

R elevant HETORIC

Bums and Bimbos: Persuasive Personal Attack in Sports and Political Discourse



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“I just feel they’re bums. 95-percent of the game is bums...”

--UFC Featherweight Champion, Conor McGregor

“Fox viewers give low marks to bimbo @MegynKelly...”

--2016 Republican Presidential Candidate, Donald Trump

Despite terms like “verbal warfare” and laments over our “argument culture,” accusation and attack have received scant scholarly attention compared to their counterparts, apology and defense. Perhaps this neglect is due in part to there being few formal speeches of attack while those of apology from individuals, corporations, and governments abound.¹ To address this imbalance in research, Benoit and Dorries developed a taxonomy of attack strategies, providing tools by which scholars can analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of persuasive attacks.² Legge et al.³ and Legge and DiSanza’s⁴ work have extended that taxonomy.

Benoit and Dorries explain, “once a persuasive attack establishes guilt to the satisfaction of the audience...there may not be much to be gained from further developing the target’s guilt.”⁵ Therefore, they focus on *the act of wrongdoing* rather than blaming or simply attacking the target’s character. Yet, even cursory attention to news and entertainment media reveals a ubiquitous form of persuasive attack focused on the target’s character: the *persuasive personal attack*. Not surprisingly, such attacks are commonly heard in sports where opponents “trash talk” to goad each other with insults, hoping for a psychological advantage in a game, and in politics where those campaigning for office routinely attack their opponents for character flaws. These fields reflect the quintessentially agonistic tradition of rhetoric as both are physical and/or verbal contests that allow “males to ‘prove their superior masculinity.’”⁶



Personal attacks rarely take the form of an extended speech, but rather are found in comments within interviews, press conferences, social media, or, in politics, in the attack ad. Such speech is often dismissed as mere *ad hominem*, fallacious, unsophisticated, and unreasonable personal attacks. However, attacks against character have a long and legitimate history in rhetoric and political discourse, as subversive, anti-ethos rhetoric. A look at current personal attacks can expand our understanding of persuasive attack overall.

This paper broadens previous work on persuasive attack by investigating personal attack in two cases: the speech of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) fighter Conor McGregor, regarded by many as one of the best

trash talkers in sports today and that of Donald Trump, businessman turned politician and now President of the United States, also noted for his aggressive speech. Specifically, I look at two Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) press conferences leading up to McGregor’s 2015 fight against Nate Diaz and two of Trump’s press conferences, one from February 2016 and another from July 2016, in which he spends considerable time attacking Ted Cruz, one of his rivals for the Republican nomination. During these press conferences, McGregor and Trump both enact extended, focused, public attacks on an individual opponent.



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I first provide background on the two speakers and the speech events analyzed. I then discuss the three aspects of personal attacks that arise from the analysis. First, such attacks exist as part of speech set in that while they tear down the image of the target, they often are accompanied by efforts to affirm or repair the image of the speaker through self-praise or self-defense. Second, attacks against character can possess an epideictic dimension by calling upon and strengthening social values. Third, the cases studied reveal strategies that can be added to those identified by Legge and DiSanza⁷ for character attacks. The final section discusses questions raised by the analysis and further work to be done.



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Two Fighters

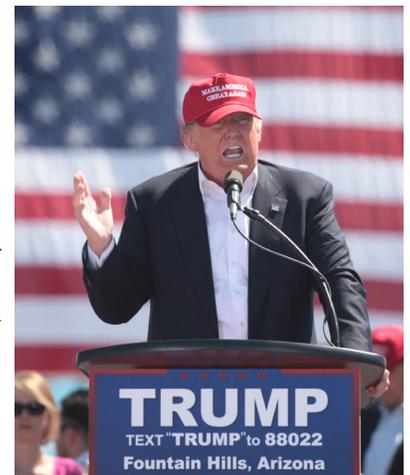
Conor McGregor has been a MMA fighter with the UFC since 2008, winning both featherweight and lightweight champion titles, and has an overall record of 21 wins to 3 losses. Considered one of the sport’s most popular fighters, he is credited with breaking ticket and pay-per-view records and has won numerous awards such as 2015 Fighter of the Year from several organizations (ESPN, MMA Fighting, Fox Sports). His popularity is attributed not only to his fighting skill and style, but also to his personality and trash talking. As one journalist noted, “McGregor... is easily the most entertaining athlete in all of sports with a microphone in front of him.”⁸ Several commentators have compared his style of mental warfare, the trash talking to intimidate his opponent, to that of Muhammad Ali.⁹ Also, YouTube hosts several “best of” video compilations of his trash talking.

