely to spend time viewing that content as well as responding to it. These actions contribute to the platform's favourable metrics and its consequential increased appeal for advertisers. Furthermore, whilst speaking out against YouTube, finidabrah provides increased data to YouTube and thereby contributes to its store of economically valuable digital traces. Such behaviour enables the platform's algorithm to better gauge which content elicits heightened levels of engagement from finidabrah and shape the content offered to him, thereby increasing their ability to generate capital through advertising. By engaging on the platform, finidabrah participates in the economic system that sustains the platform and helps to justify its strategies. However, whilst economically benefitting the platform is the cost of subversion, this does not mean the subversion is meaningless. Rather, the subversion enables platformity members to demonstrate their support for the Black Lives Matter cause, whilst affirming to themselves and other members that they have the agency and capacity to resist the suppressions of their identities.

On August 12<sup>th</sup> 2022, kiwiorlando99 demonstrated an act of resistance against the algorithmic bias she perceives on YouTube. She states, "I've lowkey found a way around this algorithmic shit.

basically livsblacmater ngl. long as people get what we mean and we support the cause. love you so much taz 4 doing this!!!" (kiwiorlando99).

She indicates a level of algorithmic literacy concerning being aware of the types of content the YouTube algorithm seeks to suppress and altering her communicative style to circumvent such modes of suppression. The establishment of a new communicative style is based upon intentionally misspelling words to prevent the algorithm from detecting what she is seeking to communicate. This practice is 'Algospeak' whereby an individual adopts new methods of communicating words based on a history of digital platforms censoring ideas connected to such language. Therefore, kiwiorlando99 resists algorithmic bias by enacting a strategy to prevent her from being censored by YouTube for communicating about a subject that she felt was secretly unwelcome on the platform. She indicates, firstly, that she believes YouTube are censoring comments, through its algorithm, that contain the phrase 'Black Lives Matter' and, secondly, that she has undertaken the labour of circumventing such censorship. The term that she has chosen to modify pertains to a platformity-relevant subject, given Clickfortaz's call, on her comment board, for her platformity to support the Black Lives Matter cause. That the phrase does not go against YouTube's community guidelines but has been modified by kiwiorlando99 to avoid wrongful violation is indicative of the perception that YouTube's algorithm, by design or fault, censors content that supports challenges to racial injustice.

kiwiorlando99's comment infers that YouTube embodies a techno-social regime of suppression (Noble 2018), whereby the commenters perceive that oppressions from broader society are being reproduced, through algorithmic technology, in digital spaces.

kiwiorlando99 indicates a desire to 'fuck' with the algorithm (Heemsbergen et al 2022) by being innovative with how she spells and arranges words from the 'Black Lives Matter' campaign name. Therefore, she considered the tactical uses of YouTube's algorithm before seeking to disrupt its practice. She subverts what she perceives as YouTube's focus on particular key phrases, by seeking to outmanoeuvre the algorithm for political ends.

Kiwiorlando99's evasion tactic involves a practice of using algospeak versions of words and phrases, perceived by such users as a necessary method of preventing the unofficial banning of content that does not violate YouTube's guidelines. Necessarily, this method requires high levels of algorithmic literacy and a motivation to consistently evolve code words to avoid

detection by algorithms. In their examination of how the characteristics of algospeak are reflective of social media users' algorithmic literacy and knowledge of how algorithms work on the platform, Klug et al (2023) identified that users felt frustrated at feeling compelled to use algospeak given that they perceived it as the only tool they possessed to counter algorithmic suppression of their voices. Some of their respondents felt that the effort they had to exert to become proficient at circumventing the algorithm impacted on their capacity to create and engage with content.

Having invented algospeak to help secure her comment within the Clickfortaz comment board, kiwiorlando99 indicates that her efforts can be used by other platformity members. She has modified the phrase 'Black Lives Matter' in a way that members could easily decipher and replicate for themselves. Whilst the coining of algospeak can function to emphasise an individual's status and importance within a platformity, algospeak as a means of facilitating group and individual identity is not the primary concern here; rather, it is the capacity of individuals to use language to resist the moderating practices of algorithms. Nevertheless, members have indicated their appreciation of kiwiorlando99's efforts through bestowing her with twelve likes (as of November 15<sup>th</sup> 2022). The opacity of algorithms means that users can only speculate on what YouTube would censor; furthermore, users cannot be certain whether, or for how long, kiwiorlando's algospeak would remain uncensored. However, the act of creating algospeak represents a willingness, by kiwiorlando99, to use the tools she has available as a means of countering the algorithm's suppression of her platformity's voice.

With written algospeak being perceived as easier for algorithms to moderate than gestures, users have deployed emojis to innovate algospeak beyond text and make algorithmic resistances harder to detect. Users have used the emoji to make it more difficult for moderating systems to learn the semantic referent behind their algospeak. As Klug et al (2023) argue, algospeak is greater than the respelling of words and the replacement of words by acronyms; rather, algospeak can be considered as a strategy that encompasses linguistic variations and multimodal communication. The use of emojis as a covert means of self-expression was displayed by celesteperez7998 on March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020. In response to Clickfortaz's post, celesteperez7998 simply comments with a line of skin-toned fist emojis. The use of a raised fist emoji has been used by supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement, in digital settings, to

communicate support for the cause whilst avoiding detection from platform content moderation systems. celesteperez7998 uses a range of skin-coloured fists to draw an equivalence between different races they represent and thereby promote a message of racial equality. Furthermore, her use of multiple skin tones indicates that the Black Lives Matter cause transcends one particular race and is, instead, a cause that people can support regardless of their race. Her comment is influenced by the digital efforts undertaken by other individuals to resist platform suppression of unwanted themes.

As highlighted by Klug et al, algorithmic systems of content moderation can learn algospeak and incorporate them into its censoring practices. When an algospeak has spread into broader digital usage, there is an onus on users to evolve the term. Communities marginalised by social media algorithms are required to make repeat efforts to ensure they can communicate in a manner that circumvents algorithmic systems. Nevertheless, these efforts affirm to communities marginalised by social media algorithms that there is a capacity to challenge and resist their suppressions. Thus, where algorithmic systems disempower certain users from communicating freely in digital spaces in a way that reflects their identities, individuals have reclaimed that power through the ingenuity of themselves and their platformity. Although there are costs to this resistance, in the form of supporting the economic models of digital platforms and the effort required to keep ahead of the algorithm's language detection system, there is value to the resistance. This value is made manifest in the steps marginalised groups make in the symbolic battleground of voice, whereby parties historically marginalised from the public sphere can assert their identities in a space that has impeded them.

As a whole, this chapter has indicated how different groups have challenged algorithmic bias within and beyond social media. It has asserted that a normative massification logic has inadvertently suppressed the voices of those who occupy marginalised positions in society; these communities have had to devise means of contesting algorithmic bias. At the level of digital media, this has meant adopting counterintuitive ways of engaging with social media. Whilst algorithms have been partly devised to enable users to consume their preferred content more easily, and to safeguard against hate speech, the lack of sophistication of social media algorithms have meant users have had to find ways to circumvent its logic. The next chapter will demonstrate how, amidst a terrain of algorithmic suppression of particular communities,

platform poets have attempted to build ‘safe spaces’ of expression. Additionally, it will examine the capacity for platform poets to create alternative spaces, beyond mainstream platforms, without repeating the exclusions and harms latent within mainstream social media.

## CHAPTER FIVE: PLATFORM POETS AND A SYSTEM OF EXCHANGE

The last chapter explored exclusionary aspects of social media, such as the need to be open to default publicness, the problematic legal provisions impacting the governance of online speech, and algorithms that have been perceived as discriminatory by particular minority communities. This chapter will explore how, against the backdrop of such limitations and exclusions, platform poets have built communities that are distinguished by a set of exchanges; these exchanges involve poets navigating between positions in order to get particular benefits. Chiefly, it will focus on an exchange that is reflective of the commercialism within social media: the platform poet's oscillations between facilitating an affective community and profiteering from that affective community. The last chapter underlined the tension between digital platforms presenting socially conscious traits such as inclusivity, a focus on user well-being, and an ethos of facilitating social connections, and compromising these traits in their pursuit of commercial goals. With platform poets operating in a space where toxicity is embedded within its functionality, there is an element of this toxicity within their practices. This chapter will focus on output by Clickfortaz and Charly Cox to demonstrate that their shifts between relatable well-being facilitator and crafter of a profitable digital persona influence their followers' paths towards the well-being benefits these poets facilitate. Finally, the chapter will consider a proposed effort by Humble the Poet to untangle his platformities on mainstream social media from the toxic elements of such spaces; to do so, he has created Handsome Friends – a platform of his design. The final part of the chapter will demonstrate that in shifting between platform owner and platformity figurehead, the tension between community well-being facilitation and self-interest leads the Handsome Friends platform to repeat the toxic elements of mainstream social media. Altogether, the three sections will assert that the tension between self and community is an integral element of a platform poet's career; however, it is one aspect of a series of tensions between self and community that is also apparent in the actions of platform architects and platform poetry consumers. It is this process of self-interest inadvertently facilitating the benefit of other parties that sustains the potential for community building, and its associated benefits, around platform poetry.

## **Clickfortaz's Generation of Community and Capital through Tears**

In addition to uploading poetry videos that range in theme from anxieties regarding career prospects to overcoming conflict in relationships, Clickfortaz uploads a variety of vlogs. These vlogs range from humorous diaries based on challenges she has received from her followers, to anecdotal vlogs expressing negative affect. The latter are framed as educational tools, whereby Clickfortaz dissects her distressed state and informs users how they might deal with their anxieties. Such vlogs fall into the category of anxiety vlogs, which Berryman and Kavka describe as being

“pedagogical in nature, involving personal accounts of the subject’s struggle with social anxiety and modelling ways to recognize and deal with panic attacks” (Berryman and Kavka 2018, pg.87).

The anxiety vlogger provides a point through which individuals might see their anxieties reflected and also get advice that could be used in the physical world. Furthermore, the vlogger eschews traditional conceptions of social media being a space for idealistic self- presentation. A social media strategy that involves an influencer idealistically presenting their life, overlooks the life struggles that the influencer faces in the present. Rather, the influencer’s depiction of personal success infers the obtainment of a lifestyle that is out of reach for their followers. For followers, the pleasure of viewing a spectacle of ideal life involves vicariously experiencing hegemonic ideals of beauty, materialism and the emotional benefits of such ideals. Lifestyle influencers display what followers do not and, perhaps, cannot have but wish to possess. Some viewers might perceive such personas as constructed to a point that the personas lack authenticity.

