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Article

“My Way or No Way”: Political Polarization and Disagreement Among Immigrant Influencers and Their Followers

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Abstract

This article explores the online discussions between Carlos and Lizzy, two Latin American immigrant influencers in the United States with profiles on TikTok and Instagram. The dataset comprises a 90-minute live debate between them, that took place on September 25th, 2021, broadcast on Instagram and available on one of the profiles, as well as 1200 comments by 933 different viewers, received during the broadcast. The analysis relies on previous research on polarization, deliberation, and disagreement on social media platforms and it provides insights regarding the political and ideological diversity that exists among immigrant influencers and their followers. It focuses on the discursive strategies deployed by these content creators to discuss issues related to immigration reform and activism from two distinct political stances. It also provides a glimpse into topics of interest for the immigrant community as reflected by these content creators and commenting followers. The findings reflect the value of the ongoing relationship between content creators and their followers in the personal support and acceptance Carlos receives. In contrast, Lizzy is largely rejected and attacked, but a few of her arguments resonate with viewers. Comments about the debate itself are mostly negative due to the perceived low quality of the arguments, the mocking attitude of both debaters, and the need for a moderator to control the times. Comments that are critical of the debate often describe expectations of a more civil discussion and pathways to improve future debates.

Keywords

debate; immigration; influencers; Instagram; platforms; political polarization; social media; TikTok; United States of America

Issue

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1. Introduction

There are approximately 21 million immigrants of Latin American origin in the United States; of these, close to 7.4 million are undocumented (Millet & Pavilon, 2022). The political climate in recent years has been characterized by the Trump administration’s stern policies establishing all forms of immigration as a threat to American society, hardening the United States’ approach to immigration (Pierce & Selee, 2017). Meanwhile, the Biden administration has attempted to undo some of these policies, especially accepting refugees and reducing deportations (Krogstad & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2022). Historically,

the social construction of Latin American immigrants in the United States has been shaped by perceptions of them as a monolithic group of “disposable strangers” regardless of their immigration status (Oboler, 2021).

This article analyses the live debate between two Latin American immigrant influencers: Izzy Lagüera and Carlos Eduardo Espina on TikTok and Instagram. The 90-minute debate in Spanish took place on September 25, 2021 and resulted from months of disputes between the two creators, who have conflicting political ideologies. On the one hand, Carlos is a Uruguayan immigrant, as well as a pro-immigration and human rights activist and a law student who supports

immigrants by providing important information about laws, requirements, and fundraising initiatives. He has also organized events such as *Un Día Sin Inmigrantes* on February 14, 2022, across 13 cities in the United States. On the other hand, Lizzy Lagüera is a Mexican immigrant who politically supports the republican party, especially Trump. She defends the right of immigrants to support the conservative party and periodically joins forces with a community of republican Latin American immigrants who support conservative ideologies and counter the community of liberal immigrant influencers. Moreover, the comments on the debate video reflect an audience profile as a group of people who are mostly Carlos' followers, speak Spanish, have a migration background, lean toward pro-immigration opinions, are from Latin American countries, and live across the United States according to the locations they mentioned when prompted by Carlos.

Both creators can be considered examples of minority celebrity, which has been conceptualized as:

Fame and recognition founded on commodifying and representing a usually marginalised and stigmatised demographic of society, built upon the validation and celebration of minoritarian values, with the political agenda of making public and critiquing the systemic and personal challenges experienced by the minority group in everyday life. (Abidin, 2021, p. 600)

In this case, mainstream metrics of influence such as the number of followers are not as relevant, as these creators target minority communities, but the levels of interaction and content creation are significant for the marginalized communities they target. The difference in followers between them at the time of the debate—where the liberal influencer has significantly more followers than the conservative creator—reflects the ideological profile of the Latin American community in the United States, with 60% considering that the Democratic party represents their interests better compared to 34% who lean toward the Republican party (Krogstad et al., 2022).

The present study aims to bring light to how minority celebrities who have a personal stake in certain political issues discuss these issues and the understudied phenomenon of political polarization and deliberation among minorities. It also aims to understand the viewers' reactions to the arguments and perspectives presented in terms of their heterogeneous discussion or polarization possibilities.

The article starts with an overview of political polarization on social media and immigration as a key topic of contention. Then, an explanation of the role of immigrant content creators and influencers on social media follows, contextualizing it within the existing literature on influencers and their followers, while positioning the uniqueness of social media as a space for ideological and political deliberation and polarization. This is followed by a description of the digital ethnography and qualita-

tive multimodal analysis carried out. The findings reflect the value of the ongoing relationship between content creators and their followers in the personal support and acceptance Carlos receives. In contrast, Lizzy is largely rejected and attacked, but a few of her arguments resonate with viewers. Comments about the debate itself are mostly negative due to the perceived low quality of the arguments, the mocking attitude of both debaters, and the need for a moderator to control the times. Finally, comments that are critical of the debate often describe expectations of a more civil discussion and pathways to improve future debates.

