



## Identity Crisis in *Ruby Gillman, Teenage Kraken* (2023): A Study of Marcia's Identity Statuses

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### Abstract

**Keywords:**  
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*This study explores the identity crisis experienced by the main character in the animated film *Ruby Gillman, Teenage Kraken* (2023). The object of this study is the film itself, which follows Ruby, a shy and insecure teenager who discovers that she is the descendant of a powerful sea kraken. As she struggles to fit in at high school, Ruby is forced to conceal her true nature. Her life changes dramatically when she learns of her royal lineage and inherits the kraken throne. This research aims to examine the process of identity crisis that Ruby undergoes and how she ultimately resolves it. The story depicts Ruby grappling with her identity due to both external and internal pressures, ultimately achieving a stable sense of self through exploration and self-acceptance. A qualitative method was employed, analyzing dialogue and visual scenes from the film. The theoretical framework is based on Marcia's (1966) theory of identity statuses, which comprises four categories: identity diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and identity achievement. The findings reveal that Ruby's identity crisis is triggered by social pressure and familial expectations, and is resolved through a process of self-exploration and acceptance of her dual identity as both human and kraken..*

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## INTRODUCTION

Identity constitutes a fundamental dimension of human existence, serving both to distinguish individuals from one another and to position them within their social worlds. It encompasses multiple domains—personal, sexual, gendered, religious, ethnic, and social—each contributing to the complex tapestry of selfhood. Erikson (1968) contends that identity is essential for social recognition, enabling individuals to interact meaningfully within their communities. Yet identity is not a fixed possession; it is continuously negotiated, performed, and sometimes concealed. When individuals, for various reasons, suppress or hide their authentic selves, they risk losing contact with who they are. This dislocation often precipitates what Erikson termed an identity crisis: a period of confusion, questioning, and psychological distress during which one's sense of self becomes unstable.

An identity crisis may arise from internal factors—such as conflicting desires or values—but it is equally shaped by external forces. Oleś (2015) observes that family dynamics, peer relationships, residential environments, and even media consumption can influence how individuals perceive and construct their identities. The crisis is not merely an individual pathology but a psychosocial phenomenon rooted in the interplay between self and society.

A compelling real-world illustration of this phenomenon is found in the actor Jim Carrey. In a 2017 red-carpet interview, Carrey reflected on his profound identity crisis following his portrayal of Andy Kaufman in *Man on the Moon* (1999). He described losing the boundary between character and self, later realizing that the persona "Jim Carrey" was itself a social construction rather than an essential truth. He questioned: "If Jim Carrey could just disappear, who is Jim Carrey really?" Drawing an analogy to the *Wizard of Oz*, Carrey recognized that identity is often an illusion maintained by external markers—name, religion, culture—accepted uncritically since birth. He concluded that the more relevant question is not "Who am I?" but "Who do I want to become?"—a formulation that emphasizes agency, reflection, and the liberating possibility of self-reinvention (Leatham, 2023).

Schwartz et al. (2011) provide a comprehensive framework for understanding such crises. They argue that identity is neither static nor singular; rather, it is a dynamic integration of personal, relational, and collective elements, continuously shaped by both individual agency and sociocultural context. Identity formation involves internalizing meanings derived from culture and history while simultaneously negotiating competing expectations from various life domains—family, work, community. When these expectations conflict, individuals may experience profound psychological dissonance. Schwartz et al. advocate for an integrative approach that acknowledges both personal construction (how we define ourselves) and social construction (how society defines us), positioning identity crisis as a multidimensional process involving adaptation, negotiation, and sometimes transformation.

Contemporary cinema, particularly animated film, has increasingly engaged with themes of identity, belonging, and self-discovery. Such films function not merely as entertainment but as cultural texts that reflect and shape societal understandings of adolescence and development. *Ruby Gillman, Teenage Kraken* (2023), directed by Kirk DeMicco, offers a particularly rich site for examining identity crisis through its titular character, a sixteen-year-old girl who discovers she is the heir to a legendary kraken dynasty. The film dramatizes Ruby's struggle to reconcile her human upbringing with her kraken heritage, her mother's protective fears with her own curiosity, and her desire for normalcy with the call of destiny.

