'It Isn't About Who Was Worse': Colonialism and Historical Debate on Social Media

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Abstract How do young people discuss history online? What is at stake for them when they engage in debating colonial heritage? This chapter reports on the ways in which young people debate controversial history on social media platforms. Typically, is taken for granted that youth navigates digital environments with a clear understanding of the content and social relations available therein. However, research shows that they are underprepared to deal with the misleading narratives that are ubiquitous on the social web. In this sense, training youths to scrutinize historical narratives and civic discourses has been keen research interest in history education. Yet, how they explain history in interaction with others has yet to explore as it is usually in this way that the sense-making of history occurs in digital environments. Herein is presented a qualitative analysis of three representative online historical debates on Facebook, out of fifteen examined, in which twenty-one young participants with culturally diverse backgrounds participated. The debates deal with the 2017 remarks from Spain's public television chief Jose Antonio Sanchez, who justified the sixteenth-century Hispanic colonization of the Americas at a keynote public lecture. The findings show three types of approaches to historical debates: mirror talk, battle talk, and persuasive talk. The participants engage with the debate considering different focuses: historical violence, historical actors, and/or historical context; these focuses determine to some extent if they debate history from one single perspective or take different angles to discuss the issue. Finally, the implications of these three types of historical debate for youth civic engagement and historical understanding are discussed.

Keywords Historical debate · Social media · History education · Controversial issues · Historical dialogue

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In recent years, by mid-October, the commemoration in many countries of the so-called 'discovery of America' (e.g., 'Columbus Day') ignites a massive range of heated discussions on social media. People all over the world share their opinions about this issue on social media expressing what they allegedly know about it, along with political stands, moral judgments, and misjudgments of the past. In these cases, historical explanations come with claims of animosity toward, sympathy for, or compliance with the colonial heritage of Christopher Columbus' arrival in what is now known as the Americas. This is an unprecedented phenomenon with significant consequences on how societies relate to the past and discuss it, resulting from the technological advances of the last decades (Collins & Halverson, 2009). It also raises the questions on whether or not social media reshapes the discussion on colonialism and its sociohistorical implications, and what are the advantages and disadvantages of these digital platforms to debate contested historical events are the present chapter explores these issues by analyzing the ways in which historical discussion unfolds on social media and its implications for history education.

Nowadays, people are exposed to a great volume of historical information on digital platforms, in contrast to what they can get in formal settings such as schools or museums (Kelly, 2016; Wright & Viens, 2017). This has made it easier to reach more historical information and gain knowledge about different cultural productions and interpretations of the past (Carretero, Berger & Grever, 2017; de Groot, 2016). Consumption of history has then become more diversified and 'virtual' real life has turned people's relations with history more complex (Maggioni & Fox, 2020). Digital platforms have expanded people's scope of historical interpretations and have given them more agency. Now, more than ever, people express their thoughts, concerns, and commitments on digital platforms more fluently than in offline environments (Bennett, Maton & Kervin, 2008). However, research exploring people's digital consumption of history has drawn attention to evidence of bias in historical explanations and misinformation available on the internet, and the related challenges and drawbacks to historical literacy and historical dialogue this entails (Haydn & Ribbens, 2017; Wineburg, 2018).

This chapter presents the analysis of the reactions and cross swords on social media about the 2017 public speech of executive Jose Antonio Sanchez, president of RTVE, Spain's state-owned public radio and television corporation. The defense of colonialism and the analogy between the Aztecs with the Nazis in his speech immediately caused outrage and confrontation. This is an exemplary case of how colonialism is still a central issue on the international agenda and how societies have failed in preparing people to deal with both its legacy and consequences. Recent international research shows the permanent goal of recreating the colonial narrative in school history content as well as the difficulty and discomfort among youths to understand and debate it (Carretero & Perez-Manjarrez, 2019; Van Nieuwenhuyse & Pires Valentim, 2018). The problematic legacy of colonialism is not only evident in

formal education settings but in different social practices such as commemorations and recently on social media platforms; however, fewer studies have paid attention to youths' sense-making of colonial pasts in these new digital environments (Carretero, Wagoner & Perez-Manjarrez, 2022). This study seeks to bridge this gap, as well as to explore the new challenges and opportunities it involves.

