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**Digital Claims and Platform-Mediated Conspiracy Discourse: Negotiating
Credibility, Authority, and Meaning on Zhihu**

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Abstract

This study examines how contentious knowledge surrounding the moon landing is expressed, negotiated, and organized on digital platforms. It develops “Digital Claims” as a potential meso-level analytical framework for examining how meanings, interactions, and visibility become observable and accumulative in digital spaces. Moving beyond approaches centered on users’ beliefs, intentions, or undifferentiated digital traces, the study distinguishes between Articulated Digital Claims, where meanings and arguments are expressed, and Associative Digital Claims, where interactional relations become observable.

Through qualitative methods, the study examines moon-landing-related questions, answers, comments, and interaction indicators on Zhihu. The findings show that the controversy extends beyond competing claims about whether the moon landing occurred. Articulated Digital Claims bring institutional knowledge, scientific-style reasoning, common sense, source criticism, and practical verification into a shared space of credibility negotiation, where different evaluative criteria are brought into relation. Technological claims also function as symbolic resources through which national capability, political institutions, morality, and collective identities are interpreted and contested.

The study further suggests that platform datafication and standardization transform semantically heterogeneous activities into comparable interaction signals that can be accumulated around specific Digital Claims. Comment relations, nested replies, and visibility arrangements further organize these relations into persistent and traceable platform objects. Digital Claims therefore offer an alternative analytical perspective for examining how platforms shape the ways controversies become observable, connected, and sustained.

Key words: Digital Claims, digital platforms, Conspiracy

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I would like to thank my supervisor. I will always remember the advice to “be less defensive and dial back the tone” when writing, and I hope that this thesis reflects my humility and understanding.

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Acknowledgements	2
Introduction	6
Literature Review	12
Introduction to the Literature Review	12
Carnival	14
Nationalism and Conspiracy	17
Digital Claims	22
Summary of the literature review	29
Methodology	31
Research Design and Methodological Approach	31
Case Selection and Research Context	33
Data Collection and Sampling Strategy	34
Analytical Procedure	37
Ethical Considerations & Reflexivity	41
Analysis	43
Operationalizing Digital Claims	43
Negotiation of Authenticity	44
Source Criticism	48
Meaning Negotiation	50
Interaction Indicators	54
Standardization Through the Platform	58
After Encapsulation	63

Sorting	68
A Summary to the Analysis Part	70
Conclusion	73
Bibliography	80
Endnotes.....	87
Appendix 1: Sources of Empirical Material	88
Appendix 2: Blank Codebook.....	91

Introduction

Scientific knowledge has historically gained authority through processes of validation and practices that distinguish legitimate knowledge from alternative explanations. However, the boundary between “scientific” and “unscientific” knowledge is not necessarily fixed, just as Porter (1997, p. 40) pointed out,

“... We must thus avoid taking for granted the antagonistic presence of two distinct traditions: the scientific and the superstitious, the right and the wrong.”

The historical development of science has often involved interactions between different forms of explanation. Previous scientific understandings may be revised, refined, or replaced through established processes of inquiry as new evidence and explanatory frameworks emerge.

The development of science communication reflects this complexity. Early approaches to science communication often relied on a model assuming that misunderstanding resulted from a lack of scientific information and could therefore be addressed through knowledge transmission (Royal Society, 1985, p. 9). However, later approaches challenged this assumption by emphasizing that public interpretations of science cannot be explained by information availability alone, because they are also shaped by trust, institutional relationships, and local contexts. The gap between expert expectations and practical outcomes raised questions about how much trust should be placed in scientific authority. Scientific authority can therefore be understood as being sustained through the social processes. This has made the ability to critically evaluate sources and evidence important.

However, while critical evaluation often involves careful examination of evidence and reasoning, digital spaces may also contain forms of expression such as sarcasm, ridicule, or symbolic opposition that employ similar rhetorical forms of questioning and

skepticism. These forms do not necessarily reflect equivalent cognitive processes or communicative practices, they may become difficult to distinguish within digital spaces. Moreover, digital platforms expose users to an unprecedented volume of information and competing interpretations. The distinction between evidence-based critique and broader challenges to established authority is, therefore, not always easily maintained within mediated spaces. Digital platforms further reshape these dynamics by introducing new conditions that allow competing knowledge claims to circulate, interact, and gain visibility.

Studies have increasingly focused on the interpretive and social dimensions of conspiracy. Conspiracy narratives can be understood as meaning-making systems that provide explanations for uncertain, complex events, especially in situations where existing interpretations are perceived as insufficient or unconvincing (Fenster, 2008, pp. 7-9; Birchall, 2006, pp. 17-18). They may reflect broader processes suggesting how individuals or groups negotiate uncertainty, negotiating positions with established authorities, and political imagination.

Furthermore, discussions of something called “new conspiracism” highlight how conspiracy discourse could just shift away from developed explanatory systems, towards more fragmented and flexible assertions (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2019, pp. 2-3). Such claims operate through ambiguity, repetition, and circulation. This characteristic could appear within contemporary digital spaces, where communication is often shaped by fragmented attention, rapid information circulation, and competition for visibility. Under such conditions, claims with different levels of elaboration or evidentiary support may regardless achieve circulation and engagement through their communicative forms.

Existing works have primarily examined conspiracy regarding their emergence, content, and social functions. However, less attention has been paid to how conspiracy-related

expressions are transformed through platform infrastructures into observable, connected, and accumulative forms. As digital platforms have been more and more embedded in one's daily life, examining these infrastructural conditions becomes important for understanding how conspiracy-related claims develop social significance.

Meanwhile, two theoretical perspectives, carnival and nationalism studies, provide useful analytical angles for examining how collective meanings are contested, reorganized, and maintained. Bakhtin's concept of carnival offers a perspective for understanding moments when established social orders and authorities become temporarily inverted, mocked, or reconfigured (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 4). It highlights how symbolic orders can be temporarily disrupted through collective performance. This perspective is useful for examining how certain conspiracy-related expressions may function as forms of collective symbolic engagement, instead of just isolated statements of belief. On the other hand, nationalism studies provide a framework for understanding how collective identities and symbolic systems are constructed through repetition, communication, and shared interpretations (Anderson, 2006, p. 6; Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983, pp. 1-2; Billig, 1995, p. 93). This could be used to explore our case of moon landing arguments, where scientific authority, Cold War symbolism, and national identity intersect.

Additionally, platform studies provide an understanding of how digital infrastructures shape the circulation and visibility of social expressions through mechanisms such as interaction metrics, algorithmic organization, and ranking systems (Bossetta, 2018). However, relatively less attention has been given to how culturally meaningful claims become collectively visible through these platform-mediated processes. This thesis therefore situates conspiracy-related digital claims at the intersection of cultural meaning-making and platform-mediated visibility, examining how individual expressions are transformed into broader platform-mediated publics.

To examine the intersection between cultural meaning-making and platform-mediated visibility, I will employ Digital Claims as an analytical construct. Instead of proposing a brand new theoretical framework or measuring individual beliefs, this thesis uses Digital Claims as an analytical construct for examining how platform-mediated expressions become observable, organized, and accumulated within digital spaces.

Existing concepts of claims, participation, and engagement have provided valuable perspectives for understanding collective expression. However, applying these concepts to digital environments may require further consideration, as they often emphasize dimensions such as user intention, subjective interpretation, or meaningful participation. And within digital spaces, such assumptions become increasingly difficult to establish, as platform architectures could re-organize diverse human activities into standardized and traceable forms of interaction. Individual expressions are captured through platform infrastructures, which may then acquire visibility through processes of interaction, repetition, and accumulation. So I am arguing that the landscapes within might be understood as outcomes of platform-mediated processes, where certain claims become more observable and socially meaningful, and Digital Claims would focus on how expressions become externally observable through these platform-mediated processes.

These theoretical perspectives serve different but complementary analytical purposes. Carnival theory helps examine how symbolic orders and authorities may be questioned or disrupted through collective expression. Nationalism studies illuminate how collective meanings and symbolic resources are constructed and reorganized. Platform studies explain how digital infrastructures shape the conditions, where claims gain visibility and accumulate. Together, these perspectives provide a framework for examining how conspiracy-related digital claims become articulated, negotiated, and rendered visible within platform environments.

The Apollo moon landing conspiracy provides an analytically-valuable case for examining the intersection between knowledge authority, collective meaning-making, and platform-mediated visibility. The case involves disputes over scientific evidence, Cold War geopolitics, national identity, and contested forms of knowledge production. Therefore, examining the moon landing related conspiracy narratives allows this study to explore how scientific authority and alternative interpretations are negotiated within certain digital platforms.

I will focus on Zhihu, a Chinese online platform that primarily features a question-and-answer (Q&A) format, where sufficient materials regarding the doubts surrounding the moon landing can be found. Through qualitative analysis, this study employs Digital Claims as an analytical construct to examine how individual expressions become observable, connected, and accumulated into broader platform-mediated publics. This thesis asks:

How are digital claims related to the Apollo moon landing conspiracy discourse constructed, connected, and organized through the platform environment of Zhihu?

And three sub-questions would guide my analysis:

1. *How are digital claims related to the Apollo moon landing conspiracy theory expressed through narratives, symbols, and argumentative forms on Zhihu?*
2. *How do interactions surrounding digital claims negotiate competing forms of authority, geopolitical symbolism, and collective meanings on Zhihu?*
3. *How do platform-mediated visibility and interaction mechanisms shape the accumulation of digital claims in broader platform-mediated publics?*

In the following Literature Review part, there will be demonstrations and critical reflections upon the ideas of carnival, nationalism and conspiracy. At the same time, in order to develop Digital Claims, focus will also be put around the encapsulation and datafication of the platforms, as well as the digital architecture. Methodology following,

outlines the research design, data selection, and analytical approach used with justifications. Analysis part applies the Digital Claims framework to examine how claims are expressed, negotiated, and organized through platform-mediated interactions and visibility structures. In the end, a wrap up and a discussion regarding the limitations and future research perspectives will be presented.

Literature Review

Introduction to the Literature Review

This thesis examines how conspiracy narratives become socially meaningful within digital platforms by analyzing how platform-mediated environments enable fragmented user expressions to become connected, visible, and accumulated as forms of collective meaning-making. This thesis understands digital platforms as spaces where individual expressions, interactions, and visibility signals can become interconnected and participate in broader struggles over knowledge, authority, and interpretation. In the following sections, I introduce the theoretical framework that guides this study, which consists of three main parts.

This literature review examines conspiracies and forms of collective cultural practice, where new social meanings emerge and are further developed. Bakhtin's concept of carnival is introduced, and I connect it with later discussions of platformization, extending the analysis from traditional forms of collective expression into contemporary digital platforms. Carnival provides a framework for understanding how the established meanings can be inverted, questioned, and reconfigured through temporary forms of collective participation (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 4). However, we might not be able to argue that carnival simply implies the disappearance of existing hierarchies. Instead, carnival represents a temporary reorganization of social relations (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 12-13), which means authority can become subject to public parody during such specific occasions. The section further argues that digital platforms could transform carnival-like expressions by embedding participation within infrastructures of visibility, circulation, and affective amplification (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018, pp. 11-15). Therefore, I argue that conspiracy claims within digital spaces can be understood as statements seeking verification, and also, performative and participatory expressions shaped by platform-specific conditions of visibility and interaction as well.

At the same time, the literature review would also explore the relationship between

nationalism and conspiracy narratives by examining how collective meanings are constructed, maintained, and contested. While nationalism provides an important framework for understanding how shared identities and symbolic systems become stabilized through historical narratives, institutional practices, and everyday repetition (Anderson, 2006, p. 6; Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983, pp. 1-2; Billig, 1995, p. 93), conspiracy narratives can be understood as alternative meaning-making practices that reorganize existing symbolic resources under conditions of uncertainty and distrust. More recent scholarship highlights their interpretive and explanatory functions, suggesting that they provide alternative frameworks for making sense of complex social realities (Fenster, 2008, pp. 7-9; Birchall, 2006, pp. 17-18). Furthermore, through examining the emergence of “new conspiracism” (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2019, pp. 2-3), I argue that contemporary conspiracy claims could operate as flexible and easily circulated symbolic assertions, other than complete explanatory systems.

The last part of this literature review will be focusing on how digital platforms could transform individual expressions and interactions into visible and accumulative forms of social activity. The existing concepts such as claims, participation, and engagement have provided important frameworks for understanding collective action and mediated communication. However, as they often depend on subjective interpretation, they are facing some challenges when it comes to digital platforms, since actions such as liking, sharing, and commenting can be captured and reorganized through platform infrastructures. Therefore, I will introduce “Digital Claims” as a complementary analytical construct, in order to better understand how digital architectures translate user activities into standardized and traceable outputs. Based on discussions around affordances, digital architecture, and platform governance, I argue that digital platforms just might not be neutral spaces or tools after all. Instead, they could be understood as actors that have certain power to influence the conditions of visibility, circulation, and amplification (Bossetta, 2018). Digital Claims do not necessarily represent expressions of user intentions, they are more like observable interaction units that emerge through

processes of infrastructural filtering.

Carnival

To explain how conspiracy functions as a collective cultural practice in certain contexts, this section will introduce Bakhtin's concept of carnival, then relating it to theories of platformization, in order to extend the discussion into the digital spaces. While nationalism explains how collective meanings become stabilized through repetition and institutional mediation, carnival provides a framework for understanding moments when these meanings are temporarily inverted, contested, and reconfigured through collective expression.

Bakhtin's idea of carnival provides a good approach for understanding moments of temporary suspension and inversion of ordinary social orders (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 4), which also have a sense of collective. Unlike everyday forms of regulated social life, carnival creates a temporary space where ordinary rules and norms are inverted through performance, excess, and collective participation. Within his framework, laughter, parody, and collective display function as a mechanism of degradation and renewal, while the everyday order is renegotiated (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 10).

