

# Overcoming the Pandemic through Viral Poetry Games: The Phenomenon of Coronavirus-Inspired Digital Acrostic Poetry in South Korea

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## Abstract

Following the outbreak of COVID-19 in South Korea in winter 2019, acrostic poems on the three-syllable word “Corona” became viral on major search engines and social media platforms across the country. The composition of acrostic poems, particularly in three lines, has been a popular cultural phenomenon in Korea since the 1980s when it became a participatory literary exercise and game featured on television entertainment shows. The digital revolution in the 2000s allowed the writing and sharing of these short and whimsical poems to expand into various digital platforms. Since 2010, PC and mobile games have been developed to further enhance the ludic approach to acrostic poetry composition and contests. While facilitating individual creativity, and as an interactive and ludic way of community building and branding, acrostic poetry contests have also been used to promote social and political campaigns and consumer products.

This paper will investigate poetry games and contests of acrostic poems on the Coronavirus featured on South Korean digital platforms. It will analyze the various games and contests organized by schools, communities, consumer product brands, and social media circles. The poems, composed by children and adults, display a wide range of messages involving self-reflection, social campaign, political criticism, and subversive wordplay. Together, these viral poems and contests promoted values of collaboration, competition, and social exchange during the pandemic. All in all, the paper explores the viral powers of language and language art in the digital world, as well as digital poetry’s connections to networked self, social mobilization, and online activism.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, digital poetry, acrostics, poetry games, social media, wordplay, viral language, networked self, social activism, entertainment, advertising

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*Language is a virus.* – William S. Burroughs

## Introduction

In the wake of the Coronavirus outbreak in South Korea in winter 2019, acrostic poems on the three-syllable word “Corona” became viral on the country’s search engines and social media platforms. Often witty and humorous, these brief poems were composed and shared in large numbers via online poetry games and contests as well as on personal blogs and social media pages. The composition of acrostic poems, especially in three lines, has been a popular cultural phenomenon in Korea since the 1980s when it became a participatory literary exercise and game featured on

television entertainment shows. In the 2000s, these short and whimsical poems expanded into various digital platforms, and throughout the 2010s, PC and mobile games that further enhanced the ludic approach to acrostic poetry composition and contests emerged. While facilitating individual creativity, and as an interactive and ludic means of community building and branding, acrostic poetry contests have also been used to promote social and political campaigns and consumer products. Despite their ubiquity, digital acrostic poetry in South Korea has not received scholarly attention, perhaps because of the compositions’ relatively low literary merit in the traditional sense, much like Instagram poetry in the English-language social media (Pâquet 296).

This paper will investigate poetry games and contests of acrostic poems on Coronavirus related themes featured on South Korean digital platforms. It will analyze various games and contests organized by schools, communities, consumer product brands, and social media circles. The poems, composed by children and adults, display a wide range of messages involving self-reflection, social campaigns, political criticism, and subversive wordplay. Together, these viral poems and contests promoted values of collaboration, competition, and meaningful social exchange during the pandemic crisis.

### Brief History of Acrostic Poems around the World

Acrostics, poetic compositions in which the initial or final letters of the lines follow the sequence of letters of an alphabet or a word, have a long history in world literature (Baldick 2). In the Western literary tradition, acrostic poems are found in the classical verses of Greek and Roman periods (Marcus 110; Robinson 290; Adkin 1029). Throughout the Middle Ages, acrostic poems and prayers were written as a creative way of scaffolding Christian messages that enhanced the sacredness of the letter (Tilliette). The courtly poetry of the Frankish Carolingian period and the Latin acrostic poems of Anglo-Saxon England also helped popularize the genre in the secular literary scene of the Middle Ages (Gallagher 250; Tilliette). Acrostics were also regularly used in hymns as well as in the secular prose and love songs of the Byzantine Empire (Jeffreys). Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, alphabetic songs for children emerged as an integral part of mnemonic curriculum in both religious and secular education (Jordan 10; Douglass). Acrostics were also employed widely in non-European literature. Within Hebrew literature, acrostics were commonly used in liturgical psalms to create lineated prayers (Holbrook) and to spell out the name of the author (Ofer 231). In the same vein, acrostic poems made frequent appearances in Arabic, Turkish, Swahili, and Somali poetry with both religious and secular content (Werner 561; Harries 146; Orwin 70; Aydin 249).

In contrast to the longstanding tradition of acrostics in European, Middle Eastern, and African literature, there are limited examples of acrostic works in premodern East Asian literature. Perhaps the most important reason for this can be found in the fact that literary Sinitic, the dominant script of the region, was an ideographic system comprised of over 50,000 syllabic characters. While Sinitic poetry made use of rhymes and wordplay, acrostics never became a key feature in poetry due to practical reasons. Throughout the premodern era, literary Sinitic was used as the common script for communication in the countries neighbouring China, including Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. In the fifth century, the 46-letter alphabet *kana* was introduced in Japan which facilitated the creation of vernacular poetry and prose. Acrostic poems based on *kana* were composed during the Heian period (794–1185 CE) but did not develop into a major genre like in other parts of the world (LaMarre;

Yamanaka). The invention of the Korean alphabet *hangul* in the fifteenth century allowed for the recording of vernacular song-poems that became popularized from the sixteenth century on (McCann 362). Yet despite the pervasiveness of wordplay in vernacular Korean poetry, acrostics were rare.

In the past two decades, however, there has been a notable development in acrostic poetry across East Asia. In Japan, acrostic poetry has been explored as a means of promoting media literacy and building digital storytelling networks (Jung, Toriumi and Mizukoshi; Mizukoshi). In China, much of the effort has focused on creating computer-generated acrostic poems based on classical poetic works (Fan, et al.; Guo, et al.; Liu, et al.) and on exploring the possibilities of using acrostics in Chinese language instruction for foreigners (He; Anggreani and Agustian). These developments in China align with recent trends in English language scholarship that probe educational benefits of acrostics for both native and foreign learners of the language (Hopkins; Frye, Trathen and Schlagal; Garba) and experimentations with digitally generated acrostic poems (Agarwal and Kann). More importantly for this paper, in South Korea since the late 1980s acrostic poetry composition developed into a major mass participatory literary phenomenon, intersecting various sectors such as entertainment, politics, education, advertising, and consumer culture.

