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FILMS AS SOCIAL MIRRORS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF FIGHT CLUB AS MAN'S SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

Loss of identity and man's search for it even if by adopting violence are the central themes of the feature film, *Fight Club*, based on Chuck Palahniuk's debut novel published by the same name in 1996. This study explores the mental state of the characters in the film as being indicative of the conflicts between the individual, the individual's perception of the self, and society's norms including its stereotypical expectations. The theme of consumerism, a malady that is known to have afflicted the American society in the age of plenty, is also explored in this study as leading to psychological fragmentation as man finds himself unfulfilled despite material achievement. The film is analyzed critically, with special attention to the themes, the method of their introduction to the audience, the development of the characters from a search for identity to self-awareness in what is likely a spiritual endeavor. The theoretical background for the study is rooted in Freud and Jung's theories and psychoanalysis.

KEYWORDS: *Fight Club*, angst, consumerism, identity, ego, id, superego

1. INTRODUCTION

There is unexpected and imperceptible exposure as viewers to many processes when we watch films. At many levels, the film and the viewer cross paths, making sense or exploring multiple possibilities of meaning both within and beyond the film or the text. Films usually have a specific ontology with which the viewers get involved. Singh (2014) mentions in his book, *Film After Jung: Post-Jungian Approaches to Film Theory*, that the necessary condition for participation of the audience in a film is for the latter to be embellished with underlying semiotic and symbolic meanings in the narrative.

Movies are a powerful mass media and in this lies their ability to impart message(s). These messages may be moral and their transmission may be sublime given that the audio and visual modes are in tandem in movies. Watching a movie can affect the audience's perspectives since the message may be abusive, educational, or informational (Paudel, 2021; Han & Yin, 2023; Trisulo & Andriano, 2024).

Fight Club (1999) (Appendix 1) is an American movie based on Chuck Palahniuk's debut novel published by the same name in 1996, a close run of an insomniac office worker's struggle with sleeplessness. David Fincher directed the movie and the lead has Edward Norton in the role of the

unnamed narrator and protagonist named Jack, Helen Bonham Carter as Marla Singer the only female member in the cast, and Brad Pitt as the mysterious, devil-may-care soap maker Tyler, the super-ego of Jack. Paralinguistic features are employed masterfully in dialogue delivery in the movie with pauses, interruptions, and tone changes revealing the underlying conflicts and tensions imposed by social norms (Cruz Fernández, 2025; Ruddell, 2007; González, 2025; Hammack & Manago, 2025). The film received several critical reviews, an Oscar nomination, and an IMDb rating of 8.8 out of 10 based on 2.6 million audience inputs. The rationale for selecting this movie lies in its quest for the self, almost symptomatic of the angst of GenX, manifested in annihilistic dialogue and acts.

The plot revolves around Jack who is trying to fill the gap created by his inability to define himself by giving in to consumerism. Environments in the movie typically depict areas where people have lived for a considerable amount of time (O'Keeffe, 2024) or are dimly lit that typify the inner state of the characters. In so doing, Freudian concepts of reflection, masculinity, and lost identity are identifiable. Tyler's alter ego, Jack's separation, and the unconscious mind trip, are also symptomatic of the same characteristics. These are demonstrated pictorially in Figure 1.

