

POSTMODERN VIEW OF EXISTENTIAL CRISIS IN CHUCK PALAHNIUK'S *FIGHT CLUB*

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**ABSTRACT**

Postmodernism, consumer culture, and existentialism converge to shape contemporary cultural paradigms, influencing individual identities and societal values. This paper explores the portrayal of existential crisis in *Fight Club* within the context of these intersecting ideologies. Postmodernism characterized by skepticism towards overarching narratives. Consumer culture, pervasive in late capitalism, profoundly influences self-perception and fulfillment, while existentialism prompts individuals to confront questions of authenticity and purpose in a commodified world. Through literature review and textual analysis, this paper examines how the novel articulates the existential crisis induced by consumerist ideology. The introduction contextualizes existential crisis and its significance in contemporary discourse. The literature review surveys existing research on consumer culture and existentialism in media representations. Employing textual analysis, the paper investigates key themes related to existential crisis. Findings reveal the complexities of consumerist ideology and its impact on personal identity. The paper argues that the postmodernist view of the narrative in the novel unravels the rejection and eventual acceptance of existential crisis in the postmodern era.

**KEYWORDS:** *Postmodernism, consumer culture, Existentialism, Identity and Narratives.*

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

From a postmodernist perspective, existential consumer theory contends that “the pursuit of meaning and the construction of an idealized concept of existence through existential consumption diverge from conventional normative and ethical paradigms” (Nedelcu 3). This deviation stems from the recognition that individuals independently navigate the complex interplay between external socio-cultural influences and personal inclinations. Consumption is oriented towards the pursuit of material possessions and lifestyle enhancements rather than contemplation of existential purpose or improvement of overall well-being. Consequently, modern existence portrays individuals as preoccupied with neither questioning nor prioritizing the pursuit of meaningful existence (Anker 8). In this societal context, time emerges as a significant concern for individuals, as heightened consumption often necessitates prolonged periods of employment. The escalation in consumption correlates with intensified work commitments, leading to exhaustion and mental strain. This cycle of heightened consumption and increased labor results in physical and psychological fatigue, contributing to deterioration of existential quality.

Examining the significance of consumption in existentialism in the realm of the novel holds significant relevance due to its exploration of contemporary cultural paradigms and societal values, within the context of postmodernism. *Fight Club* offers a compelling narrative that delves into the complexities of existentialism, deeply intertwined in modern society (Gold 18). By dissecting the themes of identity, authenticity, and purpose, the postmodern lens to scrutinize the existential crisis induced by consumerist ideology becomes relevant for the speculation of the novel. Moreover, *Fight Club* challenges conventional

notions of freedom and control, challenging the problematic ways in which consumer culture shapes individual identities and societal norms in the postmodern era (Gold 21). The purpose of this paper is to critically analyze the portrayal of existential crisis in *Fight Club* and its implications for contemporary culture, within the broader context of postmodernism. Through a comprehensive literature review and textual analysis, the paper seeks to elucidate how the novel navigates the dialectical tensions inherent in consumerist ideology within a postmodern framework. Specifically, the objectives of the paper are to contextualize the significance of nihilism in contemporary discourse within a postmodern context, survey existing research on consumer culture and existentialism in media representations within postmodernism, and unpack key themes related to existentialist dimensions within the novel from a postmodern perspective. Ultimately, the paper aims to offer insights into the ways in which *Fight Club* challenges prevailing ideologies and prompts viewers to reconsider their relationship with consumer culture within the context of postmodernism.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The speculation of an artistic work inexorably involves the examination of existing empirical literature on the work. Gold (16) argues that *Fight Club* explores the pervasive dissociative modes of experience fostered by contemporary technological society, particularly through technology and rapid mobility. This is illustrated through the fact that the protagonist's work involves significant traveling, during which he creates his alter-ego, Tyler Durden. He further contends that the narrative of the novel illustrates the ways in which these influences contribute to interpersonal disconnectedness and fragmented sense of self, both in normative and pathological forms of dissociation (Gold 13). Östberg (18) explores the character dynamics in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, focusing on the protagonist's split personality. He further argues that the protagonist is portrayed as an anti-hero rather than a villain, embodying qualities that blur the line between morality and immorality (Östberg 4). These works suggest that existing analyses of the novel explore themes related to dissociative experiences in modern society and the portrayal of the protagonist as an anti-hero. Gold's study indicates an emphasis on understanding how societal factors contribute to dissociation, whereas Östberg's research focuses on the ethical complexity surrounding the protagonist's behavior and persona. Collectively, they underscore the comprehensive investigation of social and psychological motifs embedded within the narrative. In *Fight Club: A Comparative Analysis of the Novel and the film*, Ferklová (10-15) analyzes *Fight Club* in both its novel and film forms, comparing them. For the novel, the author focuses on the narrator's unreliable narration, exploring how it fosters empathy while disavowing radical ideas. The author further applies Bordwell's theory to identify narrative gaps and observes how metafictional elements discourage trust in the narrative.