### History of the Acrostic Poetry Phenomenon in South Korea

Poetry composition, exchange, games, and contests were vital components of social, cultural, and political life throughout Korea's premodern and modern history (Lee). Beginning in the late 1980s, syllabic acrostic poems began to be popularized in South Korea when three-line acrostic poetry (*samhaengsi*) competitions became regular features on TV entertainment shows. For example, a popular Sunday morning game and arts TV show for children aired on MBC, the country's leading private broadcasting company, included *samhaengsi* contest for school-age children (*Donga ilbo*, Feb. 27, 1988, 8). Throughout the 1990s, *samhaengsi* contests appeared on more TV and radio shows, often starring celebrities and other public figures as contestants. Their poems, composed on the spot to the three-syllable words provided by the hosts, were judged (often by the audience) based on swiftness, ingenuity, and wittiness (*Gyeonghyang sinmun*, Oct. 11, 1991, 16; Dec. 20, 1991, 22; Mar. 27, 1992, 24). The popularity of acrostic poetry contests on TV entertainment shows, such as Infinite Challenge (*Muhan dojeon*) featuring comedian Park Myungsoo and others, reached its peak in the early 2000s, and videos of poetry matches between prominent comedians circulated widely via YouTube and various social media platforms (*Segye ilbo*, Dec. 1, 2008).

Three-line acrostic poetry also gained popularity through its connection to the pro-democracy movement of the 1980s and 1990s. Witty and demeaning wordplay on the

names of presidents Chun Doo-hwan (in office 1980–1988) and Roh Tae-woo (in office 1988–1993) was captured in short *samhaengsi* that spread widely among people (Yi S). These poems challenged the oppressive images of political leaders and became a creative outlet for public frustration and anger over the military government and violation of civil rights. More importantly, they demonstrated the usefulness of acrostic poetry in reinterpreting and subverting established meanings and powers through participatory mass literary exercises that fostered social and political activism. Since then, the use of acrostic poetry has become a common practice in South Korean politics. Succinct, humorous, and biting acrostic poems on the names of politicians have been composed and distributed during election times and public protests, a trend that has exploded exponentially in recent years thanks to online platforms (*Hangyeore*, Oct. 8, 1997, 11; *Gyeonghyang sinmun*, Dec. 14, 2016). Such uses of acrostic poetry exemplify political activism that employs humor as a form of “creative nonviolent resistance” (Sørensen 2) and attests to the nature and importance of political engagement in South Korea mediated by social media (Kim SB).

Starting in the late 1990s, acrostic poems and poetry contests began to be utilized by both government and organizations to promote various social and environmental issues. For example, *samhaengsi* contests with prizes were created for an environmental protection campaign (1996), a cycling promotion campaign (1998), and an anti-bullying campaign (1999) to raise public awareness and increase engagement (*Donga ilbo*, Apr. 16, 1996, 45; *Hangyeore*, Apr. 16, 1998, 9; *Donga ilbo*, Aug. 31, 1999, 8). In 2000, a *samhaengsi* contest based on the Blue House (South Korean president’s residence) was held for elementary school students, and twenty winners were invited to meet the president on Children’s Day at the presidential house (Presidential Archives of Korea, 2000).

Around the same time, businesses of various types and sizes also began to use acrostic poems as advertising and marketing tools. They organized contests asking the public to compose acrostic poems on their new products or programs and awarded the winners with prizes (*Donga ilbo*, Jun. 11, 1996, 9; *Maeil gyeongje*, Sept. 10, 1997, 31). Some of these marketing campaigns combined acrostic poetry contests with social causes and nationalistic messages. For instance, a popular South Korean fast-food chain Lotteria’s 1998 marketing campaign, titled “Love the Nation,” included a *samhaengsi* contest based on Taegukgi, the South Korean national flag. The company donated a portion of its proceeds from the campaign to support a school lunch program for underprivileged children in South and North Korea (*Maeil gyeongje*, Jul. 28, 1998, 16). While most research on the relationship between wordplay and advertising has focused on puns, the use of acrostic poetry in South Korean advertising presents another creative use of wordplay worthy of further attention (Djafarova 267; Wischmeyer 212).

It is important to note, however, that these political and mercantile uses of acrostic poetry contests often encountered public backlash. Especially in the recent decade, a number of

online acrostic poetry contests turned into platforms for open and harsh public criticism (Kim S). For example, in November 2017, the Ministry of Defense organized a four-line acrostic poetry contest on the four-syllable words “patriotic martyrs” and “patriots.” The submitted poems on the ministry’s website ended up containing disparaging messages about the ministry’s actions and about blind patriotism, which led to the ministry abruptly ending the contest (Yang; Yi Y). In June of the same year, during the election season, the Liberty Korean Party initiated a five-line acrostic poetry contest based on their party’s name in the hope of gaining public support in the upcoming election. The event once again backfired when poems with critical messages and even slanderous attacks on candidates were composed, shared, and liked by netizens (Chae; Kim T). On the marketing front, in 2013, Hyundai automobile’s marketing team created a promotional acrostic poetry contest based on “Genesis,” their luxury line vehicle. Many submissions, however, were disapproving in nature, and when the winning poems chosen by Hyundai were announced, they drew much public scorn (Bak Y; Song).

This wide range of applications demonstrates the creative flexibility and effectiveness of acrostic poetry as a literary genre and phenomenon that has become a popular way of articulating and sharing ideas and feelings in contemporary South Korean society. For many South Koreans, acrostic poems have become a ubiquitous everyday sight and experience, traversing entertainment, politics, and consumer culture. Acrostic poetry composition and exchange have also become important means of individual and communal identity building. Acrostic name poems, for example, have been used broadly as a way of creating positive self-image. Writing a name poem that adds new layers of meanings reflective of personal character and aspirations has been regarded as an empowering and therapeutic literary exercise. A study by Jeong (2010) highlights the educational benefits of such exercise for students, combining creative writing, self-reflection, and self-expression. The exchange of name poems also serves a social function and has become particularly important in South Korean youth culture. Name poems of friends and classmates are widely shared on school and classroom blogs and various social media platforms from elementary to post-secondary, indicating the significant role these poems play in creating and bolstering a sense of community (Choe).

The passion for acrostic poetry led to the development of online communities dedicated to showcasing their members’ literary creations. Online *samhaengsi* clubs began to proliferate starting in 2000 where members shared their poems and commented on works by other members (Seon). Articles and blog posts offering helpful writing tips also appeared. In general, they emphasize that in order to compose an effective acrostic poem, a writer would need to study the topic, combine it with trendy subject matters, employ uncommon words, and make use of wit and humour. The articles also provide guidance on using online searching functions to find words that start with the same syllable (Gang). Soon self-described acrostic poets began to emerge

and became active on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. Those specializing in name poems gained following by offering personalized name poems to visitors free of charge (Yi J). Eventually, responding to the popularity of acrostic poetry, a number of online and mobile apps and games were developed that aimed to provide a more gamified experience of composing and sharing the poems (Giver Corp.; Minestrone).

