



Personifying the adolescent mind: Emotional dominance and identity formation in Pixar's Inside Out and Inside Out 2

Yamini

Department of English, Zakir Hussain Delhi College, University of Delhi, Delhi, India

Corresponding Author: Yamini

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.66856/english.2026.12.3.12089>

Abstract

This paper examines Pixar's *Inside Out* (2015) and *Inside Out 2* (2024) as a continuous literary text tracing the formation of personality from childhood through early adolescence, with particular focus on young teenagers. Reading both films through the lenses of literary personification and allegory, affect theory, and Erik Erikson's theory of adolescent identity formation, with a minor supporting reference to Ben Jonson's theory of dominant humour, the paper argues that each film dramatizes personality as a structure built through the management of competing emotions rather than as a fixed, pre-given essence. Using qualitative textual analysis and comparative film analysis, the paper shows how *Inside Out* stages childhood personality formation around the necessary, initially resisted integration of sadness alongside joy, while *Inside Out 2* relocates this argument to early adolescence, where anxiety, alongside envy, embarrassment, and ennui, threatens to seize total control over Riley's emerging Sense of Self amid pressures of peer acceptance and self-image. The comparative reading that follows traces this movement from childhood foundation to adolescent complexity, situates the films' concerns within the contemporary pressures facing young teenagers, and acknowledges their broader relatability across the lifespan without losing sight of their primary developmental focus. The paper concludes that both films converge on a single claim: that a healthy personality forms not through the suppression of difficult emotions but through their balanced integration into a coherent, plural sense of self.

Keywords: Adolescence, emotion, anxiety, identity, personality formation, Pixar, *Inside Out*

Introduction

Literature and cinema have long used personified emotion as a means of making the inner life legible. From the embodied virtues and vices of medieval allegory to the externalized passions of early modern drama, narrative art has repeatedly given feeling a body and a name, treating the self not as a fixed essence but as a site where competing affective forces contend for dominance. This literary habit persists in contemporary popular cinema, and Pixar's *Inside Out* (2015) and *Inside Out 2* (2024) represent its most sustained recent expression: both films stage the protagonist Riley's interior world as a populated psychic landscape in which Joy, Sadness, Anxiety, and other emotions exist as discrete characters with motives, alliances, and conflicts of their own. Scholars on the first film has already situated this device within a long literary lineage of allegorical personification, reading Riley's emotions through the same critical vocabulary that has been applied to Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (Gulya 65-66). This continuity between medieval allegory and contemporary animation is what makes the two films suitable objects of literary, rather than purely psychological or pedagogical, analysis: they do not merely illustrate emotion for a child audience but construct a coherent literary architecture in which feeling and identity are inseparable.

This architecture becomes especially significant when the two films are read together rather than separately. *Inside Out* dramatizes Riley's childhood personality as something built primarily out of memory, family, and belonging, with Joy assuming an almost unquestioned position of narrative authority until the film insists, through Sadness's necessary recovery, that no single emotion can sustain a complete self.

Inside Out 2 relocates this argument to early adolescence, introducing Anxiety, Envy, Embarrassment, and Ennui as Riley enters puberty and a more socially exposed sense of self. Anxiety, in particular, briefly assumes the same dominant position that Joy once held, reorganizing Riley's personality around control, comparison, and the avoidance of social failure. The shift from one dominant emotion to another across the two films is not incidental; it is the films' central claim about adolescent development.

This paper focuses specifically on the young teenage years that *Inside Out 2* dramatizes, treating *Inside Out* primarily as the necessary childhood foundation against which adolescent emotional complexity can be measured. Early adolescence is a period in which identity formation, in Erik Erikson's sense of an ongoing negotiation between the self and its social world, becomes acute, exploratory, and frequently unstable, a process Erikson describes as one that "has its normative crisis in adolescence, and is in many ways determined by what went before and determines much that follows" (23). The two Pixar films are valuable literary texts precisely because they translate this psychosocial negotiation into narrative form, giving emotional dominance, understood here as the temporary seizure of the self by one feeling at the expense of others, a visible shape and a plot.

