

THE EFFECTS OF CHILD GROOMING IN *PRISCILLA* (2023): PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini menganalisis tahapan dan dampak psikologis *child grooming* dalam *Priscilla* (2023), yang menggambarkan hubungan tidak setara antara anak di bawah umur dan figur publik dewasa. Film ini menampilkan grooming melalui manipulasi emosional, bukan kekerasan eksplisit. Sebagai adaptasi autobiografis dari kehidupan Priscilla Presley, film ini menempatkan korban sebagai pusat, bukan pelaku. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dalam pendekatan psikologis sastra, dengan menggunakan konsep-konsep terpilih tentang child grooming dan dampak psikologisnya, serta mengkaji bagaimana hal tersebut direpresentasikan melalui konflik dan penokohan dalam film. Hasil penelitian mengidentifikasi lima tahap manipulasi, yaitu pemilihan korban, memperoleh akses dan mengisolasi anak, pengembangan kepercayaan, desensitisasi terhadap konten seksual dan kontak fisik, serta pemeliharaan setelah terjadinya kekerasan, dan enam dampak psikologis, yaitu kecemasan, depresi, disosiasi, masalah seksual, gangguan tidur, dan gejala pascatrauma. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa child grooming beroperasi sebagai proses terstruktur yang menghasilkan dampak psikologis yang berkelanjutan pada korban, yang membentuk respons emosional, kognitif, dan perilaku, bukan sebagai kejadian yang terpisah. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa child grooming beroperasi sebagai proses terstruktur yang menghasilkan dampak psikologis yang berkelanjutan pada korban, yang membentuk respons emosional, kognitif, dan perilaku, bukan sebagai kejadian yang terpisah. Dampak tersebut muncul melalui konflik internal dan eksternal, dengan konflik internal sebagai yang paling dominan. Penokohan mengungkap kepasifan, kerapuhan emosional, dan ketergantungan Priscilla terhadap Elvis. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa film, sebagai bentuk karya sastra, dapat merepresentasikan konsekuensi emosional, perilaku, dan kognitif dari child grooming melalui unsur intrinsik berupa konflik dan penokohan.

Kata kunci: child grooming, depresi, kecemasan, konflik, penokohan

ABSTRACT

This research analyzes the stages and psychological effects of child grooming in *Priscilla* (2023), which portrays an unequal relationship between a minor and an adult public figure. The film depicts grooming through emotional manipulation rather than explicit abuse. As an autobiographical adaptation of Priscilla Presley's life, it centers the victim rather than the perpetrator. The study applies a qualitative method within a psychological approach to literature, using selected concepts of child grooming and its psychological effects, and examines how these are represented through conflict and characterization in film. The findings identify five manipulation stages, which are victim selection, gaining access and isolating a child, trust development, desensitization to sexual content and physical contact, and maintenance following the abuse, and six psychological effects, which are anxiety, depression, dissociation, sexual problems, sleep disturbance, and post-traumatic symptoms. The findings reveal that child grooming operates as a structured process that produces sustained psychological impact on the victim, shaping emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses rather than appearing as isolated incidents. These findings reveal that child grooming operates as a structured process that produces sustained psychological impact on the victim, shaping emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses rather than appearing as isolated incidents. They appear through both internal and external conflicts, with internal conflict being the most dominant. Characterization reveals Priscilla's passivity, emotional fragility, and dependency on Elvis. This study demonstrates that film, as a form of literary work, can represent the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive consequences of child grooming through its intrinsic elements of conflict and characterization.

Keywords: anxiety, characterization, child grooming, conflict, depression

A. INTRODUCTION

Age-gap relationships draw public concern due to the unequal distribution of power and emotional maturity they may involve. The controversy surrounding English actor Aaron Taylor-Johnson and director Sam Taylor-Johnson reflects the ethical tension that arises when authority and influence overshadow consent (Glamour, 2023). The issue lies not in numerical difference but in the emotional imbalance that, in certain cases, may resemble child grooming. Leberg (1997, as cited in Hartati et al., 2022) defines grooming as a strategy to lower resistance and secure compliance, while Knoll (2010, as cited in Hartati et al., 2022) notes that offenders reshape perception so control appears as affection. Adolescents' cognitive capacity develops faster than psychosocial regulation, leaving them vulnerable to manipulation (Icenogle et al., 2019). Offenders exploit this gap to disguise dominance as care, reducing the relationship to dependence rather than equality. When emotional readiness is absent, affection turns into exploitation (DfE, 2019,

as cited in Benham-Clarke et al., 2023). Gender conventions further normalize male authority and obscure abuse beneath romanticized narratives (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2011; Milhausen & Herold, 1999). These dynamics find representation in contemporary cinema, which often translates social power into narrative form.