In the lead up to his March 5, 2016 match against Nate Diaz, two press conferences were held: One was on February 24th with him and Diaz, answering questions from the media;¹⁰ The second occurred on March 3rd with all the fighters on the main ticket, also taking questions from reporters.¹¹ McGregor's original opponent, Rafael Dos Anjos, had pulled out of the fight due to an injury and was replaced by Diaz. Also, the UFC moved the fight to a higher weight class from 155 to 170 pounds. Thus, several of the journalists' questions directed to McGregor involved the fight changes, his new opponent, and his preparation. These press conferences seek to generate interest in the event by building up the rivalry between the two opponents, which involves the competitors positioning their opponents as weak and less skilled. Thus, the goal is not to convince anyone of a specific wrongdoing, but rather weaken the opponent's image as a fighter. McGregor attacked Diaz as a less skilled fighter, but also as a less influential presence in the UFC world and as less financially successful. He also attacks other fighters for lacking the courage to fight him, claiming that they frequently pull out before the fight.

Donald Trump, a real estate developer, businessman, and television personality entered politics late in life, running for president on the 2016 Republican ticket and ultimately winning the election. His political popularity has surprised many, who cite his lack of political experience and his aggressive and uncivil way of speaking, among other things, as making him unsuited for elected office. However, political observers have noted that it is exactly his way of speaking that has endeared him to his base:

His direct, brash and unfiltered rhetoric may seem more suited for a pro wrestling ring than a presidential debate stage, but to party members filled with angst and disillusionment about career politicians and empty promises, he simply sounds real and ready to act.¹²

Trump's verbal attacks, not surprisingly are harshest against his rivals at whom he spews a "canon of vitriol."¹³ During the primaries he had particularly heated on-going and personal battle with Ted Cruz, a senator from Texas who was also seeking the nomination. Cruz took such offense at Trump's attacks that at the Republican National Convention, Cruz failed to endorse him, though he finally did several months later. The analysis looks at two press conferences in which Trump spends a considerable amount of time attacking Cruz: the first during the primaries, on February 15, 2016 in Mount Pleasant,



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South Carolina¹⁴ and the second after the Republican National Convention on July 22, 2016.¹⁵ In both of these instances, Trump spoke without taking questions.

The relationship between Trump and Cruz differed in the two press conferences: in February they are competitors; in July, Trump has won the nomination, but an endorsement from Cruz would be helpful in the general election. In February, Trump accuses Cruz of being a dishonorable liar who, like the other



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Republican candidates, are controlled by their special interest donors. In July, Trump spent a good amount of time addressing Cruz's reasons for his non-endorsement. During the campaign, Trump had tweeted an unflattering picture of Cruz's wife and threatened to "spill the beans" on her. And on a Fox News interview, he referenced a tabloid story and picture of Cruz's father with Lee Harvey Oswald, implying a suspicious association. Cruz explained his decision to not endorse Trump: "I am not in the habit of supporting people who attack my wife and attack my father."¹⁶ In the press conference, Trump tries to turn the blame back on Cruz, saying that Cruz and his supporters started the negative exchanges regarding Heidi Cruz and implying again that Cruz's father did, indeed, have a connection with Oswald.

The contexts of McGregor's and Trump's attacks differ quite a bit: McGregor and his target are in the same room and at times address each other, while Cruz is not present during Trump's press conferences; McGregor's comments are guided by reporters' questions while Trump comments are self determined; and both of McGregor's cases occur before the actual physical contest where a winner will be determined, but in Trump's second press conference he has won against Cruz in that he had secured the Republican nomination. Despite these differences, some commonalities of personal attack emerge in the analysis: its nature as part of a speech set, its possession of epideictic qualities, and some specific strategies.

Analysis¹⁷

Three patterns of persuasive attack emerged from the analysis of these two scenarios. Each pattern will be discussed and exemplified in this section. First, persuasive attack typically accompanies efforts by speakers to affirm, defend or praise themselves. Attack, then, can be understood as part of a speech set, paired with self-praise, self-defense, or image building.

