

Research Article

The Emotional Repression in Jamie Miller's Character in Netflix's Adolescence (2025) Through the Lens of Emotional Capitalism

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Abstract: This study examines emotional repression in Jamie Miller's character in the Netflix miniseries *Adolescence* (2025) through Eva Illouz's theory of emotional capitalism. Employing a qualitative, socio-cultural literary approach, this study analyzes selected scenes and dialogue to explore how emotional repression is represented and how family dynamics shape Jamie's emotional regulation. The findings reveal three interconnected patterns: silence and withdrawal as conditioned emotional responses, misdirected aggression as a product of emotional dysregulation, and the intergenerational transmission of emotional repression through family emotional capitalism. Rather than a personal failing, Jamie's emotional repression is understood as a structurally produced outcome of a social system that rewards emotional control and penalizes vulnerability. This study contributes to the growing body of research on emotional capitalism in adolescent media narratives. It contributes to the growing body of research on emotional capitalism, adolescent identity, family communication, and the representation of mental and emotional conflict in contemporary media narratives in global digital streaming culture today.

Keywords: Adolescence; Emotional Capitalism; Emotional Repression; Eva Illouz; Netflix.

Received: Juni 15, 2026

Revised: Juni 28, 2026

Accepted: July 25, 2026

Published: July 29, 2026

Curr. Ver.: July 29, 2026



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1. Introduction

In contemporary late capitalist societies, emotions are increasingly treated not as spontaneous private experiences but as competencies to be managed, optimized, and displayed in socially acceptable ways. Emotional control is routinely framed as a marker of maturity and resilience, while vulnerability, uncertainty, and emotional dependence are positioned as signs of personal failure. This logic is particularly consequential for adolescents, whose emotional identities are still forming and whose access to emotional recognition remains uneven. When emotional distress is individualized and depoliticized, the structural conditions that shape adolescent emotional life become invisible, and personal struggles are reframed as matters of psychological adjustment rather than as outcomes of broader social arrangements.

Rather than being recognized as legitimate responses to constrictive social and economic conditions, emotional struggles are increasingly addressed through individualized solutions such as therapeutic intervention and self-optimization. This shift obscures the structural forces that shape emotional life, particularly for adolescents who are still developing the capacity to interpret and articulate their own affective experiences. Eva Illouz (2007; 2012) situates this shift within a broader transformation in the political economy of emotion, arguing that psychological discourse, market mechanisms, and cultural industries have together reorganized emotional life according to capitalist values of productivity, efficiency, and self-management.

Illouz conceptualizes this condition as emotional capitalism — a socio-historical system in which emotions are no longer understood as purely private or spontaneous, but as governable and socially evaluated forms of competence. Within this framework, emotional control, resilience, and self-regulation function as a form of emotional capital that confers social recognition and advantage, while emotional dependency, ambiguity, and vulnerability are devalued and treated as deficiencies. This evaluative hierarchy produces new forms of emotional inequality, in which some emotional expressions are rewarded while others are systematically excluded from legitimacy.

From a sociocultural standpoint, emotional capitalism positions individuals as emotionally accountable subjects who must continuously adapt to unstable social conditions. Emotional distress, under this logic, is read as a failure of personal competence rather than as a socially constructed outcome. Adolescents are especially exposed to this dynamic, as their emotional capacities remain in formation and their access to emotional resources and recognition is often inconsistent across family, peer, and institutional contexts.

Visual media plays a central role in shaping and circulating these emotional norms. Unlike written texts, audiovisual narratives render emotional control, repression, and suffering affectively visible, allowing audiences to form intimate identifications with characters and their struggles. Beyond entertainment, film and television function as cultural texts that transmit dominant emotional scripts, implicitly instructing viewers on which feelings are acceptable and which must be concealed. Prior cinematic works such as *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), *The Big Short* (2015), and *Parasite* (2019) have explored the emotional dimensions of capitalism extensively, typically through adult characters embedded within explicit economic institutions. However, comparatively few narratives examine how emotional capitalism operates at the level of adolescent emotional development, a stage in which vulnerability is frequently repressed rather than acknowledged.