It appears that the proliferation of acrostic poems in the digital environment, particularly on social media platforms, owes much to the form and nature of the literary genre itself. Succinct and quick-witted acrostic poems are attention-grabbing, memorable, and easily sharable—ideal content for social media feeds. *Samhaengsi* has intersected entertainment, social and political activism, marketing and advertising, individual and communal identity building. It has also facilitated ludic public participation mediated through digital platforms and mobile space via smartphones (Jin). Indeed, acrostic poetry has become a vital channel through which networked sociality and creativity is constructed in South Korea (van Dijck 3).

### COVID-19 and Acrostic Poetry in South Korea

When COVID-19 struck South Korea in winter 2019, the country responded quickly and effectively in controlling the viral outbreak. South Korea was commended by international medical communities as one of the few success stories in the first global wave of the pandemic (Zastrow). Many factors have been identified as contributing to the successful response, including the country's excellent health-care system, the public's eager participation in a large-scale medical intervention, an outstanding digital infrastructure, a culture of mask-wearing, and the collaboration between the state and the private sector (Brazinsky). Experts have also stated that the valuable lessons learned from the fight against the 2015 Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) outbreak have enabled the South Korean government and health care system to introduce effective measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus (EGH). During the MERS outbreak in South Korea, social media played an important role in educating and communicating preventive behaviours (Oh et al.). Although the country had the highest number of MERS confirmed cases outside of the Middle East, the scale of the outbreak was mostly limited (185 confirmed cases and 37 deaths) compared to the 2019 coronavirus pandemic (WHO). Moreover, while three-line acrostic poems based on MERS were composed and circulated online, they did not turn into a nationwide cultural phenomenon.

In contrast, the COVID-19 outbreak has had a much greater impact on the everyday life of people in South Korea (as it has had in many other countries in the world). The pandemic led to a viral eruption of acrostic poems based on the three-syllable word "Corona," which were posted and shared online profusely (and their numbers continue to grow even as this paper is being written). To understand this phenomenon, I have examined the poems available on major

search engines, namely, Naver and Daum. More specifically, I focused on works circulated on Q&A forums and Café sites where public and community events and exchanges of Corona *samhaengsi* took place. The discussion that follows will explore the key types and themes of Corona *samhaengsi*. As it will be shown, the types and themes vary just as the genre of acrostic poetry in South Korea has developed in multiple ways over the years. Digital acrostic poetry became a channel for people, especially during enforced social isolation, to express their sentiments and voice their opinions about the pandemic. More importantly, the poetry exchange took on the form of a mass literary game designed to help alleviate stress and anxiety as well as build and bolster a sense of community.

### Poems Promoting Safety Measures

Numerous Corona *samhaengsi* promote preventive behavioral guidelines such as social distancing and mask wearing.

Co: Don't touch your nose!! It's dangerous.  
 Ro: When passing people on the street,  
 Na: Please be careful, for you and me!! (Yongmaru, Apr. 18, 2020)

코: 코를 손으로 만지지 마세요!! 위험해요  
 로: 로드에서 지나가는 사람들 만날때요  
 나: 나를 위해, 너를 위해 "조심"!!

Co: Do you have a runny nose? Sore throat? Fever??  
 That's not good ...  
 Ro: People in the lobby are also coughing ... a fearful scene.  
 Na: Are you the only one that matters? Others matter, too. Please wear your masks and follow the health guidelines! (Damanegi, Mar. 9, 2020)

코: 코 나오나요? 목아픈가요? 열도 있나요?? 그람 안되요...  
 로: 로비에 사람들도 기침 콜록 콜록~ 공포 분위기...  
 나: 나만 소중한가요 다른이도 소중한 겁니다 마스크 꼭 쓰시고 생활수칙 지키세요 제발!!

As the above examples show, the poems are light-hearted and witty wordplays of varying lengths that invite people to be vigilant by practicing social distancing and mask wearing. Poems like these are found on the public Q&A forums on South Korea's major internet search engines. Usually, someone would initiate a thread by posting a request for Corona *samhaengsi*. Netizens then add their poems to the thread, which are liked, shared, and commented on, much like the functions on Facebook and Instagram. In a concise

manner, the poems effectively communicate the message of public health safety. The second poem in particular shows how signs of common symptoms of cold or flu can incite fear in people's minds during the pandemic. The writer also rebukes those who do not follow the health guidelines issued by the government.

These and other examples of Corona *samhaengsi* can be considered as cases of social media poetry and chat poems. The internet gave rise to a proliferation of short literary forms, including poetry. Social media poems, such as Instagram poems, exemplify what Meiri describes as “nano-poetics,” characterized by miniaturization and duplication (Meiri). Another distinguishing trait of social media poetry is found in its canonizing process, in which “each work is graded openly by Likes and Shares” (Shakargy 330). In a similar manner, the examples of Corona *samhaengsi* cited throughout this paper were judged by web-users, who based their evaluation on the poems' affective and humorous qualities, rather than on established literary standards (Hockx 114).

Other poems highlight the importance of forging solidarity in the shared struggle to curb the spread of the virus.

Co: Look at the person blowing the nose and coughing  
 Ro: at the roundabout, for all to see, not even wearing a mask!  
 Na: A country is not a separate entity. It is made up of every individual. And my own carelessness can bring harm to it. (Duryonggeosa, May 23, 2020)

코: 코를 뽕 하고 풀면서 기침까지 하는 저 사람.  
 로: 로터리에서, 아주 보란 듯이, 게다가 마스크도 안 썼구나.  
 나: 나라가 따로 있는 것이 아니다. 개인 한 사람, 한 사람이 바로 나라다. 나 하나의 부주의가 나라를 망친다.

Co: Corona ...  
 Ro: Logging in and discovering there is “0” confirmed case.  
 Na: Ah, when will that day come? Hastening that day all depends on our attitude. (Duryonggeosa, Aug. 22, 2020)

코: 코로나  
 로: 로그인해서 검색했을 때 확진자 “0”이라는 숫자가  
 나: 나오는 날은 과연 언제일까? 그날이 하루라고 빨리 오게 하는 것은 오직 우리들의 정신 자세에 달려 있다.

