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Representing Child Grooming in Like & Share Through John Fiske's Semiotics

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Abstract. This study analyzes the representation of child grooming in the Indonesian film Like & Share (2022) directed by Gina S. Noer. The problem addressed in this article is how the film constructs child grooming as a gradual communicative process rather than as a sudden act of violence. The study uses a descriptive qualitative method with John Fiske's semiotic approach, consisting of the levels of reality, representation, and ideology. The data were obtained from selected film scenes, dialogue, character behavior, visual composition, lighting, editing, and supporting literature. The results show that grooming is represented through three main stages: trust building, boundary erosion and emotional dependency, and gaslighting with psychological control. At the level of reality, grooming appears through ordinary gestures, friendly speech, and a safe-looking environment. At the level of representation, warm lighting, close-up shots, soft music, and gradual editing make the relationship look intimate and romantic. At the ideological level, the film criticizes patriarchal power relations, victim blaming, weak protection systems, and the normalization of adult male dominance over teenage girls. The study concludes that Like & Share functions as a medium of social criticism and public education about hidden forms of grooming.

Keywords: *Child Grooming, Representation, John Fiske's Semiotics, Film, Like & Share*

INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence against children and adolescents remains one of the urgent social issues in Indonesia. The problem is not limited to direct physical assault, but also includes subtle forms of manipulation that prepare victims for exploitation. In this context, child grooming becomes important because it often begins with ordinary communication, care, gifts, praise, and emotional attention that appear harmless. The victim may not immediately recognize danger because the perpetrator first creates trust and emotional closeness (Amilda et al., 2023; Holivia & Suratman, 2021). The background of this study is strengthened by the continuing public concern over sexual violence against children. The thesis data mention that Simfoni PPA recorded 14,039 cases of violence against women and children up to July 2025. Several public cases also show a similar pattern: perpetrators are frequently people who appear close, helpful, respectable, or trustworthy. This pattern indicates that grooming is difficult to detect because manipulation is often hidden behind affection, authority, and promises of protection (BBC News Indonesia, 2024; KPAI, 2026).

Child grooming is not only a legal or psychological issue, but also a communication issue. The process works through repeated interaction, persuasive language, emotional dependency, and the gradual erosion of personal boundaries. Perpetrators usually do not begin with open coercion. They first build a relationship that makes the victim feel safe, special, and emotionally attached. When trust has been established, the perpetrator can shift the relationship into a more

controlling direction while making the victim feel guilty, immature, or responsible for the situation (Ayu, 2024; Andaru, 2021). Film is relevant to this issue because it can represent social realities through narrative, image, sound, and character construction. As a mass communication medium, film does not merely entertain audiences; it also produces meanings, frames social problems, and influences public perception. Through cinematic signs, a film can show how violence is normalized, how victims are silenced, and how social structures maintain unequal power relations (McQuail & Deuze, 2020; Barker, 2020).

The film *Like & Share* (2022), directed by Gina S. Noer, was selected because it presents the vulnerability of adolescent girls in digital and interpersonal spaces. The film depicts the experiences of teenagers who deal with intimacy, social media exposure, private images, trauma, and unequal relationships. In the thesis, the film is described as explicitly presenting sexual violence and the stages of child grooming through the relationship between a teenage girl and an older male figure. Thus, the film is not only a fictional story, but also a cultural text that reflects how grooming may operate in real social life (Dita et al., 2023).