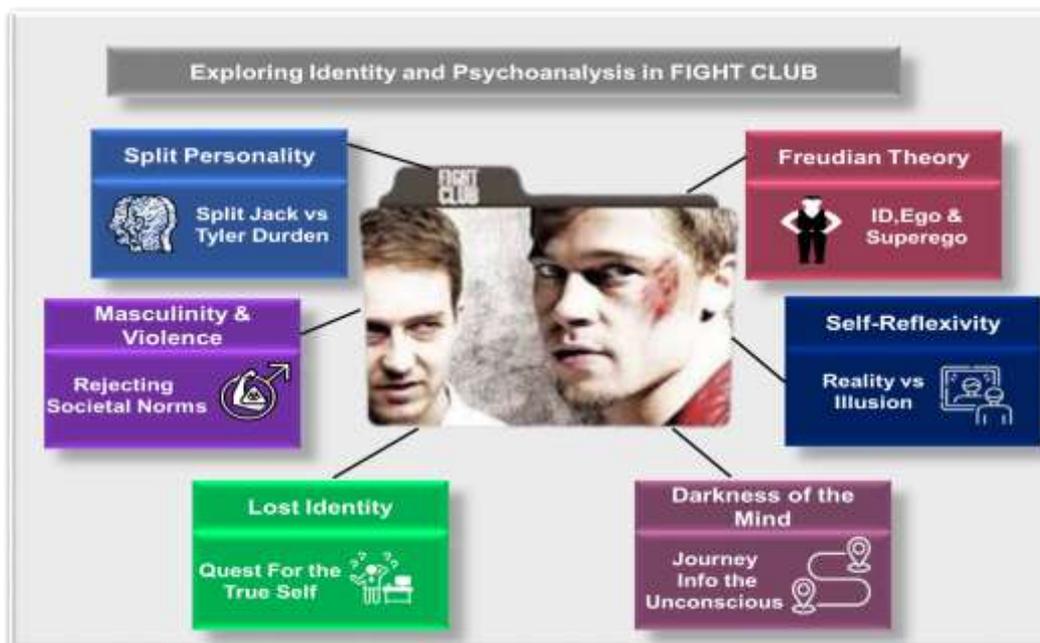


Figure 1: Key psychological and identity themes in Fight Club through Jack and Tyler's personality issues and inner conflict

It goes to the credit of the powerful cinematography and script of the movie that the audience identifies with the protagonist's struggle for the search of the self. Frequently, the hero and the viewer share the

stage, at other times, the latter is lost in the two personas of the protagonist alternating between the narration of his mental processes and his actions, revealing now the self, now the alter ego. Being a

psychological drama, it is easy to identify Jungian psychoanalytic events in the tortuous journey of Tyler in *Fight Club*: "Personality dissociation becomes problematic when the patient connects himself or herself with the character to the point where they no longer know themselves." (Jung, 1972, p. 157) Further analysis reveals how self-reflexivity is a helpful method as used in this film to emphasize the descriptions and impressions that denote the nature of human existence. On the other hand, Singh's (2014) analysis can help us to identify how personas will harm man's search for the self. This study, however, shows that the audience can go beyond the restrictions set up by personas and the subconscious. The application of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical principles can lead to a better vision of *Fight Club*, as we will identify the differences between the ego and the id and how the self and desire come into conflict. Finally, this study will show how the split personality of the protagonist creates the act of violence as a means towards self-discovery and why he uses strength as a means of regaining his lost uniqueness.

In this theoretical backdrop, the study answers the following research questions:

1. Do we accept violence as a path of spirituality?
2. What solutions do the exploration of the struggle for identity, materialism, repression, and psychological disintegration manifested in split personalities in the movie suggest for the audience?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Cisney (2019) explains Tyler's dissatisfaction with being raised by women in the all-male self-help group that emphasizes physical domination. The *Fight Club*'s

homoerotic appreciation of men demonstrates the film's upholding of patriarchal masculinity and violence as forms of power. In a male dominated cast, the film features minimal female representation in Marla Singer, who challenges traditional gender norms with her complex character that transcends stereotypical portrayals of femininity. In contrast, Tyler complicates the oversimplified notions of heroism by embodying both hyper-masculine aggression and a fractured psyche going through a breakdown. Without playing the stereotypically feminine role, Marla acts as a catalyst in the narrator's quest for selfhood. In the end, the movie presents a complex viewpoint on violence against women.

The *Fight Club* in the movie typically attracts working-class men, business people, truckers, waiters, and professionals who want to embrace violence and express their hyper masculine potential. Tyler encourages these individuals to fight by starting several fight clubs around the United States. The narrator emphasizes secrecy and never-ending fighting by stating the fundamental rules: "You do not talk about *Fight Club*." Men's need to express their repressed urges for assertiveness and authority is reflected in the rising enrolment. Stressed males avoid vulnerability and choose competition over connection, which reinforces their hypermasculinity. As a result, Tyler encourages men to fight viciously, emulating the qualities of a "real man" by avoiding compassion (Sasan, Kumar, & Singh, 2026). Jack's dissociation is depicted in Figure 2, which shows how his personality splits into several personalities, reflecting internal psychological turmoil and identity issues.