By contrast, anxiety vloggers who thrive on relatability and forming strong parasocial bonds with their followers are likely to opt for emphasising the authenticity of their lifestyle. Anxiety vloggers might achieve relatability through drawing attention to an ongoing barrier to their happiness, with which their following is likely to empathise and relate. An anxiety vlogger underlines publicly pursues lifestyle satisfaction and encourages their followers to join them as they mutually pursue well-being. Therefore, the anxiety vlogger encourages the formation of a



community who admire the vlogger's attitude in pursuing a goal that the community members value. The anxiety vlogger prioritises the appearance of authentic self-expression and indicates that emotional vulnerability can be used to heal as it encourages the individual to confront their anxieties and, simultaneously, gain a network of support.

The sense of self-expression and authenticity superseding idealistic self-presentation can be observed in a YouTube video uploaded by Clickfortaz on June 11th 2018 (Clickfortaz 2018). The video, entitled *no social media for a week and this is what happened*, contains a narrative pattern that begins with Clickfortaz addressing the camera midway through the challenge. She talks directly to the camera and wears a hoodie whilst crying in a dark bedroom.

As displayed by figure 9, Clickfortaz's grey outfit and bedroom aesthetic carries connotations of wanting to hide, which is reinforced by her tears. Conversely, her act of talking directly to her followers through the camera infers that they are trusted enough to be 'let in' and treated as confidants. Clickfortaz presents her emotional vulnerability at its climax, indicating to viewers that she is likely to disclose intimate information regarding her selfhood.

Following the introduction, the narrative depicts Clickfortaz prior to her embarking on the challenge. Her presentation of selfhood is supplemented by camera cuts that emphasise punchlines, which reinforces that the video has been intended as entertainment in addition to being a display of emotional labour. Furthermore, the imposition of graphics draws attention to the video as a manufactured product, whereby Clickfortaz comments on what she frames as her spontaneous, authentic self. The sense of self-reflexivity is furthered through the use of a voice over, which comments on the progress of Clickfortaz through her challenge. The voiceover comprises a male voice with an exaggerated staccato delivery that mimics robot speech. There is poor speech synthesis and a mispronouncing of certain words, which contributes to a designed unnaturalness. Clickfortaz juxtaposes her relatively fast-paced, charismatic speaking style with the flat intonation of the voiceover for comedic effect. When alluding to an effort by Clickfortaz to take a walk as a means of distracting herself from her temptation to use digital technology, the voice over states,

“every time I look at nature, I am reminded of how blessed we are. I mean, just look at how serene and beautiful life is. I am just like ‘wow’. This is truly life before us” (Clickfortaz, 2018).

Abruptly, a skid sound effect is used to signal a change of direction, at which point Clickfortaz states, “I’m kinda tired from the walking. so unfit”. The juxtaposition between the existential observations of the voiceover and the relatable self-deprecation of Clickfortaz creates humour and authenticity. In turn, through using language and production features to self-consciously poke fun at herself, Clickfortaz furthers the parasocial attributes of her relationships with subscribers.

The term ‘parasocial’ was coined by Horton and Wohl (1956), who used it to refer to the one-sided interactions between television and radio viewers and the mediated celebrities they were watching. In spite of the lack of reciprocity in the relationship, the audience member experiences a sense of ‘knowing’ the media celebrity. Through symbolically positioning herself alongside the viewer, by making her persona visible in the post- production features of the vlog, Clickfortaz reinforces the sense of proximity between herself and her viewers. The illusion of a two-way relationship is furthered through visual cues, such as her repeated direct address to the camera throughout the duration of the video. For example, during her aforementioned excursion, Clickfortaz uses a handheld camera, which furthers the sense of intimacy between her and the audience given that a third party, in the form of a camera crew, does not appear to be present during the interaction. The handheld camera also grants realism to the interaction, whereby Clickfortaz can maintain eye contact with the viewer as she moves through physical space. That cameras have not been set up around the vicinity to cumulatively construct her interaction with the viewer furthers the illusion that there has been an absence of pre- planned direction.

Clickfortaz alludes to the authenticity of the encounter by acknowledging aspects of the setting whilst vocalising that these situational elements were unexpected. For example, she comments on the lighting to reinforce the spontaneity of the encounter:

“oh my god, that lighting though. Get that highlighter, get that highlighter girl. Oh my god, you see that highlighter? I am glowing right now” (Clickfortaz, 2018).

Whilst demonstrating that the video content is unscripted, Clickfortaz uses colloquial language and humour to convey an attractive persona. The humour involves self-reporting, given that Clickfortaz is addressing herself for the benefit of the viewer; she positions herself as the butt of the joke in a show of self-deprecating humour. Self-deprecating humour is commonly associated with positive intentions (Lundy et al, 1998) and is seen as a marker of approachableness (Heider, 1958). However, it could also be part of a conscious strategy of constructing a persona that conveys authenticity and approachability.

As stated by Balaban and Szabolics (2021), there is a demand for authenticity in virtual spaces, with this authenticity being defined by elements that include sincerity, trustworthiness, accuracy, originality and spontaneity. Contradictorily, these elements can be consciously incorporated into the presentation of a digital influencer's persona. As Balaban and Szabolics note,

“being authentic at the beginning of one's SMI career as a content creator might be simple, but it becomes much more challenging after one's audience has grown significantly” (pg.236).

As the gap in social capital between themselves and their follower base broadens, demonstrating authenticity becomes proportionately more difficult for the influencer. Clickfortaz heightens her appearance of authenticity in the aforementioned video by returning to her enduring issues around social media addiction, ruminating on negative life circumstances and body dissatisfaction. Parasocial interaction increases in likelihood when an individual perceives similarity between their personality and that of an influencer; Clickfortaz facilitates opportunities for such interaction by demonstrating traits that are likely to be prevalent within her following. She uses self-deprecating humour as a strategy to reinforce her position as an 'everywoman' in terms of appearance and insecurities. Clickfortaz makes negative observations regarding her appearance, which stress her insecurities: “Oh, I'm so snotty and ugly. I'm going to go now. Bye!” (Clickfortaz 2018). This comment infers that her anxieties about her appearance have contributed to her cutting short her interaction with the viewer, emphasising the negative impact of her insecurities on her daily life.

Body dissatisfaction among Generation Z exists (Taylor and Nichter 2021), whereby a growing number of individuals are demonstrating, through their use of body altering applications such as Facetune and Photoshop, that they are unable to accept their bodies. Body dissatisfaction has been influenced by a culture of evaluation on social media (Nixon et al 2023), whereby individuals scrutinise bodily presentations on platforms that are centred on the curation of self. Clickfortaz pays heed to the pressures that digital natives experience with regards to heightened self-objectification, whereby an individual is encouraged to view their body as an object to be gazed on by others. Consequently, she demonstrates her struggles with the body insecurities faced by the broad population of generation Z individuals who use social media. She demonstrates synergy with a significant proportion of her audience, thereby strengthening the parasocial ties between herself and her followers.

Homophily relates to a perceived similarity between oneself and another person, which, as William Brown (2015) states, contributes to a cognitive connection between an individual and the person perceived as similar. Where an individual perceived homophily between themselves and an influencer, that individual is more likely to form a parasocial bond with the influencer (Rubin and McHugh, 1987; Rubin and Step, 2000). Bao et al (2011) identify that attitudinal homophily is the perception one has that another individual possesses a similar thinking style, personality and outlook, which leads the former to perceive that they share similar values. Therefore, attitudinal homophily pertains to the belief that one's similarity with another individual is on a deep, personal level pertaining to motivations, morals and attitudes. Clickfortaz facilitates attitudinal homophily through indicating that she experiences similar insecurities to those within her audience. By disclosing intimate details about her negative emotional habits, she is likelier to encourage her followers to perceive attitudinal homophily between themselves and her. Attitudinal homophily has a predictive effect on how a follower communicates with a celebrity. A sense of attitudinal homophily leads a follower to feel emotionally safer within their relationship with the celebrity, which increases the likelihood of them self-disclosing. Negative affective displays, such as the one performed by Clickfortaz, reinforce authenticity whilst indicating to followers that they share ties of intimacy with the YouTuber. Clickfortaz's validation of disclosing body insecurities to the group facilitates a broader culture of similar self-disclosure within the platformity she has built.

Tinil-bleach states

“OMG, i want to hug you man. I started to cry when you did. I can relate so much. I really am. self concious im really fat and ugly and anxiety is surely kicking in too” (Tinil\_bleach 2018).

The user opens by indicating a desire to shift from a parasocial relationship with Clickfortaz to a concrete relationship marked by physical intimacy, regardless of whether Clickfortaz would deem this desirable. The inferred root of this want is a perceived synergy between the emotional experiences between Tinil\_bleach and Clickfortaz, marked by an experience of simultaneous emotional excess. This synergy is related to the socially negative traits that Clickfortaz evidences, such as body-insecurity and emotional excess.

Clickfortaz’s capacity to derive relatability by demonstrating her negative traits counters the notion that individuals relate to those who correspond to an idealised self-image. The obtainment of relatability through negative disclosure counters Li, Zhang and Zhang (2021) who argue that when a user recognizes beauty in an influencer, they are more likely to relate to them because “a beautiful endorser corresponds more with the ideal self-image of consumers” (pg. 3). Whilst Li, Zhang and Zhang focus on the perceived aesthetic beauty of influencers, they overlook how the perception of shared anxieties fosters a sense of mutuality and connection.

Regarding communities around lifestyle influencers, aspects of the ordinary lived experiences of the influencer, shared to bridge the increasing status differentiation between themselves and their subscribers, become valuable community cache. Therefore, ‘ordinary’ traits such as body insecurities and general anxiety become markers of association with the influencer. The structure of Tinil\_bleach’s comment indicates a desire to claim a likeness to Clickfortaz before offering proof of that likeness. Having highlighted the strength of connection she feels towards Clickfortaz, Tinil\_bleach alludes to the trait of self-consciousness she shares with the latter. Next, Tinil\_bleach provides justification and evidence for their insecurity through referring to themselves as ‘fat’ and ‘ugly’. As a final authenticating practice, Tinil\_bleach tags on their belief that “anxiety is surely kicking in too” (Tinil\_bleach 2018), in an apparent move to align themselves further with Clickfortaz.

