

Hypermasculine Behaviour of Men at Play: A Study of David Fincher's Film *Fight Club*

Comportamento Hipermasculino dos Homens Brincadeira: Um Estudo do Filme Clube da Luta, de David Fincher

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ABSTRACT

The ideals of masculinity are grounded in the notion of hegemonic masculinity, a cultural construct that places certain male behaviours at the apex of the gender hierarchy. This study explores the manifestation of hypermasculinity in David Fincher's film *Fight Club* (1999), focusing on how men display hypermasculine traits to maintain dominance and resist subordination. Through the lens of Masculine Studies, as theorized by Raewyn Connell, the analysis highlights the exaggerated masculine behaviours embodied by Tyler Durden and their influence on men grappling with crises of identity, socio-economic marginalization, and suppressed masculinity. The film demonstrates how hypermasculinity becomes a vehicle for reclaiming dominance through violence, male bonding, and rejection of modern consumerist ideals. However, it also reveals the destructive consequences of such extremes, as the protagonist ultimately reconciles with his own masculinity by rejecting violent domination. The findings suggest that while hegemonic ideals continue to shape male identity, contemporary cultural contexts allow for more fluid and dynamic expressions of masculinity.

KEYWORDS

hegemonic masculinity; traditional masculinity; hypermasculinity; subordination; violence; gender

RESUMO

Os ideais de masculinidade estão fundamentados na noção de masculinidade hegemônica, uma construção cultural que coloca certos comportamentos masculinos no topo da hierarquia de gênero. Este estudo explora a manifestação da hipermasculinidade no filme Clube da Luta (1999), de David Fincher, focando em como os homens exibem traços hipermasculinos para manter a dominância e resistir à subordinação. Sob a ótica dos Estudos Masculinos, teorizados por Raewyn Connell, a análise destaca os comportamentos masculinos exagerados incorporados por Tyler Durden e sua influência sobre homens que enfrentam crises de identidade, marginalização socioeconômica e masculinidade reprimida. O filme demonstra como a hipermasculinidade se torna um veículo para recuperar a dominância por meio da violência, do vínculo masculino e da rejeição dos ideais consumistas modernos. No entanto, também revela as consequências destrutivas desses extremos, já que o protagonista acaba se reconciliando com sua própria masculinidade ao rejeitar a dominação violenta. Os resultados sugerem que, embora ideais hegemônicos continuem a moldar a identidade masculina, contextos culturais contemporâneos permitem expressões mais fluidas e dinâmicas da masculinidade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE masculinidade hegemônica; masculinidade tradicional; hipermasculinidade; subordinação; violência; Gênero

Public Significance Statement

This study examines how *Fight Club* portrays hypermasculinity as a response to men's psychological, social, and economic insecurities. By analysing the film through the lens of Masculine Studies, the paper highlights how unrealistic and extreme masculine expectations can influence men's behaviour in real life—especially the tendency to equate masculinity with dominance, emotional suppression, and violence. The findings emphasize why it is important for society to move beyond rigid gender norms and encourage healthier, more balanced expressions of masculinity that do not rely on aggression or control.

Introduction

The term 'gender' has various connotations owing to the dynamic and multifaceted nature of society and culture. The sex-type of an individual is primarily determined by biological anatomy but this fact is neglected due to socio-sexual factors determining one's role in the society. Every individual's gender is categorized by secondary factors some of which are pointed out by Susan Ervin in her research article titled, "The Connotations of Gender" as; "size, type of clothing, hairstyle, and voice" (253). She further argues that the cultural experience entitles all the sexes whether they are 'masculine' or 'feminine'

(Ervin 255). Such entitlements related to every gender have always been diachronic, as a result of which, the modern day societies and constituent cultures are also structured in a similar manner. Since, the construction of 'gender identity' is largely associated with the behavioural patterns, men tend to behave in a certain manner that contrasts them from women, by virtue of behaviours and their 'doing gender'. The term 'doing gender' implies that "Gender is not simply an aspect of what one is...it is something that one does and does recurrently, in interactions with others" (West and Zimmerman 140). A man is thus compelled to conform to the gender specific behaviours and norms which are reinforced by the conventional masculine ideals.

