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## Fallacy or strategy? Function of *ad hominem* in ethos and pathos

### Summary

The *ad hominem* argument, which attacks the speaker rather than the content of their argument, has traditionally been classified as a logical fallacy and dismissed as an invalid form of reasoning. However, its persistent presence in political rhetoric suggests a persuasive function that extends beyond logical invalidity. Within classical rhetorical theory, persuasion operates through the triad of logos, ethos, and pathos. *Ad hominem* arguments often target ethos by discrediting an opponent's character and evoke pathos by provoking emotional reactions in the audiences.

This paper examines how *ad hominem* arguments intersect with the Aristotelian modes of persuasion through a case study of the meeting between U.S. President Donald Trump, U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, held on 28 February 2025 at the White House in Washington, D.C. The findings indicate that *ad hominem* is more than a fallacy. It is a strategy that, directly or indirectly, affects all three modes of persuasion – ethos, pathos, and logos – by undermining credibility, evoking emotion, and diverting attention away from logical argumentation and from reasoned evidence.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** *ad hominem*, fallacy, modes of persuasion, rhetorical strategy

### 1. FALLACIES AS INSTRUMENTS OF AGGRESSION IN POLITICAL RHETORIC

Aggressive rhetoric, particularly in political discourse, largely relies on the strategic use of fallacies that distort reasoned argument in favour of confrontation and conflict,

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emotional manipulation, and delegitimation. Rather than merely representing faulty reasoning, fallacies function as rhetorical devices that contribute to the erosion of cooperative dialogue (Tindale, 2007; van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004). Their persuasive power lies not in logical validity, but in their psychological appeal and capacity to polarise the audiences, discredit opponents, and disrupt the norms of deliberative communication.

Fallacies such as straw man, false dilemma, slippery slope, and *ad hominem* frequently occur in aggressive and confrontational discourse, particularly in political contexts, where persuasive goals outweigh standards of ideal argumentation (Kišiček, 2017; Runjić-Stoilova & Jović, 2021; Tindale, 2007; Walton, 1998). They enable speakers to simplify complex issues, caricature opposing views, or redirect criticism toward irrelevant or personal aspects of an interlocutor. The straw man fallacy, for instance, allows a speaker to replace an opponent's actual position with a weaker version, making it easier to dispute (Tindale, 2007: 45). Similarly, false dilemmas exaggerate the stakes by presenting only two extreme choices, while excluding potentially more reasonable and moderate alternatives. In aggressive rhetoric, the role of *ad hominem* is to discredit an interlocutor. As Tindale (2007: 72–73) argues, the erosion of trust and credibility through personal attacks is central to aggressive discourse. Walton (1998) acknowledges that *ad hominem* arguments can be contextually relevant, especially when a speaker's trustworthiness is genuinely in question. However, in aggressive rhetoric, such distinctions are often collapsed in favour of rhetorical impact. All of the aforementioned fallacies, along with others, are often used in aggressive political rhetoric to construct moral binaries and intensify emotional appeal (Laclau, 2005; Wodak, 2015).

Building on this view, fallacies in aggressive rhetoric are not merely errors, but are often used as intentional strategies. Walton (1998: 12–13) and Mercier and Sperber (2017: 165–168) describe such uses of fallacies as “argumentative moves” designed to win audiences rather than achieve shared understanding. Furthermore, rhetorical and pragmatic approaches to argumentation stress that fallacies can be effective persuasive moves depending on the context, audience, and communicative goals (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969; Tindale, 2007; Walton, 1998). Fallacies are especially used as persuasive moves in media environments, where the theatrical and combative nature of such arguments often outweighs factual accuracy (Wodak, 2015). Thus, they contribute to shaping political communication, where the appearance of strength or certainty becomes more persuasive than reasoned discourse (Finlayson, 2012).

In this regard, fallacies operate as rhetorical shortcuts in aggressive communication, enabling speakers to assert dominance, hide the complexity of a matter being discussed,

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and undermine rivals without engaging substantively. Understanding their function is essential for analysing how persuasion operates in contexts where dialogue gives way to conflict.