I would like to emphasize that "order" within a carnival is just temporarily reconfigured, not gone absent. The essence of the carnival lies in the temporary suspension of the hierarchies (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 10), which allows participants to experience a form of equality that is unavailable within their ordinary social lives. This inversion is embedded in shared practices of festivity and public expression. Not just some event, carnival can be understood as a special cultural logic. Its meaning is produced through participation, visibility, and communal performance among those who are involved. This temporary reconfiguration of orders and codes suggests that carnival is defined by the collective practices that create new, not-everyday forms of interaction and interpretation. Such a perspective is useful for examining how contemporary media

environments may reproduce similar dynamics under conditions, where the everyday social codes and institutional arrangements are transformed through digital mediation, just like carnival. Because it shifts analytical attention away from the truth or legitimacy of particular expressions and towards the collective production, negotiation, and circulation of meanings.

Through degradation, mockery, and exposure, the sense of distance between the authority and the ordinary is reduced temporarily. I argue that this process temporarily even up the distance between authority figures and the ordinary, producing a sense of equality. But when this temporary event comes to an end, everything will be back to normal. As a temporally bounded and culturally contained mechanism, carnival, and further carnival-like events just let the tensions embedded within the everyday hierarchical system be expressed and released, symbolically, which means the authority figure is not eliminated for good, they were just being repositioned within a framework of collective visibility and critique at that time.

Furthermore, festive laughter can be understood as an inclusive and collective expression. In a carnival, participants are simultaneously positioned as both the subject and object of mockery (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 12). Festive laughter does not simply function as a way of mocking authority, it can also temporarily suspend hierarchical distance. The social gaps within the crowds are symbolically leveled down through shared participation in ridicule, parody, and exaggeration (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 12-13). However, this appearance of inclusiveness should not be seen as structurally neutral and harmonious after all, because nothing changed fundamentally regarding the pre-existing power structure. So I would like to argue that the contemporary digital platforms and their infrastructural environments can be understood as reconfiguring carnival-like dynamics within infrastructural conditions shaped by spectacle and digital circulation (Debord, 2005, pp. 7-8, pp.10-12). But, unlike temporally bounded forms of collective festivity, participation is no longer organized through discrete events but

is continuously structured through digital systems that regulate visibility, circulation, and attention (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018, pp. 11-15).

The idea of platformization provides an infrastructural perspective that connects symbolic participation with the technical organization of digital spaces. One could argue that contemporary platforms reorganize social participation through their infrastructural design, or, in other words, they have restructured existing forms of participation via infrastructural mechanisms. These mechanisms tend to emphasize quantifiable forms of interaction, including metrics such as likes, shares, comments, and other indicators of popularity and visibility (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018, pp. 52-53). These metrics register user activity and contribute to shaping the conditions under which content becomes visible and circulates across the platform. This contributes to the conditions where “being seen” retains some degree of scarcity. In simpler words, the users are increasingly “encouraged”, in a way, to adapt their expressions to platform-specific logics of visibility and impact.

Therefore, it is also arguable that participation can become increasingly organized around visibility economies, so that the content would also be subjected to being continuously performed, reiterated, and optimized in order to remain present within mediated public space (Debord, 2005, pp. 10-13). So, we could argue that carnival-like circulation can also be understood as a culturally bounded phenomenon but more of an infrastructurally governed process. The performative and affective dimensions of collective expression are also shaped by platform logic, particularly through the organization of visibility and circulation. I have to argue now that Bakhtin’s and Debord’s accounts operate at different analytical levels, instead of being two completely sides towards one another. Bakhtin explains the cultural logic of symbolic inversion and equality, while Debord helps to let us understand how such symbolic processes become organized within mediated systems of visibility.

And under such platformized configuration, participation becomes increasingly characterized by affective intensity and performative visibility, other than just deliberative exchange (Papacharissi, 2015, pp. 19-20). Therefore, networked engagement could be understood as being structured through the circulation of emotionally charged expressions that gain traction not primarily through argumentative coherence but through resonance and repetition (Papacharissi, 2015, pp. 24-29). In such environments, visibility is tied to affective amplification, where expressions that generate strong emotional responses are more likely to be circulated, recombined, and amplified across digital networks (Papacharissi, 2015, pp. 44-45).

This transformation can also be connected to carnival-like landscapes within digital spaces nowadays. Short, open-ended conspiratorial narratives, or new conspiracism, one of the key concepts of this literature review which was mentioned before, may offer alternative interpretations of social reality while, at the same time, function as performative assertions. Their communicative force derives from their immediacy, ambiguity, and repetition (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2019, p. 39).

Some digital claims are encountered less as propositions to assess than as content that users interpret, remix, and redistribute. Yet sarcasm, true belief, parody, and even commenting-bot-generated content is becoming increasingly indistinguishable within the systems, creating a complex environment where the “true intent” becomes challenging to find out (Ferrara, 2017; King, Pan and Roberts, 2017). This complexity suggests that maybe we could find alternative ways that move beyond user-centered explanations.

Nationalism and Conspiracy

Since conspiracy narratives often draw upon existing collective meanings and historical interpretations, examining nationalism would provide a useful framework for understanding how national identities, historical memories, and symbolic

representations of power become resources, through which alternative interpretations of events are constructed.

And we will start with primordialism, which is one of the earliest attempts to understand nationalism. This perspective suggests that national belonging is grounded in seemingly primordial attachments, including kinship, language, territory, etc (Geertz, 1973, pp. 259-260). Yet, as Eller and Coughlan (1993) say, such essentialist explanations lack power when it comes to explaining how identities are continuously reinterpreted and reshaped within the shifting power structures. Based on their words, we could argue that it could be more sensible for scholars to link certain phenomena to broader social contexts.

Constructivist approaches emerged in response to these limitations. They fundamentally reframe nationalism as a socially and historically produced phenomenon, not anymore treating national identity as a natural or pre-existing condition. Constructivist scholars lay more emphasis on the structural and institutional processes that produced and maintained these collective sense of belonging. For example, Gellner (1983) links the rise of nationalism to the structural demands of industrial modernity, suggesting that industrial societies call for cultural standardization, including shared language, educational systems, as well as mobile labour forces. And nationalism would provide the cultural framework to help fulfill these requirements. The term of “semantic labour (Gellner, 1983, p. 40)” reflects the necessity of shared linguistic and educational frameworks, because coordinated participation is well demanded in industrial production.

From this perspective, nationalism is a functional requirement of modern social organization. Moreover, Anderson (2006) dug in more detail and pointed out the symbolic and communicative dimensions of nationalism. His arguments around the concept of “imagined communities (2006, p. 6)” demonstrates how communication

systems could let individuals, who are technically strangers, to imagine themselves as part of a shared national collectivity.

We could see that, within some of the earliest theorization, nationalism was often implicitly grounded in essentialist assumptions that treated national belonging as a quasi-natural extension of shared culture, language, or historical continuity. However, constructivist interventions fundamentally reoriented this perspective by conceptualizing the nation as a historically produced and institutionally sustained form of collective representation. Moreover, Hobsbawm and Ranger's notion of "invented traditions (1983, pp. 1-2)" is worth mentioning: what some regard as ancient cultural practices are often recent constructions that acquire legitimacy through repetition and ritualization. Some symbols and rituals are actually assembled and stabilized through institutional processes that link present political authority to selectively curated historical narratives (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983, pp. 15-17). It explains how certain symbolic practices gain legitimacy through repetition, besides historical authenticity.

Billig's concept of "banal nationalism" provides a solid explanation of how national categories and meanings are sustained through the continuous circulation of low-intensity symbolic references within everyday life (1995, p. 93). Instead of operating as an explicitly articulated ideology, nationalism functions as a persistent background condition that subtly reproduces national categories as taken-for-granted elements of everyday perception. So that we could argue that the flags, slogans, institutional language, and media framing do not just represent the nation, they actively reproduce it as an assumed and taken-for-granted cognitive environment.

Therefore, we could argue that the constructivist approaches suggest that nationalism should be seen as something infrastructural, through which social realities are interpreted, organized, and communicated. This perspective could also be used within the digital environment, where observable expressions do not necessarily directly

reflect users' true beliefs or identities, yet maybe, more of an organic role in interpreting and shaping reality.

Importantly, this does not suggest that conspiracy narratives simply reproduce nationalist meanings. It is actually more like they selectively appropriate and reorganize existing symbolic resources in order to construct alternative interpretations of social reality. Within such a communicative environment, conspiratorial narratives may emerge as alternative sense-making strategies. Especially when structured channels for articulation are constrained or when dominant frames are perceived as insufficiently explanatory. Such narratives are often articulated within certain cognitive boundaries, drawing on the same symbolic resources while reorganizing them into simplified, sometimes, even more dramatic causal structures.

Earlier approaches to conspiracy theories often included pathologizing perspectives, which interpreted belief in such narratives through frameworks of irrational cognition or psychological dysfunction. From this standpoint, conspiracy believers were sometimes portrayed as lacking epistemic competence, relying instead on paranoid interpretations to explain personal or social misfortunes (Douglas, Sutton & Cichocka, 2017). Such accounts implicitly positioned conspiracy thinking as a deviation from normative rationality, reinforcing a hierarchical distinction between expert knowledge and lay interpretation.

However, this pathologizing approach has been increasingly challenged. Scholars such as Fenster (2008) and Birchall (2006) argue that treating conspiracy beliefs as irrational behavior overlooks the contextual and interpretive conditions where these narratives emerge (Fenster, 2008, pp. 7-9). Alongside viewing them as "reflecting cognitive deficiency", conspiracy theories can be therefore seen as attempts to construct coherence within limited knowledge or under uncertain environments, situations, etc (Birchall, 2006, pp. 17-18). In other words, they function as sense-making practices

that organize often limited, fragmented information into comprehensible explanatory frameworks.

Building on this functional perspective, Van Prooijen (2018) highlights how conspiracy thinking can emerge from attempts to identify patterns and causal explanations under conditions of uncertainty (pp. 43-44). So, conspiracy narratives may offer alternative explanations that make complex and ambiguous events appear more understandable. So, we may argue that conspiracy theories can provide a sense of cognitive order by transforming uncertainty into seemingly coherent accounts.

More recent developments, particularly the notion of “New Conspiracism” (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2019, pp. 2-3), indicate a further transformation in the form of conspiracy discourse. Other than relying on structured argumentation or evidentiary accumulation, contemporary conspiracy narratives increasingly operate as assertive and flexible claims that do not require systematic justification. This shift marks a movement from explanatory frameworks towards rapidly circulating symbolic assertions, laying the groundwork for their integration into digital communicative environments.

The transformation of conspiracy theories in digital spaces is closely linked to changes in their forms. As noted in the literature on New Conspiracism, contemporary conspiracy discourse increasingly abandons the requirement of systematic explanation in favour of flexible, assertive, and easily transmissible claims (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2019, p. 38). These narratives often function less as coherent theories than as symbolic prompts that invite interpretation. Such claims provide fragments of meaning that users can interpret, connect, and circulate according to existing cultural narratives and social concerns.

A key feature of this transformation is the emergence of ambiguity-driven circulation logics. Phrases such as “a lot of people are saying” or “just asking questions”

demonstrate a certain form of positioning that avoids direct authorship while maximizing communicative reach (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2019, p. 39). Such rhetorical strategies reduce the burden of justification, and to some level, helped within its diffusion across different groups of audiences. In this context, conspiracy narratives acquire a meme-like structure characterized by relatively lower cognitive friction and high replicability.

Therefore, nationalism and conspiracy narratives might not be understood as “identical” forms of meaning-making. While nationalism tends to stabilize interpretive frameworks through institutional and ritualized repetition, conspiracy narratives often emerge in moments where explanatory coherence is perceived to be insufficient or doubted, therefore negotiating, challenging, or reconstructing explanations of social reality. This ongoing tension between stabilizing and questioning truth creates a critical space where meaning is both staged and rewritten.

Nevertheless, the digital environment does not “require” conspiracy to be presented as complete theories or to have sufficient evidence. I would argue that platform systems do not evaluate claims according to their epistemic validity a lot. Instead, fragmented skepticism, rhetorical questions, and ambiguous assertions can spread just as much, while still appealing to conspiracy theory reasoning. It is based on this very phenomenon that we need to dig into the platforms themselves, if we are willing to find out some new knowledge. Especially in the era when they play quite an important role in one’s daily life.

Digital Claims

“It’s just not possible to know with any degree of certainty what an anonymous stranger on the internet means when, for example, they start screaming about immigrants in the comment thread of an article about rainbow tie-dye cake.”

(Phillips and Milner, 2017, p.79)

The boundaries of the concepts, “claims”, “participation,” and “engagement” are becoming more and more complex. According to Tilly and Tarrow, a claim refers to a subject reaching visibly towards at least one object, where the realization of this action inevitably affects the well-being or interests of that object (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015, pp. 7-9). So, in classical formulations, claims are closely associated with intentional and publicly articulated acts, such as protest, petitioning, or electoral participation.

As Marichal (2013) argues in his discussion regarding “micro-activism,” some seemingly minor online actions can acquire political significance at the end of the day, since they contribute to processes of mobilization and collective visibility. In that case, liking, sharing, or hashtag use complicate the conventional distinction between “claims” and “not-claims”, as they do not fit neatly into traditional repertoires of contentious action. Following this idea, such practices could be conceptualized as “micro-claims” within digitally mediated environments.

