

Identity Crisis in *The Whale* Movie by Darren Aronofsky

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ABSTRACT

This research is important because identity crisis is not only a psychological problem but also a social issue that can affect an individual's emotional condition, behavior, relationships, and ability to fulfill social roles. Although previous studies have examined identity crisis in literary and cinematic works, limited attention has been given to the representation of identity crisis in adult characters through the combination of psychological, narrative, and cinematographic perspectives. Therefore, this study analyzes Charlie's identity crisis in Darren Aronofsky's *The Whale* to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how unresolved emotional conflict, guilt, and personal loss influence an individual's sense of identity and are represented through narrative and visual elements. This study is significant because it provides a deeper understanding of identity crisis in adult characters and demonstrates how psychological struggles can be represented through narrative and cinematographic elements in film.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Typically, an identity crisis refers to a period of deep uncertainty or confusion about one's sense of self. It usually happens when a person struggles to understand who they are, what they believe in, or what their role is in life. This confusion can be triggered by major life changes or stressors such as losing job, going through a divorce, suffering the death of a loved one, or even positive changes like marriage or starting a new career. These events can disrupt a person's usual way of seeing themselves and force them to re-

evaluate their values, goals, and beliefs. A person typically has an identity crisis when their circumstances change. However, identity crises can strike at any time. According to Erikson (1968, p. 17), defined an identity crisis as a time of intensive analysis and exploration of different ways of looking at oneself. A person experiencing an identity crisis goes through a long and in-depth phase where they analyze and weigh several aspects of who they are. People investigate various viewpoints on who they are and how they see themselves throughout this time.

The Whale is a 2022 drama film about an obese English teacher, Charlie, who struggles with extreme obesity and estrangement. He offers online writing courses and contacts his estranged daughter, Ellie, a troubled and rebellious teenager, to save their connection. The film explores identity crises and the need for reevaluation of values and beliefs. (Kroger, 2007: 7) states that identity crisis can be understood as a necessary developmental task that involves a reevaluation of values, goals, and beliefs.

The purpose of this study is to contribute to a wider understanding of human development and psychology as reflected in the film *The Whale*, particularly by examining how identity crisis influences personal behavior, emotional struggles, and interpersonal relationships. Studying identity crisis is crucial for understanding how individuals develop a coherent sense of self, navigate personal and societal challenges, and achieve mental and emotional well-being. The process of identity development is both an individual and social phenomenon (Adams & Marshall, 1996).

Identity is not developed in isolation; rather, it is the result of a complex interaction between our social environments and our personal identities. There are some topics discussed in this research that similar to those related studies. Most of their research es analyzes character using different theories. The following associated studies and their findings were questioned.

Firstly, Shafira (2022) from Universitas Diponegoro, her thesis is entitled “The Identity Crisis of The

Main Female Character, Tris Prior, in Veronica Roth’s *Insurgent* (2015) Movie”. The research used descriptive qualitative method with the theory identity crisis of The Main Female Character, Tris Prior, in Veronica Roth’s *Insurgent* Movie. The research used two theories of Identity Crisis theory by Erik H. Erikson and Theory of Behavior Constraint by Gabriel Mosser and David Ulzell. The study research shows that Beatrice Prior experiences changing behavior, emotions, and personality in *Insurgent* movie. This research shows that Beatrice Prior experiences changing behavior, emotions, and personality in *Insurgent* movie.

Secondly, Prakasiswi (2023) from Universitas Islam Negeri Mas Said, her thesis is entitled “The Identity Crisis Experienced by Rachel Kim in Jessica Jung’s Novel *Shine*”: psychoanalysis approach. The aims of this research are to reveal and analyze the kinds, causes, and impacts of the identity crisis in the novel *Shine*. This study used Roy. F. Baumeister theory because this theory is related to the research. This research also uses causes and impacts of identity crisis theory by Erik Erikson; in his theory he states that there are four causes and impacts of identity crisis. This writer used qualitative methods to analyze this research. This descriptive qualitative research attempts to reveal the kinds, causes, and impacts of the identity crisis that experienced by Rachel Kim as the main character in Jessica Jung's Novel *Shine*. The researcher retrieve data in the novel *Shine* in the form of words, clause, sentence, and paragraph which show the identity crisis issue.