Existentialism, rooted in the philosophies of thinkers like Søren Kierkegaard and Jean-Paul Sartre, explores the individual's freedom, responsibility and search for meaning in an inherently meaningless world (Oaklander 19). Culture of consuming commodities, a hallmark of contemporary capitalist societies, centers on the acquisition of goods and services as a means of self-identity and fulfillment, often perpetuating materialism and commodification (Best and Kelner 115). Postmodernism, emerging in the latter half of the 20th century, challenges traditional notions of truth, identity, and reality, emphasizing skepticism towards grand narratives and embracing cultural relativism and pastiche (Jameson 146). In contemporary society, the convergence of existentialism and postmodernism prompts speculation on their interplay and influence on individual and collective experiences. Existentialism's emphasis on authenticity and the quest for meaning intersects with individual's need to define themselves through consumption choices in a world characterized by material abundance and cultural diversity. However, the commodification of identity and the proliferation of consumer choices can lead to existential alienation, as individuals grapple with the dissonance between their authentic selves and their constructed personas shaped by consumer culture. Furthermore, postmodernism complicates this relationship by blurring the boundaries between reality and simulation, challenging the authenticity of consumer experiences and identities. The postmodern condition, characterized by fragmentation and hyper reality, undermines the coherence of selfhood and truth, exacerbating existential anxieties and cultural disorientation (Harvey 281). In this context, purchasing behavior becomes a means of navigating the fluid and uncertain terrain of postmodern existence, offering temporary fixes to existential dilemmas.

through consumption-driven identity construction. The intertwined forces of existentialism and postmodernism shape contemporary subjectivities and cultural dynamics, raising questions about the nature of authenticity, agency, and meaning in an age dominated by consumer capitalism and cultural relativism.

In *Fight Club*, Chuck Palahniuk explores a myriad of themes and concepts that resonate deeply with contemporary society. One prominent theme is the critique of consumer culture and its impact on individual identity. The novel vividly portrays the protagonist's disillusionment with materialism and his search for authenticity amidst the superficiality of consumer society. Through the formation of Fight Club, the author examines how violence becomes a cathartic response to the dehumanizing forces of capitalism (Theresa and Amudha 912). Related to this critique of modern culture is the exploration of masculinity and its crisis in modern society. *Fight Club* delves into the complexities of male identity and the struggle to define oneself in a world that imposes narrow stereotypes of masculinity. The formation of Fight Club serves as a manifestation of this crisis, providing men with a sense of empowerment and belonging in a society that often emasculates them. Palahniuk delves into the dark underbelly of male camaraderie, exposing the toxic behaviors and destructive tendencies that arise from unchecked masculinity. Moreover, the novel grapples with the theme of existentialism and the search for meaning in a world devoid of inherent purpose. The protagonist's existential crisis drives him to seek out radical experiences and confront his own mortality (Theresa and Amudha 911). Through the character of Tyler Durden, Palahniuk presents a nihilistic philosophy that challenges conventional notions of morality and meaning. The novel forces readers to confront existential questions about the nature of existence, free will, and the pursuit of authenticity in an absurd and chaotic world. Additionally, *Fight Club* explores the theme of identity and the fluidity of self-conception. The protagonist's journey towards self-discovery is marked by a series of identity transformations and revelations. As he grapples with the duality of his own nature, Palahniuk blurs the lines between reality and illusion, inviting readers to question the stability of their own identities. Through the unraveling of the protagonist's psyche, the novel exposes the fragility of identity and the existential angst that accompanies the search for selfhood. *Fight Club* engages with a rich tapestry of themes and concepts that resonate with contemporary audiences. From its critique of consumer culture and exploration of masculinity to its existential inquiry into the nature of identity, Palahniuk's novel offers a provocative and thought-provoking commentary on the human condition in the modern world.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in this study involves a comprehensive textual analysis of *Fight Club* and related literature, supplemented by an examination of critical essays and academic articles. Given the theoretical nature of the paper and its focus on existential crisis in *Fight Club*, this approach is deemed appropriate for delving into the intricate themes and concepts explored in the novel. The textual analysis of the novel involves a close reading of the text to identify key themes, character dynamics, and narrative strategies employed by Chuck Palahniuk. By dissecting the novel and scrutinizing its linguistic nuances, symbolism, and narrative techniques, this approach aims to uncover underlying messages pertaining to existentialism and consumer culture. Additionally, the examination of critical essays and academic articles provides valuable insights and scholarly perspectives on the themes addressed in *Fight Club*. Drawing upon existing scholarship allows for a deeper understanding of the theoretical frameworks and discourses surrounding existentialism and postmodernism, thereby enriching the analysis of the text. By closely analyzing pivotal moments in the narrative, such as the formation of Fight Club and the protagonist's interactions with Tyler Durden, this approach elucidates how existentialist themes are manifested and interrogated within the storyline. Moreover, comparing and contrasting the portrayal of these themes enables a nuanced exploration of their significance and implications within the context of contemporary culture. This methodology combines textual analysis, critical engagement with existing scholarship, and interpretation of key scenes to offer a comprehensive examination of existential crisis in *Fight Club*. By employing a multi-faceted approach, this study seeks to illuminate the complex interplay between individual identity, societal values, and consumerist ideology depicted in Palahniuk's seminal work.

