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The Method in Madness: A Processual
Account of a South Korean Conspiracy
Theory “Community”

By

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Abstract

Why did the South Korean conspiracy theory on the 2020 general election fail to garner political influence like QAnon and anti-vaccine conspiracy theories? This paper argues that answering this question requires a processual approach to social phenomena. Appreciating a conspiracy theory “community” as a gathering of multiple entities constantly recreated in relation to others is crucial for explaining the failure of the Wuhan Gallery, a South Korean “community” that gave birth to the conspiracy theory. Even though the claims of election fraud gained traction after the landslide loss, other South Korean online “communities” criticized the conspiracy theory and engaged with the Wuhan Gallery with mockery involving rhetoric against the elderly. Wuhan Gallery responded by banning users that seemingly came from other “communities” as trolls, which hindered different readings of the conspiracy theory and its relationship with politicians. Critics of conservative YouTubers and politicians were stigmatized as trolls, making the conspiracy theory on the election fraud no different from failed conspiracy theories of the past. The result of the research implies that the conspiracy theory “community,” as well as discourse on conspiracy theory, was constantly shifting over time and that social factors play a crucial role in the rise or fall of a conspiracy theory. Furthermore, the trajectory of the conspiracy theory “community” demonstrates how users in South Korean cyberspace constantly misrecognize what is taking place by neglecting the processual character of the internet and social entities and underlines the importance of a processual approach in social sciences.

While there are apparent differences between *Hamlet*'s Elsinore and the cyberspace of the 21st century, the two bear similarities in that everything appears murky, and individuals act based on their narrow interpretations. Hamlet, for example, conspires for revenge based on the attestation of the ghost and Claudius' reaction to a play within a play. Polonius suspects that Hamlet's madness comes from his rejection of love and tries to prove this by using his daughter. Similarly, users on the web cannot have complete information about what is happening. Many writings are written anonymously with VPNs to hide their identity. The chances of manipulating a false image of public opinion are high. Nonetheless, users often buy into those claims and act upon them. If conspiracy theory refers to a particular understanding of the uncertain world that paves the way for specific responses, users on the internet are not different from conspiracy theorists, just like the characters in the tragedy of *Hamlet*.

Even though certain features of the internet are not ideal for social science research, such problem should be directly confronted. The January 6 Capitol Riot and anti-vaccine conspiracy theories demonstrate that the internet and its conspiracy theories now have the power to disrupt social procedures and the lives of individuals even though we cannot be sure of the identities, numbers, and social characteristics of the "groups" behind these theories. Moreover, the intermingling of the internet with our society implies that studies of the internet are needed to illuminate what is taking place in our current society. A great example of this comes from the internet "communities" in South Korea, where conspiracy theories on the 2020 general election germinated over the internet.¹ However, unlike its counterpart across the Pacific, the South Korean variant of the conspiracy theory has failed to gain political influence.

To understand why this is the case, the research here proposes to comprehend the conspiracy theory "community" not as a single, fixed entity but rather a process that is

¹ I am using the word "community" here, for lack of a better word. "Community," according to the Oxford English Dictionary, denotes a group of people sharing a common space, which does not apply in the case of the internet. Moreover, the processual account of this research posits that social entities are constantly recreated and intermingled with others, which cannot be appropriately grasped by the term "community," which often denotes a fixed entity with clear borders. Other words, such as group or association, also contain additional connotations that cannot aptly describe the processes taking place on the internet.

constantly recreated in relationship to others. Doing this enables us to conceptualize and perhaps even describe that “community” without defining it - even implicitly – as a single group with clear boundaries, a fixed membership, and even a denumerable character. Thus, “conspiracy theory “community” here refers to a gathering of multiple complex entities that affect each other. Some users read the conspiracy theory in a particular way and are in constant dialogue with disparate interpretations of how the election fraud took place. The “community’s” relationship with others often creates such multiplexity. The border of a conspiracy theory “community” is intertwined not only with a discourse on the conspiracy theory, but also discourses about politicians and indeed with other “communities” on the internet. The constant interaction of any of these “communities” with other entities creates novel sub-groups that steadily re-creates the conspiracy theory “community” as almost a continually new entity that only shares its name with that of the past. However, this does not necessarily mean that everything can change with ease. Encoded social structures are more stabilized than other entities and thus condition them, and fractal structures often enable entities to persist through time.²

Such a processual approach could explain why the *Wuhan Gallery*, South Korea’s conspiracy theory “community,” failed to gain political legitimacy. The loss of the 2020 South Korean general election was an event that kindled interest in a conspiracy theory. The heightened interest in the conspiracy theory “community” meant increased interaction with other entities, such as other “communities.” Some were highly skeptical of the conspiracy theory and often wrote posts or comments mocking it in the *Wuhan Gallery* with age-related discourse. As a reaction, users of the *Wuhan Gallery* reported trolls that do not share their belief in the conspiracy theory. Admins banned them from writing in the “community” and deleted their posts. However, the discussion on politicians within the *Wuhan Gallery* demonstrates the side effects that may have taken place. Criticism of politicians and

² In processual sociology, fractals are “structures that are similar to themselves at different levels.” Fractals allow us to parsimoniously describe how, in this case, similarity takes place in social entities such as online “communities.” Encoding refers to a form of purely social form of memory that arises merely in the social process proper. Encoding implies that there is no historical action at a distance and that there is a basic roster of pro-tem entities and a roster of nearness between them. More information on fractals is on page 21 of this research, while encoding is explained again on page 37.

YouTubers linked to failed conspiracy theories were often stigmatized as trolls, nudging the conspiracy theory “community” closer to its past predecessors. Hence, a conspiracy theory on election fraud became not much different from far-right conservative conspiracy theories of the past, and public interest died out as a result.

To demonstrate the research’s argument, this research will explicate the procedural trajectory of the conspiracy theory as follows. After providing a literature review of the study on conspiracy theory and the South Korean context, this paper will first scrutinize how rhetoric against the elderly, frequently employed in the discord within the “community,” is related to its interaction with other “communities” in South Korean internet. After analyzing the trend of rhetoric against the elderly within the conspiracy theory “community,” I will look at other “communities” and demonstrate how they contributed to the schism within the *Wuhan Gallery*. The paper's final section will delve into how the disparate opinions towards politicians shifted over time. The lack of usage of the rhetoric on seniors suggests that discord occurred between the believers of conspiracy theory. Nonetheless, users who did not agree with the support or denigration of some politicians were often ignored or stigmatized, and their banishment meant that the conspiracy theory of the *Wuhan Gallery* became closely linked to the failures of the past.

The result of this study demonstrates the need to observe entities on the internet as the results of a complex process that interacts with multiple internal and external entities rather than as simple entities fixed in time, but hard to identify. The trajectory of echo chambers on the internet could also be clarified by appreciating how this “community” transforms and recreates itself in relation to other entities. Moreover, scholars must focus on how social factors play a role in conspiracy theories gaining traction as this research entails how social entities such as online “communities” spread conspiracy theories and how other social factors could hinder its rise.

I. Context

A. Literature Review

a. Conspiracy Theory

Literature on conspiracy theories has tried to approach the matter in two disparate ways. According to Michael Butter and Peter Knight, a tradition that cuts across Theodore Adorno, Karl Popper, Seymour Martin Lipset, and Richard Hofstadter conceived conspiracy theory as an unscientific paranoia supported by a minority (Butter and Knight 2018, 35). Hofstadter’s *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* suggests conspiracy theories as an understanding of

the world in which one feels singled out and persecuted by the world (Hofstadter 1996, 4). Conspiracy theories often involve “a vast, insidious, preternaturally effective” enemy, often “both the ideal and the unacceptable aspects of the self,” serving as “the motive force in historical events” (Hofstadter 1996, 14, 29, 32). The framework influenced psychology and analytical philosophy that disregarding social factors and attributing conspiracy theories to the flawed psyche or “crippled epistemology” (Butter and Knight 2018, 37-9). Hence, critics argued that the marginalization of conspiracy theories might have difficulties understanding them as “a rational activity ... firmly rooted in the social mainstream” (Butter and Knight 2018, 36).

A true breakthrough from the pathologizing of conspiracy theories came from cultural theorists. Arguing conspiracy theories as part of a mainstream culture allows individuals to grasp their world; they suggest it exists only to delegitimize forms of knowledge unwanted by the elites (40-1). Contrary to Hofstadter, cultural theorists believe conspiracy theories are neither unscientific nor minor and function as “understandable responses” to social circumstances rather than a pathology (40). Despite the apt criticism, cultural theorists struggle to appreciate how the audience engages with conspiracy theories, as their analyses focus primarily on novels, TV shows, or films (34). The cultural approach thus has limitations explaining why conspiracy theory “communities” rise and fall over time and how such a process occurs.

Moreover, conspiracy theories prevalent in recent times may have novelties that differentiate them from their predecessors. Russel Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum suggest that a novel type of conspiracy theory gained traction, which might be related to the internet. In *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*, the two argue that conspiracy theories such as the QAnon are without theories that aim to make sense of the world (19-20). Internet serves as the “medium [that] invites emphatic, unelaborated assertion” even without explanation or prescription (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019, 31-2). Furthermore, new conspiracism also delegitimizes democracy and institutions, which is also helped by the development of media technologies such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019, 155-6). While the two authors point out the critical difference between conspiracy theories of our times, they still fail to give a more straightforward explanation of why such a novel form gained popularity (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019, 40). Therefore, a further understanding of the role of the internet and how it shapes the experience of individuals, and the cultural realm of a society is imperative.

b. Conspiracy Theory and the Internet

Scholars have also tried to identify how the internet affects the growth of conspiracy theories. Analysis by political scientists Joseph E. Uscinski, Darin DeWitt, and Matthew D. Atkinson serves as an archetype of such a trend. They argue that evidence suggesting the correlation between the internet and the rise of conspiracy theory is limited and unclear, as counterexamples and media contexts could correct them (Uscinski, DeWitt, and Atkinson 2018, 107-23). The benefit of hindsight suggests that the paper has not aged well, as QAnon and anti-vaccine conspiracy theories serve as a counterexample to its claims (Uscinski, DeWitt, and Atkinson 2018, 107-23). The problem seems to lie in how the writers assume the users and the internet as fixed entities. They argue that users are not "pliable," but they also neglect to account for internet "communities" and social networks that garnered formidable influence in recent times.

Christopher Bail's *Breaking the Social Media* alleviates certain limitations of the research mentioned above (2021). Acknowledging the growing sway of social networks, Bail argues that social media platforms are a prism that refracts one's identity and understanding of the world. The political realm seems more polarized on digital media as extremists could easily pronounce their views. At the same time, moderates are silenced, thus creating an echo chamber. While Bail successfully analyzes how online "communities" affect individuals, he fails to acknowledge how social forces outside the web affect social media. His approach is also individualistic, relying solely on notions such as self-worth and sense of status to explain the virtual and the real. Hence, an approach that acknowledges symbols, society, and individuals that also captures how they shape social media is imperative to better understand internet conspiracy theory "communities" and their success.

