Winter 2005 Winner

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Instructor’s Foreword

I think Eyal would agree with me when I describe his research writing experience in my PWR 1 course on advertising as a labor of love. Eyal experienced the true labor of an archival researcher, spending hours in the basement of Green Library sifting through back issues of *Time* and *Rolling Stone* magazines. He also experienced the thrill of research discovery in finding that his questions were forming into answers. Those answers resulted in the essay “Kick Ass Culture: Ads Mirror an Anti-Dialogue American Discourse.” In this essay, Eyal maps the rise of anti-dialogue rhetoric in American national discourse through astute analyses of modern print advertisements. Ultimately, he argues that these ads manifest a recurrent and pervasive pattern in current American discourse that celebrates conflict as a means to its own end, ultimately encouraging a culture of one-way monologues of winners.

His type of enthusiasm directed into carefully gathering the resources for argument is what good research is about. But Eyal’s ideas were matched by the rhetorical character of his own writing. The final persuasive power of the essay that made his argument so exceptional rested in his active revision. After being notified that his essay would be nominated for the Boothe Prize, he worked on improving and re-thinking his presentation immediately. Two weeks later, he submitted a better and stronger piece, one that was not only clearer in argument but also more thoroughly engaged in a public dialogue. In the beginning of the term, I introduced the research essay as a mode of inquiry, where the writer enters with questions rather than answers; and where the writer considers how his argument responds to a public discussion on the matter. Eyal has not only fully immersed himself in this national conversation but has held his own through his original contribution to the discourse. While the essay may relate the end of this dialogue, it signals an emergence of a scholar and the start of many more dialogues to come.

Sohui Lee
“Demonstrate Your Contempt…”

This stark, aggressive phrase is an excerpt from the catchy slogan of a Chrysler advertisement found in a recent issue of Time magazine. It is one of a rising number of highly confrontational ads that entice their audiences by inviting them into a fantasy of ego-reinforcing aggression. On a larger scale, these ads point to an emerging confrontational rhetoric based on a new portrayal of conflict—within what is perhaps a new paradigm for American dialogue. What is this new paradigm? Why do advertisers believe that the opportunity to “demonstrate your contempt” makes the public want to buy a Chrysler? More importantly, what is it about the American public that has brought advertisers to this conclusion?

Dialogue is the key to conflict resolution; conflict, in turn, is an integral part of any social structure, and the way a society resolves conflict offers a fundamental insight into its values and success. And yet, as social analyst Richard A. Skinner points out, “No country in the world seeks redress through legal means as much as does America, and this holds true regardless of how one measures the phenomenon” (Skinner). Why does our dialogue not suffice to resolve our disputes?

In present American society, conflict and its resolution are shaped on a personal and inter-personal level by the inconstancy and fluidity of modern private life and the heterogeneous nature of our society. On both a national and international level, drastic differences in opinion and perspective throw us into heated debate and open confrontation. And yet it seems, perhaps because of the complexity of modern issues and the already saturated attention spans of modern Americans in the face of an information deluge, that our national discourse has been emaciated to little more than schoolyard verbal brawls. Even the 2004 election debates can be seen as a sad testament to this trend, summed up by the New York Post in the headlines, “Brawl Together Now” (Orin and Friedman 4), “Foes Pound Each Other” (Orin, Morris 2), and “Kerry Comes Out Swinging” (Bishop 5). Politics fused with popular culture and yielded an awkward exchange of one-liners, comebacks and put-downs.

Dialogue has been replaced by a new form of discourse: the anti-dialogue. In the anti-dialogue, conflict has lost its inherent hope for resolution and has instead become a venue that inspires aggressive, confrontational rhetoric aimed at nothing more than the self-glorification of the involved parties through domination of the opponent with little or no attempt at any meaningful exchange. Instead of fostering dialogue, this discourse inhibits it and, in effect, expels it. Within the context of the anti-dialogue, conflict has become an attraction. In a society where the individual has abandoned resolution and instead strives to be a “winner,” dialogue has been replaced by conflict for conflict’s sake—it is attractive, as a vehicle for the expression of our own intellectual, rhetorical, physical, and
sexual superiority.

