

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Literary Theory & Criticism***Co-creation and interactive tools for poetry in Tiktok**Stanslaus Musyoki Nzioka¹, Charles Kebaya¹ & Larry Ndivo¹¹Department of Linguistics and Languages, Machakos University, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Transformation of traditional poetic forms within digital spaces acknowledges the evolving nature of poetry in response to technological advancements. The emergence of hypertext, multimedia poetry and experimentation with various digital tools has redefined conventional structures. The transformation process influences the reception and interpretation of poetry by diverse audiences. This paper addresses the gap in understanding how these transformations processes influence the reception and interpretation of poetry by diverse audiences. Digital Performance Theory and the principle of multimodality is used to guide the analysis. The research method used in the study was qualitative with descriptive research type. For the analysis, four poets were purposively selected from a population of ten popular poets on TikTok to give a sample of sixteen poems. Content analysis was used to gather data and thematic analysis was conducted. The results indicate that TikTok has transformed traditional poetic practices by reconfiguring medium, modality, authorship, audience and embodiment. Through transmedial and transmodal shifts, poetry moves beyond the page and voice into a richly layered visual and sonic landscape. Authorship becomes collective and authenticity emerges through emotional resonance rather than factual grounding. Prolificity and participatory tools reposition poets as both artists and performers of self, while audience members become co-authors in an unfolding digital dialogue. Finally, embodiment and spatial curation enrich the performance, turning the poet's body and environment into semiotic tools. In summary, TikTok does not merely digitize poetry; it redefines its ontology, turning it into a multimodal, networked and socially embedded cultural form. The study concludes that TikTok has significantly contributed to the digital transformation of poetry performance, creating new spaces for poetic creativity, participation, and dissemination.

KEYWORDS: embodiment, prolificity, tiktok, transformation, transmedial, transmodal

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1. Introduction

Traditionally, poetry was an art form deeply rooted in structured formats such as sonnets, haikus and free verse, each with its own set of rules governing meter, rhyme and rhythm (Padgett). Poets followed standardized poetic forms which required them to use precise verbalization to deliver both emotions and intellectual ideas and interpersonal observations on human matters. The system of rules in these poetic forms demonstrated the author's expertise yet helped both sides understand the message better.

Poetry was historically delivered in both oral and written forms, with oral traditions often forming the foundation of poetic practices in many cultures. During oral poetic performances the poet used their memory to recite their work while standing before audiences at public social events or religious celebrations or more private ceremonies. Oral performances required poets to control their delivery in order to obtain the desired audience response because these kinds of presentations relied on immediate audience interpretation and use of tone, rhythm and pacing to create emotional depth.

Written poetry, on the other hand, flourished in literary circles, where poets produced works for publication or sharing among intellectuals (Eliott). Through written poetry poets could invest extended time to pick their words and build meaning into their work. Critical interpretation within oral and written poetry required the audience to deeply understand the language which poets had chosen through their imaged metaphors and symbols (1725). All poetic experiences depended on active communication between the poet and audience no matter if it happened simultaneously or with a time delay. However, technology and the rise of social media have transformed these performative aspects of poetry in diverse ways.

2. Review of Related Literature

The transformation of traditional poetic forms involves the adaptation and evolution of established styles, structures and conventions in response to contemporary influences and mediums (Fowler). In this process, poets modify traditional elements to suit the characteristics and demands of modern platforms and digital spaces. This may include changes in language usage, rhythm and presentation techniques to align with the dynamics of platforms like TikTok. The transformation reflects a dynamic interaction between traditional poetic heritage and the innovative approaches necessitated by the digital era. Studying this transformation provides insights into how poets creatively navigate the intersection of tradition and modernity, contributing to the evolving landscape of poetic expression in our digital age (Al-Musawi).

Ajah investigates the artistic aspects of Johanna Waliya's African digital poetry, which seamlessly incorporates both French and English, key languages in Africa. The advent of new media and information and communication technology (ICT) has reshaped literature, dissolving traditional boundaries, fostering innovation in artistic creation and empowering readers (669). Within literary subgenres, poetry has experienced significant technological advancements, leading to the emergence of digital poetry. This form of poetry integrates text, image and sound, combining kinetic, interactive and hypertextual elements, resulting in artificially intelligent poetic expressions. While existing literature has extensively explored Western electronic poetry, there is a noticeable gap in attention towards the burgeoning field of African digital poetry. Ajah's exploration illuminates the symbolic uniqueness of each e-poem in terms of performance, dimensionality, temporality and interpretability. Colors, graphics, letters and images intricately interconnect, forming a nuanced language of digital poetic expression within a digital environment. This current study distinguishes itself from the reviewed literature by specifically focusing on the performative aspect of poetry within the context of TikTok, a popular social media platform.

According to Alu, Niyi Osundare's emergence represents a significant moment in the transformation of Modern African/Nigerian poetry from Euro-Modernist Poetry (62). The initial encounters of the first and second generations of Nigerian poets led to conflicting ideas. The review highlights Osundare's innovative poetry within the framework of the Alter-Native Poetic Tradition, emphasizing the synthesis of Western and African/Yoruba oral literary techniques. Notably, the use of local language and traditional speech patterns stands out as distinctive features in this poetry. This provides great knowledge and understanding on the evolving nature of African/Nigerian poetry.

