"He is Literally Me"

Cinematic Representations of Masculinity in the Manosphere

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Introduction

In May of 2014, a young man by the name of Elliot Rodger went on a killing spree in Isla Vista, California. The 22 year-old attacked 14 people, killing 6 of them before taking his own life. Before committing this atrocious act, Rodger uploaded a manifesto and a YouTube video describing his feelings and motivations for the violence. He revealed that he was seeking "retribution" for a life full of rejection from women. He was angry that the men around him were having sexual success and he wasn't, and he was upset that women didn't find him attractive. That loneliness and hatred boiled inside him until it exploded in a violent rage. It was around this time that the majority of the American mainstream began to learn more about the very real danger of incel violence.

In September of 2023, Martin Scorsese, one of the most recognized American filmmakers of all time, was interviewed by GQ about his most iconic films. In the first section of the video, Scorsese speaks on *Taxi Driver* from 1976, a film about a young man named Travis whose isolation, loneliness, and deteriorating mental state cause him to act out violently. Scorsese comments, "tragically, it's a norm. Every other person is like Travis Bickle now" (GQ, 1:25).

Scorsese's comment opens the door to a wider discussion about the current mental state of young men, especially young white men who seem to be continually more lost and confused about their role in the modern world. This comment also connects those young men to the world of film and on-screen representation.

Elliot Rodger's attitude and actions were scarily close to those of Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*. Both men were rejected by women who preferred other men, both were isolated and lonely, both suffered from mental health issues, and most terrifyingly, both carried out gun violence in order to regain control of their masculinity and "cleanse the world" in a twisted way.

Unfortunately, Rodger was not alone in his plight. He was not some one-off lunatic. In fact, since his death, Elliot Rodger has become a saint on certain internet forums, such as PUAHate and ForeverAlone, getting called the "Supreme Gentleman," idolized by troubled men with similar thoughts. Lisa Suguira, author of *The Incel Rebellion,* notes that there have also been many other instances of "incel violence," such as the attacks of Chris Harper-Mercer in Oregon, William Atchison in New Mexico, and Alex Minassian in Toronto, among others. Suguira states that from 2014 to the release of her book in 2021, incels and their ideology had been linked to the killings of more than 50 people, with even more injured (Sugiura 81). Some of them, like Atchison, were even directly inspired by Rodger. Atchison was known to use the pseudonym "Elliot Rodger" online and praised the Isla Vista murderer on forums (85).

In the last few years, there seems to be increasing mainstream coverage on the state of men and boys in the Western world. Many major publications such as the New York Times and the Washington Post have commented on the concern for men's mental health and the current state of the ongoing "Crisis of Masculinity." Uneasiness over the state of masculinity in the United States is not a particularly new phenomenon. In 1835, American author Washington Irving noted that "we send our youth abroad to grow luxurious and effeminate in Europe," arguing that a return to manual labor on the frontiers and prairies "would be more likely to produce that manliness…that the nation needs" (Taylor 76). In 1858, Walt Whitman took on the topic of young men in his series of masculinity crisis columns for the New York Atlas, shuddering at the thought of "that dreary, sickening, unmanly lassitude, that, to so many men, fills up and curses what ought to be the best years of their lives " (Heffernan). In the early 20th century, an emphasis on physical fitness became the prescribed cure for American issues of masculinity. This was exemplified by the work of Harvard philosophers William James and

Albert Bushnell as well as more mainstream publications like Physical Culture magazine, which advertised to men instructions on issues such as "How to Square Your Shoulders" (Heffernan, Emba).

In today's world, it seems that there is ample evidence that American boys and young men are not doing well in traditional metrics of success. In his 2022 book, *Of Men and Boys,* Richard Reeves discusses in depth how young men are falling behind in school, failing to launch their adult lives, and killing themselves at an increasingly high level. 2023 marked the highest number of suicides in American history, with men leading the pack (Harmon).

Coinciding with this increase in mainstream media surrounding young men, a trend on social media has begun reinterpreting a certain kind of problematic male archetype found in older movies. These characters seem to provide some sort of remedy to the woes of struggling boys, and have begun to be "worshiped" online. Users create fan edits, idolize the characters in memes, and mainstream internet trends have even followed suit (Reix). Young men are seeing similarities in flawed male characters, saying that they are "literally me," while pointing at a screen with Christian Bale, Robert de Niro, Brad Pitt, Jake Gyllenhaal or Ryan Gosling all committing brutally violent acts.

"Literally Me" Characters

If you search for "literally me" or "he is literally me" on TikTok, Reddit, Letterboxd, or any form of social media, you're bound to be exposed to a number of movies led by these flawed male characters. While seemingly conveying nothing concrete from the vague title of relatability, a distinct and limited canon of movies and characters will begin to emerge. You'll begin to hear about cab drivers, mob bosses, Wall street businessmen, soap merchants, futuristic AI cops, late night news cameramen, greeting card writers, meth kingpins, and getaway drivers, just to name a

few. This cast of characters all seem to have things in common; they have attributes and characteristics (like isolation, loneliness, and anger) that seem to resonate strongly with a certain demographic of 2020s America: young, white men.

The *Literally Me* character is actually nothing new, it has just been identified with that title in the last decade. While masculinity depicted on screen can be traced back to the very beginning of motion pictures, *Literally Me* characters really only begin to emerge in the latter part of the 20th Century. There have been different eras of *Literally Me* characters with a current renaissance that has led to the rediscovery and remediation of older film texts.

Literally Me films all tend to focus on lonesome, isolated men that feel emasculated in some way. Through a process of action and self-realization, the characters generally reclaim their masculinity and push back against the forces that oppress it, usually through violence and sexual conquests. In 1976, TIME Magazine writer Richard Schickel described for the first time this type of character, calling him a "Pothole" and a "Familiar Breed:"

> There is a certain kind of urban character who, however lightly we brush against
> him, instantly leaks the psychopathy of everyday anguish all over us. A man
> enraged by the bad deal life has given him but unable to articulate that rage.
> Instead, he is given to fantasies ranging from the glumly sexual to the
> murderously violent. He is, finally, a man of muttered imprecations and sudden,
> brooding silences; which of these moods is most alarming is hard to say
> (Schickel).

Schickel was talking about Travis Bickle, the protagonist from Martin Scorsese's 1976 classic, *Taxi Driver.* Bickle is considered the first instance of the *Literally Me* character, and this

description from TIME is an apt elucidation for what the "genre" would go on to showcase. Scorsese is known to explore the ways in which masculinity is questioned, exhibited, threatened, and repurposed, and he would go on to become arguably the father of this type of movie with titles such as the aforementioned *Taxi Driver*, *Mean Streets*, *Raging Bull,* and *The Wolf of Wall Street* being referred to as "literally me."

A list of the films and characters that are most commonly associated with the memetic phrases "he is literally me" or "he just like me forreal" includes the following titles:

Patrick Bateman from *American Psycho* (2000), Tyler Durden/The Narrator from *Fight Club* (1999), Travis Bickle from *Taxi Driver* (1976), Officer K from *Blade Runner: 2049* (2017), The Driver from *Drive* (2011), Arthur Fleck from *Joker* (2019), Lou Bloom from *Nightcrawler* (2014), Jordan Belfort from *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), Baby from *Baby Driver* (2017), and John Wick from the *John Wick Franchise* (2014)

These characters were identified based on their prevalence in user-generated lists on sites like Reddit and Letterboxd as well as their identification by other more mainstream websites and publications (Chowdhury, Colon, Firoozye, Know Your Meme, Madmadmadlad, McMahan, The Kino Corner, Salamone, Thompson, Urban Dictionary, Wang).

While this is by no means a comprehensive list of every character that could be considered *Literally Me*, the vast majority of lists, content, memes, and discourse on this "genre" tend to be focused on those featured above, with the majority just on Patrick Bateman, Tyler Durden, Officer K, Travis Bickle, Arthur Fleck, and the Driver (Ashcraft 141, Bry, Chowdhury, Firoozye, The Kino Corner, McMahan, Reix).