Bail's work thus deals with the echo chamber, suggesting that online "communities" often create conspiracy theories by crediting certain sources of information while discrediting the other (Nguyen 2020, 142-6). However, the overvaluation of quantitative methodologies on the topic seems problematic. According to Scopus, the number of articles on echo chambers grew over time: two hundred forty-one articles were published in peer-reviewed journals in 2021, almost quadrupling within six years.³ While such treatments have value in

³ Writings with the most citations debate how influential echo chambers are in shaping political communication online or whether echo chambers exist. Except for three, all the

analyzing numerous online posts and offering a birds-eye view of an echo chamber, they fail to appreciate what takes place in online “communities.” Quantitative analysis fails to grasp individual experience of echo chambers and thus cannot explicate the social factors that create or affect echo chambers.

c. Processual Theory

Many of the conundrums within existing literature could be alleviated with a processual approach to social phenomena.⁴ In brief, a processual understanding assumes “that everything in the social world is continuously in the process of making, remaking, and unmaking itself (and other things), instant by instant” (Abbott 2016, ix). Rather than positing everything as constant and attempting to explicate how shifts take place, processualism aims to explain why certain aspects of the social world seem to be reconstituted over time. In the processual account, the process of making and unmaking is understood in terms of the event. Entities “are patterns and regularities defined on lineages of successive events” that also shape future events while [receding] into the past” (Abbott 2016, xi-x).

The processual approach also acknowledges how “Individuals and social entities are made dynamically through ... their relation to one another” (2016, xi). It thus understands the entity as a process formed in relation to other entities and events and vice versa. Here, the present only exists, as the past and future matter only insofar as they formulate the shape of the present. As the common saying goes, the past is gone, and the future is yet to come (Abbott 2016, xi-xiii). However, the two are also participating in the present since it is shaped by expectations of the future and the results of past events. The present, therefore, should be understood as a Bergsonian duration rather than a Newtonian instant.

The processual approach could address several issues presented in the conspiracy theory literature. Specifically, it can avoid the limitations that faced Uscinski et al. by focusing on how changes are taking place within the conspiracy theory “community.” The

other literature with more than a hundred citations in Google Scholar is participating in the debate on the presence of echo chambers. Influential literature also employs quantitative methods that analyze many cases with either network analysis or survey, as eight out of eleven highly cited literature take this approach.

⁴ The basic outline is based on Andrew Abbott’s *Processual Sociology* as well as unpublished works discussed in his Social Process seminar in 2022.

approach will be beneficial in appreciating how conspiracy theory “community” and discourse blossomed in its inception and how its persistency may break down abruptly. Moreover, the processual account sublates interpreting a social event focusing on the individual, social or symbolic level and analyzes how diverse aspects of orders are shaped by events and vice versa. Hence, it could alleviate existing approaches to conspiracy theories that focus solely on individual, cultural, or social levels. Moreover, it could converge the individualistic account provided by Bail, the cultural theory’s focus on culture to provide a more holistic understanding of conspiracy theories.

Additionally, the processual approach to conspiracy theories may benefit in comprehending other entities that partake in the construction and deconstruction of conspiracy theories. By scrutinizing the life course of a conspiracy theory “community” in relation to other factors, such as other online “communities,” and politicians, processualism may supplement the narrow understanding of conspiracy theories prevalent in the traditional approaches epitomized by Hofstadter. Finally, analyzing conspiracy theory “communities” in relation to other factors may have merits in offering a closer look at what is taking place within the “community” itself, thus sidestepping the pitfalls that hinder studies on echo chambers, and offering an in-depth analysis of conspiracy theories that Muirhead and Rosenblum have called for.

B. South Korean Context

a. History of South Korean Conspiracy Theories

South Korea had its fair share of rigged elections that took place. The 1946 South Korean legislative election, held by the United States Army Military Government, had to be re-run due to electoral fraud (C.S. Kim 1998, 138). One of the first revolutions in the republic’s history, the April Revolution, took down South Korea’s first president but rigged elections were prevalent in the Park Chung-Hee era (Stone 1974, 134-5; "South Korean Challenger Sees A Rigged Presidential Election " 1971). Rigged elections were not also an event that happened in the recent past. An online misinformation campaign was conducted by the head of the National Intelligence Service (NIS) in 2012, while a major politician from the Democratic Party was prisoned for conducting similar illegalities (McCurry 2017; H.-J. Kim 2019). Be it conservative or liberal, strategies of election fraud were copied across ideological borders, and the same was the case for conspiracy theories.

Nonetheless, some conspiracy theories turned out to be baseless or inconclusive. When the ballot scanners were first introduced in 2002, an anonymous internet user, claiming

oneself as a NIS executive, suggested that the previous administration tried to rig the election, which led to a recounting that demonstrated the conspiracy theory's falsity (Han 2020). A similar logic was repeated in 2012 when Kim Ou-joon, a South Korean liberal version of Rush Limbaugh, produced a documentary accusing a hacking of the ballot scanners in the South Korean Presidential Election (Jeonghwan Kim 2020c). Recently, some far-right YouTubers argued that one of the evidence for the impeachment of President Park was manipulated by JTBC, a news network in South Korea, in 2017 (Jeonghyeon Kim 2017). Even though the conspiracy theory was not well received, it persisted in public protests for the reinstatement and discharge of the president for more than three years (Hong 2019). Moreover, some of the main participants of the protest also participated in other forms of conspiracy theories for the 2020 general election.

b. History of the Wuhan Gallery

The conspiracy theory regarding the 2020 election started in a “community” called *Wuhan Gallery*.⁵ As a minor gallery under DC Inside, South Korea's largest online “community,” *Wuhan Gallery* originally started in early 2020 when the Coronavirus pandemic was sweeping the Korean peninsula.⁶ Users shared information on the “community,” making *Wuhan Gallery* one of the most popular “communities” in February. At the same time, conspiracy theories on the coronavirus were also on the rise, and one variant quickly spread to the “community” at the end of February. However, the “community” became a hotbed of conspiracy theory as users started believing that the Chinese Communist Party was spreading misinformation in South Korea. *Wuhan Gallery* users tried to spread the information to other “communities” and attempted to manipulate trending topics in major South Korean portals. However, the conspiracy theorists within the *Wuhan Gallery* had difficulties countering rebuttals on their evidence, and public interest in the conspiracy theory boiled down afterward ([Why Trolls] 2020).

⁵ The information on South Korean “communities” is mostly based on *namu.wiki*, the largest and most popular wiki page in South Korea. While it has been criticized for its lack of accuracy and neutrality, it is the only website or source of information recording the history of the “community.” Hence, only the information that could be backed by evidence, such as Internet Archives or scraped “community” posts, will be mentioned in this section.

⁶ A brief outlook of the DC Inside is provided in the Appendix below.

Nonetheless, the election results gave birth to another variant of conspiracy. After April 15, the day of the election, multiple posts on the *Wuhan Gallery* reported on the possibility of a rigged election based on statistical differences in early voting results and that of the day of the election ([I Am Uploading] 2020). Some also reported mishandling of ballots in the polling places and errors in the ballot scanners as additional results ([A Summary] 2020). The conspiracy theorists tried to spread the message to other “communities” and manipulated trending topic portals on major South Korean portal websites ([Recommend This] 2020). Unlike Chinagate, which had difficulties garnering attention from politicians and media companies, conspiracy theories on election fraud successfully provoked the reaction from others outside of online cyberspace.

c. Reaction to the Conspiracy Theory & its Demise

Most of the reactions to election fraud claims were negative. The administration deemed the conspiracy theory as a hoax, and the National Election Commission conducted an open demonstration to prove the near impossibility of rigging the election (Cho 2020; S. Kim and Kang 2020). Politicians from various parties were in unison in this case, claiming that the election was conducted fair and square (J. Kang 2020a; B. Lee 2020). Conservative politicians, apart from a few, argued against the conspiracy theories and were most active in debunking them to deter their supporters away from the conspiracy theory (D. Kim 2020b; Baek 2020). Broadcasting stations and newspapers also reported the conspiracy theory but also had fact checks that rebutted those claims (Jeon 2020). Conservative media nonetheless had a mixed reaction, as they often had interviews or op-eds suggesting the possibility of misdeeds that might have taken place in the election as time went on (Choi 2020).

Even though the conspiracy theory on the general election had its moment of sparks, it eventually withered down as time went on. A conservative politician named Lee Jun-seok, who was openly critical of the conspiracy theory, participated in a live debate on YouTube (PennMikeTV 2020). A week later, Walter Mebane, a political scientist who studied election fraud at the University of Michigan, published a report claiming that the election was a fraud, reigniting support for conspiracy theories (2020). TV channels interviewed him, and documentaries on the general election were broadcasted, but South Korean experts argued against Professor Mebane, claiming he was unaware of South Korean election procedures (YTN 2020). As a result, the conspiracy theory had no chance to recover the influence and attention that it once had. Despite losing support outside of the “community” and being unable to rebut counterclaims, the conspiracy theorists, led by a far-right politician Min

Kyoung-wook, came up with an even bolder claim that the CCP was behind the election manipulation (T. Kang 2020b). However, the conspiracy theory started to lose interest from the broader audience as the number of search results of the *Wuhan Gallery* started to decrease.

d. Age in South Korean Cyberspace

It is not difficult to observe rhetoric on the elderly employed in what is left of the *Wuhan Gallery*. One of the announcements at the top of the “community” notifies its separation into three new “communities” within DC Inside. The reason, according to the notice, is that there were so much elderly within the “community,” making it filled with “odors of dentures” (Dandudae 2020). The admin writes that the elderly does not follow orders and brings in risks for the “community.” It thus asks those interested in conspiracy theories such as the Illuminati and the Deep State to go to the *Cross Gallery*, where terms mocking the elderly are banned. The *Wuhan Gallery* is now where issues relative to COVID can be discussed, even though posts with “scents of seniors” will be deleted by the admins. The announcement indicates that the elderly has been a source of conflict within the *Wuhan Gallery* and could explain why or how the conspiracy theory “community” lost traction over time.

Discord between the older and younger generation has been a rising phenomenon that is difficult to ignore in South Korean society. One of the telling signs is the spread of the word *kkondae*, referring to an older male that “expects unquestioning obedience” from youth as an insult (The Economist 2022). Surveys also back up the changing attitude of society. A 2018 report by Korea Labor Force Development Institute for the Aged suggests that about 60% of Koreans aged between 20 to 69 believed the elderly could not understand the youth, while more than 70% of them conceived of the elderly as conservative, authoritative, and egotistic (Ji 2017).

On the internet, a text mining analysis on the popular portal website Naver proved that adjectives used with elderly were mostly negative and that derogatory terminologies towards the elderly mostly took place in the comment section for political news articles (Soontae, Hannah, and Soondool 2021).⁷ Elderly, or at least users accused of being old, were

⁷ While researchers here describe *teulttak* as hate speech, they mostly focus on how terms such as *teulttak* may serve as a stigma that isolates the seniors. The usage thus differs from

always part of South Korean online “communities,” especially those on the far right, with a distinct style of rhetoric that has often become a source of mockery ([Ilbe/History] 2022). Far-right “community,” such as *Ilbe*, were thus divided by generations, which erupted when South Korean President Park Geun-hye was impeached ([Grandpas] 2022). As more and more users criticized the president, older users supportive of Park reported the criticism to the administrators. After being blocked by administrators, users critical of the impeached president thus moved on to other “communities.” Nonetheless, the fight still takes place in other online “communities,” as posts or comments that are supportive of President Park or with a distinct style of rhetoric are still accused of being old, often involving the phrase *teulttak*.

