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Deconstructing Misogynistic and Manosphere Ideology in Netflix Series Adolescence: A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the discursive construction of misogynistic masculinist ideology in purposively selected Episode 3 of Netflix's Adolescence. Drawing on theories of hegemonic masculinity, gender performativity, and ideological interpellation, the analysis explores how masculine authority is sustained through denial, conversational control, emotional escalation, and the normalisation of harm. The findings demonstrate how masculinity is reproduced as reasonable, ordinary, and emotionally justified, even in moments of aggression and entitlement. By foregrounding the subtle mechanisms through which power is rendered invisible, the study contributes to feminist media and discourse studies by highlighting how contemporary streaming shows normalises misogynistic masculinity under the guise of realism and psychological complexity.

Keywords: *Hegemonic Masculinity, Ideological framing, Gender Performativity, Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis.*

Introduction

The interplay among culture, language, and media influences one another as socioeconomic and cultural elements influence language. Hardt (2004) noted that the media serves as a crucial source of information and entertainment both globally and nationally, acting as the primary provider of information, disseminator of thoughts and ideas, and creator of social realities. Isanovi (2006) asserts that the progression of mass media and contemporary information technology has resulted in the appropriation of women's projection and portrayal. Women projection in media is not neutral, and their positive or negative role is not dependant on reality but is constantly relative to men, and often, "the content of the media distorts women's status in the social world" (Tuchman, 1979, p. 531).

Media discourse is utilised to construct and influence social realities and beliefs. Ideology is "the mental framework, [i.e.] the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery systems of representation" (Hall, 1986, p. 29). Zia (2007) also noted that the media exhibits bias against women in various domains, adversely impacting their representation and hindering their societal advancement. Internet video streaming services have changed media consumption and social relationships. Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime, and others offer millions of hours of programming.

'Gill (2007) and Banet-Weiser, (2018) noted that modern media actively promotes gender stereotypes and power inequality. In both online and offline settings, researchers have found rising antagonism towards women, a sense of entitlement to intimacy, and opposition to feminist ideals (Manne, 2018).

Ging (2019) remarks that with the rise of social media, antifeminist narratives have grown. Similarly, Banet-Weiser (2018) noted that misogyny is prevalent now for the same reasons feminism has: it is articulated and enacted across media platforms, it attracts similarly inclined organisations and individuals, and it emerges in a conflict-ridden landscape with competing power dynamics. Adolescence is a crucial phase for the formation of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours about gender (Maccoby, 2002). Frequent consumers of television, video games, and YouTube exhibited higher endorsement of masculine beliefs that promote emotional detachment, dominance, toughness, and/or the avoidance of femininity among both adolescences' boys and girls (Scharrer & Warren, 2021).

Masculinity is a multifaceted and evolving construct that overlaps with race, class, sexual orientation, and other identity dimensions (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Adolescents whose behaviour deviates from prevailing masculine norms may encounter adverse peer feedback (Reigeluth & Addis, 2016) or stress (Reidy et al., 2018).

The television series *Adolescence*, which is based on true cases, centres on a 13-year-old boy who was arrested for the murder of a female classmate and examines the effects of online sexism on youth, igniting social and political discourse. Nearly 70% of boys in the UK between the ages of 11 and 14 had come across misogynistic content online (Vodafone, 2024). Nevertheless, there is still a dearth of research on the factors and dangers influencing the popularity of this kind of information among teenagers.

The *Adolescence*, especially Episode 3, strategically focuses on a therapeutic exchange between Jamie, a 13-year-old boy responsible for her class fellow Katie' murder, and a psychologist Briony sent by authorities for psychological assessment of Jamie. The episode shows how language and interaction can construct and challenge gendered power relations. This study probes the projection of toxic masculinity, their performative role and ideological construction to avoid accountability of the Katie' murder by Jamie in purposively selected episode 3.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study lies in its contribution to media studies and feminist CDA. This study is for awareness purpose to unmask the hidden ideologies presented in media discourse that can influence the minds of adolescences. Their reliance on electronic and social media made them vulnerable to gender and misogynistic ideologies at very young age. The research promotes feminist efforts to challenge the normalization of gender-based violence and inequality.

Statement of the Problem

Despite increasing scholarly attention to gender representation in media, there is limited critical research on how popular streaming content subtly reproduces misogynistic masculinist ideologies through everyday discourse. Episode 3 of Netflix's *Adolescence* presents male behaviour and emotional expression in ways that often appear realistic or psychologically complex, yet may function to excuse accountability and reinforce masculine authority. Furthermore, the narrative structure encourages viewers to sympathize with masculine perspectives, potentially marginalizing female subjectivity and emotional labour. This study addresses the need to critically examine how such discursive strategies both reproduce and conceal gendered power relations in contemporary media.