Fight Club (1999) is an action/thriller by the American film director, David Fincher, best known for his psychological thrillers. Some of his notable films include *Seven* (1995), *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008), and *The Social Network* (2010) etc. *Fight Club* is a film adaptation of Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Fight Club*, published in 1996. The unnamed narrator-cum-protagonist (played by Edward Norton) is a common man who takes up various names throughout the movie. His first and foremost purpose is to cure his insomnia and get quality sleep as the lack of sleep makes his life intolerable and cumbersome. Although, he gets a highly paid job in an automobile company, he is not content with his profession due to his sleeping disorder.

Amid all this, his overall persona turns out to be very dull and low spirited. Consequently, he starts attending specialised support groups using different names in order to give vent to his miseries, which he couldn't do otherwise. It is because these groups serve as a means of catharsis for him as he could easily vent out his emotions in front of strangers. During one of the group sessions, the narrator comes across another man, Bob, who cries while embracing him, as he narrates, "This was a support group for men with testicular cancer. The big moosey slobbering all over me..." (*Fight Club* 00:03:17). Bob's misery comes out as he tells the narrator that his testicles were removed surgically and seeks reassurance from the latter when he says, "We're still men" (*Fight Club* 00:03:23). In narrator's arms, Bob finds solace and cries like a baby, expressing misery over the loss of testicles which implies the loss of his manhood. The narrator empathizes with the other group members on the loss they have suffered and feels contented on still having testicles. However, such a view has been discarded by Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman in their research article, "Doing Gender" in which they argue that "Most persons with penises are men, but some may not be...rather we take it for granted that sex and sex category are congruent—that knowing the latter, we can deduce the rest" (132). Bob's fear can be explained on the basis of the fact that men are conditioned to link their sexual organs with their gender.

Another male character, Tyler Durden (played by Brad Pitt) is introduced at this point in the movie who meets the narrator during a plane trip. It is revealed subsequently that Durden is a phantom self of the narrator, a character who is shown to have a separate mind and body. He is, in fact, the

embodiment of the narrator's unconscious desire that he has always wanted to become. Tyler Durden's hypermasculine behaviour and manliness has a deep impression on the narrator. The duo, the narrator and his desired self, Tyler Durden are shown as two different men interacting with each other till the end of the movie.

Tyler Durden is introduced as a salesman who makes soap and sells it. He is a 'hypermasculine' man who resorts to violence and dominant behaviour and indulges in all kind of illegalities and violations. Chris Hickey opines about 'hypermasculinity' to be understood as "the exaggeration of male stereotype behaviours...it is frequently identified within the macho assemblage, expressed as stoicism, hardness, forcefulness and rebelliousness" ("Hypermasculinity"). Here, his hyper-masculinity and dominant nature corresponds to Connell's concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' which she defines in her seminal work *Masculinities* as "the configuration of gender practice... which guarantees the dominant position of men..." (77). Since, Tyler desires to reestablish and endorse dominance of men, he starts a club called 'Fight Club' in the basement of an old bar. In his fight club, he invites men to fight violent bloody duels without any entry fees where the fighters will vent their anger, frustrations and agonies of being unable to exercise desired dominance as men in the society. Soon, to the satisfaction of Tyler Durden, a lot of men along with the narrator start joining: "But every Saturday night, we were finding something out. We were finding out more and more that we were not alone" (*Fight Club* 00:40:38). As a result of narrator's participation in the fights, his insomnia gets completely cured as the fights have a cathartic effect on his mind and body.

Many working-class men, businessmen, drivers, waiters and professionals visit the fight club to fight and thus, indulge in violence. Tyler extends the phenomenon by opening different fight clubs throughout the United States, so that every man could realize his hypermasculine potential while fighting. The narrator further informs, "Every week, Tyler gave the rules that he and I decided... The first rule of Fight Club is...you do not talk about Fight Club...Fights will go on as long as they have to..." (*Fight Club* 00:42:46). The number of men only increases every night indicating their need to vent out their suppressed inability to do what they want as men, including the desire to dominate other men and society at large. Thomas J. Scheff in his doctoral research thesis titled "Hypermasculinity and Violence as a Social System" explains "A man with character who is under stress is not going to cry and blubber like a woman or child might...The hypermasculine patterns lead to competition, rather than connection between persons" (03). Hence, Tyler instigates every man to indulge in violence and fight without mercy like a 'real man' does.

Men tend to resort to physical violence rather than simple verbal expression, to exert socio-political or economic dominance and power. This viewpoint is also presented by Connell in her seminal work *Masculinities*, where she states, "Violence becomes important in gender politics among men" (83).