Table 1: Overall Tone in South Korean Terminologies on the Elderly

Tone in South Korean Context	Terminologies on the Elderly
Hate Speech	
Derogatory Terminology	<i>Teulttak</i>
Semi-Derogatory Terminology	<i>Halbae</i>
Neutral Terminology	<i>Noin</i>

Text analysis of South Korean cyberspace suggests *teulttak* was frequently employed by users to denigrate the old. A neologism that combines the word *teul*, which comes from the Korean word for a denture (*teulli*), and an onomatopoeia for the sound when two sides of the denture meet (*ttak*), *Teulttak* is a word frequently used in the Korean cyberspace to criticize the elderly, often designating those with a political inclination to the far-right. A derivative is *teulttak-che*, referring to the distinct style of rhetoric used by the *Teulttak*. Other terminologies designating the seniors are *halbae* and *noin*. *Halbae* refers to grandfathers. While it is often used to call the elderly in a friendly manner, it could also have a denigrative tone to mock the elderly participating in far-right protests. *Noin* is a straightforward term for the elderly and thus has no negative connotations. The three terminologies will therefore

that in the American context, where instigation of violation serves as a critical criterion of hate speech. Thus, this research will refer *teulttak* as derogatory or disparaging terminologies or statements.

serve as a compass to the journey for appreciating how age played a role in hindering the *Wuhan Gallery*'s influence across society and making durable shifts, such as in government policies.

C. Data & Method

a. Data

For this study, 739,841 posts were scraped from the Wuhan Gallery. As of June 16, 1,156,309 posts were uploaded to the “community.” 416,468 posts are thus missing from this research’s dataset, and 178,168 were written before February 23rd. Those posts were deleted from the “community” and were not accessible for this research. Other posts were deleted from the “community,” meaning that the dataset has 238,300 posts missing, which takes up about 32% of the posts written since February 23rd. The scraped data include the post's ID number, the writer's ID, time, IP address, number of views and recommendations, the content, the number of comments, and the content of those comments. These data will be used for quantitative analysis to comprehend how the overall trend within the conspiracy theory “community” shifted over time. To avoid the limitations of the quantitative analysis mentioned above, a qualitative analysis of the titles, contents and comments of the Wuhan Gallery will analyze what was happening within the conspiracy theory “community” and explicate the social factors involved in the process.

The scraped data were juxtaposed with search results on Google and popular South Korean portals such as Naver and Kakao. The Wuhan Gallery data does not tell us about how the interest in the conspiracy theory outside of the conspiracy theory “community.” Search results could complement this lack by manifesting the interest in the conspiracy theory “community” from the outside. Analytics of the search results from Google or South Korean portals such as Naver offers the overall trend of interest towards the conspiracy theory “community” and other information that could guide us to appreciating what was taking place. For instance, while the Wuhan Gallery were often accused as a “community” of the elderly, Naver's search result from April 2020 to June suggests that 60% of the searches came from those in their 30s (“Wuhan Gallery” 2022). Of course, the data provided by these portals could also be misleading as people frequently use other people’s information to create accounts. Nonetheless, the research will rely on this data to sample other “communities” based on age and gender to see how diverse individuals and social groups conceived the conspiracy theory.

b. Method

To scrutinize the research question and its hypothesis, this research **first** aims to understand the overall trend in the number of posts, views, and recommendations to determine when the conspiracy theory “community” was lively and when that trend started to falter. The *Wuhan Gallery* data suggests that the number of posts or comments steeply increased on April 15th, 2020, the day of the election, and returned to normal around May. Using this data as a barometer, I will **then** try to comprehend how terminologies related to seniors have played a role in the shift of the “community” by scrutinizing the trend of posts containing rhetoric against the elderly. Terminologies related to the old include disparaging terminologies, such as *teulttak*, and neutral descriptions of the old, such as *noin*, and *halbae*.

Third, I will create a time frame for a detailed analysis of the *Wuhan Gallery*’s interaction with other “communities” and how it reformulated the conspiracy theory “community.” As there are myriads of posts and comments on other “communities,” setting a boundary for a qualitative analysis of the posts is crucial for an efficient inquiry of the interaction between “communities.” The search results of the *Wuhan Gallery* from both Google and Naver kept rising until the latter half of May. Hence, considering both the search results and the data of the *Wuhan Gallery*, this research will have a detailed examination of the conspiracy theory “community” from April 15 to the end of May.

After sampling other “communities” to investigate, posts that include terminologies related to the conspiracy theory “community,” the conspiracy theory, and the elderly within the time frame will be scrutinized to understand how the discourse on conspiracy theory and *Wuhan Gallery* took place in other “communities.” This thesis will also try to identify any interaction between the “communities,” such as plans of raids by members of the “community” going to the *Wuhan Gallery*, or vice versa, to spread information or make fun of them. Then, it will try to examine whether such an interaction impacted the *Wuhan Gallery* by juxtaposing the related discourse within the conspiracy theory “community” and other “communities.”

Finally, this thesis will examine the validity of the alternative hypothesis by examining the discourse surrounding politicians. Several politicians frequently appear in the conspiracy theory “community,” and examining every post mentioning them within their content, or their comments will be the starting point. Other politicians mentioned during the discourse would be the subject of analysis, and the research will also look for other politicians that were either national assembly members, governors, or mayors of major cities in South Korea. I will also try to figure out how terminologies on the elderly are involved

within the discourse and how they might have contributed to the shift in conspiracy theory “communities” growth.

II. Hypothesis I: Interaction with Other “Communities” Created Discord within the *Wuhan Gallery*

A. Age in the Conspiracy Theory “Community”

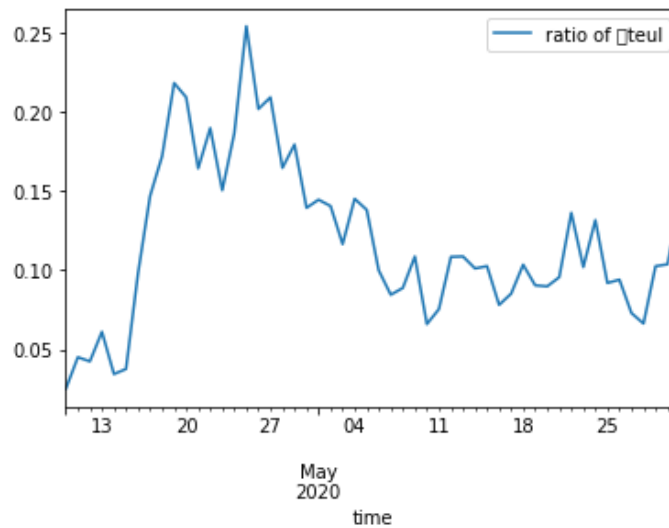
*a. Discourse on the Elderly in the *Wuhan Gallery**

To understand the overall trend of the discourse on the elderly within the *Wuhan Gallery*, posts containing terminologies on the elderly within their title, content, or comment will be enumerated. While there are cases where users respond to others in a different post, most come in the form of comments under the post. By calculating the number of posts, rather than counting each utterance involving the elderly, I prevent overestimation from adding the rhetoric’s use to respond to the accusation. Analyzing when such usage increased and decreased will be helpful in narrowing down the scope of the analysis. Moreover, the number of posts with words on seniors will also have to be compared with the overall number of posts within the whole “community.” As the number of posts concerning the elderly will increase when more posts are written, grasping the overall trend of discourse on the elderly compared to the whole volume of posts will offer a better understanding of its role.

The word *teulttak*, a derogatory terminology towards the elderly, was rarely used during the conspiracy theory’s inception. Users’ posts criticizing the banning of *teulttak* within the *Wuhan Gallery* demonstrate that the lack of *teulttak* comes from the admin’s decision to ban posts containing the word (“teulttak” 2020). Hence, the prefix *teul* could serve as a replacement. Users of DC Inside often bypass the ban by adding special letters between words. For instance, posts containing the word *teul.ttak* or *teul1ttak* could be uploaded without obstacles. Moreover, *teul* is often compounded with other words to denigrate seniors. *Teul-geukgi* refers to the elderly that participate in the protest for the discharge of the impeached president, the *Taеgeukgi*, the Korean flag. Therefore, *teul* could serve as an indicator of how derogatory rhetoric against elderly were employed in *Wuhan Gallery*.

Posts containing *teul* were common when the prohibition was in place, alluding that *teulttak* was used albeit in a deviated form. Still, the term was more frequently used after the conspiracy theory on the general election took place on April 15, even showing up in 2000 posts four days later. About 20% of the posts on April 19 contained *teul* within its title, content, or comment, a sizable increase considering that less than 5% of the posts contained

the prefix before the election. The word was also more frequently employed throughout the year, suggesting the “community” was reformulating itself after the election.⁸



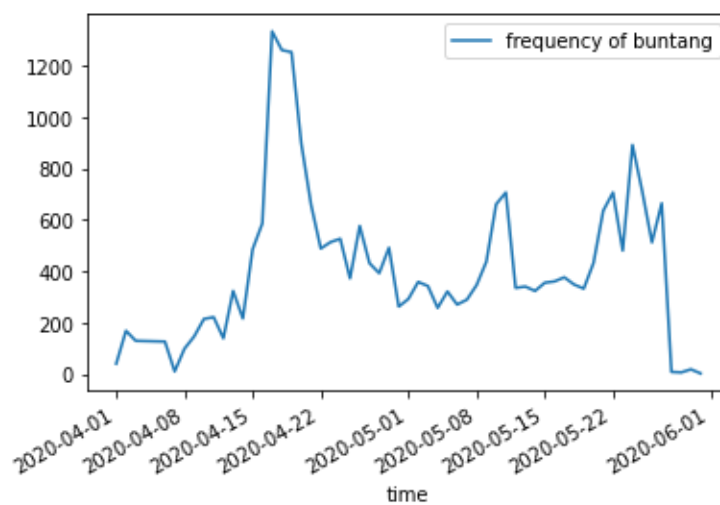
A close analysis of the conspiracy theory “community” suggests that the increase in the rhetoric against the elderly is related to the rising non-believers. Even though pollsters suggested that the liberal party would win the general election by a wide margin, users within the *Wuhan Gallery* did not buy into it.⁹ The *Wuhan Gallery* thus became a place of mockery, leading to a bombardment of posts making fun of them after the election. A discord was thus in place, intensifying as more and more users seemed to believe that the election results were a fraud. Users opposing the conspiracy theory often got blocked or reported, leading to a decrease in the number of overall posts. The heightened conflict led to increased criticism, often involving disparaging terminologies involving the prefix *teul* or the word *teulttak*. In the next section, I will try to prove this hypothesis by juxtaposing the trend of posts with rhetoric against the elderly with posts denoting schism within the *Wuhan Gallery*.

