

# Faludi as a lens for fight club



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Imagine if there was a place where you were not judged based on your appearance, socioeconomic status but solely on your ability to physically overpower the person standing in front of you. The 1999 film *Fight Club*, directed by David Fincher, tells the story of two men who form an underground club where they fight violently against other men. The creation of *Fight Club* served as an outlet for a group of men who felt emasculated by their corporate jobs and consumerist lives.

American feminist, journalist, and author Susan Faludi writes about masculinity in a similar view with her 1999 book *Stuffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* she examines the role of men in America and the collapse of traditional masculinity. Both works are highly controversial although they do share a common theme. Being masculine is inherent to being a man, in American society successful men are portrayed as having extremely muscular bodies and lots of money. These standards are hard for the average man to reach and most men don't measure up causing feelings of frustration and anger. Furthermore, when society takes masculinity away from men their sense of pride and purpose diminishes alongside it. This is further discussed in the movie *Fight Club* and in Faludi's research in her book *Stuffed*. *Fight Club* illustrates Faludi's argument about the ways American men of the 1990s filled the abandoned promises of their fathers with excess consumerism, thus leaving them further dissatisfied. The Narrator's frustrations with his life of a "house full of condiments and no food"—fundamentally ornamental and lacking sustenance—led to his existential void, where he and Tyler developed *Fight Club* as an outlet to 'fight' their frustrations with the emasculating effects of American masculinity. In this

paper, I will analyze emasculation, consumer culture, and violence elements from Fight Club and how they conform to Faludi's argument.

The movie presents the argument that men in today's society have been reduced to a generation of men that cannot do anything for themselves. Masculinity has become a brand, as well as a means to sell products. Being a man then becomes owning the right clothes or car instead of knowing yourself and your values. The emasculating effects that a society with such values creates is the driving force Jack, Tyler, and the other members of Fight Club reject. By stripping away all sense of identity and facing fear and pain these men hope to rediscover their masculinity. Faludi illustrates this argument with a similar approach after visiting a domestic violence group for men, " The men I got to know in the group had without exception lost their compass in the world " (Faludi, 9). She discusses how the men she met had issues with their masculinity. Similarly in Fight Club Tyler struggles with feelings of being lost in the world. Having an outlet such as fight club created a place where men wouldn't be defined by their collars but instead, their strength. By putting themselves through an unfiltered raw experience they hope to strip away the socially constructed parts of their lives and truly discover themselves. The fear of castration is depicted throughout the film when the narrator meets Bob at the support group for men who've lost their testicles due to cancer; a direct correlation to manhood. Later in the movie, the threat of castration is depicted through Tyler and project mayhem when he threatens the police commissioner to call off his investigation. The narrator also received threats of castration after attempting to shut down Fight Club. These men already feel emasculated by their day to day lives, so

there truly is nothing more fearful to them than castration. They feel as if they have just begun to regain their masculinity due to fight club and Project Mayhem, so castration is their worst fear. Having a barbaric act like castration as a common theme throughout the movie goes to show the extent to which these men have lost their manhood in our consumerist society. Tyler believes that our consumer culture is to blame for people feeling unfulfilled in their lives. The film repeatedly detests advertisements that promote power and wealth “ Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don’t need. We’re the middle children of history, man. No purpose or place.” (Tyler). His philosophy contends that people work jobs they don’t like to maintain an image that ultimately doesn’t lead to happiness.” Our great war is a spiritual war... Our great depression is our lives. We’ve all been raised on television to believe that one day we’d all be millionaires, and movie gods, and rock stars, but we won’t. We’re slowly learning that fact. And we’re very, very pissed off.” (Tyler) The film repeatedly portrays a life where people work jobs simply to maintain an artificial image of success and happiness when in reality they are unfulfilled. Faludi illustrates these arguments when she discusses the pressures the new baby boom generation of men faced. “ Their nation had come into it’s own, powerful, wealthy, dominant, in control of the greatest destructive force ever imagined. The fathers had made their sons masters of the universe and it felt, as in the time of Alexander, that what they had created would last forever.” (Faludi) The nation had come into its own now it was time for these men to rule the world. Pressure to become “ powerful, wealthy, and dominant” was projected onto men of this generation. After all, if their fathers can win a great war surely their sons can achieve high social

status, right? This mentality leads men on a chase for power and wealth and when many fell short it leads to feelings of emasculation and shame.

The men of Fight Club are seeking something of true value, instead of the value system handed to them by advertising and society as a whole. Fighting is used as a path to reach the core of who they are “ How much can you know about yourself if you’ve never been in a fight?” (Tyler) He filled a void for these men and gave them purpose. Faludi illustrates this argument in her chapter when she discusses how harshly men are judged in our society and the emotional toll it takes on them. “ They were men judged by their ride out into the wasteland, not their return; they were measured by the control they achieved over their environment through gunplay, not husbandry” (Faludi, 12). Faludi believes that men have trouble with their masculinity for many reasons. Faludi’s argument relates to the theme of violence in the film with the parallels she discovers between men who have issues with violence and their overall satisfaction with their lives. The men that she describes suffer from feelings of dissatisfaction and lack of control in their lives. As a result, they feel emasculated like the members of fight club. Unfortunately, these men resorted to domestic violence, but according to her, she thinks it could be stopped if we could change the way society views and treats men. By teaching men from an early age that they need to provide in order to be valued, we are teaching them that being a man has nothing to do with growth and discovery. This mentality is toxic for boys both illustrated by fight Club and Faludi’s chapter.

Fight Club goes into great depth about men, the struggles they face in society today that are unique to this generation. Faludi’s chapter illustrates

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these claims using rhetorical strategies to drive her argument. Both works look at the complex issue of masculinity and how it is being threatened by a consumerist culture with the wrong values. These issues are unique to this generation because of the fairly new culture of valuing a man for his ability to own objects rather than his ability to protect and provide, leaving men with an emasculated feeling of uselessness. It is important for us to learn from the messages of works like these. The topics discussed are not widely known and many men are suffering the consequences. I personally think that it is important to raise awareness about the issues presented in fight club especially given that it is almost two decades old and our consumerist culture is just getting worse. The whole idea of Fight club is to rebel against an ingrained system that emphasizes product over all else. Men in America face struggles just like anyone else however a lot of times they are ignored based on a stigma surrounding men and weakness. Men are expected to show no emotion conform and provide, this is a toxic message to be teaching boys and ultimately is damaging to their mental health. I feel that we as a society can learn from movies like fight club, about the internal struggles men face on the daily and instead of ignoring them facing them head-on. Men are human just like everyone else and they deserve to feel like men based on self-discovery and growth, not a car. We as a society can only benefit from men that feel strong and powerful within themselves, we should encourage self-awareness, not consumption.