Moves to grant visibility to one's insecurities, in response to those disclosed by an influential figure, indicate the perceived value of intentionally crafting a digital identity that demonstrates insecurity. The conscious inclusion of insecurity within one's digital persona depends on what the individual feels is apt in a particular social context. Within a community page linked to a Clickfortaz vlog where bodily insecurity is a recurring theme, there is an element of competitiveness, which is typical of a follower community, related to the goal of demonstrating similarity to the influencer. A vlog where the content is confessional and the influencer displays negative affect, in the form of emotional vulnerability, elicits user responses that disclose similar 'sad stories' (Dobson, 2015). A fellow Clickfortaz subscriber, Mina, deploys a similar comment structure to Tinil\_bleach. However, whilst Tinil\_bleach directly addresses Clickfortaz, thereby emphasising the parasocial interaction between herself and the influencer, Mina directs her comment towards fellow viewers.

Mina states,

“nearing the end of the video i just wanted to hug her tight. As i have been struggling with anxiety and depression for quite a while now i will have to agree that social media plays such a critical role in keeping us busy and distracted” (Mina 2019).

By addressing the platformity when disclosing her mental health struggles, Mina displays confidence that, due to the negative affective labour Clickfortaz has performed, her self-disclosures will be met with support. Mina's willingness to intimately disclose to the platformity suggests that Clickfortaz has created a vlog whose function is perceived as an avenue for individuals to disclose and obtain self-consolation and community ties. Such a community serves as a space which individuals can 'join' on the basis that they share a like-mindedness with fellow participants. The specific nature of this like-mindedness is driven by Clickfortaz's disclosures pertaining to social media addiction, loneliness, anxiety and depression. Through alluding to her grounds for identifying with Clickfortaz, Mina justifies her place within the platformity. By publicly aligning herself with Clickfortaz's emotional characteristics whilst inferring her desire to show the latter affection, Mina adheres to the normative traits of generalised anxiety and a desire to comfort other sufferers, which define the platformity. The evidencing of a high follower position is a key focus of Mina's comment; the

comment is closed with the statement, “all i’m saying is, I relate to her alot” (Mina 2019), indicating her high position on an imagined hierarchy of influencer/follower relations.

Mina, like Tinil\_bleach, indicates that the strength of their pseudo friendship with Clickfortaz has led to feelings of intimacy that would make physical interaction a logical next step.

Through stating an impulse to hug Clickfortaz, due to the emotive content at the end of the video, Mina indicates that their desire for offline interaction has been made more urgent through the sense of connectedness garnered by Clickfortaz’s negative affective labour.

Through her tears, Clickfortaz demonstrates emotional self-exposure that, due to its negativity, is taken to be a marker of authenticity. Furthermore, the authenticity Clickfortaz displays instigates Mina to self-disclose similar feelings and experiences. Mina provides background context, in the form of disclosures of historical anxiety and depression, that justifies her sense of synergy with Clickfortaz. The community site facilitated by Clickfortaz enables Mina to make aspects of her private life public.

However, there is a risk that participating in a public space of intimate emotional sharing could make disclosers vulnerable to exploitation, as Willard (2007) notes. Willard states that where an individual discloses information about their life struggles on social media, to people they do not know personally, they render themselves vulnerable to abuse. For example, online predators might take advantage of knowing the insecurities and anxieties an individual has in order to garner favour with that individual. However, the benefit of disclosing such information is a sense of having deepened one’s parasocial bond with an influencer, and the perceived support one receives from having received validation from a community with which one identifies. Therefore, there is a trade-off between making oneself vulnerable to abuse and obtaining emotional relief and a sense of validation from undertaking that very act of vulnerability. Disclosing in such a way also provides a sense of community membership, given that rather than geographical ties, the connections on Clickfortaz YouTube videos are based on shared feelings of marginalisation, shared experiences of mental illness and a sense of identification with Clickfortaz.

The global nature of the Clickfortaz platformity is highlighted through commenters indicating that they have emotionally invested in Clickfortaz despite them occupying a different national

space. Such commenters indicate that they have attained a type of intimacy “outside normative relational forms and beyond the purview of institutions, states, nations, and an ‘ideal of publicness’ (Berlant 1998, pg.284). For Lauren Berlant, such intimate spaces exist outside of societal beliefs regarding community belonging. Whilst communities related to nationhood, hometown and educational setting fit into ideas concerning belonging, intimate publics on social media are relatively less organised and more mobile. In 2018, Cássia Ferreira indicated such a shifting notion of society and community:

“YOU ARE SO AMAZING! I’m so sad because I was in England and I just found your channel when I was back to Brazil. But thank you, you’re making my days” (Cássia Ferreira 2018).

Through expressing disappointment that she learned about Clickfortaz after leaving Britain, Ferreira infers that she wants an interaction with Clickfortaz that is physical rather than mediated by social media. Ferreira indicates that she would rather her emotional intimacy with Clickfortaz be rooted in direct physical interchange rather than in Clickfortaz’s imagined presence. Therefore, she suggests that intimacy in digital spaces is less valuable and authentic than intimacy that is not mediated by technology. However, she ends by underlining that her sense of emotional intimacy with Clickfortaz has been a beneficial resource that has positively impacted her everyday life.

The capacity of the Clickfortaz platformity to cultivate relationships that carry over to domains beyond social media is unclear. Generally, as Söderström (2009) highlights, the strength of social ties between individuals on social media community pages could be considered weak and unlikely to lead to offline interaction. Nevertheless, as weak ties tend to be instrumental and are less likely to cause reputational damage, online social networks grant individuals flexibility and freedom in their self-expression. There is nuance to the formation of an emotional self-expressive style in the Clickfortaz YouTuber community as, whilst individuals validate their membership through self-disclosing negative emotional experiences, there is a wariness to excessive emotional confessions amongst social media users (Lambert 2016). The suitable Clickfortaz follower narrates their selfhood in a manner that indicates authenticity and transparency, in relation to social anxiety and negative body image, without excessively self-



disclosing. Therefore, individuals need to possess a recognition of how intimacy ought to be negotiated in different social contexts. Therefore, intimacy requires negotiation and cannot be performed publicly, whilst obtaining group approval, without an adherence to specific community norms.

Of the 42 user comments published on the video page between 22/7/21 and 22/7/22, three are longer than fifty words. This adherence to brevity not only suggests a preference for low-labour communication, but also implies that users are mindful of the boundaries of care within the Clickfortaz YouTube community. Whilst Clickfortaz's follower community features the collapsing of social contexts such as employment, race and sexuality, in favour of a shared affiliation to the influencer, there remains contextual reasons regarding how individuals share and receive data from fellow commenters. These contextual reasons concern the content of the Clickfortaz video and the information Clickfortaz has chosen to disclose; additionally, they are a result of the different conventions of social media platforms regarding length of utterance and depth of intimacy. As Carah et al (2018) note, the nuanced demands placed on users, regarding their articulations of shared feelings and experiential backgrounds, reinforces conceptions of digital intimacy as labour. That is, the individual seeking to perform intimacy in a digital space, who desires a social reaction that if not positive, is not negative, needs to exert effort to ensure their performance of digital intimacy is appropriate. This intimacy performance can be productive for the commenter, the community, the influencer, and the digital platform.

The commenter can narrate their experiences, with the act of self-writing facilitating catharsis and a more defined identity consciousness. As the influencer has already validated the self-disclosure, the commenter can negotiate their personal anxieties whilst framing them in relation to the influencer. Through positively reframing their circumstances, the commenter can potentially achieve self-affirmation and catharsis by considering the problem as something they are not alone in experiencing and something that can be managed, as evidenced by the influencer. For platformity members, the act of an individual undergoing vulnerability, without experiencing visible shame or judgement, encourages and facilitates their self-disclosures. Therefore, in the Clickfortaz platformity, the initial commenters act as secondary facilitators, after Clickfortaz, with regards to encouraging users to self-disclose and potentially obtain cathartic experiences. Meanwhile, in her act of facilitating cathartic experiences for her

subscribers, Clickfortaz also facilitates her potential catharsis through her intimate disclosure. The supportive commenter further enables Clickfortaz to obtain wellbeing benefit; through responding to Clickfortaz with information regarding their related anxieties, the commenter contributes to the space Clickfortaz has set up as a site of community-building, connectivity and catharsis. In doing so, the commenter validates the self-disclosures of Clickfortaz and enables her to receive the support of the platformity Clickfortaz has built. The platformity support is both emotional and financial as comments, being visible signs of engagement, contribute to the appeal of a content creator to advertisers. With social media influencers having been integrated into advertising industries and digital platforms acting as profiteering conduits, a triangular relationship exists that requires social media influencers to demonstrate economic worth to the advertisers with whom they directly and indirectly work.

Some YouTube influencers gain revenue through positively reviewing sponsored content in their vlogs, having cultivated relationships with businesses whose products are thematically relevant to their content. In her *no social media for a week* video, Clickfortaz does not embed sponsored content into the video; this enables her to maintain her authenticity and indicate to her audience that she does not have any motives for uploading the content other than to intimately connect with them. However, having maintained a loyal audience, Clickfortaz's subscriber base, at the time the video was uploaded, meant that her video was monetized by YouTube. As Anand and Singhal (2020) note, this involves YouTube running third-party advertisements on a video, with the advertising revenue being shared between YouTube and the owner of the channel. As engagement, such as comments and likes, contributes to a communicative culture on an influencer's channel, that channel is more likely to attract dedicated viewers who wish to be active participants within the culture. Followers can enable their active participation through subscribing to a channel which enables them to receive notifications when the owner of the channel has uploaded new content. Subscriptions directly impact the opportunity for YouTube to monetise a channel, as one of the criteria for monetisation is a channel having had at least 1000 subscribers in the past twelve months (Anand and Singhal, 2020).

Therefore, the labour of performing intimacy, undertaken by an individual commenter, contributes to a communicative culture which drives subscriber levels and secures monetisation for the influencer. As stated by Carah et al,

“when people’s sharing practices are viewed primarily in relation to the commercial business models of social media, intimate communication can be seen as a kind of free labour” (2018, pg.5).

Carah et al refer to how the machinery of social media captures affective communication and transforms it into data commodities that financially benefit its business models and those who have a stake in those models, such as monetised influencers. The conditions of digital capitalism therefore utilise relationships of care and make them economically significant. Through facilitating the benefits of intimate self-disclosure, Clickfortaz enables her followers to enjoy them and, as Mark Andrejevic (2011) argues, simultaneously serve capitalist interests through their intimate labour. Therefore, whilst users enjoy the space of digital intimacy that she constructs, they financially serve those who have set the terms on which they might access this space. Whilst being granted access to the platform and, specifically Clickfortaz’s channel, her followers compensate her and the platform through generating information. Therefore, in addition to being an intimacy facilitator, Clickfortaz also serves as a conduit through which users serve the platform’s economic interests.