## 2. AD HOMINEM FALLACY

The *ad hominem*, or *argumentum ad hominem* in Latin, literally means “to the man” (Weston, 2017: 87). It is a fallacy that occurs when a speaker attacks an opponent’s character, motives, or personal traits rather than engaging with the content or logic of their argument. Such attacks distract from the issue and divert attention to irrelevant personal aspects. In this sense, *ad hominem* builds on the natural human tendency to associate what is being said with the person who is saying it. Škarić (2011: 93) lists *ad hominem* and *ad personam* in eristic dialectic, specifying that *ad hominem* focuses on finding inconsistencies in someone’s behaviour or actions, whereas *ad personam* refers to attacking the person, not the argument (as the argument might be difficult to dispute). Pirie (2015: 88) argues that the insult itself is not fallacious. He further adds that abusive *ad hominem* is committed if an insult is made with the goal of undermining an opponent’s argument. Tindale (2007: 81) emphasises that not all *ad hominem* arguments are fallacious, and that sometimes it might be appropriate to draw attention to a person’s character if it is relevant to what the person says. Tindale (2007: 88–89) further identifies three cases when *ad hominem* is fallacious: 1. When it is concluded that a person is wrong solely because material questioning their credibility has been introduced. 2. When the character traits under discussion are not relevant to the issue being debated. 3. When the arguer attempts to prevent the other party from presenting their position by attacking them personally. Yap (2013: 99) also emphasises the relevance of character features in the argumentation process as they generally contribute to establishing a speaker’s credibility by influencing audience perceptions of the speaker’s trustworthiness and reliability.

Whereas some fallacies may arise from a lack of familiarity with the principles of logical reasoning and valid argumentation, others, particularly aggressive fallacies such as *ad hominem*, are often employed deliberately as rhetorical strategies. In such cases, *ad hominem* does not function primarily as an unintentional logical error, but as a persuasive manoeuvre used to compensate for weak evidence or insufficient argumentation. This strategic use aligns with rhetorical theory, in which persuasion is understood as operating through the interrelated appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, Book I.2: 1356a–1356b). While *ad hominem* is most often

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studied within argumentation theory, this paper adopts a rhetorical perspective that treats argumentation as a contextual and audience-oriented practice rather than as a formal logical procedure (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969; Tindale, 2007). From this perspective, analysing *ad hominem* within a rhetorical framework is particularly productive, as such arguments function by undermining an opponent's ethos and mobilising pathos to disrupt the audience's engagement with logos, rather than by directly addressing the substance of the argument (Tindale, 2007; Walton, 1998). In this sense, insights from argumentation theorists such as Walton (1998) are used to illuminate the rhetorical functioning of *ad hominem* in political discourse, rather than to evaluate its logical validity.

### 3. AD HOMINEM AND RHETORICAL PERSUASION

#### 3.1 *Ad hominem* and ethos

In political discourse, *ad hominem* fallacies are usually deployed to undermine an opponent's credibility and avoid engaging directly with the substance of their arguments. Tindale (2013: 255) claims that the emphasis placed on one's character in order to strengthen or weaken an opponent's argument is conceptually linked to the appeal to authority and the *ad hominem* argument. However, he further highlights that the manner in which someone's arguments are attacked reflects the character of the attacker as well. Both Kišiček (2017: 46) and Woods (2007: 109) emphasise that it is important to differentiate between the rhetorical and logical dimensions of *ad hominem*, or between undermining someone's credibility and a pure insult. Kišiček (2021: 56) provides examples of the situations when the use of *ad hominem* may be justified, e.g., when a politician bases his public image, thus also his ethos, on certain values he fails to practice. *Ad hominem* attacks may have powerful rhetorical functions when interpreted within the framework of the classical triad of ethos, pathos, and logos which Aristotle (*Rhetoric*, Book I.2: 1356a–1356b) identified as the three primary modes of persuasion. He defined ethos as persuasion achieved through the speaker's character when it is presented as credible. Therefore, ethos refers to the perceived credibility or moral character of a speaker and has an important role in establishing trust with the audience. Aristotle (*Rhetoric*, Book I.2: 1356a–1357b) emphasises that persuasion does not refer only to presenting logical arguments (logos), but also to convincing the audience that the person is reliable and competent. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) indicate that ethos is not simply a static quality of a speaker. It is constructed within the discourse. Thus, *ad hominem* specifically targets ethos as it aims to attack

