

# The Topic of Consumerism in Bret Easton Ellis' American Psycho

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Master's thesis / Diplomski rad

2023

Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj: **Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku, Filozofski fakultet**

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:142:715514>

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Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2024-07-18**



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Studij: Dvopredmetni sveučilišni diplomski studij engleskog jezika i  
književnosti i sociologije

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Tema konzumerizma u *Američkom psihi* Breta Eastona Ellisa

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Znanstveno područje: humanističke znanosti

Znanstveno polje: filologija

Znanstvena grana: anglistika

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Master's Thesis

Scientific area: humanities

Scientific field: philology

Scientific branch: English studies

Supervisor: Jasna Poljak Rehlicki, Assistant Professor

Osijek, 2022

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U Osijeku, 9. siječnja 2023.

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## **Abstract**

With the ever-increasing focus on capitalism and materialistic values in Western society, emerged a new appreciation for Bret Easton Ellis' third novel, *American Psycho*. A cult classic in both book and film format, this cultural phenomenon does an outstanding job of creating a unique perspective on consumerism and the ways in which it affects humans both on an individual and societal level. Therefore, the main focus of this paper is the topic of consumerism in *American Psycho*. Being that the theme of consumerism is omnipresent in the book, this paper aims to take a look at some of the more vital aspects of human existence in relation to the accumulation of material goods. Firstly, it will be crucial to inspect the social climate during the 1980s - the time period in which *American Psycho* takes place. From then on, the terminology of consumerism will be discussed, to get an idea of the general meaning and areas of human experience it most concerns. Furthermore, the paper aims to analyze the ways in which consumerism affects Patrick and other characters in the story during their day-to-day lives. It will also show the ramifications that consumerism can have on society as a whole. The aim is to shed light on the violence and objectification of people within this world and how these themes resonate in society as we know it in 2022.

**Keywords:** *American Psycho*, consumerism, identity, violence, capitalism

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## Introduction

This paper discusses the overall topic of consumerism in *American Psycho*. Some instances of consumerism can be found in nearly every single chapter of this novel. The book is filled with what seem like advertisements upon advertisements of various products, coming straight from Patrick's monologues. Objects are the only things the characters talk about, even when they are talking about other people. The thesis is categorized into three main sections.

The first section discusses consumerism in detail and the social context of the 1980s in the US, in addition to general information one must know about *American Psycho*. The first chapter dives deeper into the novel itself. The second one discusses what consumerism means as a concept and all the various implications that consumerism has on society. In order to better understand *American Psycho*, one must become acquainted with the main social ideology of the 1980s, the history, and the overall cultural atmosphere during Ronald Reagan's presidency, which is why there is an entire chapter dedicated to that. From then on, the paper discusses general instances of consumerism in *American Psycho* and the ways in which it emerges in nearly every interaction in the book.

The aim of this paper is to highlight specific concepts related to the phenomenon of consumerism. Therefore, the main section of the paper is dedicated to that particular idea. The third chapter delves into how consumerism and work is connected in *American Psycho*, as well as the perceptions of people who are poorer than the main protagonist. The fourth chapter offers insight into Patrick's identity and how that relates to his relationship with consuming material goods. The next chapter deals with the interactions the characters in the book have with each other and how they are dictated by their consumer lifestyles. Following that topic, the paper discusses the concept of human objectification, i.e., people as objects. Objectification is most present in the book when talking about women, which will be analyzed in the next chapter. In the final section of the paper, the paper discusses violence in *American Psycho*, namely fantasies of violence suggesting that they are products of frustration due to consumerist and capitalistic pressure surrounding the main character. Then the paper takes a look at the state of the world in the current decade, specifically in relation to consumption of all forms of material and cultural goods. Lastly, the paper touches upon the relevance *American Psycho* holds in the current social climate and why there has been a newfound appreciation for the novel in the last couple of years.

## 1. About *American Psycho*

*American Psycho* is a novel published in March 1991. It is Bret Easton Ellis' third novel, which shares narrative themes with his first book, *Less Than Zero*. Upon its release, *American Psycho* received a lot of controversy due to its graphic depiction of pornography and violence. It was an extremely divisive book among critics and the public. Many people thought that the book promoted racism and misogyny, whereas others praised its compelling social commentary on rich people in the 1980s.

The reason may be that there are various interpretations of the novel due to the fact that the book falls into many genres; some call it a black comedy and others call it a horror novel because the main character is a serial killer (Berkane 12). However, *American Psycho* offers a fresh perspective from a killer's point of view and serves as a harsh criticism of modern society and its emphasis on material goods over genuine human connection.

Those who have studied *American Psycho*'s style and themes in more detail have described it as a work of blank fiction since one of the most paramount traits of blank fiction is the use of a broad range of mass cultural references, which can be seen in abundance in *American Psycho*:

Blank fiction is a term that describes the writing of a generation of contemporary US writers whose influence started in the 1980s and is still alive at present in the voices of authors like Dennis Cooper, Bret Easton Ellis, and Chuck Palahniuk. Through a flat, affectless, atonal prose and non-committed narrative voices, these writers deal with contemporary urban life, violence, sex, drugs and consumerism. ("U.S. Literature")

Because *American Psycho* depicts one man's life in New York City and given that his main interests are spending money, having sex with prostitutes, and committing outrageous acts of violence, it is safe to say that *American Psycho* falls into the category of blank fiction. As a result of that, the expectations readers may hold before reading the book can be subverted in many ways. *American Psycho* is a unique novel: it is a mix of magazine-inspired descriptions of products and places, humorous tonal shifts, and shocking fantasies of violence.

Nevertheless, over the years, it has gained cult classic status among readers. With the release of the movie with the same title in 2000, it became even more of a cultural phenomenon.

Themes of social conformity and consumption resonated just as much in the early 2000s as they did when the book was first published.

There are sixty chapters in *American Psycho*. Titles of these chapters are often short, for example, “Girls” or “Tuesday.” Between ordinary sounding chapters, there are some disturbing chapter titles, such as “Killing Dog” or “Tries to Cook and Eat Girl.” The novel is divided into long paragraphs and it contains extensive descriptions of people’s appearances and places they go to. There is not much emphasis on characters’ emotional states or their motivations. The style of *American Psycho* can be described as being surface-level and descriptive.

On the superficial level, this novel focuses on young urban professionals living in New York in the 1980s, the so-called “yuppies.” They are generally fairly attractive men in their twenties or thirties with a rich social background and an impressive education. This book puts the readers directly inside one yuppie’s mind: Patrick Bateman’s. He is the blueprint of all yuppies, considering his love for accumulating objects and general acts of debauchery.

Through Patrick’s eyes, the readers witness the high-class lifestyle he leads and the state of society at the end of the 1980s in the US. The characters are mostly Patrick’s rich friends and various women he sleeps with and then kills. His girlfriend, Evelyn, is the character who is mentioned the most, after Patrick and his sworn enemy, Paul Owen. The novel mainly depicts people of a higher social class, whereas other people from a lower social class, like sex workers and homeless people, are mentioned very sparingly. All his friends work at a seemingly very impressive firm called Pierce & Pierce, dine at expensive restaurants, wear the most stylish and expensive clothing, and have beautiful and successful girlfriends.

Despite his opulent lifestyle, Patrick is hiding a dark side beneath the politeness of the average yuppie. Very early on, the reader learns that he is unhappy with his life. He takes no pleasure in what he does and openly disdains the people he interacts with. The only way he fulfills his needs is through the torture and murder of his many victims. He is a serial killer, or he wants to be one, depending on how one interprets the novel. At any rate, the book is filled with gruesome descriptions of violence and violent fantasies. Patrick describes this chaotic world in extensive detail, and despite all the luxury surrounding him, his tone remains neutral throughout the novel. Whether he is talking about the latest hip restaurant or killing a person, the emotional content of his words remains the same. Being that everything is the same and

nothing means anything, there is a strong sense of meaninglessness and futility throughout the novel: “In other words, Bateman’s narrative is a repetition of behavior patterns, situations, and reckless consumption of products that leaves the reader with an impression that Bateman’s world is small and futile” (Saraiva 111).

On the grounds that the reader is inside Patrick’s head, everything he does is highly systematic, and so are his descriptions of people and places. There is almost no introspection or self-reflection to be found after his heinous crimes; only a straightforward approach to the next steps that need to be taken in his daily routine. Due to the fact that Patrick is the narrator, there is the possibility of him being an unreliable narrator. It is fairly easy to question the validity of some events in the book because many of Patrick’s crimes are so despicable in nature that it is hard to imagine someone could do them in real life and, just as importantly, live without getting caught. Other things described in the book are easier to pinpoint as real, for example, the shallow conversations between Patrick and his friends and the poor manner in which Patrick treats his girlfriend Evelyn and other women.

Given that Patrick is the only entry to this world, the reader sees other people through his eyes and understands the climate he inhabits through his motivations and frustrations. It would be expected that this point of view would offer a deep emotional study of the main character, but *American Psycho* does the opposite. Patrick provides readers with vacuous conversations with his friends and lovers, updates on the latest media content he is consuming, and occasionally, he slips and says something aloud that one would normally only read as part of his inner monologue. In a few instances, Patrick reveals his deeper thoughts and repressed feelings, but they are written between endless paragraphs talking about products and people, so they do not hold much weight. Seeing how there is a lack of emotional content in the book and the focus is more on objects than people, only adds to the argument that *American Psycho* as a work of blank fiction.

## 2. What is Consumerism?

There are several key definitions of consumerism. Hayes defines consumerism as “the idea that increasing the consumption of goods and services purchased in the market is always a desirable goal and that a person’s wellbeing and happiness depend fundamentally on obtaining consumer goods and material possessions.” Also, others state that consumerism is the consumer ideology of Western society, which revolves around a social and economic structure in which customers are encouraged to buy anything, regardless of whether they need it (Vaidya).

Though consumerism as a standalone phenomenon is crucial for overall global prosperity, it is often followed by an entire ideology that can be detrimental to people’s general wellbeing. If one takes a look at what consumerism implies, it is evident that this ideology is not sustainable in the long term. If a person’s happiness depends solely on the accumulation of consumer goods, when is the stopping point? Does owning many objects create a fulfilling life, or is it just a lie? This idea is even mentioned in the novel: “Today’s topic is Does Economic Success Equal Happiness? The answer, in Harry’s this afternoon, is a roar of resounding ‘Definitely,’ followed by much hooting, the guys all cheering together in a friendly way” (Ellis 236). It is evident that characters in the novel are biased in that consumerism is a solution to all their problems.