Thirdly, Jannah and Sari (2024) conducted a study entitled “The Identity Crisis of Jeng Yah in the ‘Gadis Kretek’ Movie: The Study of Erick H. Erikson’s Developmental Psychology.” The study analyzed the identity crisis experienced by Jeng Yah in the film *Gadis Kretek* using Erik H. Erikson’s developmental psychology. The researchers employed a qualitative approach and selected the movie as the primary object of analysis. The study demonstrates that Erikson’s theory can be used to examine psychological conflict and identity development through cinematic representation. This study is closely related to the present research because both studies analyze identity crisis in a movie and use Erikson’s theory as the main theoretical framework.

Fourthly, Dewi and Asmarani (2025) conducted a study entitled “Identity Crisis in Adolescents Experienced by the Main Female Character in *Moxie* Movie.” The study examined Vivian’s identity crisis in *Moxie* by applying Erik Erikson’s concepts of identity crisis. Using qualitative research and library research, the study focused on the symptoms, causes, effects, and resolution of identity crisis. The findings showed that Vivian experienced role confusion, discomfort, and emotional uncertainty as she attempted to develop her identity. However, she eventually overcame her identity crisis. This study is relevant to the present research because it also examines identity crisis through a movie using Erikson’s theory. However, it focuses on an adolescent character, whereas

the present research examines an adult character experiencing identity crisis as a result of grief, guilt, loss, and disrupted social roles.

Fifthly, Ihsanuddin, Kasau, Saifullah, and Lanta (2026) examined identity crisis in the film *Nanti Kita Cerita Tentang Hari Ini* in their study entitled “Krisis Identitas Tokoh Awan dalam Film ‘Nanti Kita Cerita Tentang Hari Ini’.” The study employed a qualitative approach and literary psychology to analyze Awan’s identity crisis using Erik Erikson’s theory. The findings indicate that Awan experiences role confusion and identity confusion, particularly through difficulties in making life choices, dependence on family decisions, and limited personal autonomy. The study also shows that identity development occurs gradually through interpersonal relationships, internal conflict, and self-understanding. This study is particularly relevant to the present research because it demonstrates how identity crisis can be analyzed through a character’s conflicts, relationships, and development in a film.

Sixthly, Nurhidayanti, Nurulaen, and Nurrachman (2026) conducted a study entitled “Identity Crisis in the Hero’s Journey of Ruby Gillman; *Teenage Kraken* (2023).” The research combines Erik Erikson’s psychosocial theory with the hero’s journey as a narrative framework. Using a qualitative narrative approach, the study examines how the protagonist’s internal conflicts and social pressures contribute to the development of identity crisis. The findings show that the protagonist moves through different identity statuses before

achieving a more stable sense of self. This study is relevant to the present research because it demonstrates the usefulness of combining psychological theory with narrative analysis in examining identity crisis in film.

Seventhly, Gultom, Retnomurti, and Kurniawaty (2024), in *Foremost Journal*, conducted a study entitled “Psychological Analysis of Elsa’s Character in Novel ‘My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She’s Sorry’ by Fredrik Backman.” The study used a descriptive qualitative method to analyze the psychological characteristics of the main character. Although the study focuses on a novel rather than a film and does not specifically examine identity crisis, it is relevant to the present research because it demonstrates the use of qualitative character analysis to identify psychological conditions through character behavior, relationships, and experiences. The study also demonstrates the relevance of psychological approaches to literary character analysis within *Foremost Journal*.

Eighthly, Endah (2025), in *Foremost Journal*, conducted a study entitled “Commodifying Mental Health: Genre and Commercial Strategy in Sinemaku Pictures’ Film Narratives.” The study examines how mental health issues such as psychological distress, grief, and emotional suffering are represented in Indonesian films. Using film narratives as its primary object, the study demonstrates how psychological experiences can function as important elements in character development and storytelling. This research is relevant to the present study because both

studies examine psychological issues represented through film narratives. However, while Endah focuses on the representation and commodification of mental health in contemporary Indonesian cinema, the present study specifically examines Charlie’s identity crisis through Erikson’s psychosocial theory.