The central problem this paper addresses, then, is how *Inside Out* and *Inside Out 2* represent personality formation as a process governed by emotional dominance, and how this dominance is resolved, in both films, through integration rather than suppression. The paper argues that read comparatively, the two films construct a coherent literary account of the movement from childhood to early adolescence in which a healthy personality is not one ruled

by a single correct emotion, happiness in childhood, composure in adolescence, but one capable of holding multiple, often contradictory emotions in balance. Anxiety occupies the most contested position in this account: protective in moderation, corrosive in excess, and ultimately essential to *Inside Out 2*'s argument that adolescent maturity depends on emotional integration rather than emotional control.

Literature Review

Scholars on the relationship between emotion and personality has tended to converge on a single claim: that the self is not a fixed possession but an ongoing negotiation among competing affective states. Sara Ahmed's influential argument that emotions are not interior possessions but relational forces that move between bodies and circulate through social and cultural contact reframes personality formation as something achieved in contact with others rather than discovered within (10). This relational view of emotion underlies much recent affect theory, including Brian Massumi's account of affect as a register of intensity that precedes and exceeds conscious, narrativized feeling; for Massumi, "emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progression, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning" (28). Reading together, Ahmed and Massumi suggest that any literary or cinematic text that personifies emotion is doing more than illustrating inner life for a young audience: it is staging, in miniature, the same process by which affect becomes organized into a recognisable, narratable self.

On adolescence and identity specifically, Erik Erikson's foundational account of the identity crisis remains the dominant reference point. Erikson observes that clinical experience with severely conflicted young people led researchers to recognize "a pathological aggravation, an undue prolongation of, or a regression to, a normative crisis 'belonging' to a particular stage of individual development," and that "we have learned to ascribe a normative 'identity crisis' to the age of adolescence and young adulthood" (17). Subsequent psychological scholarship has refined rather than displaced this model, particularly with respect to anxiety. Méndez and colleagues, surveying the clinical literature on anxiety disorders in childhood and adolescence, note that fear and anxiety perform an adaptive function and that anxiety disorders properly emerge only when this response becomes disproportionate to the situation that provokes it. In the Indian context specifically, recent epidemiological research, including a 2025 cross-sectional study of school-going adolescents in Bhopal, has found that more than half of the sampled fourteen- to nineteen-year-olds reported some level of anxiety, with academic pressure and social expectation identified as principal contributing factors. This body of clinical and epidemiological work establishes anxiety not as an aberration of adolescence but as one of its defining features, which is precisely the premise that *Inside Out 2* dramatizes.

Scholars on emotion and animation has likewise grown substantially since the release of the first *Inside Out* film. Several studies use linguistic or discourse-analytic methods to examine how the film personifies emotion through dialogue and visual design; Ayat Saad Abdulameer's discourse analysis of the film's script, for instance,

demonstrates how each emotion is granted distinctly human cognitive capacities, such as judgment, memory, and self-reflection, through dialogue that exceeds simple affective reaction (Discourse Analysis of Personification). Complementary work by Marta Trysińska and by María Goicoechea González examines how the film's visual and material design, including its colour-coded characters and its literalized core memories, externalizes psychological processes that would otherwise remain invisible (Trysińska; González). Jason Gulya's pedagogical study situates the film within the much older literary tradition of allegorical personification, arguing that *Inside Out* can be productively taught alongside Spenser and Bunyan precisely because it shares their strategy of dramatizing abstract qualities as embodied agents (64-65). This scholarship collectively establishes that the personification in *Inside Out* is not merely a device for child audiences but a deliberate, theoretically legible literary strategy.

Scholars on *Inside Out 2* is necessarily more recent and more limited, but it converges on anxiety as the film's central concern. A semiotic analysis by Septi Herdiana, Dilmai Putra, and Sri Narti, applying John Fiske's three-level model of reality, representation, and ideology, finds that the film constructs anxiety through clinically recognisable physical signs, reinforced through cinematographic technique, and embeds these within an ideological critique of the performance pressures placed on adolescents (93). A short clinical commentary in *The British Journal of Psychiatry* similarly observes that the film's introduction of Anxiety, Envy, Embarrassment, and Ennui normalises adolescent psychological distress as a natural feature of development rather than a symptom requiring correction in ("*Inside Out 2*" 516). What remains comparatively underexplored, however, is a sustained literary reading of the two films together, one that treats *Inside Out* and *Inside Out 2* not as separate case studies in emotional representation but as a continuous narrative arc tracing personality formation from childhood through early adolescence. This paper addresses that gap.

Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on four theoretical resources, three of central importance and one minor.

The first is the literary tradition of personification and allegory. Classical rhetoric, most influentially Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*, defines personification or *prosopopoeia* as a device that gives voice and form to entities that do not naturally possess them, treating an abstraction as if it could speak, act, and feel (Quintilian 9.2.29-32). Angus Fletcher's modern theorization of allegory extends this classical foundation, arguing that allegorical agents are typically driven by a single ruling idea or daemonic agent that determines their behaviour with unusual consistency (25). *Inside Out* and *Inside Out 2* belong recognisably to this tradition: Joy, Sadness, and Anxiety are not realistic characters but allegorical agents, each organized around a single governing principle, whose interactions dramatize an argument about the inner life rather than depicting it naturalistically. Reading the films through this framework justifies treating Riley's emotions as literary personifications with a determinate logic, rather than as loose visual metaphors.

The second resource is affect theory, principally as developed by Sara Ahmed and Brian Massumi. Ahmed's

claim that emotions are not private possessions but social and relational forces, sticking to certain objects and circulating between bodies is directly relevant to Riley's emotional development, since both films insist that her feelings are produced through contact with family, peers, and unfamiliar environments rather than generated from within a sealed interior self (10). Massumi's related distinction between affect, understood as a pre-personal intensity, and emotion, understood as that intensity once it has been captured into a recognisable, nameable feeling - intensity owned and recognized," in his phrase — offers a useful vocabulary for the films' central narrative device: each film stages the process by which raw affective intensity becomes organized into the discrete, governable characters of Joy, Sadness, or Anxiety (Massumi 28). Affect theory thus supplies the vocabulary for treating emotional dominance not as melodrama but as a structuring claim about how selfhood is assembled.

The third resource, adolescent identity formation, draws on Erik Erikson's account of the identity crisis as a normative developmental stage in which the self is negotiated against, rather than discovered apart from, its social environment (16, 22-23). This framework underwrites the paper's reading of *Inside Out 2* as a text specifically about identity formation rather than emotional regulation alone: Riley's anxiety is inseparable from her emerging Sense of Self, and the crisis the film dramatizes is precisely the Eriksonian negotiation between an inherited childhood identity and an uncertain adolescent one.

The fourth resource is used only briefly. Ben Jonson's idea of a dominant humour provides a useful literary background for understanding emotional dominance. In Jonson's drama, a character may be ruled by one excessive humour or tendency in each character is possessed by a single ruling passion said to "draw all his affects, his spirits, and his powers" toward one consuming end (*Every Man Out*, Induction 86-89). Similarly, in the *Inside Out* films, one emotion may temporarily control Riley's behaviour. However, this paper uses Jonson only as a minor reference and focuses mainly on Pixar's representation of young teen emotional development.

Methodology

This paper employs qualitative textual analysis and comparative film analysis. It treats *Inside Out* (2015) and *Inside Out 2* (2024) as literary-cinematic texts rather than as clinical case studies, and it studies their scenes, characters, symbols, dialogue, and narrative structure as the primary objects of interpretation. The analysis proceeds through close reading: attention is given to how each film constructs its personified emotions as allegorical agents, how dialogue and visual design, colour, lighting, the spatial arrangement of the mind-world, encode psychological states, and how narrative resolution, the restoration of balance among competing emotions, organizes the film's implicit argument about personality formation.

The comparative dimension of the analysis treats the two films as a single continuous narrative rather than as unrelated case studies, tracing how the personification strategy established in the first film is extended, complicated, and revised in the second. Secondary scholarship from literary studies, affect theory, developmental psychology, and film and media studies is used to situate this textual analysis within existing critical

conversations, but the paper does not employ surveys, interviews, or experimental psychological methods. It examines the films exclusively as literary and cinematic texts, treating psychological and clinical literature as a contextualising resource rather than as the paper's primary evidentiary basis.