Advertising, capitalism’s finger on the pulse of the masses, has been quick to
discern this trend; recognizing the public’s fascination with the anti-dialogue, it has
begun employing anti-dialogue motifs to tempt its audience. Gradually, advertisements
displaying confrontational themes have left behind issue-based, commercial competition
and have begun to attract consumers through the inherent appeal of conflict itself; the
popularity of these new ads demonstrates, in turn, the popularity of the anti-dialogue
itself. Eventually, from between the pages of Time magazine, a Chrysler becomes an
opportunity to “display your contempt,” popular culture views “kick ass” and “in your
face” as compliments, and a presidential address ends with the echoing phrase “Bring
them on!” (Bush, qtd. in Frazza).

By using advertisements to trace the changes in the use of confrontational themes
to appeal to the American public over the past forty years and analyzing the rhetoric of
specific ads through case studies, this paper will attempt to illustrate how the conflict
displayed in ads has gradually become devoid of relevant content while becoming more
flagrantly aggressive, personal, and polarized. It will further endeavor to demonstrate the
pervasiveness and appeal of the anti-dialogue within the American national discourse and
define it as an approach to conflict resolution that effectively removes meaningful content
from conflict, and glorifies conflict itself as a means of personal reaffirmation; ultimately,
the goal of the anti-dialogue is not resolution, but victory.

Modern Discourse and the Anti-Dialogue

The anti-dialogue, as a new discourse paradigm, has for a foundation several phenomena
in modern American communicative norms: the gradual removal of meaningful content
from dialogue, the tendency to homogenize and polarize opposing groups, and the notion
of aggression as a popular and effective means of conflict resolution.

The motion of modern discourse away from meaningful content is prevalent in the
works of influential social theorist Jurgen Habermas and the political theorists Thomas
E. Patterson and Kathleen H. Jamieson. Habermas defined the “public sphere” as the
forum for public intellectual exchange, and wrote of its disintegration from “culture
debate” to “culture consumption,” where “the web of public communication unraveled
into acts of individuated reception …” (Habermas 161). Political analysis, specifically
of the appeals made by politicians to the American public, supports this trend. In the
landmark 1960 Kennedy/Nixon televised debate, the camera-friendly Kennedy was said
to have “triumphed,” though “Nixon was deemed by those who only listened to the
debate on the radio as the ‘winner’” (Coleman 7), pointing to what was perhaps the
cornerstone in the gradual ascendance of image over content. Patterson’s analysis of the
media coverage of American presidential elections provides further support: from 1960
to 1992, election stories went from a general focus on policy to a focus on the “game,”
yielding a “horse-race” like perception of national politics (Patterson 74). Jamieson asserts
that in the context of elections—where national politics enter the popular discourse—this
form of coverage tends to “[focus] viewers’ attention on winning rather than governing”
(Jamieson 31). As conflict gains in complexity, meaningful dialogue is almost impractical.
Thus, the anti-dialogue emerges: in the age of the sound bite, the one-liner is king.

In contrast with resolution-oriented dialogue, which involves each side’s recognition
of the other, the anti-dialogue relies on the creation of “straw-man” opponents. As research
shows, the role of conflict in modern social structures provides precisely that. Individuals
tend to use conflict schemas to define their own opinions on either side of an issue (Price 219); it is easier to “pick sides” than to analyze any given issue and formulate a new opinion. The research of Vincent Price and Donald Roberts indicates that individuals tend to associate themselves with distinct social groups, and formulate views of “homogenized” opposing groups and “polarized or exaggerated perceptions of group opinion norms” (203). This tendency to “align and alienate” lends to the formation of an anti-dialogue by creating parties on either side of an issue with little true understanding of each other, and hence little reciprocal responsibility. Ultimately, it facilitates the transformation of conflict into a “game,” allowing for replacing resolution with a victory-oriented approach.