The issue is much more complex in real life. Buying things that are not necessary for human survival is to be expected. However, accumulating unnecessary goods may not be optimal in some ways. The idea of overconsumption has been more frequently mentioned than ever before. Due to constant advertising in all forms of media, people are expected to own all the things that are being promoted, regardless of whether they need them or not. Furthermore, irresponsible spending is encouraged in many ways. In the last few decades, owning many things has been equated with being successful and is also connected to the corruption of the American dream where wealth is equated with success. On a societal level, consumerism has many positive aspects, such as spinning the wheel of production and creating job opportunities for people, but it also has the potential to cause ecological disasters due to the sheer volume of objects discarded on a daily basis.

Recently, there have been trends denouncing materialism in the form of minimalism. However, trends of minimalism and conscious spending still lie outside the mainstream. When talking about consumerism, one has to differentiate between traditional consumption and

consumption as we know it in modern society. “‘Traditional consumption’ refers to the period when consumed goods were either produced within a family or, at least, locally. Meaning, there was a connection to the consumer goods” (Asanova 12).

On the other hand, in “new” consumption, there is no personal connection with the seller. This way of selling products creates a distance between the person who made the product and the one who owns it. This impersonality is a key component in consumer culture and has vastly influenced the way in which people consume things. “Distance between humans has loosened the communal ties that were once had and created the shift from a collective to an individual self” (Asanova 12). Therefore, this way of consuming has created alienation between everyone involved in the trade process. And that estrangement between products and the people who are creating and buying them creates less human connection than it did during the traditional consumption period.

Furthermore, to understand the relationships the characters in *American Psycho* have with the products they are purchasing, one has to acquaint oneself with the concept of conspicuous consumption: “Conspicuous consumption is a means to show one’s social status, especially when publicly displayed goods and services are too expensive for other members of the same class” (Hayes). This concept is very present throughout *American Psycho*. Patrick and his friends are competing between themselves over who will have things that display their high social status to others. The utility of said objects is irrelevant as long as it serves the main purpose: showing one’s superiority to everyone. This type of consumption is more common among wealthy people, who often pay more attention to the differences in wealth signifiers than the average person. The improvement of one’s image is the ultimate goal of this type of consumption. Disregarding other utilitarian purposes for owning things creates a lot of surfacelevel objects without any true value, as shown in *American Psycho*. Some argue that Patrick’s moral decline is due to the emptiness his consumerist lifestyle creates and the frustration of buying things and never feeling fulfilled, which is, for sure, one of the negative sides of consumerism. One of the most crucial points to make when discussing *American Psycho* is that consumption is used as a vice to create identities for oneself.

In his review of sociological theories of consumerism, Thompson mentions Firat and Venkatesh, who, leaning on Lyotard’s ideas, claim that: “In contemporary societies production and consumption exist in a repeating cycle and retail sites and advertiser have increasingly focused on producing symbols which individuals consume in order to construct identities” (qtd.

in Thompson). Using objects as the way to differentiate oneself and categorize other people is not a new phenomenon, but consumerism has made it so that the entire perception of oneself and others is based on the ability to own certain things. As a result of that, one's identity has been largely influenced by their ability to buy and display objects.

The stereotype of the woman who loves shopping is a common archetype in popular culture, yet not so much is said about men as consumerists. Although there have generally been more products advertised for women, there has been more advertising directed towards men in the last couple of years. In 2022, advertising for men still operates on the same principle as it did in the 1950s. Vance Packard talks about advertising to men of the 1950s: "The game is to make them the necessities of all classes... By striving to buy the product – say, wall-to-wall carpeting on installment – the consumer is made to feel he is upgrading himself socially" (qtd. in Higgs). That sentiment remains true in the world of *American Psycho* in the 1980s. Upward social mobility has remained the primary goal of consumerism throughout the decades. Identifying oneself with things has become the standard and not the exception. Herbert Marcuse states how "people recognize themselves in their commodities" (Marcuse 11). Therefore, consumerism has become an essential part of self-construction and overall perceptions of social hierarchy.

Consumer society presents products as necessary, even if they are not. Owning products is what determines what kind of person you are, and their utility is of secondary concern. Similarly, in *American Psycho*, people are classified based on their apparent opulence or lack thereof, in which case they are completely dismissed as unworthy of consideration. On the other hand, those who want to conform might feel pressure to keep up with other people, and therein lies the danger of losing personal and moral values. Finally, the constant desire for more leaves *American Psycho* characters always striving and never quite achieving any sense of genuine fulfillment.

## 2.1 Social Climate in the 1980s

To make sense of the type of environment *American Psycho* characters live in and how the topic of consumerism fits within this timeline, it is imperative to see what life was like in the 1980s. Furthermore, the social context can help readers understand a character's motivation and action based on broader social expectations that are placed on people during these years. The 1980s were a significantly different time period than the 1970s for many Americans. The previous two decades have been turbulent for many people, and they also marked the time of counterculture and wide social change brought forth by the hippie movement during the late 1960s. The eighties were different because they were marked by a return to the *status quo*. That meant going back to social and political conservatism in terms of ideology (Musser). However, many remember the 1980s as an era of copious spending. The measure of success has significantly changed, with more focus on materialism. Due to Reagan's economic plan for the United States, which consisted of reductions in government spending and tax cuts for both individuals and corporations, there was an ever-growing gulf between the rich and the poor (Jackson).

One common goal between those two groups was the further accumulation of money. Materialistic lifestyles were sold to all groups, despite their level of income or social status. Over-excess is what many people were after during this decade, and the yuppie represented a walking commercial for consumerism. As Musser explains in his review of the decade, popular culture also followed that trend. In many popular songs and movies, the wealthy lifestyle was praised. This decade was also marked by many technological advances. New gadgets came into play, such as the Walkman, video cameras, better-quality TVs to name a few. Due to the popularity of electric devices, there was a lot of consumption of all forms of content. Mass media was an indispensable agent for further advertising must-have products and promoting the highly luxurious lifestyle that was glorified during this time period.

The tendency to glorify famous people is present in *American Psycho* as well. For instance, Donald Trump is mentioned numerous times as someone Patrick and his friends look up to. Specifically, because he embodies the quintessential male businessman. "All male characters look like clones of Donald Trump – they both represent and idolize him" (Williams). Their idolization hides an even bigger obsession, i.e., money and success, which they desperately want to replicate.



Due to the visual nature of advertising, the focus shifted onto appearances and image (Asanova 26). The image-based environment of the 1980s served as inspiration for *American Psycho* author, Bret Easton Ellis, when writing his main character. A life of surface-level banalities and a focus on consumerism is what helped create the world Patrick finds himself in. The author explains: “I was writing about a society in which the surface became the only thing. Everything was surface – food, clothes – that is what defined people” (qtd. in Freccero 51). From that initial concept rose the world of *American Psycho*, which pushed the limits of superficiality to the extreme.

The yuppie, a young urban professional whose sole goal was to make and spend money, was at the center of this world, which many would describe as the perfect embodiment of the 1980s. The mass media promoted this type of individual with its focus on acquiring the latest products, eating at the most exclusive restaurants, wearing the finest clothes, and so on. With this in mind, there was a lot of advertising directed at men to help create the yuppie image. Yuppies can easily be distinguished from other people: “He wore Armani, drove a Porsche, and carried a Gucci briefcase” (Asanova 18). This specific look was replicated by many men, and looking good became just as significant as portraying stereotypical masculine traits. Having a good personality did not matter that much in yuppie social circles, as long as the prior criteria of being successful and rich were met. This created a sense of elitism within American society, further dividing the cultural and economic gap between the poor and the wealthy. Yuppies also valued exclusivity above all, as it gave them a sense of superiority among the richest of the rich. *American Psycho*'s characters were based on those types of people. Men consumed different things than women, but their consumption significantly increased during this time period. A whole new market for products for men opened with the increasing popularity of the yuppie. The yuppie look brought back some qualities of the nineteenth century ideal of a perfect man with: “hefty membership fees, strict dress code, and elaborate drinking parties” (Asanova 15). Adhering to this lifestyle was necessary to fit in, and owning products that were promoted in the media was one of the most crucial points.

Furthermore, this cultural shift gave rise to the objectification of men, and no longer solely women, in the media. “It marked the emergence of the new “‘man-as-a-narcissist’: a playboy who wore great clothes and acquired beautiful cars and women” (Asanova 16). This objectification can be seen in *American Psycho* in the detailed descriptions of Patrick's body and his desire to be approved of because of his body. Most evidently, when Patrick is interacting

with his skin technician Helga: “I want Helga to check my body out, notice my chest, see how fucking buff my abdominals have gotten since the last time I was here” (Ellis 73). His body is simply another way to show off his sense of superiority. He works tirelessly on diet and exercise to achieve the ideal body.

This obsession with physical appearance is synonymous with his desire to stand out as the perfect yuppie. This decade was very individualistic, meaning that it focused on individual needs over collective wellbeing. The main theme of the 1980s was the idea of a self-made man, an independent figure. However, if taken to the extreme, this idea of independence can become unhealthy, as described in *American Psycho*. Overall, the 1980s as a decade were rich with many serious social events and political tensions for many Americans, the increase of both wealth and poverty, and a socially accepted ideology that focused less on the family unit and more on individual success.

This set the stage for more technological advances in the 1990s and the globalization of the world. The focus on appearance and the outside material world made it so that consumption was at an all-time high. “And practices of consumption came to dominate social relations while all aspects of social life were constituted as commodities” (Asanova 16). This commodification of people and omnipresent consumerism defined the 1980s and created the ideal environment in which Bret Easton Ellis could place his narcissistic characters.

## 2.2 General Consumerism in *American Psycho*

*American Psycho* is a novel that is full of acts of consumption. As discussed in “What is consumerism?” the characters in this novel consume products to prove themselves as great consumers rather than use the objects that are purchased. Products can be found everywhere in the novel. Some paragraphs sound as if they came straight from an advertisement, and characters act as walking advertisements for the products they use. Patrick describes cars, clothes, electronics, and every single product he uses that shapes his identity.

