

## Unmaking the Modern Man: Masculinity, Materialism, and Resistance in *Fight Club*

<sup>1</sup>Sultan Syahrana <sup>2</sup>Reza Anis Maulidya

<sup>1</sup>[sultansyahrana0512@gmail.com](mailto:sultansyahrana0512@gmail.com), <sup>2</sup>[reza.anis@staff.uinjkt.ac.id](mailto:reza.anis@staff.uinjkt.ac.id)

<sup>1</sup>Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University Jakarta, Indonesia

---

### ABSTRACT

Directed by David Fincher, *Fight Club* (1999) presents a complex and provocative critique of consumer culture, masculinity, and resistance within a postmodern capitalist society. This study examines how the film constructs and destabilizes male identity by employing an integrated framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA). Using Fairclough's three-dimensional model and Kress and van Leeuwen's multimodal theory, the analysis focuses on how ideological meanings are produced through the interaction of linguistic discourse and cinematic techniques. The findings reveal that consumerism reduces identity to a market-driven commodity, while masculinity is represented as fragmented, unstable, and continuously negotiated through discourse and visual symbolism. Acts of resistance, particularly those embodied by *Fight Club* and *Project Mayhem*, are shown to function as contradictory forms of liberation that ultimately reproduce new structures of control. By analyzing dialogue, narration, visual imagery, sound design, and *mise-en-scène*, this study demonstrates that masculinity in *Fight Club* operates not merely as a narrative theme but as a discursive formation shaped by power relations across multiple semiotic modes. This research contributes methodologically to film discourse studies by highlighting the analytical value of integrating CDA and MDA in examining ideology, identity, and resistance in contemporary media texts.

Keywords: *Fight Club*, Masculinity, Materialism, Resistance, Critical Discourse Analysis, Multimodal Discourse Analysis

---

### INTRODUCTION

In the era of late capitalism, media and cinema serve as powerful tools in influencing public discourse and shaping individual and collective identities. The postmodern era is characterized by scepticism toward grand narratives, and the rise of consumerism as a dominant ideology has transformed how individuals define themselves and others. Within this sociocultural framework, masculinity has become an increasingly contested and unstable concept. Traditional male roles—such as the provider, protector, and authority figure—are constantly renegotiated amidst shifting economic conditions,

feminist advancements, and the rise of corporate culture. These transformations have led to what scholars term the “crisis of masculinity,” wherein men struggle to reconcile societal expectations with personal identity.

One of the most prominent cinematic representations of this crisis is *Fight Club* (1999), Directed by David Fincher and adapted from Chuck Palahniuk’s novel, the film revolves around an unnamed narrator who, disillusioned by his sterile, consumerist life, creates an alter ego—Tyler Durden—who embodies rebellion, aggression, and primal masculinity. By establishing a clandestine fight club, characters seek to rediscover meaning, purpose, and selfhood in a society they perceive as emasculating and hollow.

This article explores *Fight Club* through the analytical frameworks of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), focusing on how the film constructs and deconstructs themes of consumerism, masculinity, and resistance. CDA allows us to examine how language in the film reinforces or challenges dominant ideologies, while MDA provides tools for analyzing the interplay of visual, auditory, and symbolic modes. By integrating these approaches, this study aims to reveal how *Fight Club* critiques the cultural norms of its time and raises enduring questions about identity, power, and authenticity in modern life.

While previous research by Sari and Englishtina (2024) examines *Fight Club* primarily through a thematic and ideological deconstruction of consumerism, masculinity, and resistance, the present study advances the discussion by adopting a methodologically distinct and more integrative analytical approach. Rather than focusing on thematic interpretation alone, this article explicitly combines Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) to investigate how masculine identity and resistance are constructed, negotiated, and destabilized through the interaction of linguistic choices and cinematic modes. This study places particular emphasis on the discursive mechanisms—such as evaluative language, imperatives, repetition, visual symbolism, lighting, framing, and sound design—through which ideology is produced and normalized within the film. By operationalizing Fairclough’s three-dimensional model alongside Kress and van Leeuwen’s multimodal framework, this research shifts the focus from what the film represents to how ideological meanings are generated through discourse and multimodality. Consequently, this article contributes new methodological insight to film discourse studies by demonstrating that the crisis of masculinity in *Fight Club* functions not merely as a narrative theme but as a discursive formation shaped by power relations across verbal and visual modalities.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach for this study is qualitative, employing both Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) to examine the

film's complex and multi-dimensional discourse. CDA is employed to analyze how the film's dialogue and narration convey, reinforce, or challenge existing power dynamics and societal beliefs. This research specifically adopts Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, which includes: (1) examining the language used in the text, and (2) exploring the discursive practices involved in the text's creation and reception, and (3) analysis of the broader sociocultural context in which the discourse is embedded.