This conceptual expansion has prompted a shift in the literature towards the related notions of participation and engagement. Participation, particularly in the tradition of Arnstein’s (1969) “ladder of participation” and Jenkins’ “participatory culture” (2006, pp. 3-4), is commonly framed in terms of power redistribution and cultural democratization. Yet, as Carpentier (2011) notes, the concept of participation is often expanded too broadly, causing distinctions between access, interaction, and participation to become blurred. In this context, access refers to the ability to enter and use media environments, while interaction refers to engagement with existing media content or communication processes. Although both create conditions for participatory practices, they do not necessarily involve the redistribution of power or influence over decision-making processes, which remains central to participation (pp. 68-69).

In response to this ambiguity, engagement has been introduced as an intermediate

analytical category and is often defined as a pre-condition for participation (Dahlgren, 2013, p. 86). The term “engagement” is then used to capture forms of subjective attention, presence, or involvement, though these forms do not necessarily constitute political action. However, this conceptual refinement does not fully resolve the problem of boundary blurring.

Despite their theoretical contributions, these frameworks often emphasize dimensions related to user intention, perception, or subjective experience. In reality, such assumptions are often tricky to verify. Researchers studying engagement and participation frequently employ methods such as questionnaires and in-depth interviews, which provide valuable insights into users’ experiences and interpretations. However, such approaches may also be subject to limitations including post-hoc rationalization, recall bias, and social desirability effects (Tourangeau, Rips and Rasinski, 2000, pp. 226, 254). Therefore, these approaches can capture how users understand and describe their own actions, while providing less direct access to the broader socio-technical conditions that allow digital expressions to become visible, circulated, and accumulated.

This issue becomes more complicated when physical presence is used to distinguish engagement and participation. Some scholars argue that forms of physical gathering can help set apart meaningful participation from more superficial forms of interaction (Juris, 2012, pp. 266, cited in Dahlgren, 2013, p. 87). However, this distinction becomes, again, a little complex to tell in terms of digitally mediated environments, where communicative expression is no longer dependent on physical co-location.

Meanwhile, scholars have explored alternative approaches for understanding digital practices as social media platforms such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) have become increasingly influential. One of the approaches is through the concept of affordance. Originating in Gibson’s ecological psychology, affordance refers to what

the environment offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes (Gibson, 1979, pp. 127). At the same time, an affordance possesses a certain unity relative to the posture and behavior of the animal in question (Gibson, 1979, pp. 127-128). For instance, a three-meter-tall, lush oak tree “affords” climbing, shade, etc. It should be emphasized that affordance, ultimately, is a relationship between the properties of an object and the capabilities of the agent, this relationship, not the properties alone, determines how the object can actually be used (Norman, 2013, pp. 9-10).

In digital interface environments, affordance theory has been used to explain how platform structures user behavior. A “Like” button on a platform exists as a physical entity whose affordance is manifested in the clickability of that specific area. However, the reason a user understands that this button carries the functional meaning of expressing agreement depends on the signifiers provided by the interface, such as a heart icon or a thumb-up png (Norman, 2013, pp. 12-13).

However, as platform ecosystems become increasingly complex, affordance-based approaches require further consideration regarding how platform structures influence digital practices. Firstly, the approaches primarily focus on the relationship between users and available possibilities for action, while providing less direct attention to how platforms transform these actions into observable and accumulative forms. Secondly, focusing on affordances may risk encouraging analyses that treat platforms as neutral, functional objects or tools, which underemphasizes the infrastructural and algorithmic processes that are seen to actively structure visibility, interaction, and expression (Bossetta, 2018).

Complementing affordance perspectives, the concept of digital architecture draws attention to the structural conditions through which platforms organize digital practices. While affordance focusing more on user perception or individual-level interpretation, digital architecture emphasizes the structural conditions within platforms themselves,

including interface design, algorithmic filtering, and data capture mechanisms. By examining algorithmic processes, interface functionalities, and governance mechanisms, we can analyze how platforms organize conditions of visibility and interaction. From this perspective, platforms may not function as neutral tools, for the technical protocols can influence how users' behavior becomes organized in virtual spaces in a virtual space (Bossetta, 2018)” This perspective highlights how technical structures influence the conditions under which social interaction becomes possible, visible, and organized.

I would like to introduce an idea called “Digital Claims” as a potential working analytical construct. It is not my intention to replace existing theories of claims, participation, or engagement, instead, I would like to provide a complementary analytical lens for examining how digital spaces organize heterogeneous forms of activity into observable and traceable outputs. Digital Claims can be understood as platform-mediated forms of user activity that become observable through processes of datafication, categorization, and infrastructural organization. It needs to be pointed out that the phrase of this term does not really inherit Tilly and Tarrow’s assumption that claims necessarily involve intentional demands towards certain objects (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015, pp. 7-9).

Such outputs may include platform-visible expressions and interaction indicators, such as comments, likes, replies, or other forms of engagement data, when they become available as observable components of platform environments. It is important that I have to point out that this definition does not presuppose intentionality as a necessary condition. Instead, it emphasizes the fact that digital spaces systematically render a wide range of user behaviors, whether intentional, incidental, or automated, into comparable and accumulable data traces. However, not every data trace constitutes a Digital Claim. Digital Claims should not be understood as direct expressions of subjective intention or meaning, but more as analytically observable units of meaning-

making that become externalized through platform infrastructures. Unit refers to an analytically defined object of study. It denotes a bounded form of platform-mediated output that can be identified, examined, and compared in relation to how meanings, interactions, or visibility are produced within digital spaces. Also, not all digital claims become equally available for empirical observation. The present study focuses on those claims that are externalized through the platform interface, where they become observable components of the platform's digital landscape.

Building upon these discussions, this thesis employs Digital Claims as an analytical approach for examining how platform-mediated outputs become observable objects within digital platforms. Digital Claims do not refer to direct expressions of individual intention, but to observable forms through which meanings, associations, and visibility become externalized within platform infrastructures.

Importantly, the notion of Digital Claims should be distinguished from the broader concepts of “digital traces” or “digital footprints”, which are widely used in digital sociology. Digital traces generally refer to various forms of data residues generated through online activities, including both active user behaviors and passive forms of data collection, and are often treated as empirical materials for analyzing digital practices (Golder and Macy, 2014). In contrast, Digital Claims do not represent an undifferentiated category of digital data. Instead, they refer specifically to platform-mediated outputs that are structured, observable, and analytically identifiable within digital spaces.

However, the distinction between digital traces and Digital Claims also raises a challenge. “Digital traces” are often implied as observable residues of online activity that can serve as proxies for user behavior and social patterns (Lazer et al., 2009; González-Bailón, 2013). The two concepts are analytically distinguished in this study. While many Digital Claims can appear as digital traces, not all digital traces become

Digital Claims. Digital traces provide large-scale observable data, their interpretation as evidence of social patterns often relies on assumptions about underlying user intention, perception, or motivation. The distinction between conceptual categorization and epistemological inference becomes important for understanding the limitations of physical-trace-based approaches. This limitation becomes even more visible when digital traces are used as indirect proxies for subjective states such as attention, engagement, or preference. Although computational social science has demonstrated the analytical value of large-scale behavioral data (Lazer et al., 2009), such interpretations necessarily involve a gap between the observable outputs and inobservable cognitive processes, aka, a black box.

To further conceptualize this relationship, the concept of Digital Claims draws on the logic of encapsulation in engineering. The front-end interface should be understood as a filtering structure that translates complex and heterogeneous forms of human activity into simplified and standardized interaction units (Galloway, 2006, pp. 64-66). Through this process of encapsulation, platform architectures enable diverse forms of user activity, regardless of their underlying motivations or meanings, to appear as recognizable signals such as likes, shares, comments, or reports.

In short, Digital Claims can be understood as encapsulated forms of platform-mediated meaning-making. While encapsulation explains how platforms transform user activities into recognizable outputs, the “claim” dimension refers to the fact that these outputs participate in the construction, negotiation, or indication of meanings within digital spaces.

The significance of Digital Claims lies in shifting analytical attention from reconstructing hidden intentions towards examining how digital architectures capture, classify, and aggregate observable activities. Individual actions may carry limited interpretive significance in isolation, however, through processes of accumulation,

repetition, and algorithmic weighting, these standardized signals contribute to the formation of broader patterns of visibility and social meaning within platform-mediated publics (Bucher, 2018, pp. 2-3).

It needs to be pointed out that, whether these actions are performed sincerely, ironically, or incidentally is not directly observable whatsoever within the data structure. What remains to be seen is just the standardized output produced through the interface. Accordingly, Digital Claims can be conceptualized as encapsulated platform-mediated outputs that emerge through processes of infrastructural structuring and organization. This does not imply that user intention becomes irrelevant, it is more suggesting that intentions, meanings, and motivations are not directly available through platform data, before becoming socially observable, they are mediated through the technical and organizational structures of platforms. Digital Claims, therefore, provide an analytical approach for examining how digital architectures organize user activities into visible forms of interaction within platform environments.

Summary of the literature review

Through the three interconnected parts of this literature review, I argued that conspiracy narratives could also be approached as culturally and technologically mediated practices of meaning-making. Also, the discussion of carnival laid an emphasis on how conspiracy may operate as collective cultural expressions, among, the established meanings and authorities are temporarily inverted, and reconfigured. Bakhtin's concept of carnival demonstrates that such moments of inversion do not necessarily eliminate existing hierarchies, but create a temporary condition where authority could be subjected to public parody and mockery instead (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 12-13). Extending this into digital spaces, platformization further transforms these forms of expression by organizing participation through infrastructures of visibility, circulation, and affective amplification. We could view it as a mediated form of collective performance, and then proceed with our analysis based on that.

The literature on nationalism further contributes to this understanding by explaining how collective meanings are constructed, stabilized, and reproduced through symbolic systems, institutional practices, and everyday communication (Anderson, 2006, p. 6; Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983, pp. 1-2; Billig, 1995, p. 93). However, conspiracy would selectively appropriate and reorganize available symbolic resources, in order to construct alternative interpretations of social reality. The studies regarding new conspiracism demonstrate how conspiracy could also operate as flexible and easily transmissible assertions (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2019, pp. 2-3).

Then, the researches on participation, engagement, and affordance are argued to have limitations when it comes to understanding interactions within digital spaces. For they often rely on subjective assumptions, upon also-subjective interpretations. Digital spaces complicate this discussion because platform architectures enable diverse user activities to become translated into standardized forms of observable interaction. In response, I introduced Digital Claims as a complementary analytical construct for examining how digital architectures organize and externalize heterogeneous user activities into observable outputs.

Methodology

Research Design and Methodological Approach

This study adopts a qualitative approach to examine how digital claims are constructed, circulated, and accumulated into localized forms of platform-mediated publics. Questions concerning identity construction, group mechanisms, or statistical inference fall outside the scope of this study. I have demonstrated one of its characteristics of encapsulation based on Galloway's idea, arguing that digital claims function as platform-mediated units generated when human interactions are captured, encoded, and organized by digital infrastructures (Galloway, 2006, pp. 64-66). However, the focus of this study is not the technical processes of encapsulation either. It would suggest that the potential usage of digital claims lies in analyzing the processes of meaning production. So a qualitative approach is adopted as it allows for an in-depth exploration of socially contextualized meaning-making practices (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018, pp. 10-12), which, in this study, are examined within the digital environment.

Quantitative designs work decently on account of establishing statistical associations across large sample sizes (Bryman, 2016, p. 38). However, their emphasis on measurable relationships may provide less direct access to the contextual and interpretive processes examined in this study. As Bryman (2016) notes, quantitative snapshots often suffer from ambiguity about the direction of causal influence and struggle to demonstrate how social actions unfold over time (p. 39). You could see a connection, yet, it is not necessarily a chain. Since this study examines how digital claims are constructed, negotiated, and accumulated into visible platform-mediated publics, a context-based and interpretive approach is more appropriate. Moreover, as the study focuses on questions of meaning, symbolism, and social interpretation, an interpretive approach allows greater attention to the social construction of evidence (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018, pp. 15-16), which may not be fully captured through quantitative representations alone.

This study applies three complementary analytical approaches, qualitative discourse analysis (QDA), qualitative textual analysis (QTA), and digital trace analysis. These approaches center around digital claims, a concept that I have demonstrated in the literature review section, which will function as an analytical bridge connecting interactions with broader processes of meaning production and visibility formation.

The digital claims are different from digital traces. The incorporation of digital trace analysis does not imply an equivalence between the two, it is that the method is named that way, and it is considered more suitable than several other approaches on account of this study. Digital trace analysis serves to investigate platform-mediated interactions, wherein traces are treated as analytically significant material, not direct representations of individual intentions. As Lindberg (2023) argues, digital traces require conceptual frameworks to yield theoretical value, not just as raw empirical data.

Within this framework, qualitative discourse analysis provides the overarching interpretive direction for examining how meaning, knowledge claims, and forms of legitimacy are constructed within specific contexts. Discourse analysis functions as an investigative approach to social construction, emphasizing the interconnection between texts and how they are embedded within broader contexts. As Phillips and Hardy (2002, pp. 4-5) argue, it is the very link between discourse and social reality that gives discourse analysis its explanatory power. This would help me to have more potential to uncover nuanced meanings and generate new knowledge.

This study is also supplemented by qualitative text analysis (QTA), which provides a systematic framework for examining how meanings are articulated within specific communicative contexts (Kuckartz, 2014, pp. 32-34). QTA functions as an interpretive approach where the understanding, categorization, and coding of textual data are linked to human interpretation and understanding (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 34). Together, these methodologies address distinct, yet interconnected dimensions of digital claims: how

meaning is constructed, how it is presented, and how it is rendered visible through platform processes. In the following sections, I will further introduce, with detail, regarding case selection, data collection, and analysis procedure as well as the justification of the criteria within. In the end, I will talk about the reflexivity issues, and also some limitations.

