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**American Consumerism, Mental Illness, and Violence in  
Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club***

Dissertation submitted to the department of English as a partial fulfilment of the requirements for Master's degree in Literature and Civilisation.

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## **Dedications**

To my parents

To my siblings

To my beloved ones

**Neda Bensenouci**

To my dear family and friends

**Aya keddar**

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## **Abstract**

This research work deals with the reflection of the film adaptation *Fight Club* on the socioeconomic problems of American society in the late 20th century. It aims to demonstrate the movie's critique of consumerism and materialism by highlighting its characters' struggles with their materialistic society and indicating the relationship these phenomena share with mental illness and violence. The methodology adopted in this research is a multifaceted approach consisting of a cultural study approach to investigate the reality that *Fight Club* mirrors and a psychological approach to analyze the film's characters and examine their mental issues. This study found that materialism progressed gradually due to several historical reasons affecting individuals because of the psychological link they share with their societies. Accordingly, it is proven that mental illness is tightly related to consumerism and materialism as it is considered an outcome as well as a tool to achieve shock value in cinema.

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# *General Introduction*

## General Introduction

Literary and cinematic works mostly mirror the reality of the world. They reflect social issues and discuss their communities' struggles, successes, and failures. through their narratives, they tell imaginary stories with fictional characters; including real themes and messages for the sake of discussing cultural phenomena and criticizing them. It became apparent that the aim of cinema and literature is not restricted to entertainment. Instead, they are used as tools of persuasion and raising consciousness about the negative attitudes spread in society. For instance, materialism and consumerism found great popularity in American society; especially during the late 20th century. The US witnessed an unprecedented growth of overconsumption and a shift in people's values as they generally adopted and prioritized materialistic goals. Consequently, people's psychological peace was disrupted leaving them at higher risk of mental illnesses and violent behaviors. Therefore, several works discussed these cultural phenomena.

This research work focuses on the cultural critique of materialism and consumerism in cinema where mental illness and violence are discussed as well for the sake of showing them as indicators of deeper societal problems. Our choice had fallen on a film adaptation that helped us observe this connection between cultural critique and individual psychology. David Fincher's film *Fight Club*, based on Chuck Palahniuk's novella of the same title, portrays a socially devastated America with either depressed or rebellious citizens; bringing attention to the high risks of blindly following social trends.

The reason for choosing this topic is to demonstrate the great influence cinema leaves by addressing social manifestations. For instance, when news reports the risks associated with high levels of consumerism, they often do not leave a strong impact as a movie with a powerful plot and famous actors addressing the same issue. In addition, American social and economic trends are reaching the whole world while being

portrayed as the ideal and right attitudes that lead to success. Thus, dangerous phenomena can easily be adopted in our societies such as materialism and consumerism. Therefore, one has to examine their negative consequences. *Fight Club*, despite being a controversial work, succeeded at delivering the dangers of these trends. It discusses several concepts focusing on portraying American society as a damaged materialistic one with characters suffering from mental and social issues, leading them to display violent reactions.

Therefore, this research seeks to answer two key questions:

- How did consumerism emerge and influence American society culturally and mentally?
- In what ways does *Fight Club* link consumerism and materialism to the development of mental illness and the growth of violence?

Consequently, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- It came as result of economic factors and caused a great change in society
- It portrays mentally ill characters with violent tendencies while linking their struggle to their materialistic society.

The methodology selected to answer these research questions is a multifaceted approach consisting of a cultural studies approach and a psychological approach. using the former, we set the broader context of American culture at the time *Fight Club* was released to examine the evolution of consumerism and materialism and their effects on society. On the other hand, psychoanalysis was applied to investigate the influence of society on individuals and their continuous struggle with conformity and identity.

This research work falls into two chapters. The first one introduces the genre of the selected work and explains the main concepts of the research such as materialism, consumerism, mental illness, violence, and shock value. It also presents the context of the selected film revealing the reality it reflects. The second chapter examines closely the film *Fight Club*; highlighting its critique of consumerism and showing the psychological impact it leaves on its characters. Moreover, it shows the use of shock value in the film as a major link between violence and materialism.

*Chapter One: American Socioeconomic  
Issues*

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### 1.1. Introduction

During the late 20th century, American society witnessed a significant shift in social values and consumption patterns, leading to a culture characterized by materialism and consumerism. People were stuck in an ongoing cycle of working long hours, purchasing infinite material goods to fulfill a temporary feeling of satisfaction. This was encouraged by the continuous development of advertising and marketing, resulting in harmful outcomes characterized by mental illness and violence.

The societal shift was not an isolated event but the peak of several historical influences, starting with the strong emphasis on individualism and financial success since the colonial era. Then the advancement caused by the Industrial Revolution and the growth of media and propaganda. The content of this chapter aims to define the genre of film adaptation and explain the concepts of materialism and consumerism, the reasons for their emergence, and their negative consequences on an individual's health and society. Moreover, it explores themes of mental illness and violence and shows how they can be used as a form of shock value.

### 1.2. Historical Roots of Consumerism and Materialism in American society

The late 20th-century American society was characterized by a strong emphasis on materialism and consumerism. In fact, success and happiness were strictly linked to material possessions and wealth rather than mental health, personal relationships, and community engagement. Numerous Americans deeply believed this idea because of the influence of media and propaganda. Thus, the country witnessed the rise of conspicuous consumption<sup>1</sup> as people sought to purchase and consume luxury goods to show their wealth or what was believed to be their success and well-being. The late 20th-century state of American society is believed to be shaped by several historical factors. Starting from the colonial era in the 17th century to the digital revolution in

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<sup>1</sup> Conspicuous Consumption: the situation in which people spend a lot of money intentionally so that other people notice and admire them for their wealth (Cambridge Dictionary)

the 20th century passing through the Industrial Revolution and the post-war economic boom.

### 1.2.1 The Colonial Era in America

From the very beginning, the American settlers placed a strong emphasis on individualism, self-reliance, and economic gain. These values set the foundation for future attitudes toward material prosperity.

The early American settlers could develop "out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life" (Turner 01).

According to the Oxford Dictionary, the frontier is "the extreme limit of settled land beyond which lies wilderness, especially in reference to the western US before Pacific settlement". By this term, Frederick Turner depicted the American lands that have been explored and settled during the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. The frontier was a new environment that represented unfamiliar challenges which had a significant influence on the American character. In his essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History", Turner argues that the frontier was the source of individualism. Given the fact that it was a place that lacked many rules or structures, it led people to be more independent, self-reliant, and able to make all the big decisions for themselves without the interference of a greater power. Therefore, the frontier played a major role in promoting democracy as it led the settlers to object to any type of control. For instance, settlers at the time did not like paying taxes as they viewed the "tax-gatherer" as someone attempting to control them (06). Based on this, it is realized that several policies and tendencies that appeared later in American society had their roots in the colonial era. For example, *laissez-faire* capitalism<sup>1</sup> with its resistance to government interference and rejection of welfare policies resembles to a significant extent the early settlers' opposition to authority and insistence on individualism and freedom.

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<sup>1</sup> *laissez-faire* capitalism : a type of economic system in which transactions between private groups of people are free from any form of economic interventionism (such as subsidies or transfer payments) (Sabry, chapter 1).

The new settlers already came to America for the sake of embracing their individuality in a place that does not punish them for it. This place, offering several challenges, pushed them to be more self-reliant and more concerned with survival and financial success.

### **1.2.2. The American Industrial Revolution**

By the late 18th century, the colonial period came to an end as many colonies got their independence. A new era began with the rise of the industrial revolution. This reflected a significant change not only in the production of goods but also in transforming the American mindset to a more consumerist material one.

During the first hundred years of the Industrial Revolution, American society witnessed drastic changes. After being an agricultural society containing farmers and small businessmen, it developed into an industrial nation capable of fulfilling the needs of its population and exporting products to other countries. (McCormick 10) The Industrial Revolution accelerated the production of goods providing unsurpassed quantity and variety of several items. For instance, it led to the emergence of a new kind of store that specialized in selling one type of product providing a variety of it (44). This led to a general curiosity among people to explore the new developments.

The advancements that accompanied this period covered several fields such as manufacturing, technology, communication, and transportation. The development of transportation urged the expansion of consumer markets. It allowed factories to ship their goods and introduce them to new markets marking the beginning of what is called the age of big business. This age was characterized by intense competition between companies that manufactured the same products. The solution that was adopted by many of them was lowering their prices to keep their customers. This led to making a variety of the same products easily available to the public. However, many corporations were forced to close as they could not endure the price cuts. Thus, bigger enterprises bought their smaller rivals which led to the creation of monopolies.

For instance, Andrew Carnegie bought both his rival companies and others that provided the raw materials he needed. Consequently, he ended up as the owner of one of the largest steel monopolies achieving nearly 40 million annual profit (74-78).

As a result, Americans began to adopt a consumerist mindset where purchasing and consuming material goods became essential to their daily life.

The Industrial Revolution did not lead to that only by increasing production and encouraging the growth of monopolies, but also by creating new types of consumers. For instance, by the late 1800s, most people lived in cities as the use of agriculture machines became extremely common which rendered farm laborers unnecessary (McCormick 41). Therefore, it led to an increase in urban consumers who had more exposure to trends and cultural influences. Moreover, it resulted in the growth of the middle class during the 20th century. This class included people who occupied well-paid roles that enabled them to elevate their standards of living and purchase items they desired instead of required. which opened a new market for these products (95-96). American people were initially the recipients of the Industrial Revolution's effects. But as they began to accept the changes entailed by it, they became the driving force that fostered industries.

Furthermore, technological advancements and the rise of advertising and marketing techniques fueled consumerism as it promoted the idea that material possessions can guarantee safety and, an easier, simpler, and happier life. For example, an ad was released in 1876 to promote the new invention of the telephone. It was as follows "Your wife may order your dinner, a hack [horse-drawn cab], your family physician, etc., all by Telephone without leaving the home or trusting servants to do it" (67). this ad targeted men, in order to spark their interest, it began by mentioning their wives. with a direct simple style and a call to action, it showed the telephone as something necessary in their lives. As a result, numerous men invested in a telephone although it was expensive at the time. After that, in the 1920s, Radios entered mainstream usage and became crucial for most homes in America. Therefore, they were intensely used to advertise products, attract public attention, and enhance

product sales (105-106). The rise of marketing and advertising during this period marked merely the beginning of a far-reaching impact in the years that followed.

The Industrial Revolution is a central movement that left an ever-lasting impact in the world generally and the US specifically. It introduced new technologies that helped companies grow and encouraged the rise of monopolies. As a result, consumer markets expanded which led to the emergence of a new type of consumer that would later fuel consumerism and materialism in American Society.

### **1.2.3. The Post-War Boom**

When World War Two drew to a close, the great depression was expected to continue by most of the American population. However, the US witnessed an era of unprecedented economic prosperity. Hence, it was called the post-war boom or the golden age of capitalism.

During this period, capitalism was the prevailing economic system as "private, profit-seeking enterprises provided most goods and services, employed most workers, and commercialized most innovations" (Wells 03). This led to increasing production and consumption as capitalist economies seek to constantly grow by spreading consumer culture and associating value and status with material possessions.

Throughout the post-war period, mass production techniques, as they proved their efficiency, were employed in the majority of industries to produce larger quantities (37). For example, they were used in the construction field and enabled the US to build over 1 million houses per year after 1945. Meanwhile, the quality of life of the American population enhanced as the majority of them could be categorized as the middle class. the unemployment rate decreased to a large extent as it went from 15% during the great depression to 3.9% in 1946. In addition to that, wages significantly rose due to the organization of labor unions after the Second World War (06-29). With the accessibility of a wide range of products, a higher standard of living,

and more money to spend, consumers were encouraged to purchase several goods as a way of enjoying their status and success.