Within the world of *He is Literally Me*, I have identified two different categories of lead characters. On the one hand, characters like Travis Bickle, Arthur Fleck, and Lou Bloom exhibit

a more incel archetype: non-traditionally attractive characters who live on the fringes of society and exhibit antisocial behavior lashing out with violence. On the other hand, characters like Tyler Durden, Patrick Bateman, Officer K, and the Driver, exemplify the more traditionally masculine, attractive, yet still antisocial character who pushes back against society in some way, often with violence, as well.

I would like to study the latter set of characters in this analysis, and I have chosen to focus on Bateman and Durden based on their prevalence and foremost positions on the lists of *Literally Me* characters previously identified. They also prove to exemplify what seems to be a large problem with the adoration of these characters: young white men are fundamentally misinterpreting the characters; they are interpreting the themes and messages they represent in a negotiated reading of what the creators intended. Despite being critiques or parodies of a certain type of person, young white men of the 2020s are lauding them as role models or ideal forms of masculinity.

This thesis sets out to explore why this phenomenon has been taking place for the past decade and a half. Despite the creators of the primary texts explicitly stating in interviews that their works were meant to either be satires or critiques of masculine tropes, why is the dominant reading of the texts being thrown out in favor of a new reading? What are the social, gendered, political, and economic environments that would cause this form of remediation to take place, especially over twenty years removed from the creation of these texts?

Through the framework of Stuart Hall's encoding and decoding as well as preferred, negotiated, and oppositional readings of media texts, I will argue how young men are choosing a negotiated reading of these film texts instead of the preferred reading of the creators.

All in all, *Literally Me* characters are depictions of men that exhibit traditionally masculine ideals but also resonate more with the struggles of young men in the 2020s. Additionally, the themes of the ongoing modern "crisis of masculinity" that are first explored in *Taxi Driver* have continued to permeate male culture, warping and progressing over the years to be arguably more relevant today. Because these older films contain characters with a certain set of impediments similar to issues that modern men are dealing with, I will also explore how they are then adopted into the modern canon of *Literally Me* despite their reception at the time of their release.

To begin, I will analyze the fetishization of the toned male physique and ornamental culture within the Manosphere. Then, I will address the term "Sigma Male" and its connections to the behaviors of these characters. Finally, I will connect modern mainstream role models to the characters considered *Literally Me.* However, before the analysis of this topic, I will first provide background for the setting in which this phenomenon takes place.

Literature Review

The Origin of the Manosphere

It is crucial to begin acknowledging the spaces whereby this discourse has grown out from. The *Literally Me* phenomenon is something that has emerged out of the "Manosphere," or a collection of online spaces in the last two decades where a new form of masculine ideology has formed. The contemporary Manosphere can trace its "spiritual" origins back to the 1970s and the Men's Liberation Movement or MLM. Originally created as a response to the rising feminist discourse of the 1970s, the MLM was actually a fairly progressive movement, calling upon the

work of Joseph Pleck, who claimed that both men and women suffered under rigid patriarchy, women through oppression and men through dehumanization. Scholar Michael Messner notes that over time however, the MLM fissured into two separate factions, one that upheld these progressive ideals, and one that co-opted the language of feminism and turned it back on men. This more conservative, more reactionary, and more outright misogynistic Men's Rights Movement, or MRM, began to claim that men were actually the true victims of the gender role system, being "narrowly positioned as breadwinners and protectors" and instead of being "sexual objects" like women, were actually seen as "success objects" (Messner 9). To this day, men being seen as victims in the system is still extremely prevalent in the Manosphere.

As Susan Faludi studied in her famous 1999 book *Stiffed,* American men of the latter part of the 20th century felt betrayed by a system that had promised them the American dream in the post-war decades. Instead, the trend of de-industrialization and the move from blue collar to white collar labor led to a decline in work roles that were considered traditionally masculine. Pete Deakin commented on Faludi's work summarizing that men of the *fin de millennium* felt an "underlying feeling of irrelevance" and felt that the world they found themselves in was not the world their fathers had prepared them for (Deakin ix). According to Faludi, men were experiencing a shift from a more traditionally masculine culture to one that valued things that were more associated with women previously. They were experiencing an "ornamental culture" that privileged consumption, sex appeal, celebrity, and appearance. By the late 90s, Faludi notes that mainstream publications everywhere were commenting on the "crisis of masculinity," complete with concerns of men dropping out of school, suicide rates rising, and school shootings, just like we see today.

With the growth of the internet, men with similar concerns about women and societal control began to congregate online. In their article titled, "From PUAs to Incels," Banet-Weiser and Bratich identify the rise of the modern internet Manosphere as inherently related to the failure of certain men to see success in the "Pick-Up Artist" culture present in the early 2000s. This subculture, with members known as PUAs, was made most popular by the late 2000s reality show known as "The Pickup Artist," following a professional pick-up and seduction guru known as "Mystery." Mystery's show, as well as his book, *The Game*, which became bible-like scripture, helped to convince many men that there were concrete ways to coerce women to sleep with them. Many of these tactics convinced men that women had uncontrollable desires that could be exploited, no matter what the man looked like. This philosophy promised a hack to the nature of human mating, and many men looked to follow these guidelines in the hopes of being more sexually active and gaining more confidence. Banet-Weiser and Bratich argue that it was the failure of this generation of men at the PUA game (and therefore a failure at "confidence") that caused spaces like Manosphere and incel communities to form. It was the frustration from the lack of successful sexual pursuits that forced them to find solace with one another online. One of the most famous Manosphere communities, the subreddit *r/TheRedPill,* was created for the very reasons of revealing "the truth" about how the world and human mating works. There is a clear link between the lack of hope in their sexual pursuits, the frustration expressed by these men, and the objectification of women that create a strong connection between these two subcultures and present a plausible origin to the movement.

The Ideology of the Manosphere

According to scholar Shawn Van Valkenburgh, the main theme of Manosphere spaces is misogyny, with varying levels of radicalization and extremity. Within the Manosphere, there are

smaller subgroups of people, all of whom subscribe to a very rigid worldview of how men and women interact. The most famous subgroup of the Manosphere, and one that is sometimes synonymous with the word "Manosphere" itself, is "The Red Pill" or TRP. The Red Pill ideology is named in reference to the Wachowskis' 1999 sci-fi film, *The Matrix,* in which Morpheus tells Neo that he must choose between a comfortable lie and the cold hard truth about the world, the latter only being revealed to him by taking a red pill. Similarly, Manosphere subscribers and "red pillers" believe that they too hold the key to the reality of how the world works, a reality that may not be as comfortable as the rest of the world wishes to believe. When one begins to learn the truth of how the world works, they are referred to as being "red pilled." If one chooses to ignore the information of the Manosphere and go back to living their old life, then they are referred to as "normies" or being "blue-pilled," another reference from *The Matrix*. In that way, *The Matrix* story itself resonates with the entire community in an almost allegorical fashion. Since the origin of the Red Pill and Manosphere online movement, films have played an absolutely fundamental role.

The main philosophy of TRP and many aspects of the Manosphere are based on the idea of a "sexual marketplace" (Cannito & Camoletto 598, Botto & Gottzén 2). Within this marketplace, "red pillers'" believe at a fundamental level that women only represent a sexual conquest, the entire social hierarchy is inherently sexual, and everyone within it can be categorized into a numerical value that represents the amount of sexual capital they possess. Generally, a person's value on this scale of 1 to 10 is purely physical. Highly attractive men are considered "Alphas" or "Chads" with mid-tier and lower level attractive men being considered "Betas." But, Cannito and Camoletto also point out that there is an element of LMS (Looks, Money, Status) in Red Pill communities, referring to a man's ability to move along the hierarchy

by increasing his socioeconomic status. However, the raw, physical prowess of a man is always held as the most important part of their social capital, and the true criteria that truly determines if a man is an "Alpha" or not.