Tyler Durden's violent activities provide an impetus for every man to be hegemonically masculine (only through violence). Connell further states, "The number of men rigorously practising the hegemonic pattern in its entirety may be quite small...Some heterosexual men and boys too are expelled from the circle of legitimacy" (Connell 79). In this context, most of the men who do not hold power over other men can do it by resorting to hypermasculine behaviours. Every man (innately) wants to partake in domination of patriarchy because they "gain a dividend from patriarchy in terms of honour, prestige and the right to command" (Connell 82). It thus becomes evident that all the men want the same power and presence which Tyler Durden seems to possess. They are convinced that only hypermasculinity will enable them to acquire an overall hegemony over the gender order.

The narrator is indulges in violence after he leaving his job and participates in these fights single-mindedly, along with his desired self, Tyler Durden. He seems to prefer violence rather than fancied figures from the popular culture. He says, "We all started seeing things differently...we were sizing things up. I felt sorry for guys packed into gyms trying to look like how Calvin Klein or Tommy Hilfiger said they should" (*Fight Club* 00:44:54-00:45:05). He ponders, looking at a man's poster: "Is that what a man looks like?" (*Fight Club* 45:00:13). The narrator shuns the belief that a man is made for living a peaceful and sophisticated life. He rather opts to completely rely on the statements of Tyler Durden, as he emphasises, "Fight Club wasn't about winning or losing. It wasn't about words. The hysterical shouting was in tongues...When the fight was over, nothing was solved, but nothing mattered...Afterwards, we all felt saved" (*Fight Club* 00:45:56-00:46:10). All of them begin to find respite in the newly introduced violence in their lives which serves as an escape from their personal problems and so they showed up to fight on a daily basis. James W. Messerschmidt writes in his famous work, *Crime, Criminal Justice and Masculinities* that one of the definitions of masculinity emphasises "the use of physical violence by men to solve interpersonal problems" (71). Hence, due to their participation in these violent fights on a daily basis, the characters in the film feel more masculine.

Tyler starts manipulating men into believing that their violent behaviour will strengthen their gender-position in the society. Here, the gender-position can't sustain and move ahead without strong gender-relations as the 'gender relations' are formed and carried forward by individuals pertaining to a particular gender in a given setup. Connell writes about gender-relations as : "They are formed and transformed over time...Change is also generated from within gender relations...Violence can be used to enforce a reactionary gender politics...It must also be said that collective violence among men can open possibilities for progress in gender relations" (82-84). Collective violence makes it necessary for men, who exhibit subordinate masculine behaviour to act in coherence with other men, if they want to dominate the gender order, as in a patriarchal society, dominant position is decided by men. In this context, in order to convince the members of his fight club, he says:

“Without pain, without sacrifice, we would have nothing.. This is your pain...This is the greatest moment in your life, man....Our fathers were our models for God. If our fathers bailed, what does that tell you about God?...God does not like you. He never wanted you...We don't need him. Fuck damnation, man. Fuck redemption. We are God's unwanted children. So be it! (*Fight Club* 01:02:41-01:03:35)

Tyler uses such sly words to warn every man that his manliness is under threat and it thus, needs a revival. His sole motive is to empower them and make them aware of their hypermasculine tendencies, so that the desired violence could be carried out easily. This corresponds with Connells idea of 'crisis of masculinity' as she discusses, how the men of last century believed that hegemonic masculinity is under threat, so they began to "provoke attempts to restore a dominant masculinity" (85). The dilution of traditional gender relations which are dynamic, made men weak, and Tyler wants put an end to this dilution. Every member of the fight club thereby, agrees to Tyler's ideas about violence after which he starts recruiting them for a bigger purpose, called 'Project Mayhem'.

The violence infused by Tyler in the members of fight club has the fallout, as the States witness an increase in crime rate. His followers, in order to reassert the lost dominance of men over the society, start plundering the shops, stealing vehicles and even kidnapping powerful men, just to mark their presence. Tyler motivates them: "Our Great Depression is our lives. We've all been raised on Television...one day we'd all be millionaires and movie gods and rock stars. But we won't. We are slowly learning...And we're very, very pissed off" (*Fight Club* 01:10:55-01:11:13). In a similar manner Connell, while referring to the men with hegemonically masculine behaviours writes: "They may be exemplars, such as film actors, It is a successful claim to authority, more than direct violence, that is the mark of hegemony" (77). Hence, the members of the fight club, who are common Americans, accept the fact that none of them are among the aforementioned exemplars. So, in order to reinforce male dominance, it is obvious for such men to choose violence, adds Connell (78). For the same reason, men with non-dominant masculinities, in an attempt to elevate their power position seek hegemony through direct violence here.