In parallel, Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) extends the investigation beyond verbal communication to include non-verbal elements such as visual symbolism, camera angles, lighting, editing, and sound design. Drawing on the Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's theory, MDA in this study reveals how these modes work together with language to construct meaning. For instance, the film's use of low-key lighting, gritty mise-en-scène, and abrupt editing techniques contribute to the construction of mood, character psychology, and ideological messaging.

Data for this research were gathered through a purposive sampling of key scenes from the film which prominently highlight the themes of consumer culture, resistance, and masculinity. These include but are not limited to: the narrator's apartment scenes, the first fight between Tyler and the narrator, support group sessions, and scenes involving Project Mayhem. Each scene was analyzed for both its linguistic and multimodal elements, allowing for a holistic interpretation.

Additionally, this research incorporates intertextual analysis to understand how *Fight Club* interacts with broader cultural and philosophical narratives. References to historical, mythological, and consumerist texts are noted and interpreted within their context. This comprehensive methodological approach ensures that the study captures the multifaceted nature of discourse in the film and its impact on viewers.

The dual application of CDA and MDA allows for a triangulated perspective, bridging the gap between linguistic inquiry and visual semiotics. This integrated methodology is particularly appropriate for analyzing a film like *Fight Club*, which relies heavily on both spoken language and cinematic technique to convey its critique of modern masculinity and capitalist culture.

## DISCUSSION

### 1. Consumerism and the Erosion of Identity

From the outset, *Fight Club* illustrates how consumer culture commodifies identity. The narrator's obsession with IKEA catalogs and lifestyle products represents the hollow pursuit of self-definition through consumption. Encapsulate the emptiness of consumerist ideology.

Visually, this is reinforced through product placement and sterile apartment scenes filled with catalog-worthy items. The narrator's identity becomes fragmented, constructed through goods rather than self-awareness. Tyler Durden's rejection of consumerism functions as a call to authenticity, albeit one rooted in violence and destruction. The film suggests that capitalist systems reduce individuals to consumers, rendering personal identity shallow and performative.

## **2. Masculinity in Crisis**

The film portrays men as directionless and emasculated by a society that values sensitivity and conformity. This perceived feminization, symbolized by support groups for men with testicular cancer and advertisements featuring ideal male bodies, leads to existential despair.

Tyler's creation of "Fight Club" responds to this by constructing a hypermasculine space where pain and violence become rites of passage. The quote, "How much can you truly understand yourself if you've never been in a fight?"

Reveals the underlying belief that masculinity must be tested physically. It reasserts primal values in a world seen as over-civilized.

Yet the film critiques this response by showing its descent into extremism. Project Mayhem, the evolution of Fight Club, reveals how resistance can morph into fascistic control. Masculinity, as depicted, is a fragile construct propped up by performance and violence. As R.W. Connell notes in her theory of hegemonic masculinity, such hypermasculine behaviors are sustained through dominance over others and the repression of emotion, vulnerability, and diversity of male experiences.

## **3. Resistance and the Illusion of Liberation**

While *Fight Club* appears to offer a path of resistance to consumer culture, it ultimately problematizes this rebellion. Tyler's anarchist ideology seduces the narrator and other men, but it becomes clear that the movement is another form of control. Phrases like "You are not your job, not the money in your wallet, and not the things you own." function as both liberating and indoctrinating slogans.

The narrative suggests that liberation through destruction is a false solution. The narrator's realization and ultimate rejection of Tyler signal a nuanced critique of radicalism. The film leaves open whether true autonomy is possible in a commodified world. Tyler's charismatic authority, which initially promises liberation, becomes a form of psychological entrapment—an ironic replication of the very systems it seeks to dismantle.

## **4. Multimodal Elements: Visualizing Ideology**

Fincher's visual style reinforces thematic content. The chaotic editing mirrors the narrator's disintegration. Low-key lighting and grimy aesthetics contrast sharply with commercial perfection. Sound design, including the repeated use of industrial noise, underscores the dehumanizing effects of modern life.

Symbols such as soap (made from human fat) and the burning of credit records in the final scene emphasize purification and rebirth through grotesque means. The club's underground setting, reminiscent of a primal cave, symbolically returns men to a pre-

civilized state. These multimodal elements deepen the critique of consumerism and highlight the symbolic violence required to escape its grasp.