Because of the preeminence of physical attractiveness in the Manosphere, there is a doctrine of "looksmaxxing" or self-improvement that is preached in these spaces: if one is able to maximize their potential of physical attractiveness, then they might be able to reach their full potential in the sexual marketplace; they can increase their numeric value on the attractiveness scale (Vallerga & Zurbriggen 615, Bernstein). The "maxxing" suffix can then be applied to all sorts of other more specific practices, all aimed at increasing one's sexual capital.

Whereas most scholars in this field (Vallerga & Zurbriggen, Bernstein, Cannito & Camoletto, Botto & Gottzén) agree that "looksmaxxing" is an essential element of TRP ideology, Cannito and Camoletto suggest that there can also a stigma around trying to improve at all, especially among those that believe that they are inherently ugly and have no chance of ever improving their standing in the hierarchy. It is in these spaces where we learn about the community's most notorious lingo: the "incel," or "involuntarily celibate."

Cannito and Camoletto present the idea that incels are men that place so low on the sexual scale that they can't really "acquire" women in any reliable way. Instead, their only course of action is to satisfy their sexual needs through prostitutes, coercion, and in worst cases, rape (599). In the incel community, there is a bond of pain that unites all members. To be an incel is to accept the fact that one will never be a sexually attractive person, and will never place high on the scale of social capital. This pain, and the shared understanding of a resigned fate, allow the incel community to keep functioning, channeling the pain into anger. Sometimes, the torment bubbles to the point of violence, like Elliot Rodger and the other examples of incel murders

mentioned previously (Suguira 81, Vallerga & Zurbriggen 617). More often than not, incel pain and angst are manifested as a general hate towards more sexually attractive men, all women in general (for not liking them), and mid-tier attractive men that use things like money to attract women.

Scholars also point out that among incels, there is a shared disgust at the acts of "Beta Bux," or semi-unattractive men that get roped into a social contract with women that is based on the women's exploitation of their resources. In essence, they believe that mid-tier attractive men will trade money and status for the ability to satisfy their sexual needs (Cannito & Camoletto 594, Vallerga & Zurbriggen 614). In some spaces, this is interpreted as just as bad as being an incel. It is seen as embarrassing for these men as they are essentially being used and "controlled" by women for their material resources.

There is also a darker path for incels to take. LDAR or "lay down and rot" is a term found commonly among more pessimistic "red-pillers," describing their overall lack of energy and enjoyment for life after the realization of their sexual "fate." Suicide, or "the black pill," can also be encouraged as the only viable option to deal with the pain and embarrassment of not being able to have sex with women. "Rope" became slang for suicide by hanging in these spaces, with one incel forum commenter coining the phrase "the best cope is rope. Jk [just kidding]" (Vallerga & Zurbriggen 617).

The overarching rhetoric of these incel spaces is that if one is ugly, one must accept the fact that they are ugly. "Looksmaxxing" is reserved only for those that lie somewhere on the cusp of attractiveness; it's reserved for those who might actually have a chance at being referred to as an "Alpha" someday. If you are an incel, trying to "leave" the incel community by improving your physical attractiveness is seen as an act of treason in some spaces, as showcased

by the case of Italian self-proclaimed "gymcel," Salvatore Aranzulla. Aranzulla posted his progress of "looksmaxxing" and his increase in sexual capital on Italian incel forums and was denounced as a Judas of the faction (Cannito & Camoletto 603).

The ideology of TRP is also based solely on the rigid view that women only exist in their relationship to men. It hinges on the fact that women are seen as simplified, sexual creatures. According to Vallerga and Zurbriggen, in TRP ideology there are only three elements behind women's motivations and characteristics: promiscuity, deception, and trading sex for power. Women's need for multiple sexual partners is seen as "natural," and they use deception to "lock" men into a social contract (providing resources for them) while holding all the power of sexuality, choosing when and where to "deploy" it.

Cannito and Camoletto add that TRP views the rise of feminism and the sexual revolution as being directly connected to the lack of "control" that men have in modern times. It is suggested that the sexual revolution made the social balance "uneven," subjecting men to a life of oppression under women (598). Other scholars note that Manosphere communities feel it is their innate duty to disseminate this information to young, impressionable men and reassert traditional masculine ideals and roles in order to return Western society to a previous golden-age (Haslop et. al). This sentiment is echoed in the findings of Susan Faludi in *Stiffed,* published in 1999 and relating to the American man, in general.

It was around the end of the millennium where early Manosphere rhetoric began to take root. Emma Jane describes 1998 as the year of the "dawn of misogynistic cyberhate," right as the "*fin de millennium* masculinity crisis" movies were about to take center stage. It was only a year later when *The Matrix's* "red pill" concept would be unveiled to the world and eventually become a catch-all term for this type of men's rights ideology.

But, the Manosphere has come a long way since its more fringe days of underground pick-up artists and radical incels. In 2020s America, Manosphere rhetoric has become more and more available to vulnerable young men.

Manosphere Radicalization in the Mainstream

Laura Bates proposes that the majority of young, cis-hetero men on the internet get exposed to Manosphere ideas and content that "leaks" out of the fringe forums and into mainstream social media, something like at least 70% (Bates 301). She claims that most of these boys aren't looking for this content but rather it is "coming to them" (302). The content is also packaged in more palatable ways, like through memes or charismatic online personalities.

It's a cliché that young boys often go online searching for honest advice like "how to talk to girls" or "how to get bigger muscles" and end up on an intense path of right-wing, misogynistic radicalization. Bates argues that personalized algorithms, especially on platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Reddit, push more and more radicalized content on the impressionable minds of young boys over time. She writes:

> A teenage boy can start out from fairly benign opinions—"gosh, feminists seem
> to be taking everything a bit seriously"—and then be ever so gently nudged from
> jokes and memes through to comedy video compilations and into the reaches of
> ever more extreme ideas and content without ever realizing the slippery slope he
> is on. Eventually, he assumes that a woman is lying about being sexually
> assaulted, even when she is standing right in front of him. He reaches a point at
> which he might begin to hate women without even knowing it (Bates 317).

It's not just entirely young men, either. James Ball from The Guardian notes that the "wellness-to-fascism" pipeline on the internet is extremely common, and it affects all kinds of people. There is nothing that illustrates this phenomenon in the Manosphere more than the hilarious The Onion article titled "Man Who Googled 'How To Kiss' 2 Years Ago Currently Going On Full-Blown Misogynist Tirade." It can be seen as a "natural progression" and modern version of the "PUA to Incel" pipeline (Banet-Weiser & Bratich): frustration about some sort of sexual-related endeavor leads to a community of sad and angry men, which leads to radicalized thought and behavior.

It is important to note again that these ideologies are far from fringe doctrine nowadays. They are entirely mainstream. Andrew Tate, former-kickboxer-turned-influencer and the poster child for the most toxic side of the Manosphere, is so influential in his misogynistic teachings that teachers in the UK have been forced to band together to discourage and stamp out support for him in the classroom. One teacher reported male students telling female teachers that they "shouldn't be working" and that they should "go to the kitchen and make [them] a sandwich" (White). There was even common discussions in school that women "should bear some responsibility" for sexual assault. We will return to Andrew Tate later on in this analysis.

Cinematic History of the *Literally Me* Character

As previously mentioned, the main characters from *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*, Patrick Bateman and Tyler Durden respectively, became arguably the most recognizable of the *Literally Me* figures in the Manosphere. However, the oldest character associated with the *Literally Me* canon is Travis Bickle, from *Taxi Driver* (1976). Despite not being quite as physically attractive as Patrick Bateman and Tyler Durden, Travis Bickle still displays much of the same characteristics as them, traits which would go on to be associated with *Literally Me* as a

whole. Bickle is a troubled white man who, in the aftermath of a rejection from a woman, tries to "improve" himself only to ultimately end up using violence as a way to reinstate his masculinity and regain control.