Arenberg explores the adaptation of the age-old East African tradition of poetic dialogue in today's digital era, specifically within the Facebook social network. The study focuses on an online poetic exchange between two young poets from Mombasa, illustrating how digital platforms are reshaping traditional Swahili poetic practices in East Africa. The research highlights that even platforms aiming to preserve authentic Swahili literature become intersections of language, culture and identity (1345). By facilitating ongoing interactions between the authoritative voices of Swahili culture, rooted in the East and the expressions of contemporary urban youth culture, influenced by the West, these digital spaces create new avenues for literary creation and

discussion. Arenberg's work sheds light on how digital platforms, specifically Facebook in the East African context, transform traditional poetic practices. This understanding is relevant to the current study, which also explores the transformative impact of digital spaces but on a different platform—TikTok.

Ekesa highlights a noteworthy shift in performance poetry, demonstrating its evolution from traditional theatrical spaces to print media and, most recently, its thriving presence in virtual spaces. This transformation is attributed to the adaptability of spoken word poetry to technological advancements in contemporary society. Platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and X play a pivotal role in the widespread popularity of spoken word poetry. Originating from live theatrical performances in various Kenyan platforms, this genre has transitioned to occupy social media as an alternative stage for poets.

The accessibility of a ready audience and the simplicity of sharing poems virtually have propelled many poets to prominence in this genre. Notably, these virtual spaces offer a financial advantage by relieving poets from the expenses associated with publishing books or navigating the complexities of having performances aired by traditional media houses. While Ekesa provides insights into the evolution of spoken word poetry in the digital realm, this study delves into the distinctive aspects of poetic transformation on TikTok, contributing to the broader understanding of poetry's adaptation to diverse digital platforms.

Emerson suggests that new media does not just reshape existing forms but also influences how we read both traditional and digital poems. Digital poems like "Heartpole," "Wheels," "Walkdont," and "Oh" mark a notable shift in digital textuality (161). They create an immersive experience, akin to entering a virtual reality space, where language feels tangible, intricate and responsive to external stimuli. Taking "Heartpole" as an example, it consists of three movable parts. The word "breathe" visually portrays a beating heart or a chest rising and falling. This word interacts with the second moving part, undulating blanket of text, requiring readers to navigate around it to reveal obscured central passages, showcasing a dynamic and interactive aspect of poetry in the digital realm. Unlike the literature reviewed, which primarily discusses the transformative impact of digital poems on reading practices, the current study aims to unravel if and how the performative elements within TikTok shape the contemporary landscape of poetic expression.

Furani ethnographically traces the modernization of literary traditions among Arab poets, primarily focusing on Palestinians, over the past seven decades. Following the 1948 Israeli occupation of Palestine, the classical Arabic ode lost its prominence, giving way to the dominance of modern forms such as free verse and, subsequently, the prose poem. With the aim of contributing to the ethnography of modernity, the analysis centers on poets' narratives regarding rhythm, examining how they have embraced or abandoned various poetic forms. The study specifically investigates the political significance of rhythmic transformations, asserting that the secular plays a pivotal and intricate role in the modern departure from metrical discipline. This secular influence extends to how poets endeavor to modernize their rhythm, vocabulary and engagement with the public (295). Ultimately, it shapes not only poets' approaches to modernity but also, as the study concludes, influences the ways in which anthropologists write about modernity. By understanding the shift from the classical Arabic ode to the dominance of free verse and prose poems, the current study gains a historical context for its exploration of the transformation of traditional poetic forms.

3. Methodology

In this study, a qualitative approach with descriptive research design was chosen to analyse the elements of Transformation of Traditional Poetic Forms that are used in TikTok poetry. The study selected creators of digital poetry on TikTok, and a population of ten poets of the most popular was found, consisting of fifty-five publicly available poems. The four poets were selected through purposive sampling based on their works which best met the purposes of the study. Popularity, audience response, thematic relevance, poetic output and recognition within the digital poetry community (Douglas 415) were used as criteria to help guide the selection. Four poems were then chosen from each of the four poets producing a sample of sixteen poems. Those who have significant original poetry performances, regular appearance for the audience, and proven creativity among a wide range of cultural and language backgrounds were included. The data collection technique used was content analysis, which was the main tool for data collection. The selected TikTok poetry performances were systematically analysed to determine the transformation of traditional poetic forms in the digital performances.

The analysis was centered on transmediality, transmodality, authorship and participatory poetics,

embodiment as well as capturing the audience engagement via publicly available performance metrics like comments, heart likes, reposts, and shares. The selected TikTok accounts were used to collect publicly available poetry videos and a content analysis coding sheet was used to code each poetry video to capture the transformation of the poem. The data collected were preserved by screenshots, downloading videos, and recording audio so as not to alter the integrity of the digital content during the study. The analysis of data was themed to investigate and discuss the transformation of poetry in the digital era. Through coding, emerging transformations were identified, and these were grouped and formed into larger themes describing the transformation of poetry on TikTok. The findings were interpreted in line with Digital Performance Theory, more so the principle of multimodality.

4. Findings and Discussions

The analysis focused on selected poems by four Kenyan poets: Kapedo (*Girlchild, Drugs, Bittersweet, Kazi, Dunia Iko So Unfair, Mr. Politician, Tuko Same*), Teardrops (*Hope, Generation, Cheza Tuk Ama Wewe*), Somali Iron Lady (*First Time I Saw You, Fake Friends*) and Willie Oeba (*Dear God, Dear Mr. President, Dear Mr. President 2, Uhuru Maliza Uende*). These works helped show how TikTok is changing the way poetry is created, shared and understood.

4.1 Audience Engagement and Interactivity

Audience engagement and interactivity have always played a central role in the performance and appreciation of poetry. With the rise of digital media, audience engagement has taken new forms. Online platforms such as TikTok allow audiences to interact with poetry through likes, comments, shares, duets and stitches. These tools enable users not only to react but also to become part of the poetic conversation. For instance, users can engage with a poem by commenting to express their interpretations or emotional responses, using the duet feature to provide a personal reaction, or employing the stitch function to extend, reinterpret, or critique the original poetic message. This creates a cycle of feedback and reinterpretation that shapes how poetry evolves on the platform. The immediacy of synchronous media can enhance feelings of social connection despite physical distance, but also demands simultaneous engagement from all participants (Baym 1).