Research Questions

1. What linguistic and discursive strategies does Jamie use to avoid accountability, and how do these strategies reinforce toxic masculine authority?
2. How does the episode normalize misogyny by framing it as realism, rationality, or psychological complexity?

Conceptual Framework of the Study

The present study employed FCDA by combining conceptual framework based on theory of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), gender performativity (Butler, 1988; 1990) and Althusser's (1971) theory of ideology and interpellation. It examines the discursive construction of misogynistic, hegemonic and sexual masculinist ideology in the discourse of leading character in Episode 3. Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity refers to culturally dominant forms of masculinity that legitimize male power and subordinate women and alternative masculinities (ibid).

Jamie is a 13-year-old boy and a main character in the *Adolescence* and his discursive strategies function to construct the hegemonic masculinity, avoid accountability while reinforcing masculine and sexual dominance. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) remarks that "Hegemonic patterns of masculinity are both engaged with and contested as children grow up" (p. 839). Jamie's experience with his father and peers are the interested area for researcher to probe and answer the research question as "Hegemonic masculinities are likely to involve specific patterns of internal division and emotional conflict, precisely because of their association with gendered power. Relationships with fathers are one likely focus of tension" (ibid, p. 852).

Jamie's non-verbal gestures, stares and performative action in the present of a psychologist highlights the masculine ideologies construction based on the theory of gender performativity (Butler, 1990). This theory argues that gender is dynamic and not a fixed identity and "Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed" (ibid, p. 527). It mirrors the various gender roles related to men and women based on their performance not biological identity. As Butler noted, "gender itself is something prior to the various acts, postures, and gestures by which it is dramatized and known" (p. 528).

Althusser's (1918-1990) theory of ideology and interpellation is crucial for understanding the positioning of characters like Jamie and Briony within gendered power dynamics in *Adolescence*. The episode's narrative emphasises masculine perspectives and normalises misogyny, reflecting Althusser's claim that ideology 'hails' people into natural positions. Althusser's interpellation describes how cultural values create identities and social positions. Jamie is shown as a masculine subject with psychologically complicated acts, indicating how the episode maintains masculine dominance and hides female emotional labour. With theories of hegemonic masculinity, gender performativity, and ideological interpellation, the analysis situates leading characters' utterances within broader patriarchal structures, revealing how power operates most effectively when it is disavowed rather than explicitly asserted.

Research Methodology

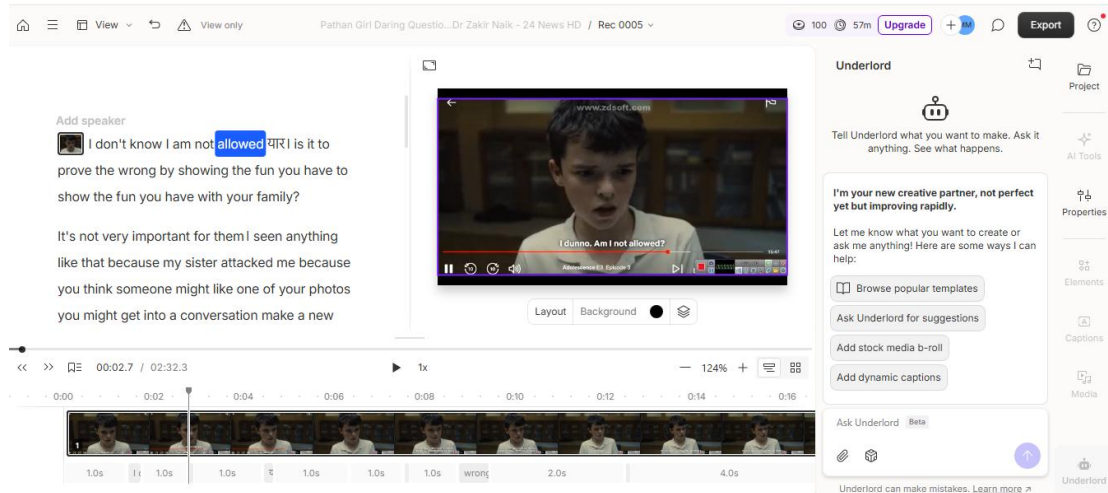
The study is fundamentally qualitative in nature. The data is taken from purposively selected; Episode 3 of *Adolescence* for the present study. The main criteria set by the researcher to choose Episode 3 are due to their top TV ratings. The third episode of the Netflix drama *Adolescence* ranked fifth in the weekly ratings with 5.14 million viewers, making it the first streaming program to top the UK's weekly TV ratings (Youngs & Mzimba, 2025).