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the speaker's character, motives, and integrity, and, consequently, undermine their legitimacy. Therefore, when ethos is distorted, a speaker's persuasive power decreases regardless of the quality of logical arguments. Walton (1998) provides a typology of *ad hominem* fallacies which includes: abusive *ad hominem*, referring to direct insults or character attacks, circumstantial *ad hominem*, focusing on undermining based on affiliations or self-interest, *tu quoque*, accusing the speaker of hypocrisy, poisoning the well, referring to preemptive discrediting of credibility, and bias *ad hominem*, focusing on perceived bias or vested interests, thereby suggesting the speaker cannot be trusted. All of the above rely on disrupting ethos in order to diminish a speaker's ability to persuade. Walton (1998) argues that *ad hominem* arguments might be fallacious in logic, but operate as effective rhetorical tactics, that is, as local discursive moves within broader persuasive strategies in political discourse, where a politician's credibility and public image may be equally persuasive as empirical evidence. Modern studies confirm Walton's conclusion about the dominant role of ethos in persuasion. Kišiček (2017) states that by attacking a speaker's ethos, politicians gain an advantage which is why *ad hominem* fallacies are among the most frequently found in political rhetoric. Manzoor et al. (2020) analysed online debates and concluded that reputation (ethos) is a better predictor of persuasion success than factual accuracy (logos). Gajewska et al. (2024) found that social media political discourse relies on ethos and pathos dynamic, and that the main persuasion tools are character attacks and emotional provocation. Describing the pragmatic and rhetorical aspects of *ad hominem* and *ad baculum*, Budzynska and Witek (2014) state that *ad hominem* has to be seen as an illocutionary act with the pragmatic force of undermining the opponent's ethos associated with the opponent's speech act. Brinton (1986) introduces the concept of the ethotic argument, showing that appeals to character and credibility can function argumentatively, not merely as logical fallacies, thereby supporting the view that *ad hominem* and related strategies operate within the ethos domain rather than in abstract logical norms. Furthermore, Budzyńska et al. (2021) characterise ethotic arguments as patterns of reasoning founded on associations between a public figure's character and the actions or objects connected with them, suggesting that character evaluations play a central, structured role in argumentation beyond traditional logical patterns. All these theoretical perspectives demonstrate that ethos is not a fixed attribute of a speaker, but a discursively constructed and strategic dimension of persuasion.

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### 3.2 *Ad hominem* and pathos

The second key mode of persuasion, according to Aristotle (*Rhetoric*, I.2: 1356a–b), is pathos, which he defines as the arousal of emotions that influence judgment. Therefore, pathos appeals to the audience's emotions, shaping their judgement by changing their emotional states. Aristotle (1989) does not directly discuss fallacies such as *ad hominem*, but he suggests that persuasion operates beyond logical reasoning. When discussing logos (*docere*), ethos (*delectare*) and pathos (*movere*), Quintilian (2001: III, 5, 2) clearly states that stirring the emotions has the strongest rhetorical effect. He further asserts that emotions constitute the orator's most powerful weapon, as they can be used to manipulate the emotional state of the opponent and evoke anger, hatred, pity, envy, fear, hope, or joy. Discussing emotional argumentation, Kišiček (2021: 51) states that emotions can be both valid and fallacious, and emotional rhetoric does not exclude rationality. Gilbert (1995) also speaks in favour of emotional argumentation, emphasising that emotions are a constituent part of communication, and therefore an integral element of argumentation as well.

Within argumentation theory, van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004) distinguish between strategic manoeuvring and fallacious reasoning. *Ad hominem* arguments (abusive, circumstantial, and *tu quoque*, especially) are fallacious as they distract from critical discussion. However, they also have a strategic function, as they appeal to the audience's predispositions, often through emotions.

*Ad hominem* directly targets ethos. However, it also operates through pathos, or the appeal to emotion. In certain contexts, political rhetoric employs shaming, fear, scorn, or resentment with the goal of emotionally polarising the audience. The importance of considering emotions while trying to understand moral arguments or *ad hominem*, *ad populum*, and *ad misericordiam* was emphasised by Brinton (1988: 82). This is particularly evident in populist rhetoric, where many fallacies focus on provoking feelings. For example, *ad misericordiam*, or appeal to pity, focuses on provoking pity, and *ad metum* and *ad baculum* aim to provoke fear. In political rhetoric, *ad hominem* attacks function as deliberate emotional appeals and instrumentalise public sentiment. Populist rhetoric constructs elite opponents through circumstantial *ad hominem*, noting the elite's class or wealth. Consequently, resentment and anger against the elite are provoked simultaneously with solidarity among the people (Laclau, 2005; Wodak, 2015). Whereas the primary role of *ad hominem* is to discredit the opponent, it is often accompanied by public fear or anger (pathos), which can shift audience sympathies.

Martini (2018) argues that personal attacks are especially effective when logos-based arguments are not valid, when they are inaccessible or complex for a general

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audience. Emotionally charged rhetoric may polarise audiences by framing political conflict in simplified, binary terms (e.g., hero vs. villain). Such framing can reduce cognitive processing demands by offering readily interpretable evaluative cues and, in certain contexts, may increase persuasiveness compared to more complex forms of logical reasoning.

Taken together, these approaches show that emotional appeals are not peripheral to argumentation but constitute a central persuasive resource through which *ad hominem* arguments acquire rhetorical force.