This gap becomes especially visible in the Netflix miniseries *Adolescence* (2025), created by Stephen Graham and Jack Thorne, which portrays a teenage boy navigating social and digital environments that demand emotional control and self-discipline while offering little space for emotional vulnerability. The series follows Jamie Miller, a 13-year-old boy arrested for the murder of his classmate, as he moves through a world that requires composure and restraint but provides no culturally legitimate avenue through which to express uncertainty, confusion, emotional loneliness, or the need for recognition. Rather than receiving emotional acknowledgment, Jamie experiences a persistent misalignment between his inner emotional life and the expectations of his family, peers, and digital environment.

This incapacity to meet the demands of emotional competence — defined by control, resilience, and independence — produces withdrawal, frustration, and emotional confusion. These unresolved experiences are later reinterpreted within online spaces as grievance and injustice, where digital environments intensify emotional resentment precisely because vulnerability remains structurally unacknowledged (Rampal, 2025). Crucially, Jamie's emotional trajectory should not be read as evidence of innate hostility or moral deficiency. Instead, his emotional repression reflects a broader emotional economy that rewards control and penalizes disclosure; emotional distancing functions as a defensive strategy within precarious and unequal social relations, particularly when vulnerability carries social risk (Gunnarsson, 2023). Emotional repression, in this light, emerges not as a personal shortcoming but as a socially constructed response to restrictive emotional norms.

Jamie's family environment further compounds these broader social and digital pressures. The series depicts a household in which emotional expression is rarely invited or validated, while composure and control are tacitly expected. Within this setting, emotional confusion and dependency go unacknowledged, and the family functions less as a space of emotional support than as a site where dominant emotional norms are quietly reproduced through everyday interaction. It is through this familial dynamic that Jamie learns to manage, suppress, and ultimately misrecognize his own emotional experience.

Adolescence is selected as the object of analysis not only for its thematic relevance but also for its considerable cultural significance. The series swept the 2025–2026 awards season, winning six awards at the Emmy Awards and receiving four nominations at the 2026 Golden Globe Awards, including Best Limited Series. Owen Cooper's record-setting win as the youngest Outstanding Supporting Actor for his portrayal of Jamie Miller, along with the series' acclaimed use of a single continuous shot in each episode — a technique that intensifies psychological tension and emotional immersion — further underscores its relevance as a cultural text worth close analysis.

Previous studies have examined adolescence and emotional regulation within media representations from various angles. Herusatoto (2025) focuses on toxic masculinity and incel ideology, demonstrating how Jamie's emotional struggles are shaped by exposure to online

manosphere communities that frame vulnerability as weakness. Horeck (2025) approaches the series through affective politics, arguing that adult emotions particularly paternal guilt and despair — are granted greater narrative legitimacy than adolescent emotional experience. Floriani et al. (2025) adopt a psychological lens, attributing Jamie's emotional withdrawal and identity confusion to developmental and mental health factors. While each of these studies offers valuable insight, they tend to focus on observable behaviors, ideological formations, or individual psychological conditions rather than on the structural emotional norms that precede and produce these outcomes.

This reveals a significant research gap in examining how emotional capitalism shapes adolescent emotional life, particularly how emotional repression is constructed prior to its manifestation in behaviors that are later socially labeled as harmful or toxic. Few studies have examined how standards of emotional self-management — especially within digitally mediated environments function to individualize, normalize, and depoliticize emotional distress. This study addresses that gap by applying Eva Illouz's theory of emotional capitalism to Adolescence, focusing specifically on how Jamie's emotional repression is shaped by family dynamics and broader socio-economic emotional regimes.