Figure 1. Poster of the film *Like & Share*



Another reason this topic is important is the growing role of digital platforms in the circulation of films and public conversations about violence. The thesis notes that *Like & Share* is accessed through official digital platforms and discussed within a wider digital culture. This context makes the film relevant not only as cinema, but also as a public text that participates in debates about consent, privacy, trauma, and the vulnerability of teenagers in online and offline relationships. The representation of grooming in film also requires careful reading because visual intimacy can be misleading. A scene that looks romantic may contain an unequal power relation, while a line of dialogue that appears ordinary may function as psychological pressure. This is why semiotic analysis is useful: it allows the researcher to examine how meanings are produced through signs, not only through the literal plot (Chandler, 2022; Sturken & Cartwright, 2023). The urgency of this research lies in the need to understand how child grooming is represented in audiovisual media. By examining the film through John Fiske's semiotics, this study identifies how meaning is constructed at three levels: reality, representation, and ideology. The analysis helps reveal that grooming may be presented as romance on the surface, while at a deeper level it carries manipulation, psychological control, and patriarchal domination. Therefore, the study asks: how is the phenomenon of child grooming represented in the film *Like & Share*?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Child grooming as staged manipulation.

Child grooming is understood as a deliberate process of building trust, emotional closeness, and dependency before exploitation occurs. In media and legal studies, grooming is usually explained as a gradual process rather than a single event. The perpetrator may use attention, gifts, advice, or emotional support to reduce suspicion and make the victim feel chosen or protected. This view is relevant to the film because the analyzed scenes show grooming as a progression from harmless-looking interaction to emotional control (Amilda et al., 2023; Holivia & Suratman, 2021).

Film as representation and social criticism.

Film is a cultural text that combines visual, verbal, and auditory signs to produce meaning. Its representation is not neutral because every shot, costume, lighting choice, and dialogue may carry ideological messages. In the context of sexual violence, film can become a space for public education by making hidden practices more visible. Previous studies on Indonesian film show that cinematic representation can open discussions about gender violence, victim blaming, and unequal relations of power (Aisyah, 2025; Cahyani & Aprilia, 2022).

John Fiske's semiotic approach.

John Fiske's semiotics explains that television and film texts operate through three levels of codes. The level of reality includes appearance, dress, environment, behavior, speech, gesture, expression, and sound. The level of representation includes technical codes such as camera, lighting, editing, and music. The level of ideology refers to broader social values such as patriarchy, class, individualism, and capitalism. These three levels are suitable for this research because grooming in film is not only shown through plot, but also through signs and social codes (Fiske, 1987; Chandler, 2022).

Patriarchy and victim blaming in media texts.

The ideological reading of sexual violence in film cannot be separated from patriarchal culture and victim blaming. Patriarchy positions adult male authority as normal and often treats female resistance as emotional, immature, or problematic. In many media narratives, victims may be judged for their choices, clothing, relationships, or silence. This article therefore reads *Like & Share* as a text that criticizes how social structures can protect perpetrators while placing moral burden on victims (Jannatin et al., 2024; Aisyah, 2025).

Digital space and adolescent vulnerability.

The issue of grooming becomes more complex in digital culture because communication can move quickly from public interaction to private channels. Digital platforms may enable emotional closeness, image sharing, secrecy, and repeated contact without direct supervision. In this context, teenagers are vulnerable not because they are passive, but because the communication environment allows manipulation to be personalized and continuous (Andaru, 2021; Holivia & Suratman, 2021).

METHODS

This study uses a descriptive qualitative method. The object of the research is the film *Like & Share* (2022), while the unit of analysis consists of selected scenes, dialogue, character behavior, visual signs, and cinematic techniques that represent the stages of child grooming. The qualitative approach was chosen because the study aims to interpret meanings in the film rather than measure them statistically (Anggito & Setiawan, 2018). Data were collected through documentation and literature review. Documentation was conducted by watching the film

repeatedly, selecting relevant scenes, writing time codes, and identifying signs related to trust building, boundary erosion, emotional dependency, gaslighting, and psychological control. Literature review was used to strengthen the analysis with references on semiotics, film, child grooming, sexual violence, and gender-based power relations. The analysis follows John Fiske's three levels. First, the level of reality examines appearance, dress, environment, behavior, speech, gesture, expression, and sound. Second, the level of representation examines camera, lighting, editing, music, and narrative construction. Third, the level of ideology examines the social values and power relations behind the representation, especially patriarchy and victim blaming. The analytical framework is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Analytical Framework Based on John Fiske's Semiotic Levels

Level	Codes Analyzed	Focus of Interpretation
Reality	Appearance, dress, environment, behavior, speech, gesture, expression, sound	How grooming appears as ordinary interaction and daily social behavior.
Representation	Camera, lighting, editing, music, shot composition, narrative rhythm	How cinematic techniques make closeness appear safe, intimate, or romantic.
Ideology	Patriarchy, class, individualism, victim blaming, institutional silence	How unequal power relations and social norms allow grooming to be normalized.