### **Charly Cox and the resource of Poetry in a Pandemic**

This section will expand on the previous section by addressing how Charly Cox, whilst facilitating user communication regarding COVID-19, draws attention to the value of her poetry during the pandemic. Therefore, whilst the previous section stressed that members of Clickfortaz’s digital audience are exchanging the financial worth of their data for a sense of social connectivity and the potential for catharsis, this section will highlight how Cox exchanges positions between community benefactor and career pursuer.

On 25th May 2021, Cox uploaded a video of the Primetime Emmy-nominated actress, Emilia Clarke, reading one of the poems from Cox's poetry collection *She Must be Mad*. The poem is entitled 'kindness' and features the following words:

"All that matters is kindness, I know it sounds obvious but it's true. Think of all the bad things in the world and then think of you. Think of all the troubles you've faced and then think of all the kind faces that pulled you through. It's them that reminded you of your power" (Cox 2018).

Emilia Clarke read this poem for Nurses' Day 2021 and uses the poem to draw attention to the work of nurses amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Through doing this, Clarke mobilises the poem into social capital that can elucidate experiences that are not specifically mentioned in the poetry. With the poem being published in 2018, prior to the onset of the pandemic, Cox would not have written the poem with the intention of it articulating events within this context. Clarke transfers the symbolic meanings that reside in the poem to a socially relevant event that has affected a broad range of people. She indicates that the area of influence that Cox possesses ought to exceed that of her relatively limited microcelebrity (Senft 2008). Consequently, there is a meeting of traditional celebrity and a microcelebrity who is engaging in a 'bottom up' process of building her celebrity. Usher (2018) calls the process of building one's celebrity through digital media, 'cyber-self-celebrification', given that it involves personal branding, largely through social media, that is devoid from the input of marketing teams. Due to the celebrity of the influencer being perceived, by the influencer's followers, as a community entity that the followers have grown through their acts of sharing the influencer's content, rather than the influencer cynically trying to grow their celebrity by overtly marketing themselves, there is a sense that the influencer's fame is part of a continuum that their followers also occupy. As Marwick and Boyd (2011) state, fame on social media can be perceived as "a continuum, rather than a bright line" that delineates celebrities and followers. Social media sites are areas of pro-sumption, whereby users of the sites shift from being consumers of content to producers and marketers of content. The conflation of the consumer and producer roles grants greater relatability to those individuals who are perceived to have attained a relatively high level of microcelebrity via a 'bottom up' process. Through her mainstream celebrity endorsement, and identification that the poetic output of Cox warrants an

audience beyond that which Cox has garnered, Clarke symbolically elevates Cox beyond the reach of her followers. Clarke's elevation of the poet complicates Cox's promotional logic, as Cox's output has focused on relatability and positioning herself alongside her community.

Whilst reblogging the video of Clarke reading her poem, Cox shares a caption that simultaneously reaffirms her status position alongside her followers and enables her to draw from the reputational capital that Clarke carries. Cox indicates deference to the celebrity value of Clarke by stating,

“On today's episode of OH IM SORRY THAT IS ACTUAL @emilia\_clarke READING MY POEM” (Cox 2020).

She highlights that the symbolic value that Clarke has placed on her poem marks a new stage in her career, with the capitalisation and lack of punctuation indicating excess emotion. The awe Cox demonstrates towards Clarke positions the former as an ordinary figure in comparison to the celebrity of Clarke. Therefore, Cox appears to retain her relatability whilst evidencing Clarke's endorsement to her followers to justify her followers' decisions to subscribe to her content.

Paradoxically to her focus on relatability, Cox indicates her pursuit of celebrity by stating,

“I offer a side of acting royalty, personal hero and woman I have always dreamed of being and ME reading the same poem” (Cox 2020).

Whilst again alluding to the celebrity value of Clarke, Cox capitalises 'me' and, in doing so, distinguishes herself from her followers and indicates she has attained some of the celebrity she has sought. The subtext of the comment is that her participation in the phenomenon of celebrity-seeking individuals interpreting the algorithmic architecture of digital platforms to better understand how to increase user engagement with their posts, has been successful. Cotter (2018) refers to this phenomenon as 'the visibility game' because individuals alter the defining characteristics of their identities to appeal to algorithmic design and ultimately increase their visibility across a digital platform. Having garnered affective relationships with her followers, through alluding to their proximate and equivalent status, Cox shifts her media strategy

towards those adopted by celebrities who have attained their initial celebrity in ways other than growing a relatable microcelebrity persona. As Duffy (2017) asserts, such celebrities tend to build and maintain fantasies that serve as counterpoints to the lived experiences of their followers. Therefore, these celebrity-fan relationships maintain hierarchies that distance celebrities from their followers. In her post, Cox indicates that she is no longer engaged in the labour of pursuing celebrity as her celebrity dream has been realised. Cox distinguishes herself from her fellow digital prosumers who are still engaged in labour that is focused on their attainment of celebrity value.

The microcelebrity is concerned with using social media to generate attention towards their creative enterprise, with the aim of cultivating a following and persona that results in celebrity value. Contrastingly, the established traditional celebrity, whose celebrity value has been cultivated through agents identifying relevant opportunities for career progression and the augmentation of a desirable public image, might use social media to close the relational distance between themselves and their followers. Through endorsing the creative output of a microcelebrity, whose bottom-up style of career progression is relatable to fellow prosumers, Clarke draws from the authenticity cache that Cox possesses. In contrast to microcelebrities, whose fame is a direct consequence of their interactions with their audiences, traditional celebrities first become known to their audiences outside of social media, via, for example, film, television or music. The audience is not party to the proceedings that led to the fame of the traditional celebrity. This results in a type of fan- celebrity identification that centres on individuals perceiving aspects of their ideal selves in a detached celebrity-figure, which Burmann et al (2022) label 'wishful identification'.

Having already garnered wishful identification from her fans through the popularity of the filmic characters she has portrayed, Clarke has used social media to directly communicate with her fans and thus cultivate a sense of similarity identification. The fanbase of Cox is relatively narrow in comparison to Clarke's, and is focused on authenticity, intimacy and relatability (Abidin, 2015). The fanbase Clarke has accrued is based on mainstream appeal, personal success and her status as a public figure who has attained acclaim through her work within popular culture. In contrast to the wishful fan identifications with Clarke, identifications based on similarity involve fans perceiving they share salient characteristics with a celebrity. Clarke

speaks directly to her followers whilst aligning herself with the poetic content of an individual who typifies the bottom-up celebrity aspirations of social media prosumers. This enables Clarke to simultaneously draw wishful identification and similarity identification from her followers. Contrastingly, having indicated her wish identification with Clarke in describing her as a “woman I have always dreamed of being” (Cox 2020), Cox suggests that Clarke’s endorsement has enabled the former to align with her ideal self. Therefore, the poetic content does not simply facilitate a tribute to the NHS staff; it also acts as a specific means to facilitate representations of, in one direction, extraordinariness for Cox and, in the opposite direction, authenticity for Clarke.

When alluding to the broader issue of the contributions of NHS nurses during the COVID- 19 pandemic, Cox emphasises the personal success she has achieved through Clarke sharing the poem. With the video becoming a visual representation of the success Cox has achieved, Cox emphasises the success of the poem in being chosen over other candidates:

“Thank you Emilia for choosing Kindness to read as your thank you to the bloody brilliant NHS staff and for elevating my work beyond what it ever knew it was worth.

Jeeeezzzzzzzzuz” (Cox 2020).

Cox highlights the extraordinariness of the celebrity endorsement, thus confirming herself as someone whose work has attained a level of acclaim that has provided her with celebrity cache. Her reference to “the bloody brilliant NHS staff” is the sole allusion to the content of the celebrity activism performed by Clarke. Rather, Cox focuses attention on her creative enterprise which, consequently, influences how her followers respond to the video.

All of the twenty-seven user responses articulate excitement at the career milestone Cox has achieved. Furthermore, each of the responses directly address Cox, thus maintaining the parasocial relationship Cox has cultivated with her followers. The post enables followers to demonstrate closeness with Cox through performing joyfulness in relation to her career advancement. As the content of the post is not something that the typical fan could relate with and thus respond with similar experiences of their own, there is limited scope for users to narrate their life stories and obtain cathartic benefit. The emotive content of the poem, referring to the kind acts of an imagined reader or of an individual an imagined reader might

contemplate, carries potential for the reader to positively reframe aspects of their life. Moreover, Clarke's reframing of the poem, into the context of COVID-19, allows users to undertake meaningful contemplations concerning the pandemic. Whilst the poetic content can still enable more nuanced understandings of self and other, the paratextual content that Cox adds through her comment, is a disruptive factor to one of the core functions of the original text concerning the emotional benefit to the reader.

Although Cox's microcelebrity was initially garnered through her life narrations on social media, with snippets of original poetry being used to further garner intimacy between herself and her followers, *Kindness* was originally published in print as part of her debut collection *She Must be Mad* (Cox 2018). When migrating such an artefact into a digital medium, an adjoining descriptive section can lead to readers revising their cognitive strategies (Apollon and Desrochers 2014). For example, in social media-based poetry, a descriptive section might facilitate identification with the author. The feeling of identification might legitimise a reader's emotional experiences and encourage that reader to disclose these experiences to their reading community. For Kuijpers (2018), the scope to narrate daily struggles to a community, which the discloser perceives as supportive and similar, means that the experience of interacting with a digital bibliotherapeutic resource could benefit mental health to a greater degree than the benefits obtained from accessing a state of absorption when reading. However, Cox does not encourage her followers to disclose their experiences and emotional difficulties, around COVID-19 or generalised anxiety, and thereby benefit from a communicatory exchange with similar individuals. She instead frames the poetic material in a way that encourages followers to indicate their bond with Cox by demonstrating excitement at the career progression she has made.

All of the 27 responses (as of 8/8/2023) to Charly Cox's post demonstrate unity with Cox and joy towards her achievement, with soulrebel\_poetry stating "OMG" (soulrebel\_poetry 2021), wilkinsonuk saying "Wow!!!" (wilkinsonuk 2021), and foxymoronic stating, "'think of all the bad things in the world. Then think of you.' GOOD JOB CHARLIE <3<3 <3 <3 <3" (foxymoronic 2021). Each of these comments indicate what David Beer (2008) calls a 'perception of proximity', which has been facilitated through Cox implying that followers are obtaining a 'true sense' of her persona. Her followers are granted an experience of intimacy which allows them to feel able to convey a sense of overwhelming joy at her achievements.