Second, persuasive personal attack can possess epideictic qualities in that it appeals to shared values to be effective. Third, the attacks in these cases shared three strategies: pejorative labeling, presentation of evidence, and belittling the target.

The duality of attack: Subversion and affirmation

The consideration of persuasive attack goes at least as far back as the ancient Greek rhetoricians, as can be seen in Aristotle's discussion of the accusation (*kategoria*) and defense (*apologia*) in forensic speech and blame (*psogos*) and praise (*epainos*) in epideictic speech. In both genres, attack could be aimed at policy or character. Aristotle treated these types of discourse as speech sets, defined in contrast to one another.¹⁸ In his article on "*Kategoria* and *Apologia*," Ryan argues "the critic cannot have a complete understanding of accusation or apology without treating them both."¹⁹ Huxman and Linkugel make the same point in their study of political exchanges in 1935, stating, "approaching accusation and defense as a set is necessary for valid evaluation."²⁰ Yet, these scholars move away from Aristotle's discrete categories of forensic and epideictic, noting that verbal attacks often have characteristics of both. Instead, they draw upon Walter Fisher's motive view of communication, which provides a more flexible taxonomy of communication. In his motive view of communication, Fisher identifies four possible motives:



1. Affirmation: giving birth to a new image;
2. Reaffirmation: revitalizing a previously held image;
3. Purification: correcting or refining an image; and
4. Subversion: undermining or weakening an image.²¹

For Fisher, an image is any "value-oriented interpretation of some part of the world."²² It could be the representation of an on going event such as a war, a singular action such as voting or an individual person. Subversive rhetoric is "anti-ethos" in that it seeks to discredit a person or idea. Huxman and Linkugel claim "it is useful to view subversion as the controlling exigence of accusatory rhetoric."²³

But subversive rhetoric also possesses a constitutive counterpart. In undermining an opponent's image, a rhetor often also reaffirms or purifies her own image. For example, the authors contend that "accusatory rhetors are themselves on trial" because they have to convey good intentions and not malice.²⁴ Also, as Engels claims in his discussion of invective in early American political speech, "Americans denounced the enemy in order to hurt him, but also to construct a more desirable identity for themselves."²⁵ What or

whom a person condemns, then, helps to reaffirm one's own identity, as condemnation expresses one's value judgments. Even in sports, trash talking contributes to athlete identity. LoConto and Roth discuss ways in which young athletes are enculturated into a world where trash talk is the norm and where it contributes to one's identity as an athlete.²⁶ Thus, subversion and (re)affirmation can be seen as the two sides of the same coin. These dual functions are clearly present in both McGregor and Trump's press conferences. Despite the modern setting of the press conference, we find the classical pairings from epideictic and forensic speech: McGregor's speech reveals clear praise and blame functions while Trump's speech contains accusation and defense.

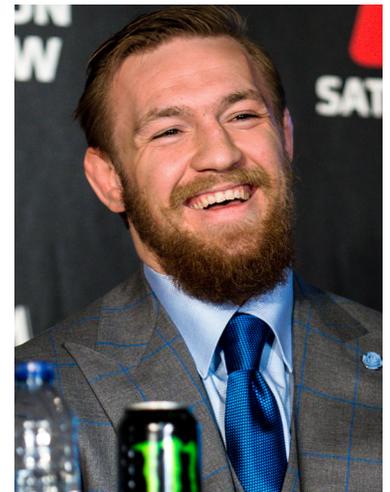
McGregor's attacks are either preceded or followed by self-praise, so much so, that for the majority of the press conferences he compares himself and his opponent. For example, in response to a question about Diaz's aggressive fighting style, McGregor responds,

[1.] He comes forward but his understanding of ring general shape and ring control is very amateurish. It's novice where I come from. So he will understand the difference between amateur and world champion. But I am looking forward to him coming out and I'll come out and I come out of the trap door like a greyhound. Like a champion greyhound I come out. At a hundred mile an hour and I don't stop.

Here McGregor critiques Diaz's fighting skills, but at the same time he takes the opportunity to build up his own image with figurative language praising his speed. In another example he praises himself for staying in shape and attacks Diaz for sometimes getting out of shape:

[2.] I work like a motherfucker. I don't get out of shape. He gets out of shape. His fight against Dos Anjos he looked like...he's the skinniest fat guy I've ever seen in my life.

