Fight Club Analysis: Perspectives from Organizational Theory

Courtney Ackerman

Greg Hennessy

Jem Lugo

Meghan Smith

Claremont Graduate University

FIGHT CLUB

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The film "Fight Club" is the story of grassroots organization, also called "Fight Club," that springs from the search for meaning that undergirds the emptiness of modern consumer-oriented culture. With time, this simple pursuit of significance morphs into an organized effort to overthrow the power structures at the heart of consumerism – starting with the major credit card companies. Along the way, the film explores how meaning turns into shared understanding, the dynamics of power, leadership and social influence. It provides a clear case study of the interplay between strategy and organizational structure. A complex and compelling film, one needs each of the three major organizational philosophies to grasp the broad array of metaphors and connotations woven into the story.

While the film is now considered a cult classic, viewership is not particularly widespread. Prior to this team's presentation, a poll of the class indicated that roughly half of the class had not seen the movie. Because the story is complex, a synopsis will be provided first. What follows is a sequential account of the major factors of organizational analysis, as described by Hatch (2013). Modernism, postmodernism, and symbolic interpretivism were considered for each factor and will be discussed as appropriate. Understanding the environment is vital to understanding not only Fight Club the film but also Fight Club the organization. The organization's birth and growth are critically tied to what is happening in the surrounding environment and the organization's structure evolves to make best use of the environment. The various stages of organization's evolution are discussed. Although it is never exactly clear whether the strategy evolved or was simply revealed piecemeal over time, it figures prominently in the story and is discussed next. Because the Fight Club organization develops an offshoot with very different goals, objectives, and means for attaining them, important insights into the role of

organizational culture can be learned from the film. A central element of Fight Club is the power behind the spread of an idea, so the film presents a great opportunity to learn about the role of innovation and change in an organization. Lastly, the film offers a great deal of insight into power politics.

Synopsis

The movie, *Fight Club* (Fincher, Palahniuk, & Uhls, 1999), begins with The Narrator desperately devoid of meaning in his life and suffering from insomnia as a result. His doctor encourages him to attend support groups for various cancers and diseases, none of which he has, as a means to gain perspective and appreciation for his lot in life. A cure seems to arrive, not through the advice of his doctor, but through the meeting of Tyler Durden on a plane during a business trip. Tyler is "the single most interesting person he has ever met." When his condo mysteriously explodes, The Narrator calls Tyler. The Narrator needs a place to stay, but avoids asking Tyler directly. Eventually, as they are about to part company for the night, Tyler tells him outright, "if you need a place to stay, just ask."

Tyler Durden and The Narrator have a fistfight, not out of anger but out of a simple longing to feel something visceral. What begins as two friends scuffling just to feel something real becomes the basis for Fight Club. Passersby, sharing in the pair's existential angst, want in. As the club attracts new members and grows, eight rules are established to maintain the spirit of the founder's intention. Fight Clubs begin sprouting up around the country – some with Tyler's guidance, others seemingly on their own.

Gradually, Fight Club develops a more formal structure and evolves into "Project Mayhem," an underground organization devoted to more than visceral stimulation and existential awakenings. Project Mayhem and its purpose are opaque. Eventually The Narrator sees evidence

FIGHT CLUB

of a grand scheme around him and realizes that Project Mayhem is bent on violently up-ending the social order with the help of explosives made in his very basement.

The Narrator also realizes that he and Tyler Durden are one and the same. Tyler is the mental manifestation of a separate personality to do what he, The Narrator, could not do. However, Tyler has unexpectedly taken on a life of his own. He is a stronger, smarter, more charismatic leader than The Narrator could have ever imagined, and he has ambitions for enacting change at a level that The Narrator never dreamed of.