Co: Those of you who dismiss Corona and wander around:

Ro: consider “The Thinker” by Rodin.

Na: Though you want to go out and play, if you abstain again and again, we will have Corona-free Korea. (Duryonggeosa, May 14, 2020)

코: 코로나를 우습게 여기고 마구 쏘다니는 자들이여,  
 로: 로댕의 ‘생각하는 사람’을 한번 떠올려 보라.  
 나: 나가서 놀고 싶어도 참고 또 참으면 코로나 없는 코리아 된다.

The first poem underscores the social responsibility of citizens during the pandemic and the impact of individual negligence on the society at large. The second poem expresses the heartfelt wish for the end of the pandemic and the need for consolidated efforts. In the third poem, the author alludes to the iconic bronze sculpture “The Thinker” by the celebrated French sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840–1917) and invites the public to regulate their actions to bring an end to the pandemic.

The global impact of the pandemic is another key theme found in Corona *samhaengsi*.

Co: Corona has turned  
 Ro: Rome, Washington, Paris, and Seoul, and many cities  
 Na: and countries in the world 180 degrees. (IDAHK, Aug. 22, 2020)

코: 코로나가  
 로: 로마, 워싱턴, 파리, 서울 등 전세계의 많은 도시들이나  
 나: 나라들을 180도 바꿔놓았다.

Co: Because of ineffective handling of Corona,  
 Ro: they say Rome is now in big trouble.  
 Na: Different strategies have led to huge discrepancies in confirmed cases and deaths country to country (Moonsorrow, Apr. 18, 2020).

코: 코로나 대처를 제대로 못해  
 로: 로마는 지금 난리라고 하던데  
 나: 나라별 대처방식이 달라 확진자나 사망자수가 차이가 많이 나는 것 같네..

The first example comments on the disruption caused by the pandemic on urban life throughout the world. The second alludes to the devastating first wave in Italy and points out how the different strategies adopted by various countries in the initial phase of the pandemic led to disparate outcomes.

While recognizing the global scale of the pandemic, nationalistic sentiments also feature heavily in many examples of Corona *samhaengsi*.

Co: Korea should  
 Ro: make a robot  
 Na: and destroy Corona that's devastating the country and humanity. (Hiro, Sept. 19, 2020)

코: 코리아에서  
 로: 로봇을 만들어서  
 나: 나라와 인류를 멸망시키는 코로나를 확실하게 박살 내자.

Co: Korea has defeated! Corona!  
 Ro: Russia and all other countries throughout the world  
 Na: are focusing on eradicating the virus!  
 (Duryonggeosa, Sept. 19, 2020)

코: 코리아는 물리쳤다~! 코로나19를!  
 로: 러시아를 비롯해 세계 각국들  
 나: 나라마다, 박멸에 전력을 쏟고 있다.

Co: Be careful when you touch your nose.  
 Ro: Romance is good but be careful when you kiss.  
 Na: You and me, all of us, let's beat Corona.  
 Go, go! Citizens of South Korea! (Hyeonhyeon, Jun. 8, 2020)

코: 코 만지는것 조심하세요.  
 로: 로맨스도 좋지만 뽀뽀도 조심하세요  
 나: 나,너 우리 모두 코로나19, 이겨냅시다,  
 대한민국 국민 화이팅!

The first poem expresses hope that Korea should take leadership in the global fight against the virus, while the second proclaims Korea's victory over it. The third example makes a patriotic appeal to the public to come together in solidarity to defeat the pandemic. A strong sense of national pride is conveyed in all three poems.

All these examples of Corona *samhaengsi* embody wordplay in various forms with a wide range of social messages. As Winter-Foemel points out, through conscious manipulation of language and literary forms, wordplay generates a humorous effect and amusement for the listener, while at the same time fulfilling "a broad range of social functions" (13-14). Using the simple form of three-line acrostic poetry, writers of Corona *samhaengsi* playfully interpreted the realities and experiences of the pandemic. As all forms of wordplay are historically and culturally bounded (34), the works of Corona *samhaengsi* also reflect the particular historical and cultural realities of South Korea, including its unique manifestations of nationalism.

The weight of wordplay in poetry increased drastically when the production and distribution of poetry transferred to the digital platform. Playfulness has been identified as one of most salient features of the electronic text (Bolter 165). The internet as a big, open, collaborative playground has allowed its users to become storytellers through the text and images

they share. Playfulness is particularly prevalent on social media platforms where "spontaneous expressions of play," in the form of jokes and banter, often evolve into "deeper social processes" (Ketchum 55).

The surge of Corona *samhaengsi* in South Korea was primarily a digital phenomenon. The poems shared on a variety of online platforms were mostly digital texts but also photographs of children's handwritten and illustrated poems. And as a massive online poetry exercise, it clearly demonstrates playfulness characteristic of internet poetry, "combining serious and original content, such as news, with creative and playful variations, such as mash-ups and jokes" (Shakargy 333). At the same time, digital Corona *samhaengsi* embody the key traits of *samhaengsi* as a literary genre characterized by speed and humour, with some of the more successful works turning into memes.

### Everyday Life During the Pandemic

Humans have been documenting everyday experiences in diaries and poems through the ages, and especially so during momentous historical events. It is through these written works that we come to a deeper understanding of the impact of epidemics, wars, and revolutions on individuals from diverse backgrounds (Humphreys 48). In a similar manner, the works of Corona *samhaengsi* document a wide range of quotidian experiences of South Koreans during the pandemic and their personal reflections on those experiences. The impact of social isolation is one of the recurring themes.

Co: I laughed at it first. "It will be like MERS."  
 Ro: Gone are the romantic outings to see spring flowers after a war to find masks.  
 Na: Unable to go out and unable to work, in vain flowers fall and time goes by. (Onyeongeo, Apr. 1, 2020)

코: 코웃음쳤다 메르스정도겠지... 하  
 로: 로맨틱한 봄꽃나들이는 커녕 마스크 전쟁을 치르며  
 나: 나가지도 못하고 일도 못하고 속절없이 꽃이지고 세월은 간다

Co: Even when comedy movies are released,  
 Ro: Even when romantic cherry blossoms bloom,  
 Na: I just stay at home because of Corona.  
 (Dongsupmaenia, Apr. 3, 2020)

코: 코미디 영화가 개봉을 하고  
 로: 로맨틱하게 벚꽃이 피어도  
 나: 나는 계속 집에 있지 코로나 때문에

Co: Because of Corona,  
 Ro: staying at home again today:

Na: I am a confirmed case. (Anonymous, Sept. 12, 2020)

코: 코로나 때문에  
로: 오늘도 집에 있는  
나: 나는 확진자

The above poems describe the disappointments caused by being confined to home without normal day-to-day social activities. The repeated reference to romance in the second line is due to rhyming requirement. The initial disbelief and the difficulty of purchasing masks in the early months as well as the experience of quarantine are all captured in these examples.