Analysis of *Inside Out*

Inside Out (2015) establishes its allegorical premise immediately: Riley's mind is governed by five personified emotions, Joy, Sadness, Fear, Anger, and Disgust, who together operate a headquarters overseeing her behaviour. From the film's opening minutes, Joy occupies a position of unquestioned narrative authority. She narrates Riley's life retrospectively, claims credit for the family's core memories, and treats Sadness's presence in headquarters as an inconvenience to be managed rather than a legitimate emotional response. This narrative structure reflects what Ahmed's account of emotion as orientation would predict: Joy's dominance is not a neutral fact about Riley's temperament but an orientation actively maintained, one that determines which memories are preserved as golden and which are quietly sidelined (10). The film's allegorical logic, in Fletcher's sense, assigns Joy a ruling idea, an organizing assumption that happiness is the correct and default state of the self, against which all other feelings are measured as deviations (25).

The film's central crisis, Riley's family's relocation from Minnesota to San Francisco, exposes the limits of this Joy-centred organization. The move strips Riley of the external structures, home, friends, hockey team, that had previously reinforced her happiness, and Joy's habitual strategy, suppressing or redirecting Sadness, proves inadequate to the scale of the loss. The film's central symbolic architecture, the personality islands, literalizes this crisis. Each island, Family Island, Friendship Island, Hockey Island, Honesty Island, and Goofball Island, is built from core memories and represents a discrete domain of Riley's identity; when Joy and Sadness become accidentally stranded in Long Term Memory, the islands begin to collapse one by one, dramatizing the claim that personality is not a fixed essence but an ongoing structure that requires active emotional maintenance to remain standing. This is among the film's clearest literary moves: it represents abstract psychological continuity, the sense of being the same person over time, as a physically eroding landscape, rendering Erikson's claim that "identity is never 'established' as an 'achievement' in the form of a personality armor, or of anything static and unchangeable" (24) into a visible, escalating disaster.

Sadness's narrative function across the film is to demonstrate that her exclusion, rather than her presence, is the actual source of Riley's distress. It is Sadness, not Joy, who is able to comfort Bing Bong, Riley's imaginary friend, after the collapse of the train of thought; it is Sadness's empathetic accompaniment, not Joy's forced cheerfulness, that proves capable of reaching Riley when she is at her most withdrawn. The film's climax inverts its opening hierarchy directly: when Riley runs away from her new home, it is only by allowing Sadness to take the console, permitting Riley to cry in front of her parents and admit she misses Minnesota, that the family is able to reconnect and that a new core memory, mixed rather than purely golden, can form. This new memory type, a complex memory tinted by both joy and sadness simultaneously, is the film's

structural answer to its own premise: personality is not built from happiness alone, and a complete self requires emotional plurality rather than emotional purity.

The discourse-analytic scholarship on the film supports this reading at the level of language as well as plot. Abdulameer's close analysis of the film's dialogue shows that even putatively negative emotions such as Sadness and Disgust are granted, through their speech, the same cognitive capacities, judgment, memory, self-reflection, as Joy, undermining any straightforward hierarchy among the emotions at the level of characterization. Trysińska's and González's accounts of the film's visual and material design similarly observe that Sadness is rendered with as much narrative interiority and visual care as Joy, despite the latter's narrative privilege at the film's outset (Trysińska 22–25; González 54, 58–59). The film's overall argument, then, is double: it dramatizes the cost of Joy's dominance over the course of its plot, and it formally undermines that dominance through its treatment of character and visual design throughout. Inside Out's childhood personality, in this account, is built not from the triumph of happiness but from the reluctant, hard-won acceptance of sadness as a legitimate and necessary participant in the construction of the self, memory by memory, island by island.