Furthermore, as the construction industry improved, Americans began to favor buying houses and living in the suburbs. Consequently, credit became more available. Lenders granted mortgages of over 35 years. The GI Bill of Rights provided loans for starting businesses, buying houses, and attending college (Wells 28-30). The availability of credit enabled Americans to purchase their wants regardless of how expensive they were. However, it reinforced the consuming culture and increased people's debts.

Because of the post-war economic boom, capitalism became the predominant economic system. Leading to the introduction of mass production techniques that increased production. Moreover, this period witnessed a rise in people's wages and an unsurpassed availability of credit. Consequently, people gained the ability to spend and consume more which contributed to the rise of Consumerism.

### **1.2.4. 20th Century Media: A Tool for Propaganda**

After the post-war period, the effects of the rise of industry were still visible in American society. The country was moving toward an era of tranquility and prosperity, and this change affected the mass media as well and led to its development. For instance, television entered several houses in the 1960s, and telemarketing received widespread acceptance in the 1980s. As a result, companies used media to promote their products following the process of propaganda in which several techniques were employed.

Due to the Industrial Revolution, the production of goods increased. However, their availability and variety did not ensure the great demand coming from the consumers potentially because of their financial constraints, mistrust toward the manufacturer, or simply a lack of awareness regarding the product's benefits. That's

why companies needed to find a suitable tool to help persuade the public and the media was the best option available (Pratkanis and Arinson 17). Mass media can be defined as the different ways and mediums that deliver information to a large number of people including news, events, opinions, knowledge,...etc (Parker 5). During the mid-20th century, several American industries sought to advertise for themselves using different mediums, especially Television. To exemplify, the “US Senate election (1958) was sponsored by a cake-making business”(13). This rise of mass media played a significant role in promoting consumer culture as it proved itself to be capable of, persuading, influencing the public, and cultivating new ideas and opinions in their minds (Pratkanis and Arinson 29) Therefore, It can be considered as a tool of propaganda.

Propaganda is ‘the communication of a point of view with the ultimate goal of having the recipient of the appeal come to "voluntarily" accept this position as if it were his or her own’ (19). In other words, propaganda is a process in which there is a propagandist and a recipient. The former aims at delivering one’s opinion, ideology, or information and convincing the latter with its credibility using a persuasive way that includes selecting, distorting, or falsifying information. This process is accomplished in a subtle way that makes the recipient willingly accept an idea that was originally not his.

Using propaganda in advertising was the most common way that foster consumerism in American society as it changed individuals’ attitudes toward consumer goods and services. In order to do that, propaganda utilizes several persuasive techniques such as psychological principles application and saturation media coverage. One of the most common psychological principles in advertising is classical conditioning studies by Ivan Pavlov. According to him, the constant pairing of an unconditioned stimulus such as pain with a neutral stimulus like a picture will eventually lead that picture to cause pain as well (30). That’s why advertisers usually associate their products with images that entail success and happiness. For example, car ads in the 20th century mostly pictured the car with a bright beautiful city

portraying a dream-like world. “The suggestion behind this image was that if you bought the car, you also obtained shiny big-city success and a rich lifestyle” (Parker 25). Moreover, the human unconscious was highly targeted by advertisements. Several psychologists worked on listing objects and their meanings to the unconscious. And therefore, marketers used that to create new admirers of their items (Pratkanis and Arinson 31). As the psychology of the recipients is addressed, what is left is to make them see the product everywhere. This process is called saturation media coverage in which one thing is extensively exposed in many sources and mediums until it becomes inescapable. For instance, by the end of 1956. An American rock and roll young artist named Elvis Presley was widely recognized in the whole Western world because of his being thoroughly seen in different mediums. His pictures were on magazine covers, TV, books, posters, and photographs (Parker 6) This led him to be immensely loved by millions of people who rushed to buy his records and attend his concerts.

Propaganda, using mass media to promote products, was very subtle. It did not seem like a conspiracy or an evil process of manipulating and controlling the population. However, with its indirect effects and messages, it could transform society and make people tremendously dependent on purchasing and consuming material possessions thinking they will provide comfort, happiness, and success.

The rise of late 20th-century consumerism and materialism was not a sudden occurrence as several historical incidents gradually brought it about. Starting in the colonial era, American society emphasized the importance of desire, a sense of liberty, and success. Then, history witnessed one of the main events that affected the whole world. The Industrial Revolution had the biggest impact as it transformed American society by growing the economy, opening new markets, and guiding people to consume more. This economic prosperity continued to develop during the post-war boom that fueled industry. This led to the rise of media that operated as a tool for propagating the link between material possessions and happiness using several psychological strategies. However, the following section is going to explain how it was soon realized that this link is untrue.

### 1.3. Consumerism and Materialism in Late 20th Century American Society

Due to the historical, economic, and cultural factors mentioned earlier, the consumption of material goods and services became extremely common in American society. During the 1990s, shopping became a daily activity, and for a large range of people a form of entertainment. Capitalism succeeded in assigning value to material possessions. Advertising and marketing constructed new meanings for products as they associated them with well-being and happiness. Consumerism and materialism spread widely and began to be identified as signs of success. However, as the 1980s drew to a close, conspicuous consumption was considered a health problem that resembles drug or alcohol addiction. Experts wrote essays giving people tips to reduce it and release the obsession. Consequently, the paradox arises: if consuming material goods was associated with well-being, why does it often lead to health issues for consumers?

The study of consumerism and materialism became increasingly popular starting in the 1980s. Several scholars adopted the topic and conducted research to examine their effects on family, society, and individual psychological and physical health. On one hand, "Consumerism is the cultural relationship between humans and consumer goods and services, including behaviors, institutions, and ideas" (Martin 03). It represents the relationship between humans and material products. Humans live in a culture that shapes their values and attitudes and influences their actions toward material goods forming a relationship that is not only economic; based on purchasing needed products, but also cultural. In consumerism, the culture influences the consumers' values and attitudes. Therefore, they give new meanings to objects and build more expectations than the usual ordinary ones. For instance, a car is a means of transportation. It is normally expected to help people move from one place to another quickly and comfortably. However, due to cultural influences, including advertising and marketing, the expectations consumers establish for a car exceed the ordinary ones leading it to be viewed as physical evidence of happiness and success.

On the other hand, "Materialism suggests a value system in which goods play a central role" (Martin 04). While consumerism highlights the consumers' actions, materialism focuses on their values that prioritize material possessions more than anything. When a person has strong materialistic values, he/she tends to emphasize wealth above all else such as personal relationships, community engagement, and mental health. For example, he/she may choose to pursue an unlikable career just for the sake of accumulating more money.

Consumerism and materialism have a strong relationship as social values are tightly related to consumer actions and needs. Values control actions while actions reflect values. Therefore, materialism leads to consumerism and consumerism is an evident sign of materialism.

### **1.3.1. Effects of Materialism and Consumerism on American Society**

Consumerism and materialism spread rapidly and pervasively in late 20th-century American society because of propaganda that its main goal was to acknowledge the significance of wealth and consumption. It promised that people's lives were going to be enhanced if they earned more, spent more, and elevated their lifestyle. However, research proved that the adverse outcomes of materialistic values outweighed the beneficial ones. The American psychologist and professor Tim Kasser, in his book *The High Price of Materialism*, documented several studies that showed the negative effects of materialism and consumerism on the American individual, his family structure, and the community he lives in.

#### **1.3.1.1. Effects on the Individual**

The American individual was immensely exposed to a consumerist culture, in which ads for products were everywhere; when he switched the TV, when he went for a walk, or when he read a newspaper or a magazine. Being the recipient of the propagandists' messages, it was inevitable to adopt the values transferred to him.

Therefore, materialistic values found their way into several people's minds. Which led to changing their behaviors and affecting their physical and mental health.

Corporations and companies, using propaganda and advertising, utilize an efficient technique in which they focus on human psychological needs and convince people that their products will fulfill them. These needs include the need for security and safety, the need for competence and esteem, the need for connectedness, and the need for autonomy (Kasser 24-25). For example, advertisements for home supplies usually capture a happy family with healthy parents and delighted kids. By doing that, they target people's need for security and safety and indirectly convince people that their goods will satisfy that need just like a good family does. The less people's psychological needs are adequately fulfilled in their childhood, the more susceptible they become to these messages. As a result, they gradually incorporate them into their values and beliefs which lead them to be materialistic (26). Their materialistic values change their attitudes and behaviors. For instance, a study conducted by consumer psychologist and marketing academic Russell Belk proved that materialistic individuals tend to be more possessive, ungenerous, and envious (18). Moreover, Their priorities shift as they first concentrate on earning money and building a good image for themselves. Consequently, they will have less time and fewer chances to satisfy their psychological needs required for happiness. As Tim Kasser says “The promise is false and satisfaction is empty” (27). Materialism not only distances people from happiness instead of ensuring it but also causes psychological problems for them.

Since the main idea of product advertisements is that they make consumers happy, one has to examine the accuracy of this statement. Humanistic and existential thinkers like Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers confirmed that psychological health is mostly linked to values of self-expression, close relationships, and social involvement. They admitted that Adequate material comfort is essential for meeting people's basic needs, yet beyond that, wealth is not essential for fostering a positive psychological state or happiness. Instead, Materialism occupies individuals with the pursuit of wealth to the extent that they become distracted from the core values essential for maintaining

their psychological well-being (Kasser 2-3). Furthermore, numerous studies conducted by psychologists who were eager to identify the relationship between wealth and happiness showed that people do not get happier when their nations prosper economically or when they get richer (3-4). Therefore, material possessions and values are unrelated to people's happiness beyond the necessity of providing the main needs like food and housing. On the other hand, research emphasized the negative effects of materialism and consumerism on the individual's psychology. For instance, Kasser's research revealed that people with a value system that is more focused on accumulating money recorded high levels of depression and low levels of vitality. Also, Patricia and Jacob Cohen's study showed that materialistic people experience problems with attention, controlling impulses, and emotional expression. They are either avoidant and alienated from society or overly dependent on others. In addition, they are more likely to encounter unusual thoughts and behaviors. Moreover, it was seen by several psychologists that consumer culture fosters narcissistic tendencies. With the way it focuses on each individual and sells him the idea that he can get whatever he wants. That's why people with strong materialistic values ranked high in narcissistic traits (5-17). Consumerism promises happiness and well-being to attract individuals and capture their attention. However, not only is this promise untrue, but its negative effects outweigh the positive ones and inflict psychological harm on people.

As the humans' psychological state is directly linked to their physical well-being, research documented materialism's effects on people's physical state. For instance, numerous individuals with strong materialistic values reported having more headaches, backaches, sore muscles, and throats (11). In addition, they are more prone to consuming tobacco, alcohol, and drugs (12). The stressful life materialism leads individuals to pursue ultimately pressures them and makes them look for temporary satisfactions that harm their bodies.

Due to industrialization and economic growth, the American individual became more aware of the importance of working hard, earning money, and ensuring a

financially successful future. However, this economic prosperity led him to blindly follow consumer culture and adopt materialistic values. As a result, negative effects were inflicted on his behavior, and psychological and physical health. Moreover, the impact of materialism and consumerism reached the family structure and radically transformed it.