Tyler's dominating masculinity is the defining factor due to which other men desire to be like him. He gains legitimacy as he successfully seeks consent of every man through his hypermasculine ways: "In Tyler we trusted" (*Fight Club* 01:31:05). This presents how dominant masculinity, is always at the top with other masculinities revolving around it. Tyler's dominant masculinity is what other men desire in order to be at the top of hegemonic ladder in their masculine behaviours. It thus becomes easier for Tyler to further use them as a medium to execute his plan which is to establish a hegemonically masculine order in the society. He calls it 'Project Mayhem', wherein he wants the whole society to acknowledge male dominance. The narrator also realises how Tyler has affected every man which ensures that the planned violence strengthens the patriarchal structure further. Tyler's dominant position as a man has

been instrumental in winning over the consent of other men. This viewpoint is supported by Jeff Hearn's argument in research article titled "From Hegemonic Masculinity to the Hegemony of Men" where he writes, "Men's power and dominance can be structural...also includes violation and violences...Some powerful men are dominant in reproduction of men's consent"(49-60).

To overcome masculine subordination, Tyler's 'Project Mayhem' provided every fighter with an opportunity to be a man, and subsequently, all of them conform to his plan as it ensures an establishment of a dominant masculine order in the society. Coming together of these men through the common act of violence is also reflected in Lionel Tiger's book, *Men in Groups* (1969/2009). He uses the term 'male bonding' to explain how, since the primitive times, men have lived in a socio-political camaraderie and created a world order that places them in the centre. This bonding as he writes "is a part of subtle political process rather than a simple, clear and specific event, such as reproduction..." (19). Tiger further compares leader of the animals' group to leader of men's group as both work to seek consensual dominance and support of others. He views such males as those who, "stayed in the centre of the group...decided group movements...thus a male's dominance status was a combination of his individual fighting ability and his ability...to enlist the support of other males..." (Tiger 27). In *Fight Club*, Tyler is the male leader who exhibits a similar masculine behaviour and is also backed by other men and hence, no man dares to go against him. All the men are so intoxicated by Tyler's plan completely.

To carry out 'Project Mayhem', Tyler asks all the members of the fight club to live in his old-abandoned mansion. Amid the turn of events, one morning, the narrator wakes up to find that Tyler Durden has disappeared and starts searching for him frantically. He feels completely dejected, orphaned and directionless, like a rudderless ship on an ocean, as he says, "I'm all alone. My father dumped me. Tyler dumped me. I am Jack's broken heart" (*Fight Club* 01:44:00-01:44:05). The narrator's inability to make sense of the ongoing situation, in the light of violence happening around him is shown in the scenes where he, for months has been trying to find Tyler as he repeatedly narrates: "What comes next in Project Mayhem, only Tyler knows" (*Fight Club* 01:44:12). He keeps on tracking Tyler, until one day, one of the waiters who is also part of Tyler's 'Project Mayhem' tells the narrator that "You're Mr. Durden" (*Fight Club* 01:51:11). It hits him like a bolt from the blue as he becomes aware of the fact that Tyler is but, the narrator himself. A series of flashbacks showcase his trip down the memory lane, runs on the screen wherein he recalls his conversations with Tyler Durden and thus, becomes aware of his reality. The narrator struggles to keep his real identity intact as Tyler reappears on the screen and confronts him:

You were looking for a way to change your life. You could not do this on your own. All the ways you wish you could be, that's me. I look like you wanna look...I am smart, capable, and most importantly, I am free in all the ways that you are not. People do it every day. They talk to themselves. They see themselves as they'd like to be. They don't have the courage you have, to just run with it. Naturally, you're

still wrestling with it, so sometimes you're still you. Other times, you imagine yourself watching me. Little by Little, you're just letting yourself become...Tyler Durden. (*Fight Club* 01:53:18-01:54:10).

In every culture, a man who doesn't exercise hegemonic masculinity tends suffer at the hands of a hegemonic male due to his power position. The traditional gender order doesn't allow men to be passive rather they are expected to possess an aggressive and dominant demeanor. In the same manner, the narrator wants to be a man who is a dominantly masculine but due to his over-conscious behaviour, he could not exercise his masculinity. As a result of this desire, Tyler Durden is created out of the narrator's manifestation of becoming a hegemonic man.