The Narrator tries to put a stop to Project Mayhem by going to the police. He then discovers that the Project's members are widely distributed throughout the community, including the police force. His penalty for trying to stop the plot, one his Tyler personality set forth, is castration at the hands of the police force Project members. He narrowly avoids this fate and finds a van rigged with explosives underneath a skyscraper. The Narrator pleads with Tyler to stop the imminent explosion. Realizing that because they are the same person, he has the control to stop the explosion, The Narrator puts a gun in his mouth and shoots. Tyler disappears. The Narrator is bleeding heavily, but the bullet misses vital tissue and exits through the side of his face. He is still alive, and Tyler is effectively out of his life. However, it is too late to stop Project Mayhem. From a nearby vacant building, The Narrator watches the neighboring skyscrapers explode one-by-one and crumble.

Environment

Fight Club is an innovative response to an environment that has left its members wallowing in a morass of empty consumerism. In joining the organization, members are reacting to a society that promotes money and materialism over real living. The environment constrains emotion and directs the population to find meaning in materials and social acceptance, the "Ikea"

FIGHT CLUB

brand of meaning.

From the modernist perspective (Hatch, 2013), the Fight Club can be seen as an entity embedded within a larger system. Resources are extracted from the environment and transformed into products. The organization's boundary separates it from the environment outside, which in this case is a very rigid boundary. The first rule of Fight Club is "You do not talk about Fight Club." The second rule is an exact restatement of the first, and thus removes all doubt about whether the existence of the club is a matter for public discussion. The eighth rule is "If this is your first time at Fight Club, you have to fight." Together, these and the other rules establish and maintain clear delineations of who is in the Club and who is not.

Using environmental contingency theory (Burns & Stalker, from Hatch, 2013), it is clear that Fight Club sprang up organically in response to its environment. There was no moment of inspiration leading to the creation of the Club. There was not an express purpose and plan for the organization. It arose in response to the founders' feelings of emptiness, and it evolved organically as members experimented with ways for weaving it into their daily lives. The environment fed Fight Club with a seemingly endless stream of men yearning to free themselves from the vapid void of consumer America. These desperate souls could choose to distract themselves with any number of activities, clubs, or events. They choose Fight Club. This is consistent with population ecologist's view that the environment selects organizations that best suit its needs (Hannan, Freeman, Aldrich, & Carroll, from Hatch, 2013).

Although the modernist perspective is a useful lens for understanding Fight Club, the symbolic and postmodern perspectives allow for more depth in analysis. The symbolic perspective reminds us that organizations form where there is shared meaning and interpretation (Hatch, 2013). This theory also reminds us of how shared meaning arises and is reinforced,

through institutionalization. In particular, neo-institutionalism is helpful. Traditional institutions such as government agencies are not the only influence on the club; the repeated action of fighting itself becomes an institution. The fights not only allow the release of aggression and constrained emotion, they also stand as a symbol of the organization itself (hence, the name "Fight Club"). At first, the eighth rule requiring every member to fight on his first night is coercive. But as the institution becomes established, it becomes less so. Fighting is the norm. It is expected. It is what each member comes to the club to do.

The postmodern perspective provides unique insight into Fight Club. Postmodernists acknowledge that the environment is a grand social construction, but they go a step further than symbolic interpretivists and advocate the deconstruction of the social constructs that are dissatisfactory (Hatch, 2013). From its earliest days, this is exactly what members of Fight Club are doing: question the way people are "supposed" to behave and abolishing the social norms and rules that govern society. Who in corporate America gets into fights during their off hours? Fight Club began its deconstruction as many postmodernists would have begun: by deconstructing the language and beliefs that pervade society. Tyler Durden repeatedly encourages The Narrator to question how things are done then begins recruiting new members to spread this philosophy of questioning everything. Before long, the Club's objectives transition to physical deconstruction. It starts small, with minor vandalism and symbolic gestures. However, by the movie's end Project Mayhem has become a major force of violent change, and several skyscrapers are rigged to implode under the force of powerful and carefully placed explosives.