Analysis of Inside Out 2

Inside Out 2 (2024) opens by literalizing puberty as a structural event rather than a gradual process: a puberty alarm sounds in headquarters, and a construction crew belonging to Riley's own mental processes demolishes the console that had organized her emotional life throughout childhood, replacing it with a larger, far more sensitive control panel. This single image performs significant theoretical work. It dramatizes, in Eriksonian terms, the onset of the identity crisis as a literal architectural rupture rather than a smooth continuation of childhood selfhood (Erikson 23), and it visually represents what affect theory would describe as an expansion in the sheer intensity and frequency of affective input the self must now process (Massumi 28). Where Inside Out organized Riley's mind around five relatively stable emotional executives, Inside Out 2 multiplies this cast, introducing Anxiety, Envy, Embarrassment, and Ennui alongside the original five, and the film is explicit that this expansion is not incidental but constitutive of adolescence itself: greater emotional complexity is what puberty is, in the film's allegorical vocabulary.

Among the new arrivals, Anxiety is unambiguously the film's dominant figure, both narratively and structurally. She arrives with an entourage, immediately positions herself as the most capable manager of Riley's future, and within a short span of narrative time exiles the original five emotions from the console entirely, locking them in a back room of Riley's mind. This expulsion is the film's central allegorical event: it represents emotional dominance not merely as one feeling temporarily overriding others, as in Inside Out's Joy and Sadness dynamic, but as a near-total seizure of executive function, in which planning, decision-making, and even Riley's sense of who she fundamentally is become organized entirely around the avoidance of future threat. Anxiety is not depicted as straightforwardly villainous; she is initially motivated by a recognisably protective logic, attempting to help Riley succeed at hockey camp and be accepted by an admired older peer group. This ambivalence

is precisely what aligns the film with Jonson's comedy of humours: as in Jonson's drama, where a character possessed by a single peculiar quality has that quality "draw all his affects, his spirits, and his powers" toward one consuming end (Induction.86-89), Anxiety's initially reasonable concern for Riley's social acceptance gradually consumes every other consideration, producing behaviour, deception, self-erasure, frantic overexertion, that becomes increasingly maladaptive even as it remains motivated by genuine care.

The film's secondary emotions function as satellites of this central anxious logic rather than as independent forces. Envy, depicted as a small, wide-eyed figure fixated on the popular older girls Riley wishes to impress, externalizes the specific adolescent experience of social comparison: Erikson's account of identity formation as negotiated against a social environment (22-23) becomes, in Envy's presence, a felt comparative deficit, the sense that one's own qualities are inadequate when measured against an idealized peer. Embarrassment, a hulking, hooded figure who hides his face and communicates largely in apologetic murmurs, dramatizes the heightened self-consciousness that Erikson and subsequent developmental psychology associate with adolescent identity work: the adolescent self is newly, acutely aware of being observed, and Embarrassment's near-constant presence in the console room represents this surveillance as an internalized, ever-present companion rather than an occasional social hazard. Ennui, by contrast, lounges with detached indifference, scrolling on her phone and refusing to engage with Riley's crises; she represents the affective withdrawal, the studied not-caring, that often accompanies adolescent identity formation as a defensive posture against the very intensity that Anxiety, Envy, and Embarrassment generate. Each of these new emotions corresponds to a recognisable feature of early adolescence identified in the clinical literature: heightened social comparison, self-consciousness, and the pressures of peer acceptance that Méndez and colleagues identify as central to adolescent anxiety presentations, and that the Bhopal cross-sectional study finds reported by more than half of the school-going teenagers it surveyed.

The film's most significant structural innovation, relative to its predecessor, is the introduction of the Sense of Self, a glowing construct built from the beliefs Riley holds about who she is. Where Inside Out organized identity around discrete personality islands built from completed memories, Inside Out 2 represents identity as an active, ongoing construction site, one that can be built well or badly depending on which beliefs are allowed to contribute to it. Under Anxiety's management, the Sense of Self is built exclusively from anxious, performance-driven beliefs, restated and reinforced until they calcify into Riley's dominant self-conception. This is the film's clearest dramatization of emotional dominance as identity distortion: Anxiety does not merely produce uncomfortable feelings but actively reconstructs the architecture of Riley's selfhood around a single, narrow, anxious narrative, displacing the more varied, contradictory self-understanding that the original five emotions had previously allowed to coexist.