What makes *Ruby Gillman* especially salient for identity research is its explicit engagement with the dual identity trope—a narrative device that externalizes internal conflict. Ruby is neither fully human nor fully kraken; she is both, and her journey toward self-acceptance models the very process Marcia (1966) theorized. Moreover, as a product of DreamWorks Animation, the film reaches a broad adolescent audience, making its psychological themes culturally influential.

Several previous studies have examined identity crisis in film and literature using Marcia's framework. Aini (2021), in her analysis of *Ali's Wedding* (2017), traced the protagonist's movement through foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement as he navigated the cultural chasm between his Middle Eastern heritage and Australian society. The study demonstrated the applicability of Marcia's statuses to narratives of bicultural identity negotiation.

Kristianto and Wahyuni (2022) employed critical discourse analysis to examine identity crisis in *Minari*, focusing on how the film represents the tension between Korean heritage and American assimilation. Their work highlighted the role of family dynamics in shaping identity outcomes.

More recently, Mansoor, Khan, and Mansoor (2025) conducted a multimodal analysis of identity crisis in animated films, arguing that visual and auditory elements—character design, color palette, musical scoring—function as semiotic resources for representing psychological states. Their study provides methodological precedent for analyzing both dialogue and visual composition in *Ruby Gillman*.

Ningsih, Amelia, and Pasang (2024) examined identity crisis in Charlotte Wells' *Aftersun*, applying framing analysis to explore how cinematic techniques convey the protagonist's internal fragmentation. Their emphasis on the relationship between formal film elements and psychological representation is directly relevant to the present study.

While these studies have enriched the field, no published research to date has examined *Ruby Gillman*, *Teenage Kraken* through the lens of Marcia's identity status theory. The present study addresses this gap.

This study is grounded in the identity status paradigm developed by James Marcia (1966, 1980, 1993). Marcia operationalized Erikson's psychosocial concept of identity crisis by identifying four distinct identity statuses based on the presence or absence of two key dimensions: exploration (actively questioning and considering alternative identities) and commitment (making a firm investment in a particular identity).

The four statuses are:

1. **Identity Diffusion:** The individual has neither explored meaningful alternatives nor made a commitment. This status is characterized by apathy, confusion, or avoidance.
2. **Foreclosure:** The individual has made a commitment without prior exploration, typically by adopting the values and expectations of parents or authority figures. Identity is "closed" rather than examined.
3. **Moratorium:** The individual is actively engaged in exploration but has not yet made a commitment. This status is marked by questioning, experimentation, and often anxiety.

4. **Identity Achievement:** The individual has completed a period of exploration and has made a self-defined commitment. This status represents the resolution of identity crisis.

Importantly, Marcia emphasized that these statuses are not developmental stages in a fixed sequence. Individuals may move between statuses non-linearly, revisit earlier statuses, or remain in a single status indefinitely. The statuses describe *positions* along the exploration-commitment matrix rather than rungs on a ladder.

This framework is particularly well-suited to analyzing *Ruby Gillman* because the film explicitly dramatizes Ruby's movement through these very positions: from passive acceptance of her mother's rules (foreclosure), through active questioning and secret exploration (moratorium), to eventual self-definition as both human and kraken (identity achievement). Additionally, her initial state—characterized by confusion and avoidance—corresponds to identity diffusion.

This study is limited to the analysis of one animated film: *Ruby Gillman, Teenage Kraken* (2023). The analysis focuses exclusively on the character of Ruby Gillman and employs only Marcia's (1966) theory of identity statuses. Other characters, other psychological theories, and other potential themes (e.g., gender representation, environmental allegory, intergenerational conflict) are beyond the scope of this investigation. The study analyzes both verbal dialogue and selected visual scenes; however, it does not purport to be a comprehensive film studies analysis incorporating all aspects of cinematography, editing, or sound design.

This study aims to identify and analyze the depiction of identity crisis in *Ruby Gillman, Teenage Kraken* by mapping Ruby's experiences onto Marcia's four identity statuses and to examine how Ruby navigates the process of exploration and commitment to ultimately achieve identity achievement.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the growing body of research applying Marcia's identity status paradigm to contemporary narrative media. It demonstrates the continued relevance of Marcia's framework for understanding adolescent development as represented in popular culture.