2. Immigration, Online Political Polarization, and the Potential of Social Media for Political Deliberation

It is relevant to define the different types of polarization that apply to political deliberations online such as the case explored in this article. In this sense, Jost et al. (2022, p. 562) differentiate between high “ideological polarization” as polarization that takes place when groups move toward extreme views on an issue, and “partisan issue alignment” which refers to situations where groups are divided but agree among themselves on various issues. Moreover, Yarchi et al. (2021) explore three modes of polarization that are relevant to online spaces: “interactorial polarization”—referring to homophily versus heterogeneity in online interactions—“positional polarization,” which describes how online polarization is diverse and dependent on the platform itself, and “affective polarization”, which refers to intense feelings expressed toward perceived members of the outgroup. Research on social media and polarization has found the phenomenon of echo chambers—understood as the process where people seek out like-minded individuals and information that is compatible with their opinion (Jost et al., 2022)—as key to understanding online opinion formation and disagreement. Research on echo chambers has been conflicting, with authors arguing that exposure to information on digital platforms can increase polarization (Bail et al., 2018), while others assert that selective exposure online has been overestimated (Barberá et al., 2015).

On the other hand, literature on the potential of social media to promote political deliberation has emphasized the importance of robust discussion characterized by civility and diversity to strengthen the quality of deliberation (Papacharissi, 2004). Moreover, Halpern and Gibbs (2013) describe the differences between the two platforms to enable a more equal deliberation and the relevance of sensitive topics in the emergence of impolite messages. Schäfer et al. (2022) explain how individuals are more likely to participate in online discussions if comments include evidence, which makes them feel more knowledgeable on the topic. This is important for the case explored in this article, as this is a topic that is highly personal and sensitive for the audience who have first-hand knowledge of the issue, and thus, it presents a unique context for political conversation.

In this sense, it is important to consider the relevance of immigration as a key issue in the North American political ecosystem. In January 2022 the Pew Research Center found that 67% of Republicans and 35% of Democrats considered immigration a top issue, and almost half of Americans (49%) considered immigration a priority for the year. Moreover, a Gallup poll in 2022 found that 75% of Americans consider immigration to be good for the country, with undocumented immigration being considered by the majority as a threat to national security (Gallup, 2022). Meanwhile, in a March 2021 survey, 39% of Latino adults mentioned their concern that a person close to them could face deportation and 84% of Latin American adults in the United States support a pathway for undocumented immigrants in the country to become documented, compared to 68% of the general United States population (Schaeffer, 2022). The significance of the Latino population in the United States has meant that these second, third, and fourth-generation migrants are considered a powerful political force in the country and one that gives voice to vulnerable immigrants who are unable to vote or even speak about the difficulties of the documentation process.

In this context, the case of immigrants is unique because research suggests that this community is notoriously voiceless in issues that affect them (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019; Georgiou, 2018). Meanwhile, studies on polarization and public opinion have often mentioned immigration as a key political issue (e.g., Bail et al., 2018; Jost et al., 2022) but immigrants seem to be considered only when they become political subjects who can vote (Krogstad et al., 2022). In this sense, this exploratory article fills this gap in the literature by considering the opportunity of digital social media to get a glimpse of the political profile of Latin American immigrant communities online.

3. TikTok and Instagram as Spaces for Political Debate

Although the debate was recorded and uploaded to Instagram, the creators studied in this article gained their following on TikTok, and the debaters are active on both platforms. These platforms are relevant as spaces that have gained great popularity and become increasingly political in recent years. Instagram has become a space of visual (self)representation and very specific aesthetics and templates that generated unique digital cultures (Leaver et al., 2020). In the political realm, specifically related to immigration, studies have focused on the multimodal characteristics of #MigrantCaravan posts on Instagram (Jaramillo-Dent & Pérez-Rodríguez, 2021; Rosa & Soto-Vásquez, 2022).

Although the scholarly exploration of political content on TikTok is still emerging, the political nature of the platform cannot be denied. In recent months, the Ukraine war has played out on the platform as a space for resistance (Specia, 2022). Moreover, in the recent Italian elections, candidates turned to TikTok in an attempt

to reach undecided voters (Pianigiani, 2022). Moreover, this platform has been pointed as key in shaping political communication and partisanship through cocreation functionalities such as the duet and overlaid text to express political and partisan content in the United States (Carson, 2021; Medina Serrano et al., 2020). These recent uses of the platform and analyses of political polarization are relevant for the present exploration of TikTok as a space for political discussion and polarization among immigrant influencers.

4. When Influencers Go Political: Personal Attacks and Social Media Wars

The political practices of influencers have been explored from different perspectives. For instance, a recent study on Finnish influencers found that many of them avoid political topics due to fear of the comments and attacks they could receive, this study also found that influencers are more likely to discuss politics when they receive positive reinforcement from their followers and the support they expect to receive from their followers in the case of a crisis (Suuronen et al., 2022). This shows the importance of follower-creator interactions for political engagement and the key role of followers in promoting and continuing to discuss political issues on social media, specifically within the context of social media influencers and their communities of support and/or opposition. Other studies have focused on the relationship between influencers and followers; this is the case of Zhang's (2022, p. 1) exploration of #stopasianhate on Instagram, which highlights followers' five types of responses: (a) educated, (b) feelings-based, (c) supportive, (d) resonating, and (e) seeking reasons.