This study is guided by two research questions: (1) How is Jamie Miller's emotional repression represented in Adolescence? and (2) In what ways does Jamie's family emotional capitalism influence his emotional regulation? This study argues that Adolescence represents emotional repression as a structurally produced outcome of emotional capitalism, in which emotional vulnerability is devalued and emotional self-control is normalized — creating the conditions under which emotional hostility and resentment later emerge.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach to analyze the representation of emotional repression in the Netflix miniseries *Adolescence* (2025) through Eva Illouz's theory of emotional capitalism. The primary data consist of selected scenes and dialogues involving Jamie Miller that depict emotional repression, emotional regulation, and family emotional dynamics. Data were collected through repeated viewing of the series, followed by the selection and transcription of relevant scenes. The analysis was conducted in two stages: first, by identifying patterns of emotional repression represented in Jamie's behavior; and second, by interpreting these patterns through the lens of emotional capitalism to examine how socio-cultural and familial emotional norms shape his emotional regulation.

3. Results

Silence and Withdrawal as Repressed Emotional Response

Jamie Miller's emotional repression is most visibly manifested through his consistent pattern of silence and behavioral withdrawal when confronted with emotionally charged situations. Rather than articulating distress, confusion, or remorse, Jamie retreats into a communicative void that signals not emotional absence, but emotional suppression. This distinction is critical: Jamie does not feel he lacks the tools and permission to express it.



Figure 1. Jamie during Jamie's police interrogation, eps 1.

This pattern is particularly evident during Jamie's police interrogation, where he repeatedly responds with "no comment" despite being asked direct questions regarding the incident. Even when confronted with CCTV footage, which visibly unsettles him and brings

him to tears, Jamie continues to refuse verbal engagement. His silence in this moment does not indicate indifference; rather, it reflects an inability to process and articulate overwhelming emotional stimuli. The coexistence of visible emotional distress (crying) and verbal withdrawal “*no comment*” demonstrates a disconnection between feeling and expression — a hallmark of emotional repression.

The scene above illustrates how Jamie's silence functions not as indifference but as a defensive emotional mechanism. When language fails or has never been made available the body withdraws. This pattern aligns with Eva Illouz's (2007) argument in *Cold Intimacies* that emotional repression is not an innate individual trait but a learned social behavior, produced when an individual has been denied access to what she calls “emotional literacy” — the capacity to name, narrate, and negotiate one's inner life. Jamie has never been taught to speak his feelings; therefore, silence becomes the only available vocabulary.



Figure 2. Jamie during Briony's psychiatric session, eps 3.

Jamie's reluctance to engage in therapeutic dialogue further reinforces this interpretation. During his sessions with the psychiatrist, Jamie frequently responds with phrases such as “*I don't know*” or remains silent when prompted to explain his thoughts and feelings. These responses indicate not a lack of awareness, but an inability to translate internal experiences into language. His withdrawal in the presence of Briony, a figure explicitly tasked with creating emotional space, reveals the depth of his conditioned silence.

Illouz (2007) notes that therapeutic discourse, while promising emotional liberation, can paradoxically expose how certain individuals have been excluded from its vocabulary altogether. Jamie does not resist Briony out of defiance; rather, he resists because emotional self-disclosure has never been modeled for him as safe or legitimate. In this sense, his silence is less a conscious refusal and more an inherited limitation — a learned response shaped by an environment in which emotional expression was neither encouraged nor practiced.

Misdirected Aggression as Emotional Dysregulation

When silence can no longer contain what has been repressed, Jamie's emotional life surfaces in a radically distorted form: as aggression, rationalization, and moral displacement. This section argues that Jamie's violence — and his disturbing inability to register guilt — is not the product of an absence of emotion, but of emotion that has been systematically denied its proper channel. What cannot be expressed becomes redirected, and what cannot be grieved becomes weaponized.