Some poems discuss the frustrations over cancelled international travels.

Co: Corona has to end quickly  
Ro: so I can go to Rome.  
Na: No matter what, I will leave in June. (Mabujang, Feb. 21, 2020)

코: 코로나 빨리 끝나야  
로: 로마를 갈 수 있습니다  
나: 나는 이래나 저래나 6월엔 떠날겁니다

Co: Just before my  
Ro: trip to Rome, Corona war breaks out..  
Na: My goodness ... How much is cancellation fee? (Coffee Giftset, Mar. 2, 2020)

코: 코앞으로 다가온  
로: 로마 여행을 앞두고 터진 코로나 대란이라니..  
나: 나 이거 참.. 취소수수료 얼마예요?ㅠㅠ

Rome, the city that rhymes with “ro,” is mentioned in both poems, which humorously capture people’s reactions to disrupted travel plans. The interruption in global travels and ensuing cancellation frenzies were experiences shared by many people throughout the world in the spring of 2020.

Reliance on online shopping is another recurring theme in the Corona *samhaengsi*. The pandemic led to an explosive upsurge in online shopping throughout the world. Coupang, South Korea’s largest e-commerce company that offers same-day or next-day delivery (a.k.a., Rocket Delivery) on all goods, including groceries, experienced a significant increase in sales since the beginning of the outbreak in 2019.

Co: Shopping online because of Corona,  
Ro: I have become addicted to Coupang’s Rocket Delivery...  
Na: I am waiting again today for Coupang Man. (DJ Cool Guy, Sept. 2, 2020)

코: 코로나로 집에서 택배만 시키다보니 쿠팡  
로: 로켓배송에 중독됐다..  
나: 나는 오늘도 기다린다... 쿠팡맨을..

Co: Because of Corona, I am just staying at home. In times like this,  
Ro: Rocket Delivery is best. Don’t you agree, everyone?  
Na: Am I the only one using Rocket Delivery? (Saechimbuggeu, May 13, 2020)

코: 코로나 때문에 집에만 있네 이럴때는  
로: 로켓배송이 최고지 안그래? 모두?  
나: 나만 로켓배송 쓰나.

These two poems capture the pandemic’s impact on e-commerce and everyday consumer behavior as in-person purchasing became severely restricted due to fear and regulations.

The coronavirus pandemic also disrupted regular school life and caused schools in Korea (like all around the world) to quickly transition to online learning. Many works of Corona *samhaengsi* circulated online are by school-age children who composed the poems as their writing assignments. Their poems offer a window into young students’ experiences of and views on the pandemic. The negative impact of social isolation features heavily in their works.

Co: You, Coronavirus!  
Ro: Because of you I miss school.  
Na: I want to go to school now! Go away quickly! (Kang Ji-u, Mar. 14, 2020)

코: 코로나19 바이러스 너  
로: 로인해 학교가 그렇게 해준 너  
나: 나 이제 학교 가고 싶다고! 빨리 물러가라!

Co: Unable to go out because of Corona, I feel very depressed.  
Ro: I miss the days when I went back and forth from home to after-school-academy like a robot.  
Na: When will I be able to return to normal daily life ... (Anonymous, May 21, 2020)

코: 코로나 때문에 밖에 나가지 못하니 너무 우울합니다.  
로: 로봇같이 집 학원 집 학원 다니던 때가 그립습니다.  
나: 나는 언제쯤 일상으로 돌아갈 수 있을까요...

Co: Because of COVID-19 social distancing,  
 Ro: I am becoming an outcast.  
 Na: Please help me! (Dajanyeomam3, May 13, 2020)

코: 코로나19로 사회적거리두기  
 로: 로 왕따가 되어갑니다.  
 나: 나 좀 살려주세요.

Co: Because of Corona  
 Ro: living like a robot doing the same routine  
 Na: makes me sick and tired. (Serassaem, Mar. 12, 2020)

코: 코로나 때문에  
 로: 로봇같이 똑같은 일상이  
 나: 나는 지겹다

The poems express students' deep yearning for normal school life and the impact of the pandemic on their social life and emotional and mental health. Even the monotonous and wearying routines of students in South Korea, whose lives revolve around school and after-school academy, have become fond memories in the post-Covid world.

Many poems also communicate frustrations over online learning.

Co: Because of Corona,  
 Ro: I log in and do schoolwork online.  
 Na: Unable to even go out, I feel very frustrated. (Yer, Jul. 1, 2020)

코: 코로나 때문에,  
 로: 로그인을 하며 학교수업을 한다.  
 나: 나가지고 못하니까 정말 답답하다.

Co: Doing online school because of Corona!  
 Ro: Loading... Loading ...  
 Na: When do I get to go to school? (Dajanyeomam3, May 13, 2020)

코: 코로나19로 온라인 학습!  
 로: 로딩중 ... 로딩중 ...  
 나: 나 언제 학교 가요?

In other works, children describe their coping methods while being confined to their homes.

Co: As for comic book, *Dog Man* is fun.  
 Ro: *Romeo and Juliet* is a famous novel.  
 Na: When I am home alone, reading is the best. (Seong Songhyeon, Mar. 14, 2020)

코: 코믹북은 Dog Man이 재미있고요  
 로: 로미오와 줄리엣은 유명한 소설이랍니다  
 나: 나 혼자 집에 있을때 역시 책읽기가 짱이죠

Co: Don't just sleep all day  
 Ro: and eat and lie around like a robot.  
 Na: Don't go out. Exercise indoors! (Serassaem, Mar. 12, 2020)

코: 코~ 자기만 하지말고  
 로: 로봇같이 밥먹고 눕지만 말고  
 나: 나가지 말고 실내에서 할수 있는 운동을 합시다!

The poems suggest activities, such as reading and indoor exercise, as ways to stay active and engaged. On the whole, school assignments and public acrostic poetry contests offered a way for these young students to express their views and emotions about the pandemic and its impact on their daily lives (Anon. Jul. 8, 2020; Annyeong).