It is soon revealed that 'Project Mayhem' includes bombing all the credit card companies, so that, every man becomes free of economic subordination, primarily as the narrator states: "If you erase the debt record then we all go back to zero. It'll create total chaos" (02:01:37-02:01:42). So, Tyler's greater plan is to free every man of economic liabilities. The world will be hit by economic depression causing a state of total chaos and disorder. The gender order will be equally affected, after once the whole socio-economic structure is dismantled. This will provide men who are members of the fight club, an opportunity to establish the desired dominance, governed by the traditional masculine ideals. Tyler while talking to the narrator takes pride in executing his own plan to demolish the whole economic setup as he says, "Think of everything we've accomplished, man...we will view the collapse of financial history...One step closer to economic equilibrium" (*Fight Club* 02:09:08-02:10:17).

Apparently, Tyler's 'Project Mayhem' undertakes to free men by ending ongoing masculine crises in their lives that would allow an easy implementation of dominant masculine order and the revival of traditional masculine dominance. Tyler believes that a sense of crises and potential trouble around the male gender will never allow men to be relieved from responsibilities related to male gender. "The discursive representations of...masculinity that emerged during and after the crisis carry a productive quality of their own..." (Brassett and Heine 763-84). In this regard, it could be enunciated that gendered crisis is one of the potential reasons for a man's subordination in a given society as against one, who is not facing any socio-political or economic crisis, and hence exercises hegemonic masculinity. Tyler Durden thus plans to help the men overcome their masculine subordination through indulgence in violence and hence altering the way they lived on day today basis.

The narrator no longer complies with the violence, hypermasculinity and the ways of Tyler Durden. After realizing that Tyler is nothing, but his own repressed hypermasculine self, which has gone out of control, the narrator seeks reconciliation in his own masculinity by stepping away from Tyler's hypermasculine behaviours. He thus, confronts Tyler urging him to stop the planned violence, "You're a hallucination...I really don't need you anymore" (02:11:01). Afterwards, a scene shows that the narrator is compelling Tyler to leave him as the former puts a gun's nozzle in his own mouth to commit suicide

as the only way to kill Tyler Durden. In order to escape the whole mishap, the narrator finally shoots himself but he doesn't die here, rather it's Tyler who disappears, which implies that only Tyler Durden has died. Moreover, when the narrator pulls the gun's trigger, no gunshot is heard, hence the gunshot is also a product of the narrator's imagination, meant to kill his imagined self, Tyler Durden. Here, the narrator's act of shooting himself shows a common man's protest against the hegemonic ideals of masculinity, carried out by Tyler. The narrator therefore, breaks free of the hegemonically masculine order by reconciling with his own masculinity.

Finally, in the ending scene of the film, the narrator is seen smirking at the whole incident who feels that his masculinity is equally relevant to the society. The narrator succeeds stop a hypermasculine and dominant male like Tyler who was a destructive force. This act thus, makes the narrator, a man enough who has ultimately accepted his own masculinity. The text of the film reflects that a man need not abide by the traditional masculine ideals because the hypermasculinity gets established through violence and aggression. Also, in the contemporary society, there is a very less scope of establishing masculine dominance through organized violence due to the democratic and dynamic nature of the gender order which facilitates for every man an opportunity to exercise his masculinity in a manner that he wants to. Similarly, this view gets reflected in what Connell points that: "No straight man is mechanically committed to defending the gender order, any more than a gay man is mechanically committed to rejecting it. It is possible for straight men to oppose patriarchy and try to exit from the worlds of hegemonic and complicit masculinity" (220). The masculine gender norms have always been there which allow men to behave in a prescribed manner but in the recent past, the stringent nature of gender order has changed, making them to exhibit different masculine behaviours. Although, hegemonic masculine ideals are still considered as the mark of being a 'real male' but the changing contemporary world has made gender more fluid.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be stated that not only the gender is a social construct which needs to be subverted but also, that the extremes of hypermasculinity as represented in the gender discourse needs to be avoided. Due to the social roles expected from a male, the desire to break away from shackles of such masculine roles gets exhibited in the form of Tyler Durden, who is nothing but the suppressed-self of the narrator. The discussion held above brings to the surface, the fact that the mere confrontation of such suppressed instincts can lead to the emergence of a balanced self. Hence, all the masculinities must not be seen in the light of violence but there are men who don't commit violence and support dynamic behaviours with regard to the socio-culturally created masculine hoax.

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