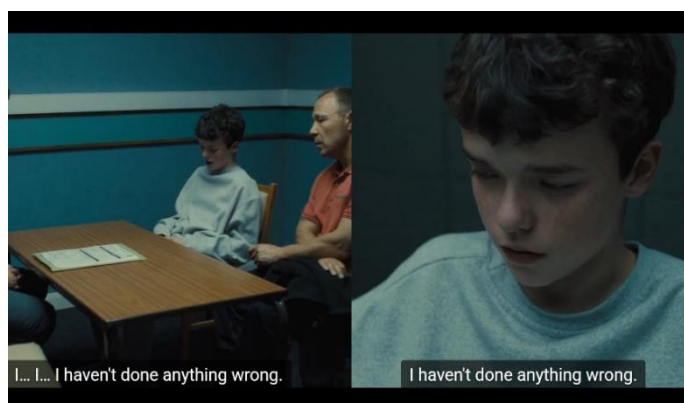


Figure 3. Jamie during Jamie's police interrogation, eps 1.

This pattern is evident in Jamie's interaction with the police, where he repeatedly asserts, *"I didn't do anything wrong."* Unlike a direct denial such as *"I didn't do it,"* this statement shifts the focus from factual accountability to moral justification. The insistence on moral innocence, despite the severity of the situation, suggests an attempt to reframe his actions within an alternative ethical logic. Rather than confronting the emotional weight of his actions, Jamie deflects it by constructing a narrative in which he remains justified.

The distinction embedded in this repeated phrase is analytically revealing. By claiming that he *"did nothing wrong,"* Jamie avoids engaging with the guilt or remorse that would normally accompany such circumstances. This indicates a process of emotional displacement: instead of processing his emotions internally, he redirects them into a defensive moral stance. As Eva Illouz (2007) argues, emotional capitalism encourages individuals to manage emotions in ways that align with social expectations, often resulting in performative expressions rather than authentic emotional engagement. In this sense, Jamie is not performing innocence; he is performing moral adequacy in the only emotional register available to him.

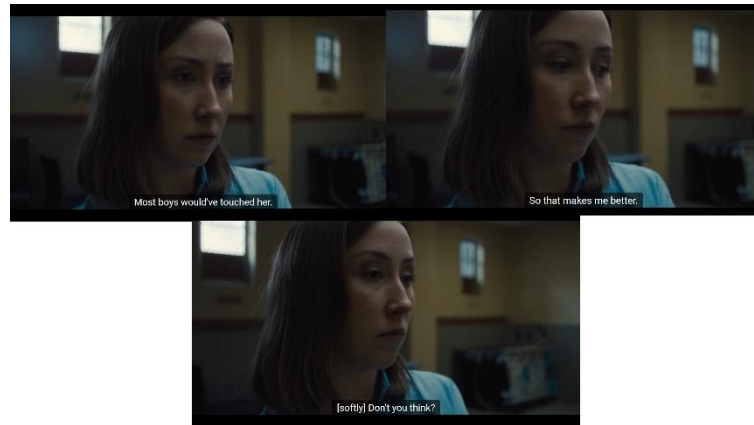


Figure 4. Jamie during Briony's psychiatric session, eps 3.

This distortion becomes even more explicit during Jamie's session with the psychiatrist, when he states, *"Most boys would've touched her. So that makes me better, don't you think?"* This statement reveals a deeply troubling form of emotional reasoning. Rather than expressing empathy or remorse, Jamie constructs a comparative moral framework in which his restraint is positioned as virtue. His evaluation of himself is not based on the harm caused, but on how his actions compare to an imagined worse alternative.

At this moment, empathy is replaced by calculation. To recognize Katie as a subject with her own emotional interiority would require Jamie to confront feelings of guilt, shame, and responsibility — emotions he appears unable to process. Instead, he displaces these emotions into a logic of relative moral superiority. He does not feel remorse; he performs it through rationalization. This is precisely the kind of emotional distortion that Illouz (2008) associates with subjects who have internalized the logic of emotional capitalism, where worth is measured not by authentic emotional experience but by socially legible performances of adequacy.