RESULTS

The findings show that Like & Share represents child grooming as a gradual process. The selected scenes indicate three main stages: trust building, boundary erosion and emotional dependency, and gaslighting with psychological control. Each stage is constructed through a combination of social codes, cinematic techniques, and ideological meanings.

Trust building

In the scene around 26:01-27:05, the film represents the first stage of grooming through a friendly and non-threatening interaction. At the level of reality, the perpetrator figure appears neat, calm, and approachable, while the school environment creates a sense of safety. The speech is casual and polite, and the gesture of giving attention functions as the beginning of emotional acceptance. At the level of representation, bright lighting, smooth editing, and calm tone guide the audience to see the interaction as normal. Ideologically, the scene reveals that grooming may start from a socially acceptable form of kindness, making it difficult for victims and observers to identify danger at the beginning.

Figure 2. Selected Scene Representing Trust Building



Boundary erosion and emotional dependency

In the scenes around 33:32-40:30 and 49:40-54:44, the boundary between the victim and the perpetrator becomes increasingly blurred. At the level of reality, the film shows closer emotional interaction, private spaces, and more frequent physical proximity. At the level of representation, warm lighting, close-up shots, soft music, and slower editing create the impression of intimacy. This representation is significant because it shows how grooming can be disguised as affection. At the ideological level, the scenes criticize the social tendency to romanticize unequal relationships between an adult man and a teenage girl. The film makes visible how emotional dependency can be built through care, attention, and repeated closeness.

Figure 3. Selected Scene Representing Boundary Erosion And Emotional Dependency



Gaslighting and psychological control

In the scene around 59:37-1:00:00, the film represents psychological manipulation through dialogue that makes the victim question her own refusal. At the level of reality, the victim appears alone in a private space, focused on the message and emotionally affected by the conversation. The words used by the perpetrator imply disappointment and maturity judgment, making refusal appear childish or wrong. At the level of representation, dim lighting, quiet atmosphere, and a focused visual composition emphasize isolation and emotional pressure. At the ideological level, the scene shows how patriarchy operates through language: the older male figure does not need direct force because guilt, emotional pressure, and maturity discourse become tools of control.

Figure 4. Selected Scene Representing Gaslighting And Psychological Control



Table 2. Summary of Semiotic Findings

Stage of Grooming	Reality Level	Representation Level	Ideological Meaning
Trust building	Friendly appearance, safe environment, polite speech, warm gesture.	Bright lighting, smooth editing, calm tone, non-threatening camera.	Grooming begins as ordinary kindness and is difficult to detect early.
Boundary erosion and emotional dependency	Private setting, repeated closeness, emotional comfort, reduced interpersonal distance.	Close-up shots, warm light, soft music, slower rhythm.	Unequal intimacy is romanticized and adult authority is normalized.
Gaslighting and psychological control	Victim looks doubtful, isolated, and emotionally pressured by dialogue.	Dim lighting, quiet atmosphere, focused framing, tense mood.	Language becomes a tool of patriarchal control and victim blaming.