### 3.3 *Ad hominem* and logos

Logos denotes the appeal to reason, an argumentation based on evidence, facts, and logical structure (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* I.2: 1356a–b). For Aristotle (*Rhetoric* I.2: 1356a–b), logos, or persuasion through argument itself, entails the use of rhetorical syllogisms and examples. Although attacking the person rather than the argument might be a classic example of fallacious reasoning, argumentation theorists such as Walton (1998) and van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004) argue that *ad hominem* arguments may function as strategic manoeuvres, especially if they are presented in a way that makes them appear as logical reasoning.

*Ad hominem* impacts logos, although it is not focused on attacking logical reasoning. Instead, it operates by distracting from it. *Ad hominem* shifts the conversation away from the argument content to the argument context, emphasising the identity or background of the speaker. Habernal et al. (2018) found that *ad hominem* arises in polarised debates when one side is struggling to respond to logical reasoning. In such cases, *ad hominem* enables the speaker to avoid reasoning and valid argumentation by attacking the opponent's character, identity, or motives.

## 4. CASE STUDY CONTEXT AND GOALS: TRUMP, ZELENSKYI AND VANCE OVAL OFFICE MEETING

The Oval Office meeting between U.S. President Donald J. Trump, Vice President J.D. Vance, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy took place on 28 February 2025 at the White House in Washington, D.C. The meeting occurred after Trump's re-election and public scepticism towards the continuation of U.S. military aid to Ukraine. The goal of the meeting was to renegotiate the terms of U.S. – Ukraine relations, particularly in terms of natural resources and geopolitical alignment, and to finalise the proposed U.S. – Ukraine agreement on mineral extraction in order to benefit both economies.

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However, the tone of the meeting diverged from standard diplomatic protocol. Trump and Vance criticised the Ukrainian government's handling of Western funds and called for an immediate audit, while Zelenskyy, being caught off guard by the tone and lack of diplomatic discourse, defended Ukraine's position, emphasising the ongoing Russian aggression and the importance of Western unity.

The televised meeting, which was supposed to be seen as a gesture of strategic partnership, became a dramatic confrontation. Reports from both mainstream media and political analysts suggest that the event was framed as a confrontational, media-oriented exchange, in which Zelenskyy was placed in a defensive position and subjected to politically motivated criticism.<sup>2</sup> Though conducted in the White House, the meeting was atypical in its format. It was publicised in advance and designed to be accessible to media coverage. Such transparency, combined with the confrontational rhetoric employed by Trump and Vance, contributed to the perception that the meeting was orchestrated not as a diplomatic negotiation, but rather as a calculated political moment.

Media and expert commentators, Sunny Hostin, and Ana Navarro<sup>3</sup>, have raised substantial concerns regarding the performative nature of the Oval Office meeting between former President Donald Trump, Vice President J.D. Vance, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, calling it a deliberately staged political spectacle. It is important to note that these media interpretations are not treated here as empirical evidence, but as indicators of how the interaction was publicly framed. Speaking on *The View*, the commentators characterised the interaction as “pre-planned” and strategically orchestrated to undermine President Zelenskyy.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The information relies on the following sources: *The View's Sunny Hostin and Ana Navarro Call Out Trump and J.D. Vance's 'Pre-Planned' Attack on Zelenskyy* (<https://decider.com/2025/03/03/the-view-sunny-hostin-ana-navarro-call-out-trump-jd-vance-zelensky/>), *Trump's sickening Ukraine game exposed* (<https://www.news.com.au/world/north-america/us-politics/be-very-very-afraid-donald-trump-accidentally-reveals-his-ukraine-plan-during-zelensky-clash/news-story/13c67be9d3c7c09eadf29077e23eacea>) and *A spectacle to horrify the world* (<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2025/mar/01/a-spectacle-to-horrify-the-world-what-the-papers-say-about-trump-and-vances-meeting-with-zelenskyy> (Last accessed: 15 July 2025).

<sup>3</sup> Sunny Hostin is a prominent American lawyer, journalist, and television personality with degrees in English, rhetoric, and law (<https://blackfacts.com/fact/sunny-hostin>), and Anna Navarro is a political strategist and commentator (<https://iop.harvard.edu/fellows/ana-navarro>) (Last accessed: 15 July 2025).

<sup>4</sup> <https://decider.com/2025/03/03/the-view-sunny-hostin-ana-navarro-call-out-trump-jd-vance-zelensky/> (Last accessed: 15 July 2025).