For Jamie, the absence of further harm becomes, in his mind, evidence of good character. This represents a profound failure of emotional development: the inability to recognize harm, to empathize, and to take responsibility. Importantly, the series does not frame this as inherent monstrosity, but as the intelligible outcome of an emotional system that has consistently denied him the tools to process and express his inner life. In this way, Jamie's aggression and moral rationalization are not deviations from the norm, but distorted reflections of the emotional logic he has internalized.

Family Emotional Capitalism as the Root of Jamie's Repression

Having established how Jamie's emotional repression manifests through silence, withdrawal, and misdirected aggression — this section turns to the deeper systemic question: where does this repression originate? The argument advanced here is that Jamie's emotional dysregulation is not an individual pathology but a structural inheritance, produced within a family environment that operates according to the logic of what Illouz (2007) terms "emotional capitalism." In the Miller household, emotions are not expressed, processed, or shared; they are managed, suppressed, and privatized, treated less as human experiences than as risks to be contained.



Figure 5. Eddie kissing Jamie's stuffed toy in Jamie's bedroom, eps 4.

This dynamic becomes strikingly visible in a moment of private remorse, where Eddie is shown holding Jamie's childhood teddy bear, whispering, *"I'm sorry, son. I should have done better."* The emotional weight of this statement is undeniable; however, its direction is profoundly revealing. Eddie does not communicate this apology to Jamie himself, but to an inanimate object that stands in as a surrogate for the child he cannot emotionally reach. This displacement underscores a fundamental contradiction: emotional expression becomes possible only in the absence of direct relational engagement.

Eddie's apology to an object crystallizes the emotional architecture of the Miller family. The fact that vulnerability is expressed only in solitude suggests that emotional intimacy has never been normalized within the household. As Illouz (2007) argues, under emotional capitalism, intimacy is structured not through open expression but through the regulation and containment of feeling. Love is demonstrated through provision, protection, and restraint — but rarely through emotional transparency. Eddie's love for Jamie is evident, yet it remains unarticulated in direct interaction. As a result, emotional meaning circulates silently within the family, never fully expressed, never validated, and crucially, never taught.



Figure 6. Eddie posing reflective questions to Manda during their conversation, eps 4.

This pattern is further reinforced in Eddie's reflective question to Manda: *"So if my dad made me, how did I make that?"* While framed as an expression of guilt, this statement inadvertently maps the intergenerational transmission of emotional repression. Eddie recognizes a rupture between his intentions and his outcomes, yet he lacks the conceptual framework to fully articulate how this rupture occurred. His father's violence may not be repeated in the same form, but its emotional consequences remain unresolved.

What emerges here is not a break from the past, but a transformation of it. Eddie rejects overt violence, yet reproduces emotional absence. Illouz's concept of emotional habitus is particularly instructive in this context: emotional patterns are not consciously taught, but absorbed through everyday interactions and silences. Jamie does not inherit aggression directly; he inherits the inability to process, articulate, and regulate emotion. What is transmitted across generations is not cruelty, but silence — and silence, as the series demonstrates, can be equally destructive.



Figure 7. Jamie's aggressive outbursts as a reflection of his father's emotionally repressive and hostile influence, eps 4.

Scene juxtaposition between Jamie and his father reveals a striking continuity in emotional expression across generations. While Jamie's outburst in the therapeutic setting — “*I don't fucking wanna sit down!*” and “*You do not control what I fucking...*” — appears as an uncontrolled eruption of anger, his father's earlier mode of communication demonstrates that such emotional expression has long been structured through aggression and intimidation. Eddie's warning — “*Don't smile, kid, 'cause I'll slap that fucking smile off your face*” — exemplifies a family environment in which emotions are not processed but disciplined.