In modern-day art, audience interaction and engagement have been significantly transformed through digital platforms, allowing for real-time participation, feedback and reinterpretation. Jenkins observes that participatory culture enables audiences to become co-creators rather than mere consumers, blurring the lines between artist and audience. This interaction enhances the impact of artistic works by fostering discussions, personal interpretations and even creating intimacy with the audience.

To create intimacy and urgency, poets use camera techniques such as close-up shots, direct eye contact with the camera and slow zoom-ins to enhance emotional connection, making viewers feel as if the poet is speaking directly to them. This contrasts with live performances, where physical presence, voice projection and audience reactions shape engagement. According to Baym, digital platforms redefine audience connection by enabling immediate and personal interactions (Baym). TikTok's algorithm-driven audience reach amplifies this effect, ensuring content is widely distributed based on user interest, unlike live performances that depend on venue capacity and location. This transformation allows poets to reach global audiences instantly while maintaining a personal touch through digital intimacy.

Through duets, users can respond to a poet's performance by adding their verses, reactions, or visual elements, creating a layered conversation around the poem's theme. Stitches enable users to clip a portion of a poem and integrate it into their content, allowing for reinterpretation and new perspectives. Comment sections further enhance this interactivity, as audiences provide feedback, ask questions and even inspire poets to expand on their themes in follow-up videos. This level of engagement makes poetry more accessible, relatable and continuously evolving based on audience input.

Through TikTok, poetry has transformed into a collective performance of digital spaces that allows multiple participants to modify textual meaning with each new interaction. Participation between creators and their audience on TikTok overturns traditional roles so poetry emerges as ongoing discussions instead of fixed presentations. Users who participate with various digital tools to remix and reinterpret poems come together as a community to co-create instead of just consuming the content.

4.2 Hyper Aesthetics and Liveality in TikTok Poetry

In the evolving landscape of TikTok poetry, performance is no longer confined to singular delivery or self-

contained meaning. Instead, it is shaped by hyperaesthetics and liveability, two strategies that extend poetic communication beyond the moment of utterance and the poet's voice. These techniques enable poets to construct not only visually enriched performances but also affective, digitally entangled experiences that engage viewers as participants rather than passive spectators.

Hyper aesthetics, as employed in TikTok poetry, involve the integration of interactive textual and visual cues such as hashtags, user prompts, stitched responses and comment threads. These features effectively transform each poem into a node within a broader, interlinked discourse, much like hypertext in digital literature. The poem ceases to be an isolated performance and instead becomes part of an expansive, ever-branching dialogue. In the poem *Fake Friends* by the Somali Iron Lady, the poet concludes with an invitation: "Tag someone you thought was real." This simple directive initiates a cascade of social interactions, where viewers bring their relationships and betrayals into the poem's framework. What begins as a critique of false companionship becomes a space for collective testimony, where meaning emerges not solely from the poet's voice but also from how it is received, shared and reinterpreted.

Similarly, poems such as "*Dear God*" by Willie Oeba generate extensive participation through stitched videos, where users visually and verbally respond to the original performance with their own reflections, reactions, or prayers. This form of participation reshapes the poem into a shared emotional event, where individual experiences are folded into communal expression. Hashtags like #DearGod or #BrokenSystem are not merely organizational tools; they are thematic gateways, drawing audiences into networks of related content and deepening engagement by positioning each performance within a larger cultural conversation.

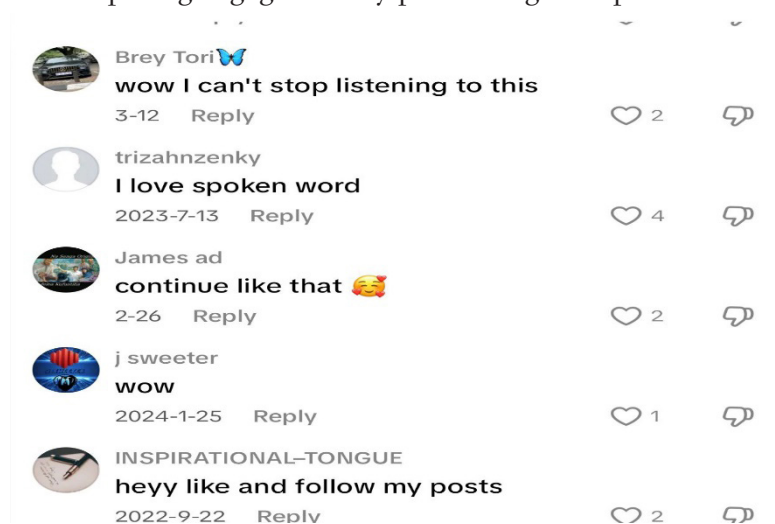


Figure 1: Screenshot of user comments on *Teardrop* by Oeba (2 June 2022).

Liveness, by contrast, refers to the strategic simulation of real-time presence within digital performances. Although most TikTok poetry is pre-recorded and edited, poets frequently employ techniques that mimic the immediacy and spontaneity of live encounters. These may include direct address to the camera, unfiltered gestures, ambient background noise and abrupt changes in facial expression or voice tone. In *Dear Mr. President 2*, Willie Oeba creates a scene that resembles a live confrontation. The presence of characters who act and react to the poet's lines, the apparent fluidity of the camerawork and the poet's impassioned delivery collectively foster the illusion that the viewer is witnessing an unscripted moment of resistance. The viewer is not simply watching a recorded performance; they are positioned as a virtual witness to a protest unfolding in real time.