Practically, this study offers educators, librarians, and mental health professionals an example of how animated film can serve as a vehicle for discussing identity formation with young people. By analyzing Ruby's journey, the study provides a vocabulary—diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, achievement—for naming and normalizing the psychological challenges of adolescence.

Pedagogically, this study may serve as a reference for future researchers analyzing identity in film or applying Marcia's theory to new objects of study, including other animated works, television series, or literary texts.

## METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design. Qualitative research emphasizes exploration and deep understanding of phenomena within their natural contexts, allowing researchers to obtain rich, detailed data through sustained engagement with texts or artifacts

(Creswell, 2017). This study analyzes an animated film as an audio-visual text, placing it within Creswell's category of qualitative audio-visual material analysis.

The primary data source was the animated film *Ruby Gillman, Teenage Kraken* (2023), directed by Kirk DeMicco. The film was purposively selected for its thematic focus on adolescent identity formation. Secondary sources included scholarly articles and interviews providing contextual background.

The researcher first viewed the film multiple times to understand its narrative and identify key scenes related to Ruby's identity crisis. Significant dialogue and monologue passages were transcribed, and visual images capturing psychological states were collected with timestamps. All data were then organized according to Marcia's (1966) four identity statuses: diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement.

Analysis proceeded in three stages. First, each data point was classified under one of Marcia's four statuses using explicit criteria. Second, the sequence and frequency of statuses were traced across the narrative. Third, cinematographic elements—camera angle, lighting, color, and blocking—were analyzed as semiotic resources representing Ruby's internal states.

To ensure credibility, the researcher reviewed data across multiple sessions, presented direct evidence from the film, applied the theoretical framework consistently, and acknowledged the interpretive nature of qualitative analysis.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents the analysis of identity crisis in *Ruby Gillman, Teenage Kraken* (2023) using Marcia's (1966) theory of identity statuses. A total of 23 data points were identified across the film's narrative, comprising dialogue, monologue, and visual scenes depicting Ruby's psychological development. The findings are organized according to the two research questions: (1) how identity crisis is depicted through Marcia's four statuses, and (2) how Ruby resolves her crisis and achieves identity achievement.

### **1 Depiction of Identity Crisis in *Ruby Gillman, Teenage Kraken***

The analysis identified 17 data points illustrating Ruby's progression through three identity statuses—diffusion, foreclosure, and moratorium—prior to her eventual achievement.

#### **1.1 Identity Diffusion**

Seven scenes depicted Ruby in a state of identity diffusion, characterized by confusion, avoidance, and an absence of both exploration and commitment. Early in the film, Ruby is shown as passive and uncertain, adhering to her mother's rules without understanding them. She does not question why she must avoid the ocean; she simply complies. This is evident in the scene where Ruby presents a video to ask her mother for permission to attend a beach party. Her hesitant posture, downcast gaze, and faltering voice convey a girl who has not yet begun to ask who she is or what she wants. Her mother's firm refusal—"You are not going near that water"—is met not with resistance but with resigned acceptance. Ruby's identity at this stage is undefined; she is neither human nor kraken, neither rebel nor fully obedient. She exists in a state of waiting.

#### **1.2 Foreclosure**

Six scenes illustrated foreclosure, wherein Ruby made commitments without personal exploration, primarily by internalizing her mother's fears and prohibitions. Her mother, Agatha, has hidden her own kraken identity and imposed this concealment upon Ruby. Ruby's repeated assurances that she will "stay away from the ocean" and "never, ever transform" represent commitments adopted uncritically from her parent. The scene at the dinner table, where Agatha recounts the "dangerous" kraken history, shows Ruby absorbing this narrative as truth. She does not yet know that her grandmother, the Warrior Queen, offers an alternative story. Foreclosure here is depicted not as defiance but as compliance—a daughter's loyalty expressed through self-suppression.

### 1.3 Moratorium

Four scenes captured Ruby in moratorium, actively exploring her identity without yet making a clear commitment. This phase begins when Ruby accidentally transforms while saving her friend Connor. For the first time, she directly experiences her kraken power. Her subsequent journey to the ocean to meet her grandmother marks a decisive shift from passivity to inquiry. She asks: "What am I? What does this mean?" These questions are the hallmark of moratorium. Ruby experiments with her abilities, tests boundaries, and listens to competing narratives—her mother's fear and her grandmother's pride. She is no longer avoiding; she is seeking. Yet she remains uncommitted, torn between the human daughter she was raised to be and the kraken princess she is discovering.