The postmodern perspective seems to be the most applicable to Fight Club. It accurately describes the organization as arising from and centering on the development of shared meaning. The members are desperately searching for meaning in a society that has denied them the

opportunity to find it through traditional (non-consumer-based) means. The Club is a joint venture in sense-making and is a symbol of their resistance to the materialistic and shallow society that surrounds them. Although the modern perspective is useful for describing the environment and symbolic interpretivism adds the critical element of shared meaning and symbolism, only postmodernism fully captures the Club's need for destruction and chaos, and only postmodernism adequately explains Project Mayhem's creation. Hatch (2013) writes that for many postmodernists, avoiding hegemony is the ultimate goal. This sentence captures the spirit of Fight Club perhaps better than any other. Project Mayhem and the destruction associated with its objectives are intended to throw the country's financial system into chaos. This, in turn, will disrupt mainstream society run for the exclusive benefit of the rich and powerful.

Organizational Structure

The structure of the Fight Club organization goes through a metamorphosis. The early Fight Club organization featured organic growth and development. Initially fights take place in the parking lot of a bar, and new members are recruited on a one-by-one basis as they stand by to watch. The Club's first major step toward structure occurs when it moves into the bar's basement. Moving the fights out of the public eye only heightens the mystique. People hear rumors about a secret fighting organization. Non-members cannot simply wander up to a "meeting"; they have to show up to a specific location at a specific time. The air of exclusivity leads to loyalty. Slowly, members are indoctrinated to the culture, and membership gradually grows week by week. With time, meetings become more frequent. Tyler begins traveling, starting Fight Club franchises around the United States. Eventually, Tyler wants to expand the organizational vision and purpose. His goals and agenda expand to more than just fighting, and Fight Club evolves into Project Mayhem. Unlike Fight Club's open, organic structure, Project

Mayhem's structure is a highly routinized and strict hierarchy, with Tyler as its CEO.

Fight Club begins as a horizontal structure. Tyler is the leader and everyone reports directly to him. Such a structure is ideal for the shared tasks of fighting and starting fights with others. Individuals feel empowered. Horizontal or flat structures have relatively few rules (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Hatch, 2013), and Fight Club has only eight. Communication is face-to-face. The organization is flexible and able to respond quickly to new members and new locations. Each member is aware of the goals of the organization and members have a sense of communal teamwork and collaboration.

Project Mayhem on the other hand has a vertical structure designed for efficiency. The vertical structure allows for specialized tasks, a strict hierarchy, and the vertical communication and reporting systems needed to accomplish task efficiently (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Hatch, 2013). Project Mayhem has five overarching rules. Each committee has additional rules for members of that committee. In Project Mayhem, decision-making is centralized at the top. Tyler decides everything and all reports are relayed back to him. Members are not empowered to make decisions and are generally fine with this arrangement. They are all believers in their role as contributor to a larger purpose, one that transcends their individual identities. Moreover, not all communication is conducted face to face. Some members of Project Mayhem have never even met Tyler Durden in person, instead only communicating with him through phone calls and message relays.

Project Mayhem can best be seen through the lens of Morgan's machine metaphor. Project Mayhem is an example of a mechanistic bureaucracy, one of Mintzberg's 5 structures (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The tasks are highly routinized, repetitive, reliable, and conducted in a predictable manner. Motions operate through patterns of authority. Project Mayhem is highly

efficient, but not entirely flexible, since all decisions are made solely by Tyler, exhibiting top-down control. Hatch (2013) states that mechanistic bureaucracies thrive in stable environments with low skill, which can be seen in Project Mayhem. Innovation is only needed at the top level, through Tyler's planning and administrative management. The "Space Monkeys" (Fincher, Palahniuk, & Uhls, 1999), as Tyler calls the members of Project Mayhem, are simply cogs in the wheel.