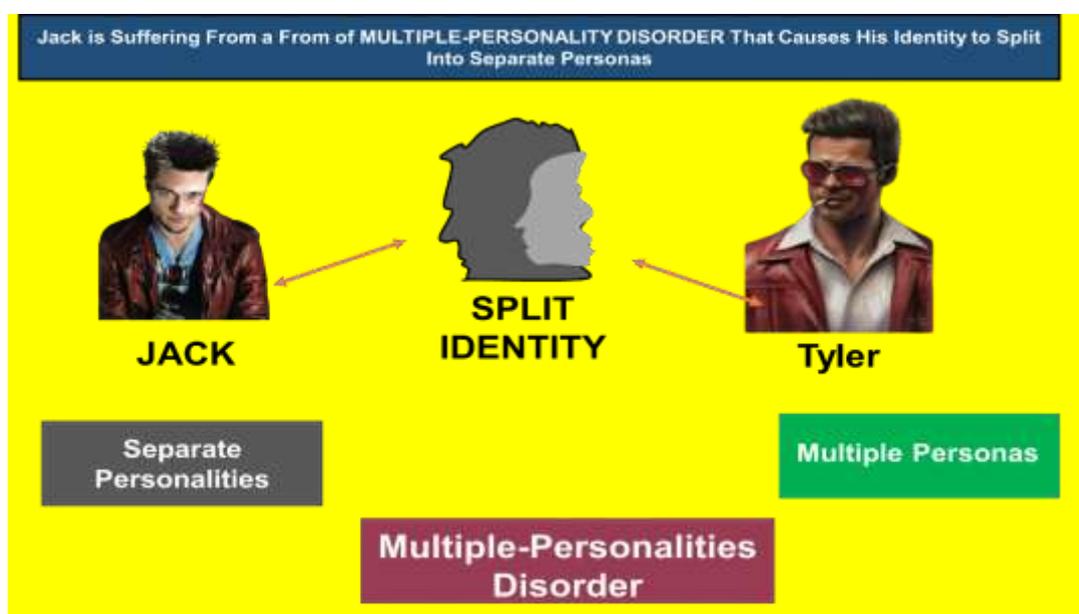


Figure 2: Jack's split identity illustrates multiple-personality disorder

In *Fight Club*, we learn that the protagonist, Jack, suffers from a type of personality disorder that divides him into at least two identities. The audiences might not be aware of this disorder because Jack is the unknown narrator of the film and he takes us to see the film through the conflict in his mind. He narrates his journey through the mind and actions of himself and his alter ego, Tyler. *Fight Club* represents darkness as one of the self-reflexive elements that puts us inside the narrator's head, making the film a representation of what is in our heads. In his *Metacinema: A Modern Necessity*, Siska (1979) identifies self-reflexivity as one of the cinematic aspects in the modernist films, which he terms "consciousness turning back on itself" (285). Siska (1979) discusses that reflexive elements in modernist cinema bring form to the mind. He also states that reflexive techniques draw attention to the formal qualities of the film by showing the process of film production and presentation (286). Therefore, we see David Fincher using this technique as a way of taking his audiences on a journey that happens in the mind. In fact, most of the scenes in this movie are shot in darkness that could be explained as part of making the audiences aware of what they are watching is a kind of mental process enacted in a place where the physical light does not reach.

Fincher uses several self-reflexive scenes in the film, particularly in two instances. First, there is the scene where Tyler is employed as a projectionist. This is the film within a film technique where Tyler speaks to the audience explaining the white circle signifying a reel change forcing the audience to acknowledge that they are watching a film. A film itself is an illusion or a series of images. Similarly, humans live in a world of images or illusions, and this concept is epitomized during the film watching process as illustrated by Fincher's self-reflexive scenes.