History Education in the Age of Social Media

In the last years, studies have shown that social media has become a primary learning environment for young people (Gardner & Davis, 2013). Social media stands out within the social web in putting them in the forefront, expanding and transforming the ways by which they communicate and relate to each other. But social media has also become a new battleground for 'cultural wars' and polarization. Civic and history education studies have pointed out the challenges of debating historical controversies (Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Kello, 2016). In social media, young people are exposed to seemingly contesting historical narratives that hinder healthy debate and fruitful dialogue (Haydn & Ribbens, 2017). Studies in this field are still emerging and particularly historical debate has been little studied. Most research on history education and digital platforms mainly focuses on the consumption of historical content on the internet (Wineburg, 2018).

Young people navigate a complex paradox in social media platforms: they have an inexhaustible source of information about any topic of interest; but, contrastingly, the relation with the truth, what is accurate and trustworthy, has never been as contested as it is today (Wineburg, 2018). Studies have shown that social media platforms are flooded with many misleading and unverified narratives which amplify disinformation and polarization (Buckingham, 2019; Lewandowsky, Ecker & Cook, 2017). Research shows that youths in different countries find it difficult to evaluate the quality of information they read on the internet. Therefore, they tend to perceive as credible information that is misleading if not directly false (Haydn & Counsel, 2004; Haydn & Ribbens, 2017; Wineburg, 2018). This has two major implications: the internalization of misrepresentations of history, and the uninformed consumption of historical content that can lead to non-prosocial attitudes toward current contemporary social controversies with strong historical roots (Haydn & Ribbens, 2017).

Against this background, there are initiatives providing technical education to history teachers, aiming to equip them with the tools to introduce online learning in the classroom and handle these predicaments (Heafner, Harshorne & Petty, 2014). This type of proposal has improved teachers' performance and skills but has brought little evidence of its efficacy on the young people's improvement in dealing with historical content and dynamics on the internet (Ikejiri, Oura, Fushikida, Anzai & Yamauchi, 2018). Some researchers on history education have tackled these problems by tapping into models of historical thinking. They argue that mastering the conceptual constructs and skills of historical thinking will permit individuals to

assess historical evidence to discriminate between interpretations and misjudgments of history (Wineburg, 2018). Significant advancements have been conducted especially on source verification, teaching young people to identify and assess historical contents on digital platforms (McGrew, Breakstone, Ortega, Smith &Wineburg, 2018).

However, the accuracy of the source is not the only problem. Historical thinking development involves more than a cluster of cognitive skills as it is also related to identity, ethical, social, and cultural dimensions (Carretero & Perez-Manjarrez, 2022). The attitudes that people hold toward digital historical content, and the symbolic load it has on itself, have important effects on how they make sense of it and engage in conversations with others about it (McGrew et al., 2018). The ability to disentangle this web of meanings within online content (accuracy, morality, identity load) in relation to the context (cultural worldview and value systems) is fundamental, as it is crucial to understand the motivations and intentions to debate this content with others. In the last years, scholars have explored the processes by which young people make sense of history from the approach of peer-to-peer interaction (Barton & McCully, 2010). Showing the advantages of learning through dialogue and debate and the need to explore further to understand this practice that is essential in social media interactions.

History Education Through Debate

Public discussion of history is a social act generally embraced by people that generates different reactions and outcomes, from common awareness of public concerns, achievement of social consensus, to exacerbating polarized contested views and irreconcilable disagreement. Yet, despite widespread social interest and involvement in public debate, excitement about the discussion of historical issues in the classroom is somewhat static or even absent (Clark, 2009). Up until recently, debating as a teaching mechanism or historical concept to advance people's historical thinking has not been considered as fundamental. There are some implicit references to debate as a relevant environment or skill to develop historical thinking. For instance, the emphasis on making different historical perspectives available to learners to foster perspective-taking has been a recurrent claim in historical thinking models (Seixas, 2017). However, this has been mainly related to enhancing individual perspective-taking instead of promoting joint learning and open discussion.

In the last years, incipient initiatives in history education and debate have emerged with promising results. Scholars have approached existing school history curriculums from the lens of debate, concluding that the design of conventional history education, at least in the cases of the US and other developed countries, hampers historical debate (Clark, 2009; Stearns, 2010). The structure and design of school history fail in connecting students with the significance of history, and with the public concerns and discussions in society around the common past. In contrast, debate can bridge this gap by promoting 'critical historical engagement' (Clark, 2009). In this respect, others

have advocated for the use of public hot topics and troubled pasts, such as colonialism, colonial legacy, and historic territorial disputes, to boost the interests of students, their historical thinking skills, and help them tackle social conversation around history (Kello, 2016; Malloy, Kelly, Scales, Menickelli & Scales, 2020; Thompson & Cole, 2003).