Sofia Coppola's *Priscilla* (2023), adapted from *Elvis and Me*, illustrates these dynamics through Priscilla Presley's relationship with Elvis Presley. The film presents a victim-centered perspective that emphasizes emotional manipulation and internal psychological struggle. It portrays how admiration shifts into control as Elvis dictates her appearance, behavior, and emotions. It exposes domination without overt violence and transforms biography into a psychological narrative. Previous studies on gender and power in cinema rarely address child grooming through its psychological effects, particularly in the analysis of how trauma is embedded in characterization and conflict. Most emphasize explicit abuse and overlook how film constructs manipulation and emotional loss through these elements. This gap restricts understanding of how film language conveys manipulation and emotional loss. Within the framework of psychology in literature, *Priscilla* (2023) provides a medium for interpreting the inner processes of abuse and the erosion of self. This study applies the psychological approach of Wellek & Warren (1949) by integrating McAlinden's (2012) concept of grooming, Winters, Jeglic, & Kaylor's (2020) stages, Elliot & Briere's (1992) psychological effects, and Petrie and Boggs' (2017) theories of conflict and characterization to analyze how *Priscilla* (2023) depicts the stages and effects of child grooming.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Film as Literary Work

Film functions as a literary medium that combines visual and narrative elements to convey meaning. Klarer (2004) states that literature can exist beyond written texts because narrative structure and symbolic representation also appear in film. Wellek and Warren (1949) regard literature as an artistic expression of life through language, while film expands that expression through image and sound. The cinematic form translates literary components into visual storytelling. According to Callaghan (2023), film studies often intersect with literary analysis because both fields interpret how human experience and emotion are structured within a narrative. This connection allows film to be examined through the same critical lenses as written literature. Petrie and Boggs (2017) explain that film uses dramatic and fictional techniques such as story, significance of the title, dramatic structure, conflict, characterization, allegory, symbolism, and irony to express human experience. Through these techniques, film communicates emotion and thought as effectively as prose or drama.

2. Conflicts in Film

Conflict in film is one of the two intrinsic theories that is utilized to unravel the effects of child grooming in *Priscilla* (2023). Murfin & Ray declare that "conflict is a confrontation or struggle between opposing characters or forces in the plot of a narrative work, from which

the action emanates and around which it revolves” (2018, p. 103). Petrie & Boggs (2017) specify those conflicts as external and internal. **External conflicts** deal with a struggle between characters or against nonhuman forces like nature or social systems. A personal external conflict might be a duel or a competition between two suitors (Petrie & Boggs, 2017). Callaghan (2023) specifies external conflicts as: 1) **Character vs. Character**, occurs when two characters have opposing goals and openly or subtly confront each other; 2) **Character vs. Nature**, occurs when the characters face natural disasters like tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, etc.; 3) **Character vs. The Supernatural**, when characters encounter supernatural elements, such as magic, ghosts, and mythical creatures, and make them rethink their understanding of reality while flexibly exploring their emotion; 4) **Character vs. Society**, when a character stands up against societal norms, political systems, or cultural expectations, which is a notable conflict in dystopian literature; and 5) **Character vs. Fate**, occurs around the character’s attempts to challenge or alter the destiny as laid out by a prophecy, oracle, or divination. On the other hand, **internal conflicts** occur within a character's mind and absorb different parts of their personality. The struggle of a character is focused on opposing desires or goals. The character might grow from this struggle, but sometimes there is no resolution (Petrie & Boggs, 2017).

3. Characterizations in Film

Aside from conflict, the intrinsic theory of characterization in film is also utilized to unravel the research question. Murfin & Ray (2018) identify characterization as the way “authors describe and develop the characters in literary works” (p. 74). In accordance with Petrie & Boggs (2017), fascinating characters “must seem real, understandable, and worth caring about” (p. 50). They outline several techniques of film characterization: 1) **Through Appearance**, when visual elements such as facial features, dress, physical build, and mannerisms reveal a character’s identity; 2) **Through Dialogue**, when the character’s word choice, tone, and dialect expose inner emotions and social background; 3) **Through External Action**, when actions align with personality and motivation, offering insight into a character’s nature; 4) **Through Internal Action**, which involves revealing thoughts, dreams, fears, or desires through cinematic devices such as flashbacks, voiceovers, or imagery; 5) **Through Reactions of Other Characters**, when a character’s image is shaped through the opinions and responses of others, also called reactive characterization; 6) **Through Contrast: Dramatic Foils**, when contrasting characters highlight each other’s traits and deepen thematic conflicts; 7) **Through Caricature and Leitmotif**, when exaggerated traits or recurring actions and ideas make a character easily recognizable; and 8) **Through Choice of Name**, when a character’s name carries sound, meaning, or symbolic association that enriches interpretation.