What defines the anti-dialogue is its glorified portrayal of aggression, and the result—domination, as a means of conflict resolution. Here too, it firmly rests on established American societal norms. In a comparative study of styles of conflict resolution in the US and Canada, social researcher Michael Adams wrote:

Out of step with social change in most industrialized nations… rather than moving toward greater autonomy, idealism, and inner direction, Americans are moving [toward] values of nihilism, aggression, fear of the other, and consumptive one-upmanship. (Qtd. in Skinner)

Popular culture points in a similar direction. A study of conflict resolution styles in prime time programs yielded the following conclusions:

Good guys were well over four times as likely to commit violence than bad guys. Given the choice between violence and the avoidance of violence, good guys were more than 3 times as likely to employ violence… bad guys, by comparison, were more likely to employ non-violence then good guys. (Niman and Dentan)

The popularity of violence over non-violent approaches in conflict resolution demonstrates the attractive view of aggression in the eyes of American audiences. This attraction has been often employed to appeal to the American public: George H.W. Bush’s famous line, “Read my lips (no new taxes!)” was originally made famous by action hero Dirty Harry, while the use of such quintessentially anti-dialogue catch-phrases as “bring it on” and “you are either with us or against us” by current US president George W. Bush shows how far the anti-dialogue has gone (Frazza; CNN.com).

As demonstrated by these social trends, conflict is easier than understanding; winning is less complex than resolution. Gradually, the oversimplifying tendencies required by the modern information influx and exacerbated by the flair of an entertainment based media vying for the public’s attention, as well as by the modern individual’s own need for self identification and reaffirmation within complex social structures, have defined the anti-dialogue: an argumentative style based on conflict for conflict’s sake, with self-reaffirmation as its drive, and winning as its goal—in as flagrant and unequivocal a manner as possible. Yet the anti dialogue is no longer a fault to be tolerated; completing a paradigm shift, it has become an ideal to be sought.

The Anti-Dialogue in Advertising

The importance and relevance of the emergence of the anti-dialogue as a social phenomenon can be shown through a review of modern advertisements and their depiction of confrontational themes. As John Berger wrote in his seminal book *Ways of Seeing*, advertisements provide us with a mirror of modern culture:
Publicity is always about the future buyer. It offers him an image of himself made glamorous by the product or opportunity it is trying to sell. The image then makes him envious of himself as he might be. (Berger 132)

By examining the images presented to the “future buyer” in advertisements, we discern the “glamorous […] image” of “himself as he might be,” and gain an understanding of what is deemed “enviable” by popular standards. By examining the prevalence and portrayal of confrontational themes in advertising, we begin to understand the anti-dialogue through the shift both in the importance of conflict in modern self-identification, and in the popular approach to conflict and styles of conflict resolution.

To define the anti-dialogue as mirrored by advertisements, I conducted a survey of ads in 39 issues of Time magazine from the years 1963, 1985, and 2003, as well as in 36 issues of Rolling Stone magazine from 1968, 1985, and 2003, focusing on the presence and nature of confrontational themes. These specific publications were chosen for their broad appeal: Time as an established periodical with a culturally central appeal, and Rolling Stone as representative of trend setting, pop-culture innovation.

The survey yielded dramatic results: the 1968 issues of Rolling Stone were virtually devoid of any confrontational themes; in all the 1963 issues of Time magazine examined, only one relevant advertisement was found. And although confrontational themes showed some presence in print advertisements from 1985, they still were far less prevalent than those encountered in 2003. These findings were reinforced by each publication on its own: both Time and Rolling Stone separately showed a proportionally similar rise in the prevalence of these ads.

1963—1985: Emerging Motifs

The portrayal of conflict in advertisements from 1963 and 1985 differed greatly from its parallel in modern ads. The ads found in publications from these periods were not openly aggressive, but rather employed more subtle techniques. In these ads, conflict was not presented as attractive in itself. Furthermore, the conflict suggested by these advertisements tended to be issue-based—addressing issues that were directly relevant to the product advertised.