On a par with this diagnosis, testing of the feasibility of historical debate has been conducted. Based on the assumption that debates enhance the student's engagement with the past and historical thinking, scholars have tested different types of historical debates and their effects (Ellis & Vincent, 2020; MacArthur, Ferretti & Okolo, 2002; Osborne, 2005). Among all, in view of Ellis and Vincent (2020) the structured controversy format is the most successful as it equips students with the cognitive skills to face difficult conversations. Researchers' findings suggest that an effective historical debate is one that, on the one hand, helps students understand the construction of historical narratives, the historian's method—mainly scrutiny of primary sources— and the forms and discussions in historiography (Ellis & Vincent, 2020; Osborne, 2005). On the other hand, a successful debate promotes high levels of engagement and equal participation, and a collective reflection of societies' past, value systems as well as, on a personal level, a reflection on one's own beliefs and civic identity (MacArthur et al., 2002). In short, a debate 'dramatizes and vitalizes the challenge of constructing historical knowledge' (Ellis & Vincent, 2020: 209) at a time that fosters authentic historical learning and ethical development (Osborne, 2005).

Despite these initial advances, the road ahead is long and not without challenges. If individual tasks of historical thinking are difficult for students, peer-to-peer activities entail a major effort and skills. Findings show that people's accurate use of evidence is variable and developing solid-based historical arguments is complicated (Malloy et al., 2020). Participants find it difficult to interact beyond dichotomous arguments and discussions, and even more, do not tend to demand evidence from other persons to sustain their claims (MacArthur et al., 2002). Also, they had troubled finding the differences between perspectives of the past and the present about specific events. In terms of historical empathy, they also tend to judge people from the past and believe that the past is something to overcome, which inhibits significant debate (Jensen, 2008). At last, the challenges for conducting effective historical debate turn it more difficult for digital environments where debates aren't guided and supervised, and control and verification of content are absent as in experimental or school settings. In social media, the above benefits and limitations grow exponentially, and it takes new research to understand how people face historical debates on these platforms.

Study

The main objective of this study is to analyze the type of approaches people take to historical debates on social media. A case study is made of the 2017 remarks from Spain's public television chief, Jose Antonio Sanchez, at a keynote lecture on Spanish history, and the reactions these remarks caused among people on digital platforms.

Antonio Sanchez's speech elaborates on two key standpoints: Firstly, the statement affirming that 'Spain' was not a colonizing empire, but it brought civilization to the indigenous peoples of the Americans.[1] And secondly, the statement undermining the violence caused by the Hispanic colonization, based on the equivalency between the Aztec Empire to the Nazi regime during World War II as two historical agents that do not merit further consideration.[2] These claims made by this TV executive caused special outrage on social media. A few weeks after his speech, several historians[3] refuted Sanchez's claims demonstrating that his speech was inaccurate and anachronistic, his use of historiographical sources was deceitful, and that his speech intended to bolster a nationalistic and political agenda. This type of historical speech is an exemplary case of the biased historical narratives circulating on social media, spreading misinformation, historical prejudices, and polarization.

The analysis was conducted with Facebook data collected in 2019. This digital platform has proven effective and functional as a platform providing rich data for academic research (Sheeran & Cummings, 2018). Its format and structure facilitate rich debates and foster the exchange of opinions, unlike other digital platforms such as *Twitter* which restrict the length of comments and conversations by its limited number of characters. Herein is presented the analysis of a set of informal historical debates that took place on *Facebook* days after the TV executive gave his public speech. This data was collected from the public *Facebook* profile of the independent media '*Remezcla*'.[4] The richness of discussion seen in this profile was relevant in comparison to other state or corporate media profiles examined. This study is part of a broader research project analyzing fifty historical debates collected from social media digital platforms. The relevance in analyzing this type of informal debate is that, as these are not being monitored and systematically conducted in controlled environments, they foster freer, authentic, and spontaneous interactions among people.[5] Informal debates can tell us about how people tackle socially relevant historical issues and handle interactions with others to make sense of the past, which is not easily achievable in formal settings such as schools.