4. Psychology in Literature

Literature serves as a medium through which human nature is explored. It captures the complexities of thought, emotion, and behavior through narrative and character to provide insight into the human condition. Psychology, similarly, examines the human psyche, emotions, and motivations through analytical and scientific approaches. Wellek and Warren (1948) define the “psychology of literature” as encompassing the study of the

writer, the creative process, psychological types within texts, and the impact of literature on readers. This framework highlights the reciprocal relationship between creator, text, and audience. As Leitch (2001, as cited in Aras, 2015) notes, interpretation arises from the interplay between what is revealed and what is concealed in a text, generating a dynamic engagement between reader and work. Thus, literature and psychology converge in their pursuit of understanding human experience, one through artistic representation and the other through empirical inquiry.

5. Child Grooming

The concept of child grooming has existed for decades but gained renewed relevance in the digital era. With social media exposure, it frequently appears in public debates about age-gap relationships. McAlinden (2012) defines grooming as the strategic use of manipulation and control to build trust, normalize harm, and enable exploitation or concealment. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC, 2012) similarly describes it as a process where an individual gains a child's trust to manipulate, exploit, or abuse them. Both emphasize exploitation masked as affection. A key framework in identifying grooming lies in age disparity and developmental imbalance. Age difference alone does not imply grooming, yet when one party is a minor, it often produces a power gap rooted in emotional and cognitive inequality. Cook and Mott (2020) note that "an age difference of four years or more for 13–16-year-olds and six years or more for 17-year-olds should alert professionals to the possibility of exploitation" (p. 48). The distinction lies not in numbers but in psychosocial maturity. An 18-year-old may display stable judgment, while a 14-year-old remains in formative stages of self-regulation and social understanding. Icenogle et al. (2019) explain this through the maturity gap, where cognitive reasoning reaches near-adult levels around sixteen, yet psychosocial maturity, such as impulse control, foresight, and emotional regulation, continues into the twenties. Steinberg et al. (2009, as cited in Icenogle et al., 2019) distinguish between cold cognition, rational thought in neutral settings, and hot cognition, decision-making under emotional pressure. Adolescents often falter in the latter, which abusers exploit to distort care into control.

a. Stages of Child Grooming

Child grooming is not an immediate act but a gradual and deliberate process that conditions the victim for later abuse. Winters, Jeglic, and Kaylor (2020) outline five stages of grooming as: 1) Victim Selection, when perpetrators target children who appear socially isolated, insecure, or physically attractive, as these traits make manipulation easier. Elliott, Browne, & Kilcoyne (1995) found that 42% of offenders selected victims based on physical appearance, while 27% were influenced by how the child dressed; 2) Gaining Access and Isolating a Child, when the perpetrator seeks opportunities for private contact and gradually isolates the child from peers or family to strengthen the perpetrator's influence and weaken external support systems; 3) Trust Development, when the perpetrator builds emotional dependence by creating an illusion of intimacy and exclusivity to fosters the victim's belief that the relationship is genuine and special; 4) Desensitization to Sexual Content and Physical Contact, which involves normalizing sexual behavior through gradual exposure, often begins with nonsexual gestures or suggestive conversation before progressing to explicit acts; and 5) Maintenance Following

the Abuse, when perpetrators work to preserve secrecy and control. They may use gifts, guilt, or fear to maintain compliance and prevent disclosure to deepens the victim's confusion and dependency.