Fight scenes are shot with intimate framing and visceral sound design, compelling the audience to confront discomfort. Visual motifs like mirrors, duplicity, and decay construct a world where identity is inherently unstable. The narrator's visual transformation—from neat professional to bruised anarchist—illustrates the bodily consequences of ideological struggle.

### 5. Intertextual and Cultural Context

*Fight Club* also dialogues with broader cultural narratives. It references post-Vietnam malaise, the collapse of traditional fatherhood, and the rise of neoliberal consumerism. Tyler's proclamation that "We are men of a generation brought up by women." reflects a cultural anxiety about paternal absence and the perceived loss of male purpose.

Drawing from postmodern thought, particularly Lyotard's scepticism of grand narratives, *Fight Club* rejects traditional moral binaries. Tyler is both savior and villain; the narrator is both victim and accomplice. This ambiguity reinforces the film's critique of simplistic solutions to complex sociocultural issues. The film challenges the myth of total liberation and exposes the fragility of constructed identities.

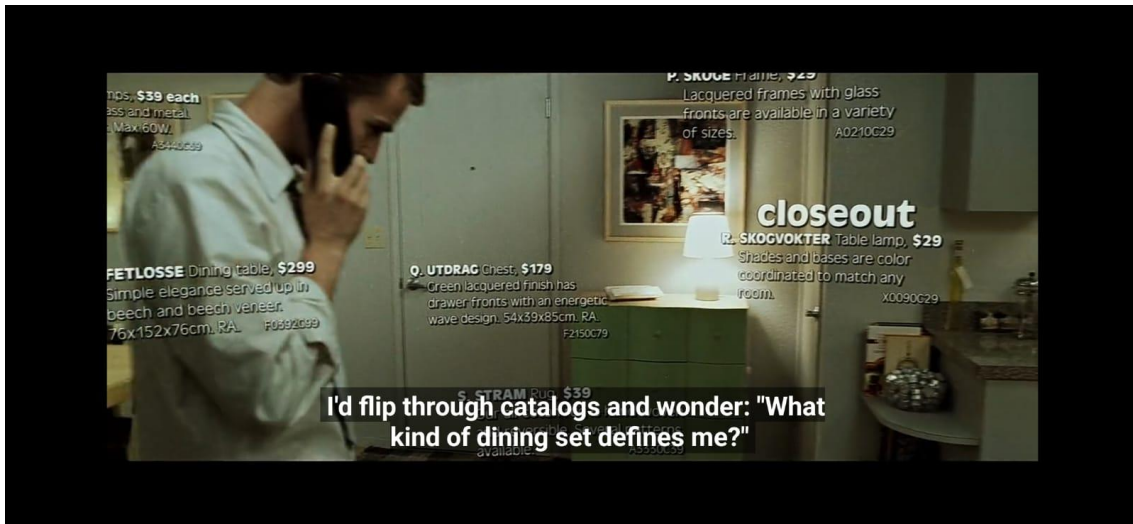
#### *Data 1 Consumerism*

From the outset, *Fight Club* illustrates how consumer culture commodifies identity. The narrator's obsession with IKEA catalogues and lifestyle products represents the hollow pursuit of self-definition through consumption. Lines such as:

- "Like everyone else, I had become a slave to the IKEA nesting instinct" (04:36–05:40),



- "What kind of dining set defines me as a person? We used to read pornography, now it was the Horchow Collection" (05:07–05:09)



emphasize the absurdity of constructing identity through commercial goods.

This identity crisis is further underscored in the narrator's addiction to catalogue shopping: "If I came across something like a clever yin and yang-shaped coffee table, I absolutely had to own it."

(05:13–05:21). Tyler Durden later critiques this lifestyle with sharp sarcasm:

"Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes. Working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don't need" (01:10:28–01:10:35). This encapsulates the central argument of consumerism's hollow promises.



Tyler Durden's lines, "Stop being perfect, Let's evolve" (32:14–32:17),



challenge the consumerist pursuit of flawless living, offering instead a call to embrace chaos and imperfection.