#### 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the novel as a postmodern text reveals its effectiveness in challenging hegemonic processes while also highlighting potential areas of reinforcement. Through its use of first-person narrative and intertextuality, *Fight Club* aligns with characteristics commonly associated with postmodern texts (McClure and McClure 81-84). The subversion of traditional narrative styles underscores its status as an exemplary postmodern work. This is illustrated through the philosophical emphasis of character progression of the protagonist rather than the plot being guided through events (Therese and Amutha 914). Thematically, the novel critiques consumer culture, corporate control, and materialistic identity, echoing concerns often addressed by postmodern theorists (Best and Kellner 9; Jameson, 39). The demonstration of this phenomenon happens when the protagonist burns down the condo, which he decorated through purchasing decorative items, inherent to modern existence. This further constitutes an existential crisis for the protagonist. Identity emerges as a central theme in the text, mirroring the broader existential crisis prevalent in postmodern society. Characters like Jack and Tyler grapple with questions of self-definition in a fragmented world devoid of traditional values or clear purpose. The novel suggests that identity is a fluid construct shaped by social expectations and consumerist pressures. Jack's observation that "a man isn't the same during 'Fight Club' as he is outside of Fight Club" underscores the malleability of identity in contemporary culture (Palahniuk 115). The malleability is further reinforced when the members of the club hardly recognize each other outside the club, because the first rule is to not talk about 'Fight Club' (Palahniuk 118). The novel articulates the impact of consumer culture on the characters' lives, depicting them as alienated and disenfranchised individuals. Marla Singer, in particular, embodies the consequences of living in an indifferent society. She fakes cancer to be a part of a focus group. Although the protagonist hates her, his alter-ego admires the personality, and develops an intimate relationship with her (Palahniuk 39). Her reliance on stealing and support groups reflects the pervasive sense of disconnection fostered by modern existence. However, the novel also offers glimpses of resistance against this existential malaise. Jack's embrace of Marla and the feminine represents a rejection of conventional gender norms perpetuated by consumer culture (Palahniuk 28). The novel serves as a potent critique of postmodern society, interrogating the complexities of identity and the corrosive influence of capitalist consumption on individual lives. The novel sets a narrative articulating critiques against prevailing narratives, supporting the postmodern status quo, and considers alternative modes of existence amidst the chaos of contemporary existence.

The utilization of parody in the novel serves as a central rhetorical technique, and its narrative subverts the hegemonic assumptions pervasive in contemporary consumer culture. This parodic approach demystifies the processes inherent in modern society, exposing them to critical examination. Indeed, the ability to install and subvert these processes in a paradigmatic form lies at the core of postmodernism as a critical theory. Without this dual process of installation and subversion, postmodern texts risk reinforcing existing hegemonic assumptions rather than challenging them, undermining their critical value. On the one hand, the protagonist continues on his journey to resolve his existential crisis by rebelling against postmodernism. On the other hand, he kills his alter-ego in the end, which symbolizes his reconciliation. This implies the installation and subversion of hegemonic assumptions, rather than merely challenging them. This further aligns with the postmodern phenomenon of non-linear narrative, and rejection of metanarratives. The characters of *Fight Club* confront the calamities of postmodern existence; nevertheless, they are aware of the fact that they are an intrinsic part of postmodern society, as observed in the scene where the narrator shoots himself to kill Tyler Durden (Therese and Amutha 914). The identification of the novel as a postmodern text raises intriguing questions about its rhetorical goals and critical efficacy. If the novel fails to achieve its goal of critical subversion, does it still qualify as postmodern, or does it devolve into a mere exercise in modern solipsism? Similarly, the interpretation of the novel remains problematic in terms of its alignment with postmodern principles to classify it as such. Ultimately, the designation of a text as postmodern precedes any assessment of its critical success; it is through a critical theoretical lens that a text is categorized within a particular genre and evaluated for its effectiveness. Furthermore, a postmodern critical approach underscores the intertwined relationship between postmodernism and modernism within critical theory. While critical theory itself emerged from modernist traditions, postmodernism contributes to critical discourse by revealing the embedded

ideologies within societal structures, rather than treating critical theory as a flawless metanarrative. This phenomenon can be understood in the interpretation of Marla