The second instance of self-reflexivity is when Tyler speaks directly to the audience. His anger is evident in the dialogue, "Don't fuck with us." Such expression of frustration immediately gets the audience to identify with the character. Unable to return to the state of the ideal self, the individual feels trapped, causing greater frustration and anger in a thus unending cycle. Man is imprisoned by the dictates of society and faced with the existential dilemma with the realization that nothing carries with it any inherent meaning other than what mere words can express. I believe that Fincher uses the technique of self-reflexivity to highlight the imageries and impressions that characterize the nature of human existence.

Fight Club portrays that both Jack and Tyler are personas in the same body albeit disconnected from

each other: When the narrator is dormant, the 'other' i.e. Tyler is active. The split of the personality can be seen through Jung's mechanism of documentation with persona which Singh (2014) calls the appearance from persona strengthening into route of uniqueness (154). What we see in this film represents Jung's characteristic formation of selfhood as a consequence of doubling. It goes with Singh's (2014) discussion of what Lacan suggested: "the twin of interior selfhood can be categorized by an internal confirming ego-identity that acts as an independent arranging occurrence" (155). The film shows that Tyler, as alter ego, is taking the control of Jack's body as the center of consciousness. Singh (2014) refers in his book to David Tracey who said, "While the Self is the heart of the entire mind, conscious and unconscious, the ego is the core of consciousness and the focal point of our own identity" (155). This could be the interpretation of why Tyler is taking the control of Jack's body.

For more than half the length of the film, Jack does not know that he and Tyler are dissociated personalities in the same body. Jack is unable to identify himself because of the impact of his multiple personas. This situation can be interpreted by Singh's (2014) reference to Jung's point that, "Personality dissociation becomes problematic when the patient connects himself or herself with the character to the point where they no longer know themselves." (p. 157). This means that personas will harm the search for the self (there already being more than one) and this is what we see in the film. The narrator takes the viewer to live the conflict in his mind as he looks for his lost identity. As mentioned by Singh (2014), identification is a stronger aspect than personality. Therefore, we see the narrator black out after his conversation with Tyler in the scene toward the conclusion of the film where he is in the hotel room and Tyler is explaining to him that they are one dissociated personality. Singh (2014) explains, "According to Jungian theory, the shadow archetype—a naive and pernicious aspect of awareness is so close to ego-identity that it is impossible to consciously recognize the incorrect affiliation—it is infused into the wicked personalities." (157). Thus, *Fight Club* gives the viewers a chance to go beyond the restrictions set up by personas and subconscious in order to understand the film. Figure 3 shows the division of Jack's personality into an ego and an id, representing internal struggle brought on by societal pressure, emotional repression, and psychological collapse. Table 1 highlights how the film's identification and psychological themes are driven by the characteristics of the main characters, their roles, disputes, and related Freudian or Jungian psychological notions.

Table 1: Psychological Profiles of Key Characters in Fight Club (1999)

Character	Actor	Role / Persona	Key Traits & Conflicts	Psychological Concept (Freud/Jung)
Jack (The Narrator)	Edward Norton	Protagonist / Narrator	Insomnia, consumerism, identity crisis	Ego, Superego conflict, dissociation
Tyler Durden	Brad Pitt	Alter Ego / Super-Ego	Masculine, rebellious, violent, confident	Id, shadow archetype, alter ego
Marla Singer	Helena Bonham Carter	Catalyst / Love Interest	Complex femininity, challenges norms	Projection, desire conflict, unconscious