This chapter presents the analysis of fifteen cases of historical debates on *Facebook*. From this analysis, three types of approaches to historical debates were identified. An in-depth analysis of three representative cases of the fifteen debates is

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[1] His exact phrase was: '*Spain was never a colonizer; it sought to evangelize and civilize. How on earth can we be ashamed of flooding the American territory with schools and churches?*'.

[2] His exact phrase was: '*Mourning the disappearance of the Aztec Empire is like feeling sorry for the defeat of the Nazis in World War II*'.

[3] Four history experts criticize controversial comments by RTVE head José Antonio Sánchez. https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2017/04/07/inenglish/1491561652_009421.html.

[4] *Remezcla* is a Latinx grassroots independent media project based in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, NYC, USA, focused on Latinx mainstream culture and counterculture. It does not receive any government or corporate funding and has its own independent editorial policy.

[5] The administrators of the independent Media profile *Remezcla* confirmed that all comments and opinions shared in the post about Sanchez's speech were reviewed according to Facebook guidelines of respect and non-discriminatory, racist, sexist or any type of violence. The data used in this chapter was not censored or edited by the administrators or the author of this study. https://bit.ly/3MeFNlv.

presented here to better explain the characteristics of the three types of historical debates found. The data analyzed is exemplary of the types of debates observed on social media and of the very culturally diverse people participating in them. Twenty-one individuals participated in these debates ranging from years 21 to 25, ten women and eleven men. Fifteen participants identify themselves as part of the Latinx community in the US (born and raised in the USA in Latino families) mostly from the American west coast. Of these fifteen Latinx participants, seven identify themselves as women, six as men, and one as non-binary. Four more participants identify themselves as White Americans, three men and one woman from the east coast. And finally, two more women participants identify themselves as Mexican–American (Individuals with Latino heritage and/or Mexican family born and raised in Mexico). They all have high school studies and four of them were studying for a degree at the moment of the debate. All the participants gave authorization for data usage via a consent request distributed among them. The participants' names presented in this study are not real since they wanted to keep their personal information private, as well as their specific location.

Data were analyzed using narrative analysis in line with the qualitative methodology previously conducted to examine adolescents' meaning-making of historical controversies (Perez-Manjarrez, 2017, 2019). The analysis was conducted on all the participants' narratives and interactions. It focused on the debates' dynamics, type of interactions and the goals, intention, and functionality underlying these interactions. This analysis was divided into two stages. First, the participants' interactions and intentions of getting involved in the debate were analyzed. The participants present certain arguments to complete specific actions. Three main actions were found in the participants interactions and were used to categorize the debates. Firstly, there was confirmation, which is seen when the participants engage to ratify a specific argument and validate a judgment made about the historical event. Secondly, confrontation was analyzed, which was visible when the participants got involved in challenging or opposing an argument and undermining certain beliefs or ethical issues related to the event. And thirdly, was persuasion, which entails engaging in the debate to present an argument appealing enough to convince other of its validity and positive ethical valuation.

Secondly, the analysis centered on the type of historical perspectives and historical assessment in the participants' narratives. The Historical perspective was coded considering the elements, topics, and angles they use to explain the event. Three main trends were identified in this code: (a) focus on historical violence, (b) focus on historical characters' actions; and (c) historical context and characters' intentions. The coding of historical assessment was based on the type and level of discussion they consider to discuss about the issue. Three main trends were identified in this code: (a) Single discussion: they assess the event considering one dimension of it; (b) Dichotomic-oriented discussion: they assess the event from comparisons mainly considering two dimensions, for instance, historical characters and the relationship of past and present; and (c) Context-driven discussion: they assess the event taking into account more than two dimensions, contextualizing historical characters actions,

intentions, causes, and historical context. Overall, these two stages of analysis allow categorization of the three types of historical debates presented as follows.

Approaches to Historical Debates on Social Media: Mirror Talk, Battle Talk, and Persuasive Talk

Mirror Talk

This approach to debate is characterized by the resolute confirmation of one historical claim about the issue in question by all the participants. The debate is sparked by a person's straightforward argument, mainly grounded on snap judgments and strong historical claims against, or in favor of the principal stand or viewpoint generating the discussion. This argument is backed by others with supporting messages, emotional reactions, and adding information sustaining it. In this sense, this approach makes debate top-down oriented. In this study, eight out of fifteen debates were led by this approach, which makes it the most common in the sample. The debate led by Sofia Sanchez is exemplary of this approach. She compares and equates both cultures: Aztecs might seem savages, but the Conquistadors were as violent as they are or even more. Then peers share and confirm his point with their own opinions:

