



International Journal of Research in English

ISSN Print: 2664-8717
ISSN Online: 2664-8725
Impact Factor (RJIF): 8.36
IJRE 2025; 7(2): 623-625
www.englishjournal.net
Received: 23-09-2025
Accepted: 26-10-2025

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American psycho: The exploration of identity and morality in modern society

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26648717.2025.v7.i2i.528>

Abstract

This research paper explores *American Psycho*, a novel by Bret Easton Ellis, focusing on the psychological and social commentary it presents regarding identity and morality in modern capitalist society. The novel, centered on the life of Patrick Bateman, portrays the dehumanizing effects of consumerism, alienation, and obsession with social status. The study discusses how Bateman becomes a symbol of emotional numbness and moral decay in a world driven by wealth and appearances. Additionally, the paper connects these themes to contemporary society, including the impact of social media and image-based culture. The novel ultimately forces readers to question the cost of a world where surface matters more than substance.

Keywords: American psycho, identity, morality, Patrick Bateman, consumerism, alienation, capitalism, violence, social media, modern society

Introduction

Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, first published in 1991, is widely known for its disturbing violence and controversial themes. However, beneath the surface lies a powerful critique of identity loss and moral confusion in a capitalist society. Set in 1980s New York, the novel follows Patrick Bateman, a young, wealthy investment banker, who appears to have it all—money, looks, and charm—but hides a dark and violent side. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that Bateman is not just a character, but a symbol of the emotional emptiness and moral confusion caused by consumerism, capitalism, and superficiality.

This paper explores how *American Psycho* uses character, narration, and symbolism to discuss identity and morality in a modern world that values image over truth. It also examines how these themes relate to current social media culture, where identity is often curated rather than lived.

Consumerism and the Loss of Identity

Consumerism plays a central role in *American Psycho*. Patrick Bateman is obsessed with designer clothes, luxury brands, expensive restaurants, and social appearances. He describes people by what they wear and own rather than by their personalities. For example, he talks in great detail about the clothing brands his colleagues wear, their haircuts, and their business cards. In one famous scene, Bateman becomes emotionally unhinged because another man's business card is slightly more stylish than his own. This shows how identity is reduced to a competitive game of material comparison.

Ellis uses these moments to critique a society where personal value is measured by wealth and status. The people in Bateman's world are all similar—they dress the same, talk the same, and even confuse each other's names. Individuals are interchangeable, and their true selves are irrelevant. This loss of individuality creates a sense of identity crisis.

Bateman himself feels empty inside. He admits, "There is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me." This quote summarizes the effect of consumerism on identity: it creates a mask but removes the soul. Bateman is a product of a system that rewards appearance over authenticity, and as a result, he becomes emotionally dead.

Alienation and Emotional Disconnection

Despite his high status and busy lifestyle, Bateman is emotionally isolated. He has no meaningful relationships and cannot truly connect with anyone. His conversations are shallow and repetitive, mostly focused on surface-level topics like music, fashion, or restaurants. Even in romantic or sexual relationships, Bateman shows no real intimacy or empathy. He treats others as objects, not as human beings.

This emotional disconnection leads to a deeper psychological crisis. Bateman is aware of his emptiness but does not know how to escape it. His internal monologues often reveal a desire to be seen and understood, yet no one truly listens to him. When he confesses his crimes, people ignore him or don't believe him, further proving his invisibility in society.

This alienation reflects a broader social issue. In a capitalist world where people are valued for what they do and what they own, emotional needs are ignored. Human relationships become transactional. The result is a generation of people who feel alone, even in a crowd. Bateman's breakdown represents the emotional cost of a society that prioritizes success over connection.

Violence as Symbolic Expression

The violence in *American Psycho* is disturbing and extreme. Bateman commits brutal murders, often in graphic detail. He kills coworkers, strangers, homeless people, and women without guilt or remorse. These scenes are horrifying but serve an important symbolic purpose.

Bateman's violence represents his inner emptiness and frustration. He cannot feel love or peace, so he turns to violence as a way to assert control or feel alive. The murders are not motivated by need or revenge but by a desire to escape emotional numbness. As he becomes more violent, he becomes even more disconnected, suggesting that violence only deepens his emptiness.

The contrast between violence and normal life is also shocking. Bateman can commit a murder and then go to lunch the next day as if nothing happened. This reflects the coldness of the society around him. Nobody notices or cares because they are too focused on their own image and status. Ellis uses this to criticize a culture where even the worst behavior can be ignored if someone looks the part of success.

The Unreliable Narrator and Blurred Reality

One of the most unique features of *American Psycho* is its unreliable narrator. As the novel progresses, it becomes unclear whether Bateman's murders actually happen or if they are part of his imagination. Some scenes are so unrealistic—such as dragging a body through a busy street without being seen—that readers begin to question what is real.

This narrative ambiguity reflects Bateman's mental breakdown but also serves a larger purpose. It shows how difficult it is to separate truth from fiction in a world driven by appearance. If society ignores the truth and focuses only on image, then reality becomes flexible.

By making Bateman an unreliable narrator, Ellis forces readers to confront their own assumptions. Are we more willing to accept a person's image than to see their true self? Are we blind to violence and immorality when it hides behind wealth and beauty?

Morality and the Collapse of Conscience

The novel presents a world where morality has collapsed. Bateman is never punished for his crimes. He confesses to multiple people, but no one believes him. Even when there is physical evidence, it is ignored or denied. This shows a complete breakdown of moral responsibility.

In Bateman's world, people are too self-absorbed to care about others. They judge morality not by actions but by social status. As long as someone is rich and stylish, they are accepted. This creates a system where evil can exist without consequence.

Bateman himself feels some guilt or confusion, but he is trapped in a cycle. He does not understand how to be good, because the world around him does not teach morality—it teaches performance. His violence is both a rebellion against this system and a product of it.

Modern Connections: Social Media and Identity Today

Although *American Psycho* was written in the 1990s, it speaks directly to today's digital age. Social media has created a culture where people build online identities based on curated images and content. Like Bateman, many people focus on how they appear to others rather than who they truly are.

The constant pressure to look successful, happy, and attractive online leads to emotional stress and disconnection. Relationships become superficial, and people begin to lose touch with their real selves. The obsession with "likes" and followers mirrors Bateman's obsession with appearance and social approval.

In today's world, harmful behavior is often ignored or forgotten if the person involved is popular or powerful. This is exactly what Ellis warned about in *American Psycho*: a society where morality is less important than image. The novel reminds us that we must look beyond appearances and value honesty, empathy, and humanity.

Conclusion

American Psycho is more than a violent or controversial novel. It is a mirror held up to society, showing us the dangerous effects of consumerism, emotional disconnection, and moral collapse. Patrick Bateman is not just a killer—he is a product of a system that values wealth and image over truth and compassion.

Through Bateman's journey, Ellis shows how easy it is to lose our identity and sense of right and wrong in a world focused on appearances. The novel challenges readers to question what defines a person: Is it what they wear, where they work, or who they are inside?

Even decades after its publication, *American Psycho* remains deeply relevant. In an age of social media, curated identities, and moral confusion, the novel reminds us of the importance of authenticity, empathy, and self-awareness. It warns us about the cost of living in a world where everyone wears a mask—and no one looks beneath it.

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