The impact of influencers' personal characteristics in political debates has also been explored in previous literature. For instance, a study on Czech female influencers engaging in political debates found that they tend to feel that it is harder for women to be respected as political influencers. They also report feeling that the attacks they receive often refer to aspects unrelated to the political topic at hand such as their appearance, their mood, their disposition, or their wit. These creators feel that men do not receive such comments while expressing their political opinions in debates and that this happens across ideological lines (Vochocová, 2018).

5. Methods

To understand this instance of political debate, the analysis followed a qualitative approach and was guided by the followers' comments and their responses to the debate to respond to the three research objectives set out:

RO1: Identify the multimodal and discursive characteristics of viewers' comments about the debater/argument/ideology they explicitly support.

RO2: Identify topics of interest and arguments within the debate that prompt discussion among viewers.

RO3: Explain how these comments and topics of interest reflect processes of heterogeneity/deliberation or polarization from the viewers toward the debaters and their arguments.

A 24-month digital ethnography was part of a larger study exploring immigrant content creators and influencers on social media residing in the United States and Spain. In this process, the researcher observed the ideological conflict between two Latin American immigrant TikTokers/Instagrammers in the United States as well as the attacks between them and their followers. The ethnographic method followed Pink et al.'s (2016) asynchronous presence approach as the fieldnotes were taken through observations of online content that was broadcast and commented live and then archived by the creators. The analysis was also informed by previous field notes from the extended observation of the community of Latin American creators that enabled the identification of these two immigrant influencers.

The 90-minute video was downloaded and viewed four times to inductively identify and code the topics discussed by the debaters. The entirety of the comments (1200) by 933 unique viewers was extracted in Excel format using the paid version of Export Comments (<https://exportcomments.com>). The video was coded based on the topics discussed in the debate as described in Table 1.

ATLAS.ti (version 22.2.3) was used to organize and code the comments and video. After translating comments that were originally in Spanish and categorizing them according to eight categories, open coding was carried out to identify emerging themes within each of the opinion-based categories of codes (Charmaz, 2000). The coding process focused on the commenter's perspectives about the issues discussed by the two debaters

and their perspective of the debate itself. Figure 1 describes the coding process followed in this study for the comments.

The analysis was carried out between March–June 2022 through an iterative coding process that combined inductively derived codes—from the data, through an interpretative process—and deductive approaches—comparing the data with existing literature about online deliberation, where Zhang (2022) emerged as a relevant study to explore this case. The video and comments were coded separately but at a later stage, the topics that were discussed the most by viewers of the debate were identified. To maintain the commenters' anonymity, comments were translated from Spanish and slightly paraphrased without losing the original tone and intention to avoid identification. The findings are organized based on the three research objectives proposed and presented in the next section.

6. Results

6.1. Multimodal and Discursive Characteristics of Viewers' Comments

The analysis suggests that viewers expressed a closer relationship with and preference toward Carlos and distanced from Lizzy and her stance, as reflected in their language and the emojis used. This was expected considering the ideological profiles of both debaters and the significant difference in popularity between them—Carlos with 3 million versus Lizzy with 28 thousand at the time of the debate, as well as the fact that the debate was broadcast in Carlos' profile. Thus, it is likely that most of the viewers/commenters belonged to Carlos "community." Various discursive markers of interest support this. Comments such as "not even God knows this woman" point to Lizzy's status as an outsider. Meanwhile, Carlos is someone they know and support, as reflected in comments such as "let's all support Carlos so this fool sees

Table 1. Topics discussed in the debate.

Debate topics	Definition
Immigration reform	Points to discussions related to legislation or ideological stance regarding immigration reform, and specific immigration policies.
Political stance	Describes creators' mention of a politician, political party, or political leaning.
Attention economy	Labels instances when creators mention indicators related to the attention economy such as views, likes, monetization, or followers.
Personal attack	Signals attacks that target personal features of the opponent but not the issues discussed.
(Self)representation	Designates instances when creators describe their self-perception or who they are.
Debunk falsehoods	Indicates that the creator is attempting to discredit statements by the opponent by providing alternative information or asserting it is false.