In addition, Riza, Oktavia, Pasopati, Andharu, and Fadillah (2025), in *Foremost Journal*, conducted a study entitled “The Interpretations of Morality and Ideology in Wes Anderson’s Film *Isle of Dogs*.” The research employs a qualitative method and collects data by watching the film and noting dialogues and scenes related to morality and ideology. The analysis focuses on characters, plot, and dialogue to interpret the meanings represented in the film. This study is relevant to the present research because it demonstrates that dialogue and scenes can be treated as important qualitative data in film analysis. Similarly, the present study examines scenes, dialogues, character actions, and interactions to identify Charlie’s identity crisis and interpret them using psychological, narrative, and cinematographic perspectives.

The previous studies described above share several similarities and differences with the present research. Most of the studies employ qualitative methods and analyze psychological or identity-related problems experienced by characters in literary or cinematic works. Shafira (2022), Jannah and Sari (2024), Dewi and Asmarani (2025), Ihsanuddin et al. (2026), and Nurhidayanti et al. (2026) are particularly similar because they

examine identity crisis in relation to characters and use Erikson's theory as an important theoretical foundation. Meanwhile, Gultom et al. (2024), Endah (2025), and Riza et al. (2025) are relevant to the present study because they demonstrate psychological, mental-health, and film-based qualitative analysis published in Foremost Journal.

However, differences can be identified in terms of the research subjects, theoretical focus, and analytical perspective. Most previous identity-crisis studies focus on adolescent or young characters, such as Vivian in *Moxie*, Jeng Yah in *Gadis Kretek*, Awan in *Nanti Kita Cerita Tentang Hari Ini*, and Ruby in *Ruby Gillman, Teenage Kraken*. In contrast, the present study focuses on Charlie, an adult character in Darren Aronofsky's *The Whale* (2022), whose identity crisis is connected to grief, guilt, loss, self-worth, and disrupted roles as a father, partner, and educator. Furthermore, several previous studies primarily emphasize psychological conditions or identity development, whereas the present study combines Erikson's identity-crisis theory with narrative and cinematographic analysis. The present study also incorporates direct dialogue excerpts as linguistic evidence to demonstrate how Charlie's psychological condition and identity conflict are expressed through language.

Therefore, the present research offers a different perspective by examining identity crisis in an adult character and by integrating psychological, narrative, cinematographic, and linguistic analysis. While previous studies have

demonstrated the usefulness of Erikson's theory in examining identity crisis in film and literature, limited attention has been given to the representation of adult identity crisis through the interaction of dialogue, character behavior, narrative elements, and cinematographic techniques. This study addresses that gap by analyzing Charlie's identity crisis in *The Whale* (2022) and examining how his psychological symptoms, behavioral manifestations, relationships, and attempts to resolve his crisis are represented throughout the film.

2. REVIEW LITERATURE

On this section the writer provides theoretical and conceptual foundations that support the analysis of identity crisis as portrayed in *The Whale* (2022), directed by Darren Aronofsky. This section explores key ideas from existing psychological, literary, and narrative frameworks that are relevant to the study of identity formation, emotional conflict, and character development in cinematic storytelling. Literature (cinema) has a close relationship with narrative theory (Andrew, 1984: 76). Through these narrative structures, a film transforms abstract ideas into vivid human experiences that engage the audience both emotionally and intellectually.

Narrative theory provides a conceptual framework for analyzing how stories function. Seymour Chatman (1978) distinguishes between story (the sequence of events and actions) and discourse (the manner in which these events are presented). This distinction is essential because it emphasizes that a narrative is not only about what happens, but also about

how the story is told through perspective, order, duration, and representation. Similarly, Tzvetan Todorov (1971) explains that every narrative follows a structural pattern beginning with equilibrium, followed by disruption, and concluding with a restoration of balance. Mieke Bal (2009) further emphasizes that narrative elements should not be viewed as isolated categories, but as functional relationships that together form narrative coherence. She explains that both the structure of the narrative (the arrangement of events and actions) and its discourse (the mode of representation) interact dynamically to produce meaning.

