Christian Tadros

Ms. Melissa Ringfield

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Framing the ICE Controversy: Rhetoric and Factual Accuracy in Political Instagram Reels

Over the past decade, social media has become a major platform for political discourse and sharing public opinion. According to the Pew Research Center, about 76% of U.S. adults under 30 say they get at least some of their news from social media (Pew Research Center). One of the most widely debated ongoing issues is the controversy surrounding the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Platforms such as Instagram allow creators to present political arguments through short-form videos that combine spoken commentary, captions, visuals, and music, while audiences can respond through comment sections. This raises the question of how rhetorical strategies used by political creators on Instagram Reels shape both the framing and the factual accuracy of information about the ICE controversy. This study shows that political creators on Instagram Reels framed the ICE controversy primarily through government accountability, enforcement actions, and human rights framing, while relying heavily on emotional appeals and credibility-building strategies. Although many Reels used laws, policies, experts, and other factual signals, the most common factual problem was not outright falsehood but partially accurate claims that stretched real information into broader or more certain conclusions than the evidence fully supported.

Literature Review

Influencer Rhetoric and Emotional Framing on Social Media

Scholars in the field of political communication and media studies have examined how social media influencers engage in political discourse, particularly through emotionally charged, entertaining, and algorithm-driven means (von Sikorski et al.; Riedl et al.; Harff et al.; Gonzalez

et al.; Gandini et al.; Harris et al.; Lewis; Sehl et al.; Schmuck et al.; Tang). In "The Political Role of Social Media Influencers: Strategies, Types, and Implications for Democracy - An Introduction," Christian von Sikorski and his colleagues argue that these influencers are more than just casual political commentators reporting the news. They suggest that they "should be seen as strategic providers of political content, raising important questions about their role in shaping public discourse and democratic engagement" (von Sikorski et al. 1). The writers also explain that, unlike journalists, influencers are not constrained by traditional journalistic norms or fact-checking standards (von Sikorski et al. 5). They suggest that the rhetoric of political influencers prioritizes persuasion and engagement over accountability. Similarly, Martin J. Riedl and his colleagues define political influencers as "content creators that endorse a political position, social cause, or candidate through media that they produce and/or share on a given social media platform" (Riedl et al. 2), emphasizing that they are driven not only by politics, but also by platform and market incentives, such as views, likes, comments, and monetization. Anaëlle Gonzalez et al. write about how influencers employed a "human impact" frame, emphasizing personal and emotional consequences over factual accuracy (Gonzalez et al. 1605). This research suggests that political content created by influencers frequently simplifies issues and optimizes for the algorithm and engagement using emotional framing. Riedl et al., drawing on Abdin and Cotter, explain that "platforms are infrastructures that influencers use to engage with their audiences. Two platforms particularly popular with influencers – and more broadly associated with influencer culture – are TikTok and Instagram" (qtd. in Riedl et al. 3).

Political influencers are not as focused on producing factual, unbiased news as traditional media. Their goal is to engage with their audience using emotionally charged rhetoric. Their influence is not independent of the platform itself but is tethered to the platform's incentives. In

other words, their influence "is captured through platforms' proprietary metrics and on terms put forth by platforms." (Riedl et al. 4). Because these platform metrics determine their visibility and success, influencers must adapt their rhetorical strategies to the platform's logic. As von Sikorski et al. framed it, "digital environments like social media allow strategic curators like politicians – but also [social media influencers] – to convey information to social media users out of strategic motives like maximizing followers or financial gain (von Sikorski et al. 5). As Thorson and Wells argue, in the digital environment, "individuals are at the center of personal information networks embedded in multiple, intersecting content flows curated by various actors in varying proportions" (Thorson and Wells 310). This suggests that emotional framing is not a style preference, but a structural adaptation to the algorithm's incentives.

Scholars also argue that political influencers typically stick to moral binaries when constructing arguments. Riedl et al. note that modern political discourse (especially on social media platforms) focuses on right and wrong instead of agreeing on some shared beliefs and disagreeing on others (Riedl et al. 3). In this environment, political influencers present issues as battles between sides and align themselves and their followers against the opposing side that they portray as wrong and immoral. This framing simplified political disagreements into a moral conflict in which one side is deemed correct and the other is portrayed as uninformed or dangerous. Political influencers choose this kind of framing because it increases engagement by creating group identity and emotional investment.