Detailed descriptions of products are present very early on in the novel. In the “April Fools” chapter, Patrick is describing what everyone around him is wearing: “Price is wearing a six-button wool and silk suit by Ermenegildo Zegna, a cotton shirt with French cuffs by Ike Behar, a Ralph Lauren silk tie and leather wing tips by Fratelli Rossetti” (Ellis 6). Note that Patrick does not tell the reader about his relationship to Price or how he is feeling upon seeing him; he is only describing his appearance as he does it with every single person he meets. In this manner, the reader is shown how detached Patrick is from the people around him, only seeing them through consumeristic lenses. The reader does not actually know any of the characters aside from Patrick in any real way. Their physical features are often not described, and their personality traits are seemingly non-existent. Therefore, the only way to know them is through the clothes they are wearing.

Not only is he describing appearances in extensive detail, he is describing every single object in his spacious apartment and office. In the following paragraph, he is debating about what he should do with a painting in his office instead of doing any actual work:

The Stubbs painting should probably go over the life-size Doberman that’s in the corner (\$700 at Beauty and the Beast in Trump Tower) or maybe it would look better over the Pacrizinni antique table that sits next to the Doberman. I get up and move all these sporting magazines from the forties – they cost me thirty bucks apiece – that I bought at Funchies, Bunkers, Gaks and Gleeks, and then I lift the Stubbs painting off the wall and balance it on the table then sit back at my desk and fiddle with the pencils I keep in a vintage German beer stein I got from Mantiques. (Ellis 44)

Patrick finds it essential to mention the price of these objects and where he got them from, as a testimony to his expensive taste. Further descriptions of products can be found during his monologue about his morning routine. His lengthy morning routine reads like another commercial. He is listing all the products he is using while he is getting ready:

Then I use the Probright tooth polisher and next the Interplak tooth polisher (this in addition to the toothbrush) which has a speed of 4200 rpm and reverses direction forty-six times per second; the larger tufts clean between teeth and massage the gums while the short ones scrub the tooth surfaces. I rinse again, with Cepacol. I wash the facial massage off with a spearmint face scrub. The shower has a universal all-directional shower head that adjusts within a thirty-inch vertical range. (Ellis 19)

The amount of care and attention to detail he demonstrates in this paragraph informs the reader about the quality of the products he is using. Patrick is clearly preoccupied with having the best quality products and, if possible, being the only person that has them. The reader is bombarded with these details so as to show the luxuries within Patrick's world and the amount of importance Patrick places on owning them. There are also a lot of brand mentions when they are not necessary plot-wise. For instance, when Patrick is watching his favorite talk show, *The Patty Winters Show*, and the topic of the episode is multiple personality disorder, he mentions this: "The shoes I'm wearing are crocodile loafers by A. Testoni" (Ellis 21). He is entirely dismissing the serious mental health issues discussed on the show and only focusing on what he's wearing. Patrick often plays *The Patty Winters Show* in the background and introduces various subjects it addresses. This show is a program about toddler murders, Nazis, sharkattack victims, and other controversial topics. "These very serious subjects are opposed to completely banal ones also treated in the program, such as tips on how your pet can become a movie star, a machine that lets people talk to the dead, salad bars or aerobic exercise among others" (Allué Bello 19). In this world, everything is the same, and consumption of this media only reinforces Patrick's indifference towards everything. Even the darkest of things becomes entertaining because all art has lost its meaning.

In a world devoid of morals and values where all that is left is entertainment, he even imagines himself on TV, promoting a product: "I'm imagining myself on television, in a commercial for a new product – wine cooler? tanning lotion? sugarless gum? – and I'm moving in jump-cut, walling along a beach, the film is black-and-white, purposefully scratched, eerie

vague pop music from the mid-1960s accompanies the footage, it echoes, sounds as if it's coming from a calliope!" (Ellis 222). Patrick's desire to sell products has been influenced by the internationalization of advertising he is subjected to day by day.

Patrick also consumes a lot of music. He listens to music on his way to work, in the office, and in his apartment. His passion for music is not fueled by his genuine love for the art. Rather, it is an extension of consumption for the sake of conforming. In three separate chapters, he recounts his favorite pop artists. He provides his opinion of Whitney Houston, Huey Lewis and the News, and Genesis. He mentions major themes of their songs and talks at length about the social ramifications of their music, not relating to the songs on an emotional level. Music is simply another form of consumption that means nothing except to confirm his social status as someone who is very knowledgeable about music.

Another piece of media that is mentioned throughout the novel is the musical *Les Misérables*. Posters of the musical are spread all over New York, and its subject matter is something the characters cannot comprehend. *Les Misérables*, a novel originally popular for its fight for social justice of the under-privileged and the oppressed, became a trivial entertainment in the world of this privileged milieu. The plot of the novel about starving people who end up in jail for stealing bread in order to survive makes for an ironic and strong contrast to the US in the 1980s and the characters in *American Psycho*. This historical and social novel adapted into a musical surely earned a lot of money and is often watched by the yuppies for one sole reason: because everyone else is doing it too. They have no genuine social consciousness and knowing about *Les Misérables* is a performative act. In Patrick's world, everything has become devoid of emotional meaning, and that fact is what creates a deep emptiness and cold detachment within him.

Contributing to this lack of substance are the many fashion rules discussed in the novel. Characters often spend most of their evenings debating proper clothing etiquette. "Now are rounded collars too dressy or too casual? Part two, which tie knot looks best with them? It's a very versatile look and it can go with both suits and sport coats. It should be starched for dressy occasions and a collar pin should be worn if it's particularly formal" (Ellis 22). The characters in the novel never talk about anything of real importance, and many of their conversations follow the same structure. For instance, they revolve around what the magazines wrote in their latest issue: "In the elevator Frederick Dibble tells me about an item on Page Six, or some other gossip column, about Ivana Trump and then about this new Italian-Thai place on the Upper

East Side that he went to last night with Family Hamilton and starts raving about this great fusilli shiitake dish” (Ellis 43). Therefore, magazines dictate the future experiences and desires of these characters. As a consequence of that, there is no genuine opinion that is shared among people; they simply recite information back and forth based on the latest trends.

Public opinion is all that matters to *American Psycho* characters, so much so that Patrick decides what to consume by reading the latest issue of *New York Magazine*. Upon ordering in the restaurant, he says: “New York magazine called it a ‘playful but mysterious little dish’” (Ellis 51). His personal taste never comes into play because consuming things is a public act which must be approved by the public. The listing of his personal items and the descriptions of them are similar to those of a sales catalog. Bateman, unable to convey emotions, opts for a highly informative approach. While at dinner with Patricia at Bacardi, Bateman is unable to express his own genuine opinion, as he has none, and instead resorts to magazines for guidance and quotations. His speech mirrors the fact that he has no authenticity and simply mimics popular culture in order to justify his social status. The show of approval is consistent among other characters as well. When Patrick takes a urinal cake from the bathroom, covers it in chocolate, puts it in a Godiva box, and gives it to Evelyn in a restaurant, she eats it despite the awful taste, and only gives positive feedback because it came in a Godiva box. This incident empathizes with the absurdity of consumer culture. Characters in *American Psycho* cannot be truthful because it would reflect poorly on them. Thinking that certain products are bad would mean that the person has a bad taste and would therefore be judged by everyone else. That is to say that the popular name of the product has more meaning than the actual quality. The fashionability of the product has become more pressing than its purpose.

One of the more shocking events in the novel is when Patrick kills a homeless man, and, upon putting him into his car, he runs into his friends, who, instead of looking deeper into the contents of Patrick’s bag, simply ask about who made it. The theme of choosing material objects over doing the moral thing is present throughout the novel. For instance, when a cab driver recognizes Patrick as the man who killed his friend, he does not turn him in. Rather, he asks for his watch, cash, and sunglasses. “‘These are expensive,’ I protest, then sigh, realizing the mistake. ‘I mean cheap. They’re very cheap. Just... Isn’t the money enough?!’ ‘The sunglasses. Give them now,’ he grunts” (Ellis 234). Patrick’s reluctance to give the cab driver the sunglasses comes from a deep place of privilege. In his mind, only certain people should own specific things. The reader can really see how much monetary wealth and status play a

role inside Patrick's mind. This perspective is shared by his friends, who value social status and their hedonistic lifestyles more than any moral values.

What the reader learns about Patrick and other characters in the novel is mainly their favorite products and what they like to wear, and not anything past that surface. The world of *American Psycho* is based on endless consumption and display of acquired objects, so much so that there is no room for authentic people to exist among those objects. Liktör notes that in this world, human existence has no other purpose but to live in luxurious apartments, dine at the most stylish restaurants, wear the trendiest clothes by the best designers and buy the newest consumer products (375). In other words, they themselves become objects, a beautiful but empty Godiva box.

Hedonism and endless consumption do not make for a fulfilling life for the characters. "Nothing fulfills him. The more he acquires, the emptier he feels" (Haws). Instead, consumerism makes Patrick bored and drives him to seek other ways to meet his needs. Due to the fact that consumerism is the main ideology of the 1980s, Patrick feels pressure to earn as much as he can and own the things people around him own. Despite being well off because of his family and his job, he always wants more. There is no greater purpose in Patrick's life other than choosing his next suit or hip restaurant to go to. In *American Psycho*, Patrick's consumerist lifestyle leads to devastating consequences: a total loss of identity, monotony, and an insatiable desire for more consumption.

### 3. Consumerism and Work in *American Psycho*

The concept of work means two different things in *American Psycho*. One is the actual work Patrick and his friends do on a daily basis. The other is the idea of success within capitalism. Right from the start, the reader is introduced to Patrick and his equally rich friends. Patrick and his colleagues do not do any work at their firm, Pierce & Pierce. Patrick only describes events in his office that are unrelated to work. Patrick's hobbies during work hours include teaching his secretary Jean the proper dress code, doing crossword puzzles, listening to music, and making reservations at exclusive clubs and restaurants. It seems that Patrick's contribution to society is not that grand. Patrick does not seem to be doing any meaningful work that fulfills him. Instead, the gratification lies in the title of the job. Like in many instances in the novel, surface matters more than substance.