b. The Effects of Child Grooming

Child grooming leaves enduring psychological consequences that persist into adulthood. Elliot and Briere (1992) found that “women who had been molested as children reported more anxiety, depression, dissociation, sexual problems, sleep disturbance, and post-traumatic symptoms than did their nonabused peers” (p. 395). The effects are outlined as follows: (1) Anxiety, a persistent state of fear or unease caused by manipulation and coercion, leads victims to live in constant worry and emotional tension (NHS Choices, 2022); (2) Depression, which emerges when perpetrators exploit emotional vulnerability by positioning themselves as trusted figures, resulting in sadness, hopelessness, and guilt that develop into long-term depressive states (Erooga, Allnock, & Telford, 2012, as cited in O’Leary et al., 2017; World Health Organization, 2023); (3) Dissociation, a psychological detachment from reality that serves as a defense mechanism to endure abuse but later disrupts a cohesive sense of self (Psychology Today, 2021); (4) Sexual Problems, including “bad thoughts or feelings during sex” (Elliot & Briere, 1992, p. 393), chronic pelvic pain, and sexual dysfunction (Randolph & Reddy, 2006), though grooming does not always lead to sexual abuse as some offenses occur without prior manipulation (McAlinden, 2012); (5) Sleep Disturbance, marked by nightmares and insomnia that stem from lingering fear and insecurity; and (6) Post-Traumatic Symptoms, such as intrusion, avoidance, and alterations in mood and arousal that signify deep psychological scars (Taylor-Desir, 2022).

C. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the stages and effects of child grooming as represented in *Priscilla* (2023). This method is appropriate because the study focuses on interpreting emotional, behavioral, and narrative elements, which require in-depth analysis rather than numerical measurement (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The data of this study derive from the visual and verbal elements of Sofia Coppola’s *Priscilla* (2023), particularly scenes and dialogues that reveal indicators of grooming stages and their psychological effects. These data were obtained through repeated viewing of the film and cross-referenced with the official script available on HBO Max, ensuring accuracy between verbal and visual representations. These data were obtained through repeated viewing of the film and cross-referenced with the official script available on HBO Max to ensure consistency between verbal and visual representations. Data collection followed three steps. First, the film was viewed repeatedly to establish a comprehensive understanding of the narrative. Second, scenes and dialogues were selected based on clear criteria, namely their relevance to indicators of grooming stages and psychological effects, as well as their significance in revealing Priscilla’s behavioral and emotional responses. Third, the selected scenes were verified with the official script to maintain accuracy. The researcher, as the main instrument of data collection (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014), then conducted a close reading of these selected scenes by mapping them onto key indicators of grooming and its

psychological impact.

The analysis adopts a psychological approach (Wellek & Warren, 1949) to interpret the mental and emotional dynamics of the main character, Priscilla, as they manifest through conflict and characterization in accordance with Petrie & Boggs's (2017) film theory. Through this approach, the research integrates psychological interpretation with filmic analysis, aligning behavioral cues, emotional responses, and symbolic actions within the context of child grooming. Miles, Huberman, & Saldana (2014) saw data analysis as "three concurrent flows of activity: (1) data condensation, (2) data display, and (3) conclusion drawing/verification" (p. 9). Data condensation involved selecting and organizing significant scenes that depicted the grooming process and its psychological consequences. The data were then displayed in descriptive form by detailing scene context, visual composition, and relevant dialogue, accompanied by time markers and still images to illustrate the analysis. The final stage involved drawing and verifying conclusions through iterative comparison between theoretical indicators and observed filmic elements, ensuring analytical coherence and validity.

D. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. Stages of Child Grooming

a. Victim Selection

Winters, Jeglic, & Kaylor (2020) emphasize that perpetrators deliberately choose children who are vulnerable, insecure, or physically appealing to them. Victim selection refers to the stage in which the perpetrator identifies a target based on vulnerability, accessibility, and personal preference. In *Priscilla* (2023), this stage appears in the initial meeting between Elvis and Priscilla at a party.



Fig. 1. First meeting of Elvis & Priscilla (Coppola, 2023, 08:10)

Priscilla is introduced as a fourteen-year-old girl who spends her time alone at a milkshake counter while doing homework. This initial appearance signals her lack of social support, which makes her an accessible target. Elvis, who at the time is twenty-four and stationed in Germany for his military service, first notices Priscilla through Sergeant Terry West, who introduces her at a party. Surrounded by women his age, he focuses instead on Priscilla. When he learns she is still in ninth grade, he laughs and says, “Why, you’re just a baby,” after she replies, “Ninth grade” (Coppola, 2023, 08:10). His tone mixes amusement and fascination, showing both awareness and dismissal of their age gap. This moment reveals two key aspects of grooming: the deliberate choice of youth and the normalization of imbalance. It supports Elliott, Browne, & Kilcoyne’s (1995) view that many offenders select victims whose youth and looks strengthen their sense of control. As Elvis leaves to play the piano, Priscilla watches him, then looks at a Brigitte Bardot poster and the older women nearby. She adjusts her dress and lowers her gaze. These actions suggest insecurity and self-consciousness, which position her as vulnerable within the interaction. This scene suggests that Priscilla is selected not only because of her age but also because of her emotional openness and accessibility. (Winters, Jeglic, & Kaylor, 2020). Elvis’s attraction to her innocence and his pursuit despite her discomfort prove that Priscilla is chosen because of her youth, impressionability, and accessibility, which are traits that make her the ideal target for child grooming. This initial selection establishes the foundation for the next stage, in which access is gradually secured and control becomes more direct.