These various examples of Corona *samhaengsi* highlight the ordinary in these extraordinary times. They also demonstrate how “chronicling and sharing of the everyday ... blurs self and other” (Humphreys 48). As Humphreys notes, the ordinary is “connective and contextual” and reveals the “togetherness” of everyday culture (6). As such, even as highly personal accounts of the pandemic, the examples of Corona *samhaengsi* listed above embody the collective and contextual experiences of many South Koreans. Indeed, Corona *samhaengsi* can be understood as a case of what Humphreys describes as “media accounting,” “the media practices that allow us to document our lives and the world around us, which can then be presented back to ourselves and others, ... involving the “creation, circulation, and consumption of media traces” (9). Individual poems function as “media traces,” which are created, circulated, and consumed on the internet, especially on social media, to build and maintain connections. The quotidian—one of the defining characteristics of social media poetry (McCabe and Atkinson)—becomes the focus of Corona *samhaengsi* in the context of the pandemic.

The poems more than just describe everyday circumstances. The writing, sharing, and reading of the poems involve a “reflexive process” that not only “reveals aspects or characteristics of lived events” but also facilitates a better understanding of “ourselves and the world around us” (Humphreys 91). The examples presented below present more thoughtful reflections inspired by the pandemic.

Co: Masked nose feels smothered.  
 Ro: Unable to sing, my mouth is shut,  
 Na: and my face confined by the invisible virus. (Sanmorongi, Feb. 7, 2020)



코: 코 막은 마스크 답답해  
 로: 노래도 못 불러 닫힌 입  
 나: 나의 얼굴은 보이지 않는 세균에 감금 당했다

Co: Though hard to breathe freely with my nose,  
 Ro: I will not hide my yearnings behind the mask,  
 Na: for my hope is still alive. (Poet Nam Jeongrim,  
 Sept. 10, 2020)

코: 코로 마음껏 숨쉬기는 어려워도  
 로: 로망까지 마스크 속에 숨기지는 않겠어요.  
 나: 나의 희망은 아직 살아 있으니까요.

Co: Corona, thanks to you,  
 Ro: I came to realize  
 Na: happiness is being able to breathe freely every day.  
 (Poet Nam Jeongrim, Sept. 10, 2020)

코: 코로나 너  
 로: 로 인해 알게 되었어  
 나: 나날이 자유롭게 숨 쉴 수 있는 것이 행복임을

The psychological and emotional toll of everyday mask wearing, as well as the feelings of appreciation for simple joys of quotidian life are expressed in the poems.

### Humour

The prevalence of humour in internet culture has been noted (Shifman 23), and in internet poetry, humour has often been expressed in the form of parody, satire, and pastiche (Shakargy 338). Humour appears as one of the overarching themes in many examples of Corona *samhaengsi*. A number of studies have been published on the role of humour in social interactions during the COVID-19 pandemic (Amici; Bischetti et al.). These studies have shown that humour was used in diverse communities throughout the world as an outlet for anxieties and distress (Lemish and Elias), a means of softening grief and lightening mood (Torres et al.), and a “form of resistance to injustices and inequalities” and “coping strategies to reclaim power and control” (Outley et al. 1). Examples of humour found in Corona *samhaengsi* also fulfill similar functions. Numerous requests for comical Corona *samhaengsi* found on social media platforms and the high level of engagement these poems create reveal the great demand for and popularity of *samhaengsi*. These poems are entertaining and frivolous in nature and encapsulate the pandemic experience in light and playful ways.

Co: Corona  
 Ro: is like my big brother.  
 Na: I hate my big brother. (Mongddangssaem, Oct. 8,  
 2020)

코: 코로나는  
 로: 오빠 같다.  
 나: 나는 오빠를 싫어하니까

Co: Because of Corona, I cannot travel. I don't know how to spend money  
 Ro: so I bought a lottery ticket. Ah! I won first place!  
 Na: Nah... It was last week's number. (Moji, Feb. 15, 2020)

코: 코로나 때문에 여행도 못가구 어디 다니기도 부담스러워 돈 쓸데도 없어서  
 로: 로또 복권을 샀어요. 1등 당첨입니다. 아~~~  
 나: 나가립니다. 지나주 번호였네요. T T

Let's defeat Corona with *samhaengsi*!  
 Co: For Corona  
 Ro: Lohas Coffee  
 Na: is best! (Masojang, Feb. 21, 2020)

삼행시로 이놈 잡자!  
 코: 코로나엔  
 로: 로하수 커피가  
 나: 나이스입니다.

The first poem, composed by a child, expresses her detestation for the virus in a humorous way by comparing it to her pestering older brother. The second poem paints a comical picture of a hope and eventual disappointment over a lottery ticket that was purchased to help the author cope with the pandemic. The introduction to the third poem, “Let's defeat Corona with *samhaengsi*!,” clearly encapsulates the belief in the role of humorous acrostic poems in the shared struggle against the pandemic. The message conveyed in the poem is unmistakably frivolous in nature, suggesting a coffee from a popular coffee shop franchise as a remedy to the virus. However, the author effectively communicates their desire to overcome the public health crisis through light-hearted wordplay.

Other examples of humorous poems intentionally avoid making any reference to the pandemic.

Co: Wearing a coat.  
 Ro: A romantic guy.  
 Na: Me? (Yonghi, Sept. 8, 2020)

코: 코트를 입은  
 로: 로맨틱가이  
 나: 나??

Co: I want to buy a Coach wallet.  
 Ro: I want to buy a Rolex watch.  
 Na: But I have no money. (Rabbit, Sept. 2, 2020)

코: 코치 지갑 사고싶다  
 로: 로렉스 시계 사고싶다  
 나: 나는 근데 돈이 없음

Co: Korea!  
 Ro: Rome!  
 Na: Nigeria! (Jjuno, Aug. 27, 2020)

코: 코리아!  
 로: 로마!  
 나: 나이지리아!

Following the three syllables of the word “Corona,” the writers have constructed new stories unrelated to the pandemic. By treating the poems as pure wordplay disconnected from meaning, they negate and reinterpret the word and the crisis associated with it. Poems of this kind make use of subversive humour to make light of the disaster and, in so doing, allow people to exert control over the coronavirus, even at the level of language, and resist and challenge the reality it has created.