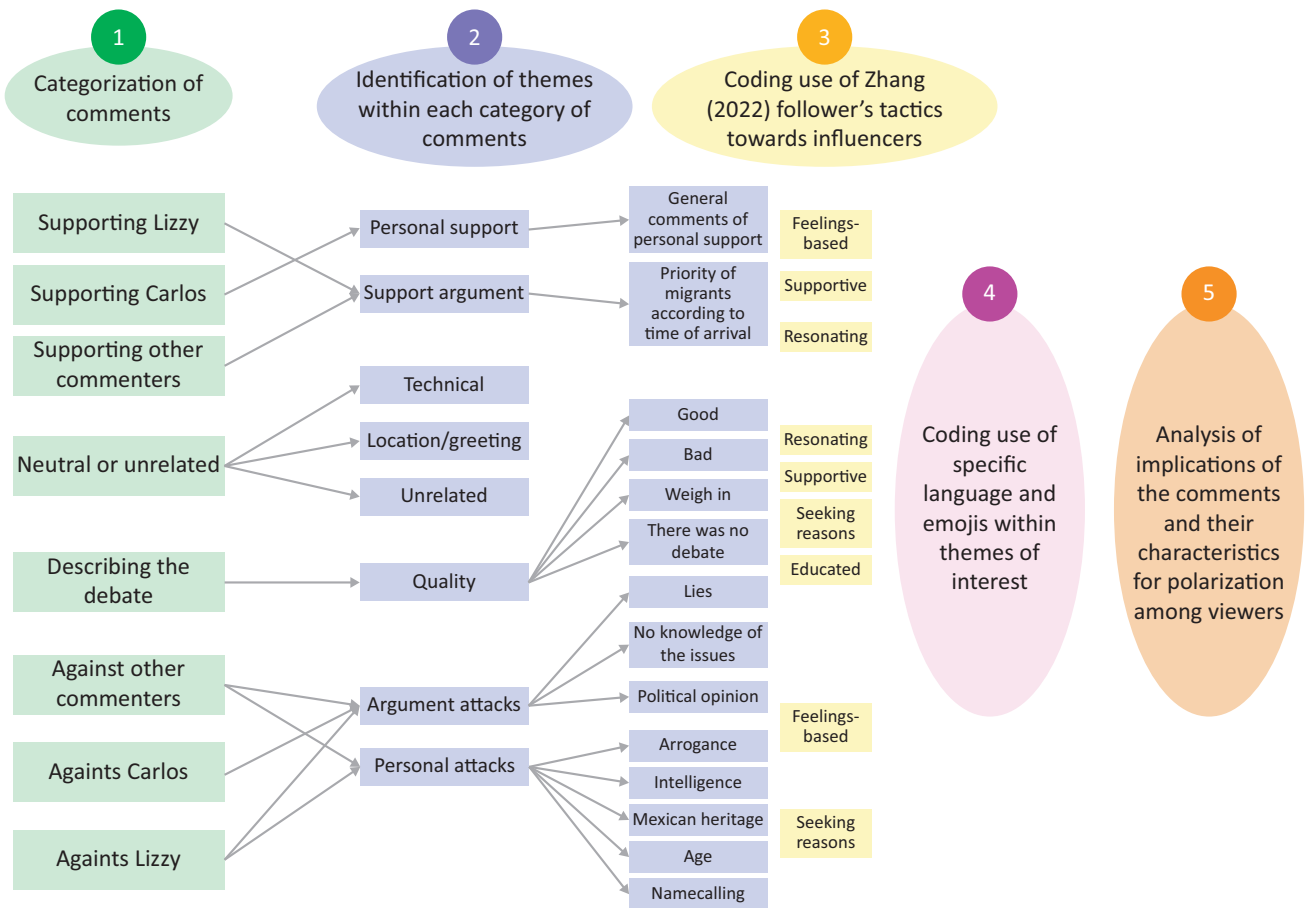


Figure 1. Coding procedure for comments.

that the people are behind him” reflecting his influence among these viewers/followers, which is relevant when considering the selection and preference for certain political information on social media (Anspach, 2017).

Lizzy’s status as an outsider is also reflected in the prevalence of comments that speak directly to Carlos, both when speaking against her “Carlos, you wasted your time with this woman” and in instances of support toward her “sorry Carlos, I support you, but you did badly in comparison to her.” In contrast, very few commenters speak to Lizzy in the first person. This difference reflects a longstanding relationship with him and a sort of ongoing, imaginary “conversation” between followers and the creator they follow. The comments supporting her arguments while specifying a preference for Carlos are relevant in the study of polarization, as some of these viewers reflect their openness toward alternative perspectives on the issue of immigration even when these perspectives come from a person perceived as an outsider. These instances reflect that, although they are a minority, some viewers can overcome ego and group justification which may lead to more polarized groups (Jost et al., 2022) by crossing the ideological aisle in specific topics that resonate with them.

Multimodally, the use of emojis reflects the viewers’ preference for Carlos and their distance from Lizzy and her arguments. The use of emojis throughout the dataset

is reflected in Figure 2, an emoji cloud where the size of the emoji illustrates its prevalence and its position in the cloud reflects the debater toward whom the emoji was directed, the figure is based on the cooccurrence analysis feature of ATLAS.ti.

Figure 2 illustrates viewers’ acceptance and support for Carlos during the debate. It is noteworthy that although Carlos received most of the supportive messages and emojis, most of them were general and did not reflect a specific argument or statement. Comments such as “excellent work on behalf of the immigrant community” reflect ongoing forms of support for Carlos rather than the ideas he put forward during the debate. This was in stark contrast with the personal attacks Lizzy received, as reflected in Figure 3.