- *Yes, the Aztecs practiced human sacrifices, but what would you call the burning of people and many other forms of torture that the "Santa Inquisición"* (Spanish Holy Inquisition) *practiced? Don't you try to go above us with this BS. If we are going to take this route, your ancestors were just as savage* Sofia Sanchez
- *Nothing in history is more savage than a disgusting European* Erika Nom
- *I think all humans are savages. We just like to believe that others are worse.* Roberto Hernandez
- *Sofia Sanchez, Getting burned at the stake wasn't even the worst. Try being drawn and quartered, being crammed into an iron maiden, or being impaled on a Judas cradle.* Jason
- *Yeah....euros* (Europeans) *top everyone* Erika Nom
- *Aztecs believed blood was life and the upmost sacred offering to the gods, yes bloody I know... But they also were incredible architect's n astronomers n not to mention warriors. So please, don't compare the culture to some racist fool's.* Donovan Smith
- *World history in one sentence: THESE WHITE MEN ARE DANGEROUS* Juan Lopez
- *The Aztecs didn't willing plan and then systematically execute a genocide... the Nazis did, the Spanish did back in the day and then other colonialist powers completed the task. So yeah... Aztecs aren't the problem here...* Lillie Va len cia

From this type of approach, the debate is taken from one perspective and situated in one level of discussion. The participants focus on the historical characters 'nature'

and the comparison between their actions and implications. The debate is framed into one single dimension, warfare, and violence, overlooking other historical approaches. They argue on the moral assessment of the colonization of America, especially on who is more violent and therefore who is to blame. The possible intentions of the TV executive in delivering this speech are also overshadowed. At first sight, the mirror talk approach may appear too simplistic as all the participants seem to solely agree with the counter-argument. Yet, some interactions identified in this debate make it less univocal than it appears to be. While some participants just back the main counter-argument, others elaborate on this claim by bringing in new information that strengthens it, as in the case of Jason delving into the Spanish Holy Inquisition torture techniques. Also, from the basis of the counter-argument main idea, other participants build on their own arguments and forms of historical comparison to confront the TV executive's historical argument. In the end, they all take a stand for the Aztecs and against the TV executive's unsuitable comparison. Sofia's arguments resonate with all those involved, but the interactions do not go unilateral as some of the participants express their own thoughts and take their own stands to engage with the debate.

Battle Talk

This type of approach is characterized by the confrontation of argumentative lines and beliefs. There is a back and forth between conflicting views which makes this approach very antagonistic. These conflicting views are based on strong beliefs and conceptions about the history and resolute judgments toward historical agents. Interactions turn defensive, adversarial, and sometimes aggressive as it seems that there is not a true intention of coming to an agreement but to demonstrate who is right and what the truth is. The debate is triggered by a person's strong historical claim against or in favor of the TV executive's speech. This approach was observed in five out of fifteen debates in this study, and it can be clearly seen in the debate sparked by George Gray's comment. George's argument, complex and contradictory in itself, is very compelling for some people as it is repellent to others. He first denies the assumed well-intended Spaniards who just sought to bring civilization to the Aztecs, clarifying that at the same moment they were persecuting and torturing Jews in Europe. Then he makes a nuance stating that no culture in those times was especially peaceful, neither in the Americas nor in Europe. But ultimately, he ends up backing the Spaniards' colonization as a good outcome for the Aztecs as no better will this culture would have without it. People then argue against or in favor of George's and the TV executive's claims:

- *He forgets that at nearly the same time in Spain, the Spanish were exiting a period of fairly brutal theocracy. Jews were being slaughtered, tortured and expelled for their religion, and people were being executed by being thrown out of windows. Few cultures in the 1400s–1600s was particularly kind, neither the Aztecs nor in*

Europe. Were it not for the conquest, who knows how that civilization would have developed. George Gray