After the first sampling of episode, the dialogues are selected through 'relevance sampling' based on the recognised contribution to the central research questions (Krippendorff, 2018). The role

of the researcher-transcriber is chosen for the study to transcribe the collected data and Descript-AI online software is used for written transcription of the episode. The video of the episode 3 was opened in Descript-AI software for transcription as shown in figure 1. The researcher played main role in closely watching the video and selecting the excerpts based on relevance sampling relevant to the research question. This rigorous transcription procedure along the help of AI software made textual data error free for present study.

Figure 1:

Descript-AI online software Dashboard during Transcription of Episode 3



Delimitation of the Study

To conduct a concentrated study, the researcher delimits the scope of the investigation to include only one episode 3 of *Adolescence*. This study does not include other episodes of the show, which may also be considered but are not the focus of this study due to time and data limitations. The study relies only on the textual analysis of the episode and the rest of the aspects are not included in the analysis.

Analysis and Discussion

In the third episode, the confrontation between Jamie and Briony becomes a complex psychological game, where he fluctuates between the states of an innocent boy and an angry and dangerous man. The series never attempts to provide a definitive answer as to why such boys exist, or why their anger is often directed at women, and instead forces the viewer to wallow in and confront this painful uncertainty. The episode is about mostly a woman in a room asking a young man about a murder he committed and the culture of sexual and toxic masculinity from which it emerged. Jamie reluctant to speak at first, but eventually he opens up about his complex feelings towards Katie.

Conversational Control, Discursive Dominance, and Emotional Escalation

Jamie asserts masculine dominance by regulating dialogue, managing turn-taking, often interrupting, disregarding questions, or charging Briony with manipulation, reinterpreting psychological assessment as deceit. Power is exercised not only through content but through interaction and performance as Butler (1990) noted that if gender is produced by performance, then there is no appeal to an inherent and unactualized 'sex' or 'gender' that these performances supposedly convey. The social expectations of toxic masculinity demand conversational dominance as "indeed, the transvestite's gender is as fully real as anyone whose performance complies with social expectations" (ibid, p. 527).

When the manipulative and forceful turn taking strategies failed, Jamie escalates emotionally and physically. His shouting, refusal to comply, and verbal aggression function as disciplinary

displays designed to reaffirm dominance. Jamie's masculinity shifts from discursive resistance to overt pressure when he observes Briony exercise institutional authority by signalling Frank to leave. His reaction "What was that? What was that?" (Episode 3, Dialogue Excerpt, p. 40) immediately reframes her professional action as illegitimate through a misogynistic and gendered insult. Perceived obstacles to masculinity can provoke compensatory behaviours of dominance and violence in men, which may effectively mitigate these concerns and reaffirm their status as powerful, dominant, and virtuous individuals (Bosson, et al., 2009). The analysis reveals how masculine power responds defensively when challenged by women rather than institutions. Similarly, Vescio and Kosakowska-Berezecka (2020) noted that the sexual objectification of intimidating women is posited to offer men a means to reaffirm masculine authority after challenges to their manhood.

Entitlement, Vulnerability, and the Moral Reframing of Violence

The Jamie and Katie conflict originates from a prior incident involving Katie when she sends a topless photograph to a student for whom she harbored romantic feelings. He swiftly disseminated it across the school, resulting in the exposure of this intimate image and inciting derogatory remarks regarding the size of Katie's breasts. Due to his internalisation of manosphere rhetoric suggesting that most men must deceive superficial and disdainful women to attain sexual gratification, coupled with his self-perception as an irredeemable failure with no alternative, and influenced by the belief that this approach is more straightforward, Jamie ultimately solicits Katie's company, presuming she would be vulnerable and therefore more inclined to acquiesce.

Jamie narrates his decision to ask Katie out as a calculated response to her perceived vulnerability, explicitly stating:

I just thought she might be - weak...So I just thought I'd ask her...because everyone else was calling her a slag you know - or flat - or -- so I thought when she was like that - weak - she might - like me (p. 47).