Furthermore, through quoting the poem and applying its sentiment to her life, foxymoronic engages with the poetic content in a bibliotherapeutic manner. However, foxymoronic's comment appears to have been constructed to demonstrate her aptness as a Charly Cox platformity member and court a direct interaction with Cox. She indicates a desire to construct a message that, in its appropriation of the poetic content, distinguishes her from other Cox followers. However, her urge to interact more directly with a content producer and earn a greater reputation in the platformity, potentially undermines her ability to obtain wellbeing benefit through engaging with the poetic content in a bibliotherapeutic manner and eliciting community support.

To conclude, this section has demonstrated that Charly Cox has used Instagram posts to exchange positions between ordinariness and extraordinariness where, at once she is both a member of the platformity she has built and someone who transcends that platformity. Furthermore, it builds on the last section in addressing how platform poets shift between community-focused well-being facilitators and crafters of profitable personas. The link between community-building and self-serving is reflective of the economic model of digital platforms. As the last chapter demonstrated, the economic model's focus on attention maximisation over user well-being has led to various harms including the marginalisation of minority groups and social media addiction; these harms have been driven by policies that have been marketed as community-focused but have been influenced by profit-seeking. Paralleling this tension between community and self, Cox builds a platformity that encourages members to view her as relatable and authentic whilst, contrastingly, using that platformity to enhance her celebrity. However, in focusing attention on herself, she enables her followers to feel an experience of proximity and intimacy to Cox; thus, Cox inadvertently produces well-being opportunities for her followers.

## **Humble the Poet and the Creation of Safe Spaces Beyond Mainstream Social Media**

This section will focus on the *Handsome Friends* networking site, which Humble the Poet has indicated was motivated by lawsuits concerning the misuse of user data by mainstream social media sites, and reports of inadequate measures taken, by mainstream social media platforms,

to tackle racial, sexual, and homophobic abuse on the site (HtP, 2021). HtP has framed his alternative space as a site of healing, personal growth and supportive community. This section will argue that despite HtP indicating his *Handsome Friends* platform has been designed as a safe space for disclosure and community support, the platform repeats some of the harmful user habits of established social media platforms. Furthermore, it will outline how, rather than facilitating well-being, the focus on building a platformity around a single microcelebrity influences the identity presentations of users, which limits authentic self-disclosure and its associated benefits.

Leading on from the previous two sections, this section will argue that the tension between community interest and self-interest in the output of platform poets is extended in the Handsome Friends network. The platform poet's tension between community and self was addressed in Clickfortaz and Charly Cox's navigations between citing prominent community issues, in social media addiction and COVID-19 respectively, and using these topics as ways of leveraging their personas as relatable or extraordinary. This section will argue that, in becoming a platform owner, the tension between self and community is particularly apparent in HtP's output. This is because his responsibilities pertaining to himself widen in scope to include both his careers as a poet and a lifestyle guru, in addition to his success as a platform owner.

Whilst having a YouTube account that has 176,000 followers (as of 27/04/24) and having 21,100 followers on TikTok (as of 27/04/24), HtP's most followed social media account is on Instagram where he has 571,000 followers (as of 27/04/24). On April 16th 2021, HtP uploaded a post, on Instagram, that featured the following quote from Nelson Mandela: "may your choices reflect your hopes, not your fears". In the description section, HtP asked his followers to leave a particular emoji (a smiley face with wide eyes behind a pair of spectacles) with their comment if they agree. The emoji acts as a marker of group identity, with sixteen out of thirty (as of 28/01/22) respondents including the emoji in their comment. All of the individuals who declined to use the emoji display their agreement in other ways. For example, westtheyeti states, "damn, that's so good" (westtheyeti 2021), neli\_saas responds with "WORD" (neli\_saas 2021) and x\_embrace\_the\_chaos\_x says, "very very true. Words of wisdom right there!" (x\_embrace\_the\_chaos\_x 2021). Other users, who have not included the emoji or a supportive statement, have instead used the comments to tag friends to the post. Those individuals have

identified the worth of the comment and have alerted individuals to the post, having decided that those individuals could benefit emotionally or psychologically from reading the words. Such a call to action is encouraged by HtP:

“What’s a decision you can make today based on HOPE more than FEAR. Leave a comment and tag someone who needs to see this. #Love” (HtP 2021a).

HtP has facilitated greater engagement with the post through asking users to comment, with engagement statistics increasing the credibility and visibility of an influencer.

In the same post, HtP shifts his readers’ attention to life in the pandemic:

“everyone I talk to has found some level of clarity since the pandemic began. The world paused long enough for us to look around and ask, ‘is this how it should be for me?’”

For those who do not feel they possess this sense of clarity, there will be a level of fear of being left behind. HtP provides the solution at the bottom of his message, in the form of a link to his new community page. He states,

“want to meet more people who are on your vibe? join us at [humblethepoet.com/COMMUNITY](https://humblethepoet.com/COMMUNITY), we created a platform so all you wonderful people can not only connect with me, but with each other.”

HtP offers an alternative space for those seeking the clarity he initially mentions. Furthermore, he distinguishes the space from Instagram and other mainstream social media platforms:

“It’s free, it’s safe and most of all, it’s 100% good energy. All the best parts of a social platform without the other bullshit.”

HtP alludes to the press coverage pertaining to how particular social media sites have used user data, and to reports of forms of abuse that have been facilitated by social media algorithms. Despite creating an alternative community space through his Handsome Friends platform, HtP has retained his public profiles on YouTube and Instagram. Such a move emphasises the

scope for a content creator to facilitate multiple platformities that each carry particular benefits for the content creator and their associated community members.

Through indicating that the space he has set up is devoid of hate speech, and attention maximisation strategies that encourage social media addiction, HtP indicates his personal emotional investment in the well-being of the individuals accessing the site. This sense of being safe and cared for is a key motivation for individuals accessing and continuing with therapeutic support. With regards to a physical therapeutic space, clients view the space as an extension of the therapist (Miwa and Hanye, 2006). Therefore, the interface of the digital site influences whether the potential visitor feels they would be prepared to self-disclose. Therefore, his emphasis on safety indicates a character that highly values the feeling of security. This would further his reliability for those seeking safe spaces to connect with others who have experienced mental illness.

The webpage itself reinforces this sense of security through individuals only being able to access the site upon being granted permission. The 'request to join' button stresses the exclusivity of the site and further indicates that HtP has considered the experiences of his users when designing the online space. For emotionally vulnerable individuals, there is a need for safety, control and feeling integrated in group therapeutic settings (Bartz et al, 2020) which he addresses. He calls upon individuals to accede control to him with regards to their safety needs and desire for deeper social interactions. Having used his Instagram post to draw attention to the safety of the site, he states the following on the homepage of his website, Handsome Friends: "I'm creating a space for my community to connect with me on a deeper level without having to dive into the trash that is social media" (HtP, 2023). For those seeking entry to the community, the persona of the poet, rather than the poetry, is the key transformative artefact. The link between the community and individual transformation is inferred in the third question on the 'Request to Join' page: 'Why do you want to join?' Whilst the first two questions elicit the individual's name and email address, this question indicates that there is a desirable response to why an individual would seek to be part of HtP's more selective community. The question indicates that the individual ought to be aiming to gain something that had previously been lacking or insufficient through joining the group. The

individual is then informed that, should their reason for joining align with the ethos of the group, they will be approved and sent an invite link from the host.

The term ‘social relatedness’ is used by Bolger and Amarel (2007) and concerns individuals seeking to obtain understanding and belonging in a particular group, whilst feeling a sense of emotional synergy with group members. Those who receive approval to join HtP’s community would likely experience a sense of social relatedness with HtP and fellow group members. With a user having obtained this sense of social relatedness, the space becomes an extension of the user’s self. Therefore, having been taken as a representation of HtP, the site is also fused to the identity of the user. The term ‘identity fusion’ can be used to allude to the joining of personal and social selves in relation to a particular community (Bastian et al, 2012). The identity fusion of individuals to communities leads to the strengthening of the community as the combination of personal and social selves facilitate pro-group behaviour. The knowledge that such core characteristics are shared between members leads to individuals projecting familial ties onto the extended group (Ariyanto et al, 2014). Consequently, the individual experiences a feeling of oneness with the group that comprises of

“a constellation of feelings that are supported by abstract thoughts but are not dependent on logic or other higher level thought processes” (Brannon et al 2015 pg.48).

Therefore, this experience of identity fusion is automatic and emotionally-led rather than being a by-product of conscious thought. For this strength of fusion to remain, extended groups must maintain the structure that nourishes the identities of its members. HtP nourishes the tie between individuals and the group through hosting Zoom meetings wherein individuals can experience fellowship and a supportive environment in which to share their work. For some individuals, this process of sharing may represent a self- defining experience that is necessary for a group identity to strengthen (Bastian et al, 2017). A transformative memory of having been accepted and valued may form, wherein an individual recalls having allowed oneself to be emotionally vulnerable, and consequently receiving validation. This sense of emotional vulnerability, and the feeling of fear that may result from it, leads to a heightened affective state. The individual making themselves vulnerable, by disclosing intimate details of their mental state, can experience an extreme emotional threat to their well-being. The

‘extreme’ aspect elevates the experience from regular interactions that contain emotional vulnerability, to a circumstance that could be costly on an emotional level. For example, an individual may perceive the possibility that their emotional disclosure might result in them being invalidated by the community. On social media, the invalidation might take the form of a dearth of community support, in the form of likes and comments; alternatively, invalidation may involve negative comments and, therefore, an explicit signal of group marginalisation. Community invalidation represents a significant threat to an individual’s self-esteem due to the rarity of the individual risking such a level of vulnerability.

Where the rarity of an individual’s intimate disclosure is declared as such to fellow group members, the act of witnessing an individual obtain a transformative experience by making oneself vulnerable to the group and receiving validation can self-define other group members. The experiencing and co-witnessing of heightened emotional vulnerability creates more extreme forms of group cohesion compared to fusion motivated by identification (Bastian et al, 2012). Identification involves individuals feeling an alignment with the category a group defines itself alongside. On the HtP community page, once accepted, an individual is granted the ability to navigate to different interest sections including art, beauty, comedy, dance, fitness, music, reading, technology and writing. Each of these sections represent sub-categories of the website that are followed by smaller numbers of members who either have professional ambitions related to the community pages, or simply engage with the communities for recreational purposes.