After Project Mayhem is established, Tyler makes decisions about differentiation and integration of the system. Whereas Fight Club begins with highly integrated roles and functions (every member does everything), Tyler begins to tailor Project Mayhem's task assignments to each individual's strengths. Integration is not important. Members are not told how their individual assignments contribute to the overall objective. However, this lack of integration and high differentiation does not seem to strain the communication or coordination efforts of the organization. The only person who seems to disagree with the Project Mayhem structure is The Narrator, or Tyler's "Ikea Self." He is extremely stressed by the lack of information and limited understanding of the broader goals.

Strategy

The initial goals of Fight Club are quite apparent, and are recited in a list at the beginning of each meeting. The strategy unfolds with the plot as the movie progresses. Over time, Fight Club's strategy takes shape, and eventually, so does Project Mayhem's. Whether the strategy evolved as Tyler Durden gained more confidence and power or it was the strategy all along is not clear. But it seems unlikely that Tyler had planned out the entire strategy beforehand in classic rational fashion (Hatch, 1997). And in any case, the strategy that was enacted is obviously easier to define than any a priori scheme he might have concocted.

FIGHT CLUB

A pivotal point in the strategy occurred when The Narrator's Fight Club-related responsibilities drained him of desire to attend to his day job. In response, he devised a tactic that would allow him to maintain the perks of having a job without actually having to go to work. When called into his boss' office, The Narrator staged an assault and crafted the impression that his boss had physically attacked him. Within a few short minutes, The Narrator had effectively redefined his role within the company. His new job would be to never make public the company's secrets and to not press charges against his boss. As he succinctly states, "I don't even need to come into the office. I can do this from home." (Fincher, Palahniuk, & Uhls, 1999) This new role afforded him 52 weeks of paychecks, 48 airline vouchers, and newfound free time to grow Fight Club. With time to focus on Fight Club, the rate of implementation of the strategy skyrocketed and new, more innovative projects, including Project Mayhem, were born.

Fight Club's strategy is laid out like a battle plan, rather fittingly. Following the military model that was first applied to business organizations in the 1950's (Hatch, 1997), the organizational strategy involves a top-down one-way model of orders flowing from top to bottom. More than simply a military metaphor, Project Mayhem becomes a military endeavor, complete with hazing rituals and coordinated training. Recruit indoctrination involved breaking down their psyche and rebuilding it in a manner that the culture requires. "We all became what Tyler wanted us to be," said The Narrator, expressing the truth of the fear and intimidation.

Culture

Fight Club and Project Mayhem are great analogues for cultural analysis through the symbolic lens. Many of the activities of Fight Club and Project Mayhem have meaning beyond the simple sum of their actions and each can be interpreted in multiple ways. Hatch (2013) states that the meaning expressed by events and processes are often more important than what is

produced. This holds true for Project Mayhem. For example, Tyler arranges to blow up the buildings of the four major credit card companies. On the surface it seems like an act of terrorism or anarchy, but the meaning behind this act is more important. By destroying the buildings Tyler hopes to erase credit records, wiping the slate clean for millions of credit customers. Tyler is motivated by a desire for equality and is revolting against the enslavement of the people by corporate giants.

The cultures ingrained in both Fight Club and Project Mayhem hold each organization together. Schein defines culture as "a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to these problems" (as quoted in Bolman & Deal, 2008). Fight Club's culture is born from Tyler's desire to provide a place for men to release their frustrations with their lives. Within the environment of the club, the culture and rules begin to form. Ultimately, Fight Club rules determine how the meetings will be run, how the Club initiates new members, and how they will maintain exclusivity. The culture of Fight Club begins to evolve along with Tyler's vision. By assigning homework to Club members, Tyler shifts the focus of member frustration from simply fighting each other to fighting for a greater good. The scale of these missions grows ever more expansive, which allows Tyler to identify the most dedicated members and recruit them into Project Mayhem. Culture also dominates the organization and processes of Project Mayhem. Culture is both product and process, and it embodies accumulated wisdom. It must be continually renewed as newcomers learn old ways their predecessors and eventually become teachers themselves (Hatch, 2013; Morgan, 2006). Each recruit for Project Mayhem is conditioned and hazed, and put through a severe militaristic

breaking down the psyche, building the necessary culture and indoctrination needed for Project Mayhem. They are made to give up all of their earthly possessions and their individual identities. They become "God's unwanted children", as they all share a uniform appearance and a social identity.