This admission reveals how misogynistic masculinity reframes female harm as opportunity, transforming compassion into strategy and vulnerability into access. Jamie's self-description of this logic as "Clever don't you think?" (ibid) exposes a masculinist entitlement that assumes women's emotional distress lowers their right to refuse. His continued body shaming comments further reduces Katie to physical criteria, reinforcing a hierarchy where women's worth and availability are assessed independently of consent or dignity. When Katie rejects him by saying "She, uh... Just - laughed. Said she wasn't that desperate" (ibid) Jamie's humiliation becomes the emotional pivot for subsequent resentment, repositioning her refusal as cruelty rather than autonomy.

The most alarming shift occurs when Jamie reframes restraint as moral superiority:

I didn't even - that night - I didn't touch her - I could have touched her - I didn't touch her - I had a knife, she was scared, I could have touched any part of her body I wanted to - I really wanted to - but I didn't - I just ...Most boys would have touched her. So that makes me better (p. 49).

Jamie narrows accountability to physical thresholds and equates desire with entitlement to access by centring what he did not do. Vescio et al., (2025) hypothesised that situational threats to men's internalised hegemonic masculine norms would provoke their desire to perpetrate sexual violence, similar to acts of domination and physical aggression more broadly. Katie refusal hurt the toxic and hegemonic masculine ego of Jamie, rendering him to violence.

Jamie repeated insistence "I didn't kill her" further collapses ethical responsibility into criminal culpability, erasing emotional harm and misogynistic aggression from consideration. Briony's intervention reframes the discussion around the finality of death and the loss of Katie's future,

momentarily challenging Jamie's narrative dominance. However, Jamie's closing revision "She wasn't so bad... She just didn't like me" returns to a logic in which female refusal is the primary injury, underscoring how toxic masculinity reasserts itself through denial, minimisation, and moral reframing even in moments of apparent vulnerability.

Discursive Projection of Toxic and Sexual Masculinity

In acknowledgement of the diversity of masculinities across various contexts, researchers in the field of masculinities have compiled a list of hegemonic masculinist virtues, which predominantly include independence, strength, power, competitiveness, assertiveness, competence, and leadership (Connell, 2005). Similarly, analysis of *Adolescence* offers a sustained and unsettling exploration of masculinity as a discursive performance structured through power, strength, aggression and violence.

When Briony attempts to explore masculinity by asking about intergenerational male behaviour "What's your Dad and his Dad like?" Jamie responds with dismissive humour: "Um. Men?" The projection of masculine anger becomes more explicit in Jamie's account of his father. Jamie recounts, "He pulled the shed down once. When he was really - in a proper rage - but that's - as bad as it's got."

This pattern is reinforced through Jamie's insistence on heterosexual certainty. His clarification "I'm not gay" and the rhetorical question "Who doesn't?" in response to whether he wants a girlfriend frame heterosexual desire as universal, natural, and unquestionable. Sexual masculinity is projected as a baseline expectation rather than a relational practice. The episode thus constructs masculinity through sexual entitlement and emotional minimalism, aligning manhood with desire rather than responsibility.

The most explicit articulation of sexualised toxic masculinity appears in Jamie's responses to discussions about images of girls circulated at school. His immediate correction "No. Not porn. Everyone sees porn. Of two girls in my year. I saw photos. Of two girls" functions to normalise sexualised looking by framing it as universal and aligning with Mulvey's (2013) idea of the male gaze. The appeal to 'everyone' diffuses responsibility into peer culture, dissolving individual accountability through assumed consensus. When asked whether the girls would be happy that he saw the images, Jamie replies, "Everyone else did," explicitly replacing ethical consideration with majority behaviour. Sexual harm is thus reframed as routine social practice.

This normalisation is further intensified when Jamie evaluates the girl, Katie. His dismissal "She wasn't my type," followed by a derogatory bodily assessment "She was quite - no offence - quite flat, you know?" reduces her to an object of masculine appraisal. The repeated appeal to peer agreement "Everyone said it. Who saw it. That's not just me" reinforces misogynistic evaluation as collective rather than personal. Masculinity is projected here as the right to judge, rank, and consume female bodies, while female subjectivity and consent are erased. Even when Briony introduces the gravity of the girl's death, Jamie redirects the conversation toward masculine peer norms of carelessness and accumulation, focusing on whether more images could have been obtained rather than on harm.

Incel Discourse, Online Misogyny, and the Denial of Ideological Alignment

According to the UN agency tasked with eradicating gender discrimination, a growing network of online groups known as the 'manosphere' is becoming a significant threat to gender equality as toxic digital environments have a greater influence on attitudes, behaviours, and policies in the real world (UN Women (2025).