In *Hope* by Teardrops, this same illusion of liveness is achieved through a carefully timed pause before the pivotal revelation of "a pregnancy test." The silence, the deliberate breath and the camera's slight zoom combine to evoke a sense of real emotional hesitation, as though the poet were struggling to find the words. While every aspect is precisely choreographed, the effect is one of vulnerability and immediacy, hallmarks of live oral storytelling traditions.

This simulated liveness is not limited to content alone. It extends to how TikTok delivers and frames poetry. The platform's algorithm, which circulates content based on interest and interaction rather than chronological order, means that each viewer encounters the poem in a moment that feels tailored to them. The poet's gaze into the lens, their tone and even their pacing creates the impression that the poet is speaking to the viewer at that exact moment. What results is a performative temporality that collapses the distance between recording and reception.



Figure 2: Screenshot of user comments on *Dear Mr. President* by Oeba (9 March 2025).

Together, hyper aesthetics and liveness mark a significant shift in how poetry functions on digital platforms like TikTok. These techniques enable poets to move beyond traditional constraints of form and audience engagement, cultivating poetic experiences that are not only multimodal but also participatory and temporally fluid. In doing so, they redefine the relationship between poet and audience, performance and memory, text and event, offering new possibilities for how poetry can exist and be experienced in the digital age.

4.3 Participatory Culture and Poetic Co-Creation

The interactive nature of TikTok allows poetry to evolve beyond author-centered expression and into a collaborative, socially mediated form of co-creation. Within this participatory culture, the audience is no longer limited to the role of silent observer; instead, they actively contribute to the construction, dissemination, and reinterpretation of the poetic text. Through affordances such as duets, stitches, and comment threads, viewers intervene in the poetic moment, extending its meaning and embedding it within a broader discourse shaped by collective agency. A case in point is the poem *Just Be Yourself*, which employs a conversational tone and culturally grounded humor to empower individuals, particularly women over 30 and persons with disabilities, to reject imposed societal norms, embrace self-worth, and affirm their identity unapologetically. The poem's intertextual references, from biblical figures like Moses to local public figures such as Waititu, create multiple entry points for viewer engagement, while its witty aphorisms "Even a Sunday best can turn into a duster" lend themselves easily to recontextualization and remixing.

Duets allow users to position their video alongside an existing poem, whether to respond, support, question, or creatively rework the original content. In many cases, these responses are not merely reactions but parallel poetic utterances, new verses, counterarguments, or emotional extensions that alter the framing of the original performance. For example, performances like *Hope* by Teardrops have attracted duets in which users deliver their spoken-word pieces that reflect similar struggles with gender, stigma, or abandonment.

Similarly, the stitch function enables users to isolate a segment of the original poem, often a single line or verse and use it as a prompt for their own video. This technique functions as a form of quotation or sampling, allowing viewers to anchor their interpretations to a particularly resonant phrase. In stitched responses to *Dear Mr. President 2*, for instance, users often extract lines critiquing political hypocrisy and use them to launch into personal testimonies or

localized political commentary, situating the poem within varied sociopolitical contexts across Kenya and beyond. This practice transforms a fixed poetic performance into an open-ended dialogue, fluid, responsive and contextually situated.

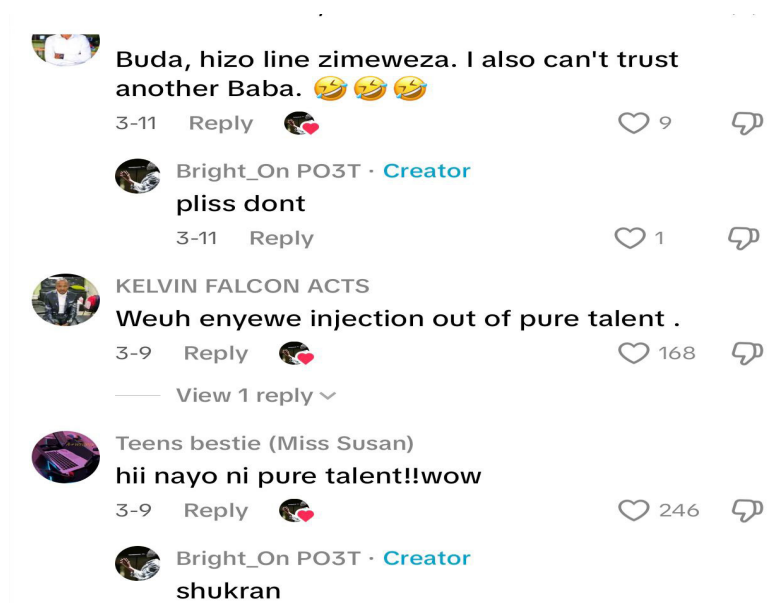


Figure 3: Screenshot of user comments on *Dear Mr. President* by Oeba (9 March 2025).

Comment sections further contribute to this culture of collaboration. Rather than serving as static feedback channels, they often become interactive forums where audience members interpret metaphors, share experiences and even suggest follow-up verses or topics. Poets sometimes return to these comments in subsequent videos, responding to audience questions or incorporating user feedback into sequels and thematic series. In doing so, the performance extends across multiple uploads, shaped by the continuous engagement of a community that participates not only in reception but in the ongoing articulation of meaning.

What emerges from this participatory framework is a poetics of reciprocity, an approach that reimagines authorship as shared, fluid and embedded in social interaction. In TikTok poetry, meaning is not solely derived from the poet's voice but emerges through the dialogic relationship between poet and audience, framed by the platform's algorithmic and interactive features. The poem, in this framework, functions as a space for collective engagement rather than a one-directional delivery of meaning.