Taxi Driver has become a staple of what's considered the "American New Wave" of cinema. Directors like Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, David Lynch, Woody Allen, George Lucas, and many others were exploring new ways of telling stories in the Hollywood system. When it came to depictions of men on screen, New Wave directors tended to explore more morally ambiguous subjects, blurring the lines between black and white. Protagonists from films such as *Mean Streets* (1973) and *Dirty Harry* (1972) proved that more anti-hero archetypes could become mainstream and successful.

Masculinity on screen in the 1980s was marked by the popularity of "hard bodies," a term coined by Susan Jeffords in her 1994 book of the same name. Many male action stars, such as Arnold Schwarznegger and Sylvester Stallone had roots in the bodybuilding world, and their success coincided with the continued rise of male "ornamental culture," where men became valued more for their physical appearance than ever before (Faludi 32). Yvonne Tasker added that, "coming at the particular point that it did, the success of these films and stars could be read in terms of backlash against the feminism of the 1970s, as indicative of a new conservatism in both national and sexual politics" (Tasker 1). This conservatism is why Jeffords also directly relates this type of masculinity to the era of Reagan.

By the time the 1990s came around, the spectacle and display of the "hard bodies" of the 80s gave way to "a presumably more internalized masculine dimension" (Jeffords 245). Without fully leaving the ripped action heroes behind, Hollywood began to give more screen time to the "New Man." This masculine archetype, seen in many male protagonists of the 90s, had a

"definite lean toward a more sensitive heroism in the movies as the decade wore on" (Deakin

10). The New Man was one who left behind the ultra-masculine stereotypes of being cold,

unsupportive, and work-obsessed, and replaced them with a male identity that was more in touch

with his feelings, contributed to domestic labor, and was "sensitive to the needs and subjugation

of his *sister"* (Deakin 9).

After a decade of this and a new generation of "sensitive stars," Deakin explores how a

period of about 18 months would go on to change how masculinity was displayed on screen to

this day. In a remarkably short amount of time, (1999-2000) 25 mainstream films were released

with shockingly similar themes and messages. Deakin calls them the "fin de millennium white

crisis of masculinity" films, with the most notable titles including *American Psycho* (2000),

Fight Club (1999), *American Beauty* (1999), *Being John Malkovich* (1999)*, The Matrix* (1999),

Office Space (1999), *and The Big Kahuna* (1999). All of the films in this list deal with issues of

masculinity, and many times ways to fight back against the ultra-capitalist, ornamental culture

highlighted by Faludi in *Stiffed.* It is within this time period that many *Literally Me* films were

made, and many films would create tropes that could be found in *Literally Me* movies later on.

Encoding and Decoding Framework

The analysis of this thesis is based on the framework of Stuart Hall's "encoding and

decoding" concept. According to Hall, mass media operates on a system of production,

circulation, consumption/discussion, and reproduction. Media texts are "encoded" during the

production phase by the producers of the text and the messages are encoded through institutional

power structures and professional codes. Because there is no "necessary correspondence"

between encoding and decoding, encoders "can attempt to 'pre-fer' but cannot prescribe or guarantee the latter, which has its own conditions of existence" (Hall 515).

Therefore, during the decoding or consumption phase, an audience can take multiple different positions in interpreting a message. The dominant, hegemonic, or preferred reading of a text accepts the creators' message of the text, and usually operates within standard, professional codes accepted by society at large. In other words, when an audience accepts the preferred reading of the text, "this is the ideal-typical case of 'perfectly transparent communication' – or as close as we are likely to come to it 'for all practical purposes'" (515). The message intended by the creators is being received by the audience in the same way.

Outside of the preferred reading, audiences can interpret a text through an oppositional or negotiated reading, as well. An oppositional reading understands the literal and connotative elements of an encoded message, but decodes the message in a "globally" contrary way. Despite understanding the message, the audience chooses to interpret it through an entirely different framework of reference.

Finally, a negotiated reading accepts parts of the dominant meaning while modifying others to fit the situation of the audience. "It acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules – it operates with exceptions to the rule" (516). Negotiated readings therefore tend to have elements of contradiction in them, as audience members choose to interpret some sections of the text through one framework and others through another.

The Manosphere and young men tend to view *Literally Me* films through a negotiated reading. While accepting on the surface level that certain elements of the characters are

problematic, they choose to modify their framework when approaching other features. They selectively ignore some of the warning signs and satire encoded by the creators and choose to praise other aspects of dubious behavior.

Literally Me Preferred Readings

A large portion of this thesis hinges on the fact that the creators of *Literally Me* characters did not intend for the characters' legacies to become what they are: poster boys for the Manosphere and the Red Pill community. While art is subjective and an audience's reading of a text may not always be the same as the author's, it is important to note the creators' preferred or dominant readings of the texts.

The creators of Patrick Bateman and *American Psycho,* including the author of the original novel, the director of the film, and the actor portraying Bateman were all very open about their intentions for the work and some even showed disgust towards the current remediation of the character.

Bret Easton Ellis, upon the release of the novel in 1991 called Bateman a "monster," a "misogynist," "barbarous," and a "creep" (Cohen). In fact, he had to fight the public perception that *he* was a monster at the time of the book's release. Mary Harron, the film's director, agreed that the film version of *American Psycho* was a "nasty comedy about the narcissistic rage lurking beneath the shiny façade of American capitalism" upon its release. She doubled down on her sentiments 20 years later, saying that she wasn't interested in exploring Bateman's past, like his childhood or family life: "it doesn't matter if his mother was mean to him. I don't care. He's a monster" (Shapiro). She also called Bateman the "embodiment of everything that's wrong with [capitalism]" (Rife).

Christian Bale, when interviewed by GQ in 2022, described Bateman as an "alien," and also recalled a time he spent talking to Wall Street traders, even before the release of the movie. They said they "loved Patrick Bateman," unironically. Bale was left "seemingly dumbfounded to see people praise a despicable, malicious character," and would go on to say "so [the idealization of Patrick Bateman] was always a bit worrying, even back then. Clearly, it's a satire…and is so bloody far-fetched and ridiculous I can't help but think it's hilarious" (Debdipta, GQ).

When it comes to *Fight Club*, author Chuck Palahniuk has slightly more vague thoughts about the purpose of the story: "It was more about the terror that you were going to live or die without understanding anything important about yourself," he said (Beaumont-Thomas). When explicitly asked about his thoughts on *Fight Club* being adopted by the Manosphere and "Incel movement," Palahniuk seemed to dance around the question on multiple occasions, just stating that he was sad that men didn't have very many other archetypes or stories that they could adhere to (Beaumont-Thomas, McDermott). But, he would go on to say, "my politics are about empowering the individual and allowing the individual to make what they see as the best choice. That's all *Fight Club* was about." It's not entirely a message against the Manosphere, but it definitely isn't endorsing the strict adherence to any singular belief system or ideology, either.

David Fincher, the film's director, was not as open with his interpretation of his own work. While first acknowledging that the interpretation of a text is not the author's responsibility, he stated, "it's impossible for me to imagine that people don't understand that Tyler Durden is a negative influence. People who can't understand that, I don't know how to respond and I don't know how to help them" (Rose).

In 2022, Edward Norton commented on the film's political nature and the concerns the left had with it upon its release, saying:

The argument was that, while the [educated liberal-leaning viewers] were smart and sophisticated enough to understand what the movie was about, the 'ordinary' people would be more prone to copy the action depicted rather than acknowledge the picture's nuances. I'd heard that line a lot from Republicans but rarely from people I'd usually consider myself to have a lot in common with (Russell).

Norton would also jokingly call the film the "Proto-Incel movie" in 2019 (Entertainment Weekly).

Despite the preferred readings of these film texts being agreed upon as satirical portraits of these specific masculine archetypes, why are young men choosing to see them as an ideal?