b. Gaining Access and Isolating a Child

Gaining access refers to the process by which the perpetrator establishes contact and interaction with the victim, while isolation involves reducing the victim’s connection to protective figures and familiar environments. In *Priscilla* (2023), these mechanisms appear during Priscilla’s second meeting with Elvis at a party.



Fig. 2. Second meeting of Elvis and Priscilla (Coppola, 2023, 11:53)

Elvis once again relies on Sergeant Terry West to mediate their contact. Priscilla’s anxious excitement about what to wear indicates her growing emotional vulnerability, while Terry’s promise to speak with her father reflects the use of intermediaries to reduce parental resistance. At the party, Elvis separates her from the crowd and says, “Would you come up to my room? ... You don’t have to be

scared, baby. I'd never do anything to harm you (Coppola, 2023, 11:53)." Priscilla hesitates but nods, showing her inner conflict between fear and the wish to please him. This exchange highlights Elvis's strategy of framing secrecy as safety. Through dialogue and external action, Priscilla's characterization reveals nervous compliance, she is torn between fear and the desire to please him. The conflict is internal, as she struggles with confusion and attraction, while Elvis maintains control by defining what is "safe." Elvis further strengthens his access at 16:35 (Coppola, 2023) by negotiating directly with Priscilla's parents at the Beaulieu residence. He tells them, "She's much more mature than her age, and I really do enjoy spending time with her." Captain Beaulieu replies, "Have her home by 2200," which allows Elvis to meet her freely (Coppola, 2023, 16:35). This exchange reduces parental control and enables continued private interaction since this stage focuses on physically and emotionally isolating the child from their environment (Winters, Jeglic, & Kaylor, 2020). Elvis achieves this by using intermediaries, separating Priscilla from her peers, and manipulating her parents' trust. He reframes her immaturity as maturity to legitimize his pursuit. These scenes suggest that access and isolation operate together. Elvis establishes trust through intermediaries and controlled interaction, then gradually weakens external supervision by gaining parental approval. By presenting himself as trustworthy while arranging private encounters, he gains access while simultaneously reducing oversight and increasing Priscilla's dependence. This increasing access and reduced external oversight create the conditions for a deeper emotional connection, which allows the interaction to shift from controlled contact to the development of trust.

c. Trust Development

Trust development refers to the stage in which the perpetrator builds emotional closeness to create intimacy and dependence. In *Priscilla* (2023), this stage appears during their second private meeting.



Fig. 3. Elvis opens up to Priscilla (Coppola, 2023), 13:32)

During this scene, Elvis builds trust with Priscilla by sharing personal grief about his mother's death during their second private meeting. This confession occurs when he appears withdrawn, then turns to her with softened eyes and speaks about missing his mother. Priscilla listens silently as she is unsure what to response, her posture tightens, yet she stays near him. This moment fits the trust development stage described by Winters, Jeglic, & Kaylor (2020), in which the offender uses emotional disclosure to create intimacy and dependence. Elvis presents vulnerability to draw sympathy from Priscilla by making her feel responsible for his comfort. She reacts with quiet concern and nervous stillness, which shows her desire to be needed and her lack of understanding of emotional manipulation. As emotional closeness is established, this trust becomes the basis for introducing physical intimacy, where boundaries are gradually redefined through controlled interaction.

d. Desensitization to Sexual Content and Physical Contact

Desensitization to sexual content and physical contact refers to the stage in which the perpetrator gradually introduces intimacy in order to reduce the victim's sensitivity to physical boundaries. In *Priscilla* (2023), this stage starts to appear during Priscilla's second private encounter with Elvis.