Fight Club and Project Mayhem are both secretive, underground organizations with strongly held shared beliefs. The Narrator describes members as "God's unwanted children" (Fincher, Palahniuk, & Uhls, 1999) and individual names do not matter except in death. Both cultures are so secretive that members are not allowed to admit knowing each outside of official events or to discuss Club business outside the Club. Symbolism and myths are highly prevalent in both Fight Club and Project Mayhem. Symbols communicate a message and a culture both internally and externally, while myths communicate narratives that build shared mental models and cohesion among the members. They convey information, morals, and values vividly, memorably, and convincingly (Hatch, 2013). For members of fight club and project mayhem, Tyler is seen as a hero, a living embodiment of the core values and beliefs of the club. Stories of Tyler are told around the world, helping spread the ideas and passions behind Flight Club and Project Mayhem. Rituals are also used similar to the myths. They involve repetitive, routinized activities that give structure and meaning to daily life. In Project Mayhem, members must perform a ritual rite of passage by burning their flesh with lye.

Power Politics

Power, control, and conflict are central themes in the film. Indeed, its very title highlights the centrality of conflict to the story. However, over the course of the film the overt one-on-one physical conflict embodied by the literal "fight club" reveals itself to be but a precursor to a social movement with more far-reaching ambitions for confronting existing power structures. So

FIGHT CLUB

although conflict is the most obvious element, power and control also figure prominently. Hatch (2013) provides useful instruction for understanding whether the film addresses political power from a modern, postmodern or symbolic interpretive point of view.

Tyler Durden has a postmodern relationship with the locus of power when it comes to the organization he is building. Social relationships are central to the organization that emerges from the Fight Club. He uses discursive practices to drive members to the adoption of the mission and vision of the organization, for example when he poured lye over the back of The Narrator's hand. Nondiscursive practices are the basis for establishing power among the rank and file, as when newbies show up on the porch. The purpose of the organization, however, can best be seen through the critical lens of symbolic interpretivism. Tyler is not simply trying to overthrow a hierarchy or overcome the status quo through knowledge or skill-building, so a modernist interpretation fails to ring true. Instead, he is attempting to undermine the very foundations of the social, economic and political institutions that he believes are threatening the soul of humanity. For example, Project Mayhem members kidnap the police chief while he is in the bathroom during a hotel banquet. They threaten him with castration unless he calls off the investigation into Project Mayhem and public refutes the very possibility of an underground organization. This is not done because he is at the top of the police hierarchy (although he is) but because he is a lynchpin in the broader societal fabric.

Through the course of the film, characters spanning all three philosophies present themselves. Tyler himself is a symbolic interpretivist, believing that power should be based on the democracy of stakeholder interests, and he takes it upon himself to challenge holders of the other two perspectives. In contrast, at the start of the film The Narrator is a corporate drone with the classic predisposition to neither question nor challenge his employers' right to produce

products with dangerous faults and to determine whether to fix those faults based upon a cold economic calculus. Much of the film is devoted to Tyler's effort to persuade The Narrator to adopt his symbolic philosophy. Tyler's persuasive technique is also exhibited when he gives a convenience store clerk the best motivational speech ever: "I'm keeping your license. I know where you live. I'm going to check on you. If you aren't back in school on your way to being a veterinarian, you will be dead. Now, get the hell out of here." (Fincher, Palahniuk, & Uhls, 1999)

Similar to this philosophy regarding the locus of power within the organization, Tyler has a postmodern perspective when it comes to the basis of disciplinary power within the organization. Tyler sees society as a web of systems of exploitation and domination. Project Mayhem is his attempt to establish a countervailing system of resistance to the oppressive authoritarian systems. As with other elements of power, Tyler's philosophy with respect to the organization itself is postmodern. He clearly sees that the organization is fundamentally both the producer and product of disciplinary power. That the organization is the producer of disciplinary power is shown by the "need to know" information flow surrounding Project Mayhem. Repeatedly, organization members emphasize that one is not supposed to ask questions about Project Mayhem -- in so doing, the members are emphasizing the need for disciplinary power and are demonstrating their own discipline (by not revealing information).