Some of the insults toward her refer to her age, political allegiance, and intelligence. Most of the comments she receives are attempts to minimize her political arguments as trivial and uninformed. This is similar to Vochocová’s (2018) findings about female influencers engaging in political discussions and receiving comments unrelated to their political stance. Moreover, her support for Trump and his conservative, anti-immigrant agenda may also contribute to this type of verbal abuse considering the audience and their political leaning. On the other hand, some commenters attempt to distance themselves from Lizzy as a female Mexican immigrant in response

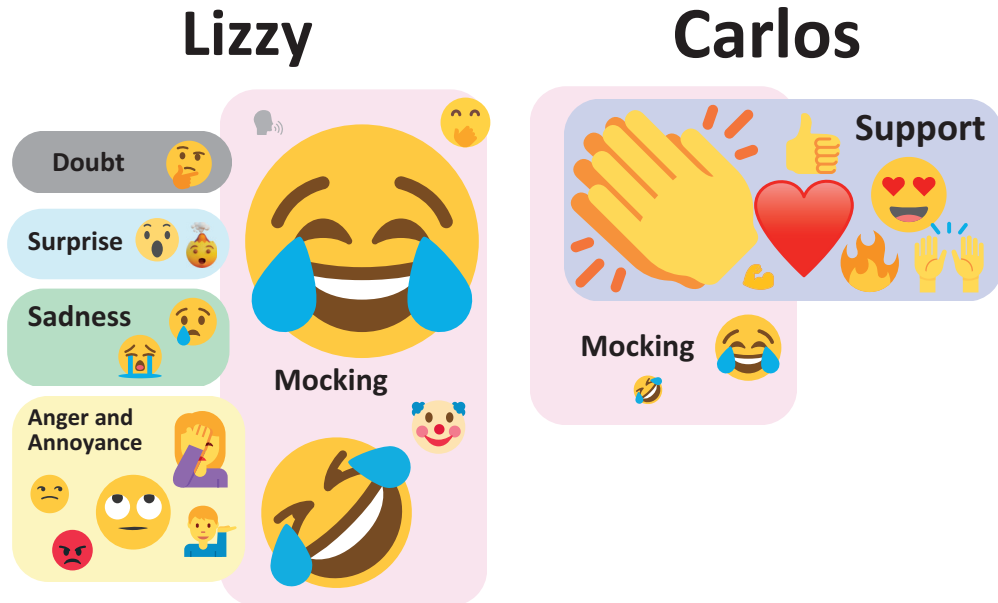


Figure 2. Emojis used by commenters toward both debaters.

to a key moment in the debate—when Lizzy stated: “I speak loudly because I am a Mexican woman”—as her comment reflects a stereotype of ethnic minorities and specifically female Latinas (Ghavami & Peplau, 2013). In response, viewers explained that she doesn’t fit Mexican culture: “I am ashamed that she said that she is from Mexico”; “I am a Mexican woman, and I am not as vulgar as her.” These commenters reflect different forms

of gatekeeping of who is Mexican and what Mexican culture looks like as reflected in Figure 4.

In turn, viewers attempt to make sense of her immigrant background and her position against some forms of immigration with comments such as “got her papers and thinks she is a gringa” and other variations that reflect the perception that some immigrants in the United States discriminate against others once they become



Figure 3. Words used by commenters to refer to Lizzy during the debate. Note: Translated from Spanish by the author.

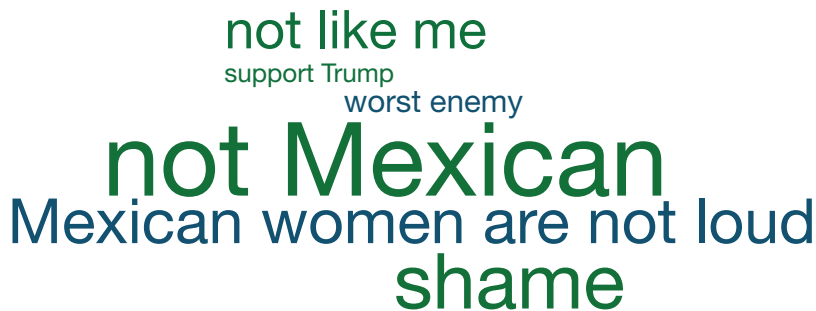


Figure 4. Words used by commenters to refer to Lizzy throughout the debate. Note: Translated from Spanish by the author.

documented. This reflects the horizontal forms of hierarchization, discrimination, and control that exist among immigrants online as described by Jaramillo-Dent et al. (in press).