4.4 Comments and Shares

The comments function within the TikTok platform enables audience members to engage in interactive dialogue with creators by offering targeted and intentional feedback. These purposeful responses go beyond casual reactions; they include expressions of praise, constructive criticism, personal reflections and thoughtful questions. Through such comments, viewers actively participate in shaping the reception and interpretation of the poem, often relating it to their own experiences or broader social issues. In doing so, TikTok users not only respond to the content but also establish a sense of connection and co-creation, thereby deepening their relationship with the uploaded material. Through its comment section, TikTok facilitates immediate audience engagement, enabling viewers to publicly respond to videos in real time. This interaction significantly shapes how content is perceived, discussed and shared, unlike traditional media platforms, which typically lack such immediacy and interactivity. The platform's interactive nature fosters the formation of community spaces around specific content genres, including poetry, where users exchange ideas, interpretations and emotional reactions.

In the context of poetry on TikTok, the comment section becomes a space for deeper audience involvement. Viewers often respond emotionally to poetic performances, expressing how the poem moved them or relating the themes to their personal experiences. These comments are visible not only to the poet who uploaded the poem but also to every other viewer, turning a personal reaction into a public conversation. TikTok's interactive tools mark a shift from normal literary criticism, where texts are openly subject to public scrutiny without authorial control. In contrast, TikTok allows poets to moderate comments, filter language, or restrict who can engage. This control can protect creators from harmful discourse and maintain intended interpretations, especially in sensitive or politicized

content.

However, such regulation also raises concerns about limiting diverse readings and critical dialogue. While it fosters safer engagement, it risks curbing the multiplicity of perspectives central to literary criticism. As scholars, we must consider how these affordances shape interpretive freedom, balancing creator agency with the democratic spirit of literary engagement.

Each poetic performance on TikTok receives a different level of engagement in the form of comments and shares. Some poems spark intense discussions, while others receive limited feedback. The number and nature of comments can depend on several factors such as the theme of the poem, the performance style, or how relatable the message is to the audience. Similarly, the number of shares reflects how much viewers value the content and want others to experience it. These metrics provide measurable indicators of how audiences are interacting with and responding to poetry on the platform. From a scholarly perspective, this presents a double-edged reality. On one hand, it empowers creators, especially marginalized voices, to protect their work and mental well-being. On the other hand, it challenges the openness of interpretive communities by narrowing the space for dissenting or diverse readings. This shift calls for a rethinking of how we evaluate and critique poetic texts in controlled, interactive environments like TikTok.

Audience engagement on TikTok can be measured through metrics such as comments and shares. Comments show how viewers respond to a poem by writing their thoughts, feelings, or opinions. These may include praise, questions, personal experiences, or suggestions. Comments give poets direct feedback and help them understand how their message was received. They also create space for discussion between the poet and the audience, as well as among viewers themselves. Eckert observes that shares in TikTok show how much a poem is appreciated and how far its message can spread. However, while shares may suggest appreciation, they are not solely determined by literary merit or thematic depth. Other factors such as algorithmic amplification, influencer endorsement, visual aesthetics, sound design and even the timing of the post, significantly shape how widely a poem circulates. Therefore, equating shares purely with poetic appreciation risks oversimplifying the platform's complex engagement mechanisms. While the number of shares can serve as a heuristic for reach or impact, it should be analyzed in conjunction with qualitative responses, user demographics and platform dynamics. This multidimensional approach enables a more balanced understanding of what 'appreciation' entails in algorithm-governed digital spaces.

When viewers share a poem, it means they find it meaningful or relevant enough to pass on to others. A high number of shares often means the poem reached a wide audience or spoke to important or relatable issues. However, this relationship is not necessarily straightforward. The number of shares may also be influenced by factors such as virality, controversy, aesthetic appeal, or even humor, elements that may not directly reflect thematic depth or artistic value. Conversely, highly critical poetry might receive fewer shares due to its complexity or political sensitivity. Thus, while share counts can offer insight into a poem's visibility, they should be analyzed alongside content, context and platform dynamics to avoid reductive interpretations.

In the context of the poems under investigation, the study found that audience engagement through shares and comments varies significantly across the selected poems, reflecting differences in thematic appeal and delivery. For instance, in *Story za Kapendo*, 'Girlchild' attracted 2,186 shares and 302 comments.



Figure 4. Screenshot from *Dear Girl Child* by Pain-Killer (@poetpainkiller 21 Jan. 2024.)



Figure 5. Screenshot from *Dear Girl Child* by Pain-Killer (@poetpainkiller TikTok, 21 Jan. 2024.)

'*Drugs*' had 1,697 shares and 241 comments, both showing high interaction likely due to their strong social messages. While *Drugs* recorded 1,697 shares and 241 comments, indicating high levels of interaction, this does not directly equate to appreciation or thematic agreement. Interaction encompassed a range of responses, including praise, critique, disagreement and engagement driven by curiosity. Although the poem contains a strong social message, other contributing factors, such as algorithmic visibility, visual aesthetics, or performance style, also informed its reception. These figures illustrate that high engagement cannot be exclusively attributed to thematic relevance or approval.