While these types of comparisons can be expected in a pre-match press conference, in which many question are asked about one's opponent, McGregor makes such attacks even when unprompted by the reporter's question. For example, one reporter asks McGregor, "How important are you to the UFC business wise?" He responds,



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[3.] Well, in the 21, 22 years of this company, 2015 was its biggest year. I mean, who was 2015? That was everything to do with me. So you even look at Nate. Nate's last fight: \$20,000 to show, \$20,000 to win. Not even a win bonus. His full check wasn't even a performance of the night bonus. Now he's popping his cherry and going to make his first million here. So he really should be thankful and be grateful for this opportunity that I am giving him.

In this statement McGregor refers to the enormous revenues his fights bring in, which benefits his opponents who get paid significantly more when fighting him. Note that the reporter's question did not reference this specific fight or opponent, yet McGregor took the opportunity to attack Diaz, criticizing him for being less financially successful than him. This pattern of attack and self-praise carries throughout the press conferences.

In Trump's press conferences, his attacks on Cruz have the constitutive counter part of self-defense, of purification from the image Cruz was creating of him. In early 2016, Cruz, like most candidates, was continually attacking his opponents' stands on issues. In the February press conference, Trump defends himself by going on the offensive, accusing Cruz of being dishonest. For example, Trump states, "I think Ted Cruz is the most dishonest guy I think I've ever met in politics" and then refers to Cruz's claims that Trump "loves Obamacare" and is pro-choice. Trump's attack of dishonesty helps to weaken Cruz's portrayal of Trump and his policies. In a similar attack Trump says of Cruz:

[4.] I think he is an unstable person. I really do. He said 'Donald Trump does not like the second amendment.' I said the second amendment is my whole thing.

Thus, throughout this press conference, Trump attacks Cruz as a liar to defend himself.

Trump operates in much the same way during the July press conference. Cruz's non-endorsement at the Republican National Convention was, he claimed, driven by Trump's wrongdoing: his attack on Heidi Cruz and on Cruz's father. For the former the claims "I didn't do anything" and the later:

[5.] This has nothing to do with me. Except I might have pointed it out, but it had nothing to do with me. I have no control over anything.

But they never denied. Did anyone ever deny that it was the father?

Here Trump defends himself by telling his version of what happened. Thus, Trump accuses Cruz of "lies" and defends himself as innocent of wrongdoing.



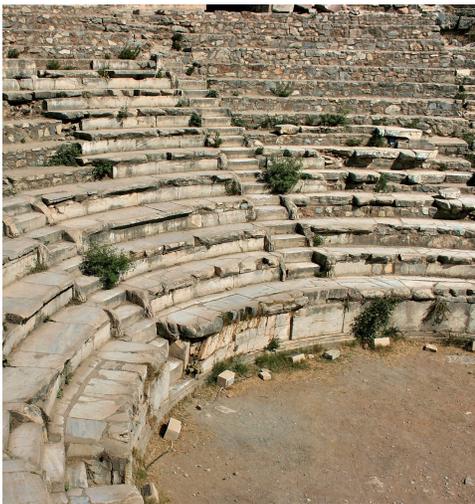
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And at the end of this excerpt, Trump pivots from defense to attack again, implying that the family's lack of denial suggests guilt.

In both cases of McGregor and Trump, we see that personal attacks on others are closely tied with reaffirming or purifying their self-images, operating within a speech set. They use the subversive nature of attacks to support a more positive image of themselves, one through self-praise and the other through self-defense. Attacks, then, often possess a dual nature, with both subversive and affirming goals.

Shared values: "He's nuts!" as epideictic rhetoric?

The analysis also noted a second quality of persuasive personal attack as reflecting qualities of epideictic rhetoric, countering the tendency to dismiss personal attack as mere *ad hominem*. As noted earlier, persuasive attacks can have qualities of both classical epideictic and forensic speech, prompting contemporary scholars to turn to Fisher's broader understanding of communication as motive driven. However, the understanding of epideictic has been significantly broadened by modern theorists and can still be useful in understanding personal attack. Aristotle defined epideictic as a ceremonial speech concerned with praise or blame, while scholars today define it by its function "to increase the intensity of adherence to certain values"²⁷ and to "help(s) shape a community's identity."²⁸ When attacks reflect the values held by specific communities and help to reinforce those values, they possess an epideictic quality.