Research also shows that emotional framing directly affects the audience response. According to Humprecht et al., "Emotional social media posts attract attention and provoke emotional user reactions" (Humprecht et al. 4). Similarly, Fischer et al. found that "partisan mockery" videos on YouTube – another platform with a large amount of political discourse – are

"particularly likely to attract viewers." (Fischer et al. 259-268). Rather than showing political issues as complicated issues with multiple factors, influencers often gloss over details to increase entertainment value and maintain audience attention. As Scheufele and Nisbet explain, online news environments are increasingly shaped by "media-centric" and "audience-centric" filters that prioritize content based on popularity, algorithmic reinforcement, and user preference, rather than what is more factually complete or correct. (Scheufele and Nisbet 47-48).

Gonzalez et al. further support this pattern by noting that political content on Instagram often emphasizes "the human impact frame" (Gonzalez et al. 1605). Instead of focusing on government procedures or policy details, influencers emphasize how certain issues affect individuals and communities, since viewers are more likely to connect with issues that directly affect them. Since influencers are "often considered role models for their (young) audiences" (Gonzalez et al. 1606), their influence relies more on authenticity and likeability over credibility.

Overall, these scholars suggest that influencer rhetoric is shaped by platform incentives, moral framing, and emotional impact. Influencers are not simply sharing political information. They are formulating their arguments and information in ways that entertain viewers, increase engagement, and feed algorithmic incentives. While this research explains how influencer rhetoric functions on social media platforms, less research has been conducted on how these approaches adapt to short-form content on platforms such as Instagram Reels.

Credibility and Authority in Digital Political Discourse

Scholars in the field of political communication and media studies have also examined how credibility and authority are established in digital political communication, particularly on platforms where anyone can become a political influencer (von Sikorski et al.; Riedl et al.; Harff et al.; Gonzalez et al.; Gandini et al.; Harris et al.; Lewis; Sehl et al.; Schmuck et al.; Tang). On

online platforms, authority and trustworthiness are not automatically assumed by association with large media outlets. In contrast to mass media, on social media, "processes of curation are also undertaken by actors such as friends and social contacts, computer algorithms, and individual media users themselves" (Thorson and Wells 310). It is earned through repeated visibility, relatability, and likeability. According to Gonzalez et al., celebrities, athletes, and social media influencers all fit common leadership traits: "(1) they represent certain values…, (2) they display high interest or (self-acquired) knowledge about the topics they share…and (3) they have large amounts of followers" (qtd. in Gonzalez 4). Unlike traditional journalists and media outlets, "they appeal to young and non-politically interested audiences, without holding formal positions of power" (qtd. in Gonzalez 4). Their influence is especially powerful because these celebrities and influencers reach people who are not already engaged and well-informed about politics. They often communicate with people who do not stay up to date on policy changes, political debates, and traditional news sources. Influencers are not just participating in political discourse; they control how politics is introduced to some audiences, especially young people, for the first time.

As a result, the way political influencers present political content matters tremendously. Influencers do not deliver political information in the same detailed, fact-checked, and reviewed way traditional journalists do. Instead, digital political rhetoric is carefully curated and formatted to prioritize view engagement and platform incentives. Unlike traditional news platforms, influencers have to compete with entertainment, meme, and lifestyle content, incentivizing them to make their content interesting, relatable, concise, and engaging to be pushed by the algorithm. Since influencers work within a short-form, engagement-driven format, their content often prioritizes concision, clarity, and immediacy over depth and procedural detail. As a result,

creators may present issues through simplified explanations, selected examples, or clear interpretive conclusions rather than through extended context, competing perspectives, or step-by-step explanations on how institutions and policies operate. This does not necessarily mean the context is inaccurate, but it does mean the format can limit the amount of nuance included. Traditional journalism generally operates under different audience expectations and professional norms, which place greater emphasis on detailed reporting, source transparency, verification, and fuller contextualization. For this study, “traditional media” refers mainly to reporting-oriented news organizations with stronger norms of verification and source transparency (e.g., Reuters, WSJ), rather than to more partisan or engagement-driven cable news formats (e.g., CNN, Fox News).

Ultimately, this contrast highlights how credibility functions differently across two political environments. In traditional journalism, authority is earned by rigorous fact-checking, detailed evaluations, and editorial oversight. For political influencers on social media, authority is earned by visibility, audience connection, and relatability. Because influencers produce political content for viewers who have not previously shown interest in or knowledge of politics, political influencers' opinions significantly shape these viewers’ thoughts and opinions. When political issues are simplified, personalized, or emotionally charged, that version becomes viewers’ only point of reference for those issues. Understanding the difference between traditional journalists and social media influencers is essential for evaluating how political content differs on both platforms.