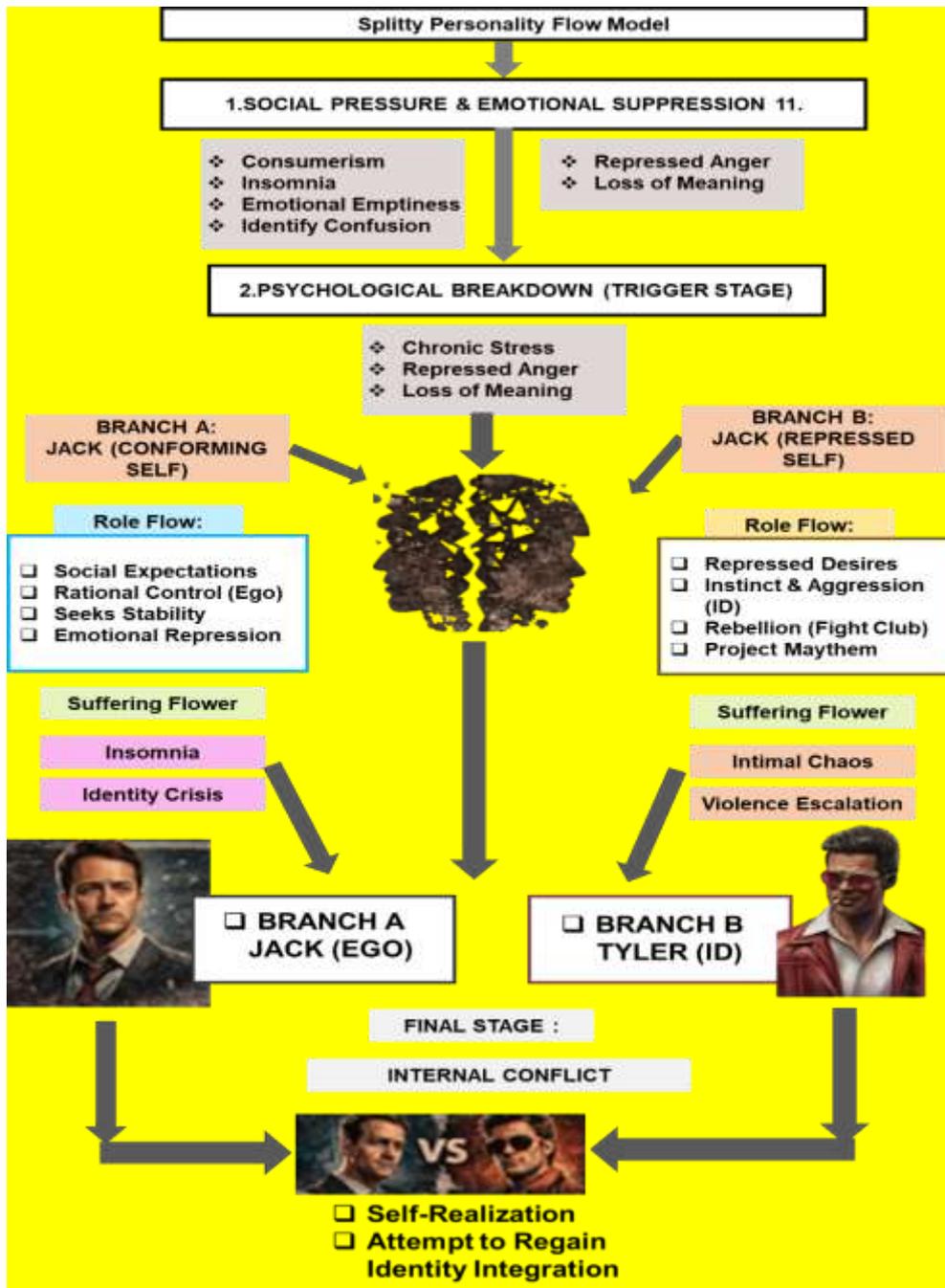


Figure 3: Split Personality Flow Model illustrating the psychological divergence of Jack into Ego and Id

One of the major messages in the film *Fight Club* is that defining yourself according to your appearance and being a slave to conformity and normalcy is problematic for the human psyche. Therefore, we see

Jack spending a great deal of time early in the movie explaining how so much of his identity is caught up in what he buys and wears. He is portrayed as a slave to his social status and what media tells him is normal

and what one should be working towards. *The movie* also shows that power seems to be connected with masculinity.

Based on what we see in the movie, in order to be masculine, you need to reject the social norms, to not follow the order and rules in the society, and to live a life based on action instead of appearance and normalcy. Therefore, the appearance of normalcy in Jack's persona as a slave to the social roles creates a problem in his psyche. The film starts with the portrayal of Jack who reaches a moment in his life when his personality dissociation becomes problematic for him with a persona that society has given him and he is no longer able to identify himself. Therefore, the salient theme of the film gives us, as viewers, a chance to go beyond the restrictions set up by Jack's persona and the subconscious.