- *Ohhh the innocent Jews! People ignore the ritual murders they did on Christian children. Look up St. Simon of Trent*. Luis Bravo
- *The Aztecs had deities that were very human, the Nazis just had a book by an insane guy who blamed the Jews (who they saw as rats) on everything. Their conquest by Spain was quite different than Stalin's troops marching into Berlin (neither Spain nor the Aztecs were as brutal as either of them). Anyhow, look at Mexico now, you cannot say that the conquest brought good things for them* Guillermo
- *Of course! both the Spanish and the Aztecs were pretty brutal conquerors, but at the end Spain won. Spain might give them civilization, OK, but Mexicans screwed this up. You can see now all that violence they have gone through... Mexico is a third world country and needs to be civilized back again!* Martin Acosta
- *Well the Nazis were a political party and the Aztecs a civilization. Germany wasn't conquered—the Aztecs were. Implying that humans are bad by nature and colonization is the only way out is as false as irresponsible. There is human progress in history and examples of people rejecting dictatorships and building democracies. You cannot simply justify colonization by no means, punk!* Rafael Silva
- *How are the Aztecs any different from the Romans? Ruthless conquerors! The same the Spanish and Nazis. Aztecs deserved it. He is damned right, humans do not deserve any better, we are by nature evil*. Jorge Ruiz

From this approach, debates tend to be driven by dichotomous reactions toward the main historical claim and toward the other peers' assessment of the historical event. The dominant perspective is on the historical characters' assumed 'nature' and their comparison. What is worth noting is from what levels of discussion people participate in the debate. They tend to position themselves, and criticize others' arguments, considering different dimensions mainly via two levels of discussion: (a) comparing characters: Aztecs *versus* Hispanics, Aztecs *versus* Nazis, or even Aztecs *versus* Hispanics *versus* Nazis; and (b) contrasting contexts: Aztecs' contexts *versus* Hispanics' contexts; colonization context *versus* contemporary context; colonization causes *versus* colonization present-day consequences. They overrule the TV executive's speech, along with each other's arguments, by pointing out: tensions or similarities between Conquistadors' and Aztecs' contexts; suitable or unsustainable comparisons between Aztecs and Conquistadors and/or Nazis; and contrasting the colonization in-time consequences and its consequences in the present. Of special attention is that there is a common trend of morally judging the colonization, and the TV executive's speech, by its perceived current consequences. They are either in favor of or against the speech by the personal assessment they do of the assumed Mexico's present-day situation. As in the mirror talk approach, these participants leave out of their judgments the possible intentions of the TV executive in delivering this speech.

Persuasive Talk

This type of approach is characterized by the interest in convincing others by creating eloquent argumentative lines about the historical issue in question. Participants using this approach display a set of historical information to demonstrate that their conclusion is rationally true. They build fact-based arguments, quote historical references, and attach source material such as specialized newspaper articles, to make their points sustainable and compelling. This type of approach makes debate dynamic: There is an initial persuasive historical argument that switches discussion on, moving toward a constant exchange of viewpoints, fact-checking, and counter-argument. Interactions are not univocal as the participants do not only react and respond to the leading comment, but they engage in animated interactions with cross-references to each other. In some cases, they even convince each other, making themselves test their thoughts and possibly change their opinions. This type of approach was observed in two out of fifteen debates in this study. Bruno de Rosa's point sets off the debate by presenting a well-structured argument about the contrasting nuances of Aztecs' history and warlike nature, explaining the causes and opposing parties involved in the defeat of their empire. He also discusses the present implications of nationalistic interpretations of the Aztecs, which lead people to praise an inaccurate image and distorted heritage of them. Bruno even ends up sarcastically affirming that the true Aztec lineage lives now in Spain. This comment engages many people that take the opportunity to debate and share their angles on the controversy:

- *The Aztecs were no angels, they tried to conquer other tribes, they were even responsible for other tribes going extinct. They also owned slaves, gave up their women to the Spaniards as prices. This is why Amerindian tribes allied with the Spaniards to take down the Aztec empire. People want to romanticize the Aztecs when they were just as brutal as the Spaniards, the only difference is their race. Aztec kings gave up their princesses to the Spaniards, many also fled to Spain LOL The Aztec linage of Moctezuma lives in Spain. (Source attached: 'Lo que nos faltaba. La Duquesa de Alba descendiente de Moctezuma!!')* http://josiemarquez.blogspot.com/2010/10/1o-que-nos-faltaba-la-duguesa-de-alba.html. Bruno de Rosa
- *I don't think it's about defending the Aztecs, but rather calling out a wild example of false equivalency and recognizing the latent white supremacy in Latin American politics.* Bill Smith
- <u>*Bruno, Bill*</u> *This article really sheds light on many spots. The fact that they were 'greeted' does not mean they were fool savages seeing them as Gods. Historian says they were not passive, they seek for dialogue before thinking in war. Other adds that Spaniards' mission wasn't to evangelize and civilize but to take their lands and to establish a system to exploit and control those cultures. That guy's [the TV executive] mouth is full of sh…lies!* Rita Lopez https://verne.elpais.com/verne/2017/04/06/mexico/1491435975_945457.html.
- <u>Bruno</u> *Meanwhile, at nearly the same time in Spain, Jews were being slaughtered, tortured and expelled for their religion, and people were being executed by being*

thrown out of windows. Few cultures in the 1400s–1600s was particularly kind, neither the Aztecs nor in Europe. Were it not for the conquest, who knows how that civilization would have developed—so stop justifying the extinction of a civilization because it was "just as violent" as the one that extinguished it. George Gray