"Looking the Part"

Beauty and the Body

Within the Manosphere, there is a cult of fetishization around the image of a muscular, toned physique. This body type is considered the ideal standard and sexualized body trope for men (Wagner, Gibbs & Piatkowski). Manosphere influencers tend to have this strong physique and in some cases an exceptional, over-the-top version of this body type. Brian Johnson, better known as "Liver King," is an essential example of this type of figure.

Johnson's physique is imposing. Gibbs and Piatkowski describe it as such: "with his unkempt beard dominating his rugged facial features, Johnson wears his musculature like armour, with granite pectorals, veiny biceps, and protruding abdominals (1)" And while Johnson uses his millions of followers on social media platforms to sell his "ancestral tenant" ideology

and products, it is the image of his idealized body that draws young men in: "one need only glimpse Johnson's physique to note its hyperbolic overidentification with this muscular ideal" (3).

When comparing the physical and visual image of a *Literally Me* character, there seems to be a similar set of corporal aesthetics that are synonymous with the "genre." Most of the characters exhibited have "hyper-aesthetic" bodies, built with lean, rippling muscles and oftentimes gleaming with sweat, oil, or lotion. They also tend to have traditionally masculine and conventionally attractive facial features. They exhibit in many ways an overwhelming ideal form of masculine image, especially "in our current culture of ornament [where] manliness is defined by display value" (Faludi xxi). In a Manospheric world where physical attractiveness reigns supreme, many young men are having trouble looking past the beautiful forms of the actors and influencers on screen.

American Psycho and *Fight Club* do not shy away from their blatant and gratuitous exhibition of the male form. Patrick Bateman is given an entire sequence within the first 10 minutes of the movie in which his form and beauty are transparently put on display. We see Bateman, dressed solely in his underwear, enveloped in high contrast light as he does various ab workouts and stretches. The light causes each one of Bateman's muscles and veins to pop out and be even more visible than in a normal context. Subsequently, we see a fully nude Bateman in the shower as even more highly contrasting and diffused light bathes his toned back and buttocks. Director Mary Harron is not subtle in the body worship of the titular character. As Tim Edwards puts it in *The Spectacle of the Male,* "The implication [of this scene] is that Patrick Bateman is about as near to an Adonis or sex god as contemporary masculinity can get" (115). This implication is communicated almost entirely through the exhibition and celebration of

Bateman's masculine corporal form. Harron was so sure that Bateman's model-like physique was essential to the role that she discouraged the studio from pursuing Ed Norton as Bateman, saying "he has to be *GQ,* he has to be model handsome" (Shapiro). It makes sense then, that Norton was used as a foil to the hyper-masculine Brad Pitt in *Fight Club*.

Tyler Durden's corporal physique is displayed throughout *Fight Club,* as well. Brad Pitt's extremely lean physique, again enveloped in very contrasting overhead lighting, is most memorably exhibited while fighting in the fight club itself. While beating up another member, his pecs, abs, and shoulders are glistening in the light as a combination of sweat and blood reveal the striations in his muscles. Even when he is wearing clothes, Director David Fincher highlights Durden's muscularity by giving constant camera attention to his often greased torso, usually emphasized by his usage of low-cut pants that expose his "v-line" and the muscles across his pelvis (Edwards, The Spectacle of the Male 117).

It's no coincidence that two of Hollywood's most attractive actors were cast to play the two roles. Both men are seen as extremely desirable and display these traditional physical ideals of masculine beauty.

There seems to be a disconnect, however, between the way in which the films talk about the masculine beauty standard and the way they *show* it. In *Fight Club,* after pointing out the chiseled male physique of a headless Gucci model on a bus ad, the Narrator asks Tyler jokingly, "is that what a man looks like? Only for Tyler to laugh and respond, "Self-improvement is masturbation, now self-destruction…" clearing critiquing those that spend all their time trying to, for lack of a better term, "looksmax."

But, the effect is generally confusing: Brad Pitt exhibits the same physical traits as the Gucci model. Christian Bale also exhibits the same ultra-lean musculature in his respective role.

Although the texts try to ideologically argue that the appearance of men is vapid or unimportant, the visual images of Pitt and Bale are undeniably in favor of the opposite. And, even if the creators are trying to be satirical in their depictions of the men, their actual appearance is too alluring to be ignored. In some ways, this is another reason why the film versions of these stories have stayed relevant in the zeitgeist much longer than their *non-visual* novel counterparts. Deakin, in *White Masculinity in Crisis in Hollywood's Fin de Millennium Cinema,* confirms:

> "American Psycho may try to show the dislocated logic of pumping muscles
> entirely for aesthetic purposes in Bateman's grueling routines, but this philosophy
> is missed in the way the images are incapable of refraining from drawing us *into*
> the body aesthetic, not its parodying. Irony, parody, or whatever the filmmakers
> (apparently) lace the constructions of their muscular protagonists with *become*
> *inherently difficult to read* through the noise of the image" (77, my emphasis).

It's no wonder that young men become entranced with the physical images of these "Adonis sex gods," despite the films' messages that appearances are not important.

Literally Me and Social Media

On social media, the hyperfixation with these characters' physiques goes even further. Many personal trainers have stated that new clients come into gyms with the goal of looking like Pitt or Bale, specifically "Brad Pitt in *Fight Club"* or "Christian Bale in *American Psycho*." This is evidenced as well by the countless YouTube videos and websites dedicated to sharing the workout and nutrition plans that will help one look like Bateman or Durden (Ward, Barnett, St.

Clair). Some Reddit users even go as far as to photoshop Tyler Durden's face onto their own

bodies as a way to flex their physique and align in it with the most ideal male they can think of.
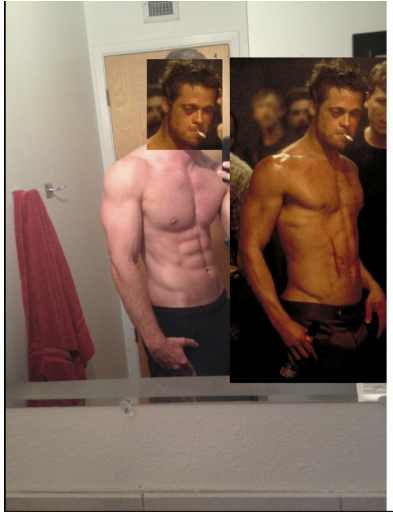
From a deleted account on r/Fitness, September 2012

This brings us back to "looksmaxxing" on social media. In many cases, certain creators

and influencers will create their content specifically to capitalize on the visual (and usually

corporal) aesthetics of these particular films. The TikTok creator Kareem Shami, who goes by

the username, "@syrianpsycho," helps young men around the world to maximize their genetics

and "level up" their looks, all under the guise that he's the Syrian version of Patrick Bateman.

Shami explicitly cited *American Psycho* as one of the catalysts for his own "glow up" and the

obsession he has with helping other young men do the same. After watching the movie for the

first time at 18, the "Syrian Psycho" said "damn, I wish I had [Patrick Bateman's] skin-care

routine, his morning routine… The only part that *isn't* perfect is his psychopathic tendencies"

(Bernstein, my emphasis). Like Deakin explained, despite the sometimes satirical nature of these

characters (the comedy, the over-the-top murderous proclivities, etc), the allure of the physical

image draws young men in, allowing them to "cherry pick" only certain qualities to idealize, blissfully ignoring the warning signs of what else comes with that type of obsession. This is strongly in sync with Hall's concept of negotiated reading of the text: choosing to read parts of the encoded message as dominant while simultaneously decoding others as oppositional.