### **1.3.1.2. Effects on the Family Structure**

Changing an individual's values and behaviors automatically impacts the way he acts in social groups such as family. One of materialism's main messages is the need to strive for money in order to ensure a decent life. Therefore, during the late 20th century, as America witnessed high rates of materialism and consumerism, people worked more hours than ever which led to more alienation, less connection with family, and an unstable atmosphere for kids.

In order to fit the new standards transferred by the media, people found themselves obliged to work long hours as it was the only way possible to afford the 'good life' they thought they and their kids needed. Human's psychological need for security and safety should be fulfilled by the family. However, as materialistic values spread widely, it was believed that wealth and possessions could satisfy that need. Consequently, parents spend most of their time either at their jobs to earn money or in malls and shopping places to spend it. This led to them spending less time with their kids or spouses.

Kasser indicates that divorce rates intensified in America during the late 20th century as it became more materialistic. In order to keep a marriage going, spouses need love, empathy, and connectedness. However, since most American spouses focused on accumulating money and possessions, the essential emotional elements were overshadowed and not prioritized. Hence why problems could not be resolved as they required affection and compassion (Kasser 88). As materialism diminished emotional fulfillment, relationships were neglected and family structure was weakened.

Furthermore, the existence of parents with strong materialistic values eventually leads to raising materialistic kids. Parents pass their beliefs and convictions to their children either intentionally or accidentally. They could lecture them about financial success's importance or expose them to the media that deliver these messages (89). In addition, parents are the role models of their children. Suppose a child constantly sees his father striving to earn more money and expressing his love with material gifts. In that case, the child is likely to internalize these values and behaviors and grow up to believe that wealth and possessions are indicators of love and happiness.

By changing the individual's behaviors and way of thinking, consumer culture consequently affects family structure as well. As individuals adopt materialistic values that encourage them to focus more on working and earning money, they neglect their families. Their relationships with their spouses get damaged and they fail to provide a healthy life for their children. Family is the source that instills values and behaviors in individuals which shape their interactions with the whole community. Thus, a materialistic family results in a materialistic community.

### **1.3.1.3. Effects on Community**

Social trends like materialism and consumerism often serve the interests of a small portion of society members but everyone embraces them as they are encouraged by powerful individuals who people consider as role models. However, these social trends brought negative consequences for the American community as they fostered selfishness and alienation, and weakened the community engagement.

In the late 20th century American society, not every individual was solely responsible for their chosen lifestyle. Although it seemed like the choice was made out of free will, it was a reflection of the decisions of powerful people in society (Kasser 90). For instance, corporation owners, public figures dominating the media, politicians, and other influential individuals shaped cultural norms and consumer behavior with

their advertising and marketing techniques. And since many of them had materialistic values, materialism spread quickly and affected the whole community.

Materialism highly encouraged the notion of independence. It urged individuals to work hard and live on their own as a way of achieving freedom. But in fact, it fueled consumerism as it led each individual to get his own house, car, furniture,...etc. following materialistic values led people to neglect their connection to their communities, isolating themselves and impeding community engagement.

Furthermore, materialism caused selfishness. Materialistic people prioritize any decision that enhances their wealth over empathy and care for others. For example, the prominent American automobile executive Lee Iacocca once reduced the merit pay of Chrysler employees while granting himself a \$20 million bonus. After that, he claimed that ‘That’s the American way. If little kids don’t aspire to make money like I did, what the hell good is this country?’(Kasser 91). This statement showed the selfishness caused by materialism and also emphasized the strong association of America with materialistic values as Iacocca labeled his selfish gesture with ‘the American way’.

Moreover, materialism harms social relationships as it makes people objectify each other. For instance, Kasser argued that the way marketers view kids is inhumane. By including several advertisers’ quotes, he showed that they think of them as objects who can raise their profit. In order to do that, they manipulate them and take advantage of their emotional vulnerability (91). materialism damages social bonds by reducing people to objects and leading them to use each other.

The media in the 1990s was significantly developed so that it allowed people’s voices to reach others and grew the American community. However, the power of decision-making and influencing society was restricted to several people who unfortunately had strong materialistic values and helped propagate them. As materialism spread, people lost connection with their community as they were fueled with feelings of selfishness.

For the sake of encouraging consumerism and making more profit, materialistic values were implanted in Americans' minds leading them to believe that financial success and economic growth are the main factors of well-being and happiness. However, research proved that there is no relationship between happiness and material possessions. Instead, materialism causes several negative consequences on the family and community structure. In addition to individual behaviors, mental and physical health. In some cases, Its negative effects can extend to causing mental illnesses and disorders.

### **1.4. Mental Illness**

Humans are social creatures. Despite being introverts or extroverts, they ought to have a social life due to their deeply rooted psychological needs; such as the need to fit in or belong. Humans often feel the need to belong to a certain group, reflected in the excessive need to label everything. For instance, naming all social groups, countries on the map, and generations from “Boomer” to “Gen Alfa”. In addition to lifestyles such as “hippie”, “Modern”, “conservative”, “minimalist”...etc. As well as the rise of social groups or cults and beauty aesthetics.

However, being a part of a group does not remove one's individuality, each person has their own identity. According to John Locke, identity is the relation each thing bears only to itself, which is necessary and unique. He believed personal identity, or the self, is a thinking, intelligent being with reason and reflection, and is the same rational being over time (335). Fundamentally, Identity is the sense of self and what defines a person. Whether it's their personality traits, appearance, likes, and dislikes. It is what distinguishes a person from others and it develops from childhood. Yet, an imbalance of one's Identity can lead to many mental disorders and illnesses. Humans are only at ease when their Identity is firm and stable. Thus, an Identity Crisis is a wide gate to various troubles.

Moreover, when talking about health and ease, the mental aspect is as important as the physical one. Mental and physical health are two faces of the same coin. One cannot truly be at joy when experiencing an unhealthy condition, on the other hand, internalized negative feelings due to mental health issues are shown on the human physical appearance. Dr. John E. Sarn, in his book *The Divided Mind: The Epidemic of Mindbody Disorders*, stated that many physical issues are deeply linked to stress anxiety and mental issues, such as back, skin, and gut issues; this is referred to as psychosomatic illnesses (36- 210). Mental health is “an alternation in thinking, mood, or behaviors that can affect an individual’s well-being and functioning” (Ramani). Mental Illnesses are conditions that affect a person’s feelings, behavior, or mood, often leading to distress and difficulty functioning in everyday life; this was what the neurologist Dr. O. Sack believed. He also stated that “We have, each of us, a life-story, an inner narrative- whose continuity, whose sense, is our lives, it might be said that each of us constructs and lives, a ‘narrative’, and that this narrative is us, our identities” emphasizing on the significance of personal narratives and how they shape one’s identity, including how individuals with mental disorders construct and perceive their own life stories, showing that identity and mental health are intertwined, and how the negative mental state can be a broken lens to life.

### **1.4.1.Mental disorders**

Mental health issues can be temporary such as anxiety due to a certain upcoming event or depression due to grieving the loss of a loved one. However, sometimes, they can exceed all of that and be permanent as a result of genetics, an unhealthy upbringing, traumatic events, or a severely toxic and stressful environment in daily life, which eventually leads the person to develop what is called Mental disorders.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health as well as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), approximately 1 in 5 adults in the United States experiences mental illness each year.

The word disorder indicates a disruption. Mental disorders occur when one is exposed to external conditions that lead to internal confusion. For instance, Bipolar disorder is one of the most famous psychiatric illnesses, which leads a person to have polar opposite episodes. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, "Bipolar disorder, sometimes referred to as manic-depressive disorder, is characterized by dramatic shifts in mood, energy, and activity levels that affect a person's ability to carry out day-to-day tasks. These shifts in mood and energy levels are more severe than the normal ups and downs that everyone experiences" (National Institute of Mental Health). Moreover, the person possessing this disorder faces manic episodes in which he becomes impulsive, rebellious, and unreasonably ecstatic. His confidence is at its peak to the point where nothing can actually bring him down. While the depressive episodes are phases where it is extremely difficult for the person to live his normal life, he becomes loaded with self-doubt, anxiety, depression...etc. These episodes can last from a few days to months, depending on the person and his recent situation. Fundamentally, in both states, whether it is maniac or depression, the person is no longer his true self. A prime example of this mental disorder is the well-known artist Vincent Van Gogh; his work was a mere reflection of his mental state and mood swings. His life story and artistic legacy provide a compelling case study for understanding the complexities and the impact of Bipolar disorder.

This disorder is a wide range of cases that differs from one to another, and one of the factors that might lead a person to develop Bipolar disorder is the sudden intense shift in one's environment such as having a peaceful life at the pre-teen phase and an extremely stressful one out of the sudden in the teenage years, making this a strong evidence to how the social environment messes one's identity and ease.

In conclusion, when human identity faces an external crisis, it leads to developing a mental disorder that may get in the way of a person living a normal social life, causing them to be left out from the rest of society.

### 1.4.2. Dissociative Identity Disorder

Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) is a similar case. To disassociate means to split; to no longer be one with the self; a piece of the self gets away. DID is an extremely rare mental disorder despite its very famous portrayal in movies. When examining DID, the main focus is pointed towards what is called the Alter which refers to the other personality the person with DID possesses, whether it has a different name, ethnicity, gender...etc. This Alter is more likely to be pulled under stress.

A Famous case study of DID is Sybil Dorsett, also known as Shirley Ardell Mason. Her case was documented by her psychiatrist, Dr. Cornelia Wilbur. Her story was widely spread through the book *Flora Rheta Schreiber* and the movie adaptation *Daniel Petrie* (1976) which highlighted her struggles with her mental disorder, leading her to be a well-known figure in the field of mental health and psychology.

Sybil was a girl who faced physical issues as well as mental issues such as anxiety and hallucinations since childhood. She lived in a fantasy world; she had imaginary playmates and refused to listen to what people had to suggest to her. Her case paved the way for psychologists to study more about the cases of DID, leading them to state that this disorder is more likely to be found in women. Consequently, DID became a famous case study regardless of its rareness (Debbie Nathan). Sybil's state was fragile and distinct since her childhood which eventually led her to be a magnet to research and being a prime case study of DID to scientists and doctors.

In conclusion, DID is a rare psychiatric mental illness that refers to people who have two personalities; the normal self which is called the Host, and the other one which is the Alter. The Host and the Alter are more likely to be the opposite of each other which is very distressing for the person experiencing it, given the fact that it creates a conflict in one's self, and anxiety to be in social settings where the Alter may cause a mess or an issues which the Host has to deal with.

### 1.4.2.1. The Host VS the Alter:

Freud's famous theory was based on dividing the human psyche into three parts; the ID, the ego, and the superego. The ID is the primitive instinctual part of the mind that seeks immediate gratification and operates based on pleasure; the Superego is the moral part of the mind based on what the person has internalized from societal rules and values; then, there is the ego, being the rational part that balances between the instinctive desires of the ID and the external moral values of the superego. These three components go hand in hand in shaping human behavior and personality. Essentially, the core human self which is the Host has three parts. In DID, the person has two personalities which means each personality has three parts; both the Host and the Alter are divided into the ID, the ego, and the superego, leading the person with this mental disorder to have different values and behaviors causing a clash in one's identity.

Having DID can be compared to two people sharing the same body, each having their own memories, values, traits as well as habits. This can lead to internal struggles, as these parts try to coexist within the same individual. Dr. Wilbur discussed the conflicts and interactions between the Host and Alter personalities. She emphasized the importance of understanding and interpreting these different parts of the self to promote healing and cohesiveness in individuals with DID (213). For instance, if the Host is more of an introverted person who tends to avoid social interactions, he often finds himself in difficult situations where he has to get himself out of social events that the Alter agreed to or organized. Additionally, if the Host is a clean freak, and the Alter has messy behavior, this can cause severe anxiety and stress to the Host when switching to the original state.