The organization's overarching goal is to free the dominated masses from the control of the power elites -- a clearly symbolic and critical mission. However, as with other aspects of power though, Tyler uses a postmodern approach to the operation of Project Mayhem itself. From the induction of neophytes onward, Project Mayhem emphasizes self-disciplinary behaviors and marginalization of the individual in favor of organizational identification.

Consistent with prior observations about power politics in the film, Tyler's view of

Project Mayhem within the large societal structure is symbolic and critical. The established powers use hegemony and systematically distorted communication to establish both social and employment contexts that are conducive to voluntary if unconscious consent on the part of the exploited. Within Project Mayhem, disciplinary technologies and internal surveillance maintain control of the organization. Tyler views conflict as the natural result of the inequalities inherent in the current system. Rectifying these inequalities inevitably calls for radical change and the overturning of the established order. This is a symbolic and critical perspective.

Within the organization, conflict arises as groups or individuals vie for control over the ability to define the organization. This was seen most clearly in the showdown scene between Tyler and The Narrator (interspersed throughout the film) in the empty high rise office. Tyler is advocating for his critical and symbolic interpretation of the nature of the system, while The Narrator maintains his modern interpretation.

Conclusion

Fight Club is a complex organization embedded in an equally complex context. It is an unexpected mix of the visceral and philosophical. Each of the three organizational theory lenses discussed by Hatch (2013) and most of Morgan's (2006) metaphors offer insight into the meaning and symbolism embodied in the Club. With evidence supporting multiple interpretations, reasonable people could disagree on which perspectives dominate the Fight Club case. But it is our considered opinion that:

Fight Club is a modern organization. Structural contingency theory, in particular, is extremely helpful in understanding the organization. The evolution of the Club's structure is heavily influenced by its environment, and it is not the product of a fixed vision of the founders. The primary Club fades from discussion as the film progresses, but its offshoot, Project

Mayhem, clearly has the mechanistic organization and leadership that is characteristic of a modern organization.

Fight Club is on a postmodern mission. The Club's mission can only be properly understood in relation to the "Ikea culture" to which it is a response. Without this interweaving of elements, the Club is simply a bunch of guys fighting in a parking lot (and later, a basement). This is the mission equivalent of *intertextuality* (Hatch, 2013, p. 182) – the idea that "no text exists in isolation." The Club's mission is also about a kind of *fragmentation* (Hatch, 2013, p. 183), that is it is a breaking up of the too widely accepted social norms that go unchallenged. The same is true for Project Mayhem's mission, but even more so. Project Mayhem goes beyond fragmentation into *deconstruction*. The physical deconstruction at the end of the film is none too subtle. But underlying the explosiveness of this act is the deconstruction of the social and financial systems that cannot be witnessed by the naked eye. Other theories may offer insight into the mission of Fight Club and Project Mayhem, but the core of these missions reads like an exemplar of the postmodern perspective.

Understanding the Fight Club culture requires a symbolic-interpretivist approach. A superficial observation of Fight Club or Project Mayhem, might lead one to the erroneous conclusion that they are about violence and anarchy. But they are really about something much more meaningful. Unearthing that meaning requires the intense studying of the artifacts and symbols used by the Club in their natural environment. This is exactly what Hatch (2013) refers to when discussing *contextualizing* as a symbolic-interpretivist research method.

And whether you agree or not, we are ready to fight.

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