Case Selection and Research Context

Since the study aims to examine how Digital Claims are constructed, circulated, and accumulated within platform environments, cases are selected based on their capacity to reveal these processes. A suitable case ought to provide observable platform-mediated expressions, diverse forms of interaction, and sufficient circulation or visibility dynamics which allow different dimensions of Digital Claims to be examined.

The United States' crewed lunar exploration program, commonly known as the Apollo missions (NASA, n.d.), remains a prominent historical and technological achievement. Its documentation encompasses scientific evidence, technical records, and institutional accounts. This makes debates over its authenticity a useful case for examining how authoritative knowledge is contested within digital spaces.

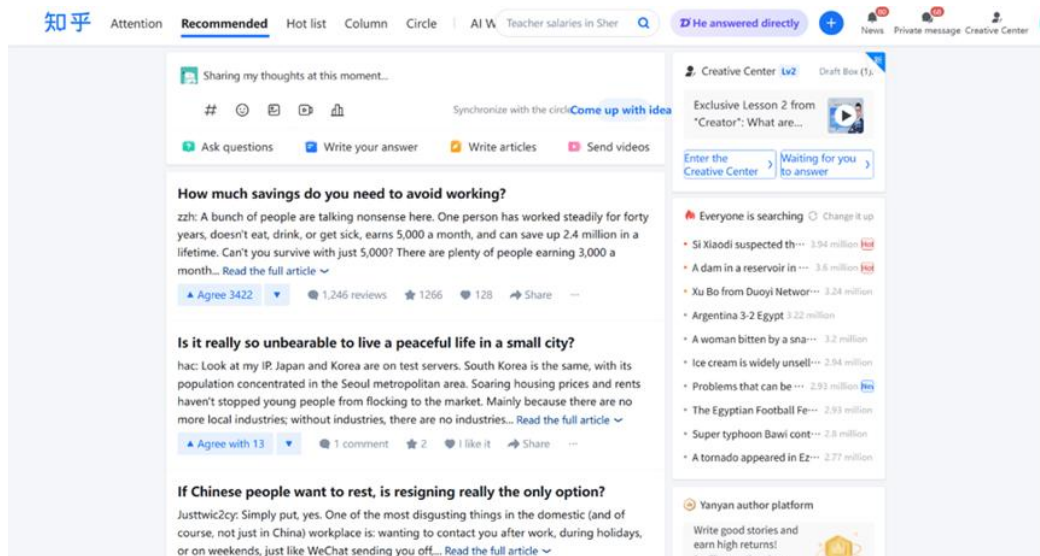
The Apollo moon landing conspiracy demonstrates how knowledge claims can live through time, and continuously undergo re-circulation and re-production alongside the evolution of media technology. Discussions regarding the Apollo missions extend far beyond scientific feasibility or technical viability. Yet, they are deeply entangled with institutional trust or geopolitical competition. This complexity allows multiple competing knowledge claims to intertwine and negotiate their presence. Therefore, this case holds certain analytical value for observing how digital claims are constructed, disseminated, and negotiated within platform environments.

Zhihu is one of China's largest knowledge sharing platforms, with over 80 million monthly active users (Zhihu Inc., 2025). Its broad user base provides access to discussions that extend beyond narrowly specialized communities. This platform encourages users to produce relatively extended answers, with enough space to justify their arguments, and engage with competing viewpoints through a question-and-answer format. These characteristics make the construction and negotiation of knowledge claims more visible, as users are expected to express opinions and to provide supporting evidence, challenge alternative interpretations, and respond to other participants at the same time. In addition, the voting, recommendation and ranking mechanisms contribute to shaping the visibility of the contents, providing observable indicators of how Digital Claims acquire different levels of visibility within the platform environment (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018, pp. 9-10).

Along with the moon landing, Zhihu provides an analytically valuable setting for examining how digital claims are articulated, circulated, contested and rendered visible within a contemporary platform environment.

Data Collection and Sampling Strategy

On Zhihu, these outputs are organized through a question-and-answer architecture, with questions, answers, comments, and interaction signals collectively forming the observable environment for Digital Claims to emerge. The Q&A format is analytically relevant because it does not simply provide a space for users to express opinions, it structures the conditions under which particular interpretations are articulated, evaluated, and made visible. Question framing establishes a discursive context, while answers and comments provide explicit forms of meaning-making. Meanwhile, votes, likes, shares, and saves function as visibility-related signals that increase the attention and circulation of certain outputs. To illustrate how these elements are presented within the platform interface, an example of a Zhihu page is provided below.



A Zhihu page (screenshot, translated by Edge).

As we can see, there are several blocks including questions, answers, comment threads, and interaction indicators such as upvotes, shares, saves, and recommendation rankings. Example answers under questions like “How much savings do you need to avoid working,” marked as “articles” are presented in a truncated format with a signifier beside (Norman, 2013, pp. 10-11). These elements constitute the publicly observable traces through which digital claims become available for analysis. However, not any kind of digital claim is available for frontend observation. Exiting and viewing times, etc, would therefore be excluded from the materials.

Because digital claims are not isolated textual statements but platform-mediated formations. Grounded in this understanding, this study integrates disparate forms of platform data into a cohesive analytical structure, aiming to capture the mechanics involved in the formation of digital claims. Question framing establishes the interpretive context within which other Digital Claims are articulated. The framing of a question influences the interpretive environment where these claims are articulated. The answers demonstrate how users construct and elaborate upon these claims through their own narratives, reasoning patterns and evidence. The comment sections would further reveal how these claims are contested, validated, refined, or challenged among

users, presenting the process of negotiation. Lastly, platform engagement metrics, such as upvotes, saves, shares, etc, illustrate how claims achieve varying degrees of visibility through algorithmic and platform mechanisms.

At the same time, platform visibility would better be understood as an analytical property of digital claim. A high level of interaction number could be better understood, that, instead of indicating that certain contents “make more sense”, it was more like suggesting that the claim has secured a higher degree of observability and communicative opportunity within the platform.

This study samples Zhihu Q&A threads that contain relatively rich interaction structures. From a pool of moon-landing-related questions, discussions were selected based on their capacity to provide diverse forms of meaning-making, including multiple competing answer narratives, sustained comment exchanges, and observable engagement patterns. Such diversity is analytically important because Digital Claims are examined as platform-mediated formations through which interpretations are articulated, negotiated, and circulated.

Data was collected through a structured manual process on Zhihu. Firstly, I identified questions and answer threads related to the Apollo moon landing and its authenticity using relevant search terms and by examining related question pages. Potential threads were then reviewed according to their relevance to the research topic and the availability of publicly observable answers, comments, and interaction indicators. The selected answers and relevant comment threads as well as the interaction indicators were then recorded into the corpus. Issues regarding the potential biases within this process will be discussed in the reflexivity section at the end of this chapter.

The final sample includes 50 answers across 5 selected questions, along with selected comment threads and associated engagement indicators. The sample size was

determined according to the analytical requirements of qualitative inquiry. Threads were selected through purposive sampling based on their relevance to the research topic, the presence of diverse claim constructions, and the availability of observable interaction patterns. I focused on comment threads as interactional structures where Digital Claims can be further articulated, negotiated, or contested. Comment materials were therefore selected based on their capacity to reveal meaningful patterns of interaction, including both independent comments and reply chains with visible exchanges between users. This approach allows the analysis to capture how claims develop through platform-mediated interactions without assuming that a larger volume of comments necessarily provides greater analytical value.

The final corpus was considered analytically sufficient for the purposes of this study, as it provided variation in claim construction, narrative strategies, and interaction patterns while remaining manageable for qualitative analysis. This criterion of analytical sufficiency guided the scope of the corpus without implying statistical representativeness or formal data saturation. Metadata associated with these materials, including timestamps, available location information, and likes, were retained as contextual indicators of platform-mediated visibility and circulation.

Analytical Procedure

This section explains how the collected materials were analyzed to address the research questions. The analytical procedure followed an iterative workflow in which the collected materials were organized into an analytical corpus, coded (in NVivo), interpreted, and subsequently examined in relation to broader patterns of digital landscape formation. The coding process focused on identifying how Digital Claims were articulated through textual expressions, negotiated through user interactions, and shaped through platform-mediated visibility mechanisms. Instead of treating individual answers, comments, or engagement signals as isolated data points, the analysis examined how different forms of platform outputs became connected through processes

of meaning-making, interaction, and circulation.

Qualitative Text Analysis, Qualitative Discourse Analysis, and Digital Trace Analysis were employed as complementary analytical perspectives operating at different analytical levels. Qualitative Text Analysis was used to examine how users constructed interpretations and narratives through observable textual outputs. Qualitative Discourse Analysis further explored how these claims were embedded within broader discursive contexts, including competing understandings of knowledge, authority, and symbolic meanings. Digital Trace Analysis examined interaction indicators and platform-related signals to investigate how visibility and circulation were organized within the platform environment. All these approaches together enabled the study to move from individual Digital Claims towards the broader formation of platform-mediated publics.

Collected materials were first organized into a corpus before formal coding was employed upon. The corpus consisted of question prompts, answer narratives, comment threads, reply chains, along with publicly observable interaction indicators such as upvotes, saves, shares, and recommendation rankings, etc. They were preserved as interconnected components of the same discussion thread, so that the contextual relationships between claim production, response, negotiation, and visibility would be, therefore, better observed.

Once the corpus was established, the next step was to determine the analytical unit. Individual textual statements were not treated as isolated units of analysis, as their significance emerged through their active articulation, negotiation, and circulation within the discussion threads. Decisions regarding the conceptualization of these units are important to qualitative methodology, as Schreier (2012, pp. 127-129) notes, clearly defining the unit of coding helps establish a consistent basis for identifying and comparing relevant segments of qualitative material. Digital Claims were employed as the primary analytical unit of this study. The Zhihu thread, including the question,

answers, comments, and associated interaction signals, served as the contextual unit within which individual Digital Claims and their relationships were examined. This distinction allowed the analysis to examine Digital Claims both as observable expressions and as elements connected through platform-mediated interactions.

After the analytical corpus and analytical units had been established, a coding framework was developed to guide the systematic analysis of Digital Claims and their associated interactions. The framework was iteratively refined through repeated engagement with the corpus, allowing recurring patterns to emerge while remaining informed by the research questions and the conceptual framework established earlier. The coding framework therefore functioned as a bridge between the Digital Claims framework and the empirical material, ensuring that subsequent coding remained both theoretically informed and empirically grounded.

Qualitative Text Analysis (QTA) is then applied to identify repeating forms of the articulated digital claims within the corpus. This approach attempted to answer the question: What kind of patterns appeared in the corpus? So, stuff like repeated argumentative structures, evidential references, and recurring formulations through which digital claims were articulated (Kuckartz, 2014, pp. 31-35), would be emphasized. During this process, these recurring claim forms were identified and compared without yet interpreting their broader discursive or theoretical significance. This descriptive mapping provided the empirical basis for the subsequent discourse-oriented interpretation of how these claims functioned within platform interaction.

Qualitative Discourse Analysis (QDA) was also employed to examine how these claims functioned within broader discursive processes. Attempting to approach the question: “How are these claims made persuasive, legitimate, and socially meaningful through discourse?” In this period, we ought to lay more emphasis on the practices through which authority was established, legitimacy negotiated, and positions constructed, etc.

We would be focusing on how particular forms of reasoning, evidential references, and rhetorical strategies helped claims to gain credibility (Gee, 2014, pp. 129-134). These were all interpreted at the level of discourse, providing the analytical foundation for the subsequent integration of broader theoretical concepts.

Building upon the discursive patterns identified through QDA, the final stage of interpretation related recurring empirical observations to the theoretical framework developed earlier. At this stage, theoretical concepts were employed to explain why particular discursive patterns emerged across the corpus. Concepts like carnival, nationalism provided complementary interpretive perspectives for understanding the broader significance of these recurring patterns (Flick, 2009, pp. 444-446). Therefore generated a theoretically informed interpretation grounded in empirical observation while remaining analytically distinct from the subsequent examination of how these patterns accumulated into broader platform-mediated publics.

Digital Trace Analysis was employed to examine how digital claims were negotiated, accumulated, and differentially rendered visible within the platform environment (Rogers, 2013, pp. 4-5). I have to again clarify that I would not treat digital traces as the primary object of analysis after all. Yet platform-generated traces could be understood as observable indicators, making the movement, interaction, and relative visibility of digital claims be examined. Which would also have a positive impact, upon the implementation of the analysis to move from individual claim trajectories towards broader clusters of interaction and recurring empirical patterns, providing the basis for the subsequent interpretation of digital landscape formation.

The three approaches addressed different dimensions of digital claims. Qualitative Text Analysis identified recurring claim forms, Qualitative Discourse Analysis examined their meaning-making processes, and Digital Trace Analysis considered how platform interactions and visibility shaped their circulation. They provided a way to analyse

digital claims as connected platform-mediated processes.

Throughout the analysis, Qualitative Text Analysis, Qualitative Discourse Analysis, and Digital Trace Analysis addressed complementary analytical levels while remaining focused on the same object of analysis, digital claims. This combined procedure enabled the study to move systematically from observable empirical materials to theoretically informed interpretations without separating textual analysis from platform-mediated interaction.

Ethical Considerations & Reflexivity

To minimize potential risks of violating privacy, user names and profile pictures were anonymized in all screenshots used in the thesis. Individual materials are identified using neutral labels such as “Answer No. ***, under question: ***” These measures were adopted to reduce unnecessary exposure of users while retaining the contextual information necessary for analysing the Digital Claims examined in this study.