Scholars in political communication, media studies, and rhetoric have established several insightful findings about digital political discourse. Studies have shown that social media influencers act as strategic providers of political content, whose rhetoric is shaped by platform

incentives, emotional framing, and algorithmic visibility (von Sikorski et al.; Riedl et al.; Harff et al.). Previous research also shows that influencers frequently rely on moral binaries, human impact framing, and emotionally charged narratives to increase engagement and audience alignment (Gonzalez et al.; Humprecht et al.; Fischer et al.). At the same time, scholars examining credibility and authority in digital environments argue that trust on social media is constructed through visibility, reliability, and personal connection rather than traditional fact-checking standards and editorial oversight (Thorson and Wells; Schmuck et al.). Overall, this research establishes that influencer rhetoric differs from traditional journalism and that these differences significantly shape political discourse on social media.

However, while scholars have extensively examined influencer rhetoric, moral framing, and credibility across social media discourse, less attention has been given to how these rhetorical strategies are used within short-form video content, such as Instagram Reels. More specifically, little research has been conducted on the controversy and online rhetoric surrounding the ICE raids and deportations. How do rhetorical strategies used by political creators on Instagram Reels shape both the framing and the factual accuracy of information about the ICE controversy?

Methods

Sampling Process

To gather the sample of Instagram Reels discussing the ICE controversy, I first created a new Instagram account to reduce algorithmic bias. Then I used Instagram's search and "Edit Interests" features to find relevant Reels. The search terms I used were "ICE raids," "ICE deportation," and "ICE." I also added "Politics," "I.C.E.," and "United States" in the "Edit Interests" section to encourage Instagram to show more relevant political content. After entering

each search term, I scrolled through the results from top to bottom. A Reel qualified for my sample only if it discussed ICE, immigration enforcement, or related immigration policy debates. The Reel also had to express a position, opinion, or interpretation of the issue, and not be an advertisement or a simple repost without additional commentary. If a Reel did not meet those criteria, I skipped it and moved on to the next result until I collected 10 qualified Reels for each search term. Using this system, I collected 30 qualified Reels. For each Reel, I recorded the link, posted date, creator name, caption, number of likes, number of comments, and the creator's apparent political bias. I also generated a transcript of each Reel using getthescript.app so that both rhetorical strategies and fact-checkable claims could be analyzed closely.

After selecting the Reels, I collected comments from each one using a public comment extraction tool called CommentGrid. The tool retrieved the first 15 comments on each Reel, and from that list, I selected the first 5 qualifying comments from each Reel. This allowed me to exclude comments that did not meet the inclusion criteria while maintaining the same number of comments per Reel. I excluded comments unrelated to the Reel, spam, GIF comments, or comments consisting only of emojis. If a comment did not qualify, I replaced it with the next comment on the extracted comments list that qualified. Since Instagram's comment ranking algorithm prioritizes comments with higher like counts and engagement, this method allowed me to analyze the comments most likely to be visible to viewers. Using this process, I collected 5 comments from each of the 30 Reels, for a total of 150 comments.

Coding and Analysis Process

To answer my research question, I analyzed each Instagram Reel for rhetorical strategies and discourse patterns related to the ICE controversy. I counted the rhetorical strategies used and

categorized them into broader groups to identify patterns across the discourse community. To analyze the rhetorical strategies in my Reels samples, I used the following coding categories.

1. Topics and Issues Discussed
    a. ICE raids or enforcement actions
    b. Deportation policies
    c. Border security
    d. Human rights
    e. Race/Identity
    f. Government accountability
2. Emotional Appeals (pathos)
    a. Emotions portrayed
        i. Fear and threat
        ii. Anger and outrage
        iii. Sympathy and compassion
        iv. Patriotism
    b. Emotionally charged language
        i. Injustice or oppression
        ii. Danger/crime
        iii. Struggle and hardship
3. Credibility and Authority (ethos)
    a. Personal Experience
        i. First-hand experience
        ii. Second-hand experience (family/friends)

   b. References to professional or institutional authority
      i. Government officials/agencies
      ii. Experts, journalists, researchers
   c. Moral or ethical arguments
      i. Justice or fairness
      ii. Law/constitutional values
4. Logical Appeals (logos)
   a. Claims
      i. Immigration enforcement is necessary/beneficial
      ii. Immigration enforcement is harmful
      iii. Government policies should change
      iv. Government policies should remain the same
   b. Evidence
      i. Statistical data
      ii. Laws or policies
      iii. News reports/external sources
5. Multimodal Presentation
   a. Audio
      i. Emotional background music
      ii. Dramatic background music
      iii. Neutral background music
      iv. No music
   b. Visual

i. Footage of ICE raids or enforcement
ii. Footage of protests
iii. News clips/screenshots
iv. Screenshots/videos of social media posts
v. Text overlays with claims or stats
vi. Government documents/policies
vii. Images of detained or deported people
viii. Charts/infographics

6. Content Format
    a. Original commentary
    b. Reaction to news or media content
    c. Reaction to other political creators
    d. Compilation (multiple clips, images, or pieces of evidence)
7. Political Framing
    a. pro-ICE
    b. anti-ICE
    c. Right (politically conservative)
    d. Left (politically liberal)
    e. Unknown

Along with coding the 30 Reels I collected, I also coded the 150 associated comments. To analyze the rhetorical strategies in my comment samples, I used the following coding categories.