But can calling someone "nuts" really be epideictic? In *Toward a Rhetoric of Insult* Thomas Conley traces the uses, forms, and contexts of abusive language from the classical era until today and defends its value as epideictic discourse. He calls the end of the Roman Empire "the heyday of invective,"²⁹ when a common rhetorical move was insults and "calumny, using public communication to destroy the reputation and standing of an opponent"³⁰ Conley develops an extensive list of commonplaces of attack such as gluttony, hypocrisy, greed, appearance, cowardice, sexual deviance, stupidity, etc. He then traces insult's importance in literary works, such as Shakespeare's plays, and, of course, in the discourse of political protest and commentary. For an insult to be effective, Conley argues, the speaker, target, and audience must share a set of values and beliefs that undergird what counts as shameful or edifying. Thus, insult works rhetorically via identification more so than through traditional argument.³¹ He also notes that insults can evolve

into compliments—it depends upon the social context and community beliefs. In these ways, insults can be seen as a type of epideictic speech:

...one side of insults calls for shared values and beliefs, rests on a kind of intimacy between insulter and the one being insulted, and can be a way of reinforcing social bonds, not just asserting alienation.

*Insults can be viewed as indirect celebrations of public virtue...*³² (emphasis added).

Thus, while judgments of abusive speech may deem it unfair, unprofessional, uncivil, or simply wrong, Conley claims they are rhetorically “an interesting and important aspect of human relations.”³³ In a similar vein, in his article of civility and incivility in political discourse, Thomas Benson claims that “vernacular scorn” and “incivility is itself a tactic in political discourse, employed as a indicator of sincerity,”³⁴ of moral outrage and indignation,³⁵ appealing to common values. Persuasive attacks, then, either as blame, accusation, or insult, invoke communal values and by that invocation, they can reinforce those values. In the cases of McGregor and Trump, then, what might their attacks reveal about their community’s values?

McGregor’s attacks on Diaz revolve around a discrete set of values, particular to the MMA fighting world: specific fighting skills, courage to fight, influence and prestige in the business, and money earned. As illustrated in quotes [1] and [2] above, McGregor frequently targets Diaz’s fighting skill, his understanding of the ring, his form, and his lack of consistency in staying in shape. Several times he refers to Diaz as “fat,” “soft,” or “flabby.” McGregor is more critical of other fighters with regards to courage. As discussed, McGregor complains how fighters typically pull out of fights with him, calling them “pussies.”

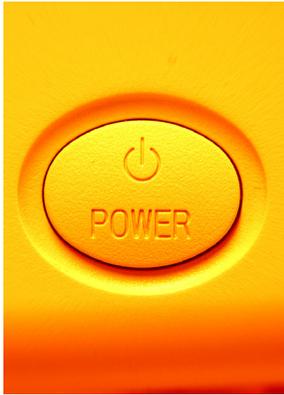
In the realm of influence in the UFC and earning power, McGregor is quite harsh with Diaz. In excerpt [3] above, McGregor explicitly compares their earnings and makes several such comments in both press conferences. Also, fights and pay are negotiated with the UFC and the fighters. At one point McGregor and Diaz go back and forth, addressing each other directly, arguing about how the fight came to be at 170 pounds:

[6.] Diaz: 170 was my call. They next called you back.

McGregor: You know what, you don’t make any calls you only answer the calls.

Diaz: ... then he tried to get it to 160 and now we’re at 170. Don’t act like it was your call. I’m calling that shot.

McGregor: You call no shots, Nate. Let's be honest here. You call absolutely nothing. You sit there.



In this exchange, both are trying to perform their power and influence and are debating who has more influence within UFC business deals. In saying “You call no shots, Nate” McGregor accuses him of having no influence.

Trump invokes quite different values from McGregor in his attacks of Cruz. Although Trump defends his own stance on specific conservative policies (opposing gun control and being pro-life), his attacks on Cruz rarely touch upon policy. Only once, in the February press conference, does Trump criticize Cruz for his debate performance and stance on waterboarding and immigration. Instead, Trump's attacks

focus on the more general values of integrity and honesty required of any politician. He refers to Cruz as a “liar” six times, calls him “dishonest” three times. Despite both vying for the Republican nomination, with these accusations Trump does not try to portray Cruz as a weak Republican, but rather as a bad person altogether who is therefore untrustworthy as a politician.