By being a yuppie, Patrick does not have to do any of the work. The prestige lies in the social status and exclusivity of the profession, not in any work-related activity. His job is to earn money and spend money so that he can repeat the cycle all over again. Being successful as a yuppie means maintaining the yuppie image and owning material goods that prove one's success. The emphasis Bret Easton Ellis places on not working is intentional, as it further demonstrates his view of 1980s New York, a place full of flashy things and no substance. *American Psycho* characters are complacent because they are always preoccupied with some form of consumption. In the midst of all that stimulation, there is no time left for any sort of self-reflection to take place.

Work is another avenue for Patrick to perform the image he wants to present to the world. Therefore, work is just another social activity Patrick has to participate in to keep his social image intact. At one point in the novel, Evelyn even asks him about work: "‘You practically own that damn company,’ she moans. ‘What work? What work do you do? I don't understand’" (Ellis 132). Therefore, Patrick is not going to work to actually do something and contribute to the society, but rather to fill in that social norm. It is also quite telling that his girlfriend does not know what type of work he does. Instead of answering, Patrick changes the subject, not fully convincing her he himself knows what his job is. It is evident that Patrick views work as another part of the social game, and he judges people based on their wealth and the type of work they do. Meaning that those who are unemployed are seen as worthless in



Patrick's eyes. That is especially true when it comes to homeless people. Given that they do not own the things Patrick and his friends do and do not have the same social status, they are given very little thought. To make matters worse, yuppies in *American Psycho* treat poor people in a terrible manner throughout the novel. His mistreatment of the homeless goes even further when he attacks several homeless people and even one man's dog. His disdain for the homeless can be interpreted as insecurity as well as part of his superiority complex due to his high-paying job and social status. During one of his attacks, he tells the man to get a job. Revealing that Patrick does not understand his own privilege and expects everyone to meet his standards. Otherwise, they are not worthy of being a part of society. This confirms that yuppies are not interested in societal issues and the people portrayed in the musical they saw. Their lives are similar to the ones portrayed in *Les Misérables*, and those yuppies, brainwashed by consumerism and having lost all their moral values, do not understand that they are the ones who are miserable.

He takes pride in his position and is offended when sex workers he brought home do not seem interested in knowing about his job. In this instance, the amount of money Patrick offers appears to be so generous that sex workers are willing to risk death just to get it. People who have less income are therefore susceptible to exploitation by those who are powerful and wealthy. Yuppie's attitude towards members of lower social classes is tolerable at best. The idea of work and earning money represents different things to different social classes. For Patrick, it is relatively easy considering his wealthy background. For sex workers and homeless people, earning money is a painful task that does not offer any prestige or social power. On the contrary, as seen in *American Psycho*, they are open for exploitation and treated like secondclass citizens.

The internalization of capitalistic ideology is present in Patrick, as he represents capitalism's harsh dismissal of people who do not earn the most and consume that much. Most of Patrick's crimes are committed through this capitalistic lens. He either attacks people who earn more money than him or who are so below him in terms of wealth that no one would bother to investigate their disappearance. Patrick's disposable view of people is the result of capitalism and consumer culture. The brutal side of capitalism is shown through Patrick as he carries out acts of violence directed towards people who are poorer than him. In the *American Psycho* universe, money is everything, and the way in which you acquire that money matters less than the social status it provides. Even though Patrick does not work, he still looks down

upon those who do not have a job as it jeopardizes his worldview. Because of the lower class's inability to earn money and buy lots of things, they are not actual humans in Patrick's mind. Due to the fact that consumerism is the main activity in Patrick's life, people who are unable to participate in that lifestyle are not worthy of being part of his world. Patrick's sense of entitlement is an extension of the separation between the wealthy and the poor in the 1980s.

To conclude, *American Psycho* displays two sides of capitalism. Namely, capitalism is supported among the characters, as it is their primary ideology. Many people in this world thrive within a capitalistic system. There are endless forms of consumption and material goods available to them, and they do not have to work that much to get a lot. On the other hand, the brutal nature of capitalism is shown through poor treatment and outbursts of violence toward lower social classes. As previously mentioned, no actual work is being done by any of the characters; only talk of dress codes and trivial facts about products. Any desire for meaningful work, self-reflection about their privilege, or empathy for the less fortunate is replaced by constant consumption of products and the search for the next thing that will fill the inner emptiness created by consumer culture.

#### 4. Consumerism and Identity in *American Psycho*

Identity is one of the most prominent themes in *American Psycho*. *Oxford Dictionary* defines identity as “the characteristics, feelings or beliefs that make people different from others.” In *American Psycho*, the reader may find it very hard to distinguish one person from the other. The descriptions of characters all sound the same, and there is no mention of distinguishable personality traits that might help with the identification. In the consumerist society of *American Psycho*, there is no such thing as “different.” Everyone holds the same beliefs and emotions about everything. In that sense, there is no personal identity to discuss in *American Psycho*, only one collective identity everyone shares. Consumer culture has made it so that everyone is talking about the same things, and with the force of advertising, it has created the social pressure to agree with the most popular opinion. There is no space for subjective opinions or beliefs within this culture if one wants to fit in. Patrick is a prime example of this. He has no sense of identity, only opinions and feelings he has been programmed to have by consumer culture.

In other words, he has become what he consumes: “Bateman attempts to disguise his lack of humanity by purchasing the accessories of an identity he wants to possess: rich, successful and good-looking. He’s buying his identity through things!” (Nystrand 8). As he himself notices: “There is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory, and though I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable: I simply am not there” (Ellis 225). He is describing emptiness within him, and despite trying his best to form some image of himself, it is all a lie. There is nothing underneath it, only a void that is getting filled with more objects. Due to the fact that Patrick has no coherent identity, he tends to copy everyone around him to fit in. He dresses the same as his friends, goes to the same restaurants, works at the same firm, and so on. Patrick is not only consuming things; he is literally and metaphorically consuming other people, too.

A further argument for the lack of any distinguishable personal identity is that the characters in the novel are constantly getting mistaken for each other. Being that everyone looks the same, they have sacrificed their individuality and become interchangeable. Even though Patrick has a desire to confirm, this interchangeability becomes a point of frustration within him. The desire to stand out in some way, to be seen as an individual, preoccupies Patrick

beneath the yuppie facade. Therefore, it can be argued that Patrick developed another identity next to his yuppie facade, that of a serial killer. These identities do not represent Patrick; they are merely ways in which he created himself in order to survive. The yuppie identity is a mask Patrick wears to come across as the person consumer culture taught him he needed to be. The serial killer identity represents his sadistic urges and can be interpreted as a persona Patrick needed to create in order to express the frustration and boredom that envelope his every waking moment inside this capitalistic nightmare.

Despite his efforts to distinguish himself from everyone else by committing those crimes, he receives no recognition from others. He is denied being seen because everyone is interchangeable. Bateman will always be the same as everyone around him. Given that everyone is indoctrinated with the same ideology of consumerism, there is no way to establish a genuine personal identity without the risk of being alienated. That is why collective identity plays a major role in *American Psycho*. The best example of this phenomenon is the fact that every single man in Patrick's social circle is a vice president at the very same firm. Therefore, if for some reason one of them decides to quit or disappears, it does not matter in the slightest as they have many more of them doing the same job. Everyone is connected due to consumerism, and anyone who does not conform to established rules is looked down upon. They are distinguishable only in details, which Patrick notices on rare occasions: "'No. That wasn't Conrad,' I say, surprised at Price's inability to recognize co-workers. 'That guy had a better haircut.'" (Ellis 35). Even though Patrick expresses shock, he is nonetheless guilty of the same sin. Everyone is a copy of each other, and recognizing people would represent more awareness of others, which is difficult to achieve in *American Psycho*'s self-centered world. People's focus on themselves is the primary driver of all their relationships, making it irrelevant to keep track of other people. Patrick's identity is based mostly on how good he looks, and he does everything he can to maintain the perfect body. Patrick is obsessed with himself and his appearance: "'Hi. Pat Bateman,' I say, offering my hand, noticing my reflection in a mirror hung on the wall – and smiling at how good I look'" (Ellis 10). Since he has no sense of inner motivation or drive, he is simply following the image of a perfect man as advertised in the media. Consumer culture has replaced any sense of inner wants or needs he might have had.

All the knowledge Patrick possesses is consumer knowledge; even his speech is filled with pop culture references and food critic reviews as he has no original thoughts on the matter.

“Bateman is unable to express his own genuine opinion, as he has none, and instead resorts to magazines for guidance and quotations” (Nystrand 9). Therefore, Bateman’s personal taste cannot be distinguished from anyone else’s as they all read the same magazines and adhere to the same information. Given the fact that there is no stability in this type of identity, his feelings and opinions change easily as soon as mass media presents new information. As a result, his identity is based on what he consumes and he pays close attention to what he consumes, as it is the only thing that says anything about him.

His entire identity is based on his ability to buy products. In that way, Patrick models himself after a commodity, a product that everyone can approve of. Even though he is socially accepted, his yuppie identity is false, and therefore he feels no genuine sense of acceptance. He just keeps on switching between two false identities and becomes increasingly homicidal throughout the novel. Patrick remains utterly empty by the end of the novel, making no meaningful progress towards uncovering his real self, i.e., his authentic thoughts and feelings. Rather, he continues to define himself through consumer goods and success. The endless struggle for a stable self-image through consumption is what lies at the heart of all Patrick’s actions and social interactions. Patrick is a man who does not exist at all. He is just another product in an infinite cycle of consumption, nothing else but the personification of 1980s consumerism.

## 5. Consumerism and Social Interactions in *American Psycho*

As discussed in the previous chapter, there is no sense of personal identity in *American Psycho*. Instead, there is one collective identity shared by everyone in the book. Since nobody is their genuine self because they have no concrete sense of self, all relationships between characters are shallow. Their relationships are based, like everything in their lives, on consumerism. Berge states that, while Patrick can always recognize a brand, his attempts to identify people are less successful (290). For instance, Patrick only associates himself with people who participate in consumer culture as much as he does, make about the same amount of money, and are of equal social standing. Patrick's colleague, Price, even makes a joke about the standard everyone in their circle has for making friends. "I mean I doubt Stash makes the society pages of W, which I thought was your criterion for choosing friends" (Ellis 15). Since there are no authentic selves, there is no possible way to have truthful relationships.