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In a separate but complementary analysis, it was emphasised that the meeting's theatrical and confrontational elements exceeded substantive policy discourse.<sup>5</sup> The above-described meeting was selected as material for the analysis precisely due to its orchestrated, pre-planned, and confrontational character, as claimed by the media. This context suggested the potential presence of *ad hominem* used as rhetorical strategy, not a fallacy. In accordance with the previously mentioned, the goal of this case study was to investigate the use of *ad hominem* during the Oval Office meeting, especially by President Trump and Vice President Vance. More precisely, considering that the meeting seemed to be pre-staged and choreographed, the goal was to study the strategic function of *ad hominem* and, specifically, its strategic role in constructing ethos, pathos and logos.

The paper adopts a rhetorical perspective on *ad hominem*, approaching it not primarily as a logical fallacy, but as a communicative strategy embedded in strategic political interaction. The analysis does not aim to assess the logical validity of the arguments advanced, nor to make general claims about political discourse as a whole. Instead, it focuses on a selected, highly mediated interaction in order to examine how *ad hominem* operates as a persuasive resource by targeting ethos and pathos, and how such targeting may indirectly weaken the role of logos within the interaction. In this sense, the study aligns with rhetorical approaches that emphasise situated argumentation and the persuasive dynamics of real-life discourse rather than abstract logical norms.

## 5. ANALYSIS – FUNCTION OF *AD HOMINEM* IN ETHOS AND PATHOS

In order to illustrate how *ad hominem* might function as a strategic manoeuvre and be used to attack or evoke rhetorical appeals, the most reported and the most intense six-minute segment of the meeting (from 41:18 to 47:01) was analysed<sup>6</sup>. This excerpt was chosen because it represents the most interactionally dense and confrontational segment of the encounter, as identified by both media coverage and preliminary

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.news.com.au/world/north-america/us-politics/be-very-very-afraid-donald-trump-accidentally-reveals-his-ukraine-plan-during-zelensky-clash/news-story/13c67be9d3c7c09eadf29077e23eaca> (Last accessed: 15 July 2025).

<sup>6</sup> The transcript of the whole meeting can be found at <https://www.rev.com/transcripts/trump-and-zelensky-in-the-oval-office>. The analysis included a segment starting from 41:18 and ending at 47:01. (Last accessed: 16 July 2025).

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viewing of the full recording. The segment contains a high concentration of turn-taking, interruptions, and direct interpersonal confrontation, making it particularly suitable for examining the rhetorical use of *ad hominem* arguments. However, it should be noted that the analysis does not aim to provide a quantitative account of the overall frequency or distribution of *ad hominem* arguments across the entire meeting. Rather, it offers a qualitative, case-based examination of how *ad hominem* functions in a specific, rhetorically important moment. Consequently, the findings cannot be generalised to the full interaction, as different patterns may emerge in other parts of the meeting. Furthermore, in this analysis, the term *strategy* refers to the broader, goal-oriented rhetorical orientation of the interaction, while *tactics* denote local, moment-to-moment argumentative moves such as individual *ad hominem* attacks.

The analysis showed 13 different examples of *ad hominem* aimed at undermining the speaker, evoking emotion, or derailing logical reasoning. The results are shown in Table 1. The results present each *ad hominem* example along with the speaker who employed it, its classification according to Walton's (1998) typology, the rhetorical appeal it targeted (ethos, pathos, or logos), and a brief description of its strategic function. Furthermore, the strategic functions in Table 1 foreground the defining rhetorical features of each *ad hominem* type.

**Table 1.** Types of *ad hominem*, corresponding rhetorical appeals, and strategic function

	Example and speaker	Type of <i>ad hominem</i>	Rhetorical appeal	Strategic function
1	"You should be thanking the president..." – Vance	Circumstantial <i>ad hominem</i>	Ethos (morality), Pathos (guilt)	Frames Zelenskyy as morally deficient by invoking situational dependence and expectations of gratitude.
2	"I know what happens is you bring people, you bring them on a propaganda tour..." – Vance	Bias <i>ad hominem</i>	Ethos (honesty), Pathos (suspicion)	Attributes bias and hidden motives to Zelenskyy, casting doubt on the objectivity of his claims.
3	"You're in no position to dictate that. You're in no position to dictate what we're going to feel" – Trump	Abusive <i>ad hominem</i>	Ethos (authority), Pathos (humiliation)	Delegitimises Zelenskyy's authority through direct humiliating personal attack.