Marla emerges as a compelling and multifaceted character in the novel, serving as a catalyst for Jack's personal transformation. Her overt eroticism is not demeaning but rather emblematic of sexual awareness, exemplified by the concluding scene where Marla accepts the protagonist even without his alter-ego. Marla embodies the strength, intelligence, and sexual agency characteristic of women in the postmodern age. To view Marla solely as oppressed by male dominance overlooks her agency and complexity, while the text's hyper masculinity is parodically subverted through elements of eroticism present in the novel. The purpose of the Fight Club is to let a man's animalistic instincts loose. For such a club, Marla becomes an interminable member due to the blurring of gender qualities manifested in her character (Therese and Amutha 914). Additionally, the novel possesses subversive implications for anti-capitalist and anti-corporate rhetoric, which is evident through the culminating in attacks on banking and credit institutions by the members of the Fight Club (Palahniuk 108). The novel delves into discourse inequality, critiquing the narrative structures that perpetuate social inequalities. This is observed in the hierarchy of Fight Club, where Tyler Durden remains the boss and the members follow his orders blindly (Palahniuk 131). The postmodern author constructs politically challenging narratives, and the postmodern critic utilizes specific approaches to uncover the discourse structures embedded within texts. By deconstructing these narrative layers, postmodernism exposes and challenges hegemonic processes, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced understanding of societal dynamics and power relations.

The postmodern author deliberately aims to subvert entrenched societal norms and challenge prevailing grand narratives, particularly within Western culture. By employing cutting-edge narrative and rhetorical techniques, postmodern texts capture the attention of a media-savvy audience and prompt critical reflection. *Fight Club* exemplifies this subversive intent, critiquing contemporary hegemonic practices, including privatized corporate culture. This is observed in the characters' defiance of rules and regulations in their workplace as observed through the narrator smoking in his office, and the Tyler Durden urinating consumer's plate (Palahniuk 90). While traditional critics may critique its lack of structure, postmodernism's versatility and ability to challenge established norms ensure its continued relevance in rhetorical theory. As postmodernism evolves, it remains at the forefront of cultural and critical practice, reshaping traditional notions of culture, aesthetics, and political commentary. *Fight Club* stands as a seminal work in the postmodern era, exemplifying the inherent historical complexities. These findings make it conclusive that the postmodernist view of the narrative in the novel unravels the rejection and eventual acceptance of existential crisis in the postmodern era.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the intricate relationship between postmodernism, consumer culture of characters, and existentialism as depicted in Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Fight Club*. By examining the novel through a postmodern lens, the complex dynamics of existential crisis and its impact on individual identity and societal values have been uncovered. The novel's narrative subverts traditional notions of identity and authenticity, presenting a critique of consumer culture and its dehumanizing effects. Through the protagonist's journey, Palahniuk articulates the existential crises induced by consumerist ideologies, highlighting the struggle for authenticity in a commodified world. The findings of this analysis reveal that *Fight Club* serves as a potent critique of postmodern society, exposing the pervasive influence of consumption culture on personal identity and fulfillment. The novel challenges conventional notions of masculinity and freedom, questioning the ways in which consumer culture shapes and distorts individual lives. The portrayal of characters like Marla Singer and the protagonist's alter-ego, Tyler Durden, underscores the fluidity of identity and the existential angst that accompanies the search for meaning in a fragmented, postmodern world. Moreover, the novel's use of parody and intertextuality aligns with postmodernist principles, reinforcing its status as a critique of contemporary cultural paradigms. The protagonist's ultimate reconciliation with his existential crisis, symbolized by the killing of his alter-ego, suggests a nuanced perspective on the interplay between rebellion and acceptance in the face of consumerist pressures. This duality reflects the postmodern phenomenon of non-linear narrative and the rejection of grand narratives, emphasizing the complexity of navigating identity and purpose in a

consumer-driven society. Ultimately, *Fight Club* offers a thought-provoking commentary on the human condition in the modern world, inviting readers to reconsider their relationship with consumer culture and the search for authenticity. Through its exploration of existential crisis, the novel highlights the dialectical tensions inherent in consumerist ideology within a postmodern framework, challenging prevailing narratives and encouraging a deeper understanding of individual and collective experiences in contemporary society.

**Ayushi Gupta et.al (2020)** has studied that the sensory marketing can enhance the promotional effectiveness of food brands by influencing consumer buying behavior. This study examines the influence of sensory marketing on consumer buying behavior and brand promotional effectiveness, highlighting the importance of customers in building brand images and identifying taste as a key area for further research to enhance promotional effectiveness.

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