On the Handsome Friends site, particular members have the title of ‘host’, whereby they are symbolically elevated above other members to a position closer to HtP. Their role can be distinguished from other members as their posts focus on eliciting platformity viewpoints related to the group identity markers. In contrast, posts by untitled members range between self-promotion and requests for advice. On January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2024, Navreen A, a member who possesses a ‘host badge’, posed the following question to the Handsome Friends writing group: “what’s most important for your growth in 2024?” (Navreen A, 2021).

The post has elicited two responses (as of 15/1/2024), with its social function centering on reminding members of the reason they have joined the group. The inference is that this digital platform will facilitate such a journey and can be used as a tool. The platform's suitability as a tool to aid members in their pursuit of personal goals was stressed by HtP in a 2021 interview by Nikki Walton. Walton is an author and psychotherapist who interviewed HtP on the *Be Here Now Network's* YouTube channel. The interview represented a collaboration between these two influencers, whose work engages with the themes of healing, community and teaching. Such collaborations are common on the *Be Here Now Network*, with its content featuring conversations between individuals whose works focus on building communities of healing.

Within the interview, HtP indicates that his Handsome Friends community is largely self-functioning through its members' active roles. He states the member experience is like

“going to your favourite concert and making a friend there. Sometimes, it's not even about who is on stage” (Be Here Now Network, 2021).

HtP indicates that his role at the centre of the community is subservient in importance to the interactions that take place around him. For Nick Couldry (Couldry 2003a), the 'mediated centre', in social media interaction, is the sense of cultural status that is gained through being at the centre of the mythical world inhabited by an individual and their friends. This space is a myth because it infers that there is a societal centre which, by accessing, grants the individual a sense of connectivity that the rest of the group lacks.

Couldry indicates that for the myth of the mediated centre to thrive, there needs to be a 'myth of us' where, through obtaining this sense of constant connectivity, individuals can experience their ideal life which is comprised of being central to the people they want to be with. This, Couldry states, is based on our “ideologies of connection” (Couldry in Campanella, 2019), whereby the importance of connection is socially perpetuated by companies that benefit from the data. In his interview with Nikki Walton, HtP underlines a personal drive to connect individuals and give them voice:

“I’m grateful to have such a big audience for my work, but the next level of that is...how do we connect these nodes to other people as well” (Be Here Now Network, 2021).

Therefore, HtP indicates that the platform serves as a vehicle that uses his celebrity to grant a voice and sense of community to his followers, while at the same time placing him at the mediated centre.

Through highlighting the scope for his alternative platform to grant a sense of mutuality and connection for its users, HtP infers that such characteristics are lacking in the communities he facilitates on mainstream digital platforms. Furthermore, he indicates that one reason for his relative inability to instil mutuality in his platformities on mainstream social media platforms is due to the technological interfaces of those platforms; HtP indicates that because of technological restraints on mainstream platforms, he has faced difficulties in asserting his presence within his platformities on YouTube and Instagram. The willingness of individuals to undertake the effort to sign up to Handsome Friends and engage with HtP on a new, niche, platform demonstrates the strong affective links he has formed with his platformities on the mainstream platforms. That HtP has retained his accounts on Instagram and YouTube and continued to publish content on these platforms, indicates his desire to preserve and build the platformities he has fashioned in those spaces whilst creating a new platformity on the Handsome Friends site.

Individuals may choose to partake in multiple HtP platformities, on Instagram, YouTube and the Handsome Friends Network; alternatively, an individual might decide to leave the platformities on the former sites, due to the platforms’ toxic elements, and exclusively engage with HtP’s content on the Handsome Friends Network. For HtP, his utilisation of the mainstream social media platforms enabled him to build his community, whilst the Handsome Friends Network allows him to provide his followers with the sense of being more intimately guided. The willingness of particular followers to engage with the Handsome Friends platform, and the desire by HtP to make the community accessible for individuals beyond mainstream social media, indicates a focus, within the HtP community, on community development. Whilst declining to engage consistently with community discussions (HtP did not comment on any of the discussions initiated by users in 2022), HtP has ensured his presence remains visible on the



site. This has been achieved through the HtP profile being used to initiate member discussions. Therefore, although HtP indicates that he will occupy a peripheral position on the site and, to an extent, does so through declining to involve himself in visible interactions with the community, he appears to grant individuals the opportunity to voice their viewpoints to him. For example, on January 1<sup>st</sup> 2021, HtP asks, “what do you wish for 2022?” (HtP 2021b). The post received seventeen responses in the week after it was published, with the interaction appearing to temporarily close the boundary between ‘ordinary people’ and a media personality. Couldry (2003) indicates that cultural status is achieved by those ‘in’ or ‘on’ the media, in contrast to the devalued location of being outside of the media realm. This means that, through responding to the question by HtP, ordinary individuals can attain the cultural capital of ‘sharing the stage’ with the media figure. Each of the seventeen comments draw upon themes that are associated with HtP’s persona, such as self-love, well-being, human connection and self-improvement.

Therefore, whilst symbolically sharing the stage with HtP, the participants adhere to the underlying logic of his media persona. The blurring of an ordinary individual into HtP’s momentary representative is exemplified by the poster Priyanka Parida. Parida’s response to HtP’s prompt is, “will start loving myself and then it will radiate from me to others” (Parida, 2022). Having crossed into the mythological mediated centre, Parida deploys a social front that partially mimics that of the host. Here, Parida deploys the social front of an individual who, whilst embarking on a journey of self-acceptance and discovery, intends to pass on the benefits of her newly acquired self-acceptance. Therefore, Parida positions herself in an intermediary role, a step behind HtP who, in contrast, has constructed a persona that indicates he has already attained such self-love and is in a position to emit such an emotional and spiritual state to others.

The example of Parida, when combined with all of the seventeen comments having thematically aligned with HtP’s persona, suggests that previously unmediated individuals negotiate how they engage with specific mediated centres. The negotiation is influenced by what performance of identity is required to grant the individual greater symbolic proximity to the figure associated with the mediated centre of the community. Thus, whilst HtP states the platformity is “beautiful and brilliant because they (the ‘ordinary’ platformity members) get to

communicate with each other” (Be Here Now Network, 2021). How individuals communicate with one another is influenced by the group expectations and norms encouraged by the group leader. Therefore, although HtP has facilitated a community space beyond social media, community interaction within the space is constrained according to the conscious or unconscious pressure to ensure comments align with the central media figure’s persona.

The Handsome Friends community has been marketed as an extension of HtP’s altruistic persona, with it being advertised as an alternative social media platform that does not have the financial imperatives of mainstream platforms. HtP indicates that, due to this, it does not have the algorithmic biases and attitude towards hate speech that have been associated with such sites. Instead, he markets the site as being well-being focused for its users with the benefit of community-building in a space that is designed as supportive and facilitative of disclosure. In addition to emphasising that the relationship between platform, stakeholders and advertisers can have negative impacts on the well-being of its users due to discriminatory algorithms (HtP, 2021), HtP indicates that the technological architectures of mainstream social media platforms create a problematic culture of comparison that undermines well-being. In a Facebook post on 20<sup>th</sup> October 2019, HtP states,

“I get jealous. Going on social media will always give me an excuse to feel jealous of something” (HtP, 2019).

HtP draws attention to his personal experiences of appearance comparison on social media, which has led him to feel body insecurity. He indicates that such experiences are driven by a circulation of selfhood on social media, whereby users are influenced by the emphasis on visuality on social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook.

Cultures of selfie-sharing on digital media have been identified as a cause of decreased body satisfaction and increased negative affect (Engeln et al, 2020). Having linked social media usage to undesirable psychological effects, he indicates that the visual element of particular platforms has been a driver of his personal negative body image outcomes. With social media feeds often featuring curated images of attractive peers (Engeln et al, 2020), HtP alludes to the issue of upward social comparisons whereby individuals compare themselves to others who seem to possess more of a certain desirable characteristic. His statement, “maybe it’s

someone's beach body", aligns with research which has proposed that body image concerns are particularly influenced by social media platforms that are more visually focused (Fabris et al, 2018). HtP indicates that the Handsome Friends platform is a space of community support rather than self-presentation (Be Here Now Network, 2021), with his claim having initially been furthered by the lack of opportunities for physical self-presentation on the site. The space is predominately populated by prompts for discussion that have been posted by HtP on the main community feeds, or by users on the niche pages. Nevertheless, users are given the option of including a profile picture in place of a default text, thereby facilitating online disclosure and a focus on impression management.

As Bevan et al (2011) emphasise, the element of a profile picture, on sites such as Facebook, is a central means of enabling users to construct and perform an identity (Bevan et al, 2011). This process of identity construction occurs through 'showing' rather than 'telling' as users tend to favour implicit signals (Grasmuck et al, 2008). Rather than explicitly making identity statements, such as 'I am popular', Facebook users generally favour listing affiliations with particular groups and activities (Grasmuck et al, 2008) or including photographs that indicate their sociability. In their content analysis of 63 Facebook accounts, Grasmuck et al explore how users construct and perform favourable identities. One significant finding was that "most implicit identity claims are visual" (Grasmuck et al 2008, pg. 1826), with Facebook walls either being populated by photographs uploaded by the users themselves or by pictures posted to their Facebook walls by others. In the latter scenario, whilst the content would be chosen by another party, the profile owner indicates that the image aligns with their preferred identity presentation by accepting the image onto their wall. Given that individuals tend to display photographs of themselves on social media to favourably align their identities to community preferences (Grasmuck et al, 2008), the absence of photographic self-presentations in the Handsome Friends community indicates that other forms of identity presentation are being favoured.

As addressed earlier in this chapter, users within the Handsome Friends community have aligned their identities with the themes promoted by HtP. A central theme is the act of writing to heal the self and others; this identity marker is articulated, in the Handsome Friends community, through posting on the community pages or responding to a post started by

another member. Users of mainstream social media platforms engage in a process whereby individuals tailor their identity performances according to the cultural preferences that define the groups they intend to align themselves with; Grasmuck et al (2008) label this process 'cultural-self- description'. On sites that have a culture of idealised image sharing, such as Facebook (Grasmuck et al 2008) and Instagram (Sherlock and Wagstaff 2009), individuals use photographs to articulate socially favourable identities. This culture has been influenced by the technological features of particular social media sites; for example, Instagram has a strong visual emphasis that was primarily designed for individuals to edit and share images. Having evolved into a social media platform, the options to filter and edit photographs have furthered the opportunity to include idealised images as part of their narrative of self. Meanwhile, the technological interface of Facebook enables users to create photographic albums which can be liked and used by individuals to numerically measure their popularity.