Most conversations between characters revolve around discussing dress codes and various objects they own or plan to acquire. Because everyone's emotional lives are limited, there is no emotional connection between them. Most of their time is spent being concerned about their looks. Nobody pays that much attention to other people. "Jesus, Bateman, you should see how ripped my stomach is. The definition. Completely buffed out" (Ellis 8). Since everyone is equally focused on themselves, nobody gets any recognition from other people. Their main mode of conversation is competing against each other. As their sense of self lies in commodities, they try to one-up each other through their acquisition of material goods. In one of the most famous events in the novel, Patrick and his colleagues show each other their new business cards. This event would not have such high stakes in any other world, but for Patrick's circle of acquaintances, this is how they base their own sense of self-worth because they lack a personal identity.

Preferring certain objects directly affects Patrick's self-esteem and relationships with other people, as they represent other people's rejection of him. Not that Patrick necessarily wants deeper relationships with them; he simply wants to be seen as superior. Generally, there is a strong indifference towards people around him. Even his romantic relationship with Evelyn does not have any signifiers of commitment or genuine companionship. "I am fairly sure that

Timothy and Evelyn are having an affair. Timothy is the only interesting person I know” (Ellis 17). Patrick does not seem affected by the fact that she is cheating on him. If anything, he admires Timothy and does not take offense because he does not care that much about Evelyn. On top of that, he himself also has affairs with his friend’s girlfriends.

Therefore, characters in *American Psycho* are detached in their relationships with one another, their primary motive being molding themselves into the perfect image consumer culture has created for them. Patrick questions Jean’s perception of him: “Nothing. I’m just... letting you know that... appearances can be deceiving” (Ellis 225). Further demonstrating that he has created an image that has been meticulously crafted in order to fit in with others. Jean’s perception of Patrick is flawed because Patrick reveals what he knows is socially acceptable and nothing else. When Jean says to Patrick: “‘You’re... concerned with others,’ she says tentatively. ‘That’s a very rare thing in what’ – she stops again – ‘is a... I guess, a hedonistic world’” (Ellis 226). The reader can clearly see how Jean’s perception of Patrick is far from objective. Since Patrick has presented himself as someone who cares about social issues, Jean has the wrong idea about him. On the other hand, he senses that she wants to know more about him past the surface and often contemplates having a genuine relationship with her. Their relationship stands out in the novel because it causes Patrick to have true feelings about someone and goes a bit past the usual talk of consumerism. Jean expresses a real desire to get to know Patrick, but he is unable to oblige her as he is in too deep with the way he is living. Consumer culture has robbed him of any emotional depth he needs to have to pursue a loving relationship with another human being. And that is how consumerism directly affects relationships in *American Psycho*.

This inability to connect with others leaves him isolated from everyone, including his sense of self. Social games he plays in order to fit in isolate him even further, and he has no way to satisfy his emotional needs, so he finds an outlet in pornography and violence. His fixation on consumerism simultaneously brings him closer to everyone else and further apart, as it is a false identity. Patrick’s inability to free himself of his false identity and shallow relationships seems futile in every way. Even when he breaks up with Evelyn later on, she is more concerned about maintaining their false identities than losing a valuable relationship. Since everything in their world is about image, it would badly reflect on her. She says: “But your friends are my friends. My friends are your friends. I don’t think it would work” (Ellis 206). Therefore, the concern is about collective identity and not potential personal heartbreak.

All human connection has been replaced by the endless consumption of objects. However, the relationships one can have with objects are relatively limited and possess no actual depth. Every character in the novel seems incapable of having real relationships, and therefore, their ability to love is put into question. Ellis depicts a world in which social interactions resemble a chess game rather than a pleasurable activity of sharing common human experiences. As self-recognition happens through objects, everyone is treated like an object that can easily be disposed of. As a result, no emotional attachments can be formed between people, only to the images they have created for themselves and each other. Patrick has three close friends: Timothy Price, David Van Patten, and Craig McDermott. There is no description of Patrick's origin stories with each of them, the reader never learns anything about their personalities, so much so that it is hard to know who Patrick is talking about. All he ever describes are their clothes and distasteful comments they make about other people, namely women. They waste their time in a similar fashion as Patrick, and they easily get caught up in trivialities that matter to nobody except them. In the chapter "Another Night," they spend hours talking about making a reservation and getting distracted with other things and never end up deciding where to go.

There is also the issue of communication. Characters tend not to listen to each other when speaking, as they are too focused on themselves. Patrick usually does not listen to people of lower social standing than him as he judges people based on their ability to buy. His irritation with the cleaner who washed his sheets is a prime example of this tendency. He accuses her of not listening, and then he does the exact same to her, further perpetuating the miscommunication. This miscommunication in social interactions does not stop between members of different social classes. Patrick and his friends do it to each other as well. Most of the time they pretend they are listening, but none of them seem to care what the other is saying, as long as they get to appear intelligent in the conversation. Even when outright confronted with Patrick's violent musings, no one calls him in on it; they dismiss it or think he said something else. Therefore, it can be seen how Patrick's frustration grows as no one truly listens to him and acknowledges his needs.

They remain disinterested in anything real, as Patrick, on a rare occasion, talks about real-life issues: "We have to encourage a return to traditional moral values and curb graphic sex and violence on TV, in movies, in popular music, everywhere. Most importantly we have to promote general social concern and less materialism in young people" (Ellis 13). Patrick's



monologue is meaningless as he is not living the lifestyle he is advocating nor adhering to the values he preaches. His friends are dumbfounded by this, once again exhibiting that they are not bothered with social issues if they do not concern them. They go back to competing with each other over who has the most money or who sleeps with the most beautiful women. Of course, there is no winner among them as they all act exactly the same. However, in Patrick's eyes, Paul Owen is better than anyone else as he owns the Fisher account, something Patrick desperately wants. He expresses anger and envy toward him multiple times and ends up killing him because he is battling with feelings of insecurity.

One of the reasons Patrick is insecure is that he thinks of people as objects, and his object value is lower than Paul Owen's in his mind. "In some studies, they have found that strong materialistic values lower people's life satisfaction, leads to depression, narcissism and antisocial behavior" (Rosa). Therefore, Patrick's focus on consumerism directly affects his mental health and the way he approaches social interactions. It is evident that Patrick's values and opinions are not his own. In many ways, he's a product of his environment, and he suffers because of it. Patrick fluctuates between feelings of inferiority and need for superiority, trying his hardest to put everyone else in their place as perceived by his higher social standing and feeling envy towards people who have better apartments or jobs. He even resents his own brother because he could secure a reservation at Dorsia when he cannot. He is shown not to care that much about his brother's well-being, only focusing on the fact that his inability to make a reservation makes him look inferior.

There is also a lot of feelings of superiority and narcissism. He assumes anyone who compliments him is in love with him. He is often mistaken for a model and appears to be thrilled about it, as looks are one of the few things he bases his self-worth on. He assumes every woman is flirting with him. Even Jean's affection for him is put into question since Patrick is an unreliable narrator. Behind the need for acceptance is the deeper need for love that he cannot satisfy in this empty, materialistic environment. Patrick is most vulnerable when surrounded by his many victims. During one particular murder, he weeps and asks to be loved. This inability to form human connections is one of the strongest drives that make him violent, along with the unsatisfactory, temporary gratification of consumerism.

Even when Patrick tries to express his frustration to others, nobody listens. There could be many different interpretations as to why nobody listens. It might be due to guilt by

association. If anyone acknowledged Patrick's antisocial behavior, it would be detrimental to their reputation. It is also easier to remove evidence of Patrick's wrongdoings from Paul Owen's apartment than it is to turn him in and have the apartment charge a lower rent. Maintaining the perfect image is the only thing that anyone cares about, exhibiting once more the brutal side of capitalism. Products are described in more detail than actual people, emphasizing the difference in importance between those two things. Objects will always have the upper hand because they are simpler than human beings. One of those forms of consumption is pornography, which Patrick consumes frequently. He notes: "Pornography is much less complicated than actual sex, and because of this lack of complications, so much more pleasurable" (Ellis 159). Crawford explains this: "Even a low, crude description of a pornographic scene is not complete and cannot be mentioned without references to en vogue products like 'Diet Pepsi' and the 'New Stephen Bishop' or metropolitan shopping palaces like Saks" (15). The omnipresence of consumerism and its relation to social interactions is evident throughout the novel.

Another example of consumerism being a foundation for a relationship is when Patrick goes to a restaurant with Patricia, one of his mistresses. At first, she does not want to go out with him, but then he mentions Dorsia, and she instantly changes her mind. Due to the fact that Dorsia is a sign of high social standing and she wants to be seen there, she accepts his offer even though she does not care about him. Their entire relationship is therefore based on a lie driven by consumerism. Social relationships exist solely to confirm his social status and allow him to fit in. It serves no greater purpose in terms of self-actualization. Products and media have created new false needs and dismissed real needs for socialization. Even though people have now found themselves in objects they own, it still does not negate the real need for self-recognition in others. Overidentification with objects has created a lot of issues in the world of *American Psycho*. It has created an unhealthy society with fake individuals and a lot of the blame falls on consumer culture. Philip Cushman also describes a world "in which flash is valued over substance, opportunism over loyalty, selling ability over integrity, and mobility over stability" (qtd. in Asanova 17). That is the world of *American Psycho* and the social interactions in it.

## 6. People as Objects

As discussed in previous chapters, human beings and their relationships with one another are deeply affected by consumerism. Consumerism has made it so that humans are reduced to commodities themselves. This chapter discusses the implications of this ideology within the *American Psycho* universe. Given that *American Psycho* characters refuse to see other people as other beings who have feelings and lives of their own, their relationship with their own selves suffers as well. For instance, Patrick largely thinks of himself as an object and not a real person. Due to his excessive identification with things, he sees no real difference between things and other people either. In Patrick's eyes, everything is an object that he can use for his own benefit and then discard.