The aforementioned "morning routine" of Patrick Bateman actually appears to be ahead of its time in 2000. "My Morning Routine" content across platforms is rampant in the age of social media. Additionally, the way in which Bateman painstakingly describes each product and its application process is reminiscent of "hauls," "get ready with me," and "my workout routine" content that have become staple genres of influencer culture in the last ten years. There is a feeling that Patrick Bateman, if taken out of 1980s yuppie culture and dropped into 2020s America, could be a very successful "looksmaxxing" influencer if he wanted to. This sentiment was even echoed by Bret Easton Ellis himself who, in 2016, was asked where he thought Bateman would be if he lived in the mid-2010s. Ellis wrote: "Would he be using Instagram, showcasing his wealth, his abs, his potential victims? Possibly," while also going on to say he could see Bateman tease girls on Tinder while wearing a Yeezy hoodie (Ellis, Town & Country).

Literally Me and Homoeroticism

There is also a strong case to be made of the homoerotic appeal of the lead characters in these films. While the Manosphere and TRP are generally reserved to speaking on heterosexual relations between men and women, there is a sense that, like mentioned before, the presentation of the male figure and form is quite alluring. The depictions of the bodies of these characters could therefore be interpreted in a sexual and homoerotic way.

To begin, it is important to note that the authors of the books of both *American Psycho* and *Fight Club,* Bret Easton Ellis and Chuck Palahniuk respectively, are both openly gay men. The stories themselves came from men who understood the dynamics of masculinity and sexuality in a different way than the average straight man.

However, in many ways the film versions of the stories are more implicitly queer due to their visual nature. The same morning routine scene that lingers on Bateman's nude form, in which it is implied that Bateman is an "Adonis Sex God," can also be also be interpreted as homosexual: "his muscularity and grooming, if not his dress sense specifically, are equally if more implicitly also recognisable as gay…the film cannot escape the inevitable ambiguity concerning his sexuality" (Edwards, *The Spectacle of the Male* 115). Additionally the scene in which Bateman has sex with two prostitutes (and videos the encounter) intentionally limits the objectification of the women. Instead, Harron depicts Bateman as watching *himself,* adoring "his own oiled and gleaming, pumped and pumping physique on the video screen" (115). To me, it is here where a connection is drawn between the idea of Manospheric "self-improvement," "looksmaxxing," and "focus on yourself, king" and homoeroticism. Bateman would rather watch the male form (his own, which he painstakingly perfects every morning) engage in sexual acts than the two women in front of him.

Similarly, there are also many homoerotic overtones in *Fight Club*. Fincher and Palahniuk do their best to overtly deflect them with the addition of a sexualized woman, Marla, but the very nature of the fight clubs and the fights themselves can be seen as a metaphor for homosexual sex. There are clear links in the physicality, the secrecy, the all-male exclusivity, the sweaty bodies, the lack of clothing. Even the way that the fighters collapse on the ground holding one another after a fight, as if they just climaxed, implies "homosexual sex could easily be

substituted for the violence were it not for the stigma of effeminacy attached to it" (Edwards, *The Spectacle of the Male* 118).

In a way, the appeal of these characters' bodies comes from not only an attraction to their idealized form and one's aspiration to be like them, but also just sexual attraction in general. *Literally Me* characters operate somewhere in the middle ground of the question, "do you want to be them or be with them?"

Overall, due to the undeniable physical beauty of both of the lead actors in these roles, the standard and Manospheric physical ideal of masculinity is celebrated and put on display. Patrick Bateman and Tyler Durden would both be considered 10/10 attractive on the Manosphere grading scale; they would without a doubt be "Alphas" or "Chads," making them some of the most ideal figures for what young men should be (or at least look like). They are idealized examples of what Faludi noted as "ornamental" masculinity. Additionally, the homoerotic overtones of the film confirm the overall sexual attractiveness of these characters, implying that part of the allure is their sexual appeal to young men. But, there are plenty of men in Hollywood and famous movie characters that have a chiseled physique and intense beauty. Why would only these specific characters become "Literally Me?"

"Acting the Part"

The Sigma Male

Where these characters differ from the "hard bodies" of the 1980s and the steroid-heavy superheroes of the 2010s, is their mentality. While they may display a hero-like physique and appearance, their mindset is much more aligned with that of the Manosphere and "Sigma Males."

Since the global pandemic of 2020, an increasingly larger subset of the internet began to use the term "Sigma" to refer to a certain set of characteristics exhibited by both fictional characters and real people. The "Sigma Male" became a new subversive masculine persona that fell into the world of Manosphere lingo. Sigma males are men that exist in a role other than "Alpha" or "Beta," yet they are still equivalent to an Alpha on the hierarchical scale. According to Selna Kim in a 2022 explainer TikTok, the Sigma male is known as "the rarest male on Earth, which makes them irresistible to women."

Sigma males are often described as introverted Alphas; they are "lone wolves" that play by their own rules and often live on the fringes of society, either literally or figuratively. Instead of focusing on normal societal problems or cultivating healthy relationships (whether that be romantic or personal), they are often focused on the acquisition of wealth, personal development, and career enhancement. Despite Sigma Male accounts and communities claiming that they are removed and separate from the regular Manosphere (as a true Sigma would claim), Hadford argues that due to their use of similar vernacular and ideological frameworks, they are just a subset of "redpillers." Unlike many Manosphere personalities, Sigma male real life personalities, such as Jordan Belfort (also a character in a *Literally Me* film), Jordan Peterson, and Gary Vee, do not self-identify and rarely teach an explicit "Sigma Male" lifestyle. Instead, the Sigma community "cultivates those it perceives to be worth emulating through their own curation, primarily Sigma Male Grindset edits and compilations on TikTok and YouTube" (Hadford 87).

Perhaps the most famous "Sigma Male" in real life is Andrew Tate. Tate, a former professional kickboxer, has become an influential voice in the Manosphere for his controversial teachings that advocate for young men to return to earlier eras of masculinity. Like a true Manopheric voice, Tate claims that women should be subservient to men and that men should

connect to their masculinity through discipline, working out, and building a business (Haslop et al. 8). Tate is the ideal Sigma Male because he has both the material and worldly success of an "Alpha," yet he continues to play "outside of society's rules" by openly spouting misogynistic rhetoric, promoting anti-establishment views, and staying on the cutting edge of controversy.

It is this combination, the success and the societal opposition, that also makes *Literally Me* characters so appealing to the Manosphere crowd. They are "literally me" because they are the ideal forms of an everyday "redpiller" becoming the ultimate "Sigma Male." I will explore how these characters exhibit these characteristics.

Literally Me and Women

Because the number one cohesive trait of the Manosphere is misogyny, *Literally Me* characters tend to have an interesting relationship with women. Sigma *Literally Me* characters, despite exhibiting antisocial behavior and being incredibly misogynistic, don't seem to have trouble engaging in sexual relations with women. Yet, they exhibit the Manosphere trait of pure misogyny, seeing women essentially as sexual escapades and nothing else. Bateman in *American Psycho* is successfully engaged to be married (even though it's clearly just for the status of it), and is participating in affairs with the partners of his coworkers. Additionally, his hiring of prostitutes seems to gain him favor in a Manosphere that approves of the practice; it is an incel staple, as mentioned before (Cannito & Camoletto 598, Vallerga & Zurbriggen 615).

In *Fight Club*, Durden is the physical embodiment of the Narrator's most masculine, sexual, and dominant side. Durden engages in over-the-top dominant sex with Marla, the film's only female character, in an extremely ridiculous manner. Marla's moans are heard throughout the house at a hilariously loud volume while the bumps and slaps heard upstairs by the Narrator

cause dust to fall from the ceiling. When the Narrator sees Durden while in the bedroom with Marla, he is wearing a pair of yellow rubber gloves. As Deakin points out, "beyond marking his sexual encounter with Marla as merely 'riotous fun,' [the gloves] also imply more scathingly that she is a disease or infection, something he must safeguard against as to not become contaminated by her female influence (97).