#### *Data 2 Masculinity Issues*

The narrator's identity crisis is not merely a matter of consumer addiction but also a deeper conflict rooted in gender identity. A crucial dialogue between Jack and Tyler illustrates this:

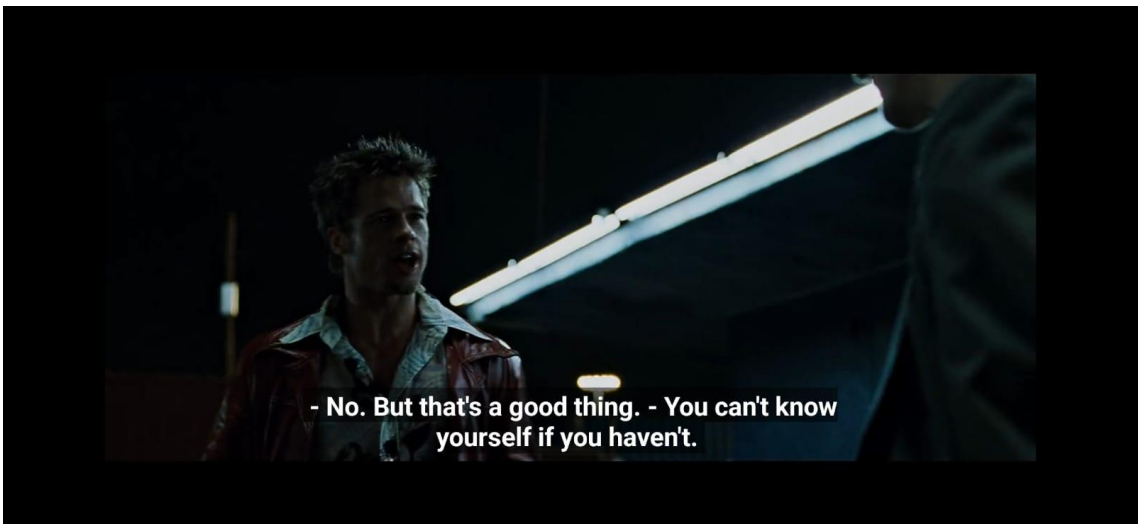
**Narrator:** "Why?"

**Tyler:** "Why? I don't know. Have you ever been in a fight?"

**Narrator:** "No, but that's probably a good thing."

**Tyler:** "No, it's not. How can you really know who you are if you've never been in a fight? I don't want to die without any scars."

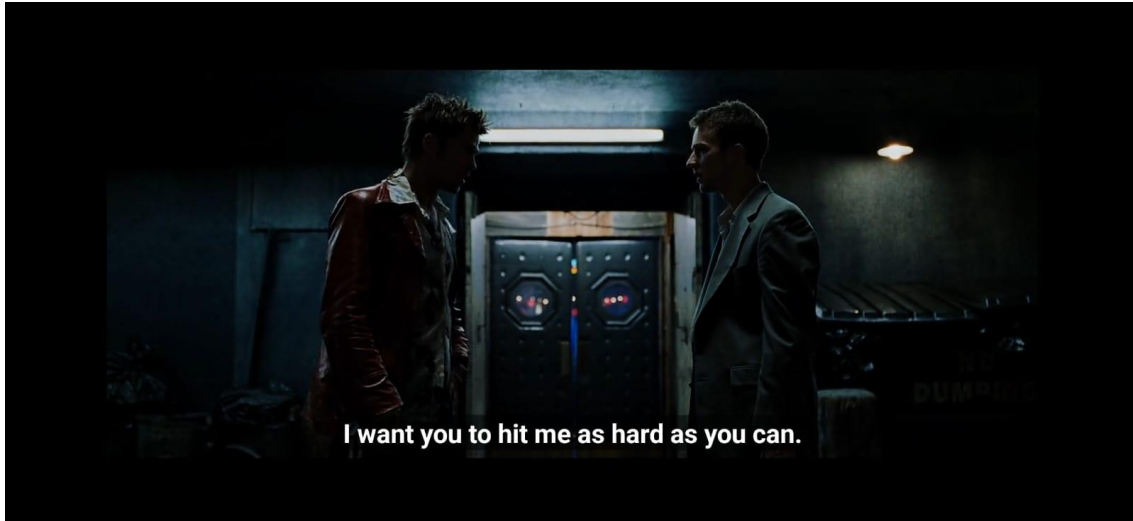
(34:15-34:21)



This encapsulates the need to physically affirm masculinity in the absence of social recognition.