	<b>Example and speaker</b>	<b>Type of <i>ad hominem</i></b>	<b>Rhetorical appeal</b>	<b>Strategic function</b>
4	<i>"You're gambling with World War III..."</i> – Trump	Abusive ad hominem	Ethos (judgment), Pathos (fear)	Portrays Zelenskyy as irresponsible and dangerous, provoking fear through personal attack.
5	<i>"Have you said thank you once?"</i> – Vance	Circumstantial ad hominem	Pathos (guilt), Ethos (courtesy)	Shames Zelenskyy by invoking contextual expectations of gratitude, shifting focus from policy.
6	<i>"You haven't been alone."</i> – Trump	Abusive ad hominem	Ethos (resilience), Pathos (dismissiveness)	Dismisses Zelenskyy's self-reliance narrative through humiliating personal attack.
7	<i>"This stupid president..."</i> – Trump (about Biden)	Abusive ad hominem	Ethos (opponent), Pathos (contempt)	Discredits a third party through explicit personal insult to elevate the speaker's ethos.
8	<i>"Obama gave sheets. I gave javelins."</i> – Trump	Abusive ad hominem	Ethos (competence), Pathos (sarcasm, mockery)	Uses ridicule to undermine opponents' competence and reinforce speaker superiority.
9	<i>"You don't have the cards."</i> – Trump	Abusive ad hominem	Ethos (capability), Pathos (humiliation)	Highlights alleged powerlessness to weaken Zelenskyy's persuasive authority.
10	<i>"You're allowing yourself to be in a very bad position."</i> – Trump	Circumstantial ad hominem	Ethos (leadership), Pathos (blame)	Attributes responsibility to Zelenskyy's situation, reframing blame away from substantive argumentation.
11	<i>"It's going to be very hard to do business like this again."</i> – Trump	Bias ad hominem	Ethos (reliability), Pathos (warning)	Questions Zelenskyy's reliability by implying partiality and predisposition.
12	<i>"You went to Pennsylvania and campaigned for the opposition in October."</i> – Vance	Circumstantial ad hominem	Ethos (political loyalty), Pathos (resentment)	Challenges political neutrality by invoking external affiliations and contextual loyalties.
13	<i>"I think it's disrespectful for you to come to the Oval Office to try to litigate this in front of the American media."</i> – Vance	Circumstantial ad hominem	Ethos (respect) Pathos (indignation, national pride)	Frames Zelenskyy's conduct as inappropriate due to contextual and institutional norms.

As shown in Table 1, 11 identified instances of *ad hominem* focus on attacking Zelenskyy, and all of them impact both ethos and pathos in the sense that they undermine his character and evoke negative emotions towards him in the audience. Only two instances (examples 7 and 8) are directed at other political figures, namely Presidents Biden and Obama. Both are examples of abusive *ad hominem*, aimed at building one's own ethos and positioning oneself as superior while discrediting/ridiculing the opponent, in this case, previous Presidents Biden and Obama.

Abusive *ad hominem* is also used to discredit Zelenskyy (examples 3, 4, 6, 9). In total, six instances of abusive *ad hominem* make it the most prevalent type in this analysis. Furthermore, it is worth noting that all instances of abusive *ad hominem* were employed by Trump. In example 3, Trump responds to Zelenskyy's assumption that the U.S. is not feeling the consequences of the Russian – Ukrainian war yet, but might in the future. Trump responds with abusive *ad hominem*, stating that Zelenskyy is "*in no position to dictate that. You're in no position to dictate what we're going to feel*". He avoids the discussion on the potential consequences of the war and attacks Zelenskyy, delegitimising him based on status. He attempts to discredit him as irrelevant, attacking his ethos in terms of authority. Consequently, Trump evokes the feeling of public humiliation directed towards Zelenskyy. By repeating "*Don't tell us what we're going to feel*" several times, he further provokes and causes irritation in Zelenskyy, and repeatedly undermines his legitimacy, painting Zelenskyy as an outsider and automatically rejecting his claims. In example 4, Trump continues derailing from the topic and intensifying his attacks stating that Zelenskyy is "*playing cards. You're gambling with the lives of millions of people. You're gambling with World War III.*" Such a narrative is an attack on Zelenskyy's ethos, as it implies his recklessness and lack of responsibility. By implying his moral irresponsibility, Trump tries to present Zelenskyy as a leader unfit to lead a country in times of crisis. Furthermore, questioning his capability of a leader to make reasonable decisions evokes fear among the audience. In the context of example 6, Zelenskyy was being criticised for not being thankful to the U.S. for all the assistance his country received. He rejects it by saying that he had expressed his gratitude many times, emphasising Ukrainian people's strength from the "*very beginning of the war when being alone*". Trump uses this phrase to attack Zelenskyy by combining two abusive *ad hominem*, one directed towards Zelenskyy and the other towards Biden, whom he calls the "*stupid president*" ("*You haven't been alone. We gave you, through this stupid president, \$350 billion*", examples 6 and 7). Therefore, when Zelenskyy emphasises Ukrainian resilience, Trump discredits it, suggesting Zelenskyy's arrogance and ingratitude, impacting both Zelenskyy's ethos