The semiotic analysis by Herdiana, Putra, and Narti, applying Fiske's tripartite model, demonstrates how this distortion is reinforced through cinematic technique as well as narrative content: at the level of reality, Riley's anxiety manifests through clinically recognisable physical signs, tensed posture, vocal tremor, restless hands; at the level of

representation, the film's lighting, editing rhythm, and sound design intensify and externalize these signs for the viewer; and at the level of ideology, the film situates this individual distress within a broader cultural critique of the performance pressures imposed on contemporary adolescents. The British Journal of Psychiatry's brief clinical commentary on the film makes a complementary point, observing that the film normalizes adolescent anxiety as a feature of development rather than treating it as a symptom to be eliminated, while still distinguishing carefully between anxiety as a normal developmental emotion and anxiety as a clinical disorder ("Inside Out 2" 516).

The film's resolution does not banish Anxiety, in the manner that *Inside Out*'s resolution might be misread as simply restoring Joy to the console. Instead, Riley suffers a full panic attack during a critical hockey match, after which Anxiety, confronted with the consequences of her own overreach, relinquishes sole control, and the original five emotions are reinstated alongside the four newcomers as joint, cooperative managers of the console. The Sense of Self that survives this resolution is explicitly plural and contradictory, built from the acknowledgment that Riley can be selfish and kind, good and bad, simultaneously, rather than reducible to either Joy's earlier insistence on simple happiness or Anxiety's later insistence on flawless performance. *Inside Out 2*'s argument, read this way, is not that anxiety is wrong but that anxiety is dangerous only when it is permitted sole executive control: adolescent maturity, in the film's allegorical vocabulary, consists precisely in the capacity to hold multiple, competing emotional truths about oneself without allowing any single one, however well-intentioned, to author the whole of one's identity.

Comparative Analysis

Read together rather than separately, *Inside Out* and *Inside Out 2* trace a single continuous argument about the relationship between emotional dominance and personality formation, even as each film locates that argument in a different developmental stage and through a different central conflict.

The first film's conflict is binary: a single competing pair, Joy and Sadness, vies for control of a relatively simple, five-emotion system, and the resolution involves integrating a previously excluded feeling rather than restructuring the system itself. The second film's conflict is structurally more complex, both because the cast of emotions expands from five to nine and because Anxiety's dominance is total rather than partial: she does not merely overshadow the other emotions, as Joy does Sadness, but physically expels them from the console, a difference that registers the heightened intensity and stakes of adolescent identity formation relative to the comparatively settled emotional economy of middle childhood.

This shift corresponds to a shift in symbolic architecture. The personality islands of *Inside Out* represent identity as a completed structure built retrospectively from finished memories, durable but capable of collapse under sufficient strain. The Sense of Self in *Inside Out 2* represents identity instead as an active, ongoing construction, perpetually vulnerable to being built from whichever beliefs the dominant emotion permits to contribute. This is not a contradiction between the films so much as a developmental refinement: where childhood identity, in the first film's

logic, is something one already has and risks losing, adolescent identity, in the second film's logic, is something one is actively and continuously making, a shift that closely tracks Erikson's own description of identity formation as a process that "is always changing and developing" and that "has its normative crisis in adolescence" (23).

The main issue at stake also shifts accordingly, from family and geographic belonging in the first film to peer acceptance and self-image in the second, reflecting the well-documented developmental transition from a family-centred to a peer-centred frame of social reference. Yet the lesson each film draws from its respective crisis is structurally identical even as its content differs: in *Inside Out*, sadness, an emotion the system had wrongly excluded, must be readmitted; in *Inside Out 2*, anxiety, an emotion the system temporarily allowed to dominate entirely, must be rebalanced rather than readmitted or banished. Both lessons converge on the same underlying claim, which is the comparative argument this paper advances: no single emotion, however positively or negatively it is culturally coded, can be permitted either total exclusion or total dominance without producing a distorted, incomplete self. Together, the two films trace Riley's emotional movement from a childhood foundation organized around memory and belonging to a teenage complexity organized around comparison and self-image, while insisting, at both stages, that psychological completeness depends on holding multiple emotional truths in balance rather than allowing any one of them to govern alone.