McGregor's and Trump's attacks reference different sets of values. McGregor is not concerned with Nate's honesty, but rather his skill as a fighter, power and influence within the fight business, and financial success. These qualities support certain performances of masculinity³⁶ that seem to undergird fighters' public personae and the sport of professional fighting.

In contrast, in Trump's press conferences, he seldom provides attacks Cruz referencing specific partisan values, but rather relies on blanket accusations against honesty and honor. While it is not surprising that a MMA fighter and a politician would refer to different sets of values, their differing kinds of topics (field specific vs. non-field specific) is interesting. Trump could have offered more specific critiques of Cruz as a conservative Republican politician, such as his record of public service, experience, voting record, etc. Instead, his attacks reflect the “simplistic dualities in which campaigns traffic: friend against enemy, saint against satan,”³⁷ which operate by visceral identifications with persons or ideologies.



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McGregor's and Trump's attacks call upon certain values, but can they be considered epideictic? It seems useful here to think of epideictic as existing on a continuum—rather than determining whether or not some speech “is” epideictic, we can consider if it has epideictic qualities. Surely, the attacks in these press conferences are less epideictic than a presidential inaugural address. However, the cases studied seem to illustrate that some attacks can be more epideictic than others. That is, they can appeal more clearly to a specific set of community values. McGregor's attacks referenced fighting skill and a type of masculinity lauded by fight culture, suggesting an epideictic quality. In contrast, Trump's attacks rely on more general values that don't seem to shore up a Republican identity. Understanding personal persuasive attack as epideictic may prevent it from being dismissed as mere *ad hominem* and prompt closer consideration of the values and community being invoked. Although the two cases here differ on the epideictic scale, they shared several strategies for personal attacks.

Methods of Attack: Pejorative labeling, evidence, and belittling

Finally, the analysis revealed three shared methods of attack, which expand upon previous discussions of attack methods: pejorative labeling of the person, offering of evidence, and belittling. As Conley has pointed out, ancient and classical rhetoricians identified commonplaces of character attacks, such as gluttony, shameful family lineage, financial difficulties, sexual deviance, etc., which informed direct, explicit attacks on a person's character. Benoit and Dorrie's study offers a more subtle perspective on attack by focusing on the *function* of specific moves within an attack—how they either increase the target's responsibility for the act or increase the offensiveness of the act. They analyze how a *Dateline NBC* investigative report exposes Wal-Mart's “Buy America” campaign as deceptive, to inductively develop a list of strategies for persuasive attacks for wrongdoing. They found that such attacks consist of two elements: 1) the act must be perceived negatively by the targeted audience, and 2) the accused must be seen as responsible for the wrongful act.³⁸ This definition of attack leads them to identify two sets of strategies that either 1) help the attacker increase the perceived responsibility for the act or 2) increase the perceived offensiveness of the act.

Benoit and Dorrie's taxonomy can be applied to Trump's attacks. At times he did make moves to increase the offensiveness of wrongdoings and Cruz's responsibility for them. For example, he implies Cruz and his PAC carefully planned to mislead voters in Iowa (increasing responsibility). However, because the taxon-



omy does not address issues of character, Legge and DiSanza³⁹ expanded upon it, noting that many persuasive attacks are attacks against character, rather than attacks increasing responsibility or offensiveness.

Legge et al.⁴⁰ and Legge and DiSanza⁴¹ further Benoit and Dorries' work in several ways. First, by investigating the many attacks against Rush Limbaugh during his Sandra Fluke controversy,⁴² they found three strategies to add to Benoit and Dorries' taxonomy that helped to increase the offensiveness of the act. Second, when studying Keith Olberman's attack on the NFL and prosecutors for their light treatment of Ray Rice's abuse of his wife,⁴³ they noted the significance of attacks on credibility, proposing "the addition of a third category of persuasive attack: attempts to weaken or damage a target's credibility in relation to the offensive act."⁴⁴ They interpret attacks on credibility as helping to increase the offensiveness of the act and identify four areas in which credibility can be attacked: sagacity, virtue or good moral character, goodwill, and dynamism.