Digital channels are being used as weapons to propagate hate and misogyny. The manosphere, which was once limited to marginal online communities, has spread to workplaces, schoolyards, and occasionally even close personal relationships. These males find 'strength' in online forums

that also propagate negative views that distort masculinity and feed misogyny as they search for solutions to feel more confident about themselves. Boys are searching for 'validation online'. These spaces are really taking advantage of those insecurities and a need for validation, very often circulating messages that are very dismissive of women's and girls' positions in society and are very misogynistic, portraying a very bad picture of women's rights activists. Social media algorithms are progressively amplifying these narratives by rewarding content that is divisive and inflammatory.

Briony shows Katie's online comments to probe Jamie's exposure to misogynistic digital cultures, prompting an immediate defensive reaction "Facebook??" that shifts attention from content to medium. Jamie's attempt to reassert control by monitoring Briony's emotional state "Did I scare you when I shouted?" reflects a masculine strategy of reframing aggression as concern. When the discussion turns to the emojis and "truth groups," Jamie distances himself from explicit ideological affiliation, insisting he only "had a look" at "incel stuff" because "everyone kept going on about it". This language frames misogynistic online communities as ambient cultural noise rather than belief systems, allowing Jamie to deny alignment while acknowledging awareness.

This exchange exposes how incel discourse and digital misogyny are internalised and rationalised through symbolic language. When Jamie explains the emojis "Want love. Won't get it," and "Red pill exploding", he translates online misogynistic ideology into seemingly objective truths. Red pill philosophy, often known as being red-pilled, is the realisation that women are favoured over men in society. It implies that those who disagree have taken the blue pill, a reference to the film *The Matrix*. His assertion that "80% of women are attracted to 20% of men... that's just – right" marks a critical moment where grievance-based masculinity shifts from observation to belief. According to 80-20 rule, 80% of women who date online choose the top 20% of attractive and alpha men. This makes men who think they are unattractive think there are not many opportunities for them in online dating.

Findings and Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates how masculinist ideology circulates through online spaces in indirect and deniable forms, enabling youth to absorb its logics without claiming its label. It can be argued that the main reason behind the gender ideology of Jamie was manosphere. According to Reyes et al. (2016), traditional gender role attitudes that are propagated inside the manosphere are also associated with an increased risk of dating violence perpetration among teenage guys. In addition to the fact that certain members of the manosphere have a history of violence against women, this type of behaviour is frequently accepted and even promoted (Aiolfi et al, 2024). The episode risks normalising misogynistic ideas as exploratory rather than ideological (Althusser, 1970), reinforcing hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) through disavowal rather than commitment.

The study finds the toxic and hegemonic masculinity manifested in the episode through simple but loaded interaction between Jamie and Briony. The finding reflects how male anger, sexual entitlement, and sexism are contested as representative and Jamie's performative masculine behaviors and these responses are framed as accustomed teenager reactions. This ideological construction and negative framing of toxic masculinity encourage viewers to accept these toxic behaviors rather than challenge them.

The first research question focused on identifying the discursive strategies Jamie uses to avoid responsibility while maintaining masculine dominance. The analysis observes Jamie's discursive strategies for evading responsibility while upholding masculine dominance, revealing that adolescent masculinity is ideological, unstable, and not inherent. The episode critiques everyday misogyny but fails to challenge the ideologies underpinning it. It portrays emotional depth and

friendships with women as unnecessary, linking masculinity with sexual entitlement and emotional minimalism, thus highlighting masculinity as fragile and contingent. Hegemonic masculinity is portrayed as not reliant on overt aggression; instead, it operates through confidence, spatial control, and central narrative positioning, granting Jamie complexity and justification while relegating Briony to a passive, empathetic role.

The second research question examined how misogyny is normalised by being framed as realism, rational thinking, or psychological depth. Jamie resists interpretations that portray him as weak or emotionally unstable, often redirecting discussions to preserve his masculine authority. Butler's theory highlights how his responses render masculinity appear natural despite being constructed. Misogyny is depicted subtly through emotional manipulation, rather than explicit insults. Jamie's defense mechanisms illustrate how toxic masculinity normalizes misogyny, with Briony's societal role emphasizing women's expectation to manage male behavior. The episode reveals vulnerabilities in hegemonic masculinity, illustrating ideological structures that validate Jamie's actions despite questioning the notion of masculinity itself.

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