His alter ego, Tyler represents everything that is masculine and sexual to Jack. We can see in the film that Tyler becomes a fetish for Jack to exercise his hidden sexual desires and to overcome his fears of death. In this situation, allowing Tyler, Jack's other persona to present itself, Jack is finding a way to appease his erotic life and express his hidden desires. Therefore, the role of Tyler in this film can help the viewers to identify and face what is in Jack's subconscious. The question is, how?

Fight Club takes the audiences to a situation that is

not coincidental when Jack becomes Tyler, who is a "most interesting single-serving friend." He feels much more powerful and satisfied with his masculinity and his life. According to the film, Tyler represents the perfect persona in Jack's subconscious mind as he follows nothing the media or society forces on him. He takes what he wants when he wants it. At the beginning of the film, Jack is shown living a life that is based on the routines of normalcy as he goes to work, exercises, and is a slave to his daily schedule. As a narrator of the film, Jack tells the audience that he is a "slave to the IKEA nesting instinct", and that is what makes him happy. He wears clothes and presents himself to conform to societal norms. He asks himself, "What kind of dining set defines me as a person?" in a way that shows the viewer that he has lost his identity. His appearance becomes the expression of his identity, the only one he has or one that explains who he is or what he does with his life. Jack begins to have great difficulty sleeping because of his tendency to allow his other psyche and hidden desires to manifest themselves. This can be understood by applying Freudian theory to his situation as depicted in Table 2 which illustrates how films encourage viewers to reflect on their own psychological states and self-discovery by highlighting major themes, illustrative moments, and their Freudian or Jungian interpretations.

Table 2: Psychoanalytic Interpretations of major themes in *Fight Club* (1999)

Theme / Concept	Example Scene / Moment	Psychoanalytic Interpretation (Freud / Jung)	Impact on Audience / Self-Discovery
Identity Crisis / Split Personality	Jack realizes Tyler is the same person	Persona vs Self; dissociation; shadow archetype (Jung)	Audience experiences inner conflict and self-reflection
Consumerism / Materialism	Jack obsessed with IKEA furniture	Superego enforcing societal norms; ego trapped in routine (Freud)	Critique of societal pressures and false identity
Masculinity & Violence	Fight Club Underground fights	Repressed desires expressed through ID; physical assertion of self	Explores hyper-masculinity and reclaiming identity
Desire & Sexuality	Jack's attraction to Marla / fantasy sequences	ID seeking gratification; ego mediates moral/social constraints	Illustrates internal conflict between desire and repression
Self-Reflexivity / Mind Awareness	Tyler projectionist scene / addresses audience	Consciousness turning back on itself; mind reflection (Siska, Singh)	Encourages viewers to question reality and perception

According to Rivkin and Ryan (2004), Freud believed that social attention was divided into three components: the ego, id, and superego (p. 391), each of which fulfilled a unique but critical function for both the person and society. They can easily be seen as features of intra-psycho conflict, or competing drives. The id represents the passions of a person, while the ego represents reason. In describing the ego, Freud writes: "Consciousness is tied to the ego; the ego regulates the approaches to mobility... [and] the repressions, by which it is sought to exclude certain patterns in the mind." (Freud, 1961, p. 17). The final element, the superego, attempts to control

the id (pleasure-seeking) through rules. These are elements which Freud believed controlled human behaviors. Life, then, is a continuous struggle between the id and the superego, mediated by the ego. Accordingly, this conflict generally culminates in an individual repressing the core human desires that comprise the id (Rivkin & Ryan, 2004, p. 391). According to Freud's paradigm, the ego (reason) mediates the ongoing conflict between the id (desire) and the superego (morality), which determines human conduct. Repression of instinctive drives is frequently the result of this internal battle, represented in Table 3.