This analysis identified several strategies used by McGregor and Trump that attack character, rather than increasing the offensiveness of the act. The most common attacks fulfill three categories: pejorative labeling of the person, providing evidence in support of accusations and labels, and belittling the target through mocking or patronizing speech. The most prevalent strategy used by McGregor and Trump is pejorative labeling of the person. As discussed, McGregor calls other fighters "pussies," describes Diaz as "a scared little boy" and "a gazelle" (positioning himself as a lion preying on the gazelle) and refers to Diaz's team as "juice heads and bums." Trump, as noted, repeatedly calls Cruz and "liar" and describes him as "dishonest," "dishonorable," and "nuts." However, he only uses these labels in the February press conference. Interestingly, in July, after he has won the nomination, he refrains from pejorative labels of Cruz's person, instead only describing Cruz's actions as "lies."

A second strategy found involved the both McGregor and Trump offering support for their accusations, providing detailed descriptions or narratives of wrongdoing. For example, as discussed, McGregor takes the time to critique specifics of Diaz's fighting style and to make general assessments: "I feel his repetitive foot patterns and his pull motions are too readable, too predictable. He will be too slow in there." In another example he states,



[7.] I'm certainly going to toy with the young boy. I'm going to play with him. His entries and his exits, his retreats, his faints, his patterns are all identical. He can't break out of his set routine so he's very very predictable.

In both these examples McGregor demonstrates detailed knowledge of Diaz's fighting style, but describes them in a generalized way and uses that knowledge to make his overall negative assessments ("He will be too slow." "He is very predictable. "). Throughout the press conferences, McGregor backs up his accusations on character with such descriptions or narratives.

As discussed above, Trump also provides support for his accusations, but only in narrative form. He never provides a generalized description of Cruz's behavior, but always relays specific events. Soon after stating "I think he is an unstable person." Trump accuses Cruz of wrongdoing during the Iowa caucus:

[8.] What he did to Ben Carson in Iowa was a disgrace. ...But he did a couple of things. He did voter violation forms. Did you see that? Voter violation forms and it looks like it is coming from the internal revenue services...and it says you are in violation...essentially if you vote Cruz you'll be ok. And I said man that's a fraud.

Trump seems to be using this wrongdoing to support his accusation that Cruz is unstable and a liar. Like this example, throughout his press conference Trump provides evidence for his attacks against Cruz's character with narratives of wrongdoing. Thus, both McGregor and Trump accuse their targets of wrongdoing, but in these cases, it seems that these moves reflect what Huxman and Linkugel found in their study of attack: that "policy attacks were used to support anti-ethos nature of the speech."⁴⁵ Ryan made a similar observation in his study: "character accusations must be based on that fact of a policy or practice."⁴⁶

Finally, perhaps the most interesting method they use is belittling their target through mocking and patronizing. Although mocking and patronizing speech are closely related, in that they both belittle the opponent, they are not synonymous. Mocking is generally understood as ridiculing or making fun of someone. Like mocking, patronizing language belittles the target, but does so in a particular way—by positioning the target as incompetent or dependent,⁴⁷ in some way lesser than the speaker, marked by the speaker's condescending tone. Throughout both his press conferences, McGregor frequently mocks other fighters and Diaz with regard to their masculinity and toughness. For example, when referring to Dos Anjos's injury that caused him to pull out of the fight, McGregor says: "I looked at the picture Dos Anjos put up. It's a bruise. I heard ice works wonders." Here McGregor uses sarcasm to belittle Dos Anjos' injury. And with reference

to the several top fighters with injuries he states, “I know. They all have sore vaginas lately. Dos Anjos broke his foot and his vagina in the same damn day...” Here he employs sexist language to mock their masculinity, implying their injuries are minor and they are being weak for not stepping up to fight.

McGregor often mocks Diaz when attacking him for being less financially successful and less influential in the UFC. For example, when discussing the pay for the fight, McGregor says to Diaz: “But all I want is a thank you. Or even a little dance. Dance for me Nate. Dance for me.” In another instance McGregor says,



[9.] I tell ya. I like Nick’s little bro. I do. I like Nick’s little bro. I mean, how can you not? He’s like a little [undecipherable] gangster from the hood, but at the same time he coaches kids’ jiu jitsu on a Sunday morning and goes on bike rides with the elderly. He makes gun signs with the right hand and animal balloons with the left hand. So you’re a credit to the community.

In this quote he calls Diaz “Nick’s little bro,” referring to his older brother, Nick Diaz, who is also a professional fighter, thus positioning Diaz in a diminutive way. Then, he ridicules his teaching jiu jitsu to kids, reminiscent of schoolyard taunting for being “good” or following the rules.