Conflict itself is not the attraction in a 1963 Tareyton cigarettes ad (see figure 1). Although the ad speaks of the fight with a beckoning smile, the protagonist is not clearly displayed as an aggressor. He is smiling and at eye level with the reader—creating a sense of camaraderie, not intimidation. He is also not presented as an unequivocal winner (his black eye is prominent, and it is not even entirely clear that he won the fight), nor is he seen to dominate anyone or anything. Rather, he is presented as someone who might be forced into a defensive fight—he “would rather fight than switch.” The fight is a last resort; it is bad, but not as bad as giving up the taste of Tareyton. The product does not invite conflict, facilitate it, or allow the audience to be the victor; rather, it argues that the product is worthy of conflict. Tareyton smokers—“The Unswitchables”—are described
not as “aggressive,” but “aggressively loyal;” the latter phrase places the emphasis from “aggression” to “loyalty.” The image of the man in the ad is not that of an intimidating winner, but rather of an “old boys club” style, rugged, happy-go-lucky all-American, his big smile shining past the black eye.

The ads I encountered in advertisements from 1985 show a gradual progression in the portrayal of conflict towards the anti-dialogue culture of today. Yet their portrayal of conflict was still restricted in its scope: the opponent was often limited to topics relevant to the product advertised. For example, a Goodyear tire ad (Figure 2) declares, “Enemy: potholes,” inviting the consumers to assert themselves against badly paved roads by using the Vector tire. The ad is actually presented from the perspective of the pothole; the reader looks through a gaping hole in the road at the tire above. The visually dominant black tire is seen sending rocks flying behind it as it surges forward; it is described in the text as “aggressive” in the face of “the punishment of torn up roads,” communicating the flair of domination (over potholes) and victory in conflict. Yet the conflict is not gratuitous—potholes are reasonable opponents of the car owner, and the conflict addresses practical matters within the realm of the product rather than directly targeting the consumer’s self image. The consumer may be tempted to buy the product to achieve the victorious air implied by the ad, but this victory can be logically and sensibly justified.

An ad calling for financial contributions to U.C. Berkeley provides an example of a portrayal of conflict that is more playful than truly threatening and ultimately rests on a message of collaboration rather than confrontation (see Figure 3). The ad harnesses cold war anti-Russian sentiment to attract attention with the line, “Berkeley threatens Russia.” Note the use of the word “threatens”: although the confrontational verb is definitely used to excite the reader, it is more a challenge than outright aggression. The call is more for pride on a national level, than the individualized gratification offered by the modern anti-dialogue. And though the headline uses a dominant, large, bold font, the text that follows is presented in a decidedly more gentle script. In addition, the achievements of the Berkeley professors are presented in a manner that is witty, without being flagrant: although the ad counts the institution’s achievements, it states, “But hey, who’s counting? Certainly not our professors … ” Furthermore, these achievements are attributed to the reader’s generosity:

“You deserve a medal.” And lastly, under the U.C. Berkeley name is the slogan, “It’s not the same without you.” The ad creates an image of the university as intellectually formidable, yet personable, approachable, and collaborative. Neither Berkeley, nor the
reader, are presented as infallible; rather, it is the collaboration that is glorified.

**The Anti-Discourse in Modern Ads**

Print advertisements encountered in the 2003 issues of *Time* and *Rolling Stone* paint a dramatically different picture than their predecessors. As the anti-dialogue established itself within American dialogue norms, the ads that employ it to appeal to their audience changed as well. First, the conflict presented in the ads is no longer issue based. Departing from the rhetoric of commercial competition and leaving relevant issues behind, these ads present confrontation and conflict itself—no matter how gratuitous—as inherently attractive and employ its attraction to appeal to their readers. Secondly, having thus lost old constraints, the rhetoric of these ads has become more flagrantly aggressive, capitalizing on conflict’s newfound appeal. Thirdly, with relevant content giving way to flagrant rhetoric, meaningful dialogue disappears, and the ads are characterized by dramatic polarization of opposing sides: typically, “winners” and “losers.” Fourthly and finally, as conflict becomes no longer resolution-oriented but victory-oriented, the ads present it as a means of self-reaffirmation. The following case study analyses of modern ads employing confrontational themes will attempt to illustrate these trends, thereby extracting a definition of the anti-dialogue, and demonstrating its appeal across various social contexts.