Digital Claims should be understood to function as an analytical construct developed through theoretical engagement with existing discussions of platform mediation, digital architecture, and digital traces. It is closer to a “sensitizing concept” (Blumer, 1954), which provides an analytical orientation. The identification of digital claims reflects the researcher’s theoretical decisions regarding what constitutes analytically meaningful interaction within platform environments. However, the concept is developed through engagement with existing discussions of digital architecture, platform mediation, and digital traces. Digital Claims are therefore proposed as a sensitizing concept that helps the examination of how platform-mediated interactions become observable, connected, and meaningful.

I also acknowledge the asymmetrical power relation between the researcher and the materials. Just as Berger (2015) argued, researchers’ prior assumptions and positions

may influence the ways how social phenomena get interpreted. This consideration is particularly relevant in studies of conspiracy-related discourse, where research can easily form oversimplified assumptions that position the creators of the material as irrational or uninformed. Therefore, the analytical focus of this study examines the social and discursive processes through which such claims acquire meaning and visibility. This reflexive orientation aims to avoid reducing the studied actors to pre-determined categories and instead maintain analytical openness towards the contexts.

Analysis

Operationalizing Digital Claims

Digital Claims are operationalized through three boundary conditions. Firstly, Digital Claims are identified through processes of platform-mediated transformation. This means that they need to be translated into forms that are observable and exchangeable within digital spaces (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018, pp.33-37). For instance, if a user angrily smashes the keyboard after reading something on Zhihu or just about any other digital platform, this physical act itself would not be considered a Digital Claim, because it did not enter the platform-mediated environment. Unless the action were recorded and made available somehow as an observable, analytically interpretable platform output.

Secondly, Digital Claims should possess analytical observability. Digital platforms generate extensive traces, objects, like user logs, system records, and other technically produced data (Rogers, 2013, p.1). A digital trace becomes a Digital Claim when it is observable, accessible, and analytically relevant to examining how meanings, interactions, or visibility become expressed and organized within digital spaces. Though platforms may technically record forms of behavioral data such as dwell time, reading patterns, or exit behaviors, these traces become relevant as Digital Claims only when they are available for analysis and can provide insight into how meanings, interactions, or visibility are produced within digital spaces.

Lastly, Digital Claims are examined in relation to processes of circulation and accumulation. They may become connected with other digital outputs through observable interaction and visibility mechanisms, such as comments, likes, rankings, and recommendations. This boundary identifies their capacity to enter platform-mediated processes, through which outputs can become connected, retained, and potentially accumulated. A Zhihu user described seeing comments that had been “eaten by the system”, as quote:

“Don’t be fooled by the seemingly harmonious comment section; I’ve seen dozens of comments eaten by the system in the backend...”

(Answer No. 302, under question: “Why is it so difficult to land on the moon now, even though it was successful half a century ago?”, Google translation)

The example is analytically important, it suggests that the distinction between what may exist within platform systems and what becomes available to users through the interface needs to be taken into consideration. Circulation and accumulation, therefore, depend on how the platform makes claims observable and connects them to other interactions, instead of being properties of the expression itself.

These conditions provide the operational basis for identifying Digital Claims in the corpus. In the empirical material, two complementary dimensions are particularly relevant. Articulated Digital Claims refer to observable platformed expressions, through which meanings are constructed, such as answers, posts, and substantive comments. Associative Digital Claims, refer to interaction signals through which connections around such expressions become observable, including likes, shares, saves, and related engagement indicators.

This distinction serves an analytical purpose by separating the articulation of meaning from the observable accumulation of interaction around such articulations. It is used as an analytical distinction instead of a comprehensive classification system, allowing me to examine different forms of platform-mediated claims, while recognizing that these categories may require further refinement in future research.

Negotiation of Authenticity

The controversy over the authenticity of the moon landing involves a reconfiguration of the criteria, where credibility is re-evaluated. Articulated Digital Claims bring different forms of knowledge resources into the certain space of negotiation, where

scientific reasoning, engineering common sense, source criticism, etc., all become the resources for assessing the credibility of explanations (Wynne, 1992). Therefore, the controversy is not just about determining which argument or evidence is “correct,” it is also about negotiating what types of evidence, reasoning processes, and verification standards can support a credible explanation. For example, Answer 508 compares Chinese and American lunar soil research and uses scientific-style reasoning tone to establish consistency across different cases:

“China retrieved 1.7 kg of lunar soil, and after research, found it contained water. However, the United States retrieved 380 kg of lunar soil and reported it was waterless. Some might say this is due to the different sampling locations. However, Chinese research found that the primary source of water in lunar surface soil is the solar wind, the solar wind that blows across the entire moon. Therefore, theoretically, regardless of where on the moon the soil was sampled, water should be detectable on the surface.”

(Answer 508, under question: “What made people start to question the authenticity of the moon landing?”, Google translation)

This answer attempts to redefine what kind of evidential relationship can constitute a credible explanation. As Gieryn argues through the concept of boundary work, scientific authority is produced through processes of knowledge representation and judgement, while also being continuously negotiated through changing criteria of evaluation (1999, pp. ix-x). Therefore, scientific reasoning itself becomes a resource in the struggle over credibility. Institutional authority is therefore not presented as the only reference point for credibility assessment. Within these expressions, credibility is additionally associated with perceived consistency between evidence, reasoning processes, and technical explanations.

This pattern can also be observed in other Articulated other Digital Claims, while through the cognitive translation of complex technical knowledge. For example, by

comparing the developmental trajectories of different space programs, technical feasibility is reframed as a question of testing sequences, risk management, and gradual verification:

“China’s Chang’e program: first, unmanned lunar orbit, then, unmanned lunar landing, then, unmanned lunar return, then, manned lunar orbit, then, unmanned delivery of supplies to the lunar surface, and finally, manned lunar return... The Apollo program... directly sent three living people to the moon for tourism and back, a three-step process!... There is not a single record of unmanned landing and return, which means that the safety and feasibility of the return capsule’s return were never verified even once, and Apollo 11 and three astronauts were directly sent to the moon for landing and return!”

(Answer 410, under question: “Why did the United States react so strongly to the news that China was going to land on the moon?”, Google translation)

By transforming specialized technical issues into an experiential logic that can be more easily understood and evaluated by non-specialist users, “whether a complex and high-risk mission had undergone gradual testing and followed a verification pathway from simple to complex”, this cognitive translation makes technical feasibility more accessible as an issue that can be evaluated through engineering common sense and causal reasoning. As a result, professional identity becomes one of several criteria used to evaluate credibility. We can see that common sense becomes an accessible criterion for questioning institutional explanations.

Another recurring form observed in the data involves the use of existing cognitive frameworks from popular culture and online games to reduce the complexity of technical disputes. For example, Answer 308 states:

“Because only when you reach level 90 and fail to defeat the level 100 boss will you

realize that the guy who told you he had defeated the level 100 boss at level 50 was probably bragging, after all, you have to choose between 'faking' and 'being a failure' because you could do it before but can't now"

(Answer 308, under question: "Why is it so difficult to land on the moon now, even though it was successful half a century ago?", Google translation)

Metaphors provide a more direct and simplified causal structure for understanding, although they may not fully correspond to reality because they inevitably conceal certain characteristics of the concepts they represent (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 10). In this case, the metaphor constructs a logic of explanation: if a lower level of capability was previously sufficient to accomplish a more difficult task, then later failure to achieve the same task requires additional explanation. Similar to the engineering common sense demonstrated in Answer 410, this expression transforms professional knowledge disputes into judgement relations familiar to ordinary users. However, its function extends beyond technical translation towards cultural translation. Complex technological histories are therefore re-interpreted through shared cultural and experiential resources, becoming objects that can be more easily understood and evaluated by non-specialist users.

So, I would argue that what repeatedly appears in the data is a repositioning of credibility evaluation criteria. As Jasanoff (2004, pp. 2-3) argues through the concept of co-production between scientific knowledge and social order, knowledge authority does not exist independently from social relations, it is continuously constructed through interactions among different forms of knowledge, norms, and evaluation criteria. Institutional scientific authority often derives credibility from professional identity, institutional certification, and established knowledge systems. However, these Articulated Digital Claims introduce additional criteria of judgement, including understandable causal relationships, experiential plausibility, and procedural consistency. The focus of the dispute partially shifts from "who produced the

explanation?” towards “is this explanation reasonable according to accessible and understandable standards?”

Therefore, we can argue that the analytical significance of platform-mediated expressions lies in how specialized credibility criteria become available for collective evaluation and debate through argumentation, translation, and metaphor, besides in the alternative facts they circulate. Articulated Digital Claims make alternative criteria of credibility evaluation visible, which can later become further considered, negotiated, and contested through later interactions.

Source Criticism

When tensions emerge between vernacular engineering logic and institutional narratives, some Articulated Digital Claims do not remain limited to questioning specific pieces of evidence. Instead, they further extend the controversy towards the legitimacy of knowledge sources, attempting to re-negotiate topics like “what types of sources are qualified to explain the event?”, and “whether or not institutional endorsement alone is sufficient to establish credibility”. For example, Answer 510 uses domestic doubts within the United States regarding the authenticity of the moon landing to reposition the legitimacy of its own skeptical stance:

“...Do you think no one questioned the US manned moon landing and return? No, no, no, actually the most suspicious ones weren't China, nor the Soviet Union, but the Americans themselves... Some things, everyone knows perfectly well, but when it comes to national boasting, there is no need for empty rhetoric... Pompeo directly said, 'We cheated, we robbed, we lied...'”

(Answer 510, under question: “What made people start to question the authenticity of the moon landing?”, Google translation)

Through reorganizing relationships between different sources, this answer places

skepticism within a framework perceived as more legitimate within the discussion context. The controversy therefore moves beyond the question of “whether this claim is correct” towards “which sources are qualified to explain this event.” As Muirhead and Rosenblum point out, conspiracy does not necessarily rely on the accumulation of evidence or a detailed explanatory account. It may also generate suspicion through insinuation, rhetorical gestures, like “A lot of people are saying” (2019, p. 3), and strict words that suspect hidden motives. In this answer, the expression that “there are also doubts within the United States itself” functions to weaken the perceived externality of skepticism and to redefine the basis of its legitimacy.

This source criticism further introduces another criterion of credibility: if existing institutional statements cannot independently resolve the controversy, what forms of verification can be considered more sufficient? Answer 203 provides a relatively direct example:

“People aren’t questioning you, they just want to see more of that greatness again. It’s simple then, the US just needs to land on the moon again...”

(Answer 203, under question: “Why doesn’t the United States simply copy the manned moon landing method from 50 years ago?”, Google translation)

This answer constructs “landing on the moon again” as a form of practical verification. If a certain technological capability existed in the past, its credibility can also be confirmed through contemporary technological practice and repetition. Therefore, the focus of the controversy shifts beyond “who has the authority to explain history” and also includes “what forms of practice can serve as grounds for credibility.”

Wynne’s (1992) research on the relationship between science and the public suggests that scientific credibility does not originate from abstract epistemic authority alone, it is also connected to processes of knowledge production, social relationships, and

practical experiences. Source criticism demonstrates that credibility competition is constructed around how different actors and sources are represented as capable of providing valid knowledge within the discussion.

Meaning Negotiation

When technological practices become associated with national capability, modernization projects, and geopolitical competition, they can acquire meanings beyond their immediate technical functions and become connected to broader social and political imaginaries (Jasanoff and Kim, 2009; Hecht, 2009, p. 2). The materials suggested that some Articulated Digital Claims no longer only discuss whether Apollo was authentic, they were exploring what broader meanings this event may acquire. Technological facts, therefore, are seen to work as symbolic resources carrying political and social meanings (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). For example, Answer 108 states:

“What truly breaks the American isn’t the alleged moon landing hoax, but the fact that the moon landing was real, and they can no longer do it. That means that 50 years of American elections, American democracy and freedom, and the hard work and bravery of the American people have all been a joke...”

(Answer No.108, under question “If China lands on the Moon and publicly claims it found no traces of the American moon landings, would that constitute a stroke of masterly open strategy?”, Google translation)

Here, the authenticity of Apollo is re-interpreted as an evaluation of contemporary American national capability. The answer establishes a chain of reasoning from “having achieved this accomplishment in the past” to “being unable to reproduce this accomplishment today,” and further connects technological capability with political institutions and national development. Making the moon landing no longer just a historical technological achievement or event, but a symbolic indicator for evaluating national institutional performance and developmental trajectories.

This meaning translation is further reflected in the moralization of technological practices. Answer 110 describes China's future lunar exploration plan as a long-term, gradual, and constructive engineering practice, while characterizing related American narratives as "habitual lying" and lacking integrity:

"China's lunar landing site is intended to be a permanent lunar base, with future power plants, production bases, and other infrastructure suitable for human habitation, to do more solid work for continuing to explore deep space. Why would China have the time to verify whether the United States is fabricating data? The United States is a habitual liar with no integrity or bottom line. They show no shame when their lies are exposed. This is the reason for the suspicion and also the conclusion."

(Answer No.110, under question "If China lands on the Moon and publicly claims it found no traces of the American moon landings, would that constitute a stroke of masterly open strategy?", Google translation)

Scientific and technological practices are embedded in the production of social orders, values, and relations of authority and legitimacy (Jasanoff, 2004, pp. 3-5). In this piece of material, this process appears as the re-encoding of technological practices into resources for evaluating actors' credibility and moral attributes. Engineering capability, technological pathways, and verification methods are no longer only criteria for judging "who is capable of reaching the Moon," they also become symbolic grounds for judging "who deserves to be trusted."