Table 4: Freud's Structural Model of the Mind and Intra-Psychic Conflict

Component	Core Function	Key Characteristics	Role in Intra-Psychic Conflict	Supporting Source
Id	Represents instinctual drives and passions	Operates on pleasure principle; seeks immediate gratification	Creates basic desires and impulses that demand satisfaction	Rivkin & Ryan (391)
Ego	Represents reason and conscious control	Attached to consciousness; regulates behavior; performs repression	Mediates between id and superego; manages internal conflict	Freud (17)
Superego	Represents moral rules and societal standards	Imposes restrictions; enforces ideals and norms	Attempts to control the pleasure-seeking id	Rivkin & Ryan (391)

Several scenes in the *Fight Club* represent the Freudian argument about the conflict in the mind that will be treated in this study. First, we see how Jack is desperate for sleep and he suffers due to this. The sleeplessness that he complains about could be a signal of the conflict within the self. Jack seems to have social conflict in his daily routines, as rules and authorities, as described by Freud, prevent him from satisfying his (selfish) desire. Therefore, Jack finds his comfort, a way to sleep by following the doctor's recommendation to visit people in the support groups to understand what 'real' pain is. It is a process intended for him to know himself better.

Fight Club shows that Jack has another conflict that is causing his psychological disintegration. One of the best examples that represent this is the desire conflict in the relationship between Jack and Marla Singer. Jack is confused by the fake condition of Marla when she joins the support group with Jack. It may be that he is struggling with his desire to have sex with her, and therefore, the ability to cry and sleep elude him. Fear of intimacy while also wanting it may be creating a conflict of desires in him. The existence of Marla creates sexual differences in the group, and Jack is back in the grip of conflict.

Another scene in the movie represents Freud's discussion of the accidental eternal. Jack's dream in which he has sex with Marla can be seen as a representation of the conflict stretching into his sleep state. Freud (2001) mentions, "An objection may perhaps be raised in dispute of the ideas that dreams are unable to represent logical relations" (p. 822). It could be argued that Jack's desires are portrayed by his dream that results in his incomplete repression of his anxiety that cannot be expressed in his social life.

These conflicts make Jack want to be a different person, more like Tyler, his alter ego. His inability to sleep makes him want to do anything to change his meaningless life. His life has no excitement or enjoyment and no sexual satisfaction and is essentially based on how society determines individual's behavior by a system of taboos and appreciation. According to the film, Jack's lifestyle can be seen as stereotypically feminized, which is an

opposite representation of masculinity. Tyler changes the ways in which Jack is repressed and allows him to live a more sexualized lifestyle by allowing his fantasies to become a reality when he is acting as Tyler. In the bar scene, after Jack first meets Tyler, he tells him that humans should "never be complete, stop being perfect, let's evolve." Jack wants to change himself into Tyler, because Tyler represents everything that Jack is not, and that he subconsciously seeks to be.

As Jack's personality splits, we see him become Tyler, constantly having sex with Marla. In addition, he dresses much more freely. He asserts himself as a sexual being and that gratifies him. He feels in control of everyone whom he comes in contact with on a daily basis. He feels empowered to give orders and bosses everyone around and does not take orders from anybody. The persona of Tyler allows Jack to be spontaneous. The lifestyle of Tyler's persona helps Jack to live out all his hidden desires that he was previously too scared to.

Fight Club shows us Jack's departure from social norms by taking control through masculine violence, which represents men in fight clubs as powerful versions of the men in the support groups that Jack has been to. Unlike the latter who cry and cling to one another, the former spend their time in action, producing their own reality. The situation of Jack's psyche represents Singh's (2014) discussion of the double consciousness and why one experiences his/her two-ness. Singh (2014) states, "it is maintained by a society that rigorously enforces its political boundaries and discriminates, frequently in an unpleasant manner, and lives in the reality of unreconciled belonging/otherness" the aspect of "looking at oneself through the eyes of others." (p. 156). Singh's (2014) argument here may describe the situation of Jack's psyche that has been developed to a stage where he loses his identity and shifts to his ego-identity. This represents Tyler's persona that makes Jack fetishize himself to live out his wildest fantasies and suppressed desires, which is one of the major messages of *Fight Club*. However, one may ask why would individuals in this film use fierceness as a means of retrieval of the lost the uniqueness?