Furthermore, when the Host finds out that the Alter has done something that he is against or is forbidden in his beliefs, it can be devastating and difficult to recover from. For instance, a Muslim person who possesses an atheist Alter, would drown in shame and guilt if the Altar had drunk Alcohol or practiced Adultery. The Alter can ruin

one's daily life, by interfering with his relationships and his close ones whether by fighting with them or betraying them. Another instance is if the person possessing DID is in the Alter state at his job, he might cause the Host to lose his position and ruin his financial stability. Hence, the Alter makes life difficult for the host and others.

The story of Chris McCandless is a clear illustration of how the Altar can ruin one's life. McCandless had DID whom Alter's impulsivity convinced that he would be better if he abandoned his material life and went out on a journey to live in the wilderness, seeking a deeper connection with nature. However, his pursuit of freedom and self-discovery led to a tragic ending with isolation in the Alaskan wilderness, ultimately resulting in his death (22-24). This tragic story is a piece of evidence of how the Alter can not only ruin the Host's life but even leads to his death.

The coexistence of two personalities is a difficult state that harms the Host and makes his life and anything he had built collapse. This can lead to more mental stress and anxiety. Recovering from what the Altar had sabotaged is not an easy job, and even if the Host manages to fix the damages; the fact that the Alter can come out at any moment to ruin everything once again is a scary and discouraging thought to the Host that leaves him with nothing but frustration. Overall, the Host lives in a constant state of paranoia and chaos due the the differences between him and the Alter.

### **1.4.3. Violence: A Projection to One's Frustration**

Individuals expressing a mental disorder may perceive themselves as isolated and distinct which potentially targets bullying. This can manifest unexpressed negative emotions such as loneliness, sadness, frustration, and even anger. All of this leads the person with mental disorders such as DID to externalize bottled-up emotions through aggressiveness and violence.

Statements such as "they are insane" or "stop the Madness!" to point out an unusual behavior is not unheard of. People associate abnormality in mental health with

insanity and refuse the option to educate themselves more about other's mental issues. Hence, people with mental disorders such as DID, grow up or spend years of their lives internalizing the idea of being "not sane" regardless of the inaccuracy of the description; holding a grudge which eventually may lead their Alter to act rebellious to society as a trauma response or a form of coping mechanism.

In his book *The Mind of The Murderer*, Dr. James K. Luiselli has written extensively on this matter and has stated the link between mental health issues and violence as a coping mechanism. His work shed light on addressing the needs of these individuals as well as the importance of approaching them with understanding, empathy, patience as well as showing leniency towards their behavior (112-125). This will eventually lead to creating a peaceful accepting environment with justice and tolerance, leading to a healthier society with healthier parents and upbringings, and eventually eliminating mental pressure, thus fewer mental issues.

Billy Milligan was a person who was diagnosed with DID, known for various criminal activities, such as armed robbery, kidnapping, and rape. Milligan was the first person in the US who successfully used his diagnosis of DID to get his charges dropped. His violence and unethical behaviors were all associated with his DID which can be used as proof that DID and Violence are intertwined (63). This case was a proof that the Host and The Alter are two different people trapped in one body, in addition to that it shed light on the violence that is highly associated with DID in the person possessing it.

Overall, DID is a mental disorder that causes one's self to split into two parts leading to a struggle between the split self as well as the society. This struggle is a magnet for mistreatment from the external environment, where others can treat the person with DID as less of a person which leads people with DID to hold negative feelings that can be projected onto others through violence by the Alter rather than the Host itself.

### 1.5. Shock value

Mental illnesses and violence are often used in films alongside other negative elements in order to add shock value to the work. Sometimes, society is so immersed in daily routine life. People, even when knowing the unacceptable incidents happening around them, rarely take action as they are distracted by their standard life. Therefore, only a powerful example can break through their minds and grab their attention. In some cases, more than a good pure message is needed to inspire change and make people question great matters; and extreme images are occasionally required to shake people and provoke them which would result in a visible reaction.

Merriam-Webster defines shock value as the "usefulness to surprise and usually upset people". It is an element targeted to cause negative emotions like shock, fear, disgust, anger, ...etc; for the sake of usefulness or the benefit of causing a profound impact. For this purpose, the media employed shock value in different forms such as advertising and cinema. While studies of shock value in cinema and movies are not prevalent, advertising is known for using it for more than a century. Therefore, there are much research that one can examine. For instance, Rita Hubbard dedicated a study about the usage of this device in advertising focusing on the clothing company Benetton.

Hubbard in her article "Shock Advertising: The Benetton Case" demonstrates that shock value is mostly used for raising awareness. For example, it is used in anti-smoking ads to scare people as other methods proved to be not as effective (Hubbard 40). Moreover, the Benetton company came out with the most shocking controversial ad campaign in 1992 as it used a compilation of real photographs to highlight various problems society suffered from such as Aids, violence, and poverty. To illustrate, an ad showed a picture of a dead man who happened to be an aids victim surrounded by his weeping family. Another photograph displayed a great number of black refugees put in a small garbage container. In addition, an ad presented kids working in making bricks (43-45). At that time, people viewed this campaign as extremely provocative

and controversial as it was banned in several countries. But on the other hand, many considered it as a wake-up call for people living their lives giving very little attention to social and political issues. This unfamiliar campaign was considered extremely effective in raising awareness because using shock value in media ensures delivering the message and attracting the audience's attention. Benetton company claims that its main purpose is to show its values and what it stands for rather than showing its products in ads; it seeks to target consumers with the same principles (46). Therefore, it utilizes shock value to highlight its message and save it from being lost in a world dominated by media and advertising.

Shock value is an efficient device used to increase visibility and understanding. However, its exploitation is often criticized as several people are skeptical about the industry's real intentions. Debbie Price states "If Benetton thinks that it can sell more sweaters by portraying itself as a company with a conscience, fine. That is what advertising is all about. But remember. That is all this is about: advertising" (47). In fact, shock value is commonly implemented for reasons other than raising awareness. Several industries make use of it in order to reach more people and automatically earn more money. The case of cinema is similar to this as many filmmakers include disturbing content and present extreme graphic violence for financial gain.

Shock value is a cinematic or media device used by authors and directors to shock and disturb viewers by displaying extreme scenes of violence, disgust, sickness,...etc, to serve a specific purpose. One of the most common objectives of employing it is to raise the public's consciousness about important matters in society such as illnesses, violence, terrorism, and dangerous ideologies. Shock value is believed to be a tough but wise method to do that as it resonates with people and leads them to question their actions and beliefs. However, the usage of it in certain instances can be a part of a corrupted intention seeking to cause chaos and chase fame.

## 1.6. Film Adaptations

At the beginning of the 20th century, the film adaptation genre was introduced to people. It captivated their attention by giving them a chance to revisit their beloved literary works in an unfamiliar way. film adaptations soon received great popularity and gained widespread admiration. Consequently, it raised scholars' interest and marked the beginning of film adaptation studies. These studies mainly focused on defining the genre and its characteristics and exploring its relationship with literature.

### 1.6.1. Film Adaptations Definition and Emergence

To understand the meaning of film adaptation, one has first to define the word adaptation; "to adapt means to alter the structure or function of an entity so that it is better fitted to survive and to multiply in its new environment. To adapt is to move that same entity into a new environment" (Cahir 14). Therefore, adaptation is modifying or adjusting something in a way that makes it more suitable to a different context or medium. Film adaptation produces a new creation by transforming literary works from a written form to a cinematic mode. during this process. The filmmakers do not only modify the form but also the content as they can deliver their own interpretations, of their own time, to the screen following several creative ways resulting in the production of numerous forms of adaptations such as movies, video games, comic book, musicals,...etc (Rahmoun 68-70). In short, film adaptation is a transformed work based on modifying the original written text in a manner that makes it suitable for the screen. During this process, the form and content are recreated according to the filmmakers' interpretation.

Various factors significantly influenced the introduction of film adaptations in cinema. For instance, it was an easy option (Desmond, Hawkes 14). The creation of cinematic works requires extensive effort as it includes numerous steps such as scriptwriting, filming, and editing. selecting a suitable text is a challenging process demanding considerable expertise. given the fact that classic works were already

available and successful, producers preferred to adapt them for films to ensure success and simplify the process. Moreover, film production wanted to “borrow literature's prestige for the new art form” (15). literature was not merely a form of entertainment. It was considered a powerful tool that could be used to express ideologies and influence societal norms and values. prominent authors like T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf were seen as literary titans who wrote notable works that resonated with people for a long time. Meanwhile, cinema was initially regarded with skepticism and seen as an amusement tool. Therefore, producers sought to bring to the audience's attention that films are also a form of expressive art that can deliver complex messages. the simplest way to do that was to adapt prominent works. Furthermore, Desmond and Hawkes indicate that the most important reason for film adaptations' emergence is that they make substantial profit (15). For example, the film series *Harry Potter* made over \$7.7 billion in profit, and *The Lord of the Rings* grossed over \$2.9 billion worldwide. Film adaptation was an easier approach that helped promote and strengthen cinema while seeking the audience's approval and interest.

### **1.6.2. The Relationship between Film Adaptations and Literature**

The main issue that captivated scholars' and critics' attention about Film adaptation was its complex relationship with literature. this intricate connection sparked numerous studies since the beginning of the 20th century. countless researchers wrote papers that tackled this link, analyzing its evolution over time.

As a way to compare the two media, several scholars stated their similarities and differences. Film and literature are both narrative genres that seek to uncover the complexities of human life, depict its socio-political aspects, and address the conflicts that arise due to individual and societal interactions, offering the recipient the chance to analyze them in various approaches. Moreover, they share the same narrative devices as film, during its emergence, depended on literary devices such as plots and characters (Onikoyi 286-230). However, scholars argue that the two arts are perceived differently. For instance, the reader draws a mental image while the viewer just

perceives the visual image films provide. Therefore, the recipients' imagination is more restricted in the film as the latter decides most of the things the reader can imagine while interacting with literature such as the settings and the characters. In addition, literature tells the story allowing the reader to vividly know the internal thoughts of characters while in film; it is the responsibility of the viewers to comprehend the characters' thoughts through their expressions and gestures (Rahmoun 66-68).

One of the most common debates surrounding film adaptation focuses on the tension between fidelity to the original text and the creative liberties filmmakers take. Fidelity discourse views literature as original while its film adaptation is the translation of it that should be faithful to the source and not make radical changes (Bruhn, Gjelsvik, and Hanssen 05). Therefore, the film is not considered an independent work and is not judged based on its quality but on its relativity to the literary work. This led numerous scholars to criticize fidelity discourse and abandon the works written on its basis. For instance, Colin Maccabe et al argue that the film adaptation should be appreciated as an individual work rather than a variation of the literary text (41). Thus, Desmond and Hawkes suggest using fidelity as a descriptive term rather than an evaluative one to examine the relationship between film and literature and make comparisons (2). Therefore, the relativity of the adaptation to the source should be examined to compare the two media and mark their similarities and differences rather than judging the film's worthiness. Desmond and Hawkes categorize the film adaptation into 3 types, a close, loose, or intermediate interpretation (03). First, close interpretation means that the film keeps most of the key elements of the literary work such as plot, settings, character development,...etc. The changes made are subtle and mostly just for the sake of condensing the text to fit the film's length. For example, the film adaptation *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a close interpretation of Harper Lee's classic novel, it includes the same characters, preserves the main themes of racial injustice, and keeps dialogues significantly similar to the ones written in the novel. Second, a loose interpretation is an adaptation that drives out to a large extent from the literary work as it considers it a mere source of inspiration. for instance, the film

*Clueless* keeps the same themes of Jane Austen's novel *Emma* but portrays the story as a modern version of the novel including contemporary slang, fashion, and cultural references which grants great liberties for the filmmakers. Third, intermediate interpretation takes place in the middle, it maintains the core elements of the story while allowing a space for creative interpretations and changes to fit the new medium. As an illustration, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy remains faithful to the main plot of Frodo's journey to destroy the One Ring but modifies certain elements and omits some characters such as Tom Bombadil to fit the constraints of the film medium.