People are there for his consumption in all forms to satisfy his needs, and they do not exist outside of that realm. He categorizes people in the same manner as he categorizes objects. He is very detached in his relationships because he is viewing people through the lens of consumeristic value rather than emotional connection. This objectification of people allows him to distance himself from everyone and be violent towards them as, to his mind, they have no inner value other than to satisfy his sadistic urges. In one of the more telling paragraphs in the novel, it is evident that Patrick cannot tell the difference between people and objects. He describes the contents of his bedroom: "Things are lying in the corner of my bedroom: a pair of girl's shoes from Edward Susan Bennis Allen, a hand with the thumb and forefinger missing, the new issue of vanity Fair's splashed with someone's blood, cummerbund drenched with gore..." (Ellis 209).

This lack of differentiation is what creates more room for consumption and less for human connection. He does not seem to see the difference between some designer shoes, an issue of *Vanity Fair*, a cummerbund, and a mutilated human hand. Consumption of objects is

so all-encompassing that it involves cannibalism. Cannibalism is simply the next step in Patrick's already existing treatment of humans as things. Eating their flesh is a part of his consumerist lifestyle, but it also represents Patrick's desire for some form of real human intimacy he cannot get otherwise. Consumerism has turned people into objects looking for other objects in a never-ending cycle of consumption. Patrick is stripped away from his civilized self and is lost in a sea of objects he cannot tell apart and unhealthy self-obsession.

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The sense of isolation he feels from himself and others takes a toll on his mental clarity and leads to homicidal behavior and the treatment of people as objects. His internalization of materialistic culture in the 1980s causes a lot of problems in his life and is the ultimate cause of the tragedy that is Patrick's existence. Another instance where people are seen as objects is during intercourse suggesting that the exchange of goods is the act of sex. Consumerism is most evident in Patrick's pursuit of sex workers. He does not treat the girls like actual humans. He directs them as to what to do and how to look. They have no free will during this interaction. Patrick uses them for his needs and then tortures and kills them. On account of their lesser social standing, Patrick disregards them, as no one will look into their disappearance. Their interactions with Patrick are no different from any other exchange of services. Furthermore, Patrick's relations with his girlfriend and other mistresses of the same social status are just as impersonal and emotionless. Since they are looking at each other to satisfy their own needs and nothing more, there is no room for intimacy or depth. In a capitalistic society, individuals do not matter as long as there are other consumers buying material goods. This interchangeability is due to capitalism's emphasis on quantity over quality. A capitalistic society as a whole matters more than an individual. In this manner, people are similar to the objects they are buying.

In one of the most disturbing parts of the novel, Patrick describes three vaginas he holds in his gym locker. "There's a barrette clipped to one of them, a blue ribbon from Herme's tied around my favorite" (Ellis 222). The reader is informed that Patrick has kept trophies of his victims. In this way, humans have literally become objects. Patrick has internalized consumerism to the utmost degree, displaying human remains as one would sort products in a window-shop. People are dehumanized in these acts of violence and cannibalism. Furthermore, people who turn into objects do not give Patrick any satisfaction. Just like any form of consumption, it leaves him wanting more. Not only does Patrick relate to other people as

objects, he thinks of himself as a product as well. Through his various self-care routines, from vigorous exercise, skincare routine to meticulous dressing, he is creating a brand of himself. He is molding himself into an object that everyone around him wants to buy, not letting any imperfections be noticed. As mentioned in the previous chapter, he is competing with other brands (people) to become the “it product.”

In their daily lives, characters in *American Psycho* deal with an enormous volume of objects, and their default mode is emotional distance between themselves and perceived others. This detachment and dehumanization create a lot of anguish in characters and enforce the ideology of viewing oneself and others as objects. The world in *American Psycho* has become a colossal shop full of the same objects in the form of New York yuppies.

## 6.1 Consumerism and Women in *American Psycho*

Women are one of the social groups in *American Psycho* that are treated like objects and described in derogatory terms. They are regarded as less than men and objects to be used and discarded. Women are side characters in the novel, and that is by design. Even though men are also objectivized through detailed descriptions of their clothes, women are much more sexualized than men. They are also Patrick's most frequent victims.

Male characters have no regard for women as their equal counterparts. Instead, they refer to them as "hardbodies." This term is used in a derogatory fashion, reducing women to objects for men's pleasure. Often, when talking about women, they use dehumanizing terms that reflect their perception of women as a sum of body parts meant for their use. They talk about their heels, their hair, or how big their breasts are, focusing only on appearance and not personality. Their bodies exist only to be appreciated by men and used as they see fit. Even though Patrick tries to be politically correct around women and everyone else outside his social circle, it is evident that he is lying and is only honest when talking to his like-minded friends.

Therefore, Patrick and his yuppie friends are misogynistic in their views. "What do we want to eat?' Me. 'Something blond with big tits.' Price" (Ellis 22). Not only do they reduce women to their physical features, they judge and scoff at women who are not conventionally attractive. They notice the smallest imperfections on their bodies, as their body is the only thing of value to them. "While the hardbody stands there we check her out, and though her knees do support long, tan legs, I can't help noticing that one knee is, admittedly, bigger than the other one. The left knee is knobbier, almost imperceptibly thicker than the right knee and this unnoticeable flaw now seems overwhelming and we all lose interest" (Ellis 33). As they perceive themselves as objects, they look at women in the same manner. Anything that does not fit with the consumerist image is not acceptable and therefore, worthless. The consumerist

image of the perfect woman is usually a skinny white woman in her twenties with blond hair who is stylish and submissive. The perfect woman serves as an accessory to the perfect 1980s poster boy, which Patrick flawlessly embodies. Because he has authority over women in general, he does not shy away from commanding them in his daily life. He even says to his secretary Jean: “‘Don't wear that outfit again,’ I say, looking her over quickly” (Ellis 44). His dominance over women is evident in the acts of torture and violence he commits throughout the novel. Patrick's perception of women as objects means that he can manipulate them however he pleases. He controls what they wear, what they eat, what they talk about, and even if they get to live. This form of control Patrick has over women in the novel shows capitalism's ideology of treating women when it is taken to extreme.

Even the expected societal forms of romance are destroyed due to misogyny. For instance, Patrick contemplates bringing Evelyn some flowers when one of his friends interjects: “‘Nah. Hell, you're banging her, Bateman. Why should we get Evelyn flowers?’” (Ellis 7). Male characters in the novel represent patriarchal society that abuses and then disregards women, not showing any empathy for them as long as they are fulfilling men's needs. Yuppies' misogynistic views are also present in her consumption of media. Most evidently, in Patrick's consumption of large volumes of pornography and gore as well as other forms of mass media. For example, when watching *The Patty Winters Show* about the topic of big breasts, Patrick ridicules a woman who decided to have a breast reduction and then calls his friend to mock her with him. In the *American Psycho* universe, women are viewed as being there for reproduction and doing what they are told. To Patrick, women have no value unless they are attractive or want to pleasure him sexually. He also assumes every girl is in love with him as he fits into the consumerist image of the perfect man.

Furthermore, personality does not matter, as visual appearance is the only thing that brings any value. Men in the novel even discuss what constitutes a good personality in a girl. “‘There are no girls with good personalities,’ we all say in unison, laughing, giving each other high-five. ‘A good personality,’ Reeves begins, ‘consists of a chick who has a little hardbody and who will satisfy all sexual demands without being too slutty about things and who will essentially keep her dumb fucking mouth shut’” (Ellis 59). What men look for in their girlfriends is essentially a sex doll. Sex is the main drive between men and women in *American Psycho*, from the men's perspective. The only reason men interact with women is in pursuit of sex. Women's purpose for existence is to be sexual objects for men. To them, sex is just another

material good. They even admit to it: “Listen to me, Bateman,” Hamlin says. ‘The only reason chicks exist is to get us turned on, like you said. Survival of the species, right? It’s as simple’ – he lifts an olive out of his drink and pops it into his mouth – ‘as that’” (Ellis 59). As their perception of women has been shaped by patriarchal society and capitalistic ideology, men cannot see anything past the surface and never look for emotional connection with the women they interact with.

What is more, they think that women view them in the same manner. Namely, that they are just as vapid and indifferent as them, simply caring for material objects. When discussing what women look for in a partner, they come to this conclusion: “They want a hardbody who can take them to Le Cirque twice a week, get them into Nell’s on a regular basis. Or maybe a close personal acquaintance of Donald Trump,’ Price says flatly” (Ellis 59). Social status and money matter more than any genuine relationship. Ellis confirms Price’s suspicions in several instances. The most obvious one being Evelyn’s reaction to Patrick’s wish to break up. “But your friends are my friends. My friends are your friends. I don’t think it would work,’ she says, and then, staring at a spot above my mouth, ‘You have a tiny fleck on the top of your lip. Use your napkin’” (Ellis 206). Her concern is not about the loss of their relationship. Rather, it is about how others perceive them and the consequences of their social standing. She is just as emotionally detached as he is, proving Price’s point. On the surface, they look like a perfect couple, yet it is evident that this relationship is just as hollow as any other in this world. Patrick is tired of the perfect consumer image they have created together, even mentioning that he is bored of looking at her beautiful face. Instead of celebrating that his girlfriend is successful in her line of work, he is turned off by it, envying her autonomy outside of his control. In this way, characters in *American Psycho* use each other as tools that shape their social image and then leave whenever they desire to do so.

Jean is one notable exception in this world, as is Bethany, Patrick’s former girlfriend. When they meet, she does not seem to be as self-involved as everyone else in the novel. She seems to be curious about Patrick’s life and tries to keep the conversation going beyond superficial things. Bethany and Jean are people who prove that there are women in the *American Psycho* world who are not that absorbed in consumer culture and, albeit in the minority, are actively looking for authentic social interactions. Patrick has a lot of mistresses, many of whom are his friends’ girlfriends. Nobody actually minds swapping partners because they do not view women as people. To them, they are objects that they can trade between



themselves. All relationships with women are transactional in nature. Buying women as a company is the same as acquiring any other object, and they are just as disposable as anything else.

Violence against women by men is also a common theme in *American Psycho*. Patrick is obsessed with serial killers whose main victims were women, drawing inspiration from them. He shares his violent fantasies with his friends, and they do not seem to be alarmed by this behavior. If anything, they encourage it and agree with him. In one of their conversations, he says this: “‘When I see a pretty girl walking down the street, I think two things. One part of me wants to take her out and talk to her and be real nice and sweet and treat her right.’ I stop, finish my J&B in one swallow. ‘What does the other part of him think?’ Hamlin asks tentatively.