Contemporary Relevance

The emotional architecture *Inside Out 2* dramatizes corresponds closely to documented conditions of contemporary adolescence, particularly among the young teenagers the film addresses. Academic pressure remains one of the most consistently cited sources of adolescent anxiety in recent research: the Bhopal cross-sectional study found that more than half of the school-going adolescents it surveyed reported some level of anxiety, with academic demands identified as a principal contributing factor, a pattern echoed across comparable studies conducted elsewhere in South Asia. This academic pressure rarely operates in isolation; it interacts with competition among peers, the pressure to be visibly successful relative to a comparison group, that *Inside Out 2* literalizes through Envy's preoccupation with Riley's idealized older peers.

Friendship groups present a related and equally well-documented source of strain. Adolescence marks a developmental shift from a family-centred to a peer-centred frame of reference, and the fear of exclusion from a desired friendship group, dramatized in the film through Riley's anxious courtship of an admired older clique at the expense of her existing friends, mirrors the heightened sensitivity to peer evaluation that developmental psychology associates with early adolescence. The fear of rejection this generates is not incidental to adolescent social life but, as Erikson's account of identity formation suggests, structurally central to it: the adolescent self is negotiated in relation to a social environment whose approval or disapproval carries unusually high psychological stakes (22).

Body image and broader self-image concerns, dramatized in the film through Embarrassment's hypervigilant self-monitoring, are similarly well-attested features of contemporary adolescence, intensified though not solely

caused by the visual and comparative culture of social media. Recent research on adolescent social media use finds that heightened social comparison correlates with measurably lower self-esteem, particularly among teenagers who engage frequently in appearance-focused activities such as editing photographs or monitoring engagement on their own posts. This paper treats social media as one example among several contributing pressures rather than as the central explanatory factor: the film's own emphasis falls more heavily on offline peer interaction, academic performance, and the general pressure to be perceived as successful, and contemporary research on adolescent anxiety likewise identifies a constellation of academic, social, and familial pressures of which digital comparison is only one strand, however visible. Read in this context, *Inside Out 2*'s central allegorical claim, that anxiety becomes dangerous specifically when allowed total executive control over identity, functions less as a sequence of isolated, age-specific symptoms and more as a coherent account of how the structural pressures facing contemporary young teenagers, academic, social, and digital, combine to produce exactly the kind of anxious dominance the film dramatizes.

Universal Relatability

Although both films focus deliberately on Riley's specific developmental stages, childhood in *Inside Out* and early adolescence in *Inside Out 2*, the emotions they personify are not exclusive to those stages. Joy, sadness, fear, anger, disgust, anxiety, envy, embarrassment, and ennui are recognisable across the lifespan: adults experience comparative anxiety before professional evaluations, envy in response to a colleague's success, and the same impulse toward self-protective avoidance that the films attribute to adolescent Anxiety. This universality is part of why the films have attracted comment from psychologists, psychiatrists, and educators writing for adult as well as child audiences, and why *The British Journal of Psychiatry* could publish a clinical commentary on a film ostensibly designed for children ("Inside Out 2" 516)

This relatability, however, should be read as a supporting rather than a central feature of the films' argument. The specificity of the young teen focus is what allows *Inside Out 2*, in particular, to dramatize the precise developmental conditions, the transition from a family-centred to a peer-centred frame of reference, the sudden expansion in emotional range the film associates with puberty, the construction of an as-yet-unstable Sense of Self, that distinguish adolescent anxiety from its adult counterpart. A reading that treated the films primarily as universal allegories of emotion in general would risk flattening this specificity, losing precisely the developmental argument that gives the films their analytical interest as literary texts about adolescence rather than as generic meditations on feeling. The films' relatability to viewers of all ages should therefore be understood as evidence of their underlying claim's explanatory power, rather than as evidence that the claim is not really about young teenagers in particular. The universal and the specific operate together: it is because the films root their account of emotional dominance in a developmentally precise depiction of early adolescence that their broader observations about emotional balance carry weight for audiences well beyond that age group.