Fight Club, as is evident in the name, represents Fight Club or the Project Mayhem that is concerned with the construction of the self. The project starts with the inner fight between Jack and Tyler where Tyler challenges the system that Jack lives in by asking him to break the normalcy of his life. Tyler asks Jack, "how much can you know about yourself if you have never been in a fight?" and explains, "I do not want to die without any scars". Both Jack and Tyler portray challenges to the normed perceptions of masculinity through scars on their faces which is a symbol of their masculinity. Hurting (2011) discusses the use of violence for self-discovery as represented in *Fight Club*. Hurting states that, Tyler, as the alter-ego of Jack, becomes the leader and hero of the Project Mayhem and leads his followers. He strives for a better life and, as a result, obtains status and respect. According to Hurting, "this gives him a sense of identity because his status defines him in the eyes of the others, and coupled with the fact that he is a spokesperson for violence, it (in a sense) makes him a truly masculine male." (19). It could be argued that Jack wants to escape his inner struggle between his split identities, his feminine identity and his unconscious longing for a male identity that he seeks and is identified by his unconscious ego, Tyler.

Hurting mentions that, "With the development of Tyler, and later Fight Club and Project Mayhem, Jack is able to take up both masculine and feminine postures, allowing himself to play the role of victim while simultaneously maintaining his virility." (Quoted in Hurting, 2011). Jack's use of violent behavior to express his disappointment with society has nothing to do with the political functions within the society. Instead, his masculine violence is supported by many other individuals who also have lost their identities. Their use of violence is an act of regaining an identity that has been there in their subconscious, but is veritably absent until supported by the Project Mayhem. There is no doubt that fighting in the film is not portrayed as a solution to the character's problems, however, it is more like a means to reaching a spiritual reawakening. In contrast to this view of the body, *Fight Club* encourages self-destructive behaviors to possess a body that incorporates violence into daily existence (Karakasis & de Lera, 2022; Ekaputri & Fanani, 2022; Rafique et al., 2022).

Fight Club portrays what is happening in the human mind. Its portrayal of the act of violence as a means to reach a spiritual reawakening does not

suggest that one accept the act of masculine violence. There are many ways of communicating dissatisfaction that might be informally recognized and regularized, but violence is certainly not one of them. The fight between Jack's super ego and id represents both his personal struggle and a larger struggle for masculinity in Western culture. This film can be seen as a context that presents a critique of Western society that allows freedom to the individual to express oneself through violence. *Fight Club* raises a pertinent question for the audience: Is western society responsible for violence? Or are there individual factors that create this type of behaviour? At least the film does not venture an answer. However, going by the recurrent themes as reflected in the dialogue, one can identify a certain shift from identity to self-reflection, perhaps a sign of man's growth through suffering.

From this perspective, *Fight Club* can be seen as an interesting journey that allows viewers to experience the processes of the mind. The director of the film uses several self-reflective techniques that assist us to realize how the images and illusions in the film represent the nature of human existence. It throws open the possibility for the viewers to venture beyond the boundaries erected by personas and subconscious, as also described by Singh (2014). In addition, Freud's psychoanalytical principles can assist the reader to understand the difference between the ego and the id for a better appreciation of the movie. What can be said with some degree of certainty is that the conflicts in the mind tell upon the personality's integrity by splitting it into two or more selves.

3. CONCLUSION

The film shows that the split personality of the protagonist leads him to violence that is for him at least, a technique of self-discovery. Both Jack and other male individuals in the film use violence as a means of regaining their lost identities. The fight between Jack's super ego and id represents both his personal struggle and suggests a larger struggle for masculinity in Western culture. *Fight Club* thus presents a critique of the Western society that thinks of masculine violence as a path for spiritual attainment. At the end, the film leaves the audience with the suggestion that there are many ways of communicating annoyance that might be socially acceptable, but violence is certainly not one of them.

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Appendix 1: Key Information and Core Elements of the Film *Fight Club* (1999)

Aspect	Description
Title	<i>Fight Club</i>
Director	David Fincher
Release Year	1999
Genre	Psychological Drama / Thriller
Based On	Novel by Chuck Palahniuk (1996)
Main Character	The Narrator (Jack)
Alter Ego	Tyler Durden
Central Theme	Identity crisis and split personality
Psychological Concept	Ego, Id, Superego conflict (Freudian theory)
Major Themes	Consumerism, masculinity, rebellion, alienation
Climax	Revelation that Tyler and Jack are the same person
Resolution	Attempt to destroy the alter ego and regain identity control