Film and literature, while distinct, share several aspects. The film adaptation is currently seen as a distinct art creation. It has its own qualities and visual storytelling techniques that make the recipient's experience distinct from their reading experience to the literary source. Therefore, it should be given the value of an independent work rather than assessing its merits based on its faithfulness to literature.

The film adaptation is the recreation of a literary work according to the filmmaker's interpretation. Since the emergence of cinema, many producers opted to adapt literary works as the original text facilitated the process, made good money, and brought respect to the cinema. As film adaptations gained popularity worldwide, researchers sought to discover their relationship with literature by comparing them and stating their similarities and differences. Some scholars followed the concept of fidelity and evaluated film adaptations based on their faithfulness to the source while others used fidelity merely as a descriptive term and believed it should be evaluated independently.

### **1.7. Conclusion**

Consumerism is an economic and cultural phenomenon that promotes the constant acquisition of material goods and services, encouraging people to adopt materialistic values and prioritize them over every other life aspect. Consequently, society gets corrupted and individuals get affected by health problems and mental

disorders. Several literary and cinematic works emphasized this topic for the sake of challenging societal norms and raising people's awareness by taking the negative consequences of materialism to the extreme. Film adaptations could bring this issue to the attention of contemporary audiences and give a shocking but efficient call to action; such as the movie *Fight Club*. The latter explores the destructive consequences of materialism by describing a protagonist who possesses Dissociative Identity Disorder and chooses to live in a world characterized by violence and chaos.

***Chapter Two: Fight Club's Cultural and  
Psychological Analysis***

## Chapter two: *Fight Club's* Cultural and Psychological Analysis

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### 2.1. Introduction

The 1990s was an extremely important time for American cinema as it was characterized by innovation and the rise of independent filmmakers. Several successful movies and cult classics like *Titanic*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *Jurassic Park* were released at that time. Similarly, the economy of the US was progressively rising; achieving technological advancement, prosperity, and stability. However, it caused issues of overconsumption and exaggeratedly pursuing materialistic goals. Since literature and cinema are a reflection of society, several works tackled issues related to consumerism and materialism, mental illness, and violence. *Fight Club*, a film adaptation released in 1999 could bring the author Chuck Palahniuk's critique of society and constructed norms to movie theaters and DVD players. As a result, it left a significant impact on American and worldwide audience; sparking intense debates over the years.

### 2.2. The Film Adaptation *Fight Club*

In the realm of cinema, it is a common practice to adapt literary works into captivating movies. *Fight Club* stands as a prime example, being an adaptation under David Fincher, of the novella with the same title written by Chuck Palahniuk in 1996.

Palahniuk drew inspiration from a personal experience during one of his camping vacations, where disruptive noise and loud music from neighboring campers prevented him from sleeping. When he tried to confront them the next morning, he faced physical abuse, leaving him all bruised up. When he went to work on Monday no one asked him about the bruises. Palahniuk remarked,

My face was so awful and so trashed that nobody would acknowledge it, because to acknowledge it somehow they would have to find out something about my private life they just did not wanna know, and so for three months as my face changed color eventually coming back to white people would look at my chest and they would talk to my Adam's apple and they would

say 'so how was your weekend?' Did you do anything interesting?, and I'd be looking at them with two huge black eyes, saying 'No, how about you?', if you look bad enough, no one would dare ask you what you did with your free time (Palahniuk 1:55- 2:52).

With *Fight Club*, Chuck Palahniuk delivered a raw story that peeled back layers of societal norms, offering a raw glimpse into the human condition.

The film burst onto screens in 1999, captivating audiences from different age ranges with different views. Some believed that the movie dared to tackle what the people have been struggling with yet no one had the power to express the suffering, while others saw it as something that brainwashed the new generation and influenced them negatively leading the society to witness a massive rise in vandalism and violence. Overall, despite the movie not getting any major awards or its polar views; it gained huge popularity in American society; influencing many to create their own fight club.

Moreover, *Fight Club* is not considered just a regular movie, it was a mirror that reflected the American society's social norms and lifestyle in the late 90's. It tackled controversial issues such as consumerism, masculinity, and existential crisis. Chuck Palahniuk's novella was a provocative literary work in which the movie adaptation gave a provoking visual idea to American society and eventually to the whole world.

Chuck Palahniuk himself has expressed in an interview with The Guardian magazine entitled *Chuck Palahniuk*, "I wanted to write about the emptiness and meaningless of modern life" admiration for the film adaptation, acknowledging that it captured his original vision in ways that surpassed the novella. He stated that when the movie first came out, he was embarrassed by the novella; Palahniuk expressed that many parts of the novella were well explained or expanded better into longer scenes in the movie, leading his original idea to be expressed vividly. The movie adaptation was a great work that did not strip the novella of its original aim but gave it a great description and projection.

The movie is an adaptation of a novella that successfully painted the image that Chuck Palahniuk attempted to convey; the audience's reaction was polarized from awe to controversy. Some believed that the aim of the movie was to raise awareness about consumerism and others viewed that it aimed at social corruption and vandalism. Overall, whether it was a positive or a negative perception and feedback, the movie gained huge fame and gradually spread throughout the whole world.

### 2.2.1. Psychoanalysis of Characters

When speaking of the psychological genre in the cinema, the movie *Fight Club* is a prominent work given its captivating storylines in which complex characters are included. The movie starts with a graphic visual from deep parts of the brain passing by the amygdala which is a part of the brain that controls emotions such as guilt, remorse, sadness, and happiness. It is centered in the middle reaching to the human forehead, creating a journey from internal to external; from sensory to psychological. It then proceeds with the unnamed narrator in a terrified state with a gun inside his mouth. The narrator then begins to explain the events of the movie, expressing his struggle with insomnia and emptiness and his journey of finding self-fulfilling activities that distract from his misery such as support groups of illnesses that he does not struggle with, leading him to have the satisfaction of being different. He then gets triggered by a character named Marla Singer who does the same disturbing his peace and making him return to his original miserable state. Eventually, the character meets Tyler Durden who in the end is revealed to be his Alter ego with whom he creates an exclusive club under the name "Fight Club" which welcomes men only and forbids Marla from joining. Thus the Narrator does not have to worry about her anymore. Ultimately, the "Fight Club" expands all over the United States with different men from different backgrounds and jobs. They were compared to space monkeys and used to spread a long chain of violent acts, vandalism, and physical abuse under different names such as "Project Mayhem".

According to Sigmund Freud, every human is psychologically divided to three aspect, the ID which is represented in the movie through the Alter ego Tyler Durden who reflect the narrator's instinctive desires and acts on them without conforming the superego which are societal norm, Marla representing both the ID and the ego, given the fact that she lives by her own rule and act on her instinctive desires and does not conform to the society, yet balances between them since she does not hurt anybody; and the narrator being the ego since he conform to the laws and rules of society without rebelling. This psycho-analysis indicates the co-relationship between one's actions and their state of mind.

### **2.2.1.1. The Narrator**

The protagonist of the movie is the first-person narrator, Although in many scenes and some documents of the movie script it was hinted that his name might be Jack, he remained unnamed. This character is played by the actor Edward Norton who was cast to play the role due to his average looks according to the Western beauty standards that prefer men with sharp jawlines, prominent cheekbones, a low full hairline, and strong tall toned athletic body and; in addition to his cold emotionless narrating voice. Norton successfully brought the anxious state of the character to the screen as a result of his accurate performance as well as his looks.

The narrator is the host and the primary personality, he comes from a toxic background in which his parents cannot stand to be in the same room together, and his father eventually leaves when he is 6 years old. He struggles with insomnia that damages his brain and leads him to be in a constant state of derealization in which he is hyper-aware of everything yet barely processes a thing, he is never fully awake and never fully asleep; he observes everything around him and analyzes everyone's behavior. The narrator wants nothing but the ability to rest at night, he reaches for medical help to be capable of falling asleep yet the doctor does not allow him to take any pills claiming that he should fall asleep naturally; leaving him to be more anxious and miserable.

Thus, he continues to use other coping mechanisms such as excessive furniture shopping in which he surrendered to his "nesting instinct" as he stated, as well as joining support groups for people who were dying of diseases such as prostate cancer, testicular cancer, brain parasites, and others. This highlights his tendency to be self-destructive. The character's ordinary life failed to bring him any type of satisfaction due to its emptiness and repetitive routine, "I felt like putting a bullet between the eyes of every panda that wouldn't screw to save his species" he stated, expressing his frustration with the lack of motivation or drive in life using pandas metaphorically since they are known for their low productive rates. However, once he joins these groups he feels heard and cared for. He was the only one who was not truly dying and this gave him a sense of superiority and distinctiveness and finally, he fell asleep.

However, a year later someone named Marla starts doing the same as him and disturbs his peace by triggering his wrongdoing and reminding him that he is a fraud; as well as taking his sense of distinctiveness. Once again he returns to his anxious sleepless state until he co-founds the "Fight Club" which helps him fill the void in his life in a different yet similar way, by giving him a sense of belonging, stating "we were finding out more and more that we were not alone"(Fight Club 40:42-40:45).

Despite his struggle, the narrator is extremely comfortable in his routine, he conforms to social norms and prefers to have an organized routine that repeats itself without disturbance. A prime example of this is him attending the same multiple support groups a week for a whole year before he got disturbed by Marla who took away his sense of distinctiveness. The narrator longs for a sense of belonging as well as distinctiveness, and the attendance of support groups successfully managed to achieve that for him and bring him peace; until it was all disturbed by a trigger that was a constant reminder of his lies.

All in All, the character of the narrator is complex, unsatisfied with his reality, and seeks external gratification using consumerism to cope as well as joining clubs of

different purposes to fill the void in his meaningless life; leading him to create his own club; "Fight Club".

### 2.2.1.2. Tyler Durden

Tyler Durden is the protagonist's Alter ego who is everything the narrator wishes to be as he stated. This character is played by Brad Pitt who is conventionally good-looking, with a muscular tall body, sharp facial features and full voluminous hair, who reflects this character's confidence with his good looks and talent in acting.

Tyler is a complex character, he is charismatic, self-confident, rebellious, and impulsive. He does not conform to societal rules. Instead, he makes his own and leads others into following them, he adapts the philosophy of letting go of everything in life and attaches himself to nothing. He supposedly comes from a healthy background in which his dad constantly reminds him of the importance of finishing his studies and getting a job. He is in a constant state of mania which is a psychological state in which the person is extremely impulsive and energetic, as well as processing rapid thoughts and an elevated mood ("Mania"). He spends sleepless nights being hyperactive and doing unordinary activities such as breaking into plastic surgery facility dumps and stealing the remaining body fat from liposuction procedures, using them to make soaps and chemical bombs.