- *George Gray no one is justifying anything. Aztecs would've either had more indigenous tribes extinct completely like many became thanks to them, or other tribes would have been under Aztec rule, but who knows because the Purepechas defeated them about 2 or 3 times when the Aztecs tried to conquer their lands. And again, yon are not understanding that the Aztec empire fell due to the Amerindian allies that Spain had and one of those allies were the ones who were at war with the Aztecs. Aztecs were in conquered lands, the Otomis were the original people of the land they had conquered for themselves, the Aztecs were originally from mid-America (USA), they migrated down to what we now call Central Mexico, in an area we now call D.F* (Mexico City), *in D.F before the Aztecs, there were the Otomis.* Bruno

- *Bruno you are spot on. It kind of ends up belittling the influence those groups had in Mexican culture.* Martin

- *Bruno. George It isn't about who was worse or all the same. It's his blatant denial of historical facts. He is basically saying that his people did no harm lo those indigenous of the Americas. That is absolutely incorrect and a woefully ignorant and problematic view for a journalist/newsman to have. It is possible for him to use his platform to spread his inaccurate views amongst others and that's dangerous. I like* Violeta Martinez

There are two principal levels of discussion in this type of approach: (1) colonization's causes and circumstances; and (2) accuracy and ethics of the TV executive's speech. In the first level, participants focus on various aspects that may explain why the event unfolded in the ways it occurred. They consider three main perspectives: Historical characters comparison, Aztecs' time, and Aztecs' intentions and actions. Some center on the comparison between Aztecs' and the Conquistadors' circumstances; others underline the importance of understanding the general context and époque of the Aztecs—the role they play in the broader indigenous context, the power relations, and the interplays with other indigenous peoples; while others highlight the historical characters' worldview and intentions underlying the Aztecs' actions. Besides examining the historical event by its parts, some individuals cast doubt on the historical content and intentions of the TV executive's historical argument. This is the case of the second level of discussion, in which participants such as Bill, Rita, and Violeta criticize that the equivalency between Aztecs and Nazis is unsustainable, mainly because historians refute this as anachronistic as it is irresponsible; Violeta points out the danger of spreading this type of misleading narratives and the imprudence of doing it to fulfill a political agenda. Interestingly, from this type of approach, there is less attention to the present-day consequences of colonialism or the relation between past and present.

Participants are prone to use or inquire about source evidence to sustain arguments. They fact-check the TV executive's speech and discuss the pertinence of taking sides against or in favor of the Aztecs. Overall, findings suggest that the participants are concerned about what criteria of truth underlie historical explanations and historical judgments. They also are keen to disclose the historical significance of the issue discussed and are skillful in presenting it convincingly. Bruno's alert about the danger of romanticizing a biased image of the indigenous past is very compelling to his peers, for instance. Finally, this analysis suggests that debates such as this can make individuals test their opinions and consider other opinions and facts. The case of Martin is a good example. His engagement in the debate makes him consider other viewpoints and integrate them into his argument. He looks proactive in participating in the debate holding conversations with many peers involved, but also in improving his historical understanding of the event and its broader social relevance.

Discussion: What is Gained with Historical Debate? What Can We Learn from It?

This study sought to analyze the types of approaches that people take toward historical debates on social media, in order to advance understanding of its characteristics, trends, and functionality. Findings support the benefits and challenges underscored in previous research in improving historical thinking education (Clark, 2009; Ellis & Vincent, 2020; Osborne, 2005). It also contributes by providing new insights into the debates' functionality for the participants in making sense of the past and their own cultural background. Results also show that the relation with history on social media is interactive rather than accumulative, as it is usually in conventional history education settings. This sheds light on the recently studied types of relations of people with the past, exploring alternative cultural productions of history or participating in performative historical events (Carretero et al., forthcoming, 2022; de Groot, 2016), making individuals explain history in interaction with others voices while negotiating meanings with their present.