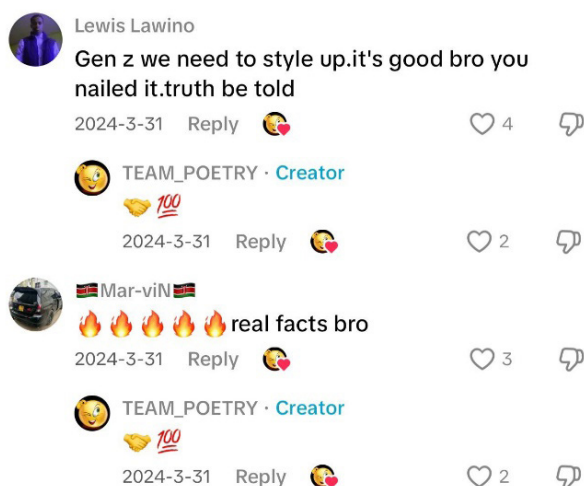


Figure 6 Screenshot from *Drugs* by Team Poetry (@team_poetry), TikTok, 31 Mar. 2024.

In contrast, '*Tuko Same*' received only 48 shares and 14 comments, indicating lower audience engagement. A similar trend is seen with Teardrops' works. While *Cheza Tu Kama Wewe* recorded 4,672 shares and 499 comments, another poem in the sample received only 100 shares and 170 comments. This disparity in audience interaction reveals patterns tied to performance intensity, linguistic accessibility and thematic immediacy. The higher engagement with *Cheza Tu Kama Wewe* stems from its emotionally charged performance, accessible language and socially resonant content. In contrast, the less-engaged poem features a more subdued delivery and addresses themes with lower immediacy among viewers. These figures demonstrate that interaction is influenced not only by thematic relevance but also by delivery style, linguistic choices and timing of release.

In the case of Somali Iron Lady, '*First Time I Saw You*' had strong engagement with 1,534 shares and 220 comments, while '*Fake Friends*' showed a sharp contrast, just 144 shares and 190 comments but only 3 hearts, hinting at mixed reactions. Willie Oeba's poems also illustrate variation: '*Dear Mr. President 2*' received 2,105 shares and 284 comments, more than '*Dear God*,' which had 280 shares and 150 comments. Overall, poems with bold or emotionally charged themes tended to receive higher engagement. These figures show how

TikTok allows poets to measure and compare audience response.

4.5 Heart Likes

In the context of poetry on TikTok, heart likes serve as an immediate, non-verbal form of feedback that can reflect the poem's reach and emotional impact. For instance, poems with large numbers of likes reflect a form of audience engagement, but this metric alone does not conclusively demonstrate meaningful interaction or thematic resonance. The like function may signify aesthetic appeal, platform trends, or habitual user behaviour rather than critical appreciation of the poetic message. Given that likes are visible to both the poet and the audience, they offer an instant gauge of the video's success.

The poem *Girlchild from Kapedo* received 34,300 heart likes, the highest among the sampled works. This figure indicates significant audience engagement. The high number of likes suggests that the poem resonated widely with viewers, either through its message, delivery, or visual presentation. However, without direct feedback data, such as comment analysis or viewer surveys, the specific reasons behind this response cannot be conclusively determined. The engagement remains notable and reflects strong viewer interest and interaction with the content. The vast popularity of *Drugs* demonstrated through 47,000 heart likes shows how well it resonated with the audience. The emotional connection to *Tuko Same* was lower than other poems according to the number of heart likes as the poem received only 2,135 heart likes. The different number of video likes among poems indicates specific literary works generate higher emotional responses from viewers due perhaps to their content or performance delivery approach by the authors.

The poem *Cheza Tu Kama Wewe* by Teardrops received 33,600 heart likes, more than five times the number recorded by *Generation*, which had 6,254 heart likes. *First Time I Saw You* by Somali Iron Lady registered 46,000 heart likes, in sharp contrast to *Fake Friends*, which received only 3. These figures demonstrate clear disparities in audience engagement across the poems, with some attracting significantly higher levels of approval as measured by the heart-like feature on TikTok. Willie Oeba attained 31,000 heart likes for his *Dear Mr. President* piece and *Dear God* received 3,300 heart likes. Heart likes between poems diverge because audience involvement depends on how well readers relate to content along with performance approach and emotional strength. The high number of heart likes shows how important this metric is for poets because they can use it to identify their audience's favorite content for adapting their writing.

4.6 Adaptation of Poetic Structures

Contrast, TikTok poetry is influenced by the platform's format, which encourages brevity and immediacy due to its short, time-limited video structure. This shift impacts how poetic messages are composed, delivered and consumed. This brevity forces poets to condense their ideas into more concise and direct expressions, often sacrificing traditional structural conventions. Poets on TikTok are less concerned with rigid rhyme schemes or syllabic patterns and instead focus on delivering powerful messages quickly and efficiently. The challenge of fitting a poem into a 15- to 60-second video encourages spontaneity and creativity, with poems often featuring sharp, impactful lines that speak directly to the viewer.

The poem *Tuko Same* by Kapedo demonstrates how TikTok poets often depart from traditional poetic structures, such as fixed rhyme schemes and instead prioritize message delivery and emotional resonance. Unlike some traditional forms where structure and meter were central, TikTok poetry tends to foreground direct emotional appeal and contemporary relevance, facilitated by visual and performative elements. This approach enables poets to connect with audiences in immediate and relatable ways. The poem does not follow a fixed rhyme pattern but uses powerful lines to highlight issues like tribalism, political betrayal and the need for unity.

A close analysis of *Tuko Same* reveals that the poet emphasizes emotionally charged themes and visual storytelling rather than relying on traditional sound patterns such as rhyme or meter. The performance employs direct address, facial expressions and visual cues to evoke empathy and reflection, suggesting that within the TikTok context, poetic impact is often driven more by content and delivery than by formal structure. This is consistent with the platform's affordances, where brevity, immediacy and audiovisual elements enable poets to reach broader audiences through emotive resonance rather than adherence to conventional poetic forms.