Tyler is a figment of the narrator's imagination that challenges him to embrace the emptiness in his life rather than conform to consumerism; he is a result of his suffering. The narrator wishes to be at ease, in a reality in which he has control over his life; meaning he wishes for a polar opposite reality than his. A prime proof of this is in the scenes where the narrator's Alter ego keeps flashing into the screen although he is in his host state (Fight Club 12:36-12:37); Tyler Durden; symbolizing the narrator's frustration with his current state and longing for a radical change. As a result of all the pressure his brain witnesses and the absence of rest and sleep, he starts to live in a

hallucinative reality in which he witnesses his actions as a third person, thinking that the Alter ego Tyler Durden is a separate person from himself.

Tyler Durden is a representation of the narrator's deep inner dark desires, also known as the ID in psychological terms. The co-existence of such polar opposite personalities within the same person leads to a conflict and a battle within oneself, thus the human brain copes with creating an alternative, hallucinative reality in which the self is at ease, and in this case a rebellious, complex, and impulsive Alter ego.

### **2.2.1.3. Marla Singer**

After auditioning many female actors, the production team decided to give the role of Marla Singer to Helena Bonham Carter, who managed to deliver the character's wildness and unperturbed state of mind due to her good performance, as well as her skinny body and dark under eyes which are huge indicators of poor health and a result to smoking. Helena Carter even asked the make-up artist to apply her makeup with the left hand to portray Marla's personality, given the fact that Marla is not the type of woman who would put a lot of effort into her looks. The character of Marla is no ordinary character; her complexity and unorthodox behavior are well portrayed through the actress Helena.

Marla Singer is also a complex character. She is a self-confident, yet troubled, unbothered woman; as the narrator states: "She lives with the philosophy that she might die at any moment, the tragedy she said, is that she didn't" (*Fight Club* 18.56-19:02). Unlike the Narrator who seeks comfort and control, Marla embraces chaos and rebels against social norms, she embodies depression where she is incapable of finding joy and satisfaction within herself resulting to being indifferent about rules, impulsive, and reckless. Marla's views towards life and its emptiness push her to not be cautious; this is portrayed in many scenes, such as her crossing the road in an unsafe manner, constant smoking, as well as overdosing on pills while being completely aware that it

may lead her to death. Marla's life is insignificant to her, hence why she risks it all the time with her reckless behavior and different forms of self-harm.

While not much is said about her background, in the scene where the Alter ego Tyler saves her and helps her run from the police; Marla sarcastically states "The girl who lives here used to be a charming, Lovely girl, she's lost faith in herself, she is a monster, she is an infectious human waste! Good luck trying to save her!" (Fight Club 51:45-52:02). This may indicate that in her past she used to be different than her current state, and her new rebellious version is a result of the hardship and traumatizing life events that she went through leading her to view life as an empty meaningless thing and embrace its chaos. Marla's past self faded over time due to the hardship of life which eventually led her to give up on bouncing back to her old self or having a better life, which only boosts her recklessness and her tendency to self-harm.

Despite the darkness of this character, Marla is not a heartless harmful person, she is capable of creating serious relationships without pushing people away and developing emotions. This is shown in her falling in love with the Narrator, although he humiliates her, treats her harshly, and pushes her; she manages to forgive him and come back to him every time. She confronts the narrator's polar, unpredictable behavior towards her and asks him to leave her alone, "you are the worst thing that ever happened to me" (2:00:20-2:00:22) she says to the narrator. However, she eventually forgives him without taking a long time which is shown in the last scene of the movie where the narrator and Marla hold hands as the city collapses before their eyes. In the scene where she informs the Narrator that one of the members of the f cancer support club whose name was Cloe has died, Although Cloe and her were not close, she cared for her and remembers her name and considers her death as an important thing that the narrator would want to know. All in all, the odd behavior of Marla does not take away her well-being as a human.

Marla is a complicated character, she is warm-hearted with a cold attitude, she attempts self-harm yet never hurts anyone, she acts recklessly and carelessly with

herself and ignores the rules yet cares for others. Marla possesses her old self's kindness and her current life's toughness.

#### **2.2.1.4. Space Monkeys**

In the Late 1940s, Monkeys were launched into space by various space agencies such as NASA and the Soviet Union, Soviet space program. This event is utilized as a symbolic metaphor in the movie. Monkeys were used as biological experiments, their safety was not really significant; Thus, the Alter ego, Tyler uses this term to refer to the members he collected for Project Mayhem in which they commit various acts of crime and vandalism. This reference emphasizes the idea of following an ideology or a law blindly.

Unlike the previous characters, Space Monkeys are not really complicated characters. They are real-life test subjects, their beliefs and desires are irrelevant, they are pushovers who follow their leader Tyler without any argument, and they are blindly obedient to the point where they are ready to kill Tyler himself just to obey his own rules. They strive for a purpose for their lives, and Tyler has given them that; hence, they sacrifice their whole lives to fulfill it. They are conformists to which every rule is applied to them without any resistance, they are loyalty-driven, sacrificial, and radical where there is no between good and bad, which is once again illustrated in the scene where they try to kill and sacrifice their lead for the sake of their purpose of project Mayhem.

Space Monkeys are portrayed solely as servants, they have a job to do and that is their only importance. They are a symbol of the dehumanization of conformity, this is portrayed in the way Tyler chooses them, by putting them under inhumane conditions where they spend three days standing in front of his door waiting for his acceptance while getting yelled at and told that they will never achieve their purpose "Get off my Porch!" (*Fight Club* 1:25:50-1:25:51) using dehumanizing language such as "Fat man" as well as cuss words. Moreover, the representation of conformity is also shown in the

scene where Tyler picks out the members of Project Mayhem. Tyler asks members "You get two black shirts? Two pairs of black pants?; one pair of black boots? Two pairs of black socks? One black jacket?" (Fight Club 1:29:05-1:29:13) as a portrayal of the need to consume to be a part of society.

One of the members of Space Monkeys is Bob who is a survivor of testicular cancer. The imbalance of hormones in his body led him to possess a female-like body and have breasts. He first appears as a member of an anonymous testicular cancer support group, hugging the narrator with the need to scream out that they are still men "We are still men " (3:22-3:23) illustrating his insecurity and the need to prove his masculinity. Yet apparently the peaceful environment of support groups was not fulfilling, he later joined the "Fight Club" and condoned physical confrontations to feel more masculine. Eventually, he joins Project Mayhem in which Tyler the Alter ego rejects him given his insecurity. Unlike all the other contestants, he leaves immediately. However, the narrator allows him to stay and ultimately he gets accepted to the project in which his need to prove his masculinity to himself is more prominent to the point where he dies while committing an act of vandalism. Bob is one version of Space Monkeys, his motivation to conform is his deeply internalized self-rejection; he strives to find a place where he can fit in and feel how a masculine man would feel; like every other member of "Fight Club", he was given a reason to live, this was worded through the narrator in the scene where he said "Fight Club became the reason to cut your hair short or trim your fingernails" (46:48-46:51). Bob's need to fit in and belong to something led him to bounce from support groups to "Fight Club" and eventually to project Mayhem where he dies.

Space Monkeys are a troop of men from different backgrounds and motives who share the same purpose and dedication. They mirror the state of conformists whether in materialism and consumerism, obedience, or deeply rooted, internalized insecurities.

### 2.3. Materialism and Consumerism Critique in *Fight Club*

Through the film adaptation *Fight Club*, one can easily notice Chuck Palahniuk's intention to address consumerism and materialism and deliver its negative consequences. He shows that American society is mostly shaped by overconsumption and materialistic values; especially in the exposition of the plot. Using the character of the narrator, the author gives an example of a person who is mainly dominated by consumerist principles. On the other hand, he shows the Opponent's point of view by employing the character of Tyler Durden.

The narrator experiences an ongoing cycle of materialistic life as he works in a major car company for numerous hours a week. He travels to several places and endures the job he does not like and the company's practices he does not agree with just for the sake of earning more and spending more. The movie shows his continuous need to purchase new goods to the extent that he describes himself as "a slave to the Ikea nesting instinct" (*Fight Club* 04:47-04:52). He buys many unnecessary products in different sizes and shapes such as coffee table in the shape of a yin and yang or the Rislampa<sup>1</sup> wire lamps of environmentally-friendly unbleached paper. He senses the obligation to own these things just because they belong to famous big brands.

Moreover, he adopts materialistic values and integrates them into his belief system. As a result, he prioritizes material goods and financial success more than anything; he even believes that what defines him and completes him are his daily purchases. For instance, after describing his furniture, he says "I had it all" (05:23-05:26). Although he was a single man, living alone, suffering from insomnia, and having no friends or family, he considers himself to have it all just because he owned a complete collection of expensive furniture. In addition, when his house got burned and every item he purchased was destroyed; he spoke sadly about his loss saying "I had it all, I had a steroid that was very decent, a wardrobe that was getting very respectable. I

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<sup>1</sup> A type of a lampshade, made by rice paper.

was close to being complete" (Fight Club 29:22-29:39). These scenes indicate that the value of material possessions in the late 20th century America was extremely exaggerated to the point that they were claimed to have the ability to define and complete humans. In fact, these assumptions were raised by propaganda and advertising. Marketing campaigns focused on the idea that there is a significant variety of material goods due to the diversity of people's personalities. Therefore, each one should look for what resembles or defines him the most to make himself special. The narrator blindly follows this pattern of life despite realizing that it does not make him happy. On the contrary, it causes him misery.

Palahniuk tackles the negative effects of materialism and consumerism on the individual and society by showing the struggles the narrator and his community encounter. He highlights that what keeps the narrator trapped in unhappiness is addiction. For instance, when the narrator is introducing his way of life at the beginning of the movie; he says "We used to read pornography, now it was the Horchow<sup>1</sup> collection"(05:38-05:43). Here, the author shows the resemblance between consumerism and other addictive behaviors; he claims that pornography and consumerism have the same effects on people. Therefore, overconsumption leads to mental health problems and addiction.

Furthermore, the main aspect that depicts the narrator before meeting Tyler Durden is his struggle with an empty, rigid, and boring life. Although he always travels, meets new people, and receives a substantial wage; he is devoid of joy, never seen smiling or enjoying himself. Instead, he experiences a resentment towards life which causes him to be unable to find fulfillment and satisfaction in his existence to the extent that he wishes for a plane collision each time he takes a flight. The reason out of this state is repressing his human nature and distancing himself from basic instincts and emotions. As was explained in Chapter 1, materialism diminishes emotional fulfillment and encourages people to only focus on their financial success. Consequently, the individual totally loses touch with his basic instincts. The character

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<sup>1</sup> A famous company that sells expensive furniture, decor, and accessories.

of the narrator is a good example of this condition, he pursues a cold plain life that does not include any healthy integration of human instincts like survival, social instinct, and emotional instincts. Accordingly, he loses the ability to feel fear, anger, happiness, or sadness. He becomes unable to sleep or cry. However, the first time he gets separated from his materialistic life is to go to a support group for testicular cancer; and surprisingly he can get in touch with his emotions, cry, then sleep. He states: "I was lost in oblivion, dark and silent and complete, I found freedom, losing all hope was freedom" (*Fight Club* 09:05-09:19). As he lost hope in the false expectations promoted by material life, his instinct rejected its constraints and unleashed a chance for his emotions which granted him freedom.