In answer 110, terms such as "permanent," "continuing to explore," and "solid" are assigned value meanings related to responsibility, reliability, and future orientation. In contrast, expressions such as "no integrity," "habitual liar," and "no bottom line" further transform doubts about Apollo into moral evaluations of American behavioral patterns and political identity. Thus, technological credibility and moral evaluation become connected within platform discussions. Engineering processes become standards for

evaluating capability and symbolic resources for judging actors' credibility and moral attributes at the same time.

Related expressions also expand the objects of discussion, the scope of evaluation, and emotional intensity, producing expressions involving mockery and sarcasm. In the comment section of Answer 110, one user added:

“The United States can never rise again, it’s a declining America, so discussing whether it ever did rise at all is meaningless.” (Google translation)

and similarly, there is another one that goes:

“The foundation of the United States is ‘lying, deception, and theft,’ as stated by their intelligence chief and Secretary of State.” (Google translation)

Beyond evaluations of nations and institutions, meaning negotiation also operates through the division of relationships among discussion participants. For example, Answer 309 uses the politicalized label “Royalist” to describe participants who maintain traditional Apollo narratives:

“Royalist moon-landing-protecting nerds can’t take a bridge when it’s offered... They can’t even take a hint, and instead start throwing shade and calling me anti-science. Fine then, if you refuse the high road and spit in my face, I’m coming after yours.”

(Answer No.309, question “Why is it so difficult to land on the moon now, even though it was successful half a century ago?”, Google translation)

The relationship between discussion participants is therefore renegotiated. Through the label “Royalist,” those who defend the original narratives, the “American one”, are represented as those protecting existing authority, while skeptics are constructed as

challenging established interpretive frameworks that are suspected to be fake.

The original debate concerning technological history is consequently transformed into a classification of positions. Those involved are debating whether a particular explanation is valid, yet also using naming, evaluation, and classification practices to establish symbolic boundaries between different positions (Lamont and Molnár, 2002). It should be pointed out that this analysis does not suggest that such labels represent users' stable personal identities, actual beliefs, or explicit intentions. From the perspective of Digital Claims, the importance is to observe how labels as platform-mediated expressions reorganize relations within controversies: they transform technological debates about Apollo into classification practices concerning authority, knowledge order, and the legitimacy of interpretations.

Such emotionally charged expressions are not exclusive to one side of the debate. Within the materials, emotional language can be observed among different positions supporting or opposing Apollo skepticism. Some responses opposing the moon landing conspiracy narrative also contain relatively strong expressions:

“The shaping of collective memory is actually feasible. Two or three years ago, questioning the moon landing was just a performance art piece by a small group of populists, who generally demanded that the populists prove the moon landing was fake. Today, in the eyes of many, the moon landing being fake has actually become a fact, and they are now demanding that normal people prove the moon landing was real...”

(Answer No.107, under question “If China lands on the Moon and publicly claims it found no traces of the American moon landings, would that constitute a stroke of masterly open strategy?”, Google translation)

This counter-example demonstrates that meaning negotiation does not belong exclusively to one position. Participants supporting or opposing Apollo skepticism can

both use classification, labeling, and moralized language to define others and position themselves. Meaning construction in our discussions, therefore, establishes relational structures concerning knowledge, identity, and value through symbolic classification, turning technological controversies into practices of social positioning (Lamont and Molnár, 2002).

Meaning negotiation within Articulated Digital Claims can therefore, be understood as a process where technological facts expand into broader social meanings. Apollo is no longer just some historical event waiting to be judged as true or false, but a symbolic object connecting technological capability, political institutions, moral values, and collective identities.

Interaction Indicators

As discussed above, users can construct relatively complete interpretive frameworks through historical materials, technological comparisons, or political symbolism. However, within the materials examined in this study, comment interactions were observed to less frequently function as additions of new factual materials to existing claims. Instead, they more often appeared as responsive attachments to existing claims, including agreement, sarcasm, opposition, questioning, and emotional resonance. Therefore, I argue that the function of comment interactions is not primarily to add new factual materials to existing claims. It could also be understood as changing the ways in which an Articulated Digital Claim is associated with other meaning frameworks.

A beginner programmer, an unreliable educator

+ Attention

7,174 people agreed with this answer >

Don't think the comment section is chaotic. I saw dozens of comments in the backend all been eaten by the system. Looks like Douhu has developed a new strategy targeting digital life...

----- the following original answer-----

A couple of days ago, I just heard a big brother give an answer, and I think it can be put here.

Whether or not the U.S. really landed on the moon, we must question it. No matter what you say, it's a desperate argument, questioning, constantly questioning. When you slap the evidence of the U.S. landing on the moon, I'll casually say one more thing

So what is the cost?

Edited on 2023-06-13 15:42

▲ Agree with 7174 ▼

🗨 Collapse comments

★ 271

♥ 301

➦ Share

✦

...

Speak rationally, interact kindly

404 reviews

Default Latest

...

That's right, this has been the public intellectuals teaching Chinese people for years to have a spirit of questioning. In Western countries, it's easy to be questioned, and now that I've done it, the intellectuals should be very pleased 🤔

2023-06-09 · Guangdong · Hot comments

🗨 Reply ♥ 996

View all 6 replies >

...

Oh, I misjudged you, so you really did eat a bowl of noodles. Hey, let's go, let's go.

2023-06-08 · Shaanxi · Hot comments

🗨 Reply ♥ 2053

View all 20 replies >

(Screenshot of Answer No.302 and its default-sorted comments on computer, translation: built-in translation function of Edge browser)

The comments below Answer No.302 provide an example. The top comment under the default sorting discussed the value of skepticism and connected the Apollo controversy

with differences between Chinese and Western public knowledge environments. This comment did not provide new evidence regarding the authenticity of the moon landing, instead, it attached new symbolic associations around the existing claim. Another reply below it borrowed a plot from the popular Chinese film *Let the Bullets Fly* (Jiang, 2010) as a metaphor. Therefore, a character is accused of “not paying for a bowl of rice noodles” and is forced to prove his innocence through the extreme act of cutting open his own guts. Through this metaphor, the Apollo controversy was re-theorized:

“Oh, I misjudged you, so you really did eat a bowl of noodles. Hey, let’s go, let’s go.”
(Second reply under the first default-sorted comment of Answer No.302, translation: built-in translation function of Edge browser)

Cultural symbols can provide interpretive frameworks through which complex controversies are reinterpreted and connected with broader systems of meaning (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). In this study, such symbolic resources allow Digital Claims to be recontextualized through familiar cultural references and social experiences.

Similar contextual transfers also appeared in other comments. For example, one user connected the Apollo controversy with singers who lip-sync, as shown in the third comment from the bottom in the figure above, thereby translating the question of technological authenticity into a more general question of whether those being questioned need to prove themselves again. This reveals a recurring pattern: interaction does not necessarily expand the original argument, but may reorganize the relational position of Digital Claims through cultural symbols, emotional structures, and connections with other social issues.



(Screenshot of expanded replies under the first default-sorted comment of Answer No.302 on computer, translation: built-in translation function of Edge browser)

This process means that an Articulated Digital Claim may no longer exist just as an independent expression, it could also become an interactional object jointly constituted

by expressions, responses, and interaction relations. Platform datafication enables these interactional relations to be recorded and observed (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018, p.33). The position of the claim within its surrounding field of meanings is continuously reconstructed through responses, refutations, associations, and recontextualization. Such expansion does not require users to develop a consistent interpretation. The same Digital Claim can simultaneously connect to competing meaning frameworks, which will be further discussed in the next section.

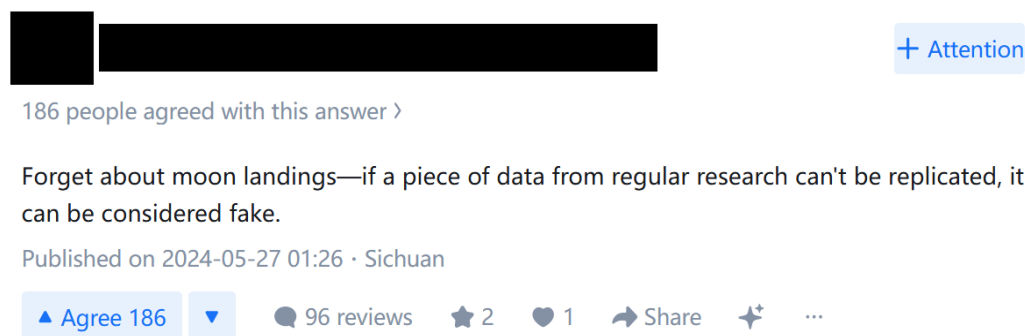
Therefore, platform interaction changes the types of knowledge, cultural, and political resources that the claim can become connected with. From the perspective of Digital Claims, the analytical value of interaction does not only lie in determining whether “users agree” with a claim, it could also be in observing how a platform-mediated expression obtains new positions of meaning through interactional relations.

Standardization Through the Platform

Platform interfaces further organize these interactions through a process, in which activities carrying different social meanings become represented through interaction signals that can be recorded, displayed, and compared within the platform environment. As Gillespie points out, algorithmic systems increasingly rely on processing data traces left by user activities, preferences, and expressions, while these traces are not equivalent to the social meanings behind them (2014, pp.168, 189).

As shown in the figure below, Answer No.210 received 186 upvotes and 96 comments. However, the comment section simultaneously contains different directions of responses, including support, questioning, refutation, and additional information. Therefore, 186 upvotes cannot be interpreted as 186 users explicitly accepting the answer, nor can the 96 comments be used to infer a unified public opinion. Users may agree with the answer’s discussion of scientific reproducibility as a credibility criterion, may simply be interested in the issue of American technological authority, or may

consider a particular expression worthy of response.



(Screenshot of Answer No.210 on computer; translation: built-in translation function of Edge browser)

This uncertainty reveals why interaction signals require analytical separation from the meanings attached to them. Instead, it reveals the analytical value of interaction signals: differences in meaning between various responses may remain unresolved, while platform interfaces allow these activities to appear through comparable interaction forms. Through standardized interface forms, these activities become traceable and comparable within the platform environment. Likes, comments, replies, and their numerical relationships became observable platform objects, even though they are not equivalent in terms of social meaning.

The interactions below Answer No.210 further demonstrate this process. A comment that questioned Apollo through irony received 11 upvotes, while a reply immediately responding against that comment received 17 upvotes. These two expressions with different meaning orientations were both represented through the same platform structure as recordable interaction signals: posting time, reply relationships, and numbers of likes.



(Screenshot of Answer No.210 and the comment interaction below it; translation: built-in translation function of Edge browser)

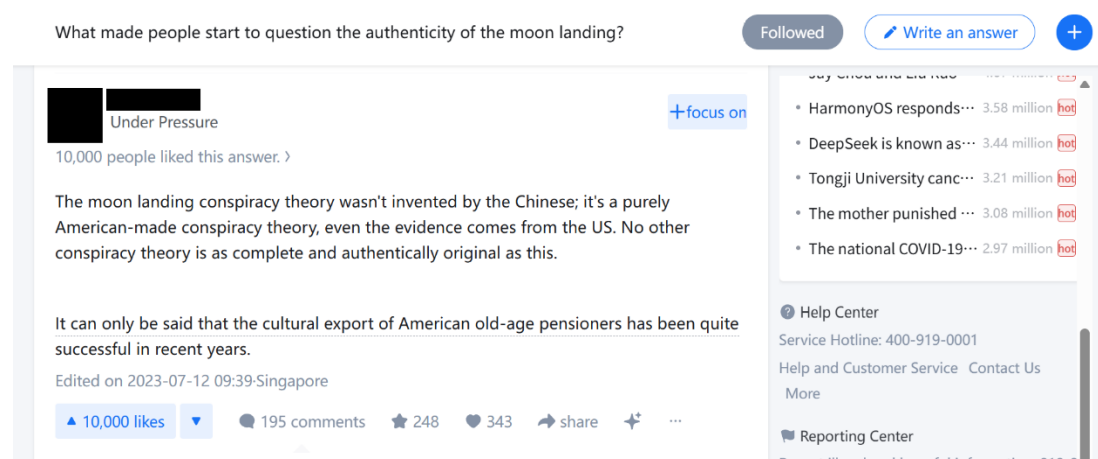
Therefore, this interaction should not be simply understood as one side “winning” the debate, nor should it be used to further infer that one interpretation has achieved widespread acceptance. What is more important is how the platform processes such differences: it does not resolve the disagreements in meaning between Digital Claims, instead, it transforms responses with different orientations into standardized and formally limited interaction signals surrounding the same Articulated Digital Claim through platform architecture.

This can be understood as an interaction-level manifestation of the encapsulation process discussed earlier. The front-end interface should therefore not be understood as a transparent window that simply displays interactions. We could argue that it provides a structured environment, where heterogeneous activities become represented through

categorized and standardized interaction indicators (van Dijck et al., 2018, p.33). Therefore, I do not argue that researchers can directly equate likes with agreement, or that opposing comments and dislikes necessarily indicate disagreement. The same interaction form can correspond to multiple social meanings. The significance of platformization does not lie in eliminating these differences, it is more in allowing heterogeneous activities to obtain a comparable form within technical structures.

In other words, semantic heterogeneity does not prevent infrastructural equivalence: interactions can conflict with each other at the level of meaning, while still existing as the same type of computable signal within platform structures. This also means that the “relationality” of Digital Claims is not entirely produced by users’ shared intentions, it also emerges from the platform’s capacity to connect different activities around the same object.

This mechanism is more directly visible in the interface structure of Answer No.504. This answer received 10,000 upvotes and 195 comments, while further replies and interaction numbers are displayed below the comment section.