This new brand of anti-dialogue ads shows how confrontation—and conflict itself, regardless of content, has become attractive—so much so that it is used to lure potential customers. An ad for Chrysler’s PT Turbo leads with the line, “Demonstrate your contempt for conformity 3.1 seconds faster” (see Figure 4). The use of such a phrase to lure readers implies that “demonstrating contempt” is an indulgence attractive to the ad’s target audience. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “contempt” as “The action of contemning or despising; the holding or treating as of little account, or as vile and worthless.” It is an openly negative act, and its demonstration is an act of aggression, or conflict. Yet this is precisely what the ad is inviting its audience to do—and suggestively, to enjoy; the ability to “demonstrate your contempt” is one of the luxuries afforded to the owner of the new Chrysler. The metallic blue car, punctuated by white highlights, blends into the black background, and mirrors the blue and white flames, echoing the “fiery” slogan. The text below describes how it “shaves” and “hacks off” at the statistics of previous models. The advertiser is tempting the reader with a rather loud subtext of aggression. Conformity constitutes an easy foe, the “straw man” opponent of the anti-dialogue—it is impersonal, ready and waiting to submit to the gratuitous, self-indulgent aggression of the consumer.

Another ad, this time for Dodge Trucks, reinforces the popular appeal of confrontation suggested by Chrysler advertisers (see Figure 5). It emphatically states of its trucks, “They have a starring role in other trucks’ nightmares.” The selling point is intimidation. The truck is portrayed using exaggerated perspective as not only powerful and dominating but also threatening. The advertisement suggests to the audience that by...
associating themselves with a Dodge truck they too can be dominating and intimidating—the audience is being sold not only a truck, but the potential for inspiring fear. In a manner that could not be more direct, this ad demonstrates how intimidation, in American society, is being sought as a fantasy; it is indeed so attractive that Dodge advertisers believe it will sell their trucks.

The attractive nature of conflict and confrontation is made all the more apparent by the absence of any relevant content. It seems almost any conflict affording the buyer the chance for unequivocal domination of an opponent is attractive. A Mazda ad heralds the Mazda 6 with the following slogan (see Figure 6): “Insects call it the widowmaker.” The car is viewed from above, giving the reader an insect-like view, to better illustrate the threat. The conflict here is between the driver—and insects: the ability to massacre insects, and win the conflict, is the feature of this car used to enhance its appeal to the buyer. Again, the potential for aggressive domination is the attractive characteristic, but what is remarkable in this instance is the entirely inane character of the conflict. The domination over insects offered through the suggested conflict is entirely irrelevant to the actual driving experience (and actually, rather unappealing if truly considered). But in the eyes of the anti-dialogue culture, the substance of the conflict is immaterial; it is the very conflict itself, as a venue for unequivocal domination, which attracts.

A Wendy’s ad makes clear the extent of the departure from relevant, issue-based conflict: here, aggression is no longer commercial—it’s personal (see Figure 7). The ad’s aggression targets what is perhaps a friend or a roommate: “There is a cure for snoring: Jam one of these in his mouth.” Nor is this ad restricted to male aggression. The text of the ad implies a protagonist who is spending the night with a snoring man—which may very likely be suggesting an appeal to a female audience as much as to men. The burger’s enormous size, suggestively presented as dwarfing the earth, is communicated through violence. The “cure” is “jamming”—resolution is replaced by aggression and unmitigated victory. This innovative remedy to snoring says nothing of the taste (let alone the nutritional value) of the burger. The conflict, and its rather ugly resolution,
Program in Writing and Rhetoric

are entirely gratuitous—and directed at an acquaintance. The Wendy’s ad not only illustrates the transition from issue-based, commercial conflict (as in the case of the Goodyear Vector ad’s assault on potholes) to personal conflict, but also demonstrates the increasingly flagrant nature of the anti-dialogue.

This flamboyant, unapologetic confrontational rhetoric is further visible in the text of a Honda ad (see Figure 8): “Caution was not thrown to the wind. It was thrown to the wolves.” The difference between the two parallel sentences is nothing more than the flair of aggression. The layout of the text in relation to the speeding car moves the reader from a starting position in front of the vehicle to a finishing position behind it: perhaps the reader too will be thrown to the wolves, unless they buy a Honda Accord. Objectively, there is nothing to suggest that “throwing caution to the wind” is any less indicative of the reckless—or perhaps impetuous—image sought by Honda, than “throwing caution to the wolves.” But it is the latter that the company uses to seize the audience’s imagination. Perhaps other dialogue paradigms would throw caution to the wind. The anti-dialogue thrives on, and is defined by, flagrantly throwing its opponent to the wolves.