This parallel suggests that Jamie's emotional dysregulation is not spontaneous, but inherited. What appears as individual aggression is, in fact, the reproduction of an emotional grammar learned within the family. Eddie's language operates not as communication, but as regulation a mechanism to suppress emotional expression before it can even be articulated. In such a setting, vulnerability is not merely discouraged; it is actively punished.

In line with Illouz's (2007) notion of emotional capitalism, the Miller household does not provide a space for emotional articulation, but instead regulates affect through control, suppression, and fear. Emotional expression becomes risky, and therefore must be contained or redirected. Jamie's outburst in the presence of the psychiatrist is thus not a deviation from familial norms, but a continuation of them — the same emotional structure, expressed in a different context.

Jamie's inability to regulate his emotions in the therapeutic setting therefore reflects not merely personal instability, but the absence of a learned emotional framework. He has not been taught how to express vulnerability only how to experience emotion as something that must either be silenced or explode.

Taken together, these three thematic strands withdrawal, misdirected aggression, and familial reproduction constitute a coherent portrait of emotional repression as theorized by Illouz: not as a personal failing, but as a social and structural condition. Jamie Miller does not repress his emotions because he is inherently flawed, but because he has been systematically deprived of the emotional conditions necessary for expression. He represses them because he was never shown an alternative emotional framework. In this sense, repression is not merely his response to the world, but the very language through which he has learned to exist within it.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that emotional repression in Adolescence is not a character flaw but a structurally conditioned response to an emotional environment that systematically withholds recognition of vulnerability. Across all three themes silence, misdirected aggression, and family emotional capitalism a consistent logic emerges: emotional expressions that deviate from norms of control and self-sufficiency are suppressed, displaced, or denied. This is precisely the dynamic Illouz (2007) identifies at the heart of emotional capitalism, where the management of feeling supersedes its authentic expression.

These findings extend and complicate previous studies on Adolescence. While Herusatoto (2025) rightly identifies emotional suppression as part of toxic masculine norms, this study demonstrates that such suppression operates at a deeper structural level — one that precedes gender ideology and is reproduced through the everyday emotional grammar of the family. Similarly, whereas Floriani et al. (2025) read Jamie's emotional difficulties as developmental or psychological in nature, this study reframes them as socially produced

outcomes of an emotional economy that penalizes vulnerability at every level: familial, social, and cultural. Horeck's (2025) observation that adolescent emotional experiences are underarticulated in the narrative is also supported here Jamie's interior life is not absent, but structurally suppressed.

Crucially, the intergenerational dimension revealed in Section 3.3 adds a layer of structural depth that is absent from existing studies. Eddie Miller's emotional unavailability is not willful neglect but the inherited outcome of his own emotional formation. This generational chain illustrates Illouz's (2007) concept of emotional habitus as a lived, transmitted practice rather than a conscious ideology. The implication for reading *Adolescence* is significant: Jamie's violence is not an origin point but an endpoint — the final, visible expression of a long, invisible accumulation of emotional misrecognition.

5. Conclusions

This study has argued that Jamie Miller's emotional repression in *Adolescence* is best understood not as individual pathology but as a structurally produced condition of emotional capitalism. Through three interconnected patterns silence and withdrawal, misdirected aggression, and intergenerational familial repression — the series constructs a portrait of a young person who has been systematically denied the emotional vocabulary necessary to process, express, and regulate his inner life. Applying Eva Illouz's theoretical framework, this study has shown that what appears on the surface as deviance or moral failure is, in fact, a legible response to an emotional economy that devalues vulnerability and rewards control.

These findings carry implications beyond the text. *Adolescence* invites audiences to reconsider the social and structural conditions that shape adolescent emotional life, rather than locating failure solely within the individual. For media studies and literary scholarship, this study demonstrates the value of applying emotional capitalism as an analytical lens to contemporary audiovisual narratives particularly those that engage with adolescence, family dynamics, and the affective consequences of late capitalist culture. Future research may extend this framework to other media representations of adolescent emotional life, or examine how audiences negotiate the emotional norms that such narratives reproduce and contest.

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