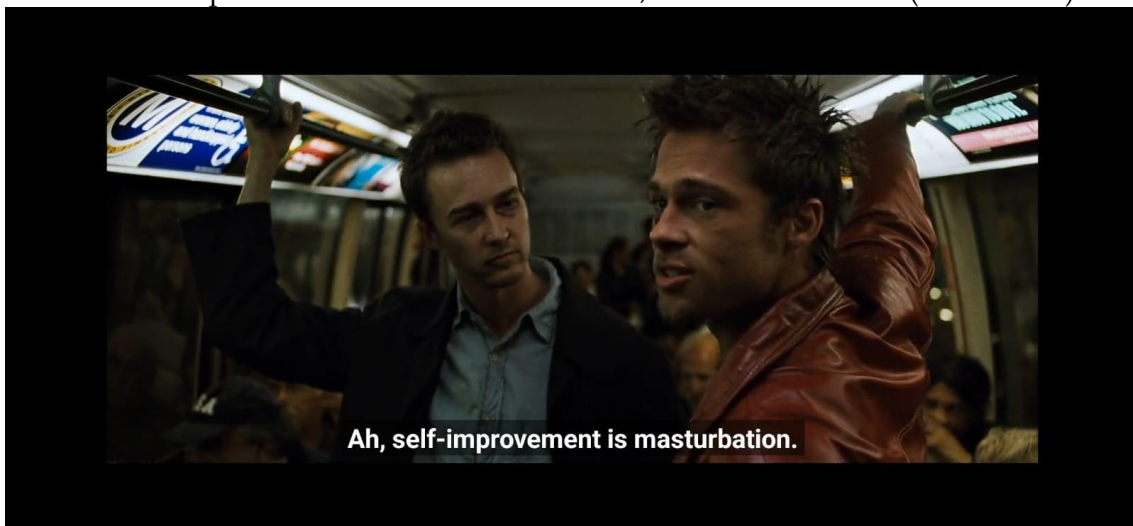
Other pivotal lines include:

- "I want you to hit me as hard as you can" (31:02-31:04)



Tyler's philosophy further critiques commercial masculinity:

- "Self-improvement is masturbation. Now, self-destruction..." (43:22-43:29)



He also comments on generational disillusionment:

"We're a generation of men raised by women. I'm wondering if another woman is really the answer we need." (38:44-38:49)



### *Data 3 Resistance*

Resistance in *Fight Club* is both literal and symbolic. Tyler's philosophy urges complete rejection of societal norms:

Tyler's confrontation with the police chief highlights subversive empowerment:

"Hello. You're going to stop your intense investigation. You'll make a public statement denying the existence of any underground organization. Otherwise... these men will castrate you – one of your testicles will go to The New York Times, the other to The LA Times. Look, the people you are after are the people you depend on. We prepare your food, take out your garbage, connect your phone calls, drive your ambulances. We watch over you while you sleep. Do not... fuck with us."



Meanwhile, Jack reflects on the futility of their actions:

- "When the fight is over, nothing's solved, but nothing mattered." (44:25–44:28)



The chaos of Project Mayhem represents resistance turned into authoritarianism—replacing one form of control with another.

## CONCLUSION

Fight Club provides a powerful lens through which to examine the masculinity crisis and the transformation of identity into a commodity within modern culture. Through its dialogue, imagery, and narrative structure, the film critiques the promises of consumer capitalism and explores the dangerous allure of hypermasculine resistance. This study highlights the value of integrating CDA and MDA in analyzing film. The intersection of language and imagery in Fight Club constructs a complex discourse on power, identity, and ideology. The film endures as a postmodern artifact that both reflects and interrogates the values of its time. Its continued relevance invites further exploration into how modern masculinity is shaped by economic systems, social expectations, and media representation.

By integrating Critical Discourse Analysis and Multimodal Discourse Analysis, this study demonstrates that masculinity in Fight Club is not merely represented as a narrative theme but produced and negotiated as a discursive formation through the convergence of linguistic and cinematic modes. This finding reinforces the methodological contribution of the study, showing that ideological meanings in film emerge through interacting verbal and visual discourses, thereby extending discourse-based film analysis beyond thematic interpretation toward a systematic examination of multimodal meaning-making.

## REFERENCES

- Barker, C. (2003). *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*. SAGE Publications.
- Connell, R. W. (1987). *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics*. Stanford University Press.
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. Longman.
- Foucault, M. (2002). *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984, Vol. 3*. Penguin Books.
- Kress, G., & Van Leeuwen, T. (2001). *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication*. Arnold Publishers.
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1984). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Palahniuk, C. (1996). *Fight Club*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Sari, S. M. N., & Englishtina, I. (2024). Deconstructing Identity: Consumerism, Masculinity, and Resistance in Fight Club. *LINGUAMEDIA Journal*, 5(2).