The enjoyment of such flagrant aggression relies on distancing oneself from the opponent. To this end, the creation of the “homogenized” and “polarized” factions described by the sociological research of Roberts and Price is evident in anti-dialogue rhetoric.

Reality in the eyes of the anti-dialogue paradigm is a matter of black and white—a field of winners and losers. This polarization is encapsulated in this Dodge slogan (see Figure 9): “You’re either with us. Or behind us.” When viewed by a public that espouses such a paradigm, the need to associate oneself with the “winners” and to be removed as emphatically as possible from the “losers” is pressing, almost threatening. This is precisely the reason why this ad is so effective. The visual relationship between the audience and the cars pictured in this ad suggest a third clause to the slogan: “You’re in our way.” In the world of the anti-dialogue, conflict is inevitable: “You’re either with us. Or behind us.” Any middle ground, or resolution, is pictured as mundane, and made irrelevant. The ad, and with it the anti-dialogue paradigm, both literally and figuratively, turns its back to dialogue.

At the core of the appeal of the flagrant, polarized anti-dialogue is its ability to impart
a sense of validity or reaffirmation to the winner, as seen in the following Nissan ad (see Figure 10). In this ad, which echoes the inter-personal aggression of the Wendy’s ad above, the driver’s opponents are the rest of the passengers in the car. The attraction of the ad lies in the reader’s desire to bolster his or her ego and reaffirm their social status in relation to those around them. The interior landscape of the new “265 HP [horsepower] Nissan Maxima” shown in the ad is divided in the following manner: “One seat for exhilaration. Three seats for petty jealousy, resentful mumbling, and wishful thinking.” This is not only a mapping of the landscape of the car—it is a mapping of interpersonal social relations in the context of the anti-dialogue. It is a world of “exhilarated” winners defined in relation to the “petty,” “resentful,” “mumbling” losers. The ad relies for its effect on the reader’s need for reaffirmation; a reaffirmation established just as much by the losers’ loss as it is by the winner’s gain. In the eyes of the advertisement, to claim the throne of the anti-dialogue “winner,” all you have to do is drive a Maxima.

Advertisements also point to the prevalence of this dialogue across different social spheres—beyond the perhaps naturally competitive world of cars, or the depraved anonymity of late night fast-food. In a pre-Christmas issue of Us Magazine, an ad for Hormel ham presents the following protagonist narrative: “Today’s the day I cook the holiday meal. In addition to the ham, my mother-in-law will be eating her words” (see Figure 11). The demographic addressed is the homemaker, preparing for the holiday meal. Into this traditionally idyllic setting the advertisement introduces a dialogue of conflict—and invites the homemaker to put her (or his) mother-in-law in her place. The product, ham, is marketed as the means by which the homemaker can achieve unequivocal victory over the opponent. Contrast this ad with the 1963 Tareyton cigarette ad—whereas Tareyton presented aggression as a means to gain the prize of the “great taste” of “fine tobacco,” Hormel presents the “ideal flavor” of their ham as simply a means of silencing one’s mother-in-law. Thus, aggression has actually displaced the product as the focus of attention. Again, the mother-in-law is a convenient archetypal enemy, ready to reaffirm the dominance of the protagonist. The ad is summed up by the text, “Hormel Cure 81 Ham. Unarguably, the ideal flavor for holiday meals.” The use of the word “unarguably” is anything but coincidental. It is an argument that is the vehicle in this ad, the venue for the self-reaffirmation of the protagonist. Even within the context of the

Figure 10. Nissan Maxima, advertisement, Time 18 Aug. 2003: 2-3.

Figure 11. Hormel Cure 81 Ham, advertisement, US Magazine 20 Dec. 2003: 63.
Christmas meal, it is the conflict that is the attraction—with the product conveniently positioned as the key to victory. It would appear that American society has embraced the anti-dialogue to such an extent that this approach is not only appalling—it sells.

From pick up trucks to Christmas meals, the anti-dialogue appears to be clearly defined and firmly entrenched.