⁸ A similar trend could be found in other terminologies related to age. The usage and ratio of *halbae*, a term that often contains negative nuance, and the neutral *noin* increased since the day of the election and reached its peak after some days and then fell back.

⁹ The result thus hints that the Chinagate conspiracy theory that the CCP was manipulating public sentiment was thus persisting within the *Wuhan Gallery*.

b. *How the Shift in Attitude toward the Elderly Is Related to the Growth of the Conspiracy Theory “Community”*

The overall trend of the posts within the conspiracy theory “community” suggests that rhetoric related to age mirrors the discord taking place. The word *bintang* could be a term that explicates whether a conflict is occurring within the “community.” Translated as trolling, the term is often used to stigmatize the other as the enemy with the sole intention of mocking others.¹⁰ Users often report *bintang* to the administrators, claiming they should be banned from the “community.” The term thus demonstrates disparate opinions within the *Wuhan Gallery* and that a peaceful resolution is deemed impossible, making it a beneficial tool for appreciating the conflict taking place in South Korean cyberspace.



The frequency of posts including *Bintang* follows a similar trajectory to those involving age. While the number of posts did increase on the day of the election, it was not until two days later that the frequency hit its apex. The number almost tripled in April 17, from 485 in the day of the election to 1333 and maintained a similar trajectory for two more days. Its relative volume in relation to the overall number of posts increased from 2% on the day of the election to 15% three days later. Terminologies related to the elderly also increased, albeit in a slightly slow manner. For example, the frequency of the prefix *teul* increased four times four days after the election. The slight delay between the peak in the frequency of *bintang* and terminologies related to the elderly seems to demonstrate the

¹⁰ Trolling refers to posts or comments with the intention of provoking other users rather than the aim to contribute to the overall discourse taking place. As the line between the two is often blurry, this paper interprets trolling as posts or comments with derogatory terms in form or referring to others as incapable of engaging in a rational discussion or reflection.

growing discord within the “community.” As it takes time for the administrators to ban someone accused as a *buntang*, the reaction involving terms related to seniors seems to have been postponed.

Words related to seniors thus suggest their relationship with the discord within the “community.” However, it also raises the question of why this discord occurred in the first place. The rising number of posts after the election suggests that disbelievers of the conspiracy theory may not necessarily be endogenous to the “community” itself. The skyrocketing mockery taking place on the evening of the election seems difficult or impossible to explain with a simple change of heart of users among the “community.” Posts denigrating the *Wuhan Gallery* often involve separation and contrast between the writer and the conspiracy theory “community,” suggesting that the writer conceives oneself not belonging to the *Wuhan Gallery* ([Do you] 2020). The frequent interaction between South Korean online “communities” suggests that they might be the culprit for the non-believers that infiltrated the *Wuhan Gallery* with rhetoric against the elderly. Hence, the next section will delve into an analysis of relevant South Korean online “communities.”

B. Relationship with Other “Communities”

a. Outline of “Communities”

Six “communities” shall be scrutinized to recognize their interaction with the conspiracy theory “community.” The sampling will take place with the available information on online websites such as gender and age, provided in the search results. The first is the *Baseball Gallery*, one of the most popular “communities” in DC Inside as well as the whole South Korean cyberspace, with almost a million posts uploaded every month ([Korean Baseball Gallery] 2022; “disiinsaideu” 2022). In 2020, 90% of the searches on the *Baseball Gallery* came from males, mostly in their twenties (“Baseball Gallery” 2022). Hence, the “community” may be a place where diverse generations of males received information about the conspiracy theory and reacted to it, even though attacking the elderly. Furthermore, the *Baseball Gallery* is also where politics are frequently discussed. While some posts are related to baseball, the “community” also hosts discourses on other topics, and politics has been frequently discussed in the “community” throughout its history.

Other “communities” related to the *Wuhan Gallery*, according to Google search results, will also be the subject of inquiry. One of them is the *Stock Gallery*. According to Kakao search results, visitors of the “community” are 55% females, mostly in their forties and fifties (“Stock Gallery” 2022). Nevertheless, there is a caveat. While it initially described

issues on the stock market in its inception, politics became one of its main issues as time passed. Eventually, DC Inside changed the “community’s” name to *Politics and Society Gallery* on April 16, 2020, and created a new *Stock Gallery* on May 8th ([Politics and Society Gallery/History] 2022). While it is said that users genuinely interested in the stock market moved toward the new “community,” it is impossible to verify this statement as most of the posts uploaded in 2020 are currently deleted from the new *Stock Gallery*. Hence, this paper will focus on the *Politics and Society Gallery* to understand how the conspiracy “community” interacted with other online groups.

The *Women Entertainer Gallery* shows how online “communities” composed of women thought of the conspiracy theory. According to the Naver search results, 94% of its visitors are women, mostly from the younger generation (“Women Entertainer Gallery” 2022). 36% of the visitors were in their thirties, while teenagers took about 15% and 17% from the twenties. The “community” thus allows how younger women, unrepresented in the *Baseball Gallery* or *Politics and Society Gallery*, thought of the conspiracy theory and how they interacted with the conspiracy theory “community.” Even though politics is not the main subject, it often has been a frequently discussed topic, especially during the April general election, and discussions on the conspiracy theory were no exception ([Women Entertainer Gallery/History] 2022).

Finally, as the conspiracy theory “community” accused the liberal administration of rigging the election, most of the users were rooting for the conservatives and frequently interacted with conservative online “communities.” The *United Future Party Gallery* is one of the largest conservative “communities” in DC Inside. Kakao search results suggest that in the first half of 2020, 66% of the search results came from men, mostly in their thirties and forties. The “community” is in constant conflict with the *New Conservative Party Gallery*, a “community” of supporters of a minor conservative party. As the South Korean conservatives conflicted over the treatment of impeached conservative President Park Geun-hye, those who were critical of the President were pushed out of the United Future Party and created their own, eventually becoming the New Conservative Party. The latter was supported mostly by younger males that did not agree with the United Future Party and its supporters, even though the two parties merged again for the general election. Nonetheless, hostility between the two “communities” remained, demonstrating how two different “communities” from the conservative appreciated the conspiracy theory.

b. “Communities’” Reaction to the Conspiracy Theory

Posts and comments of the online “communities” mentioned above suggest the unsupportive atmosphere towards the conspiracy theory after the election. Conservative “communities” were the most adamant ones. In the *New Conservative Party Gallery*, no posts supporting the conspiracy theory made it to the recommended post section.¹¹ The situation was not much different in the *United Future Party Gallery*. While there were recommended posts mocking the conspiracy theory “community,” just like the *New Conservative Party Gallery*, apologetic posts towards the conspiracy theory never received enough recommendations or views to become get through the recommended section ([A Meme] 2020). The election loss was attributed to the *Wuhan Gallery* and its users assumed to be the elderly, in conservative “communities.” Claims for the conspiracy theory were difficult to find and were often ignored ([I Currently] 2021).

While some “communities” supported the conspiracy theory, they soon lost interest in the subject as time went on. The *Women Entertainer Gallery* had three recommended posts that questioned the legitimacy of the balloting process a day or two after the election ([Voting Percentage] 2020). While the comments were mostly approving, no posts on conspiracy theories gained popularity afterward. Similar was the case within the *Politics and Society Gallery*, as more and more users geared towards the conflict between conservative YouTubers rather than the conspiracy theory itself. Even though there was discord surrounding the validity of the conspiracy theory, discussions on the issue became less popular. One of the posts on May 1st notified of the protest for protecting the server inside the National Election Committee as evidence of election fraud, which faced plenty of criticism under the comment section ([[Must Read]] 2020). Nonetheless, the recommended section was filled with posts on YouTubers supportive of the conspiracy theory, even though the focus shifted towards the conflict between them.

The *Baseball Gallery* was openly critical of the conspiracy theory. While some posts with evidence of election fraud did gain some recommendations, they frequently became the

¹¹ Recommended post is a feature unique to DC Inside that displays posts labeled “recommended” in a separate section, which received a significant number of views, recommendations, and comments. The section thus offers a glimpse of the atmosphere of the “communities,” and the lack of conspiracy theories within the section suggests no users within the “community” were buying it and ignored posts related to conspiracy theories.

site of conflict between supporters and critics of the conspiracy theory. In the *Baseball Gallery*, one user organized evidence of the election fraud two days later but was faced with harsh criticism under the comment section ([[※Emergency※]] 2020). While there were some advocates, most of the comments were derogative of the conspiracy theory and suggested that support for conspiracy theories was why the conservatives ignored the centrists and lost the election. Derogatory posts about the conspiracy theory frequented the recommended section well after the election and mostly had supportive comments that conspiracy theories are just a hoax. Posts sharing how *Wuhan Gallery* users were fooled by fake information gained many recommendations with comments mocking the elderly ([The Miraculous Magician] 2020). These posts show how rhetoric on age was employed in the interaction between “communities,” suggesting that users of the *Baseball Gallery* frequented the conspiracy theory “community” and employed derogatory terminologies towards them.

c. Usage of Rhetoric on the Elderly

The rhetoric on the elderly was difficult to ignore in the fractals in “communities.”¹² For instance, comments on a post on the *Politics and Society Gallery* on the evidence alluding to the election fraud were frequently related to age (Jjangkwibeollaeaut 2020). Most of those involved *teulttak* and were often used to criticize their low intelligence for buying into conspiracy theories. Criticism of conspiracy theories also involved rhetoric on the elderly as well. On April 17, a post on the *Baseball Gallery* mocked the conspiracy theorists for stigmatizing a conservative politician as Chinese for being critical of the conspiracy theory (Kaepjeung 2020). Most of the comments here involved disparaging statements towards the elderly and suggested that their feeble minds were why they backed conspiracy theories,

¹² The process of diminishing support for the conspiracy theory in the *Baseball Gallery* could be explained with fractal structures. Referring to “structures that are similar to themselves at different levels,” fractals could parsimoniously describe how, in this case, similarity takes place in social entities such as online “communities.” In the *Baseball Gallery*, posts promoting conspiracy theory often took place within a sea of posts that were mostly hostile towards the *Wuhan Gallery*. The same pattern is repeated in the comment section, where advocates of the conspiracy theory are swarmed by those in contempt. The structure is repeated in different levels, consolidating the *Baseball Gallery*’s opinion towards the conspiracy theory.

which eventually created a bad image for the conservative party during the election. These comments could be interpreted that the conspiracy theory was immediately related to the elderly in its inception.

Conservative YouTubers may be one reason such correlation took place in South Korean cyberspace. One of the posts in the *Baseball Gallery* argued that conservative YouTubers would do much better after the loss, as they would upload videos dealing with conspiracy theories to gain donations from the elderly (Muminenteo 2020). As the conspiracy theory gains more support and spreads online, the conservative image would be damaged, leading to the liberal's victory and starting a vicious circle. The affirmative atmosphere in the comment section demonstrates how the elderly and conspiracy theories are linked by YouTubers: They are mobilizing the elderly's feeble mind for economic profit, creating videos promoting conspiracy theories; Senior citizens buy into the conspiracy theory and try to spread it in online forums. Popular posts on conservative YouTubers promoting conspiracy theories were thus flooded with rhetoric on the elderly in the comment section (1 ∪ 1) (2020).