## 2 Resolution of Identity Crisis and Achievement of Identity

The second research question examined how Ruby resolves her crisis. Six data points corresponded to identity achievement, wherein Ruby demonstrated a self-defined commitment following active exploration.

The turning point occurs when Ruby learns the truth about the mermaid queen Nerissa, who has masqueraded as her friend Chelsea. Nerissa's deception forces Ruby to recognize that concealment—of identity, of history, of power—is not protection but vulnerability. In the climactic battle, Ruby does not fight *as* a kraken; she fights *as herself*. She declares: "I am Ruby Gillman. And I am a kraken." This statement is the linguistic marker of identity achievement: she names herself on her own terms.

Crucially, Ruby's achievement does not require her to reject either aspect of her identity. She remains her mother's daughter, but now by choice rather than compliance. She embraces her grandmother's legacy, but critically rather than reactively. Her integration of human and kraken selves models Marcia's conception of achievement as synthesis, not selection.

The film's visual language reinforces this resolution. In early scenes, Ruby is often framed small within the *mise-en-scène*, visually overwhelmed by her environment. During her achievement, however, she occupies the center of the frame, illuminated against the darkness, her full kraken form rendered not as monstrous but as majestic. Color shifts from the muted blues and grays of repression to the vibrant golds and emeralds of self-acceptance.

## 3 Discussion

The findings demonstrate that *Ruby Gillman, Teenage Kraken* offers a remarkably faithful narrative instantiation of Marcia's identity status paradigm. Ruby's trajectory—from diffusion through foreclosure and moratorium to achievement—is not linear; she regresses to doubt after moments of clarity, and her achievement is hard-won. This messiness is not a flaw in the film but a strength, reflecting the recursive, non-linear reality of identity formation.

The film also extends Marcia's framework by visualizing what the theory describes abstractly. Cinematographic choices—camera distance, color symbolism, character blocking—function as semiotic resources for representing psychological interiority. When Ruby's grandmother tells her, "You are exactly who you were meant to be," the camera pushes in slowly, isolating Ruby's face against the vast sea. The moment externalizes internal recognition: she sees herself clearly for the first time.

These findings align with previous research applying Marcia's theory to film narratives. Like Aini's (2021) analysis of *Ali's Wedding*, this study confirms that contemporary cinema continues to dramatize the adolescent identity crisis with psychological sophistication. Unlike live-action drama, however, animation permits the literal externalization of internal conflict: Ruby's transformation is not metaphor but event. This may render identity crisis more accessible to young viewers, who see their own confusion and courage reflected in a girl who becomes a giant sea creature and learns that this is not something to hide, but something to claim.

*Ruby Gillman, Teenage Kraken* depicts identity crisis through Ruby's movement across diffusion, foreclosure, and moratorium, and resolves this crisis through identity achievement. The film affirms Marcia's enduring relevance while demonstrating animation's unique capacity to render psychological development visible.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined the depiction of identity crisis in *Ruby Gillman, Teenage Kraken* (2023) using James Marcia's (1966) theory of identity statuses. Analysis of 23 data points—comprising dialogue, monologue, and visual scenes—revealed that the film systematically represents all four identity statuses: diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement.

The first research question investigated how identity crisis is depicted. Findings showed Ruby initially in a state of identity diffusion, characterized by confusion and avoidance. She then entered foreclosure, uncritically adopting her mother's fears and prohibitions without personal exploration. Subsequently, she moved into moratorium, actively questioning her origins and experimenting with her kraken identity. The second research question examined how Ruby resolves her crisis. Six scenes illustrated identity achievement, marked by her conscious, self-defined commitment to an integrated identity as both human and kraken.

The film visualizes Marcia's abstract concepts through cinematographic choices—framing, color, and composition—that externalize Ruby's internal psychological states. Her journey from concealment to self-acceptance models the adolescent identity formation process with remarkable fidelity to the theoretical framework.

This study contributes to the growing body of research applying identity status theory to contemporary narrative media and demonstrates that animated film can serve as a meaningful vehicle for representing complex psychological development. Future research may explore other themes within the film, including gender representation, intergenerational conflict, or environmental allegory, as well as apply Marcia's framework to additional animated works.

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