However, having initially departed from a culture of idealised self-presentation by abstaining from including photo sharing features, users (as of 12<sup>th</sup> August 2022) can now upload a selfie in place of a default avatar. In drawing the Handsome Friends interface closer to those of mainstream platforms, HtP enhances its attractiveness for those users seeking a closer alternative to mainstream social media. However, he also makes the platform vulnerable to the types of harms experienced by users of mainstream platforms as a consequence of selfie behaviours. James Gray and Evelyn Meier (2014) report that specific features of digital platforms encourage body image disturbance amongst their users. Specifically, they identify that photo applications lead to elevated exposure to idealised bodies. Such exposure correlates significantly with self-objectification, weight dissatisfaction, thin ideal internalisation and a drive for thinness. By enabling Handsome Friends users to engage with the selfie-related practices of staging, modifying and posting selfies and then having those selfies evaluated through likes and comments, HtP facilitates the threats to well-being that are caused by selfie practices. Whilst the Handsome Friends platform contains a culture that is less focused on selfie sharing than platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, the capacity of users to engage in such practices undermines the validity of Handsome Friends as a platform geared towards circumventing the harms facilitated by mainstream platforms. Whilst HtP enables his platform to provide a user- experience that is closer to mainstream social media, he encourages the negative consequences of those interfaces to become embedded within the Handsome Friends

network. Although the community's culture has been consciously focused on discussions around well-being and disclosures about one's journey towards life satisfaction, the technological interface does not entirely align with this culture.

Aside from the capacity for image sharing, the Handsome Friends interface has adopted other characteristics from mainstream social media platforms that have been identified as contributors to user harms. These characteristics include communication functions that allow users to like and share user posts, and a notification icon that alerts users to multiple types of new information pertaining to their social network. As a byproduct of mimicking mainstream social media platforms by utilising public metrics, such as likes and shares, Handsome Friends enables users to quantify the feedback they receive from other users. Consequently, the platform repeats the metric-related pressures faced by users on mainstream digital platforms, whereby users experience anxieties concerning receiving what they perceive to be an adequate number of likes and shares. As reported by Buonopane et al (2021), the presence of metrics, such as likes and shares, heightens rejection sensitivity in social media users. The perception of being rejected because of one's post being met with an inadequate number of likes and shares, can cause the individual to feel socially marginalised and experience insecurity concerning their likeability. Challenges to well-being also derive from peer-comparison, whereby users judge their social attractiveness based on the number of likes and shares they receive in comparison to their peers.

By including heart and share functions that serve as public indicators of the popularity of a post or comment, Handsome Friends encourages peer comparison. Quantitative trackers of the appreciation of one's posts encourage an individual to self-evaluate one's popularity; for individuals suffering from existing insecurities and low self-esteem, there is a tendency to undervalue the support they have received on social media. Brannick et al (2019) assert that feeling depressed may lead individuals to perceive that they are less supported on social media. The process of particular individuals undervaluing the quantitative support (likes and shares) they receive on Handsome Friends undermines the suitability of including such functions on the platform's interface. With HtP having acknowledged the capacity of social media to contribute to an individual feeling jealous of their peers (HtP 2019), his move to include features, such as

likes, shares and the ability to upload selfies, contradicts with his stated ambition to construct a platform that is devoid of elements that facilitate user harms.

Whilst including functions that enable users to share selfies and quantifiably evaluate the popularity of their posts and the posts of their peers, with these features being facilitative of negative body image and perceptions of social rejection, Handsome Friends also encourages users to spend more time on the platform. Handsome Friends contains a notification feature which, by its nature, encourages users to feel aware that the platform is indicating a circumstance has arisen that warrants their attention. Notifications further a sense of being pressured to respond whilst making individuals more prone to habitual checking (Du et al, 2019) which, as Coleman et al (2021) identify, impacts on the ability of users to relax. In addition to being alerted to platformity updates through the notification icon, Handsome Friends members receive updates via their email inbox. This feature furthers the pressure on individuals to respond, which inflates the sense of being constantly connected. Rather than obtaining intrinsic enjoyment from each engagement on the site, users might feel that, on occasion, they are engaging with the site due to an obligation to conform to what they deem to be an acceptable level of engagement. This deemed level of suitable engagement is driven by the urgency to engage that is communicated by the platform which, in this case, is heightened through internal and external notifications.

Given that the Handsome Friends platform mimics particular aspects of mainstream social media platforms, and that these technological aspects have been identified as having negative impacts on user well-being (Aksoy 2018; Coleman et al, 2021; Du et al, 2019), the Handsome Friends platform is not the idealistic space that HtP has indicated (HtP, 2021). Whilst the absence of a culture of image sharing has enabled individuals to participate in the community textually, whereby users are not obligated to reveal their physical characteristics beyond an optional avatar, users still face pressures to actively participate within the platformity. Consequently, although the issues of body-related social comparison and potential resulting body dissatisfaction are not as prominent on the Handsome Friends interface as they are on mainstream social media platforms, known challenges to the well-being of social media users are apparent on the Handsome Friends platform. Therefore, whilst Handsome Friends marks a departure from issues arising from the selfie cultures of mainstream social media platforms such

as Instagram and Facebook, and from anxieties concerning the use of algorithms (Ellis et al, 2018), the platform reproduces conditions that have been found to negatively affect well-being.

This chapter has underlined that the tension between community facilitation and toxic self-interest prevalent in the functioning of digital platforms is replicated in the output of platform poets; however, the self-interested actions of platform poets do not result in the harms that are a byproduct of the self-interested actions of platform owners. Clickfortaz and Charly Cox cross into topics (social media addiction and COVID-19) that could produce well-being benefits for their followers in the form of validation, should those followers be given the opportunity to narrate their personal experiences; however, those followers are, instead, encouraged to communicate about Clickfortaz's persona and Cox's personal achievements. Therefore, whilst the self-interested actions of platform poets do not result in user harms, they represent deviations from opportunities to directly facilitate their followers' well-being. Nevertheless, for a platform poet, the navigation between self-interest and community facilitation is necessary due to the need to build and sustain a career around a marketable persona. Furthermore, in focusing attention on themselves, Clickfortaz and Charly Cox indicate a relationship of intimacy between themselves and their followers; the feeling of emotional closeness to a platform poet furthers the possibility for a follower to perceive the poet as a role model and to be motivated to follow the poet's lead in undertaking healthy, positive steps towards well-being. The inadvertent benefit a platform poet potentially provides to their followers is in keeping with the network of benefit experienced by poets, consumers and platforms, which is sustained by self-interest inadvertently producing rewards for other parties. There is a notable proviso: there are different conclusions to be reached depending on whether the party assessing their rewards is a career poet, a follower looking for healing, or a corporate developer.

The final section examined the tension between self-interest and community benefit as manifested in HtP's output as the creator of a platform he claims to be devoid of mainstream media's toxic elements. It demonstrated that the tension between self and community increased in scale to account for HtP's self-interest in the growth of his Handsome Friends platform. Consequently, elements of mainstream social media that have facilitated high engagement, but which have contributed to user harm, have been replicated on the platform. These functions

include the capacity to upload selfies, the ability to like and share posts, and a notification feature that encourages users to respond quickly and to be continually engaged with the platform; such functions have been identified as contributors to negative experiences pertaining to body image, insecurities regarding one's social desirability, social media addiction and a fear of missing out. Each platform function, in principle, has the capacity to reinforce a positive sense of group membership where they are not accompanied by the aforementioned negative experiences; however, the presence of notifications, likes, shares and image sharing on the Handsome Friends platform, contradicts somewhat with the stated focus of the platform. Nevertheless, it is the pursuit of self-interest that sustains the system of benefits, of which HtP and his Handsome Friends platformity are two benefactors. Ultimately, the chapter demonstrates that the tension between self-interest and community-facilitation is ubiquitous in platform poetry; the tension partly stems from platform poets building personas that infer interest in enhancing the wellbeing of their followers, and partly from these poets inadvertently facilitating community benefits despite the latter's self-interested actions.



## **CONCLUSION: PLATFORMITIES AS MARKERS OF SOLIDARITY AND GATEWAYS TO WELL-BEING IN AN ENVIRONMENT OF TOXICITY**

This thesis has underlined that by building a platformity that is based on cathartic solidarity, a platform poet facilitates well-being benefits for themselves and their platformity members. It has been possible to discern the capacity for platform poets to build platformities, influenced by a digital platform's technological interface and broader communicative culture but adapted to account for the particularities of their practice, due to the particular positionality of this research project. The contribution this research makes to existing knowledge stems partly from its approach, whereby it intersects social media studies, digital humanities and communication studies. Through choosing a sociological approach, rather than seeking to undertake a critical interpretation of the literary merit of the poetry, this study has contributed new knowledge to the fields of social media studies, digital humanities, communication studies and English studies.

Poetry on social media has been largely analysed in a similar way to analogue poetry; that is, research has focused on the technical qualities of the poetry. Through treating platform poetry differently to other research in the field and focusing on the networks that form around poetry that has been shared on social media, this study has discerned the relationships that emerge through the creation of platform poetry, how these relationships function and the impact of these relationships on producers, consumers, advertisers and platform owners. Given this study's sociological approach, and the newness of the field, there has been a need to devise an academic vocabulary to account for the structures and relationships that facilitate and impede the capacity for well-being through platform poetry.

Digital platforms have particular architecture and therefore particular capacities and limitations. Thus, bibliotherapeutic platform poets are required to take heed of the specific technological interface of a given platform when deciding whether to publish their work in that particular space. Their work is not simply a literary artefact but a conduit for community which benefits both the bibliotherapeutic platform poet and the other individuals that form that

community. Platform poets must consider whether a platform has a communicative culture and technological interface that would enable their followers to obtain the well-being benefits made possible by the content of their poetry. The term platformity was proposed in this thesis to account for how the different affordances of various digital platforms influence the types of communities that form in those spaces.

Although a digital platform contains a general communicative culture that is influenced by the platform's technological affordances, niche groups can form which, whilst influenced by the platform's communicative culture, contain their own rules and ambitions. These community norms pertain to appropriate in-group behaviour and the outcomes its members are jointly focused on achieving. In a platformity cultivated by a poet whose persona and poetry are geared towards themes of self-love and encouraging self-love in others, there is an onus on individuals disclosing that what is preventing them from achieving well-being; furthermore, there is an emphasis on platformity members validating those disclosures and inferring similarity between themselves and the disclosers. The extent to which this process of disclosure and support is apparent differs across digital platforms, depending on their technological, social and communicative specificities. This thesis has underlined that the strength of ties and the balance between self-presentation and support-giving behaviours differs across Instagram, YouTube, Tumblr and Facebook. Platformities develop and operate differently across each of these platforms; furthermore, platformities within these platforms will differ based on the motivations of the platformity figurehead and their followers. This is the first known study to explore how the technological affordances and communicative cultures of different platforms influence the community building efforts of content creators.