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and the audience's emotions. Simultaneously, this rhetoric positions the United States as a rescuing power. As Walton (1998) emphasises, abusive *ad hominem* is not simply name-calling, but a move within a dialogue intended to invalidate an argument by discrediting its source, especially in contexts where ethos plays a central role (such as political or legal discourse). The attack functions by suggesting that the opponent's claims should not be taken seriously because the opponent possesses certain negative traits (in this case, arrogance and ingratitude). Discussing the same topic as in example 6, Trump once more tries to question Zelenskyy's leadership skills and competence (example 9) by suggesting, "*You don't have the cards. Your people are dying. You're running low on soldiers.*", thereby causing the feeling of humiliation and depicting Zelenskyy as powerless.

Five examples (1, 5, 10, 12, and 13) illustrate the use of circumstantial *ad hominem*, predominantly employed by Vice President Vance. In example 1, Vice President Vance derails from the conversation by referring to Ukraine's manpower shortage and difficult military circumstances, suggesting that Zelenskyy should be thanking President Trump ("*You should be thanking the president...*"). The Vice President is therefore implying that Zelenskyy has no right to criticise or challenge the U.S. president or should be more grateful due to his country's desperate situation. In terms of persuasive appeals, such an *ad hominem* argument aims to question Zelenskyy's morality, suggesting his ungratefulness (undermining ethos), and to evoke a feeling of guilt (pathos). Such a narrative is continued in example 5, when Vance once more tries to shift focus from war to Zelenskyy's personal gratitude, shaming Zelenskyy considering that his ingratitude is implied regardless of his response ("*Have you said thank you once?*"). Unlike the other circumstantial *ad hominem* used by Vance, example 10 is used by Trump. Similarly to previous examples, Trump emphasises challenging circumstances as a reason to dismiss Zelenskyy's point of view, shifting the focus from what he is saying to where he strategically stands ("*You're allowing yourself to be in a very bad position.*"), and thus emphasising context instead of logical reasoning. This constitutes a blame-oriented attack, aiming to evoke the feeling of accountability and guilt, attributing Ukraine's losses to Zelenskyy's poor choices. Example 12 presents another circumstantial *ad hominem* by Vance, aimed at diverting attention from the topic of the meeting, diminishing Zelenskyy's ethos, questioning his political loyalty and undermining his sincerity ("*You went to Pennsylvania and campaigned for the opposition in October.*"), creating a sense of resentment. Similarly, in example 13, Vance diminishes Zelenskyy's ethos by attacking his credibility and framing

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him as manipulative and disrespectful (“*I think it’s disrespectful for you to come to the Oval Office to try to litigate this in front of the American media.*”). This tactic also appeals to patriotic and institutional respect, evoking the emotion of indignation and national pride in the American audience. It further evokes suspicion in the audience regarding Zelenskyy’s motives. This circumstantial *ad hominem* implies that Zelenskyy’s arguments are flawed because they arise from improper motives.

Examples 2 and 11 illustrate bias *ad hominem*, as they imply that the speaker’s position is unreliable due to a lack of objectivity. Within Walton’s (1998) framework, bias *ad hominem* differs from circumstantial *ad hominem* in that it focuses specifically on partiality or predisposition, rather than on broader life circumstances or situational constraints. In example 2, Vice President Vance attacks the credibility of Zelenskyy’s statement by suggesting that his position is manipulative rather than trustworthy. When Zelenskyy questions how much Trump and Vance really know about Ukrainian problems, Vance asserts that Zelenskyy stages propaganda tours, suggesting that the way he presents Ukraine’s situation is manipulative or staged, not authentic. Thus, Vance attacks Zelenskyy’s ethos, or honesty, weakening his credibility and evoking suspicion among listeners. Similarly, Trump makes another attack on Zelenskyy’s trustworthiness (example 11: “*It’s going to be very hard to do business like this again.*”), implying that his behaviour is uncooperative and undermining his reliability or diplomatic capabilities. Consequently, he indirectly warns Zelenskyy, creating a feeling of insecurity regarding future cooperation.