Conclusion

Reading together, *Inside Out* and *Inside Out 2* advance a coherent literary argument: personality is not a fixed possession discovered within a stable interior self but a structure actively built and rebuilt through the management, and mismanagement, of competing emotions. *Inside Out* establishes this claim at the level of childhood, dramatizing how Riley's early personality, organized around memory, family, and belonging, depends on the reluctant admission of sadness into a system that had previously privileged only joy. *Inside Out 2* relocates the same underlying claim to early adolescence, where the stakes, and the emotional cast, expand considerably: anxiety, envy, embarrassment, and ennui join the original five emotions, and the film's central crisis is not the exclusion of a single feeling but the near-total seizure of identity by one of them.

Across both films, anxiety in particular emerges as the most theoretically interesting case, precisely because the films refuse to treat it as straightforwardly negative. Anxiety in *Inside Out 2* is motivated by genuine, protective concern for Riley's wellbeing; her error lies not in caring about Riley's future but in her insistence on sole executive control over how that future is approached, a dominance that produces deception, self-erasure, and eventually psychological collapse. The film's resolution does not punish or expel Anxiety, any more than *Inside Out*'s resolution punishes or expels Joy; instead, both films insist that no single emotion, however benevolently or maliciously it is culturally coded, should be permitted to author the whole of a personality alone.

This is the film's shared and this paper has argued, their most significant claim about young teen maturity: that it is achieved not through the suppression of difficult emotions, sadness in childhood, anxiety in adolescence, but through their integration alongside emotions more readily welcomed. A healthy adolescent self, in the vocabulary the films construct, is not one that has eliminated anxiety, envy, or embarrassment, but one capable of holding these feelings in productive tension with joy, confidence, and ease, allowing each to contribute partially rather than totally to an ongoing, necessarily plural Sense of Self. The films suggest, finally, that young teens do not become complete individuals by suppressing the emotions that feel most uncomfortable or socially undesirable, but by learning to accept and integrate even their most difficult feelings into a balanced, multifaceted sense of who they are.

References

1. Abdulameer AS. Discourse Analysis of Personification in Disney/Pixar's *Inside Out*. *Comparative Linguistics, Translation and Literary Studies*, 2025;2(3):176-189.
2. Ahmed S. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh University Press, 2004.
3. Erikson EH. *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. W. W. Norton, 1968.
4. Fletcher A. *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*. Cornell University Press, 1964.
5. González MG. Empathy and Materiality in Pixar's *Inside Out*. *Kids + Media: Zeitschrift für Kinder- und Jugendmedienforschung*, 2017;7(1).
6. Gulya JJ. Applications in the Classroom: Teaching Disney/Pixar's *Inside Out* within the Tradition of Allegorical Personification. *Dialogue: The*

- Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy, 2017;4(1):Article 7.
7. Herdiana S, *et al.* A Semiotic Analysis of Anxiety in Inside Out 2 Based on John Fiske's Theory. International Journal of Human Capital and Innovative Management, 2025;2(2):93-103.
 8. Inside Out 2: The Adolescent Mind and the Role of Anxiety – Psychiatry in Movies. The British Journal of Psychiatry, 2024;225(5):516.
 9. Jonson B. Every Man in His Humour. 1598.
 10. Massumi B. Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation. Duke University Press, 2002.
 11. Méndez FJ, *et al.* Editorial: Anxiety Disorders in Childhood and Adolescence: Psychopathology, Assessment, and Treatment. Frontiers in Psychology, 2022;13:930299.
 12. Parida D, *et al.* Burden of Anxiety Among School-Going Adolescents in Urban Bhopal: A Cross-Sectional Study. Cureus, 2025;17(4):e83186.
 13. Quintilian. Institutio Oratoria.
 14. Trysińska M. A Film Discourse on Emotions, Exemplified by Pete Docter's Animated Film for Children Inside Out. Media Linguistics, 2022;9(1):15-31.