1. Comment Function Toward Reel Claim

    a. Supports claim
    b. Challenges/Corrects/Questions claim
    c. Mixed/Unclear
2. Reaction
    a. Emotional validation
    b. Personal anecdote
    c. Adds evidence or context
    d. Fact-checks or corrects
    e. Moral judgment or blame
    f. Humor/mockery
    g. Call to action
    h. Off-topic/other
3. Accepts Claim at Face Value
4. Personal Experience
    a. Firsthand
    b. Secondhand
    c. None
5. Emotional Tone
    a. Outrage
    b. Fear/Panic
    c. Grief/Sympathy
    d. Moral Condemnation
    e. Cynicism/Hopelessness

   f. Celebration/Approval
   g. Mockery/Sarcasm
   h. Other/Unclear
6. Rhetorical Response
   a. Repeats Reel's main frame
   b. Intensifies Reel's main frame
   c. Resists Reel's main frame
   d. Redirects to a different frame
   e. Corrects Reel's main frame

Fact-Checking Procedure

In addition to coding the rhetorical strategies used in the Reels, I also analyzed the factual accuracy of the information presented in each Reel. For each sample, I first extracted the Reel's transcript using getthescript.app. I took screenshots of any relevant visual elements such as charts, new screenshots, captions, headlines, or other visual claims shown in the Reel. I then uploaded the transcript and any related screenshots to ChatGPT using GPT-5.4 Extended Thinking mode. I used a standardized fact-checking prompt designed to produce a consistent, evidence-based analysis across all samples. The prompt instructed ChatGPT to identify the Reel's main argument and rhetorical framing, extract distinct fact-checkable claims, and separate factual claims from opinions or emotional rhetoric, verify those claims using current and credible sources such as government documents, court decisions, official policy materials, reputable reporting outlets, and fact-checking organizations, and evaluate whether the Reel relied on misleading reasoning, omitted context, exaggeration, or other logical problems.

For each Reel, this process produced a structured fact-checking report that included a summary of the Reel, a list of extracted factual claims, a claim-by-claim analysis, and an overall assessment of the Reel's factual reliability. Each claim was assigned one of four verdicts: True, False, Partial, or Unknown. A claim was marked true if it was supported by strong, credible evidence, false if it was contradicted by strong, credible evidence, partial if it contained some truth but was materially misleading, incomplete, or overstated, and unknown if there was not enough reliable evidence to verify or falsify it. After generating these reports, I compiled them into a single Fact-Checking Report, which will be cited in my findings and included in my ePortfolio so readers can review the full analyses and evaluate the evidence for themselves.

Limitations

This study had several limitations, especially in the sampling process. First, Instagram's search results and comment rankings are shaped by algorithms, so another researcher using the same search terms at a different time might not receive the exact same results. Creating a new account and following a set search process reduced some bias, but it did not eliminate algorithmic influence entirely. Second, because I selected only a small number of qualifying Reels from each search, my sample will reflect the content that Instagram makes more visible, rather than the full range of possible Reels about the ICE controversy. In the same way, CommentGrid retrieves only the first 15 comments that are ranked the highest by Instagram's algorithm, rather than a perfect sample from every viewpoint. These limitations mean the sample is not perfectly unbiased, but they also make my research manageable and repeatable for other researchers.

There were also limitations in the coding and fact-checking process. Some categories, such as political framing, emotional tone, and political bias, required my interpretation and

subjective judgment. The fact-checking report added another layer of analysis, but it also has limits. Because the Reels are short, fast-moving, and sometimes rely on implied meaning instead of clear factual statements, it was not always easy to separate direct claims from rhetorical framing. In some cases, available evidence was incomplete, disputed, or still developing, making final judgments less certain. As a result, the report is used for identifying patterns in factual accuracy and misinformation, but it should not be treated as a source of absolute certainty for every claim. Lastly, different political issues have distinct political discourses surrounding them. While the results from my study do not represent all political discourse on social media, they allow for a detailed analysis of how political discourse behaves within a specific discourse community.