The rhetoric on age was also frequently related to support of the impeached president Park Geun-hye, the daughter of former President Park Chung-hee, a controversial figure who brought economic success to the peninsula at the price of democracy. For instance, one of the recommended posts mourning the change within the conservative party was frequented with comments linking the elderly and President Park ([How the Image] 2020). The 2020 general election was the fourth straight election that the conservatives lost since the impeachment in 2017. While public support of the conservative party plummeted ever since some conservatives were still fond of the impeached president and protested for her release from prison. The protestors, mostly the elderly, argued that the crimes accused to the Park were a hoax and bought into conspiracy theories of how the innocent president was framed by the liberals (An and Lee 2019). The elderly were thus stigmatized as those who believe in conspiracy theories and deteriorating the conservative's image by not letting go of the past that has now become an obstacle to its success ([The Reason Why] 2020). Hence, previous histories surrounding the impeached president and conservative YouTubers promoted the usage of rhetoric against the elderly in *Wuhan Gallery*. The question now is what role the rhetoric played in the failure of the *Wuhan Gallery's* goal to spread their conspiracy theory.

C. Impact of Other “Communities”

a. Interaction of Wuhan Gallery and Other “Communities”

Not only did *The Baseball Gallery* members share posts and comments from *Wuhan Gallery*, but they also actively participated there. One evidence comes from posts reporting how they were blocked from the conspiracy theory “community” ([I am Blocked] 2020). Some were also promoting users to come to the *Wuhan Gallery*, suggesting that writing fake posts supporting the conspiracy theory could easily get the attention they wanted ([I Got Ten Recommendations] 2020). The travel journals of the users had later turned into a promotion to visit the conspiracy theory “community” itself. Some asked for views and recommendations to mock the *Wuhan Gallery*, while others recommended users to go and troll the conspiracy theory “community” ([I am Tricking] 2020). Posts saying that the “community” has become quieter as everyone went to the *Wuhan Gallery* to troll suggest that the *Baseball Gallery* was constantly interacting with the conspiracy theory “community.”

Moreover, users within the *Baseball Gallery* believed that users from the *Wuhan Gallery* were residing in their “community” and were trying to expel them.¹³ After the election, some users believed that users from the *Wuhan Gallery* would no longer come to the *Baseball Gallery* and manipulate the recommended posts by recommending each other ([I am So Happy] 2020). Some of the posts were calling for the elderly to move out of the “community” and go back to the *Wuhan Gallery* ([Tteulttaks Talking About] 2020). The posts describe seniors, or *teulttak*, as not part of their own “community” and that they should return to where they belong (Bellachyao 2020). The usage of the rhetoric on age not only links conspiracy theory and the elderly but also reconfigures the boundaries of the “community” by suggesting that the elderly believing in conspiracy theories do not belong here. Users from different “communities” were thus constantly interacting with each other and shaping the context of conspiracy theory. By mocking posts on the conspiracy theory, trolling the *Wuhan Gallery*, or accusing users as conspiracy theorists, other “communities” were creating a negative image of the conspiracy theory and lessening its leverage over other parts of the internet.

¹³ While difficult to verify, this may be true considering that no obstacle exists to prevent users from residing in more than one “communities.” Hence, other “communities” reactions to the conspiracy theory may also be their interaction with the conspiracy theory “community.”

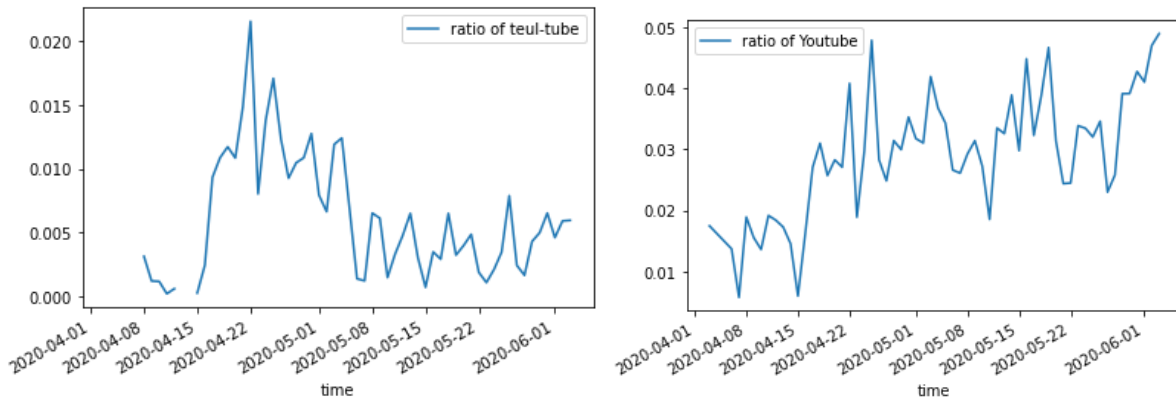
b. How the Conspiracy Theory “Community” Responded

The recommended section of the *Wuhan Gallery* suggests that the conspiracy theory “community” held strong against trolls coming from other “communities.” All the “communities” mentioned above had either supportive or critical posts of the conspiracy theory. However, such was hardly the case in the *Wuhan Gallery*, as no post critical of the conspiracy theory made it into the recommended section. The result suggests that posts by users from other “communities” written to make fun of the conspiracy theorists did not make the cut. It is possible that either the posts were deleted from the *Wuhan Gallery* after recognizing trolls wrote them, or that it did not gain enough recommendation compared to other posts sharing evidence for the conspiracy theory. Either way, the recommended posts demonstrate the cohesiveness of the conspiracy theory “community.”

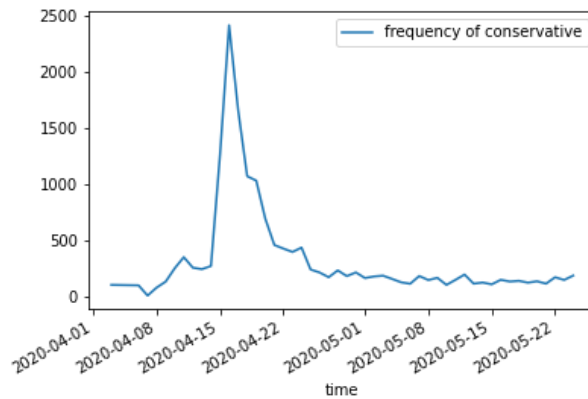
However, a different story was taking place in the other section. Ordinary posts on the conspiracy theory “community” were filled with outsiders mocking the conspiracy theorists. One of the recommended posts uploaded on April 22 testifies that about 90% of the posts on the “community” are written by *buntang* or trolls ([What is So Funny] 2020). While the statistic may be exaggerated, there does seem to be a grain of truth within it. Managers of the “community” uploaded posts notifying that they were trying their best to delete posts from trolls (Aireu 2020; Beikeori 2020b). The recommended section was clean because the admins kept eradicating posts that mock the conspiracy theories, which one of the recommended posts suggests coming from the *Baseball Gallery* ([What is So Funny] 2020). Some users commented on posts that denounced the conspiracy theory to ignore such criticism and watch the recommended section instead. The conspiracy theory “community” was hence participating, or at least conceiving themselves to participating, in siege warfare to protect their sanctuary from outsiders.

Filtering the *Wuhan Gallery* through specific keywords alludes that the conspiracy theorists did succeed in their mission. As demonstrated in the rhetoric on the elderly, YouTube is one of the key topics debated by other “communities.” After the election, the ordinary section of the *Wuhan Gallery* was filled with posts blaming conservative Youtubers and its elderly followers for the loss. From the 17th, however, believers in conspiracy theory started to share evidence from those Youtubers, causing havoc between supporters and critics of conservative YouTubers. For instance, the ratio of posts containing the word *teul-tube*, a combination of *teulttak* and YouTube referring to YouTube channels seen by the elderly, compared to the overall volume of posts increased from the day of the election and hit the apex on April 22 and started to decrease afterward. In comparison, posts containing the term

YouTube started to take more volume than other posts within the “community.” The ratio increases since the day after the election and does not go below 1.8%, the average ratio before the election, throughout April and May. The decreasing mention of *teul-tube*, mostly written by trolls and outsiders, suggests that the *Wuhan Gallery*’s efforts to protect its borders were not in vain.



The frequency of posts containing the word conservative also demonstrates how *Wuhan Gallery* withstood the swarming trolls within itself. The term’s usage increased six times on the day of the election and peaked the next day with 2417 posts. However, it started to drop ever since and reached normal levels two weeks later. A close analysis of the “community” suggests that the initial increase of the word stems from the loss of the election, as lots of users attributed the conspiracy theory “community” and the elderly as one of its main causes. However, things have taken a turn on April 18. Users of *Wuhan Gallery* try to evade such criticism by arguing that they are not conservatives and have nothing to do with the loss. One of the administrators posted that the conspiracy theory “community” is not necessarily a conservative one and that it does not support any political party related to such an effort (Beikeori 2020c). Posts accusing those who relate the conspiracy theory “community” with the conservatives as Chinese or trolls started to increase. Considering that there often were posts written by those sympathetic to the conspiracy theory calling for self-reflection after the election, the accusation meant that the conspiracy theory “community” has shifted to protect itself from outsiders, even at the cost of some of its users.



The frequency of posts with the word conservative or the ratio of *teul-tube* follows a similar trajectory with other “community’s” interest in the *Wuhan Gallery*. In the *Baseball Gallery*, posts including the term *Wuhan Gallery* reached 356 times on the day of the election and maintained similar numbers until April 18. However, the interest began plummeting since then and reached 41 times three days later. The trend in the number of posts mentioning the conspiracy theory “community” thus coincides with the abovementioned trends, as it rapidly increased after the election and return to normal levels a week later. Trends involving rhetoric towards the elderly, as mentioned earlier, are not dissimilar. Hence, the immense confusion about the election fraud that took place at the inception of the conspiracy theory in the *Wuhan Gallery* is likely related to the involvement of other “communities” outside of the internet.

c. Evaluation of the Hypothesis

To summarize the overall picture, the conspiracy theory “community” initially gained a broad audience within South Korean cyberspace, as it faced an increase in the number of posts and comments. However, it was not necessarily a success, as an increase in frequency and ratio of terminologies related to the elderly suggests a discord took place. The reaction of other “communities” demonstrates that the excitement towards the conspiracy theory only lasted for a week, as the number of posts mentioning the *Wuhan Gallery* dropped over time. The rhetoric towards the elderly in other “communities” was not much different from that found within the conspiracy theory “community,” as it often blamed the conspiracy theorists and the elderly for losing the election. As many of the visitors of the “community” consisted of trolls, mocking them for supporting absurd claims and becoming a burden to conservative politics, the conspiracy theory “community” tried to block them from writing posts, leading to a decrease in the overall participation within the “community.” This might have made it difficult for users with disparate opinions to write posts or comments freely, thus hindering

the conspiracy theory “community” from embracing enough individuals and gain more leverage.