In fact, *Fight Club* and Tyler Durden have a lot to say about women. In the first scene of the film, the Narrator voices over, "and suddenly, I realize that all of this—the gun, the bombs, the revolution—has got something to do with a girl named Marla Singer." A woman is inherently the cause of all of the destruction that the characters are "forced" to carry out in order to regain control of society. Durden blames much of their generation's woes on women as well: "We are a generation of men raised by women. I'm wondering if another woman is really what we need." This is of course at the same time that he is spitting his ideology about how the men of their generation have been forgotten and left behind. Andrew Tate's ideology says something very similar. Scholar Craig Haslop and his colleagues identify "gender unfairness and male victimhood" as one of the essential pillars of Tate's ideology, preying on boys' insecurities of their role in the "zero-sum game" of gender equality (Haslop et al. 7).

In *American Psycho*, Patrick Bateman seems to view all women (and to a fair extent all people, in general) as just another commodity for him to consume. They are just as immaterial as the suits he wears and the beauty products he uses. Because of this, he has no problem using prostitutes for his perverse purposes and killing women whenever he feels like it. Even the way Bateman orders around the women in his apartment is as if they have no autonomy of their own and are nothing more than objects for his pleasure. The only exception is his secretary, Jean.

Jean is the one person who Bateman lures to his apartment and is about to kill, but stops himself at the last second and shows empathy. This is a great example of a secondary kind of relationship that *Literally Me* characters can have with women: the protector. In many *Literally Me* films, characters may simultaneously treat some women as sexual objects while looking at others as "damsels in distress" in need of saving. Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* lusts over Betsy but ultimately almost gets killed trying to set Iris free from a life of prostitution. The Driver in *Drive* goes on a killing spree to protect Irene. There is a sense of old school masculine chivalry that can also be very attractive to young men looking for meaning in their lives. One could argue that there is a connection here as well to Freud's madonna-whore complex, with *Literally Me* characters having trouble viewing a woman as both sexual and saintly (or worth protecting).

Therefore, when it comes to a relationship with women, Sigma *Literally Me* characters are perfect Manosphere members. Not only do they view women as sexual objects for their pleasure, but they also still manage to have access to a lot of women for said sexual encounters. They also can justify their beliefs by occasionally acting as a hero/protector for some women who they deem worthy of such.

Literally Me and Nonconformity

Literally Me characters also exhibit Sigma characteristics through their anarchic or "outside the rules of society" thinking, despite their material success. Like Tate, the ultimate Sigma Male archetype in real life, *Literally Me* characters are generally very successful and yet still believe that they need to "fly solo" and operate on the fringes of society.

Patrick Bateman has, on paper, an incredibly successful job. He works in mergers and acquisitions at a Wall Street firm that affords him the lifestyle of fancy high rise apartments and

Michelin star dinner reservations. He has designer clothes and more luxury beauty products than one could ever need. He also has a beautiful, rich fiancé. Yet, despite all of that, he feels the need to reject the lifestyle in some way, lashing out and killing people in order to feel something. His rejection of the elite capitalist lifestyle while also his indulgence in it is what makes him the quintessential Sigma Male. He is able to have his cake (partake of the excessive luxuries of a Yuppie lifestyle) and eat it too (reject it through violent outbursts and sexual escapades). It is the fact that he is able to "have it all" and still look cool doing it that makes him so alluring.

And, while Tyler Durden alone may not have the material wealth of Patrick Bateman, the Narrator does, to some degree. The very nature of the two-sided *Fight Club* protagonist accurately depicts both sides of the Sigma Male. On the one hand, the Narrator has all of the financial success and security that one could ask for in the modern world. He has a stable, well-paying job that affords him the luxury of filling up his apartment with unnecessary ornamental furniture and knick-knacks. He also has a boss that is more than reasonable, allowing him for a long time to show up to work underdressed, bloody, and not meeting normal workplace hygiene standards.

On the other hand, the very existence of Tyler Durden as the narrator's other half allows him to indulge in the violence, anarchy, misogyny, and lack of "political correctness" most associated with the Red Pill, all while looking effortlessly cool and masculine.

That's also not to say that Durden alone doesn't have some form of traditional success, either. Even though he's not the CEO of a large company per se, he does become the leader of a paramilitary terrorist organization crafting his cult-like followers into whatever image he likes. He creates his own success that operates outside of the rules of normal, capitalist society.

Andrew Tate is like a capitalist version of Tyler Durden in this regard. He advocates for freedom from an oppressive system not through the destruction of everything, but through the exploitation of it. "Get rich" is his prescribed remedy to the woes of the "rat race," assembling a "space monkey"-like army of followers who trust his "authentic and reasonable voice" (Haslop et. al 6).

Overall, despite having the perfect outward "look" for an ornamental culture that praises body appearance, facial features, grooming habits, personal style, and material success, *Literally Me* characters tend to *think* and *act* the part of an ideal Sigma Male from the Manosphere. They are deeply misogynistic, anti-establishment, and play by their own rules. They are simultaneously able to voice their opinions of the crooked, oppressive nature of the system while also being effortlessly good at it. It is this precise contradiction, the one that allows them to live almost hypocritically, that makes them so alluring to young men in a depressing social system, and promotes a negotiated reading of the texts.

Trump, the Mainstream Role Model

In 1991, when *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis was published by Vintage, there was a massive outcry against the novel's content. Ellis' original publisher, Simon and Schuster, who had paid Ellis a $300,000 advance for the book, backed out after seeing the final product. According to the New York Times, Ellis received death threats with graphic details about how he should be cut up and tortured like the Bateman's victims in the book. Even national feminist societies like The National Organization for Women called for nationwide boycotts of the book, saying that Ellis was a "confused, sick young man with a deep hatred of women who [would] do anything for a fast buck" (Cohen).

To counter the backlash, Ellis claimed that he thought people should be more aware of the difference between an author and the characters they write about: "People seem to insist I'm a monster. But Bateman is the monster. I am not on the side of that creep" (Cohen). All in all, upon release of the novel, only a very small percentage of readers viewed Patrick Bateman in any way as some sort of admirable figure, who portrayed *any* sort of aspirational or redeeming qualities. There was not as much of the confusion we see today between the author's explicit take on Bateman (as a misogynistic, barbarous, monstrous creep) and how the character is revered thirty years later. It would probably be seen as the other way around: the public believed that Bateman was such a vile psychopath that they even passed that judgment onto the character's creator.

However, around that time, Donald Trump had already become a household name on Wall Street, having already written multiple books and living in a very similar environment as the one described by Ellis in the novel. In fact, Patrick Bateman in the novel is *obsessed* with Donald Trump. Trump is mentioned twenty-four times in the book, not only helping to ground the novel in its selected time period but also to signal Trump as Bateman's ultimate role model. To Bateman, Trump is everything he wants to be: he is the perfect Yuppie.

Bateman even thinks about Trump just before murdering in the novel: "Faded posters of Donald Trump on the cover of Time magazine cover the windows of another abandoned restaurant, what used to be Palaze, and this fills me with a newfound confidence" (Ellis, *American Psycho* 157). It's almost as if the image of Trump in his mind, the person who described the "almost maniacal" behavior of successful people in *The Art of the Deal,* allowed him to justify his violent outbursts. Therefore, from the origin of the character of Patrick Bateman, there is a direct connection between him and Donald Trump.

Donald Trump's legacy would go on to entirely change as his political career took off in the 2010s (and is still ongoing with his leading of the polls for the 2024 election). Trump became not only the president of the United States but the poster boy for a new cultural movement: post-truth.

In this section, I will touch on how Trump not only exemplifies many of the characteristics of fictional *Literally Me* characters but also helps to legitimize these characters as role models for young men.