Free verse and spoken word dominate TikTok poetry, as seen in performances like *First Time I Saw You* and *Tuko Same*, which reject fixed rhyme and meter in favor of conversational tone and emotional delivery. This shift reflects the platform's emphasis on personal expression and immediacy over traditional structure. Due to limited expression scope the traditional structures of sonnets and haikus are rarely chosen for TikTok content production. Free verse format prevails on TikTok since publishers choose it instead of traditional forms because it provides enhanced flexibility for structure and rhythm use. Poets on TikTok have full dominion over

their performance style through their ability to combine pauses with tonal variations along with natural speech patterns. The platform's casual format combines with a speaking style that matches how the TikTok audience prefers to receive information. Through its nonrestrictive format TikTok offers poets a distinct opportunity to innovate without compromising their poetic values.

In traditional poetry, poets engaged audiences through voice, print, or stage performance, with limited tools to enhance their expression beyond language. However, modern day poetry has transitioned into a multimodal form. Poets now incorporate visual elements, background music, sound effects and on-screen text to enrich their message. These features allow for visual poetics, where meaning is conveyed not only through words but also through images and audio. This shift marks a move from linear, language-only poetry to interactive and dynamic forms that blend technology, creativity and performance.

4.7 Collaborative and Interactive Poetics

Through collaborative poetry on TikTok people demonstrate how poetry moved away from being a solitary activity toward becoming participatory and shared. Traditional poets both produced their poetry as well as performed it without significant audience participation. Through TikTok features including duets and stitches poets can today work side by side with each other. Users find it simple to contribute their version of existing poems using TikTok's dual collaboration tools. Poetry transforms into a continuous discussion that multiple poets develop together through shared ideas. Mainly due to the elimination of segmentation between creators and their viewers poetry continues to evolve through creative work shared by multiple participants.

Audience participation acts as a fundamental element for building new approaches to modern poetry. When users engage on TikTok they can both share their opinions and reactions through comments and likes and by sharing poems with others or making duets with new content. Poets gain insights from the platform through seeing their most popular verses alongside the preferred themes and appreciation of their poetry techniques. The study also considers poems with minimal engagement, as they provide important contrasts that help illustrate patterns in audience reception. These low-engagement pieces reveal which themes, delivery styles, or poetic techniques fail to resonate widely. By comparing both high and low engagement content, the study identifies not only what appeals to audiences but also what tends to be overlooked, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how poetry is received on TikTok.

The study found that feedback received on TikTok varies in tone and substance, ranging from supportive to critical or dismissive. While some poets appear to adjust elements of their work, such as tone, message, or performance style, in response to viewer comments, others maintain consistent stylistic approaches regardless of the nature of the feedback. This indicates that audience interaction does not uniformly influence poetic revision. As explained by digital performance theory, the digital spaces have brought revolution in the literary world, including poetry. According to Reinartz, Wiegand and Imschloss, digital platforms have introduced new elements, a shift that is not just about preserving poetic traditions but about actively changing them. TikTok enables poets to present their work using multimedia tools, leading to new forms of expression that mix performance, visuals and sound in ways that traditional formats did not allow. This change reflects how technology influences not only the presentation of poetry but also its reception and understanding.

Karacok, Rinsta and Finsta agree with this by arguing that online users adapt content to fit different online spaces. Just as Instagram users create content tailored to either public or private audiences, poets on TikTok adjust their style, structure and delivery to suit the platform's short-form video format and interactive tools. TikTok encourages creativity within constraints, prompting poets to shorten their pieces, make them more direct and include engaging visual or audio elements.

4.8 Media and Modal Shifts: Transmediality and Transmodality

One of the most visible shifts in contemporary poetry is its migration across media (transmediality) and its expression through multiple semiotic modes (transmodality). In traditional settings, poetry appeared either in oral form, performed live, or in written texts with structured forms such as rhyme and meter. On TikTok, these boundaries dissolve. Poets deliver their lines through video, sound, gesture, visual effects, ambient environments, kinetic captions and camera techniques, creating performances that are both transmedial and transmodal.

For example, Willie Oeba's *Dear Mr. President 2* circulates across YouTube, Instagram and TikTok, with each platform demanding a different mode of delivery. On TikTok, the poem is dramatized with on-screen captions, gestures, multiple camera cuts and overlaid text like *ushuru* and "*sitting allowance*," which flash at key rhetorical moments. The same poem on YouTube is longer, slower and less visually charged, highlighting how digital platforms mediate poetic expression.

Kapedo's *Drugs* illustrates transmodality through its integration of grayscale filters, haunting background music, rhythmic editing and stylized kinetic captions like "*kula moshi*." These visual and auditory devices heighten the message of social decay and personal loss. Similarly, in *Dear Girlchild*, phrases float upward in sync with the poet's voice, mimicking the rising hopes linked to education and self-empowerment. In these cases, form becomes meaning, the way the poem looks and sounds directly contributes to what it says.

4.9 Authorship and Authenticity in a Shared Poetic Economy

Traditional poetry emphasized singular authorship. The poet composed and performed the work and ownership was clear. On TikTok, these roles blur. A poem might be written by one person, performed by another and then reinterpreted, remixed, or stitched by dozens of others. The poem becomes an evolving artifact of collective meaning-making, shaped by multiple hands and voices.

In Somali Iron Lady's *Fake Friends*, viewers question whether the poem's emotional intensity stems from personal experience or performance. One comment asks, "*Did this happen to you or someone else?*" The desire for authenticity for the poem to be rooted in lived truth is palpable. But on TikTok, authenticity is not only about truth; it is also about emotional credibility. A convincing delivery can feel "authentic" even if fictional. In this context, authenticity becomes a rhetorical performance—measured by resonance, not fact.