Palahniuk also manages to portray the negative outcomes of materialism on society by addressing some other minor characters in the movie. For instance, the narrator calls the friends he meets on the plane "single-serving friends" comparing them to the single-serving products he finds everywhere such as sugar, cream, mouthwash, bars of soap,...etc. Using this comparison, the author implies that in a materialistic culture; humans ultimately start to resemble the things they produce and consume, they become industrial products instead of authentic human beings. Moreover, they lose empathy toward each other and objectify other individuals. As an illustration, the narrator goes to see a car that went through an accident, got crashed, and burnt with everyone trapped inside it. The first observation the technician accompanying him makes is "The teenager's braces around the backseat ashtray would make a good anti-smoking ad" (20:40-20:46). This joke shows that people become so programmed and oriented toward everything related to marketing and consumption that they see each other as advertising products even when exposed to a deadly accident. In addition, They become disconnected from family ties and struggle to make friendships. For instance, when the narrator's house got burned he found no one to call or seek help from but Tyler Durden; a single-serving friend constructed by his own delusions. Through the character of the narrator, the author gives an embodiment of conformity to consumerism and materialism. However, he represents an opposite figure that supports different ideologies.

Tyler Durden, the Alter of the narrator, is the voice of anti-consumerism and non-conformity in *Fight Club*. His statements and actions aim at demonstrating the worthlessness of materialism and the importance of rejecting it. He argues that none of the widespread products are necessary for survival. However, everyone purchases them due to being controlled by the illusion of safety. For instance, during Tyler's first meeting with the narrator, he asks him "You know why they put Oxygen masks on planes?" not for people to breathe but to make them high, euphoric, willing to accept their destiny and die in peace; the oxygen masks are only an illusion of safety (*Fight Club* 22:21-22:58). This symbolizes other material goods that are propagated and claimed to ensure safety and security but in fact they are unable to achieve that.

Tyler explains that the constant acquisition of products turns into an obsession that gets out of control. He says "We are consumers, we buy products out of lifestyle obsession. Murder, crime, poverty, these things don't concern me. What concerns me are celebrity magazines, television with 500 channels,..." (30:06-31:22). Here, Palahniuk criticizes people's indifference to social issues and the wrong priorities of society. He also brings to the viewers' attention the necessity to reconsider their values. In addition, he states that consumerism enslaves people and controls their lives, habits, and actions as Tyler tells the narrator "The things you own end up owning you"(31:10-31:17). One of the main ideas expressed by the anti-consumerist Tyler Durden is the false expectations people are raised within a materialistic culture. Materialism feeds delusions to people and makes them build extremely high expectations about themselves. By propagating the idea that everyone can be anything they want, everyone wishes to be movie stars, great businessmen, athletes, or sports stars. However, few people can achieve that while the rest end up "working jobs [they] hate so [they] can buy s— [they] don't need" (01:10:33-01:10:37). Consequently, they feel disappointed, betrayed, insecure, and unworthy of success. Moreover, they develop an immense feeling of anger toward societal norms and cultural instructions.

Anger is a double-edged sword, it can work as a fuel that helps people to realize great achievements. For instance, the author, in an interview, states that anger is a

great battery that everyone can use to write books and make other achievements. In fact, anger was what encouraged him to write *Fight Club* in a good and unforgettable manner after the failure of his previous novel "Invisible Monsters" (Palahniuk 53:30-55:08). Also in *Fight Club*, Anger serves as a fuel that encourages the narrator to abandon his materialistic life and seek better fulfillment. However, it can easily turn into a destructive process. For example, the "Fight Club", the refuge where men come together to release their stress and pressure, gradually became a terrorist organization seeking to sabotage people's possessions and destroy modern civilization. The organization that was first built on non-conformity principles, empowering people to reject cultural conventions and material possessions, ironically transitioned to a clear example of conformity. It includes numerous rules and guidelines, and its members are referred to by one name which is Space Monkeys. Moreover, they wear the same clothes, do whatever they are asked to do, and are not even allowed to ask questions. The author highlights the fact of how easy it is to reject one belief system, only to fall into another similar to it.

*Fight Club* demonstrates the signs of consumerism by addressing the narrator's daily habits and behaviors, in which he shows his addiction and dissatisfaction with his boring life. In addition, it portrays Tyler Durden as the voice of anti-consumerism who calls for giving up on social expectations and pursuing life in any way one desires. He fights social norms using anger as a motive but ultimately shifts to causing a harmful cycle of devastation. The film adaptation also highlights more damaging outcomes of consumerism such as mental illness and violence.

### **2.4. The Relationship Between Mental Illness and Violence in *Fight Club***

One of the first things that a psychiatrist would attempt to know about his patients is Whether they hurt themselves, others, or both. Violence and Mental Illness are two faces of the same coin; the question of whether a mentally ill person is more dangerous than others has been debated for years. When taking a look at a mental health facility, it is more likely to find three different groups of patients; those who

self-harm and are put under a suicide protection unit with excessive protection; those who harm others and are more likely to start physical fights; and those who do not fight yet sometimes engage in physical confrontation or hurt their fellow patients. This reflects the Co-relationship between mental instability and violence, which is a prominent theme in the movie.

It is widely common for people with mental issues such as depression to harm themselves and neglect their safety. The movie sheds light on this behavior through the character of Marla, who neglects her health with excessive smoking, crosses the road recklessly, and overdoses on pills not to kill herself yet is on the edge of dying. Marla believes that it is tragic that she has not died yet, she views life with a depressing lens, people with depression are more likely to find life meaningless and dull given the lack of joy and excitement; hence why she constantly attempts self-harm with different forms whether neglecting her safety or attempting suicide. Depressed people are somehow numb, their lives contain no feelings, and they turn to self-harm due to the rush it gives them. They finally feel something even if it is just pain, it still makes the numbness go away for a short period of time. Dr Adrian Raine revealed through his research about serial killer's brain how the part of the human brain that is responsible for guilt and remorse which is called the Amygdala is shrunken by 8% in serial killers, highlighting the co-relationship between violence and the mental state (4:42-5:00). In addition to low heart rate, which contributes to making life boring and dull. People with mental illnesses differ anatomically than regular people in brain region and heart rate.

The Relationship between mental health and violence goes both ways, It was revealed that violence itself leads to mental issues. People who grow up in violent households with abusive parents are more likely to become serial killers with unstable mental health, and this was shown in the movie as well. When talking about his parents, the narrator reveals that he grew up in a toxic environment where his parents refused to be in the same room together. In Addition to that, his father left them when he was 6 years old. Mental issues and Violence are compared to a cycle, when put in

an abusive environment growing up, the person is more likely to develop mental issues such as depression, and mental issues result in toxic coping mechanisms such as self-harm.

The narrator's Alter ego is a reflection of what he deeply desires; meaning he internally is a violent person filled with dark tendencies. The movie highlights this with extremity. Every violent act Tyler commits is unrealistically extreme; in the scene where he wanted to get back at some people at the restaurant, he urinated on the entire soup, not their plates only which means he hurt the entire restaurant (*Fight Club* 33:53-33:59). Moreover, when he wanted to make a student appreciate his life more and focus more on his studies, instead of just talking to him or only yelling at him, he pointed a gun to his head, stating that "...his breakfast will taste better than any meal you and I have ever tasted" (1:23:53-1:23:55); leaving him in a traumatizing state.

Tyler's actions are extreme, his state of mania is wrapped in the sense of violence, and he acts with the idea that he has nothing to lose "It is only when we have lost everything, that we are free to do anything" (1:04:01-1:04:04) he said after chemically burning the Narrator hand to teach him how to let go and stop resisting, which also highlights his extreme violent behaviors. Tyler is also emotionally abusive, he manipulates everyone into adapting his beliefs and ideas as well as abusing Marla emotionally, giving her just enough attention to be attached to him and abandoning her, leaving her with a state of emotional confusion and pain, as well as manipulating the Space Monkeys by reinforcing their insecurities "You are not special" he said to them as they perform manual labour in his garden (1:30:34-1:30:35). Tyler feeds into people's weak spots and insecurities and brain washes them into either being attached to him or working for him and following his beliefs.

Another Form of violence is depicted through physical fights between the members of "Fight Club" which is the whole point of it. Tyler convinces a troop of men with pointless lives and insecurities to gather and watch each other fight with few guidelines, they fight until they break each other's bones and teeth, and leave each other

with severe physical injuries. Tyler is emotionally and physically abusive, he lives with a manic state of mind and hurts everyone around him physically and emotionally.

The movie *Fight Club* contains complex characters with unstable mental states whose actions are a reflection of the co-relationship between mental health and violence with its different forms, Marla reflecting self-harm and neglect, and the narrator's ID, Tyler in hurting others and physical aggression, as well as emotional manipulation and abuse.

### **2.5. The Use of Shock Value in *Fight Club***

By examining *Fight Club*, one can easily understand the author's intention to raise people's awareness about the danger of consumerism and materialism in American society. Therefore, he used several narrative devices to deliver this message; among them is shock value. Chuck Palahniuk displayed various controversial and disturbing content for the sake of granting his audience an unforgettable experience.

At the beginning of the movie, the author followed the most obvious simple way to show the risk of a certain harmful trend in society. He depicted the life of the narrator who is a character strongly influenced by materialism, presenting the daily struggles he encounters with a dull meaningless life he despises. Moreover, Palahniuk illustrates the detrimental impact of materialism on the main character as the narrator suffers from physical and mental issues. However, most people in American society adopted a lifestyle similar to this. They might have noticed its harmful outcomes but did not truly feel the need to reject, protest, and seek change. They were used to seeing the devastated state of the narrator, hence why it did not touch their nerves or speak to their minds. Thus, the author included Tyler Durden as the advocate of freedom and non-conformity to show his audience the alternative option and the importance of revolution against harmful societal norms. But as numerous anti-materialist movements were speaking against overconsumption and calling for the need to embrace a simple minimalistic life, Tyler's lessons were also overheard and not

incredibly effective. Consequently, Palahniuk utilizes a different method where he implements shock value in his narrative.

By employing the same character, Tyler Durden, the author focuses on the shocking reaction provoked by the disappointments and anger caused by materialism. After presenting the good side of Tyler and portraying him as a strong, happy man, free from all social constraints; he turns to a terrorist aiming at destroying all of his country's civilization. By including this contradiction, the author leaves his audience baffled about whether to approve or detest Tyler. In fact, Tyler Durden is a complex character proving that almost everything is a double-edged sword. Just like materialism supports the spirit of work, depending on one's self and seeking success; it fills people's lives with selfishness and rigidity. On the other hand, just like the reaction to it can be in the form of organized movements peacefully encouraging people's consciousness; it can also be characterized by numerous acts of vandalism fueled by anger, hate, and revenge. Therefore, Tyler is a multifaceted character with a part people should listen to, and another they should condemn.

This complexity of Tyler led a significant number of the audience to interpret that the author portrays violence as a solution to the anxieties American society deals with. However, Palahniuk intended to make the novella disturbing and perturbing to the audience to add to its shock value rather than to encourage violence. This can be proven by the narrator's rejection of the intense sabotage promoted by his alter ego. Although the narrator welcomes the reasonable solutions presented by Tyler at the beginning, he starts showing his disapproval as things take another extreme path. *Fight Club* is somehow similar to a necessary threat used when other methods proved their failure. It is a scary work but in a different way than horror movies are. For instance, in her article "Sorry to Disturb You: An Analysis of Shock Value in Film", Elvy McCrudden states that there are two types of shock value. The first one is employed by horror movies in which they use sudden sounds and visuals to shock and scare the viewers leaving a temporary effect. In contrast, the second one is applied by disturbing movies that use gross or obnoxious content creating a lasting impression.

Therefore, *Fight Club* can be considered a disturbing film as it includes several scenes of violence, weird actions, and extreme narratives.