Together, the various types of Corona *samhaengsi* shown and discussed above give voice to multiple experiences, feelings, and reflections inspired by the pandemic. They cover a wide range of topics—the impact of the pandemic and new social measures on people’s lives, coping strategies, and messages of hope and solidarity—all captured in three succinct lines with varying degrees of literary skill. Most of the poems are light and humorous in nature, and, as with all three-line acrostic poems, are accessible and memorable. It is important to note that most of these poems appear not as individual poems but as groups of poems on blogs and social media platforms. They are products of mass literary games that exist in long chains of digital text which can be added to, commented on, and shared.

All in all, Corona *samhaengsi* offer diverse significations of the pandemic. As representations, the poems reflect “contested meanings, ideological struggles, and negotiated differences” concerning the coronavirus and its impact on people and their lives (Levina 4). Indeed, the poems helped expand the “outbreak narrative,” which through history has encompassed mythological and ideological properties of language (Wald 4) and often embodied officially sanctioned views of the disease and the diseased. The poems have led to the creation of diverse outbreak narratives reflective of the diverse populations that contributed to this massive online poetry play.

Besides “Corona,” there were other three-syllable words that inspired the creation of COVID-19-related acrostic poems. These words include “mask,” “*Himnaeyo!* (Be strong!),” “*Igija!* (Let’s beat this!),” and “*Uiryojin* (Medical workers)” (Jang). Most of the poems based on these

words contain message of encouragement for those involved in the fight against the virus and highlight the importance of shared efforts. In some cases, the poems were presented as gifts to frontline workers as a show of support (Ha; Kim D). Alternatively, the poems also were sites for criticism of certain events. The word that attracted most negative acrostic poems was “Sincheonji,” an offshoot Christian religious organization, whose mass gathering and cover up led to a major outbreak in the city of Daegu in February 2020. Acrostic poems on Sincheonji circulating on the internet accuse the organization of breaching social distancing rules and putting the population at risk (Scruple).

### Contests, Social Activism, Consumerism

Given the history of political uses of acrostic poetry in South Korea, from the start of the pandemic the government was quick to promote new behavioral rules through acrostic poems. To introduce the mandatory mask wearing rule and a fine for violation, in October 2020 the Office of Prime Minister Jeong Segyun published a poster featuring the following *samhaengsi* on mask:

Ma: If you do not wear a mask  
 S: or if you lower your mask in secret,  
 K: you will be asked to pay a huge fine of ₩100,000.

마: 마스크를 쓰지 않거나  
 스: 스리슬쩍 마스크를 내리면  
 크: 크나큰 과태료 10만 원이 부과됩니다.

The poster also included a cartoon drawing of the prime minister peering down with a scrutinizing look at a woman without a mask and a man with a lowered mask. In a news release, the office stated that the purpose of the poster was not to intimidate the public but to ensure widespread mask wearing to stop the spread of virus (Sin). Prime Minister Jeong also joined a popular morning radio show to publicize the new rule through the poem (Bak S). In three succinct lines, the poem effectively communicates the terms of violation and the amount of the fine (equating roughly to \$100 USD).

The composition of Corona acrostic poems was also promoted outside of Korea through a contest with cash prizes by the Korean Consulate General’s Office in Sapporo, Japan. The contest, designed for Japanese learners of Korean language, invited participants to compose Corona *samhaengsi* in Korean. The Consulate General’s Office stated that the contest was created to provide an opportunity to reflect collectively about the shared experiences of the global pandemic (Yi H). These two examples demonstrate the South Korean government’s use of acrostic poetry domestically to inform the public of the new policies and to foster good will and solidarity internationally.

Even more so than these official uses, it was Corona *samhaengsi*’s connection to social activism that allowed this unique digital, literary, and ludic phenomenon to have such

profound and overarching impact on everyday experiences of the pandemic in South Korea. The poems were the products of online poetry games and contests, created and sponsored by various social groups, corporations, and businesses across a wide range of spectrum. Numerous non-profit organizations, communities, churches, hospitals, educational services, and clubs organized online acrostic poetry contests to engage and support their members. These include organizations such as various arts associations, Young Mothers' associations, Small Business associations, and Apartment associations (Haebaragi; Yujinmam2munseong; Masojang; Dolbomnanumdungji); community centers such as Senior Wellness Center, Lifelong Learning Center, Support Center for People with Disabilities, and Family Law Online Community (*Gangwon ilbo* Aug. 25, 2020; Jang; Ddaenggeuri; Seeukssaksseukssak); hobby groups such as Ping Pong Club, Acoustic Guitar Club, Mountain Bikers' Association (Daegu Ping Pong; Hwolhwol; Bak Sangjun); and private educational and athletic services such as Taekwondo schools, dance studios, and after-school academies (Kim J; Jjangi; Mongddangssaem; Serassaem).

All of them used their online platforms to reach out to their members and larger community through fun Corona *samhaengsi* contests with prizes. In most cases, the prizes were small, from face masks and vitamins to Starbucks coffee and McDonald's combos (Hyeseong Sanbuingwa). What mattered was not the prizes themselves but the sharing of pandemic experiences in a fun and playful way, reading each others' poems and commenting on them, and strengthening a sense of community during the time of mandatory social isolation. Indeed, these organizations and groups used acrostic poetry and poetry contests as a means for creating positive social change built on communication and cooperation. At the same time, the ways in which these contests were run demonstrate the close connection to consumer culture that aligns with the general developments of acrostic poetry phenomenon in South Korea discussed earlier in the paper.

In fact, many small businesses and corporations used pandemic-related acrostic poetry and poetry contests as opportunities to advertise their goods and services. Numerous restaurants and stores organized online Corona *samhaengsi* contests to attract customers with coupons and giveaways (Ddalsetmam; Gwail Abba; Book & I Children's Bookstore). Poems were featured on consumer product packaging: for example, an acrostic poem on "mask" was included on the packaging of children's face masks (Gaeul Gyeoul Mam). Some companies organized poetry contests for their employees to increase engagement and communication as well as to build brand awareness. For example, in October 2020, Samsung SDI, a branch of Samsung specializing in storage battery manufacturing, held a Corona poetry contest for its employees. The contest generated positive media coverage and improved the brand image as a caring company (Kim H).

Additionally, acrostic poetry was used in charity events. In April 2020, MBC, one of South Korea's largest

broadcasting companies, organized a fundraising poetry event to support small businesses affected by the pandemic. For every online submission of acrostic poem based on the three-syllable expression "Be strong!," MBC donated an equivalent of \$1 USD to the cause (Cha). Prizes were also given to select participants through a draw. Events such as this demonstrate an effective blending of social campaign and brand building by way of digital acrostic poetry games and contests. Such developments demonstrate the interconnectedness of the virtual and the offline world and how actions taken in one can influence the other (Ketchum 56).