**The Anti-Dialogue in Perspective: Is it a Problem?**

The above ads do not constitute a majority of modern advertisements. Ads celebrating meaningful dialogue, understanding, and mutual respect are no less prevalent in the various media. But despite arguments to the contrary, the increasing employment of anti-dialogue rhetoric for the purpose of attracting and enticing modern audiences and the prevalence of this rhetoric across different contexts and media cannot be dismissed.

It may be argued that the aforementioned ads exhibit nothing more than meaningless rhetoric, attempting to appear “edgy” in a marketing world defined by competition. But the advertisements are not the source of this anti-dialogue paradigm; they only offer the public a reflection of itself. In the highly competitive sphere that is the advertising world, a method that does not attract the consumer does not last. The rising prevalence of ads glorifying conflict and anti-dialogue rhetoric would thus suggest that the appeal of this rhetoric to the public is indeed strong and very much relevant.

From a different perspective, it may be tempting to dismiss the argument for the historical emergence of this trend as nothing more than misled nostalgia. This, again, is not the case. The 1960s were a time of dire national division, whether over international policy or racial tensions. This paper thus does not suggest that American society has become gradually more violent or more aggressive. Rather, the focus here is the national discourse. Perhaps it is precisely because open violence is being tolerated less and less that American national discourse is becoming an outlet for the release of pent-up aggression and the need for pseudo-physical self-reaffirmation. Nevertheless, whereas the conflict in the past may perhaps have been swept under the institutionalized mainstream carpet of racial segregation and the Cold War to maintain a façade of national harmony, today that conflict is in the open—in the way Americans talk to each other, in the way they argue, in the way they are entertained, and in the way they are enticed as consumers. Advertisements show that this confrontational anti-dialogue is out in the open—and it is relished.

The inherently competitive and power-oriented context of the products advertised may also be used to excuse the attractive depiction of confrontational dialogue. At first glance, there is nothing unusual about highlighting the power and dominance of automobiles. Once again, it is the dialogue and its rhetoric that are under review. It seems that power in itself is no longer enough—dominance must be relative. Reaffirmation becomes based on the loser’s defeat as much as on the winner’s victory. The result is the category of ads presented in this paper, characterized by rhetoric that goes beyond statements of power, to statements of antagonism. Echoing the words of Honda, for the sake of reaffirmation of either the product or the consumer, the competition is not only “thrown to the wind … it [is also] thrown to the wolves.”

Is this anti-dialogue simply fad rhetoric, indulging the immature facets of the individual in moments of quirky experimentation, or is it truly a social phenomenon? Perhaps when a society is characterized by abandoning interpersonal dialogue in favor of
the court system more than any of its international counterparts, when foreign policy is defined in terms of an “axis of evil” and phrases such as “you’re either with us or against us” (eerily echoing, or perhaps inspiring, the text of the examined Dodge ad in Figure 9), and military opponents are confronted with the words “Bring them on,” indulging immaturity is more than a fad.

On a final note, this paper is not intended as an invective against the advertising world, nor is it political by nature. It points to a social phenomenon: both politicians and advertisers consistently employ anti-dialogue rhetoric to appeal to the public for a very simple reason—the public finds this rhetoric appealing.

**Of Winners and Victory**

The exposure to new, radically foreign perspectives afforded by global communication and inter-cultural integration underscores the cardinal importance of dialogue. However, through the filters of popular culture, the focus has shifted from issue-based dialogue to ego-inspired rhetoric. And in the individual-oriented American context, success in dialogue has been equated with “winning” the argument. The new goal is not resolution, but victory. In this manner, dialogue has come to serve not the resolution of conflict, but the glory of the orators—at each other’s expense. It has become the anti-dialogue. As such, it has created a standard for self-evaluation based on success in this rhetorical joust. In a final twist, to allow for self-reaffirmation in light of this new standard, conflict itself has become attractive.

So how does one proceed? Perhaps the realization that dialogue was never meant to reinforce the ego, but to help foster mutual understanding, will arouse greater self-awareness in discourse. We may hope that in time, and—more likely than not—on an individual basis, popular culture will surrender the pursuit of victory, and gain a chance at winning.
Works Cited


News Articles


Advertisements


Works Consulted