(Appearance of Answer No.504 on the platform, translation: built-in translation function of Edge browser)



(Appearance of Answer No.504 and its comment section on computer interface; scrollbar can be dragged downward, translation: built-in translation function of Edge browser)

From the perspective of social meaning, these signals may correspond to different forms of expression, participation practices, and social relations (Marres and Gerlitz, 2016). However, within the platform interface, they are transformed into interaction units that can be recorded, counted, and aggregated around the same answer. The platform does not need to determine whether a particular upvote comes from agreement, irony, interest, or skepticism. Instead, it attaches these activities to the same answer through a unified structural form. In this way, activities that are heterogeneous in social meaning obtain a shared technological carrier and form an interactional record surrounding the Digital Claim.

Whether considering Answer No.504 or other answers, the different types of data indicators displayed below them, together with comments containing various meanings, can be understood as evidence that different forms of interaction have already been aggregated around the same Digital Claim. What occurs here is, I would like to argue, the aggregation of relations at the level of platform structures. Heterogeneous activities maintain their differences at the semantic level, while becoming accumulative components of the same platform object at the infrastructural level.

After Encapsulation

Standardization enables different interactions to be recorded as structured signals. The next step that can be observed is that these signals do not remain separated from each other after being recorded. Instead, they become associated and observable around the same Digital Claim within the platform. As a result, the platform existence of a Digital Claim is no longer limited to the original text, but gradually forms a platform object composed of expressions, interactions, and the relations between them. The following provides an example.

Followed Write an answer +

(Screenshot of Answer No.506 on the platform, translation: built-in translation function of Edge browser)

64

structure.

Therefore, accumulation here refers to, both an increase in quantity, and an accumulation of relations. As interactions continuously attach themselves to the same Articulated Digital Claim, the original expression begins to acquire an interactional history constituted through platform relations. The platform object of a Digital Claim can therefore be understood as extending beyond the answer text itself, which means it also includes the comments, replies, and interaction records formed around that text. It can be observed that this accumulation has a clear temporal dimension. Activities generated by different users at different times do not become separated from the object as time passes, they can continue to remain within the same interaction structure.

[Comment Reply](#)

2024-05-27 · Hebei

12

9 replies

The US moon landing was a hoax, and the US is not as powerful as it was 50 years ago—one of these two points must be true, right? Otherwise, please explain this issue.

🗨️ reply ❤️ twenty four

2024-07-25 · Hebei

reply 2

2024-09-28 · Guangdong

 reply 19

2024-09-28 · Hebei

reply like

2024-11-28 · Beijing

reply 10

2024-12-05 · Jilin

reply 2

2025-05-26 · Shandong

reply like

Reply to

○ Also published to Ideas

release

(Part of the comment tree under Answer No.205, translation: built-in translation function of Edge browser)

The comment tree under Answer No.205 demonstrates this process. A comment-reply chain surrounding this answer continued from 2024 to 2025, and responses generated at different points in time remain accessible within the same interaction structure. At the same time, these responses do not form a single direction of meaning. The important point is that activities from different periods, different participants, and different meaning orientations can all continue to be connected to the same Digital Claim through the platform and remain as part of its interactional history. In other words, platform accumulation enables heterogeneous activities to obtain persistent visibility and traceability through relational structures.

So that we could, therefore, understand circulation as an ongoing process that lets Digital Claims acquire new connections, responses, and possibilities of recontextualization within platform environments. Digital Claims obtain new connections, responses, and possibilities of recontextualization through user interactions, datafication, and platform connection mechanisms (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018, pp.34-35). More precisely, circulation refers to the process, through which Digital Claims are continuously connected, responded to, and repositioned within new interactional relations, thereby gaining opportunities to re-enter visible user interfaces and participate in further interactions. Accumulation, meanwhile, refers to how interaction activities from different periods, and with different meaning orientations are continuously attached to the same platform object through platform datafication mechanisms, forming a continuously traceable and visible relational structure.

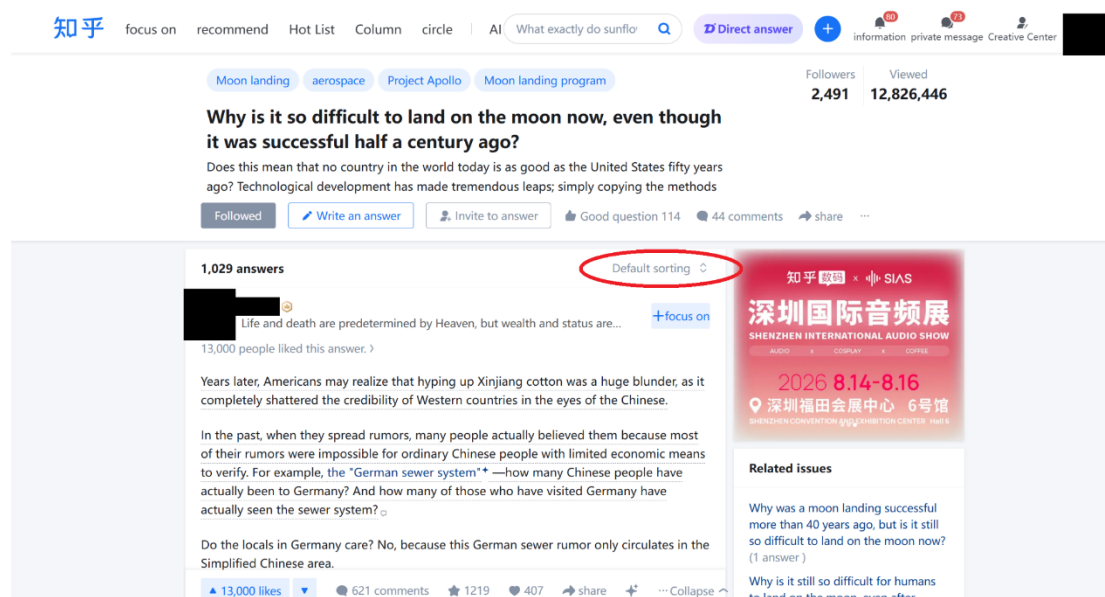
What the platform provides is a structural condition that allows these activities to persist, connect with each other, and continue entering subsequent platform processes (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018, p.34). Accumulation does not necessarily indicate the development of discussion, construction, or consensus. Instead, it can be understood as the process through which activities from different periods, different participants, and

different meaning orientations obtain a relational structure that allows them to continuously exist within the same platform object.

Sorting

Platform-based accumulation does not end with the aggregation of interactions around the same Digital Claim. After comments, replies, and other interaction signals have been recorded, connected, and preserved around a particular expression, these interactions do not form a completely flat collection. Instead, they present different positional relationships and degrees of visibility within the platform environment (Bucher, 2012; Bossetta, 2018).

On Zhihu, comment sorting, “popular comments,” nested replies, and the presentation of interaction numbers allow different interactions surrounding the same Digital Claim to obtain different positions of display. Therefore, we could argue that the platform-based accumulation is reflected in how these interactions are arranged, connected, and differentiated within the platform object.



(Answer No.301 and the default sorting button; after clicking, an option for chronological sorting appears, translation: built-in translation function of Edge browser)

The comment section of Answer No.301 demonstrates that comments, although presented through similar interface forms, are not arranged in a completely flat manner. The comment section displays “default sorting” as the initial option, while also providing chronological sorting. This indicates that the same set of interaction contents can be presented through different organizational arrangements. Moreover, under default sorting, comments appearing at the top do not simply correspond to the highest number of likes or the greatest number of replies.



(The comment section of Answer No.301, comments appearing earlier under “default sorting” are not necessarily those with the highest number of likes or the largest number of sub-comments, translation: built-in translation function of Edge browser)

Therefore, although interaction signals obtain observable and comparable forms, or

parameters, through platform mechanisms, such comparability does not mean that they occupy equivalent structural positions around a Digital Claim. Sorting and nested relationships further shape how interactions are positioned in relation to one another, allowing some comments to occupy more visible positions, while other interactions remain at lower levels or require further expansion before becoming visible.

This process can be interpreted through the previously discussed processes of standardization and accumulation. Standardization enables semantically heterogeneous activities to be transformed into interaction signals that can be recorded, aggregated, and analyzed (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018, pp.34-35). Accumulation allows these signals to remain attached to the same Digital Claim and form a traceable interactional history. Therefore, we could argue that the platform object is formed through processes of standardization, accumulation, and organization.

Finally, an important direction for further discussion is that a Digital Claim within a platform is not constituted only by its expressive content and interaction quantity, but, at the same time, by how these expressions and interactions are organized, arranged, and presented by the platform. This point also indicates a limitation of this study: comment order, nested relations, and interaction numbers are treated here only as observable manifestations of how platforms organize Digital Claims, not exactly as the specific mechanisms of sorting themselves. How particular sorting rules, algorithmic selections, and platform governance mechanisms participate in distributing the visibility of Digital Claims requires further research.

A Summary to the Analysis Part

Through the three boundary conditions of platform-mediated transformation, the chapter offered an argument around the differences between Digital Claims and digital traces. It further differentiated between Articulated Digital Claims and Associative Digital Claims as analytical distinctions for examining both the construction of

meanings and the interactional relations surrounding these expressions.

The analysis of Articulated Digital Claims demonstrates that discussions surrounding the authenticity of the moon landing were not limited to the circulation of alternative explanations. They also involved negotiations over how credibility could be evaluated. As presented in the analysis of authenticity negotiation and source criticism, users mobilized scientific style arguments, evidence-based comparisons, source evaluation, and demands for practical verification as resources for assessing competing explanations. Institutional expertise was not simply accepted or rejected, it became one among multiple criteria where credibility was discussed and re-evaluated. At the same time, we could see that the event itself was connected to broader meanings, for instance, national capability, institutional performance, moral evaluation, and collective identity (Jasanoff, 2004, pp. 3-5; Jasanoff and Kim, 2009; Hecht, 2009, p. 2). And the follow-up interactions further contextualized these Articulated Digital Claims by connecting them with cultural references, emotional expressions, and other interpretive frameworks as symbolic resources (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989).

Moreover, the analysis further suggested that interactions surrounding Digital Claims do not retain only their original social meanings when represented through platform interfaces. Through interaction indicators such as likes, comments, replies, and their numerical relations, heterogeneous activities become represented through comparable and recordable forms (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018, p.33). And the analytical significance lies in how different activities become associated with the same Digital Claim while maintaining differences in meaning.

At the same time, it was demonstrated that Digital Claims are constituted by individual expressions, interaction quantities, as well as the digital architecture of the platform, including comment relations, nested replies, interaction records, and visibility arrangements, that expressions and interactions become connected within a

continuously traceable relational structure. This process indicates that platform environments allow activities with different meanings to remain attached to the same Digital Claim through observable relations.

Overall, the analysis suggests that Digital Claims allow attention to move beyond individual expressions towards the relations through which meanings, interactions, and visibility are organized within platform environments. Digital Claims provide an analytical perspective for observing how technological controversies become connected with different forms of reasoning, symbolic meanings, and interactional structures within digital spaces.

Conclusion

This study has examined how controversies surrounding the moon landing are expressed, connected, and organized on Zhihu through the analytical framework of Digital Claims. By combining Qualitative Discourse Analysis, Qualitative Textual Analysis, and Digital Trace Analysis, it focuses on how contentious claims are formed on digital platforms, how they participate in credibility negotiation, as well as how platform structures affect their circulation, accumulation, and visibility.

Digital Claims are concerned with how contentious knowledge acquires an observable, connectable, and persistent form within platform environments. The study suggests that some expressions may gain opportunities for continued responses, reinterpretation, and further circulation within platform environments, while others may receive less sustained visibility when interaction and preservation mechanisms are limited. Therefore, understanding digital controversies requires attention to what people express, as well as how these expressions are organized by platforms into objects that can be seen and accumulated.

Returning to the research questions and sub-questions proposed in this study, the analysis demonstrates that the moon landing controversy becomes organized as a process of negotiation over credibility, authority, and meaning. The analysis suggests that credibility is continuously redefined among different evaluative criteria, including institutional certification, experiential logic, technical explanation, and practical verification. At the same time, this study further demonstrates that platform structures participate in shaping how controversial objects become observable through processes of datafication, standardization, encapsulation, accumulation, and sorting.

As initially anticipated in the writing of this study, “classic conspiracy theories,” or the more direct and assertion-based “new conspiracism” discussed by Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019, p. 3), are present in the discussion of the relevant questions, but they

are not the only phenomenon observed.

A considerable number of expressions in the empirical material involved the renegotiation of criteria for judging credibility. By introducing two analytical dimensions of Digital Claims, Articulated Digital Claims and Associative Digital Claims, it becomes possible to see how Articulated Digital Claims bring different types of knowledge resources into the same visible space. They employ multiple forms of argumentation, including scientific-style reasoning, evidence comparison, the translation of engineering logic into everyday logic, and metaphorical expressions. Multiple explanatory pathways coexist within the same platform space. The controversy on the platform is not simply organized around “official knowledge” versus “unofficial knowledge,” or around “whose evidence is true or false,” but around competition between different standards of credibility. Institutional certification, causal consistency, technical feasibility, and practical verification all become resources for evaluating the reasonableness of explanations. This perspective also connects the analysis to research on knowledge authority and science communication.

Existing research has pointed out that scientific authority is continuously constructed through different forms of knowledge, evaluative criteria, and social relations (Gieryn, 1999, pp. ix-x; Wynne, 1992). The analysis shows that users draw on different forms of knowledge when assessing whether a claim is credible, including institutional knowledge, scientific reasoning, engineering common sense, and practical verification. Controversies on digital platforms concern the content of knowledge, reorganization of source legitimacy and meaning frameworks. By questioning sources, demanding repeated verification, or drawing on other social and cultural resources to interpret the moon landing, users extend the controversy towards questions of “who is qualified to explain this event” and what the moon landing, as well as broader space programs, “means.” This finding resonates with Jasanoff’s (2004, pp. 2-5) concept of co-production between knowledge and social order. Knowledge authority is always

embedded within social relations, value judgements, and institutional environments. The analysis observes that the moon landing is expressed by users as a symbolic resource concerning national capability, political institutions, and the moral evaluation of these actors and institutions (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989).