6.2. *Topics of Interest in the Debate According to Commenters*

6.2.1. Potential for Deliberation in Support of Arguments While Rejecting the Speaker

As mentioned in previous sections, the audience was biased toward Carlos and his influencer/activist profile. However, one of the arguments that resonated with viewers the most throughout the debate was Lizzy's contention of "false hope" and perceived unfairness in the immigration process. In several instances during the debate, Lizzy identifies false hope as the key problem in Carlos' content related to immigration and the liberal agenda. Lizzy describes the rhetoric of false hope as "unfair to people who already live here, people who came as undocumented 20 or 30 years ago." Her rhetoric is vague and dispersed, as she does not provide any specific examples but only general observations about her perception of the situation at the border. The sensitive nature of the topic and the viewers' personal experience are reflected in their support for this argument which is never accompanied by an acceptance of her but of one of her arguments as part of a shared migratory experience. To Carlos' question "so why do you support a political party that doesn't want to legalize immigrants?" Lizzy also responds with a "false hope" argument, noting that Democrats (and Carlos) make promises that are never realized. Within academic texts, the idea of false hope for immigrants in Democrats' rhetoric has not been explored but recent news articles describing recent policies by Democrats mention the notion of false hope (Rappaport, 2022) that has led to confusion at the border (Kriel, 2021).

As the debate continues, Carlos attempts to discuss the need for immigration reform. Both debaters agree that immigration reform is necessary, but they disagree as to who is responsible and how this type of legislation should be proposed. As the conversation advances, Lizzy offers an argument giving reasons why immigrants should care about the situation at the border when she states:

Any person whether they are legal, or illegal is affecting the system because the same system processes legal and illegal visas. It doesn't affect me personally because I have my citizenship but people who are home, waiting for those papers, who did it legally....There is a way to do it, what is happening at the border is not the correct way.

Lizzie repeats this argument several times throughout the debate and in response to different arguments by

Carlos. Her stance follows well-established perspectives that argue that immigrants should migrate "the correct way" following the misconception that immigrants can just gain documented status in the United States by applying. The American Immigration Council clarifies this misconception by explaining that many undocumented immigrants have no pathway to becoming legal residents or citizens in the United States and that even those who pay taxes and contribute are not able to gain documented status unless a new immigration reform is passed to provide them with legal status (American Immigration Council, 2019). What is rare is that this debater is an immigrant herself, who has gone through the system and doesn't seem to understand the difficulties faced by many immigrants entering the United States. In this sense, the debate provides a simplistic perspective about a very complex issue involving the lives of millions of people living in the United States and entering the country, who are unable to obtain a legal status due to a series of issues in the country's immigration processes.

On the other hand, Carlos argues for an approach that emphasizes human rights when he asserts:

I support giving papers to all who are already here, do you support this?...The issue at the border is not as you paint it, they are people who want a better life, just like you and me....I support the right of people to migrate, and some laws are unfair, so I want to work to help immigrants.

Carlos' perspective relies on the idea that borders and immigration legislation are often unfair in line with arguments for the abolition of borders. These arguments consider borders as symbols of inequality, that systemically constrain and render some individuals inferior to others due to their immigration status. Supporters of this perspective call for more humanitarian immigration processes (Anderson et al., 2009).

This is a key moment in the debate, as viewers also weigh in about the reality of the immigration system, a commenter asserts:

No Carlitos, she is right about that, that's why the people who are here never see a light, because those who are entering are the priority, all the programs are for those who enter, and for those of us who have 10, 20 years here nothing.

This comment resembles Zhang's (2022) "resonating" reactions by commenters in the #stopasianhate conversation on Instagram. This comment reflects that regardless of her status as an outsider within this community, Lizzy's argument resonates with their experience or their perception of the immigration system.

In the next section, the attempts by both influencers to force the other to accept a political allegiance are explored.

6.2.2. Forcing a Political Allegiance

Throughout the debate, there are several instances where both participants attempt to corner the other within an established political stance. They do this by referring to the opponent in relation to a politician (such as Trump vs. Biden), a political party (Democrat vs. Republican), or a political stance (open borders vs. border control). They do this with statements such as “your president,” “your political party,” or “the ones you support.” Carlos clearly establishes his perspective, as well as his political stance toward Democrat politicians and immigration issues:

I can guarantee that very few or none of the people within the Democratic party support open borders....I don't consider myself a Democrat. I vote for Democrat candidates because they are the closest to my ideals but there are many Democrats that I don't support.

He reflects a critical and informed political posture and one that mimics many immigrant activists and members of the immigrant community who assert that the Democratic party has once and again betrayed the immigrant community. This stance also enables him to distance himself from some policies that the Democratic party brings forward concerning immigrants—such as criticism from progressive groups who have called on Democrats to “lean in” on issues of immigration, rather than evade them and let Republicans appropriate this issue (Bernal, 2022). This stance also allows Carlos to offer an alternative pathway that evidences his activism and support for immigrants without fully supporting a politician or political party. Conversely, Lizzy responds to this push toward a political ideology differently. She seems comfortable supporting Trump and his policies, stating that she believes that “Donald Trump won the 2020 elections” and defending his immigration policies by asserting:

So, if finally, the Republicans had reached an agreement, when Trump was in office, they wanted to give some immigrants a pathway to citizenship.

The debate falls into an “all or no one” exchange where both debaters interrupt each other and do not let each other speak. Carlos responds by shifting his attention to the current legislation in congress that has not passed due to the lack of support by the Republican party, Lizzy deviates attention to topics that are unrelated and avoids answering the question.