Fig. 4. Elvis kissing Priscilla (Coppola, 2023, 14:36)

Before the physical contact occurs, Elvis reassures Priscilla by saying that she is safe and that he would not harm her. This dialogue establishes a sense of trust and security, which prepares her to accept his actions without resistance. Priscilla's behavior reflects hesitation and uncertainty. She follows him into the room and remains physically still as he speaks about his mother. Her silence and lack of resistance suggest confusion rather than consent, which indicates her limited understanding of the situation. As he speaks about his mother's death, he creates a false sense of emotional closeness, then kisses her directly on the lips. This act violates boundaries and introduces sexual contact under the guise of affection. His use of "Little One" afterward softens the violation, masking exploitation as tenderness and beginning Priscilla's desensitization to sexual intimacy (Coppola, 2023, 14:40). Once physical and emotional boundaries are weakened, the interaction progresses into a stage where control is no longer introduced but maintained through repeated patterns of dependence.

e. Maintenance Following the Abuse

This stage marks reinforcement of dependence and compliance through emotional and physical control. In *Priscilla* (2023), this phase appears through Elvis's attempts to regulate Priscilla's behavior, appearance, and emotional state.



Fig. 5. Elvis introducing pills to Priscilla

Elvis introduces Priscilla to sleeping pills under the guise of care, saying, “Here, you can take one of these. It’ll help you sleep after your trip” (Coppola, 2023, 31:07). This act establishes chemical dependence while reinforcing his image as a caretaker. The control intensifies once Priscilla moves into Graceland. At 47:33, Elvis withholds sexual intercourse while suggesting alternatives, “Baby, don’t get carried away. You gotta let me decide when we take this moment... It doesn’t mean we can’t do other things” (Coppola, 2023). By positioning himself as the gatekeeper of intimacy, he conditions Priscilla to accept his authority over their relationship. At 49:53, Elvis dictates her physical appearance, telling her, “Black hair and more eye makeup will make your eyes stand out more” (Coppola, 2023). Elvis’s manipulation aligns with Winters, Jeglic, & Kaylor’s (2020) explanation of the maintenance stage, where abusers preserve control through ongoing psychological and emotional confinement. This sustained control not only shapes the dynamics of the relationship but also produces lasting emotional and psychological consequences for the victim.

2. The Effects of Child Grooming

a. Anxiety

Symptoms associated with anxiety appear when emotional dependence and fear of abandonment intersect. In *Priscilla* (2023), this condition emerges in a domestic scene in which Priscilla and her parents are at the kitchen table.



Fig. 6. Priscilla lays the dining table (Coppola, 2023, 15:37)

Priscilla’s parents confront her about her late-night outings with Elvis while she clears the dining table. Her father demands to meet Elvis, and her mother urges her to rest, but Priscilla bursts out, “I’m fine! He’s gonna be gone in a few months! Please don’t ruin my life!” (Coppola, 2023, 15:37). The conflict unfolds on two levels. Externally, Priscilla opposes her parents’ authority, as their concern challenges her relationship with Elvis. Internally, she struggles between awareness of parental control and fear of losing Elvis’s presence. This internal tension intensifies her emotional reaction and disrupts her ability to respond calmly. It reflects what McAlinden (2012) describes as grooming’s emotional dependency, where the victim associates safety with the abuser. Her outburst, characterized through dialogue, exposes not ordinary teenage defiance but deep psychological anxiety rooted in coercive attachment. Through phrasing and tone, Priscilla’s dialogue reveals her sense of stability exists only within Elvis’s control. As this fear of loss intensifies, the emotional response shifts from heightened reaction to

withdrawal, where distress no longer appears through outburst but through silence and reduced engagement.

b. Depression

Symptoms associated with depression may appear as emotional withdrawal, loss of interest, and reduced responsiveness. In Priscilla (2023), these symptoms are suggested through Priscilla's behavior in a scene at the kitchen table.



Fig. 7. Priscilla at the kitchen table (Coppola, 2023, 24:02)

In this scene, Priscilla sits at the kitchen table, quietly packing her homework while Mrs. Beaulieu says, "Maybe it's time to forget about him," when her mother adds, "He's probably with women his own age. What about boys at school?" Priscilla looks at her hopelessly, her brows furrowed, her eyes lifeless (Coppola, 2023, 24:02). This lack of reaction captures the erosion of self that Elliot & Briere (1992) describe as a consequence of early emotional domination. Child grooming teaches victims to equate self-worth with the abuser's presence; once separated, they face emptiness rather than freedom. The conflict here is internal as Priscilla's longing for connection clashes with her inability to detach from Elvis, showing what Petrie & Boggs (2017) call an opposition of desires within the mind. Her characterization unfolds through internal action and appearance: her stillness, blank expression, and absence of vitality reveal depression's quiet persistence. Her plain attire and lifeless gaze visually convey emotional depletion. When emotional withdrawal persists, it may extend beyond reduced responsiveness into detachment, where the individual disengages not only from others but also from their immediate reality.

c. Dissociation

Dissociation refers to a state of detachment from reality that may occur as a response to stress or trauma (Psychology Today, 2021). In *Priscilla* (2023), this scene suggests dissociative tendencies in Priscilla's behavior during a classroom setting.