Results

Overview

This study analyzed 30 Instagram Reels about the ICE controversy. These Reels were coded for rhetorical strategies, political framing, and multimodal presentation. In addition, each Reel was analyzed through a structured fact-checking report that extracted fact-checkable claims and assigned verdicts of TRUE, FALSE, PARTIAL, or UNKNOWN. A secondary dataset of 150 comments, five from each Reel, was also coded to identify patterns in audience reactions.

Across the fact-check dataset, the 30 Reels contained 279 distinct fact-checkable claims, with an average of 9.3 claims per Reel and a range of 6 to 14. At the claim level, 104 claims (37%) were classified as TRUE, 107 claims (38%) were classified as PARTIAL, 34 claims (12%) were classified as FALSE, and 34 claims (12%) were classified as UNKNOWN. At the Reel level, all 30 Reels were classified as mixed or misleading rather than fully accurate. “Mixed or misleading” refers to Reels that were neither fully accurate nor entirely fabricated, but instead

combined real, factual material with incomplete context, overstatement, or distorted framing. The pie chart below (Table 1) shows an overview of the verdict totals from the fact-check.

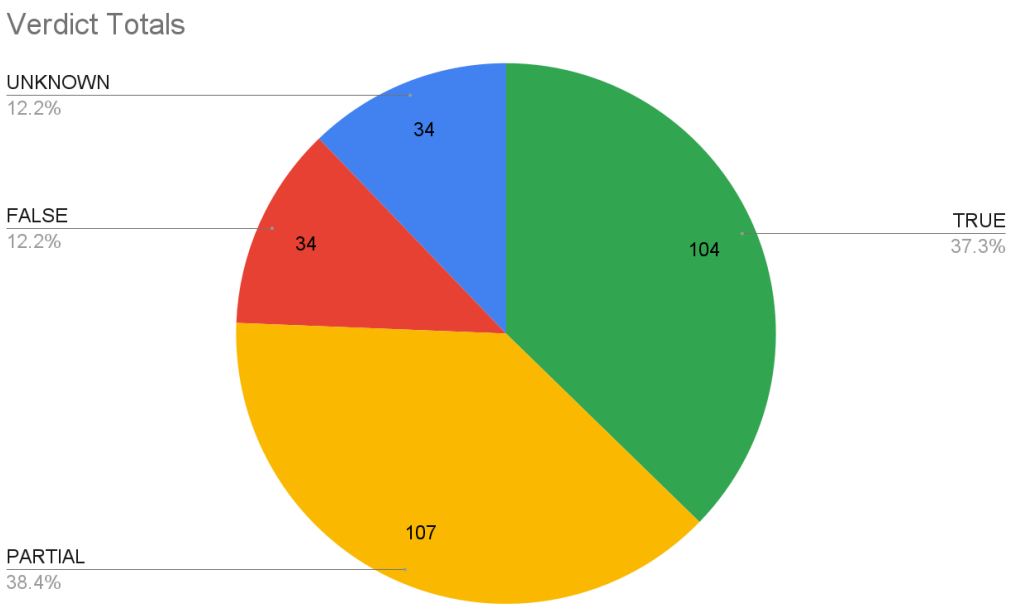

Table 1: Verdict Totals

Common Rhetorical Patterns in the Reels

The coding results show that the most common issue framings were government accountability and ICE raids or enforcement actions. Government accountability appeared in 26 of the 30 Reels (86.67%), while ICE raids or enforcement actions appeared in 24 Reels (80.00%). Human rights was also a frequent frame, appearing in 20 Reels (66.67%), and deportation policies appeared in 15 Reels (50.00%). Race/identity appeared in 9 Reels (30.00%), and border security appeared in only 5 Reels (16.67%).

Emotional appeals were one of the most consistent rhetorical features across the sample. Anger/outrage appeared in 27 Reels (90.00%), and fear/threat appeared in 24 Reels (80.00%). Sympathy/compassion appeared in 19 Reels (63.33%). Other recurring emotional frames

included injustice/oppression in 18 Reels (60.00%), danger/crime in 17 Reels (56.67%), and struggle/hardship in 13 Reels (43.33%). Patriotism appeared much less often, in only 3 Reels (10.00%).

Credibility-related and evidence-based strategies appeared less often than creator-driven commentary in the sample. Across the sample, 14 of the 30 Reels (46.67%) included at least one reference to authority, such as laws or policies, government officials or agencies, or experts, journalists, and researchers. Laws or policies were coded in 10 Reels (33.33%), and experts, journalists, or researchers were coded in 6 Reels (20%). News reports or external sources were coded in 11 Reels (36.67%), statistical data were coded in 5 Reels (16.67%), and references to government officials and agencies were coded in 9 Reels (30%). On the contrary, original commentary was the most common content format, appearing in 22 of the 30 Reels (73.33%).