‘What her head would look like on a stick,’ I say.” (Ellis 59). Violent fantasies about women are presented as a normal conversation topic among men as it strengthens their bond and their superior social status and masculinity. By behaving badly towards women, they conform to the accepted standard for how men should behave.

It is also noteworthy that Patrick kills men and women differently, further solidifying his perception of men’s superiority. He tends to kill men in an almost painless way, whereas he tortures his female victims and sexually violates them. Patrick’s rage toward women appears to be more personal than his rage toward his male victims. It is also made clear that women from the upper class are more protected from violence than women with lower social standing. Their perceived value in society is higher, making it more difficult for Patrick to get rid of them. It is also telling that they are not protected completely, as they are still women and therefore of less value than men in their eyes. Patrick is seen to be obsessed with women’s bodies, not only sexually but also in a consumeristic way of wanting to own them completely as objects. His desire to want to dominate women in all areas of life is connected with the way consumer society defines masculinity and femininity. In the 1980s, the socially accepted view of men and women still heavily relied on old gender roles. The primary role of a woman was still as a mother and a wife, while men were defined by their ability to earn money.

Since yuppie culture is so influential in this decade, men’s ability to provide financially and have the capacity to buy expensive things is their primary identifier. Likewise, women’s capacity to behave within society’s parameters of being a good wife and mother has been shaken up by more and more women getting involved in stereotypically man-oriented fields of

work. However, advertising still heavily relies on old gender ideologies. “Indeed, advertisements in women's magazines were predominantly for fashion items and domestic products, whereas men's journals portrayed masculine consumption as both ‘glamorous and manly’” (Asanova 15). Nevertheless, this financial independence and decreasing lack of submission to men’s will is what created bitterness and resentment in men at the time. Given that money is a major part of why many men hold power over women, Patrick exercises this power by buying escort services, as those women are financially dependent on him.

Therefore, he wishes he could exercise the control he has over people of less social standing than women in his social circle. This bitterness manifests as apathy and indifference in Patrick’s romantic pursuits. He pursues them as part of the social game he has to play in order to fit in, competing with his friends over the perceived value of the women they get together with. Since all relationships are transactional, romantic relationships are also a part of that. “Their appealing appearance functions as sign-exchange value as the women are desirable and wanted. In exchange, Bateman offers sign-exchange value in the form of reservations at expensive restaurants and exclusive venues. The relationship is simply an exchange of social status” (Nystrand 13). Patrick does not consider those girls’ feelings because he does not care about them beyond the social and sexual value they provide. It is also mentioned that Patrick forces one of his mistresses, Jeanette, to get an abortion. Women have no autonomy in this world. They are simply status signifiers for men. Therefore, all individuality is erased from women as they are an extension of men’s repertoire of objects surrounding them. Women with lower social status do not get to use their own names; Patrick makes them up from them and dresses them how he wants, putting them in expensive clothing to replicate his true desire of dominating someone of his own social status and proving his masculinity to himself. Sex workers are nameless, and readers find out nothing more about them: their appearance, profession, social status, and so on. These pieces of information are not considerable for Patrick, as they are all just bodies for him. He is neither interested in their past nor does he give them any hope for the future. His insecurity is then covered with displays of superiority over these women. In Patrick’s mind, these women should be thanking him for the opportunity to enter his luxurious apartment and be part of his lifestyle, even if it is just for a night. Because he paid for their services for the night, they became just another object in his apartment, meant to satisfy him in whatever way he saw fit and then discarded once their purpose was complete.

This dehumanization of women shows that women have no inner value to men within the *American Psycho* world. Reducing women to flesh represents what consumerism can do if taken to the extreme – marketing women’s bodies in such a manner that inspires further dehumanization. Part of the ritual Patrick does with sex workers is dressing them up like dolls, fabricating their appearance in the manner he has seen done in media and advertisements. Since Patrick lives in a world of objects and knows nothing except how to manipulate objects, it is natural to him to treat women in the same way.

To conclude, Patrick consumes women in the same way he consumes objects. He does not view them as people and has no empathy for them. He tortures and kills them, disposes of them, and looks for new women to objectify and dehumanize, further getting lost inside of the never-ending cycle of consumption. Patrick and his guy friends are highly chauvinistic, as shown on multiple occasions. There is no hope for Patrick to ever have a healthy relationship with people because real people do not exist in his world. Manipulating objects is all he knows, and that, along with his lost sense of self, is why human connection is virtually impossible in this extreme form of consumer culture.

## 7. Consumerism and Violence in *American Psycho*

As discussed in the previous chapters, violence is one of the ways Patrick's obsessions for consuming objects is expressed. Violence is a way to express his frustration with the consumerist lifestyle he is living. In that way, the relationship between violence and consumerism is complex and multifaceted. There are two ways in which Patrick's need for violence can be looked at: individual factors and societal factors. Patrick's violent urges can be viewed through his psychological problems, mainly his narcissism. His sense of superiority allows him to see others as less than, and ultimately, disposable. As discussed previously, he has no sense of self and no way to fulfill his needs.

Giving in to violent urges is one of the only ways he can fulfill them. And because he is so invested in consumer culture, he consumes objects and people in the same fashion. He uses them to fulfill his needs and then gets rid of them as soon as he sees no other use for them. This perception of people allows him to kill without guilt, as he does not see people as having rich emotional lives. Rather, they are as vacant and worthless as any other object in his consumeristic world. Everything is equal in Patrick's mind. His consumeristic habits are often connected to his murder sprees. For instance, when his favorite show, *The Patty Winters Show*, does not have new episodes during the summer, he describes feeling homicidal: "Life remained a blank canvas, a cliché, a soap opera. I felt lethal, on the verge of frenzy. My nightly bloodlust overflowed into my days and I had to leave the city. My mask of sanity was a victim of impending slippage" (Ellis 169). Some theories have discussed the possibility of consumerism being a device through which certain human urges are channeled: "Consumer culture emerged

as a tool of controlling the masses driven by primitive impulses of sex and aggression postulated by Freud “(Asanova 27).

In that sense, buying and owning objects serves to soothe people’s darkest urges. This does not work when it comes to Patrick as accumulating objects never fully satisfies him, and he continues to look for different ways to channel his urges. Consuming objects and consuming people become identical to him, as he describes eating people in the same way he describes eating a dish. He is indifferent towards his victims because they are nothing but objects to him. “I just remind myself that this thing, this girl, this meat, is nothing” (Ellis 210). The media Patrick consumes is also violent in nature, making him desensitized to gore scenes. He often mentions famous serial killers and fictional serial killers as he consumes that type of content on a daily basis. Objectification of people, especially women, has taken precedent in Patrick’s mind. He replicates everything he sees in the media because there is no difference between real life and whatever the media is showcasing. Trapped inside the endless cycle of consumption, he wants to gain some control over his hollow life that feels decentralized and expresses his needs in the only way he knows how: through murder. Instead of working on his issues of insecurity and instability, Patrick consumes to ease his pain and yet only ends up trapped, as consuming things no longer gives him the emotional reaction it once did.

As buying things is the default solution to all problems in 1980s New York, Patrick does not see how to break this cycle, so he expands his repertoire of consumption to include human beings. There are different reasons for each individual murder. Patrick kills people of lower social standing based on their gender, wealth, or some other scale of societal worth. Due to his fear of poverty and a certain disgust for them, as well as the fact that no one will actually care about them dying as they are not valued members of society. He even says to the homeless man: “Do you know what a fucking loser you are?” (Ellis 83).

Patrick also feels threatened when his ex-girlfriend Bethany tells him he hung a David Onica painting upside down while in his apartment. This enrages him because it lowers his social status, as it makes it obvious that he does not know how to own an expensive object properly. This increases his insecurity and makes him feel as though he is failing to be a poster boy for consumerism, which is the only basis for his already unstable identity. Consumerism here has directly affected his decision to kill Bethany, as he kills her not soon after that exchange. He kills women as a way to control their autonomy and bodies. He also yearns for human connection and has no other way to be intimate than through a literal consumption of

their flesh. Patrick's obsession with women's bodies makes it difficult to distinguish between his sexual desires and his cannibalistic desires, which have become one in his mind. He kills Paul Owen because he envies him, and his own narcissism gets in the way of a possible friendship. In that way, all his reasons for violence are, in some aspects, related to his relationship with consumerism. Consumerism is always present in Patrick's mind and influences all his private activities, even murder.

As Patrick lives in an amoral, meaningless dystopia, he is driven to use violence as a way to express his desires. On a societal level, he is defying the rules set out to preserve all human life as an agreed-upon principle, as well as society's inability to provide him with a way to fulfill his needs. On the other hand, Patrick represents capitalism in its cruelest form, killing off people that are deemed unworthy of being a part of the system. Since Patrick's social standing is high, he can do as he pleases, inflicting his pain on everyone without consequences. His ability to buy and own is what helps protect him from the possible repercussions people of lower social standing would face if they acted in the same manner. Patrick's act of violence towards people with less power and wealth than him represents the economically privileged people overpowering the lower classes. Materialism is, once again, the root of systemic violence. In the modern world, there is a known phenomenon called "retail therapy," which stands for people solving their problems by buying material objects. In some ways, this is what all the characters in *American Psycho* are doing.

Given that they are surrounded with images of perfection, they strive to embody that image, and when they fall short, they feel insecure about themselves and buy more things to feel better. In that manner, the cycle never stops, and Patrick's rage towards the exhaustion and vacancy of consumption leads him to look for temporary relief in drugs, sex, and violence. Violence is a way to alleviate the pain and meaninglessness of endless consumption. As Berkane notes, he transgresses the only way he knows how to, armed with the only set of values he was ever exposed to: objectification and violence (25). He kills a total of fourteen people in the novel, most of whom are women, and there is an allusion to the fact he has been violent in the past. The reader is left wondering when Patrick's murder spree began and if it was due to some prior psychological issue or if it can all be blamed on consumerism. The values of 1980s New York rely on the ideology of accumulating as much as possible for oneself. Having the mindset of a winner, where ends justify the means, fits into Patrick's sense of freedom to kill whomever he wants. This parallel between the individual violence of the main protagonist and

the collective violence of capitalistic culture is displayed when asked by someone at a party what his line of work is. Bateman answers, “murder and executions,” and his answer is assumed to be “mergers and acquisitions” (Messier 81). In that way, consumerism and violence are inextricably linked, allowing Patrick not to feel any inner inconsistencies between his consumerist lifestyle and the violence he commits on a daily basis.