The summary shows that the three stages are not separate events, but a sequence of meaning. Trust building makes the relationship appear safe, boundary erosion makes the victim increasingly dependent, and gaslighting maintains control when the victim begins to set limits. This sequence is central to the representation of child grooming in the film because the violence is hidden behind ordinary social codes and romantic visual language.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that the film does not present child grooming as an abrupt violent act. Instead, it constructs grooming as a communicative process that begins with trust and ends with psychological control. This is consistent with studies that define grooming as a gradual strategy in which perpetrators first create emotional access to victims before moving toward exploitation (Holivia & Suratman, 2021; Andaru, 2021). The trust-building stage is

important because it shows how danger can be hidden inside ordinary social interaction. The film does not immediately mark the perpetrator as threatening. Through friendly behavior, neat appearance, and a safe-looking environment, the audience is positioned to understand how easily grooming can be misread as kindness. This representation supports the idea that grooming is often difficult to detect because it resembles acceptable care and attention (Amilda et al., 2023).

The second stage, boundary erosion and emotional dependency, shows how the film uses cinematic language to blur the line between romance and manipulation. Warm lighting, intimate framing, and emotional music can make the relationship appear affectionate. However, semiotically, these elements also expose the danger of visual romanticization. The film therefore invites the audience to question how media, culture, and everyday discourse sometimes normalize unequal relationships between adults and adolescents (Aisyah, 2025; Jannatin et al., 2024). The final stage, gaslighting and psychological control, reveals how manipulation works through language. The victim is not only pressured by actions but also by words that make her feel guilty and immature. This representation is crucial because it shifts the focus from physical coercion to psychological domination. In the context of John Fiske's ideological level, this form of control is connected to patriarchy, where adult male authority is treated as natural while the young female victim is positioned as doubtful, emotional, or responsible for the conflict (Fiske, 1987; Barker, 2020).

The use of school, private rooms, phone screens, and intimate spaces also expands the meaning of grooming beyond a single location. The film suggests that vulnerability is produced through a network of spaces: peer culture, family absence, digital communication, and private emotional dependency. These spaces are connected through narrative and technical codes, making the audience aware that grooming can move across everyday environments without being immediately noticed. Another important discussion point is the role of the viewer. Because the early scenes are framed with warmth and normality, the viewer may initially interpret the interaction as romantic. This delayed recognition is part of the film's critical strategy. By allowing the audience to experience the ambiguity first, the film shows how grooming can be socially misread and why victims may also find it difficult to explain what is happening to them. Overall, the film functions as a medium of social criticism. It challenges the audience to recognize grooming not only in extreme or visible violence, but also in subtle interactions that use affection, attention, and emotional dependency as instruments of control. Through semiotic analysis, this study shows that *Like & Share* contributes to public awareness about the early signs of grooming and the importance of protecting adolescents in both offline and digital environments.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that *Like & Share* represents child grooming as a subtle and gradual process. Through John Fiske's semiotic levels, the film shows that grooming begins with trust building, develops through boundary erosion and emotional dependency, and is maintained through gaslighting and psychological control. At the level of reality, grooming appears through ordinary gestures, friendly interaction, safe-looking spaces, and emotional speech. At the level of representation, cinematic elements such as lighting, camera, editing, music, and narrative rhythm make the relationship appear intimate before revealing its manipulative nature. At the level of ideology, the film criticizes patriarchal power relations, victim blaming, and weak protection systems that allow grooming to occur and remain hidden. Therefore, the film can be read as a social critique and an educational medium that encourages audiences to recognize the early signs of manipulation in unequal relationships.

LIMITATION

This study concludes that *Like & Share* represents child grooming as a subtle and gradual process. Through John Fiske's semiotic levels, the film shows that grooming begins with trust building, develops through boundary erosion and emotional dependency, and is maintained through gaslighting and psychological control. At the level of reality, grooming appears through ordinary gestures, friendly interaction, safe-looking spaces, and emotional speech. At the level of representation, cinematic elements such as lighting, camera, editing, music, and narrative rhythm make the relationship appear intimate before revealing its manipulative nature. At the level of ideology, the film criticizes patriarchal power relations, victim blaming, and weak protection systems that allow grooming to occur and remain hidden. Therefore, the film can be read as a social critique and an educational medium that encourages audiences to recognize the early signs of manipulation in unequal relationships.

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