To begin, I want to address a contradiction: despite Trump's clear lack of athleticism and a traditionally ideal masculine physique, his body is still associated with the kind of masculine body types that are fetishized by the Manosphere. While the majority of *Literally Me* characters do exhibit hyper masculine body types and aesthetics, Trump simply does not, and never really did. However, I do think that it's notable that many of Trump's followers will depict him as being more of a "Chad." A perfect example of this would be the work of Ben Garrison, the right wing political cartoonist. Garrison often depicts Trump with more of a traditionally masculine physique, his deltoids and biceps bulging out of his shirts. He also will depict Trump as participating in more traditionally masculine activities that he doesn't do in real life, such as boxing, lifting weights, or fighting dragons. It's as though Trump apologists (many of whom are Manosphere crossovers) are making up for Trump's lack of physical masculinity in other ways.

Schiff the Punchy Bag, Garrison, January 2020

Trump the Powerlifter, Garrison, November 2019

Yet, Trump exhibits many of the behavioral and mental traits of both Bateman and Durden. All of these men (fictional or not) exemplify the shared characteristics and behaviors associated with both postmodern fiction and "post-truth," in general. To begin, I want to look at how all three prioritize unreliable narration and subjectivity over objective truth.

Unreliable Narration and Post-Truth

In both *Fight Club* and *American Psycho,* Tyler Durden and Patrick Bateman are unreliable narrators. As we come to find out later in *Fight Club*, Tyler Durden and the Narrator are actually one in the same. Tyler is a figure of the Narrator's imagination, his "shadow" self or the hyper-masculine version of himself. Because of this, the audience is left thinking for the majority of the film that there are two separate characters on screen at a time, who exist independently from one another and interact individually with supporting characters. However, we soon see that all of what was shown needs to be reevaluated and judged again for its subjectivity. The narrator has actually been fooled himself, just like the audience.

Similarly, by the end of *American Psycho,* the audience is unclear whether or not Patrick even committed any of the murders depicted on screen. Paul Allen is said to be alive and well,

and Bateman gets off scot-free despite his best efforts to confess for his crimes. Both of these events likewise force the audience to reflect on the subjective experience of Bateman's telling of the events and rethink whether or not anything he said (or was shown) was true.

Matt Graham identifies in his 2021 article *Twenty-First Century Postmodernism: The Legacy of American Psycho in the Era of Donald Trump,* that "features more commonly associated with postmodern fiction—[including] unreliable narration…reappear in the bizarre behavior of Trump, reinforced by the advent of post-truth culture"(223). In other words, post-truth political information, which "prioritizes subjectivity over universality, facilitating an individual's detachment from a collectively shared reality" is very similar to the way in which *Literally Me* characters present the truth in their films (224). I think it's especially interesting to note that arguably the three most famous *Literally Me* characters, Bateman, the Narrator/Durden, and Travis Bickle from *Taxi Driver*, all use voiceover in their cinematic interpretations, signaling that, without a doubt, the film is being shown through their subjective perspective.

Trump's own style of political rhetoric functions in a similar way. It prioritizes "style and presentation over coherence and consistency," and is so all over the place and unreliable that many political scholars have claimed that really nothing he says should be taken seriously or held to the same standard of truth as normal people (225).

In an interview with the AV Club, Mary Harron, the director of *American Psycho,* discussed the similarities between Trump's comment that "he could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot someone and not lose any voters" and Patrick Bateman's ability to get away with murdering tons of victims right in front of everyday people. It feels as though, regardless of the era, both "characters" play into their unreliable nature for their own benefit (Rife, Dwyer).

Unregulated Capitalism

Similarly, Trump aligns himself with *Literally Me* characters by, in essence, being a caricature of unregulated capitalism, full of excess. Bateman is, of course, the best example of this as he has completely built his life around the types of clothes he wears, restaurants he dines at, and hilariously, what type of font and paper he uses for his business cards. The Narrator, pre-Tyler Durden, also is completely lost in the consumer rabbit hole, explicitly asking himself how his IKEA furniture defines him as a person. Another *Literally Me* character, Jordan Belfort from Scorsese's *Wolf of Wall Street,* can even be seen as a literal Trump stand-in with his excess of money, women, drugs, and playboy Wall Street lifestyle.

If, as Matthew D'Ancona writes, Trump is "more a symptom than cause" of post-truth culture in America, then he and other *Literally Me* characters are representing sort of the same thing: they are both ultimate examples of how postmodern storytelling, with elements such as unreliable narration and excessive consumption, have become more of a reality than fiction in post-truth America. No wonder there is confusion, therefore, of how to interpret these fictional *Literally Me* characters in the 2020s. On the one hand, they exhibit characteristics that are unreliable and lacking truth, but on the other hand they are simply exhibiting traits of the leader of the free world. "Essentially, the aesthetics that functioned as a point of critical reflection in *American Psycho* have become a political reality during Trump's presidency" (Graham 226). The institutional codes that were used to encode the original texts more than 20 years ago are not the same institutional codes being used to decode them in the modern day.

"Anti-Woke" Views

The next aspect of Trump that aligns him with *Literally Me* characters is his display of Sigma-like beliefs and "anti-politically correct" views. If a Sigma Male is an extremely successful Alpha that doesn't play by the Manospheric hierarchical rules, then Trump aligns perfectly. Many Sigma Male thought leaders of the Manosphere, like Andrew Tate, Gary Vee, Jordan Peterson, and Joe Rogan have made their brand by "telling things as they are;" the entire Manosphere is built around the idea of the "red pill," or exposing someone to the "real truth" behind the way the world works.

Chuck Palahniuk, in an interview in 2016 talking about the recent release of the book Fight Club 2, compared Trump and Tyler Durden in this regard: "I think that they're very much alike. They are, in a way, the same archetype, that big, blond, blustery guy who stands on a soapbox who says bold things that a lot of people wish that they could say" (Puchko).

And while Trump might not take violent action to fight back like his film counterparts, the act of speaking out against the oppressive forces of "political correctness," "wokeness," and the "elites," while also being very much an elite himself makes his double standards on par with Bateman and Durden. He too is able to complain and whine about how unfair the system is and how oppressed he is while also being undeniably successful at it.

<u>Conclusion</u>

The world of the "He is Literally Me" character is a world of contradictions. By using the guide of Stuart Hall's negotiated reading of a text, young men who identify the characters as role models must choose to straddle the line between two different frameworks of reference.

On one hand, Sigma *Literally Me* characters are perfect, idealized forms of men on the Manosphere hierarchy of sexual capital. They are traditionally masculine and beautiful in their appearance, with lean, muscular bodies, well-groomed hair, and chiseled jawlines. They are successful in their careers and have so much disposable income that they don't know what to do with it. They have plenty of women in their life who they are able to have sex with whenever they want. They should be ultimately content with their style of life.

On the other hand, Sigma *Literally Me* characters exhibit thoughts and behaviors more akin to "red-pillers" and incels. They are deeply misogynistic, viewing women mostly as sexual objects used for their own pleasure, with rare exceptions in which they choose to "save them." They are anticonformist and anti-establishment. They are bombastic and preach rhetoric that goes against societal norms, whether it be literally or through their actions. They all use violence as a means to take control of a world that they feel has robbed them of their masculinity and oppressed them in some way.

The issues and themes explored in the early *Literally Me* films were not only relevant at the time of their releases, but have become even more prevalent in today's culture. The "ornamental culture" described by Susan Faludi has become exacerbated by social media and camera phones in everyone's pockets. Loneliness and isolation has become an epidemic, with the COVID-19 pandemic making an already desperate problem even worse. And violent, misogynistic ideology, which used to be more underground, has leaked from the shadows and thrust itself into the mainstream for our youth to consume in their most formative years. Unfortunately, "every other person is like Travis Bickle now" (GQ, Scorsese).

As young men continue to struggle with their identity in a world that is different from the one they were taught to expect from their parents, they will continue to look for strong role

models that can remedy their insecurities. When "past models of masculinity feel unreachable or socially unacceptable [and] new ones have yet to crystallize," where do young men and boys turn to? (Emba). *Literally Me* characters and Sigma Male role models, grown out of the Manosphere, have fulfilled that need for many young men. .

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