In balance, Carlos attempts to discuss issues rather than politicians, although he prefers the Democratic party. Lizzy is comfortable openly supporting Trump throughout the debate and defending his administration and his policies. It remains unclear how Lizzy supports the immigrant community as she asserts. Moreover,

commenters overwhelmingly reject Lizzy's support for Trump, as can be seen in Figures 3 and 4. As a result, her Trump-related arguments generate a wave of comments and attacks toward her and against the former president's discriminatory migration policies (Pierce & Selee, 2017).

6.2.3. Debunking False Statements

Much of the debate is spent attempting to debunk false statements by the opponent with no concrete evidence to differentiate fake from fact. Although clarifying data and information can be a great way to enrich the credibility and reliability of the issues discussed, both creators refer to the other's videos and their perception of the other's general approach to politics and immigration. This is problematic considering that both these creators have had their accounts temporarily blocked by TikTok, and viewers may not be able to find the videos they are discussing. It becomes a “he said she said” situation rather than a clear and solid debate on the serious issues that affect immigrant communities. As they discuss falsehoods, Carlos points to a few inconsistencies:

First, when you say you don't use your platform to promote your half-crazed agenda on Trump, well, you surely know you are lying. Second, it is funny that you come to a Live event where thousands of people are watching to say that you support reform for undocumented people when we know that is not true, because there is a proposal right now in congress. In your videos, you have said: “Oh we don't need more illegals.”

Lizzy's debunking style focuses on what she perceives as flawed sources of information Carlos uses such as Telemundo:

You rely on sources such as Telemundo and Univision, hahaha...Your content is based on people's feelings, you have taken advantage of people's feelings and emotions. You have given people misleading information. You are telling them you are with them and supporting them, but you are not doing it.

Both debaters try to debunk the other's arguments based on the credibility of their statements and their sources. Lizzy's perspective that Telemundo and Univision—two of the main news channels in Spanish serving the Latin American communities in the United States—are unreliable sources follows a general trend among Republicans to doubt mainstream news and prefer to find alternative media for information (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). In the case of Carlos, he refers to her general political approach and her videos, which deviates from the debate itself and makes it hard to distinguish reliable information during their exchange.

6.2.4. The Attention Economy and Mutual Surveillance

The conversation between them falls into a series of discussions about the value of views/social media metrics and monetization as an inauthentic form of aid towards immigrants. In these conversations, Carlos defends the creation of videos to make visible the work he does for the immigrant community, and Lizzy argues that real help doesn't need as many views. Such an exchange is illustrated in the following:

Lizzy: You care about views; you have been losing followers and supporters and you really care about that. People are not dumb, and they know what you are doing...you often have 70K views and only 5K likes.

Carlos: I uploaded a video yesterday that has more than 700K views and if it doesn't [have views], I don't really care. Last week I had five videos with more than a million. If I was searching for views I would do it with someone who is worth it; you have like 10K followers, I don't understand what is the problem with creating videos to evidence the work that is being done in the community...I think what hurts you is that nobody cares or identifies with your videos, your only commenters make fun of you.

This exchange reflects an additional dimension for online political discussion and participation, the issue of attracting engagement in the attention economy. The attention economy refers to the shift from an economic system based on material goods to a system that relies on attention as proposed by Goldhaber (1997). This exchange also brings to light the mixed reactions these two creators receive from their commenters and the fact that both creators are surveilling each other's videos to assess their opponent's level of engagement. Lizzy mentions his lack of engagement as evidence of his failure to support immigrants. He responds with his argument that she has fewer followers and most of their comments make fun of her. This reflects the platformed dimension of the debate, where ideological opponents engage in attacks that relate to their success within the attention economy and whether they are relevant to the community. However, viewers' comments reflect a rejection of the discussion about likes and views:

God, this idiot is focused on likes and views, seriously, she has no gray matter at all 🤔🙄

Omg! So much for the debate only for views or likes 🙄🙄 omg 😞 how boring

We all like Carlos and she only wants fame

Many commenters perceive her motivations as attention-based and her participation as an attempt to gain visibility through Carlos. Many of the viewers lose

interest when the two speakers start talking about popularity, which happens at different points in the conversation. This reflects the interest of many commenters and viewers in the issues rather than personal and superficial exchanges.

In the next section, the discussion about the debate itself is analyzed as a reflection on the audience's perception of healthy, valuable deliberation.

6.2.5. The Debate and Its Characteristics as Issues of Contention

In relation to the debate itself, comments mentioning the quality of the debate reflect the perception of worthlessness and a waste of time, hindering the possibility of healthy deliberation from the viewers in line with previous research on online deliberation (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Papacharissi, 2004). There are only a few comments that engage with migration-related topics in depth, focusing more on the personal attacks (toward Lizzy) and personal support (toward Carlos). However, there are a few "educated" comments that are critical of the debate itself and provide additional dimensions for consideration:

It was not a debate, it seemed more like a personal dispute with a lack of legal knowledge. I agree that immigrants should come and that they should be gradually regularized. But there needs to be a process...if you agree to open the doors of your country without question is like opening the doors of your house!