Multimodal support also appeared in much of the sample. Nineteen of the 30 Reels (63.33%) included at least one supporting visual element, such as screenshots of news headlines, social media clips, photos, or charts used to reinforce the creator's claims. The bar chart below (Table 2) shows some of the most frequently used rhetorical patterns.

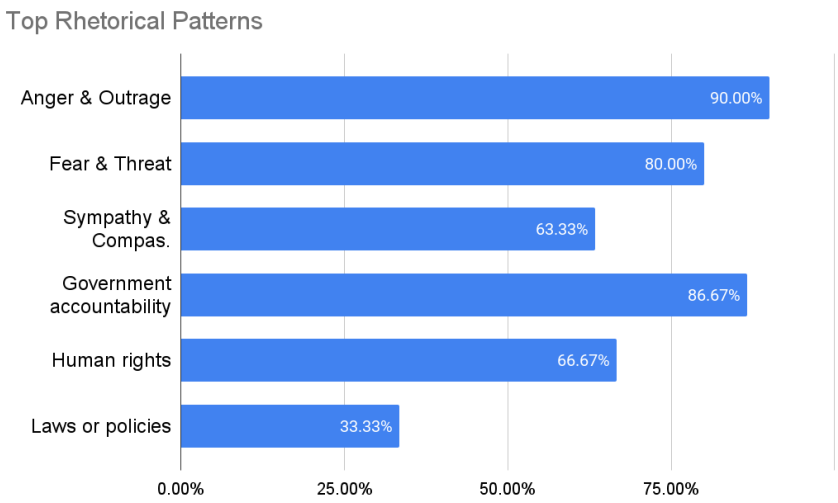

Table 2: Top Rhetorical Patterns

Patterns in Factual Accuracy and Misinformation

The fact-checking results indicate that the most common factual problem across the sample was not outright falsehood, but partially accurate or misleading claims. Since PARTIAL was the most frequent verdict category, many Reels combined real facts with missing context, overstatement, or unsupported generalization. FALSE and UNKNOWN claims appeared less frequently overall, but they still accounted for a substantial minority of the extracted claims. Reels that used statistical data showed a lower average combined FALSE + UNKNOWN share than Reels without statistical data. At the same time, Reels that used laws or policies still showed a high average PARTIAL share. Reels that visually presented government documents or policy materials also showed especially high PARTIAL shares.

A similar pattern appeared when the Reels were compared by emotional density. Reels coded with a larger number of emotional appeals tended to show higher average shares of PARTIAL, FALSE, and UNKNOWN claims than Reels with fewer emotional codes. This pattern was especially visible in Reels that combined multiple emotional strategies such as anger, fear, sympathy, injustice, and danger framing in the same video. By contrast, Reels that relied more heavily on explicit evidence-signaling strategies, especially statistical data, tended to show lower levels of fully unsupported claims, even though they still often remained mixed overall.

Comment Response Patterns

The comment sample primarily reinforced the framings already present in the Reels. Of the 150 coded comments, 134 (89.33%) supported the Reel's claim, 9 (6%) challenged, corrected, or questioned the claim, and 7 (4.67%) were coded as mixed or unclear.

The most common comment-level reactions were moral judgment or blame, and adding evidence or context. Moral judgment/blame appeared in 111 comments (74%), and adding

evidence or context appeared in 100 comments (66.67%). Emotional validation appeared in 60 comments (40%), and fact-checking or correcting behavior appeared in 23 comments (15.33%). Smaller patterns included call-to-action comments (23; 15.33%), personal anecdotes (20; 13.33%), humor/mockery (11; 7.33%), and off-topic/other (7; 4.67%). The pie chart below (Table 3) shows the ratio of comment agreement with the Reels creators in the sample.