However, the hostility towards the conspiracy theory “community” was not always the same. Most of the “communities” happily joined forces with the *Wuhan Gallery* in late February, when it claimed that the Chinese were manipulating opinions on South Korean websites ([Asking for Recommendations] 2020). However, users were beginning to get frustrated as conspiracy theorists bombarded other “communities” with evidence of the Chinagate, making it difficult for existing users to enjoy the content they wanted or to send their posts to the recommended section (Beulpingjichyu 2020). They were often accused as Chinese for not participating in the campaign led by the *Wuhan Gallery* (*Sincheonyeok* 2020). In the end, a few users from the *Baseball Gallery* hacked the conspiracy theory “community” and started an outright war between the two groups ([Must-Read for Newbies] 2020).

The war had consequences as the *Wuhan Gallery* now had one of the largest online “communities” against their back. Discontent within other “communities” was consolidated after the event, as users from other “communities” such as the *Politics and Society Gallery*, criticized the *Wuhan Gallery* for accusing them and everyone as Chinese and hindering the atmosphere of their own “community” ([Mentioning Park Geun-hye] 2020). The conspiracy theory on the general election was thus off to a rough start, as users in other “communities” were already negatively biased towards them and vaccinated against information stemming from the *Wuhan Gallery*. It thus may be adequate to refer to the war of “communities” as a large event that encoded South Korean cyberspace.¹⁴

Nevertheless, the conspiracy theory “community’s” relationship with other “communities” cannot explain the search results, which kept increasing in May. Appreciating the causes behind its popularity requires us to move a step out of the internet. In the digital world, the *Wuhan Gallery* was no different from a dead man walking. The number of overall posts and comments was decreasing, and other “communities” were also shifting attention elsewhere. However, the *Wuhan Gallery*, now consolidated with loyal supporters of the

¹⁴ Large event, in processual sociology, refers to an event that is contagious over time and pervasive in social space. In the case of South Korean cyberspace, the war between the *Wuhan Gallery* and the *Baseball Gallery* had a ripple effect that pervaded other “communities,” which was also contagious over more than a month.

conspiracy theory, was still gathering evidence that would support their conspiracy theory. It was now able to share the burden with other politicians, who found a concrete support group that would back them up if they were supportive of the conspiracy theory. Therefore, this research must appreciate how the conspiracy theory “community” interacted with others outside of cyberspace, such as politicians. The *Wuhan Gallery* frequently interacted with politicians who either supported or criticized them, from the inception of the conspiracy theory in April that went through May. Hence, the next section will examine how the interaction of the *Wuhan Gallery* with other politicians and the impact it had on the conspiracy theory “community.”

III. Hypothesis II: Politicians Created Discord within the *Wuhan Gallery*

A. The Schism in the *Wuhan Gallery* Surrounding Politicians

a. Context on Politicians

The conspiracy theory about the general election is still not dead in a technical sense. Min Kyung-wook, a former congressman and a mouthpiece to the president, is one politician still clinging to the conspiracy theory. Min is one of the most avid supporters of the conspiracy theory, even visiting the United States before the 2020 U.S. presidential election to warn then-President Trump of a possible election fraud led by the Chinese (C. Kim 2020a). His journey as a politician cannot be explicated without mentioning the impeached President. Min quit his gig as an anchor of the most popular news program in South Korea to become the spokesperson for Park Geun-hye and was voted into the national assembly as a close ally of hers. However, his try in 2020 ended up a failure, and Min blamed the election fraud for his loss. He often collaborated with the *Wuhan Gallery*, sharing posts on protests organized by the conspiracy theory “community” and conservative YouTubers.

An example of those YouTuber is Kang Yong-seok. Kang is a former congressman and was a member of the *hoverlab*, one of the most famous or notorious political YouTube channels in South Korea. After his career as a politician nosedived due to a series of legal cases, Kang found his place in the media industry, where he commented on issues related to politics and law. At the *hoverlab*, Kang gained popularity by reporting on the private lives of celebrities and critiquing issues in politics, which often involved suing politicians. Even though most of his videos are demonetized by YouTube, he received humongous donations from his fan base, making the channel the fifth biggest earner worldwide in terms of donations in 2020 (J. Lee 2021). After the 2020 general election, Kang promoted the

conspiracy theory by broadcasting evidence of election fraud and invited politicians such as Min to discuss it. He also live-streamed protests of the *Wuhan Gallery* and often used information from the *Wuhan Gallery* on his YouTube channel.

Lee Jun-seok, the current conservative party leader, was someone who ditched President Park after the impeachment and criticized the conspiracy theory in 2020. After graduating from Harvard, Lee was handpicked by President Park, then party leader, as a member of the emergency measure committee of the conservative party. Even though he started his political career as “Park Geun-hye kids,” Lee was one of the president's fiercest critics of the president during the impeachment trial and even switched to a new conservative party, composed of politicians that tried to detach themselves from the president and her allies. In 2020, Lee returned to his original party as the two parties united to stop the liberals from winning four straight elections. While Lee ran as a candidate, he lost and could not stop his party from suffering another defeat. Even though Lee could save his face by embracing the conspiracy theory, he chose a road not taken by most candidates and became one of the fiercest critics of the conspiracy theory. He criticized YouTubers and politicians for spreading the conspiracy theory and bringing the conservative party down to ruins, even though he did not mention the *Wuhan Gallery*.

b. The Schism Surrounding Lee

While there were disparate opinions toward Lee prior to the election, it does not seem to be a serious discord. On the eve of the election, posts claiming to vote for Lee made it into the recommended section (NeverGonnaGiveYouUp 2020; [I Just Voted !] 2020). Lee’s criticism of the liberal party also had made it to the recommended section in the past, with wide support in the comment section ([Lee Jun-seok Speaks the Facts] 2020; [Did You Just Hear] 2020). Even when Lee debunked the conspiracy theories in the election a month prior, the support was unanimous. As an extension of the Chinagate conspiracy theory, some anti-Chinese media in the *Wuhan Gallery* problematized the use of Huawei’s network for the early voting procedures (In 2020). While the argument rekindled after the election, the conspiracy theory “community” did not send much support, one of the reasons being Lee’s rebuttal. On March 21st, Lee argued the impossibility of election fraud and urged supporters to stop producing conspiracy theories about the election, as it might have a detrimental effect on its result ([Lee Jun-seok Said] 2020). Posts sharing Lee’s statement were highly recommended in the “community,” and some users confessed disbelief in the conspiracy theory because of him ([The Election is Probably Not Rigged] 2020). Even those who still

believed in the possibility of a rigged election refrained from criticizing Lee in the comment section, suggesting that Lee had much support ([Let's Stop Talking] 2020).

However, a crack appeared when the conspiracy theory on the election fraud swarmed the “community.” Initially, posts suggested that Lee should now be the new figurehead of the conservative party, symbolizing youth ([I am a Leftists] 2020). Since Lee publicly announced the impossibility of rigging the election a month ago, users in disbelief of the conspiracy theory used his statement to argue against the conspiracy theorists (Goni 2020). Criticism of Lee, however, also surfaced at the same time, accusing him as young and inexperienced and that he had never won an election before ([Why Are You Guys] 2020; [Lee Jun-seok Lost] 2020). After Lee denounced the possibility of the conspiracy theory on April 17, the recommended section now had criticism of Lee, blaming him as the reason why “community” users did not feel alert about the election fraud and not try to stop it ([Haven't I Told] 2020). Afterwards, however, lots of trolls mocked the conspiracy theory with rebuttals provided by Lee, leading some users to ask Lee's name to be banned from the “community” ([We Should] 2020). One of the admins wrote that posts containing Lee's name would be deleted due to the immense conflict in the *Wuhan Gallery*, and his name was banned for about a week (Bisyopsaranghae 2020). While some posts critical of Lee made it into the recommendation section by avoiding the ban, admins deleted them (Beikeori 2020a). When the ban was lifted a week later, posts on the *Wuhan Gallery* were overtly negative towards Lee, and some posts critical of him were sent to the recommended section.

c. *The Schism Surrounding Kang*

On the other hand, Kang received a mixed reaction from the “community” before the election. Even though not many posts were written about Kang or his YouTube channel before the election, most were not fond of the politician/YouTuber. One of the posts asked which YouTubers are good enough to watch while adding that *hoverlab* is not part of one's subscribed channel due to one's hatred towards Kang ([Which YouTuber] 2020). Another post, quoting another YouTuber, claimed that Kang and his channel were secretly supporting the Chinese, to which some of the comments agreed ([An Jeonggwon] 2020). Even though there were posts quoting Kang or the *hoverlab*, urging users to watch their live feed, they did not receive a significant number of views, recommendations, or comments. There thus seems to be a schism between critics of Kang and those watching his YouTube channel, but it was a minor event that did not receive much interest from the overall “community.”

The overall atmosphere of the “community” towards Kang also fluctuated after the election. Initially, posts accused him of losing the election, but things took a turn when the conspiracy theory on the election fraud germinated ([Conservative Party] 2020). Some posts argued that the *hoverlab*, the epitome of yellow journalism on South Korean YouTube, will not resist the chance to publicize the conspiracy theory and make a fortune ([It Would Certainly] 2020). When Kang’s channel did pick up on April 17, posts mocking Kang coexisted with those urging to use him for the “community’s” benefit and spread the conspiracy theory (Rangkaseu 2020). Support thus initially came with some sort of a concession that Kang is a problematic figure while claiming that he still has political ambitions and would not have committed himself to the conspiracy theory if he was only in it for money ([Don’t Trust] 2020). Strife within the “community” continued when Kang announced in May that he was receiving donations to seek evidence for the conspiracy theory. However, supporters of the *hoverlab* grew out to be the majority as criticizing the channel often led to the stigmatization of the accuser as Chinese who does not wholeheartedly believe in the conspiracy theory ([Again *Buntangs*] 2020). Thus, posts critical of Kang did not appear in the recommended section after the second day of May.

d. The Schism Surrounding Min

While Min did not receive much criticism prior to or after the election, disparate opinions toward him surfaced when he pronounced that the Chinese were involved in the election fraud. In May 21, Min announced that a Chinese hacker manipulated the voting scanner and inscribed a secret cryptogram on the election result, which read “follow the party” (Park 2020). To Min, this was undeniable evidence of Chinese involvement, as the phrase is one of the slogans of the CCP. The culmination of the Chinagate conspiracy theory and the election fraud received a mixed reaction. While there were avid supporters, who made the slogan one of the top trending topics in South Korean portals after a few days, there were several posts demonstrating their disappointment and not buying into the conspiracy theory ([Follow the Party] 2020).