Meanwhile, authorship becomes diffuse. Poems like *Dear God* have been re-uploaded by content aggregators without attribution. Others are stitched or duetted into entirely new compositions. In this environment, authorship is collaborative and ownership is shared across a network of creators, performers and responders.

4.10 Proficiency and Participatory Poetics: Building Identity and Dialogue

TikTok poets are not just creators of content; they are curators of persona. Drawing from Byung-Chul Han's concept of proficity, TikTok poets construct stylized public selves through aesthetic choices, recurring themes and algorithmic engagement. These choices affect not only how poetry is performed but how poets are perceived and validated in the digital space.

Teardrops, for example, cultivates an image of a social critic and street prophet. His poems, such as *Hope* and *Cheza Tu Kama Wewe*, are set against gritty urban backdrops and delivered in an impassioned, spoken-word cadence. The high number of heart likes, comments and shares, over 33,000 in one case, signal not only poetic success but social capital. These metrics allow poets to track what resonates, adjust their style and grow their influence.

Simultaneously, TikTok enables a participatory culture where viewers respond through comments, duets, stitches and remixes. In *Hope*, audience members stitch their own stories of pregnancy, abandonment, or resilience. In *Dear Mr. President 2*, stitched responses vary from affirmation to parody, some users re-perform the president's lines with sarcasm, adding layers of interpretation. The poem is not just consumed; it is inhabited, rewritten and expanded by its viewers.

Such engagement extends poetry's function from self-expression to community dialogue. Viewers become co-authors, shaping the poem's cultural afterlife through reinterpretation, emotional testimony, or critical response. The poetic experience thus becomes dialogic, not monologic—a collaborative unfolding rather than a solitary statement.

Embodiment and Digital Space in Poetic Performance

In traditional poetry, embodiment and space were literal and physical: the poet stood before a live audience, their voice and body anchoring the performance. TikTok reimagines this through the screen. The poet's body is fragmented, choreographed and mediated. Space becomes a curated backdrop, where environment and gesture become integral to meaning.

In *Dear God*, Willie Oeba stands on a windswept hilltop. His static posture, black clothing and clasped hands form a visual icon of despair. The natural setting—a rocky cliff beneath open skies, invokes divine distance and existential vulnerability. This spatial framing enhances the spiritual yearning in the poem's content. In contrast, *Tuko Same* places Kapedo in a slum alley, the tight frame and cluttered background reinforcing themes of poverty, marginalization, and political neglect. The congested urban setting visually echoes the lines that call for tribal unity and mutual compassion: *Kama unaishi Mathare, usirushie mtu wa Dandora mawe*, "If you live in Mathare, don't throw stones at someone from Dandora". Here, physical space mirrors the poem's ideological space, one calling for proximity, tolerance, and collective identity across socio-geographic divides.

Mr. Politician, on the other hand, exploits embodied sarcasm and performative gestures to critique elite hypocrisy. The poet often addresses the camera directly in a mock-pleading tone, his expressive hand

movements mimicking both begging and pointing accusatorily. The performance space, typically a bare or minimally adorned domestic setting, emphasizes class contrast and material lack. The poet's embodied irony is heightened by lines like *Na the only thing unachange ni suti after kuwa elected*, "And the only thing you change is your suit after getting elected", where a simple costume change (a different jacket or shirt) might be used to physically enact that change, mocking the superficiality of political promises. Another sharp line, "*Sasa wananchi sijui tuanze kupanda miti kwa bunge / Juu huko kumejaa monkey business*" "Maybe as, citizens we should start planting trees in Parliament Because there's too much monkey business there" uses metaphor and irony, but it is the delivery, accompanied by exaggerated facial expressions and minimalistic framing, that turns criticism into embodied satire. The visual juxtaposition of modest surroundings with performative sarcasm underscores the lived realities of disenfranchised citizens in contrast with the affluence of the ruling class.

Embodiment, too, carries gendered and cultural significance. Somali Iron Lady's performances use soft lighting, slow zooms and facial expressiveness to evoke vulnerability and resistance. Her performance of *First Time I Saw You* combines tender vocal inflections with gentle hand gestures, drawing attention to affect and identity. In these performances, the poet's body becomes both a medium of expression and a site of meaning.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that TikTok has transformed the performance, circulation and reception of poetry, using sixteen selected poems by Kenyan poets Kapedo, Teardrops, Somali Iron Lady and Willie Oeba, among others. The analysis demonstrates how the digital environment reshapes poetic form, audience interaction, authorship, embodiment and cultural function. Audiovisual tools such as background music, filters, gesture and voice modulation not only enhance the aesthetic value of the performance but also intensify its emotional and rhetorical power. These elements help transform poetry into a multisensory experience, allowing social commentary to be felt as well as understood. Through such aesthetic layering, poems become more accessible, affective and culturally embedded. According to digital performance theory, these poetic practices are not merely artistic; they function as performative enactments of social meaning. The content reflects ongoing cultural tensions while simultaneously shaping public perceptions of identity, injustice and belonging. As Sidorenko et al. suggest in their study of relational intimacy through TikTok dance, performance fosters connection and collective emotional resonance, an insight equally applicable to poetry. In this sense, poetic commentary on TikTok is not isolated or abstract, but communal and grounded in everyday realities. Thus, digital poetry is a vehicle for civic dialogue and cultural intervention. It elevates marginalized voices, disrupts dominant narratives and engages users in reflective meaning-making. The convergence of language diversity, performative nuance and multimedia elements has transformed poetic social commentary from a solitary critique into a vibrant, interactive and socially embedded discourse.

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