The thesis has contributed to knowledge in English studies by demonstrating how various platform poets have differently facilitated well-being by tailoring their platformity-building endeavours, in addition to their poetry, according to the specificities of the site on which they have chosen to publish their work. Whilst Clickfortaz, HtP, r.h Sin and Charly Cox have each undertaken different approaches to community building, they have each facilitated well-being for their readers. However, there is a pervasive tension, which has been addressed in this study, between self-interest and well-being facilitation in platform poetry. The tension derives partly from platform poets cultivating personas that indicate an emotional investment in their

followers' well-being despite the poets self-interestedly utilising their followers as leverage for their own career progression. Nevertheless, the self-interested actions of the poets produce inadvertent benefit for their followers; such a process is in keeping with a system of benefit whereby platform poets, platform poetry consumers and the platforms themselves seek self-interest that, inadvertently, can benefit parties who have a stake in the poetry's 'platformity'.

The thesis has focused on how these poets have built platformities on YouTube, Handsome Friends and YouTube, Instagram and Tumblr respectively, whilst ensuring that their communicative strategies align with the conventions of their chosen platform. These poets, in their different ways, they have each encouraged a culture of cathartic solidarity in their platformities, which has encouraged strong ties between members and contributed to the platformities' identities. Cathartic solidarity is a significant conduit to achieving well-being through bibliotherapeutic platform poetry. The experience of cathartic solidarity enables an individual to feel they have permission to mediate their reading of a poem through their personal circumstances, and to then disclose their reading to a supportive audience.

Critically, the discloser must feel that this support derives from a desire, on the part of the community at large, to know that fellow community members are obtaining well-being benefits through their experiences of the poetry. The thesis has contributed to social media studies and communication studies by identifying that the element of cathartic solidarity, in a social media-based community, enables an individual to reveal part of their emotional self that has been hurt and receive community acknowledgement of that hurt and validation of their selfhood. An individual's act of disclosing intimate information pertaining to their negative emotional state, which is then met by support and validation from a community with which that individual identifies, is a crucial part of the digital bibliotherapy that can be facilitated through platform poetry.

This thesis has contributed to the field of digital humanities in outlining that digital bibliotherapy is a phenomenon that sits between traditional analogue bibliotherapy and self-medication. Traditional bibliotherapy calls for a practitioner whilst, in digital bibliotherapy, there is an onus on an individual to independently research resources that might facilitate well-being benefits. A key reason why bibliotherapeutic platform poetry can be used for

such gain is because the creative form provides gaps for consumers to insert their circumstances into the text. In doing so, a synergy is created between the consumer and the narrator figure, with the latter being perceived by readers as an extension of the author. The nature of platform poetry output means a consumer can experience the journey of the narrator and, by extension, the poet, over a prolonged period of time across multiple poems. The poet/narrator becomes a role model who encourages the consumer to positively reframe their experiences according to the upwards trajectory the bibliotherapeutic platform poet demonstrates. In the presence of a facilitative platformity, the platform poetry page becomes a space where an individual can consume poetry in a self-medicating manner that enables them to positively reframe their life circumstances and narrate their reframed life story to a supportive community who provide peer support.

Meanwhile, the poet can self-medicate and achieve well-being benefits through the act of writing and obtaining validation through witnessing a community benefitting from their writing and community-building endeavours. The bibliotherapeutic platform poem is positioned as a reflection of the author's identity which means that a digital community that forms around the poetry and embellishes individual poems through likes, positive comments and shares, validates the author's identity. Thus, in platform poetry, therapeutic gain can in effect accrue to both the 'writer' and the 'consumer owing to the essentially community-based, affective and inherently relational nature of digital platforms.

In accessing digital bibliotherapy through disclosing intimate details about their emotional state to a supportive community, the discloser inadvertently mobilises benefits in other parties. The support-giver derives a sense of worth from perceiving themselves as having contributed to the relief of another individual within their community. Moreover, through community members viewing a discloser articulate their experience of catharsis and those members then demonstrating support for the discloser, the notion of the community being a site of cathartic solidarity becomes reinforced. The cathartic solidarity encourages other community members to disclose and provide support to disclosers. Furthermore, the reinforcement of comment sections as spaces suitable for articulations of the self and the exchanging of support benefits bibliotherapeutic platform poets from both an economic and a well-being point of view. With the community culture of cathartic solidarity encouraging community members to engage with

the comment section, platform poets potentially benefit from the increased monetisation of their social media accounts, but this is not the only or main benefit the poet might achieve. Additionally, the poet might obtain the well-being benefit of increased self-worth through having contributed to an individual's catharsis. The poet might obtain catharsis themselves, through reframing their life narrative in a positive sense due to their role in the healing of others.

However, the economic imperatives of digital platforms contribute to a normative massification logic, whereby content that appeals to mainstream audiences is privileged at the expense of content reflective of minority communities. Therefore, in the context of bibliotherapy, whilst platform poetry's strength lies in its digital setting, whereby users can experience a sense of mutuality and community, this digital setting also undermines the potential for wellbeing benefits. Chiefly, this is because social media platforms deploy algorithms which have a marginalising effect on communities already experiencing marginalization in offline settings. Therefore, whilst bibliotherapeutic platform poetry is sculpted to address feelings of exclusion, its digital setting can exacerbate such feelings. The utilisation of algorithmic technology, by platform architects, is central to the flow of content on digital platforms, with the flow of dominant content being aided by algorithms. There is an insidiousness to algorithms whereby algorithms further normative, dominant modes of representation due to platforms focusing on increasing advertising revenue by prioritising digital material which would most likely earn engagement. As a consequence of creating dominant positions, algorithms end up marginalising others. The censorship of material on digital platforms undermines the well-being of individuals who had, up until the point of censorship, felt security and belonging within a platformity on that platform.

For both content producers and content consumers, an experience of algorithmic precarity (Duffy 2022) ensues after they learn of the biased suppression of the content that they create and with which they identify. For a content creator whose content reflects their identification with a race, religion or sexuality that they deem to misalign with the ideology perpetuated by a particular platform, algorithmic precarity might involve the sense that the monetisation benefits they can accrue from the platform will be capped through the platform preventing their content from being visible to individuals outside of their existing network. For content

consumers who deem that an algorithm is negatively impacting the work of a content creator with whom they identify, and in whose community they thrive, algorithmic precarity might involve a feeling of uncertainty concerning the platformity's long-term existence. Given the communicative culture of a platformity being inherently linked to the technological interface of a digital platform, and individuals feeling a sense of emotional investment in that platformity, platformity members who experience algorithmic precarity will experience a negative impact to their well-being.

In response to the perception that a platform's algorithmic design is biased against the aims of a platform poet and is negatively impacting the ability of that poet to deliver their aims, community members seek to publicly resist the algorithm. Marginalised groups have contested the insidiousness of algorithms by organising and staging challenges from within digital platforms. However, by using the platform and reinforcing its properties by contributing to site engagement, protesters cater to the platform's economic model of deriving capital.

Nevertheless, in using the platform architecture in an oppositional way, protestors can somewhat subvert the mechanisms that oppress them. This subversion has been achieved through community members circumventing the algorithms' means of detecting the audience the content has been targeted towards. Users have been deploying language in innovative ways to avoid the algorithm detecting their allegiance to a community the algorithm has disfavoured. Consequently, they have symbolically reemphasised the platformity's capacity as an avenue for marginalised individuals to assert their voices.

In response to the marginalising tendencies of platform algorithms, along with the perception that hate speech is wilfully under-policed on mainstream digital platforms, niche alternative spaces have been created with the stated aim of addressing the toxicity of mainstream platforms. The HtP Handsome Friends platform was analysed to assess how it both departs from and repeats different harms associated with mainstream digital platforms. It was highlighted that in occupying the position of platform creator, HtP takes on additional roles that lead him to become a platform poet, digital bibliotherapy facilitator and platform architect. The latter role leads him to repeat some of the attention maximisation strategies of mainstream platforms and thus repeat their associated well-being harms albeit while continuing to build a supportive community of cathartic solidarity. Hence, the elements of problematic platform

architecture, platform poet as well-being facilitator, and consumers as self-medicators and community supporters, become reestablished.

The phenomenon of digital influencers creating niche digital platforms that publicly address the harms associated with mainstream social media, might be a topic that future research could explore. New platforms are regularly emerging and a need remains to consider the kinds of platformities that are developing on those sites and how those platformities might facilitate and impede well-being. Another project that could follow on from this thesis is an examination of how AI technologies are influencing the communicative cultures of platformities. The ability of digital influencers to encourage the formation of a platformity through using bots that artificially populate a comment section with particular comments is an area that warrants exploration on the back of this study.

With the current research having created new knowledge on the capacity for platform poetry to deliver bibliotherapeutic benefits via the formation of platformities that stimulate cathartic solidarity, there is now potential for follow-on research to examine how new developments might influence the formation of platformities both within and beyond the area of platform poetry. This thesis identifies several potential damages caused by platform architecture that is set up to facilitate user engagement; these damages include social media addiction, exposure to hate speech and an exacerbation of the feeling of marginalisation. However, what the current work has achieved is an identification that, within a digital setting that is set up to provide benefit to the platform owners at the expense of user wellbeing, the self-serving actions of a single party, for whom platform poetry offers benefit, inadvertently can mobilise some benefit for another party. A network exists wherein each party cannot obtain benefit in isolation; rather, even where one party's pursuit of benefit negatively impacts another party, the negatively affected party relies on the other party's successful pursuit of benefit. This is the first known study to identify such a network exists and how a given party's pursuit of benefit impacts other parties within the chain. The study has discerned such processes through its approach, which intersects social media studies, digital humanities, communication studies and English studies. Whilst addressing the macrostructure around platform poetry, the study has identified and focused on the role of platformities in mobilising the digital bibliotherapeutic benefits of platform poetry for its producers and consumers. Each platformity built by a

platform poet is shaped by the poet's response to the technological interface and communicative culture of a given platform, and how their followers engage within the boundaries of the platformity culture the poet has built. Amidst the insidiousness within the network of relationships around platform poetry, a key contributor to platformity members obtaining digital bibliotherapy lies in the extent to which the poet has cultivated a community of cathartic solidarity. Thus, amidst a culture of self-interest within platform poetry, it is the experience of solidarity, within a platformity that mobilises its wellbeing benefits – both for its consumers and its practitioners.



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