Fig. 8. Priscilla stares blankly in class (Coppola, 2023, 22:16)

In this scene, Priscilla sits in her classroom while her peers focus on their work. She repeatedly writes “Elvis” on her notebook, her eyes glaze over, and she stares blankly ahead before turning her head to the side in disorientation (Coppola, 2023, 22:16). Her body remains still, but her mind drifts elsewhere. This moment reflects the aftermath of grooming described by McAlinden (2012), in which emotional control and normalization of harm blur reality and self-perception. The conflict here is internal; she struggles against the emptiness left by emotional overexposure and dependency. Her compulsive focus on Elvis’s name replaces conscious thought, functioning as a coping mechanism for distress. Characterization in this scene unfolds through internal and external action: her blank expression and repetitive motion reveal a fractured consciousness, while the contrast with her attentive classmates emphasizes her dissociative withdrawal. This detachment from reality also affects basic bodily functions, as disrupted perception and emotional instability begin to interfere with patterns of rest and recovery.

d. Sleep Disturbances

Sleep disturbance in *Priscilla* (2023) appears as a condition associated with disrupted rest and dependence on external control.



Fig. 9. Priscilla wakes up while Elvis sits next to her (Coppola, 2023, 32:09)

Elvis gives Priscilla a sleeping pill, saying, “Here, you can take one of these. It’ll help you sleep after your trip” (Coppola, 2023, 32:09). She swallows it without hesitation and rests in his arms. When she wakes, she says, “I just went to bed,” and Elvis replies, “No, baby, you’ve been out for two days. On a goddamn five hundred milligram Placidyl” (Coppola, 2023, 32:20). Her reaction shows confusion and suggests diminished awareness and reduced autonomy. This moment indicates control that appears as care (McAllinden, 2012). Elvis’s gesture introduces dependence, as her ability to rest becomes linked to his authority. The conflict occurs internally, as she does not question him directly, yet shows disorientation and unease. Her characterization appears through dialogue and external action. Her tone is disoriented, and her passive response reflects vulnerability. This scene suggests how grooming reshapes basic needs such as rest into mechanisms of control. As control extends into physical and psychological needs, it also begins to reshape personal boundaries, particularly in the context of intimacy and consent

e. Sexual Problems

This category refers to difficulties in sexual boundaries and experiences that may emerge as a result of prolonged manipulation and control. In *Priscilla* (2023), this condition appears in a coercive encounter between Elvis and Priscilla.



Fig. 10. Priscilla resists Elvis during a coercive encounter (Coppola, 2023, 01:43:49)

Elvis forces Priscilla onto the bed and says, “I wanna show you how a real man makes love to his woman” (Coppola, 2023, 01:43:49). Priscilla responds, “What are you doing?... Please, stop! Just stop. Stop” (Coppola, 2023, 01:43:55). He then walks away as she sits up and fixes her clothes in silence. Priscilla’s behavior reflects distress and resistance. Her repeated pleas indicate fear and confusion, while her still posture and downward gaze suggest emotional withdrawal. These actions show a lack of mutuality in the interaction and indicate that intimacy occurs under pressure rather than consent. This scene presents a character versus character conflict between Priscilla and Elvis that develops from emotional coercion rather than direct physical struggle. The interaction suggests a disruption of previously established trust and indicates a shift in the relationship from emotional dependence to control. The encounter reflects how grooming may distort boundaries and shape the victim’s perception of intimacy. These repeated violations of boundaries contribute to longer-term distress responses, where the impact of control persists beyond individual encounters and shapes reactions to subsequent interactions.

f. Post-Traumatic Symptoms

Post-traumatic symptoms refer to behavioral and emotional responses that emerge after repeated exposure to distress and instability. In *Priscilla* (2023), this condition appears in a scene where a playful interaction shifts into physical aggression.