Considering the above, it can be concluded that in this short exchange, 11 of the 13 *ad hominem* targeted Zelenskyy’s ethos. Two were focused on third parties (Obama and Biden). Those focusing on Zelenskyy aimed at portraying him as ungrateful, manipulative, powerless, reckless, and biased in order for him to appear morally flawed, incompetent and dependent on the United States. By doing so, Trump and Vance made an attempt to weaken the persuasive force of his arguments or even prevent him from presenting them. The *ad hominem* arguments analysed in this study evoked emotional responses in the audience, namely guilt, mockery (in case of Biden and Obama), resentment, and humiliation. This shifts the audience’s focus from rational evaluation of Zelenskyy’s arguments to emotional opposition against him. The *ad hominem* arguments examined do not directly challenge logical reasoning (*logos*); instead, they disrupt it by repeatedly diverting attention from Zelenskyy’s factual claims to personal attacks.

It is worth noting that more adverse argumentation errors, such as *ad personam* and name-calling, which have no argumentative function and are purely abusive

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(Pirie, 2015; Walton, 1998), were not found in this meeting extract. The only direct insult was found in the context of example 7, where ex-President Biden was called *stupid*. The lack of more explicit or inappropriate attacks indicates that the speakers were aware of the potentially negative image such strategies might project. The use of *ad personam* or name-calling might shift the audience's sympathy negatively in relation to the attackers, undermine the attackers' ethos, and provoke sympathy for the target rather than the speaker (Tindale, 2007; Walton, 1998), considering that, as Tindale (2013) states, aggressive rhetoric aims to attack the opponent but also portrays the speaker. Thus, the idea that *ad hominem* arguments were used consciously as a rhetorical strategy aimed at discrediting Zelenskyy's ethos and encouraging the audience's emotional engagement is additionally supported.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This case study shows how *ad hominem* arguments may be used to gain a rhetorical advantage by undermining an opponent's credibility and redirecting audience attention away from substantive argumentation. Despite the fact that only a short meeting extract was analysed, it can be seen that although Zelenskyy tries to appeal to logos and ethos to justify Ukraine's position, Trump and Vance use *ad hominem* attacks to discredit Zelenskyy's ethos and manipulate pathos to shift the audience's sympathies. Their *ad hominem* arguments are not the result of ignorance of logical reasoning, but a strategy used to strengthen their own weak arguments and weaken Zelenskyy's logical reasoning. Thus, the idea that *ad hominem* arguments are not just errors or fallacies, but strategic moves used to shape the audience's perception, is reinforced.

By analysing *ad hominem* in terms of ethos, pathos, and logos, its rhetorical function is better understood. While *ad hominem* might be logically fallacious, it is a rhetorically important strategy, especially in a political context, where credibility, emotion, and identity might outweigh rational debate. It is a tool used to reshape discourse and redirect attention from the substantive towards the personal.

In this specific case, mostly abusive (6 examples) and circumstantial (5 examples) *ad hominem* arguments were used by both President Trump and Vice President Vance. The goal of these *ad hominem* arguments was to try to impact Zelenskyy's ethos by destroying his credibility and undermining his authority; to impact pathos by encouraging emotional engagement from the audience and causing polarisation; and indirectly, to impact logos, or to derail from issue-based argumentation and erode rational discourse. The findings of the analysis indicate that the persuasive power of *ad*

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*hominem* in the examined interaction does not stem from its logical strength, but from its ability to reframe the communicative situation. By repeatedly redirecting attention from factual claims to personal attributes, *ad hominem* arguments contribute to a redistribution of persuasive strength, in which appeals to ethos and pathos come to dominate attempts at reasoned argumentation. From a rhetorical perspective, this shift can be seen as a persuasive imbalance in which logoi-based argumentation is not explicitly challenged but is rhetorically weakened. At a theoretical level, the findings of this case study support rhetorical approaches that conceptualise argumentation as a situated and interactional practice, rather than as an exclusively logical procedure. Therefore, understanding *ad hominem* as a rhetorical strategy, not merely a logical fallacy, is both beneficial and essential for rhetorical research, especially in a political context, as it opens space for empirically examining its interaction with ethos, pathos, and audience alignment in real discourse.

Several limitations of the study should be acknowledged. Importantly, this analysis does not allow claims about the persuasive effectiveness of *ad hominem*, as rhetorical effectiveness ultimately depends on audience reception, which was not examined in this study. Furthermore, the analysis is based on a six-minute excerpt of a longer political meeting, selected for its confrontational and interactionally dense character. While this allows for close qualitative analysis, it does not permit claims about the overall frequency or distribution of *ad hominem* arguments throughout the entire interaction. Finally, the study focuses on a single high-profile political encounter, which limits the generalisability of the findings to other contexts, genres, or political cultures.

Future research should focus on analysing larger datasets or entire political interactions in order to examine how *ad hominem* strategies evolve across different phases of discourse. Comparative studies involving different political actors, media settings, or cultural contexts could further illuminate the relationship between *ad hominem*, audience alignment, and persuasiveness.

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