All opinions are valid but when they are imposed, they lose value and even more if they do not have good reasonable arguments.

As shown in these quotes and the previous results regarding the debate, many viewers expressed their desire for a more informed exchange, in line with Zhang's (2022) proposal of "educated" and "seeking reasons" comment typologies that question and provide critical perspectives about immigration while rejecting the debaters' vendetta. This suggests that there is potential and desire for a more deliberative discussion among viewers and that they are aware of the characteristics of a more robust/deliberative discussion about immigration as noted in the examples of their comments.

Comments that described the debate as "good" did not offer any details about the aspects that made the exchange good. Conversely, critical comments identified aspects that would have made it better such as a commenter who stated:

I really expected more. I would like it to be repeated, having a moderator in charge, and keeping track of time.



Figure 5. The language used in comments to describe the debate. Note: Translated from Spanish by the author.

Such comments reveal the importance placed by viewers on the imbalance in speaking time (Figure 5), which reflects their understanding of equal participation as key to healthy political deliberation online (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013).

6.3. Implications for Deliberation Versus Polarization Among Viewers

The analysis throughout Section 6.2 emphasized the parallel development of the issues discussed in the debate and viewers’ comments. This analysis provides isolated but valuable insights about the opportunity of such exchanges online for healthier deliberation among viewers and debaters. Moreover, the comments overwhelmingly reflect a debate that fails to discuss issues in a structured way and a polarized viewership that has intense affective responses to the topics and debaters due to their personal experiences and the sensitive issues/stances discussed. Although it could be argued that the viewers feature forms of “affective polarization” (Jost et al., 2022; Yarchi et al., 2021) toward the debaters and some of the issues mentioned, the unique case of immigrants calls for a nuanced analysis of a community that is personally affected by and have unique knowledge of the issues discussed (Schäfer et al., 2022).

Moreover, the perception of Lizzy as an outsider and Carlos as the preferred debater, as reflected in the comments, is relevant in terms of the possibility for a more heterogeneous deliberation. In this sense, Lizzy’s lack of acceptance among viewers limits their openness toward the alternative views on immigration she presents. Thus, the personal contempt they express against her may drive viewers toward a more extreme and polarized political position as described by Jost et al. (2022). Moreover, the personal traits of the viewers, as reflected in their comments, suggest a group of Spanish-speaking Latin American immigrants living in the United States, who express support and allegiance to Carlos. This suggests that the required ideological diversity to achieve a healthier deliberation is not present in this online community, as the ideological majority is well-defined toward the left.

The topics analyzed and mentioned by commenters, including the role of the “attention economy” (Goldhaber, 1997) driving part of the conversation, are relevant to the analysis of social media platforms as unique spaces for deliberation and polarization. In this case, the perception of Lizzy as a less popular creator who engages in this conversation in a quest for increased celebrity deviates from the migration issues at hand and reflects a unique form of minority celebrity (Abidin, 2021) where the debater seems to engage in an extreme attempt to reflect her integration into the United States society and herself as a “good migrant” in line with previous research on the self-representation of immigrants as deserving (Georgiou, 2018; Jaramillo-Dent et al., in press).

7. Conclusions

This study brings light to how niche influencers and their followers discuss issues that are personally relevant to them and their potential for deliberation or polarization. First, the issues and conversations that frame these exchanges reflect the need to further theorize political opinion, deliberation, and polarization among minorities who are directly affected by the issues discussed. In this sense, mainstream studies exploring issue, party, and affective polarization (e.g., Jost et al., 2022; Yarchi et al., 2021) versus effective online deliberation (e.g., Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Papacharissi, 2004) have traditionally focused on the general population. More research is needed to understand the processes of deliberation and polarization that take place among communities that have a personal interest in the issue. This research may illuminate the unique nature of grassroots political discussion among minorities.

The cultural sensitivity reflected by viewers who gate-keep Mexican culture and identity in comments against Lizzy is also relevant as an aspect that shapes the possibilities for political discussion. This reflects horizontal forms of policing and control among the immigrant community to establish the “correct” ways to be an immigrant (Jaramillo-Dent et al., in press) which in this case extends to ideological and behavioral aspects of her

profile. However, the presence of educated and critical comments by viewers about the quality of the debate sheds light on the interest of the community and their desire for a political discussion that focuses on issues that are unique to immigrants, and their interest in different perspectives on these issues, rather than only receiving information that supports their previous ideas. This uncovers the potential of the study of disenfranchised communities online to understand heterogeneous conversations among groups that share certain political, demographic, and life experiences such as immigrants.

The limitations of this study include the specificity of the case analyzed and the ever-changing nature of the platforms under study. In terms of future lines of research, it is necessary to carry out analyses and explorations of political conversations and opinions among racial, national, and ethnic minorities in an increasingly globalized and diverse world shaped by human mobility.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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