Fig. 1. Priscilla is hurt during a pillow fight (Coppola, 2023, 1:01:48)

A pillow fight turns violent when Priscilla hits Elvis too hard. His expression shifts as he yells, “Not so rough! You’re not a goddamn man!” (Coppola, 2023, 1:01:48), then throws her down and strikes her eye. Priscilla clutches her face and

storms off, shouting, “You can’t play without winning!” Behind the door, Elvis softens his tone and says, “Baby, I’m sorry. You know I’d never hurt you in any real way” (Coppola, 2023, 1:02:10). The conflict is character vs. character, where affection collapses into aggression. The abrupt emotional shift shows how trauma thrives in instability. Priscilla’s flinch and retreat reveal a hyperarousal response, a trauma reflex to unpredictable violence. Characterization unfolds through external action and dialogue. Her recoil and silence express fear and disbelief. Dialogue exposes both awareness and resignation to a cycle of harm. Elvis’s soft apology masks control while at the same time reinforces emotional confusion typical of post-traumatic symptoms (Petrie & Boggs, 2017).

3. Discussions

The findings reveal that *Priscilla* (2023) portrays child grooming not through explicit acts of abuse but through emotional manipulation, dependence, and gradual loss of agency. The film visualizes grooming as a process that evolves across five stages, targeting, gaining access, trust development, desensitization, and maintenance, following Winters, Jeglic, & Kaylor (2020). Each stage is represented through conflicts that show how affection transforms into control. Using Petrie & Boggs’s (2017) concepts of conflict and characterization, Priscilla’s experiences reveal both internal and external struggles that expose the shift from admiration to subjugation. Internal conflict dominates as she rationalizes emotional control, while external conflict arises when she resists Elvis’s dominance. Characterization through dialogue, silence, and external action underscores her transition from a naïve teenager to a psychologically dependent victim. These findings align with McAlinden’s (2012) view that grooming operates through manipulation rather than overt coercion, reinforcing emotional control disguised as love. In *Priscilla* (2023), control is not established through immediate force but through gradual emotional influence that reshapes the victim’s perception of the relationship. The progression across stages shows how attention, affection, and reassurance function as tools to lower resistance and build dependence. Priscilla’s responses indicate that control is internalized, as she begins to interpret restriction and imbalance as forms of care. This pattern reflects McAlinden’s argument that grooming sustains compliance by embedding authority within emotional attachment, allowing domination to persist without explicit violence.

The analysis also identifies six lasting psychological effects, anxiety, depression, dissociation, sexual problems, sleep disturbance, and post-traumatic symptoms, based on Elliot & Briere (1992). Each effect reflects how emotional conditioning erodes Priscilla’s sense of safety and self. Anxiety and depression emerge from her dependency and loss of autonomy; dissociation shows her detachment from reality; sexual problems stem from the collapse of consent; while sleep disturbance and post-traumatic symptoms reveal her ongoing fear and hypervigilance. These effects illustrate how trauma develops gradually, shaped by manipulation and emotional imbalance. The study differs from prior works by focusing on the aftermath rather than the process of grooming, showing that trauma in film can be conveyed through cinematic silence, subtle gestures, and psychological realism. Ultimately, *Priscilla* (2023) turns emotional control into a

visual language of trauma where conflict and characterization expose how love becomes a site of harm and silence becomes evidence of survival.

E. CONCLUSION

This study examines *Priscilla* (2023) through psychology in literature to show how the film portrays the stages and effects of child grooming. Using Wellek & Warren's (1949) psychological approach, McAlinden's (2012) definition of grooming, Winters, Jeglic, & Kaylor's (2020) stages, Elliot and Briere's (1992) effects, and Petrie & Boggs's (2017) theory of conflict and characterization, the analysis focuses on Priscilla as the victim. The film presents manipulation as affection and control as care. It reveals five stages of grooming that expose the gradual loss of autonomy. Internal and external conflicts reflect coercion beneath emotional attachment, while characterization through dialogue, internal action, and appearance shows Priscilla's dependence and submission. The six psychological effects appear as consequences of sustained manipulation. *Priscilla* (2023) affirms that trauma and control can exist without explicit violence and that film can act as a literary form that uncovers emotional truth. This research contributes to psychology in literature and film by clarifying how conflict and characterization can represent grooming as a structured process of domination. Future studies may extend this analysis through Mulvey's (1975) male gaze theory to examine how visual elements construct power and vulnerability in similar narratives.

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