The discord heightened as it became difficult for the conspiracy theorists to verify Min’s claims. As doubts about “follow the party” were on the rise, a whistleblower that first found the information and handed it to Min came out on YouTube to demonstrate his argument on May 25th. The reaction was mixed within the *Wuhan Gallery*. The critics came up with a number of reasons why “follow the party” cannot be verified and that the *Wuhan Gallery* should not embrace it as primary evidence of election fraud (Suhakjaem 2020). Even

though the admins now asked to stop writing about “follow the party,” Min still presented it as the main evidence of the conspiracy theory, and some users still adhered to the claim since Min still did not give up on it ([Who Are Those] 2020; [Please Have Faith] 2020). In the end, the *Wuhan Gallery* moved on to other evidence of the conspiracy theory, and support for Min stood firm. Critics of Min were frequently ignored or stigmatized as *buntang*, and posts voicing support for him frequently made it to the recommended section ([Min Kyung-wook’s] 2020).

B. Rhetoric Against the Elderly and the Schism Surrounding Politicians

a. Seniors, YouTubers, and the Impeached President

The rhetoric against the elderly was also employed in the discord surrounding politicians. However, the pattern in the usage of rhetoric bore similarities with that of trolls from other “communities.” First, disparaging terminologies towards the elderly were used in relation to conservative YouTubers. As Lee zeroed in on YouTubers from the start, criticizing them for spreading ungrounded conspiracy theories, supporters of Lee often employed the terminology *teul-Tube*, a combination of YouTube and *teulttak*, a derogatory term towards the elderly. When conspiracy supporters criticized Lee, the comment section would often involve his supporters urging not to watch *teulTube* (Enjeltureu 2020). When conspiracy theorists tried to rebut Lee with evidence on YouTube channels, derogatory words toward the elderly frequently resurfaced (Siganeuldallineunsonyeon 2020).

Critics of Kang also used rhetoric against the elderly in posts related to Kang, as his channel was the epitome of far-right YouTube that Lee criticized. When Kang first mentioned the conspiracy theory on his YouTube, critics wrote comments asking *teulttaks* to stop sending money to a channel that is negatively perceived by the public and hence may have detrimental effects on spreading the conspiracy theory ([Breaking News] 2020). Lee’s claim that the YouTube channels are only in it for the money was echoed when Kang asked for donations to investigate the election. Comments or posts identifying the elderly as pushovers who give up money to tricksters were thus frequent in the schism related to Kang ([*hoverlab Finally*] 2020).

When the impeached president was mentioned, derogatory statements toward the elderly were also employed. As conspiracy theorists often were supporters of President Park, they criticized Lee as a traitor who betrayed the one who brought him into politics in the first place ([What have] 2020). Lee’s criticism of the conspiracy theory was another betrayal to them and the reason why the “community” should not adhere to Lee’s words ([Catching Up]

2020). Such claims were frequently followed by comments with disparaging terminologies towards the elderly ([What Lee] 2020). The comments thus suggest that usage of the rhetoric against the elderly is closely connected with the impeached President.

The usage of rhetoric against the elderly thus illuminates how social entities are a process that persists over time. Similar patterns that link the elderly with conservative YouTubers and President Park have appeared repeatedly in posts concerning other “communities” or politicians. It might not be an exaggeration to argue that such a worldview is shared by those beyond the scope of online “communities.” Two years ago, news reports by JTBC, a major South Korean network, on the conspiracy theories surrounding President Park’s impeachment demonstrated how fake news was created in a vicious cycle that involved online “communities,” far-right media, and politicians from the right (JTBC News 2018). Far-right YouTube channels created conspiracy theories that became contagious through online “communities” and voiced by some politicians, giving more political leverage to the YouTube channels and their conspiracy theories. As the protestors advocating for those conspiracy theories in protests mainly were the elderly, the view that the elders in online “communities” are the reason why the conservative party cannot do away with the impeached President was encoded to the public and was fixed over time.¹⁵

b. Explaining the Lack of Rhetoric against the Elderly

However, what was noticeable was that rhetoric against the elderly was rarely used compared to the earlier period of the conspiracy theory. Posts or comments referring to Lee usually did not have much rhetoric about the elderly. One of the reasons seems to be that some users who supported Lee but did not want to show enmity towards the conspiracy theorists. As there were supporters of Lee before the election, some of them still maintained their backing and wanted other users to follow suit. Hence, they refrained from employing disparaging terminology toward the elderly and persuading others to be critical of Lee. For instance, some posts gently asked others to stop condemning Lee, as it is difficult for a politician to accept a

¹⁵ By using the word encoding, I am here trying to suggest that there is a social memory created around conservative conspiracy theories that link the elderly with far-right YouTubers and conservative politicians. The encoding thus facilitates the use of rhetoric against the elderly while constraining the conspiracy theory “community” and discourse to get acceptance from the public.

conspiracy theory ([Those Who] 2020). A similar sentiment could be seen in the admin's announcement, which notified that posts containing Lee's name would be deleted, as there is no reason to criticize him as not much evidence is given (Bisyopsaranghae 2020). Hence, support for conspiracy theory and the politician that criticized it was compatible for some people, which prevented them from employing derogatory terminologies toward the seniors.

Moreover, posts linking Kang and President Park did not involve rhetoric against the elderly. Several posts mockingly mentioned Kang's channel broadcasting in front of the Supreme Court for the discharge of the imprisoned President Park. Nevertheless, there was no usage of terminologies on the elderly in their content, and the comments were no different ([The Biggest Dilemma] 2020). One reason seems to be that Kang's support did not appear sincere, as people believed he was in it for the money ([Are There] 2020). As even the conspiracy theorists somewhat conceded that Kang was a temporary ally with intentions other than promoting the conspiracy theory, the conspiracy "community's" support for the impeached president did not matter to both believers and critics.

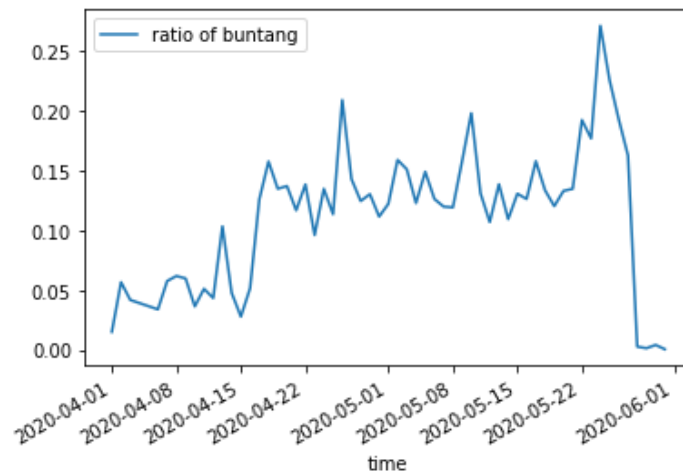
The lack of rhetoric on the elderly was much clearer a month later when Min proclaimed the Chinese involvement in the election. While there are many posts dealing with "follow the party," rhetoric on the elderly was seldom employed. Even though some posts had disparaging statements about the elderly, they were relatively short outbursts that did not offer much information and were often ignored by the "community" ([You Elderly] 2020). Phrases referring to the elderly were also challenging to find in recommended posts with many comments. While many posts were deleted in this period, either by the admins or the writers themselves, most comments remained the same. The disappearance of the rhetoric suggests that those who still wrote comments or posts within the "community" had a sense of bond with other conspiracy theorists. Rather than being trolls aiming to provoke the *Wuhan Gallery*, they seem to be adhering to parts of the conspiracy theory but were disappointed that the movement was going awry.

In this context, the use of *buntang*, or trolls, may offer evidence as to why rhetoric against the elderly was not much employed. Posts supportive of Lee often argued that trolls wrote criticism towards the politician ([Those Who] 2020). Users critical of Kang demonstrated a similar attitude, claiming that support for him and his channel comes from trolls who want to break down the conspiracy theory "community," which made it to the recommended section (Daekkaemunaut 2020). *Buntang*, as a rhetoric, thus hints that the schism involving politicians often took place between firm believers of the conspiracy theory that would not employ disparaging terminologies on the elderly to mock each other. Criticism

of the “follow the party” was often accused as the work of trolls as well, making it impossible to deter the general opinion of the “community” from following the claims of Kang or Min (Sijinpingmoksumidallangdallang 2020).

C. Evaluation of Hypothesis II

a. Evaluation & Comparison with Hypothesis I



The schism surrounding politicians demonstrates the ripple effects of the interaction between “communities.” *Buntang* depicts a time in the *Wuhan Gallery* that the French calls *L’heure entre chien et loup*. Just like a time between darkness and daylight, impossible to differentiate between the dog and the wolf, the constant inflow of critics of the conspiracy theory, likely from other “communities,” made it difficult to determine whether a different reading of the conspiracy theory was sincere or just a hoax. The increasing ratio of *Buntang*, and the lack of rhetoric against the elderly, support this argument. Even though fewer posts were uploaded to the *Wuhan Gallery* and interest from other “communities” were decreasing, more posts accused others as trolls, suggesting a division between different readers of the conspiracy theory. Believers of conspiracy theory, therefore, were often accused as trolls for having a different opinion towards certain politicians and were ignored as a result.

Ignoring the discontent seems to have contributed to the demise of the popularity in the conspiracy theory discourse. Even though the number of posts and comments on the *Wuhan Gallery* was decreasing, the rising number of search results denotes that there still

was interest in the discourse itself.¹⁶ Considering that prior conspiracy theories, such as the Chinagate, had minuscule search results at the time, one could suggest that the interests in the conspiracy theory assumed it to be different from its failed predecessors. However, the “follow the party” claim eradicated those differences, as the election fraud conspiracy theory became a simple extension of the Chinagate that was supported by far-right politicians and conservative YouTubers that participated in failed conspiracy theories. Even though discord within the *Wuhan Gallery* tried to prevent this from happening by warning the dangers of adhering to certain politicians, the users in the *Wuhan Gallery* did not listen to the canary in the coal mine.¹⁷

The effect discord on politicians had on the conspiracy theory discourse denotes how the two different hypotheses of this paper explain two different sides of the conspiracy theory. The *Wuhan Gallery*, as a conspiracy theory “community,” differs from the conspiracy discourse. The interaction with other “communities” deterred the growth of the *Wuhan Gallery* as lots of users were banned and posts were deleted. Moreover, the diffusion of the conspiracy theory was blocked as efforts to spread the conspiracy theory to other “communities” was met with harsh criticism. However, the search results suggest that conspiracy theory discourse kept rising even after the *Wuhan Gallery* had a diminishing number of posts. It was only after the “follow the party” by Min that the interest in the conspiracy theory discourse declined. Discord surrounding politicians manifested different readings of the conspiracy theory that made it different from its failed predecessors, but it failed to materialize. As “follow the party” became the slogan of the conspiracy theory discourse, it became no different from other conspiracy theories and lost the public’s interest.

¹⁶ Factors behind the rising interest in conspiracy theory go beyond this paper’s scope. To briefly mention one of those factors, a University of Michigan named Walter Mebane claimed that the South Korean General Election was rigged. Several interviews he had with major Korean news networks suggest his claim grabbed the attention of the South Korean public.

¹⁷ It does not seem to be the case that the discord surrounding the validity of “follow the party” hindered the growing interest in the conspiracy theory. Search results from Google, Naver, and Kakao started to decrease right after Min announced “follow the party” as the main evidence of the election fraud on May 21st. However, it took more than five days for the users in the *Wuhan Gallery* to realize the limitations of the “follow the party.”