The explicit content of the film adaptation varies from shocking storylines to specific scenes of graphic violence. For instance, it includes several scenes of physical fights. However, the most excessive one was when the narrator fought with a blonde guy where he took it so far that he repeatedly struck his face until it became disfigured. He says: "I felt like putting a bullet between the eyes of every Panda that wouldn't screw to save its species. I wanted to open the dump valves on oil tankers and smother all the French beaches I'd never seen. I felt like destroying something beautiful" (*Fight Club* 1:36:16-1:37:06). Here the author, using a disgusting bloody violent scene, shows the danger of repressing one's instincts and feelings as it leads to letting them out in a horrible manner. Moreover, the situations where Tyler and the narrator fought or hurt each other mainly refer to self-harm caused by mental illness as they are both the same person possessing DID. For example, the narrator shoots his face in an attempt to kill his alter. The moral lessons taken from these scenes can be displayed in a nice peaceful way but it would not have the same effect as these dramatic film sequences.

Furthermore, the shock value is implemented in different forms of vandalism. Space Monkeys are given homework to destroy television antennas which symbolize the exploitation of media in the modern world; while Tyler and the narrator wreck a VW Beetle car that symbolizes 60s counterculture and freedom. "By the time *Fight Club* came out in the 90s, the youth had become the corporate bosses and they were now trying to repackage their culture onto another generation" ("30 Facts you Didn't Know about *Fight Club*" 15:06-15:19). Basically, that company went from a company that preaches about freedom to one that attempts to enslave people with consumerism. Space Monkeys pollute fountains in a way of breaking the hypocrisy of a society that cares about clean streets and fountains while being the central factor in polluting the environment. In addition, they replace the safety instructions cards found in planes with frightening but more accurate ones showing the real state of people in case of a

plane collision. They seek to destroy the layer of perfection added by materialism and embrace the flawed reality of the world. Doing that in a questionable manner is in fact the main purpose of shock value. It does not encourage the viewers to do the same things but obliges them to confront their false beliefs and behaviors.

Palahniuk accompanies these actions with a set of odd meaningless behaviors to foster shock value in his narrative; such as adding pornographic pictures to family movies, urinating in restaurant's soup, kidnapping monkeys and shaving their bodies,...etc.

Additionally, one of the main ways shock value is implemented in the movie is the rare mental illness and the shocking plot twist. Palahniuk employed Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) to craft a narrative that captivates and shocks readers. He explores aspects of human consciousness and shows the complexities of identity that individuals suffer from in the modern world. In addition, he portrays the revelation of the main character's dissociative identities as a profound plot twist, challenging traditional narrative structures and leaving the audience with a sense of disbelief and fascination.

*Fight Club* utilizes shock value as a cinematic device to increase public consciousness about the risks associated with materialism. Despite using other traditional methods of describing its negative effect on individuals, the author marks the necessity of including the character of Tylor Durden who represents the good alternative to materialistic values while showing the destructive part of it as well. The author includes several scenes of violence and destruction to serve the element of shock value. However, they are also exploited to add value to the narrative and mirror real-life issues as most of the situations depicted in the movie happen in everyday reality.

### **2.6. The Audience Response**

It is common with works that use shock value that they provoke an intense reaction from the audience. As is the case with *Fight Club*, numerous people received its deliberate expression of violence with shock and amazement. However, it generally stimulated positive feedback which enabled it to build a cult following over the years. Many viewers approved and glamorized the film for its exploration of central themes, while others found its portrayal of gender and violence unacceptable.

Audience response is crucial to understand the impact and significance of a certain work. For instance, Cooper and Dinerman in their article "Analysis of the Film Don't Be a Sucker: a Study in Communication" argue that the success of the communication process relies not only on its content and the way it is delivered but also on the audience and their interpretations of the work (30). In fact, the audience response is what gives meaning to literary and cinematic works. With no audience, messages would not be delivered; artistic styles would not be witnessed and masterpieces would not be memorable and long-lasting. Audience response is a set of reactions and interpretations influenced by several factors and presented in various forms.

Therefore, it is important to examine the audience's response to the film adaptation *Fight Club* in order to discover its value and relevance in American and worldwide culture. Ironically, the film was a box office disappointment as it earned only \$37 million in the U.S. on a \$63 million budget. However, the progress of the DVD market helped it to reach its audience later (Goldberg). Over the years, the film gained a large fanbase and left a huge impact as many people started their own fight clubs, and references from the film were used in daily life and other media. For example, various people use Tyler Durden's Quote and follow them as a life motto. Moreover, in the video game "Borderlands," there is a character named Chuck Durden; his first name is taken from the author's name Chuck Palahniuk and his last name is one of *Fight Club's* main characters' last name ("Borderlands Pop Culture References"). Thus, *Fight Club* had a considerable effect on the audience as it resonated with numerous people around the world.

However, the opinions each person holds on the film are quite different. It can be considered one of the most controversial works in history as it provoked contradictory reviews and reactions. On one hand, *Fight Club* is described as one of the greatest movies as it reflects the truth of society and addresses the crises of modern American life. It depicts the intense conformity to socially constructed values and guidelines, telling the audience an extremely similar story to their own. It grants them the chance to relate to the film, encouraging them to question matters and think in untraditional ways (Forst; Singh; Bera; Winslon).

On the other hand, *Fight Club* is seen as a provocative work that encourages violence and fails at introducing real solutions. For instance, Suzanne Clark in her article "Fight Club: Historicizing the Rhetoric of Masculinity, Violence, and Sentimentality" claims that the movie delivers dangerous messages. She argues that it reveals the anger of men toward their materialistic lives but provides no real solutions for that. Instead, It encourages violence and portrays it as an expression of male rage that grants men freedom (411,413). Moreover, Clark indicates that *Fight Club* reflects risky ideologies; it gives the wrong portrayal of both femininity and masculinity as it associates the former with a consumer-focused life and the latter with violence, fascism, and anarchy. In addition, it shows that the consumerist world is a product of a feminized culture that leads men to lose their roles and identities (412-413). Indeed, when seeing the work from a feminist lens, several areas can be criticized academically.

However, *Fight Club* received criticism from the laymen as well. For instance, Matt Miller in his review of the film "Have We Finally Grown Out of Thinking *Fight Club* Is a Good Movie?" states that "*Fight Club* is a joyless two-hour mansplaining of modern capitalist America". he makes a comparison between his young and older selves' reactions to the movie. When he was a teenager in high school, he was fond of Tyler Durden for his non-conformist ideologies, his good looks, and his masculine powers. He dreamt of resembling him because he "wanted freedom" and that was the

case with most people his age as his schoolmates started their own fight club in their parents' basement. However, as Miller grew up and became an adult; he realized that it was a bad film advocating misogyny and failing to address consumerism properly. He argues that *Fight Club* "didn't ask its viewers to think". It just showed anger and the wrong expression of it.

Despite the criticism from several reviewers, *Fight Club* remains an extremely successful movie exceeding a rating of 8.8/10 on IMDb (Internet Movie Database). That is thanks to its engaging narrative in which several themes are explored by the author Chuck Palahniuk, strong actors' performances, and the innovative direction of David Fincher. It is claimed that the film did not provide any efficient solutions but *Fight Club* is not the type of educational movie that lectures on morality and guides people to self-improvement by offering step-by-step instructions. In fact, it explores numerous societal issues calling people to pay attention to them using the literary device of shock value. However, this film adaptation is indeed extremely confusing which leads it to be easily misunderstood. Palahniuk portrays several aspects as dangers that threaten society such as the modern materialistic society, the terrorist organization of "Project Mayhem", and the lack of manhood expression. He opens all these doors and leaves the audience with the responsibility to discover which element the movie warns from and which one it encourages. Even in interviews the author attends, he does not reveal his main messages keeping the door open for interpretations.

The audience response to *Fight Club* is considerably varied. When examining reviews of the movie, it is found that several people claim that others missed the point of it thinking they are the only ones getting its message. The audience of *Fight Club* differs from passionate fans who view the film as a masterpiece and a must-watch because of its accurate reflection of American society and its focus on issues for the sake of raising awareness, to critics and haters who despise the film based on its sexist themes and encouragement of violence. This polar contradiction proves the film's

success in employing shock value and its ability to provoke deep reflection and spark intense debates.

### **2.7. Conclusion**

*Fight Club* is one of the brightest film adaptations of the late 20th century. It is characterized by its unordinary characters who reflect the terrible state of American society at that time. It highlights the author's critique of cultural and economic issues like materialism and consumerism, showing that they can be a crucial factor in mental illnesses such as depression, mania, and DID. As an outcome, violence arises in society leaving destructive and rebellious behavior. In order to deliver his message and raise awareness, the author of *Fight Club* Chuck Palahniuk employs the element of shock value which is a cinematic device used to trigger negative emotions for the sake of leaving a lasting impact on the audience. Ultimately, the audience reaction to the film is mainly positive as it got high ratings and a cult following. However, several critics highlighted its wrong portrayal of femininity and masculinity and considered the explicit violence unnecessary rather than a component of shock value.

# *General conclusion*

## General conclusion

This research work attempted to examine the cultural critique of materialism and consumerism in the film adaptation *Fight Club*.

The first Chapter aimed at setting the context of the film which is the late 20th Century American society. It sought to investigate the historical roots that led America to become a materialistic society and reveal how material possessions were propagated as reasons for happiness, well-being, and success. However, scientific studies are presented to prove the inaccuracy of this statement and present the negative outcomes of these cultural trends.

Furthermore, the first chapter highlights the relationship humans have with their societies and the conflicts that arise once their identities are disturbed by external crises; causing them to develop mental disorders such as Dissociative Identity Disorder that leads one's self to split into the host and the alter. In some cases, the alter displays violent behaviors as an outcome of frustrations caused by society.

The second chapter thoroughly examined the film adaptation *Fight Club* using psychoanalysis in order to answer the raised hypothesis of whether mental illness and violence are related to consumerism and materialism. Social issues like mental disorders and violent behaviors often appear as signs of deeper problems, and indeed, *Fight Club* utilizes these symptoms to highlight the disadvantages of consumerism in society. Palahniuk mainly employs these psychological themes to raise awareness about the risks of materialism. He links every character's mental issue to a continuous struggle with the materialistic society. In addition, he displays violence in each act of rejection of materialistic values.

We came to the conclusion that the film indicates that the relationship between mental illness and the targeted socioeconomic phenomena works both ways. Characters develop mental illnesses as a result of their identities getting disrupted due

to materialism. Then, they cope with their issues using overconsumption in some cases or total rejection and vandalism in other situations. The movie also demonstrates that the interaction between the individual and society is mutually influential. Society molds the individual's life and dictates its norms which sometimes damages one's individuality. But on the other hand, human behavior is a reflection of his/her inner self. When a person does not feel fulfilled within himself, he reflects it in his behavior within society.

The second chapter also indicates that *Fight Club* not only employs mental illness and violence so they can serve as indicators of cultural issues but also to ensure the work has a lasting impression on the audience. Adopting such social challenges in cinema while picturing them in an unordinary extreme way disturbs the viewers and serves as a cinematic device called shock value. The latter seeks to raise awareness but causes the work to provoke great controversy which is evident in the movie's audience response. People either absolutely love it, or totally hate it.

The film adaptation *Fight Club* delivers a cultural critique of late-20th-century American society. It focuses on materialism and consumerism and indicates their disadvantages by demonstrating their relationship with mental illness and violence. The reflection of social issues in cinema is a considerably broad field as several other themes are explored in *Fight Club* such as masculinity in the modern world and philosophical themes like existentialism and nihilism.

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