## **8. Consumerism in 2020s**

The trend of increased consumption has not slowed down since the 1980s. Despite a couple of financial crises, consumption has stayed more or less the same. Due to omnipresent advertising in real life and in online spaces, the average person in the 2020s feels the pressure to have the latest trendy gadget or cosmetic product. The standard of what the average person has to own has also changed. What were once luxuries only reserved for the highest social class have now become everyday items for everyone. “As these products and goods became more available; they also seem to have lost their status as luxuries and became necessities” (Saraiva 118). Having said that, there are still objects that only a few can afford. That also has to do with the issue that has stayed relevant since the release of *American Psycho*, which is the ever-growing gap between rich and poor people. Wealthy people set the standard for the rest of society, and the availability of certain products is therefore limited to people in lower social classes. This tendency creates the need for the rest of society to recreate the lifestyle rich people are often promoting in online spaces.

The main focus of consumption appears to be body-focused: “The cultural ideology of a socialized body enforced through mass media, social relations, and advertising is responsible for consumers' image of the ideal or more desirable body, and the consumption practices that these self-concepts encourage” (Asanova 21). Furthermore, consumerism profits off of the insecurity in people precisely because of the new ways in which products are promoted on social media, hence the emergence of a now professional career – an influencer. *Cambridge*

*Dictionary* describes an influencer as “a person who is paid by a company to show or describe its products and services on social media, encouraging other people to buy them.” Influencers have become an exceptional figure in the media, and their opinions often dictate consumeristic trends. Therefore, there is an even greater presence of advertising in all forms of content, which is nearly impossible to escape from. Since products are omnipresent in most of western society, there is even more pressure to own products that are promoted.

There is also the factor of presenting a certain image of oneself on social media, and owning products is one way of creating that persona. In a sense, everyone in the 2020s is an influencer, and consuming products is crucial in that process. With all that in mind, it can be seen how creating certain personas can create inauthenticity in people and their interactions. If one’s sense of self is based on owning products or creating relationships based on other people’s ability to own or promote products, it can certainly affect the way one would categorize oneself and others in social hierarchy. Owning a lot of things and living a lavish lifestyle is being put on a pedestal as an ideal lifestyle for ultimate happiness. However, there is no actual evidence to attest to this. As seen in *American Psycho*, owning things only creates a void that begs to be filled with even more stuff, so that cycle never ends. No characters in the novel express genuine joy for owning things, only brag about having them as it relates to their superior social status. It can be concluded that “keeping up with the Joneses” mentality has not died, it has only transferred to online spaces. In that way, the reader can see the parallel between consumerism in the 1980s and in the 2020s. Bragging about having things is more essential than cultivating human relationships. Despite the latest economic crises and everything being more expansive, consumerism is still as ever-present as it ever was.

Even though excessive spending has stayed the norm since the time *American Psycho* was published, there has been more and more talk of conscious spending and the effect that too much consumption can have on people and the environment. “In the past few years, there has been a growth in popularity of artisanal production, sustainable agriculture, and small local brands - a phenomenon that can be viewed as an attempted reversal to ‘traditional consumption’” (Asanova 12). This focus on conscious spending has become more evident throughout most western countries, so much so that the factor of sustainability has become crucial when buying products. It can be concluded that consumerism in the 2020s has remained a strong force within society. Buying things as a measure of social status and prestige has persisted in modern



society. However, there have also been cultural shifts such as minimalism and conscious spending that emphasize responsible consumption and a healthy relationship with materialism.

### **8.1 The Relevance of *American Psycho* in 2020s**

As stated in the previous chapter, consumerism has not gone anywhere in the time since *American Psycho* came out. Recently, there is a trend of morning routines and influences promoting products online. People's general desire to look the best they can is also due to the newfound importance of social media. Social media served as a platform on which people further demonstrated their so-called perfect lives and promoted various products and material goods as something to strive for. This collates with *American Psycho*, which depicts a society centered on consumerism and the fake personalities the characters create for themselves.

The main question that is often brought up when talking about *American Psycho* is: What would Patrick be like if he lived in the 2020s? It is easy to imagine him as someone who does skincare routines on YouTube or as an influencer showing off his body and promoting products for maintaining his physique. The answer to that question is that Patrick Bateman would not have much trouble fitting into society in the 2020s. There are many factors as to why that is. The most obvious one being that contemporary society has remained intrigued by excessive wealth and compulsive spending, something Patrick is a prime example of. There is also the self-obsession that lies at the core of his personality, and this tendency is more than obvious in posting selfies and other pictures of oneself all over social media.

Patrick's obsession with his body and how he represents himself rings true more than ever in this contemporary society with the constant fierce competition between people in online

spaces over who gains more followers, who looks better, who has more expensive clothing, etc. Not only is this behavior encouraged, it has become mandatory in order to maintain the right image that people will find appealing. “The idea of Patrick's obsession with himself, with his likes and dislikes and his detailing, curating—everything he owns, wears, eats, and watches, has certainly reached a new apotheosis” (Crawford 30). Patrick’s relentless strive for physical perfection is relatable to the modern viewer as everyone appears to curate a perfect image of themselves online. Even the pettiest events in the novel ring familiar to the modern reader as they perfectly describe the inauthenticity of most interactions based on social media images.

There has also been a rise of *American Psycho* memes on the internet, often depicting Patrick as someone to admire and imitate. This worship of Patrick proves that consumer culture is here to stay. On account of the fact that Patrick is a perfect consumer, he is a symbol of wealth and success for young men who desperately want his lifestyle. Due to a societal shift in the way gender is viewed, men’s view of their masculinity has also shifted. Certain male behaviors have been reframed as being part of toxic masculinity and deemed unacceptable by mainstream society. And old ways of defining masculinity have been denounced as harmful to both men and women and dismissed as unnecessary. However, there are still men who prefer traditional definitions of masculinity. Patrick fits into the old ways masculinity is defined, and that is why his persona resonates so deeply with men in 2020.

Furthermore, there is also the ever-present obsession with serial killers in both online and offline spaces. True crime podcasts, *YouTube* videos, and *Netflix* documentaries are as popular as ever, discussing the origins and stories of fictional and real-life killers, reaching millions of people. Even though most media content openly condemns serial killers and their crimes, there is a risk of glorification and fetishization of such crimes. Furthermore, displaying advertisements in such content is an added element in which consumerism is directly linked to violence. It is easy to imagine Patrick wanting to be celebrated among other famous serial killers, becoming media content himself as his image becomes the most perverse version of himself.

Finally, Patrick’s obsession with Donald Trump has also been reframed throughout the years. As previously mentioned, Donald Trump was a quintessential yuppie and a role model to Patrick and his friends. Nowadays, he is not associated with the materialistic 80s. Instead, he is remembered as the former president of the United States, which many liked and just as many disliked. We can only assume what *American Psycho* characters would think of him becoming

president, as he promoted the same ideology yuppies once lived by behind closed doors. It seems that money and power remained the main motivators for human behavior throughout the last decade.

Cultural and ideological shifts during the 1990s and 2000s did not change the core of capitalism, which is endless spending and identity formation that is based on owning those products. On top of that, social media has made it possible for people to falsify their own identities and maintain vapid social interactions even more than during the *American Psycho* era. *American Psycho* is a book that dives into the core problem of consumerism, and as long as consumer culture is alive, *American Psycho* will talk about the society of today. And that is why *American Psycho* and its themes are relevant as ever.

## **9. Conclusion**

The thesis analyzed ways in which consumerism dictates nearly every event in *American Psycho* and how it shapes every relationship in the novel. It is also evident that consumerism is strong as ever in the 2020s. It is clear that the materialism of the 1980s evolved and transformed into the consumer culture we are witnessing in contemporary society. Many of the core themes of *American Psycho* are as relevant as ever, and that is why this novel resonates with so many modern readers. Consumerism has remained the central focus of many people's lives, with online pressure to display opulence in all forms. The gap between the rich and the poor has only increased since the 1980s, and this disconnect is dismissed as everyone is expected to own the same things and have the same standard of living.

The shallow relationships portrayed in *American Psycho* and the emptiness of identity that come with it are nothing but a byproduct of a consumer culture that values appearance over substance. *American Psycho* is a powerful lesson on the dangers of materialism and losing one's personhood to things. It is about the consumer, the most powerful person in the world, who can determine how to treat other people and the world of objects around them.

The loneliness displayed in characters and destructive habits that follow from the pain of never achieving genuine fulfillment is something that is very close to the contemporary reader, as it depicts the disposability and impersonality of most human interactions in the modern world. The objectification of humans in *American Psycho*, while taken to its extreme

form, shows the reader the possible ramifications of prioritizing materialism over human relationships. If one relies on objects to tell us our worth and place in society, we risk losing our unique personality and becoming copies of others, just like Patrick and his yuppie friends who cannot tell people apart. As objects are everything Patrick knows, people are just as disposable as any other material object. The horrifying prospect of this is that no one would care if someone was a murderer if they played the social game required to fit in. No one genuinely cares about anyone and this self-obsession leads to more consumption and no chance of moral values overriding aesthetic ones.

In essence, the consumerism displayed in *American Psycho* is a form of replacement for satisfying primal human needs and creating new false ones. The pursuit of perfection in *American Psycho* transforms everyone into people from magazine covers with no distinguishable personality traits. The ultimate risk of overconsumption in modern society is the dehumanization of others and sheer meaninglessness that come from empty identity and numbness, egoism, and the loss of subjectivity. If taken to the extreme, alienation and the commodification of others can lead to violence as well as a deep vegetative state among the masses.

The emphasis on consumerism transforms everyone into cold, detached versions of once-authentic people. This empty existence only amplifies the already existing feelings of meaninglessness and neglects real human needs for human connection. Consumerism drives Patrick to have violent fantasies and urges. The possible destructiveness of such a path leads to emotional pain and the possibility of being manipulated with ads, blindly following consumerist ideology.

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