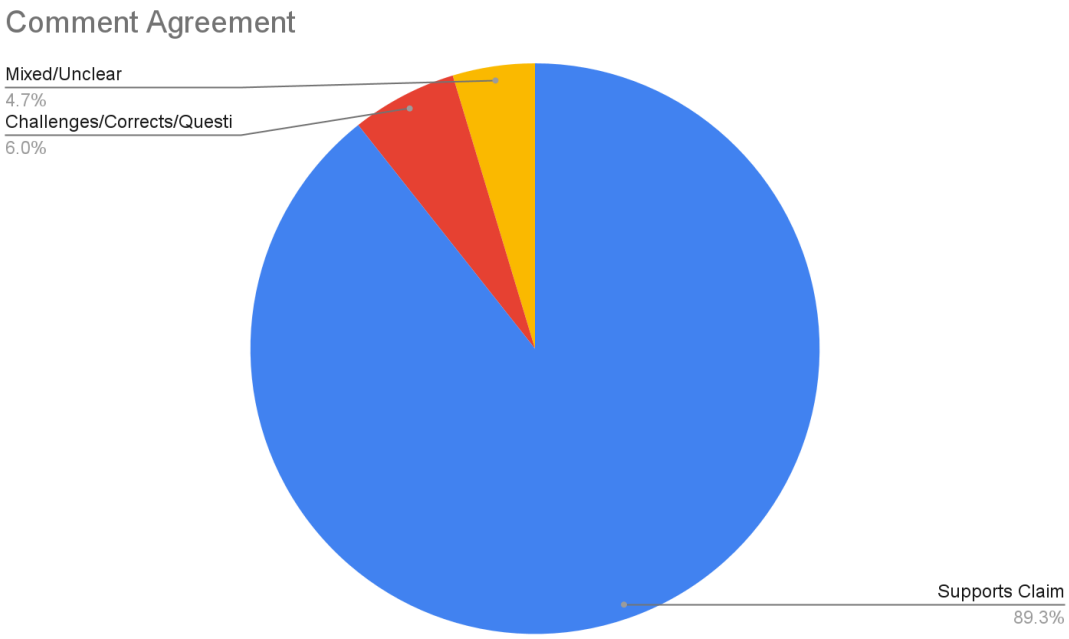

Table 3: Comment Agreement

Discussion

This study found that rhetorical strategies used by political creators on Instagram Reels determined both the framing and the factual accuracy of the information about the ICE controversy. The results showed that the ICE controversy was framed primarily in terms of government accountability, enforcement actions, and human rights, rather than through policy and legal explanations. Emotional appeals such as anger, fear, and sympathy appeared across

most of the sample, suggesting that creators did not present the ICE controversy as a policy or legal issue, but more as a moral and human rights conflict. At the same time, the fact-checking results showed that these rhetorical strategies frequently influenced the accuracy of the information presented. The most common pattern in the sample was not completely false or fabricated claims, but partially accurate claims that use real, factual information that gets stretched or oversimplified. Overall, these findings suggest that on Instagram Reels, rhetoric shaped not only how the controversy was understood, but also how reliable the information appeared.

Framing the ICE Controversy Through Topic Selection

One of the clearest findings in the results is that the ICE controversy was frequently framed in terms of government accountability, enforcement actions, and human rights, rather than in policy and legal terms. This suggests that creators were not mainly asking viewers to understand ICE through policy or legal issues alone. Instead, they encouraged viewers to see the controversy as a broader moral issue about human rights, government power, and danger. This framing is important because it shaped how the issue was understood before specific factual claims were evaluated. Once the controversy was framed as abuse, threat, cruelty, or public protection, creators could then select and present details in ways to support their position.

Pathos and the Framing of Urgency

The emotional coding results show that anger, fear, and sympathy were the most common rhetorical strategies in the sample. This suggests that creators frequently relied on pathos to make the ICE controversy feel urgent, personal, and dangerous. Rather than presenting claims analytically, many Reels urged viewers to respond emotionally and fight back. That does not mean that emotional rhetoric made the content false, but it does show that emotional framing

played a major role in shaping how viewers interpreted the issue. This matters because emotionally intense rhetoric can narrow the range of possible interpretations by simplifying the issue and reducing it to a moral binary of right and wrong. In this case, utilizing pathos not only made the Reels more emotionally persuasive but might have also narrowed the audience's ability to interpret the issue on their own and reach their own conclusions. This pattern reflects what Gonzalez et al. describe as a "human impact" frame, in which political creators emphasize personal impact over legal and policy detail (Gonzalez et al. 1605). It also supports the broader argument that influencer rhetoric is often optimized for engagement and algorithmic incentives.

Pathos and Factual Simplification

The results also showed that Reels with greater emotional density typically had more partially accurate, false, and unknown claims than Reels with fewer emotional codes. These findings suggest that emotional intensity was often associated with a more simplified presentation of factual information. In Reels with multiple emotional codes, such as outrage, fear, sympathy, and injustice, the creator was more likely to move beyond factual claims toward a broader interpretation of their meaning. This does not indicate that emotionally dense Reels always contained more misinformation, but that emotional density appeared to increase the likelihood of moral binaries and factual simplification. This fits Riedl et al.'s argument that much political discourse on social media is framed through ideas of right and wrong, which can make complex issues easier to moralize but harder to present with full context (Riedl et al. 3). This explains why many of those claims fell into the PARTIAL category on the fact check. These results suggest that emotional rhetoric frequently determines factual accuracy by pushing incomplete or limited facts into broader claims than the evidence supports.