### Viral Poetry and Networked Selves during the Pandemic

The multifaceted development of the coronavirus-inspired digital acrostic poetry in South Korea is a great example of the complexity and interdisciplinarity of digital poetry in the twenty-first century. As shown throughout this paper, Corona *samhaengsi* and the various games and contests designed for their composition and dissemination intersected multiple spheres, including self-expression, entertainment, education, social activism, politics, advertising, and consumer culture.

The Corona *samhaengsi* phenomenon reveals the complexities and multifariousness of twenty-first digital poetry. While exhibiting the process of intermediation, defined as "the dynamic, mutant nature of digital textuality and aesthetic human-machine interaction" (Ensslin 32), the recent developments in digital acrostic poetry in South Korea illuminate how digital poetry transcends the domains of literary text and aesthetic experience into everyday lives of people in the forms of social media postings, educational programs, entertainment shows, online games and contests, consumer products, and social and political campaigns. The fluidity of the event, and the ways in which it combines digital and non-digital worlds, offer us a new window into exploring and understanding the rapidly evolving digital textuality of our times.

Shakargy's concept of Internetica, "the sphere of intersections between the internet, social media and poetics" (326) provides an insightful lens through which to examine the Corona *samhaengsi* phenomenon as a dynamic manifestation of contemporary digital poetry. Shakargy observes that by integrating writing, publishing, and literary community building, poetry in the internet age has become "a way of life, a routine," liberated from the concerns of "originality and quality" (339). In this changed context, the act of writing a poem becomes "social playing" (334) and poets become "playing witnesses" (325). Everyday poems by people shared on social media illuminate and heighten the testimonial nature of poetry that allows for the preservation and passing on of collective memories of human experiences (333). These traits of digital poetry are clearly evident in the unfolding of the Corona *samhaengsi* phenomenon. By

writing and sharing the poems about their quotidian experiences as a mode of social playing, South Koreans became playing witnesses of the global pandemic. Their poems paint composite and disparate pictures of their collective memories.

And as discussed, online communities played a crucial role in this development. Shakargy explains the ways in which online communities affect “literary creation through dialogue, commentary and the provision of feedback during the creative work” (327), making writing a collaborative exercise (328). He compares this aspect of digital poetry to “dialectical poetry,” composed to meet “community-oriented goals,” making “community poetry-writing on the web ... a lifestyle choice of young internet users” (329). While Shakargy focuses primarily on online literary communities in his discussion, the Corona *samhaengsi* phenomenon reveals that digital poetry creation does not have to be restricted to literary communities only. As shown, various organizations and interest groups organized their poetry games and contests to support and engage their members. We learn that offline and online membership to these existing communities played an important role in incentivizing people to participate in the poetry play. The fluid relationship between online and offline worlds was vital for the composition and distribution of the poems and for the social functions they fulfilled.

Shakargy’s theory of Internetica builds on earlier theoretical explorations of poetry as play, in particular, Winter-Froemel’s conceptualization of ludopoesis. Ludopoesis, or poetry-at-play, describes a way of writing and understanding poetry which recognizes that “poetic inspiration and language can be generated by various procedures, arbitrary constraints, and artificial means, or even by chance” (Winter-Froemel 2). Ludopoesis challenges the classical view that has long characterized poetry as a fruit of inspiration, individual genius, and solemn moral purpose. Ludopoesis celebrates the ludic nature of poetry as expounded by Huizinga in his seminal book, *Homo Ludens*. As Huizinga so aptly put, “all poetry is born of play” and “poesis, in fact, is a play-function” (132). The development of digital acrostic poetry games in South Korea demonstrates the various ways in which ludopoesis can play out in the digital sphere via social media platforms. It epitomizes digital poetry growing out of “collaboration, competition, and social exchange,” a “technologically mandated and digitally mediated literary experimentalism” (Eburne and Epstein 2-3).

I would argue that one of the distinct contributions of the Corona *samhaengsi* phenomenon is that it pushes digital poetry beyond the boundaries of project-based work into a massively multi-author online poetry game, occurring concurrently yet independently through various channels, as tens of thousands of people explored creative ways to respond to the pandemic. Certainly, the scale of the pandemic played a key role in creating this massive poetry game. While acrostic poetry has been a part of everyday life in South Korea in recent decades, the pandemic generated an unprecedented number of acrostic poems, games, and contests, in which people from all walks of life participated.

The implementation of social distancing and isolation, which led to drastically increased dependency on digital communication, also became a crucial factor in acrostic poetry’s widespread uptake.

Indeed, the Corona acrostic poetry phenomenon exemplifies fundamental transformations in language in the post-digital world explored in depth by Johnston in his ontological reflections on digital poetry. He points out that since the dawn of the digital age, language has been undergoing “an ontological state change from inert to active, from isolated to interconnected, from tool to quasi-proto-organism” (6). Corona *samhaengsi* are examples of what Johnston terms “spoems,” “languaged spaces where poets establish networks of resonance between things and experiences, memories and intuitions” (13). The poems, as products of “bursty, crowdsourced language play” (13), became “languaged spaces” where writers created collective resonances of the pandemic and their experiences and thoughts. Johnston further compares poetry to a “language virus that destabilizes pretentious perceptions or congealed opinions” and a digital poem to “a computer virus” (78). He describes digital poetry as “collective creations [that] mutate into poems” (3), and as such, rather than confirming selfhood, digital poetry as a viral growth “distends selves toward collectivities,” engendering “networked” selves (2).

Johnston’s analysis of digital poetry is particularly useful in contemplating the question of authorship in Corona *samhaengsi*. The authors of most examples of Corona *samhaengsi* circulated online are identified by their usernames and profile thumbnails. The date and time of their entry is marked next to their poems. Surely, these short whimsical wordplays are not “poems” in the traditional sense. But collectively, they are superb examples of collective wordplays that have mutated into poems in a particular socio-cultural and digital literary context. The spread of Corona *samhaengsi* shown in this paper clearly illustrates the viral growth of digital poetry and the formation of networked selves. In the context of the pandemic, it has allowed the participants in this massively multi-author online poetry game to cope with the global health crisis. Through their brief and witty acrostic poems, South Koreans experienced and redefined the predicament and became part of the digitally mediated sociality. They fought the virus with their viral wordplay.

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