The position of the platform is also emphasized in this study. Digital Claims continuously undergo reinterpretation, negotiation, and circulation through platform interactions. Associative Digital Claims such as comments, replies, and likes function as observable, standardized forms supported by the digital architecture of the platform, or, more precisely, forms shaped by its architectural design, through which activities with different meaning orientations become connected to the same platform object (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018, pp. 34-35). Through the platform processes of datafication and standardization, interactions with different social meanings are transformed into forms that can be recorded, compared, and accumulated.

This study attempts to supplement an aspect that has received relatively less attention in existing conspiracy theory research: the platform-mediated processes through which contentious knowledge acquires form, connection, and persistence within digital infrastructures. Digital spaces generate large amounts of analyzable digital traces (Rogers, 2013, p. 1), yet these traces do not automatically possess social meaning. I propose that digital traces become Digital Claims that can be used to analyze knowledge controversies, only through processes of platform-mediated transformation, analytical observability, and circulation and accumulation. This theoretical development avoids treating all digital activities simply as expressions of meaning.

Furthermore, the role of the platform extends to the formation of the controversial object itself. Through interaction indicators, comment relations, and visibility arrangements, activities with different social meanings can be recorded, connected, and persist around the same Digital Claim. The theoretical value of Digital Claims focuses

on how expression, interaction, and visibility jointly constitute knowledge controversies within platform environments. Through this concept, the study attempts to establish a connection between digital methods, platform studies, and the sociology of knowledge, providing a complementary analytical approach to the production of controversy and negotiation of meaning in digital public spheres.

This point also responds to an important methodological challenge in digital research: how to avoid directly transforming observable data traces into inferences about people. For example, a like does not necessarily represent agreement, a comment does not necessarily represent opposition, and an answer with high levels of interaction does not necessarily represent majority opinion. Digital Claims provide an intermediate analytical level, they neither treat platform data simply as objective facts nor directly jump to explanations of users' psychology and social attitudes. Instead, they establish analytical distance between expression, technological structure, and social meaning.

In addition, Digital Claims may offer practical implications for understanding social interaction in everyday media environments. Interaction indicators on digital platforms, such as likes, comment counts, and visibility rankings, can sometimes be easily understood as direct reflections of user attitudes, group opinions, or social consensus. King, Pan and Roberts (2017), in their study of organized information manipulation, and Ferrara (2017), in his research on automated accounts and non-human participation, both suggest that visible interactions in digital spaces cannot simply be understood as naturally produced public opinion. Therefore, in a highly datafied media environment, I suggest that people living in deeply mediatized everyday environments may need to recognize that the "popular views," "majority opinions," or "user attitudes" they encounter do not necessarily correspond directly to individuals' actual thoughts. Instead, they may constitute a landscape jointly shaped by platform structures, forms of interaction, visibility mechanisms, and multiple actors exercising different forms of power.

Therefore, I emphasize the importance of de-intentionalized analysis. Digital Claims do not attempt to determine what users actually believe or to simply attribute platform behaviour to user motivations. Instead, they analyze how platforms organize observable expressions and relations. This perspective avoids over-psychologizing digital traces, yet reminds researchers, policymakers, and ordinary platform users that, when interpreting digital social phenomena, it is necessary to distinguish between “the objects presented by the platform” and “real people and their complex intentions.” In an environment where everyday life and digital media are deeply integrated, this distinction can contribute to a more cautious understanding of the formation of public controversies, social divisions, and knowledge conflicts.

At the same time, this study has several limitations. Different platforms have different user structures, interaction mechanisms, and logics of visibility, including differences in comment formats, recommendation systems, and governance rules. Therefore, I want to emphasize that the analytical framework proposed in this study does not imply that controversies on different digital platforms necessarily follow the same mechanisms of formation. As a platform centered on a question-and-answer format, Zhihu’s modes of content organization, interactional relations, and culture of knowledge discussion all influence the formation of Digital Claims. Therefore, the understanding of the platform’s role developed in this study remains constrained by the specific platform environment. Future research could conduct cross-platform comparisons, for example by comparing how question-and-answer platforms, social media platforms, and video platforms organize contentious knowledge through different infrastructures, and further examining how Digital Claims take different forms under different platform conditions.

At the methodological level, this study combines QDA, QTA, and Digital Trace Analysis to analyze expressions, interactional relations, and visibility structures that remain observable on the platform. Because the study relies on front-end visible and accessible data traces, I cannot fully observe data that remain invisible within the

platform, such as user dwell time, exit behaviour, which may also be recorded as discussed earlier, and system-level judgement processes that are not publicly presented, including algorithmic sorting logics, human moderation processes, and platform governance rules. Consequently, I also lack direct observation of expressions that have disappeared due to platform governance, user deletion, content modification, or reporting mechanisms.

Furthermore, this study cannot completely separate itself from the researcher's own positionality. My understanding, interpretation, and translation of the Apollo controversy, scientific authority, and digital platforms inevitably influence the selection of materials, the interpretive process, and some of the wording and sentence structures used in the analysis. Qualitative research itself involves interpretive judgement. Therefore, I do not claim to provide the only interpretation, or to possess theoretical or practical "superiority," but to provide an analytical pathway based on a particular theoretical framework and empirical material, an alternative perspective. Future research can further examine the applicability of the Digital Claims framework across different empirical environments through comparative analysis among researchers, cross-cultural case studies, or the combination of other research methods.

In addition, I believe that the assumption that "comment sorting may change over time" deserves attention. For example, as a Zhihu question is reposted and recommended to the "homepage," its interaction volume may continue to increase. At the same time, changes in platform rules may alter the visibility of a particular expression. A Digital Claim may also undergo processes of emergence, circulation, sedimentation, reactivation, and disappearance. As mentioned in Answer No. 302, under the question "Why is it so difficult to land on the moon now, even though it was successful half a century ago?" at the beginning of the analysis chapter:

"I've seen dozens of comments eaten by the system in the backend"

Therefore, Digital Claims should not be understood only as static analytical units at a particular point in time. They can also be further studied as dynamic platform objects that undergo processes of emergence, transformation, and maybe, in some cases, disappearance.

Based on the limitations discussed above, future research can further develop the framework of Digital Claims through several possible directions. To begin with, cross-platform comparative research could examine how different platform architectures produce different types of visibility and interactional relations. Meanwhile, future research could focus on the temporal changes of Digital Claims by incorporating changes in sorting, content deletion, platform governance, and recirculation into the analysis, in order to understand how platform power affects the continued existence of controversial objects. Lastly, computational methods could be combined to trace Digital Claims across large volumes of platform data, for example by analyzing interaction networks, circulation pathways, and changes in visibility. However, these methods would still need to maintain attention to the conceptual boundaries of Digital Claims and avoid once again equating digital indicators simply with social meaning.

Overall, this study does not attempt to determine whether expressions on digital platforms represent genuine public opinion. Instead, it provides an analytical approach for understanding how platforms organize heterogeneous expressions and interactions into observable social objects with particular relations of meaning. In an environment increasingly dependent on digital media to conduct research upon, as well as to reflect social reality, understanding how platforms shape “the content we see,” and how such content may be mistaken as a direct reflection of “what people really think,” has become an important issue for understanding contemporary digital public life. Therefore, understanding digital society requires not only asking “what do people express?” but also “what kinds of expressions can be preserved, connected, and made visible by platforms?”

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Endnotes

NVivo was used for coding in this study, and Google Translate was used for directly accessible user-generated text, while Edge's built-in translation function was used for text contained in webpage screenshots.

The choice was based on the format of the collected material, and original materials were retained for reference, which is available to be seen in the Appendix 1: Sources of Empirical Material. Although these platforms may not be entirely objective, using them relatively helps avoid the subjective biases that could arise from translations performed by the researcher or others.

Appendix 1: Sources of Empirical Material

Q1 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/656925113>

101 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/656925113/answer/3510693673>

102 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/656925113/answer/3508884810>

103 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/656925113/answer/3510404660>

104 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/656925113/answer/3510404660>

105 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/656925113/answer/3509063280>

106 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/656925113/answer/1938298757218272115>

107 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/656925113/answer/3513648541>

108 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/656925113/answer/3578894132>

109 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/656925113/answer/3507693599>

110 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/656925113/answer/3508574968>

Q2 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/607622786>

201 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/646529403/answer/3501720592>

202 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/646529403/answer/3506318959>

203 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/646529403/answer/3500884038>

204 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/646529403/answer/42850619379>

205 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/646529403/answer/3501357981>

206 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/646529403/answer/3499738768>

207 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/646529403/answer/3499451691>

208 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/646529403/answer/3510874684>

209 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/646529403/answer/3505141033>

210 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/646529403/answer/3511053818>

Q3 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/360822980>

301 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/360822980/answer/3504988054>

302 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/360822980/answer/3061448271>

303 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/360822980/answer/3066574004>

304 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/360822980/answer/3486685486>
305 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/360822980/answer/3488565707>
306 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/360822980/answer/1627316737>
307 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/360822980/answer/3055672875>
308 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/360822980/answer/3503929885>
309 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/360822980/answer/3516253161>
310 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/360822980/answer/1618473916>

Q4 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/655268701>

401 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/655268701/answer/3495082908>
402 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/655268701/answer/3494409264>
403 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/655268701/answer/3501845918>
404 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/655268701/answer/3504896755>
405 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/655268701/answer/3493867325>
406 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/655268701/answer/3494323654>
407 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/655268701/answer/3496414255>
408 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/655268701/answer/3495260055>
409 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/655268701/answer/3497168317>
410 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/655268701/answer/3494359125>

Q5 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/338573621>

501 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/338573621/answer/3493712990>
502 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/338573621/answer/2683198249>
503 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/338573621/answer/3498913134>
504 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/338573621/answer/3115304076>
505 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/338573621/answer/3500199681>
506 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/338573621/answer/3053724064>
507 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/338573621/answer/2687739487>
508 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/338573621/answer/103193064822>

509 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/338573621/answer/3289118978>

510 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/338573621/answer/3311328551>

Appendix 2: Blank Codebook

Constructing Alternative Interpretations

How do users reinterpret the moon landing?

Sub-code	Explanation/Notes	Examples
Doubt & Suspicion	Expresses uncertainty regarding, or a refusal to accept official narratives, established facts, or mainstream explanations. Focuses on the stance of disbelief than on judgments of veracity.	
Evidence Referencing	Draw upon materials, data, case studies, and technical phenomena related to the moon landing as supporting resources. Pay attention to how the evidence is utilized.	
Scientificized Suspicion	Skepticism is packaged using the logic of science, engineering, and technology, presenting it in the form of professional reasoning.	
Causal Attribution & Common Sense	Explain the motives, interests, or underlying reasons behind an event, relying primarily on common sense and basic (or pseudo-) logic.	

Credibility and Authority

Whom is worth the trust?

Sub-code	Explanation/Notes	Examples
Scientific Expertise	Engage scientists, engineers, and technical personnel as knowledge resources.	

Defense of Lay Knowledge & Vernacular Expertise	Establish the grounds for offering an explanation by drawing on visual experience, life experience, and common-sense reasoning, while emphasizing that non-experts also possess the ability to make judgments.	
Expertise Contestation	A struggle over who holds the authority to interpret, though not an overt “anti-Leviathan” stance.	
Scientific Verification	Requires experiments, repeated verification, re-logging in, etc.	
Authority Delegitimization	Proactively undermine the credibility of U.S. experts, institutions, and media. Shift distrust from one domain to another.	

Symbolic Meaning of Moon landing

Why is moon landing such a big deal?

Sub-code	Explanation/Notes	Examples
National Power Symbol	Moon landings are viewed as a symbol of national capability and comprehensive soft and hard power, representing a competitive landscape defined by powers.	
Technological Modernity Symbol	It represents capabilities in technology, industry, and modernization, without emphasizing comprehensive strength.	

Civilizational Development Narrative	It connects with nations, civilizations, and stages of historical development, placing greater emphasis on ideological blueprints.	
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Argumentative Strategies

How do users organize and disseminate their arguments?

Sub-code	Explanation/Notes	Examples
Accumulation of Details	A wealth of technical and historical details enhances the sense of authenticity.	
Comparison	Comparing between countries, timeframes, and technological pathways, etc.	
Irony/Mockery	Uses humor to undermine the opposing position.	
Collective Mockery	A shared source of humor emerges in the comments section.	
Narrative Framing	Place the event within a broader political and historical framework.	
Questioning Form	Express doubts through questions.	
Analogical Reasoning	Explain complex issues by drawing analogies from everyday experience.	
Counterfactual Reasoning	Form judgments based on hypothetical scenarios.	
Moral Evaluation	Transform events into moral judgments.	

Emotional Expression	Expressing a stance through anger, mockery, humiliation, etc.	
Identity Positioning	It establishes opposition through dichotomies such as “us vs. them” and “the rational vs. the anti-intellectual.”	

Platform-mediated Circulation

Sub-code	Explanation/Notes	Examples
Interactional Affirmation	Actions such as liking or replying, signal attention, not equivalent to belief.	
Interactional Contestation	A debate has unfolded in the comments section centering on the argument.	
Memetic Circulation & Emotional Aggregation	Similar emotions cluster around comments. Certain expressions become symbols that are repeatedly circulated.	