This quote also illustrates McGregor’s patronizing tone he often uses toward Diaz, as in excerpt [3] above. Patronizing is also evident in excerpt [7] when McGregor says he will “toy with the young boy.” McGregor often uses such language when discussing the financial aspect of the fight negotiations, as when he says, “all I want is a thank you.” In these types of comments, McGregor positions himself as the one with power, as the decision-maker and Diaz as the one who passively receives the outcomes of McGregor’s decisions.

Trump also belittles his target, but employs different methods in his two press conferences. Despite Trump having some notorious instances of mocking people in public, he does not mock Cruz in either press conference. And he does not use patronizing language in the February press conference—only in July, after he has won the nomination. With reference to Cruz being booed off stage at the convention, Trump says, “I feel so badly.’ And “I don’t want his endorsement. Just Ted, stay home, relax, enjoy yourself.” He portrays mock sympathy and concern here with condescending language.



In two other instances he seems to compliment Cruz or his family members. When discussing the incident involving Heidi Cruz he says, “I think Heidi Cruz is a great person. I think it’s the best thing he’s got going and his kids.” And he says of Cruz’s father: “I don’t know his father, I met him once. I think he is a lovely guy. I think he is a lovely guy.” Despite the seemingly positive nature of these statements, they possess a darker dimension. At times, compliments, especially between persons who are not intimates, can be a way of demonstrating power. In her study of language and gender, Mary Talbot observes, “It is possible to use the act of complimenting not

just in a friendly way, but as a way of asserting power over the recipient... It is possible to interpret a compliment as a patronizing ‘put-down.’⁴⁸ Trump’s compliments of people he admittedly doesn’t know very well seem like weak attempts to correct his previous attacks on them, of perhaps placating Cruz, but they also they also communicate dismissiveness and condensation. Thus, both McGregor and Trump belittle their opponents by either mocking or using patronizing language toward them. McGregor seems to use more of both strategies while Trump never mocks and only becomes patronizing after he has won the nomination.

Conclusion

While recent scholarship has developed our understanding of persuasive attacks for wrongdoing, persuasive personal attacks have received less attention. Despite being ubiquitous in media-driven public life, they are often dismissed by rhetorical scholars due to their often informal, “sound bite” natures, and perhaps because they are perceived as fallacious. However, a closer look at the scholarship on attacks against character reveals a rich tradition in rhetoric and public forums. And by studying McGregor’s and Trump’s personal attacks, three shared qualities emerged: First, the attacks commonly exist as part of speech set, accompanied by efforts for affirm or purify an image; second, they invoke communal values and to the extent that they do so and help affirm those values, they possess an epideictic dimension; And third, they can employ the strategies of pejorative labeling of the person, descriptive support for the accusations, and belittling through mocking or patronizing.

Despite these shared characteristics, there were also differences. McGregor’s attacks acted as counterparts to his self-praise, while Trumps supported his self-defense. McGregor’s attacks function more

productively as epideictic rhetoric in that they invoked a set of values specific to the world of MMA fighting. Trump on the other hand, appealed to broad values not tailored to a specific audience. Finally, McGregor makes liberal use of mocking and patronizing his opponent while Trump only patronizes, and only after he has won the contest. These case studies also suggest that the division between act and person is not altogether clear. To accuse someone of wrongdoing seems inevitably to impact images of character and attacks on character seem to require evidence of wrongdoing to be legitimate.

Exploring the differences found in the analysis would be worthwhile in future studies. After identifying common characteristics and strategies of persuasive personal attack, studying variations among such attacks, perhaps related to speakers' individual styles and/or different situations would be helpful in developing a deeper understanding of how personal attacks operate. It would be also useful to investigate less agonistic realms, if possible. Sports and political campaigns are defined by competition and beating an opponent verbally and literally. What about personal attacks outside such contests? When and how do they take place? Personal persuasive attacks are increasingly part of our public life. Appreciating and understanding them as complex rhetorical acts builds upon a long rhetorical traditions while enriching our assessment of contemporary public discourse.



End Notes

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- ⁶ Robert Connors, *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), 25.
- ⁷ Legge and DiSanza, "The Rhetoric of Persuasive Attack: Continuing the Development of a Taxonomy of Attack Strategies and Tactics"
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⁴⁶ Ryan, "Kategoria and Apologia," 257.

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