Ethos and the Appearance of Authority

The results also showed that many Reels relied on building credibility through references to laws, policies, experts, and journalists. This suggests that creators did not rely solely on emotional framing. Instead, some creators also constructed the appearance of authority and knowledge by borrowing language and the appearance of expertise, legal representatives, and traditional journalism. In the sample, 46.67% of the Reels (14/30) used at least one reference to authority. This is important because it shows that ethos in this discourse community was often performance-based. Reels frequently signaled credibility through screenshots, legal terms, policy references, or external sources, making the content appear factual and grounded even when the creator's claim went beyond what the evidence supported. By mixing factual information with personal interpretation, creators can make their claim appear to be supported by facts, even if the conclusion is factually incomplete or exaggerated.

Logos and Partial Accuracy

The results showed that claims based on data and legal policy were not without factual inaccuracies, but they did show a lower amount of fully unsupported (FALSE) claims. This suggests that evidence-centered Reels had stronger factual grounding. However, these types of Reels also showed high rates of partially accurate claims, which might indicate that, in evidence-based Reels, creators tend to overstate interpretations or draw generalized conclusions that are not fully supported by the evidence. This suggests that logos in the sample was often selective rather than fully complete. This supports Scheufele and Nisbet's argument that online political content is not always organized around what is most factually complete or correct, since many Reels used evidence in ways that sounded grounded while still leaving out context or overstating conclusions (Scheufele and Nisbet 47-48). This matters because it shows that factual

appeals and persuasive framing often worked together. Evidence was not always used to give a full context and background, but was often used to strengthen the creator's interpretation.

Multimodal Rhetoric

Another important pattern is that the political creators did not rely solely on spoken claims. They also used multimodal strategies such as screenshots of news headlines, social media clips, and photos to strengthen the overall credibility of their claims. In the sample, 63.33% of Reels (19/30) had at least one supporting visual element. Visuals could help the audience visualize an issue, increase sympathy for victims, or make the claims appear more credible, especially when the Reel resembled a documentary-style video. That matters because multimodal presentation can increase both persuasion and perceived credibility. A screenshot, news clip, or official document can make a claim seem based on factual information even if the creator's interpretation is contestable.

Factual Accuracy

One of the most important findings in this study is that the largest factual pattern was not entirely false claims but rather partial accuracy. Since PARTIAL was the most common verdict category, the most common type of misinformation in the sample was not complete fabrication of facts, but extending conclusions beyond what the facts support. Many of the Reels used a real event, statistic, image, or news story as the base of their claim, but presented a conclusion from the data that could not be verified by the available facts. Out of the 279 fact-checked claims, 34 claims could not be verified and were marked as UNKNOWN. A Reel did not have to be entirely false to be misleading. In some cases, a Reel would have mostly factual information, but its final conclusion would oversimplify or overstate what the facts supported. In the sample, this occurred for 107 of the 279 fact-checked claims. This pattern aligns with von Sikorski et al.’s argument

that political influencers are not constrained by traditional journalistic norms or fact-checking standards, which helps explain why accurate details could still be presented in selective or misleading ways (von Sikorski et al. 5).

Conclusion

Overall, this study found that rhetorical strategies used by political creators on Instagram Reels shaped both how the ICE controversy was framed and how factually reliable that information appeared. Across the sample, creators most often presented ICE through emotionally charged narratives of accountability, danger, harm, legality, and injustice, rather than through neutral legal and policy explanation alone. The fact-checking results further showed that the most common factual pattern was not entirely false claims, but partial accuracy, in which real events, statistics, images, or policies were used as the basis for claims that were then simplified, overstated, or extended beyond what the evidence fully supported. Together, these findings suggest that political creators on Instagram Reels do more than just share information. Instead, they determine what information means, how it should be interpreted, and how audiences are encouraged to respond to it. Although this study is limited to a specific sample of Reels and comments, it shows how political influencers can affect public understanding not only through the claims they make, but also through the rhetorical strategies they use to frame those claims. Future research could build on this study by examining larger samples, other political topics, or other short-form video platforms to determine whether these same patterns appear across digital political discourse in similar ways.

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Appendix A: AI Transparency Statement

I used ChatGPT (GPT-5.4, OpenAI) to help generate the paper's title, brainstorm section subheadings, analyze my research results to identify common patterns and key findings, and assist in drafting the Results section based on my own collected data and research materials. I also used Grammarly to review spelling and grammar. All final analysis, interpretations, and written content submitted in this paper were reviewed, revised, and approved by me.

AI Tool(s): ChatGPT (GPT-5.4, OpenAI); Grammarly

Date of use: April 2026

URL: https://chat.openai.com/