The structure of argumentation and sense-making found in the three types of approaches to historical debate can help understand the above-mentioned. Debates develop in three simultaneous domains: (1) Discussion on the historical issue in question, the colonization of the Americas, ('what actually happened'); (2) Discussion on the interpretations of the issue, the TV executive's speech, ('what is interpreted'); and (3) Discussion on the present consequences of the event, the colonial heritage in Latin America, ('What is conveyed'). It is believed that this structure is useful to understand the debates' dynamics and the complex inner process that individuals experience to make sense of a historical event. This led to a working reflection; as seen in the analysis, and in line with previous research findings, the issue of source verification is crucial in hindering or encouraging trustful historical explanations and solid historical arguments to participate in debate (Haydn, & Counsell,

2004; McGrew et al., 2018). However, as it was seen in the participants' historical arguments, there are more factors shaping the explanation of, and engagement with history. For instance, a latent need to bring the past to the present and see the past from the present consequences was a major trend among all the participants. All the above invites us to keep examining the processes of construction of historical explanations either on digital platforms or in public life, which is rooted in evidence and verification but also boosted by identity, moral and civic factors.

From the data of the mirror talk approach, it can be inferred that there was no special interest in historical accuracy but in endorsing a political stand toward the event discussed. Those using the battle talk approach do not aim to foster discussion to achieve integrative historical understanding but to confirm and validate 'a side' in the debate and demerit others. However, although it was a minority, debates such as those of the persuasive approach can promote both complex and nuanced historical understanding and social responsibility in public debate. Participants engaging in these debates tend to contrast the source views and to make their argument convincing. They appeal to historical sources and 'experts' such as historians or journalists, as well as assumed popular collective emotions to persuade others.

Also, it was observed that when there was disagreement or misunderstanding, they tend to contrast views with source materials or clarify their points and try to set a dialogue, sometimes under an environment of good-natured rivalry and sometimes with passive-aggressive exchanges. Ultimately, although debates on social media usually take place in a context of polarization, at least in this study there are examples suggesting that although these cases are unstructured and uncontrollable, informal debates can help heat down the vibe for some people and in general, to foster dialogic understanding of history. Another encouraging finding is that, even though not all the participants were equipped with sufficient knowledge and were skilled in historical analysis, many of them try to use historical thinking and historical concepts. The most skilled participants were proficient in the use of historical sources, source verification, and tried to present accurate historical arguments and nuanced historical judgments.

Interestingly, many of those less skilled participants used some abilities such as historical distance, historical significance, and contextualization, and of special attention was historical comparison that was used the most. The dichotomy between false equivalency and proper historical comparison stands out in the debates, and it permitted some participants to nuance their positions while being exposed to it. Research on people's ability to compare historical processes is necessary as it was demonstrated the great appeal it has among the participants to construct historical explanations. Finally, it was also shown that individuals make use of discursive practices to strengthen their points. They, for instance, made historical generalizations about violence to disavow responsibility to both Aztecs and Spaniards, and justify their actions. Due to space limitations, this aspect is not fully discussed in this paper, but the relationship between discursive devices, historical explanations, and civic goals in debating history has been explored elsewhere (Perez-Manjarrez, 2019).

Finally, in line with previous research findings (Barton, 2019; Brauch, Leone & Sarrica, 2019), the historical debate has important teaching implications. Besides the development of historical thinking skills, debating can help young learners in their

moral and civic development (Perez-Manjarrez, 2017). This study's findings show that moral judgment and affective responses are trends among the participants, and it might be caused by a contemporary reading of the past focused on the assumed consequences in the present. In this sense, informed discussions could offer a safe environment for them to make their own historical prejudices and moral judgments explicit while creating the space to review them critically and be aware of their own misjudgments. Recent research (Campbell, 2008; Perez-Manjarrez, 2019), shows that debating controversies allow students further development of their understanding of social norms, moral values, politics, and identity. It can be said that debates may help participants positively engage in history and shade their opinions: For instance, there are participants in this study that participated in different types of debates and were able to soften or change their viewpoints and valuation of the issues discussed. It is hoped that all the above results foster, nevermind the redundancy, debates about how people debate history in public life, school, and digital platforms to create safe spaces for dissent, dialogue, and to promote the development of complex and nuanced historical understanding.

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