Moreover, rhetoric against the elderly may have some explanatory power in explaining why the conspiracy theory discourse has stopped growing. Search results from Google and Korean portals indicate that interest in the conspiracy theory decreased since May 21st, when Min publicized “follow the party.” In the *Wuhan Gallery*, and in other “communities,” the elders were depicted as those supporting the impeached president and far-right conservative YouTubers. Senior citizens rooted for President Park after the impeachment, YouTubers created conspiracy theories on how Park was framed, and the conservative party found itself in a quagmire by not doing away with the remnants of a failed administration and lost the election. When Min, the former mouthpiece of President Park, came up with a conspiracy theory that brought disbelief among those with the firm support of the election fraud, it must have been difficult for those outside of the “community” to buy into the conspiracy theory anymore ([I Believe] 2020; [I am Ashamed] 2020). “Follow the party” thus seems to have worked as a large event that associated the conspiracy theory with the framing of the impeached president, thus nailing the coffin to the election fraud claims by hindering its spread.

b. Implication on Related Studies

This research thus demonstrates the need to account for social factors in appreciating how conspiracy theories occur and disappear. Conspiracy theories are not built in a day. To comprehend the trajectory of both the conspiracy theory “community” and discourse, an understanding of the political environment of South Korean society and how media such as YouTube and online “communities” play a role within it are required. The rise of the conspiracy theory took place due to a novel event, the election in this case, which took place within an online “community” that was already a birthplace of a conspiracy theory just months ago. The hindrance to the conspiracy theory was no different from the past. Negative preconceptions of the elderly, conjoined with conservative YouTubers and pro-Park politicians, eventually defeated the conspiracy theory, which took a similar trajectory to those produced by the far-right in the past.

The research also demonstrates the complexities of echo chambers in online “communities.” While it is true that echo chambers debase specific sources of information while promoting others, the *Wuhan Gallery* shows how easily it could change. In the time of Chinagate, Baseball Gallery and other “communities” were the barometers of public opinion and persuading them to join the fight was thus at the top of the list for the conspiracy theory “community.” After a month, they turned into an arch enemy that should be defeated at all

costs. Kang, who was disliked by the “community,” even during their alliance, became a source of reason as the conspiracy theory developed over time. Hence, it is imperative for the study of echo chambers to track down changes in the valuation of sources and what might be the cause lying under it.

Finally, it is clear from this analysis that discourse and “communities” dealing with conspiracy theories are not fixed. The Wuhan Gallery, for example, was a different beast a month after the election. Changes were constantly occurring as outsiders approached the “community,” and insiders tried to block them. Those comfortable within the conspiracy theory “community” before the election found themselves alienated, as they were now accused of being trolls or Chinese. The discourse on conspiracy theory has also changed over time. Support from professors and other intellectuals often made the conspiracy theory legitimate and worthy of attention, even though they were promoted by the same Youtubers stigmatized as phonies. Evidence supporting the conspiracy theory was akin to the head of Hydra, as it constantly regrew, albeit in a different form, even though they were constantly cut off through counterexamples or rebuttals.

IV. Conclusion

A. Limitation

Before jumping to a conclusion, it is necessary to point out some of the limitations that may constrain the implications of this research. The quantitative analysis of the rhetoric against the elderly in the *Wuhan Gallery* may not accurately portray what is happening. As it only enumerates the number of posts that contain specific terminologies within its title, content, and comment, it could miss out on multiple usages of that rhetoric in certain cases. For instance, a post that contains ten comments containing the word *teulttak* would only be counted as a single case in this research. Downplaying repetitive usages within the text has its benefits, as it does not count the repetitive usage by a single author and those responding to the accusation as elderly. Nonetheless, denying that some of the usages within posts have been neglected is difficult.

Another limitation of this paper pertains to the interpretations employed in evaluating hypotheses. Like everyone else on the internet, this research is culpable for seeing what it wants to see. The countless posts and comments mean that diverse opinions and dispositions preside within the *Wuhan Gallery* and linking several of those dots could lead to a vastly different understanding of what is taking place. Of course, this research attempted to prevent such misinterpretation with quantitative analysis and a somewhat thorough reading of many

posts and comments. Still, a different explication of what happened in the *Wuhan Gallery* could exist, and the interpretation provided in this paper may be vastly different from the experience of the users that lived in the moment.

The volatility of the internet is another factor that hinders the research's objectives. Like any other internet website, information within the DC Inside could be easily deleted. Hence, it was not challenging to see posts or comments deleted on the website. The first 170,000 posts, for example, were completely deleted by the administrators of the *Wuhan Gallery*, making it difficult to understand what took place at the beginning of the "community." The admins also notified that those posts written by trolls would be deleted, making it difficult to track the discord in the *Wuhan Gallery*. It is also possible that a lump of posts containing rhetoric against the elderly would have been deleted in the process, contaminating the results provided in the quantitative analysis.

B. Conclusion

Nonetheless, this research demonstrates what took place in the *Wuhan Gallery* that hindered the conspiracy theory from garnering political influence. The usage of the rhetoric on the elderly manifests the obstacles that the conspiracy theory "community" failed to overcome. Other online "communities" accused senior citizens as part of a vicious circle that includes conservative YouTubers and the impeached president that hindered the success of the conservative party and South Korean politics writ large. The accusation was not entirely false, as the *Wuhan Gallery* became no different from what was alleged over time. As diverse opinions were accused of trolls and thus banned, it became challenging to voice different readings of the conspiracy theory. Criticism of politicians and YouTubers with a history of failed conspiracy theories of the past were banned or ignored, and the conspiracy theory on election fraud became not much different from those that existed in the past and failed to gain more supporters.

The analysis of the *Wuhan Gallery* demonstrates that users on the internet are no different from the Hamlet of Elsinore. The internet is a constant process as every entity involved is constantly being recreated in interaction with others. However, fully grasping such a process is impossible, as it requires attention to myriads of information constantly created in cyberspace. Hence, users must take a leap of faith, relying on conventions to bring stability to one's lifeworld and acting as if it is accurate. They are all Hamlets in that they refuse to doubt certain beliefs or axioms and interprets the events on the internet in a way that brings security and stability to their life. The plethora of information easily accessible on the

internet allows users to strengthen their beliefs, making it a perfect breeding ground for conspiracy theories.

However, the moral of this research does not have to be limited to the internet. The social world has always been and always will be a constant process that is impossible to grasp as fixed. Bright minds ranging from Heraclitus, Zeno of Elea to Bergson, Mead, and Whitehead have all pointed out that everything is changing and that appreciating the world as fixed would give us a false sense of security. The internet is a technological innovation that exposes what we have not realized or tried to forget, and we now must confront the fact that we have always been and always will be Hamlets. Thus, scholars must not evade these complex phenomena but rather, as Shakespeare said, “speak to it” (2016, 182).

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V. Appendix A: A Brief Outlook of DC Inside & Wuhan Gallery

번호	말머리	제목	글쓴이	작성일	조회	추천
2301	설문	그룹보다 솔로 활동 시 포텐 터질 것 같은 여자아이돌 멤버는?	운영자	22/07/11	-	-
2302	이슈	[다시인터뷰] 1408:1의 경쟁률 '2대 마녀', 배우 신시아를 ...	운영자	22/07/13	-	-
1152855	공지	강 별글 써라 [10]	RaspberryPi4	21.01.10	2852	20
1147192	공지	여긴 [29]	단두대	20.12.12	4324	62
1147749	공지	우한 마이너 갤러리입니다 [7]	RaspberryPi4	20.12.12	2224	22
1147115	공지	[공지] 겔 분리합니다. [87]	단두대	20.12.12	6331	67
831197	공지	To our friends in TW, TH, and HK [5]	○○ (104.143)	20.05.10	5718	92
1156323	일반	썸덕갤 순회 열차입니다. [4]	○○ (124.51)	07.03	74	0
1156322	일반	공무원	○○ (1.227)	07.01	42	1
1156321	일반	탈원전	○○ (1.227)	07.01	29	1

Figure A-1: Screenshot of the Wuhan Gallery Main Page

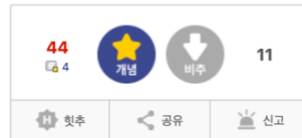
The main page of the galleries in DC Inside resembles the picture above, except for the title of the gallery and the banner that is located at the top. The blue button on the top left informs that all the posts in the “community” are shown below. Clicking the button on the right, then the DC Inside will only show the recommended posts of the gallery. Below is a list of posts of a gallery. Starting from the left, one can get the post number, the category of the posts, the title, writer, the date of the post, and the number of views and recommendations. Even though writers of the post can select which category their post should belong, most of them belongs to the general category. The number on the right of the title tells us how many comments the post received. The orange and blue icons at the writer section notifies that the writer is an admin. Orange icons are given to the head administrator, while the blue ones are given to others. As one can see from the posts on the bottom, most posts are written anonymously with the ID ○ ○ . IP addresses are provided for posts with anonymous writers, as shown on the numbers next to ○ ○ .

[일반] 우겔 너희가 읍았다

○○(223.62) | 2022.03.05 19:33:57

조회 1480 | 추천 44 | 댓글 22

시발 투표 개값이 관리하네 부정선거가 맞았다 미안하다 고맙다



현재 댓글 23개 | 등록순 ▼

본문 보기 | 댓글닫기 ▲ | 새로고침

○○(110.35)	ㄹㅇ	03.05 20:04:13
○○(117.111)	허허	03.06 01:03:32
○○(183.101)	ㅋㅋㅋㅋㅋㅋ 나도 여기 생각나서 들어와봄	03.06 01:33:33
○○(223.62)	여기새끼들은 부정선거 없다고 주장하던 놈들임 부정선거 언급은 미1정1겔이고	03.06 01:42:40

Figure A-2: Screenshot of a Post in Wuhan Gallery

By clicking on the posts in the main page, one can see the post and its comments. The title of the post could be seen at the top left, and the phone icon shows that the post was written in a mobile environment. The ID and the IP address of the writer is written at the bottom, along with the date of the post. The numbers on the right show the number of views, recommendations, and comments. Below, one can see the content of the post. Since the title of a post is accessible at the main page, while the content is not, users often write short posts with all the information on the title. In this case, the content only gives a brief information related to the title. The star icon at the bottom is the recommendation button, and the red number at the left informs the number of recommendations it received. The small number below denotes the recommendation from the managers. The icon with the downward arrow is the downvote button, and the number on the right informs how much downvote the post received. The three buttons below are hit recommendation, sharing, and report. Hit recommendation is recommending the post to the *HIT Gallery*, where the top recommended posts from the whole DC Inside are shown. The report button is useless for the *Wuhan Gallery* as the admins blocked it. Users must report directly to the admins to delete a post or ban a user.

The comment section is at the bottom of each post. The number on the top left, written red, informs how much comments the post received. The information about the writer of a comment can be seen at the very left. The content of the comment is at the center, and the date of the comment can be seen at the right.