Language is an important element in literary and cinematic works because it functions not only to convey information but also to reveal characters' thoughts, emotions, attitudes, and relationships with others. In film, language is primarily represented through dialogue, which enables audiences to understand a character's psychological condition and social position. According to Leech and Short (2007), the linguistic choices made by characters can provide significant information about their personality, attitudes, and psychological states. Therefore, examining language use in dialogue can contribute to a deeper understanding of character development and characterization. In addition, Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) explain that language is a social semiotic system through which individuals express experiences, establish interpersonal relationships, and construct meanings. This perspective is relevant to film analysis

because characters use language to communicate their experiences and negotiate their relationships with others. The way a character speaks, responds, refuses, apologizes, or expresses emotions may indicate changes in psychological condition and interpersonal relationships. From a literary perspective, stylistics provides a useful approach to examining how linguistic choices contribute to meaning in a literary or cinematic text. Simpson (2004) states that stylistics examines the relationship between linguistic choices and interpretation. In film, stylistic analysis of dialogue can therefore be used to identify how particular words, expressions, repetitions, or patterns of speech contribute to the representation of a character. Through such linguistic features, the audience can interpret the character's emotional conflict, attitudes, and development. In *The Whale* (2022), linguistic aspects are particularly relevant because Charlie's identity crisis is expressed through his interactions with Ellie, Liz, Thomas, and his students. His dialogue reflects guilt, loneliness, regret, emotional dependence, and his desire to reconnect with his daughter. His manner of communicating also demonstrates his difficulty in confronting his past and maintaining meaningful social roles. Thus, the analysis of language and dialogue complements the psychological and narrative analysis by showing how Charlie's identity crisis is constructed not only through his actions and visual representation but also through his verbal interactions.

2.1 Identity Crisis

Identity Crisis creates Erikson's most perceptive findings about the different kinds of identity crises and their effects. Erikson observed that the meaning of identity was changing in ways he had not planned despite the fact that his general writings on the subject served as an inspiration for a great deal of empirical investigation. Indeed, not all of the neo-Eriksonian theories have operationalized his clear descriptions of the identity crisis.

In the context of *The Whale*, Charlie's psychological state reflects Erikson's "identity vs role confusion" stage. Although this stage is often associated with adolescents, Erikson later emphasized that unresolved identity issues could emerge in adulthood during times of personal crisis, grief, or loss. Charlie's profound guilt, emotional withdrawal, and self-destructive behavior all point to an unresolved identity crisis that is rekindled by the impending threat of death and the need to reconnect with his daughter.

In addition, Kroger (2007) expands Erikson's theory by viewing identity crisis as a necessary developmental challenge a turning point that forces individuals to reevaluate their self-perception. This reevaluation process includes confronting one's past, assessing one's values, and seeking emotional closure all of which are clearly observed in Charlie's journey throughout the film.

Moreover, identity crisis in *The Whale* can also be interpreted through the lens of role displacement, in which Charlie's inability to fulfill the roles he once occupied father, partner, and educator intensifies his fragmentation

of self. Erikson emphasizes that identity is sustained through meaningful social roles that provide individuals with continuity and purpose. In Charlie's case, the loss of these roles creates a psychological void that he attempts to fill with self-isolating behaviors and emotional withdrawal. His refusal to engage with the outside world and his reliance on routine, such as teaching with his camera turned off or rereading Ellie's essay, illustrate his struggle to maintain a coherent sense of self amid overwhelming guilt. These behaviors suggest that Charlie's identity crisis is not merely rooted in grief, but also in his inability to reconcile who he believes himself to be with who he has become, reinforcing the notion that identity crisis emerges when one's internal narrative collapses under the weight of unresolved emotional conflict.

2.2. Character and Characterization

The first thing that will be analyzed is character and characterization. Characterization is the process by which things are produced in a specific way, and it results in characters. A character in a literary work is someone who has an identity consisting of appearance, conversation, action, name, and internal thoughts. Bennett and Royle (2004:60) states that the specific ways in which the author has chosen to portray his or her character include the kind conversations they have, the actions they take, their appearances, and furthermore. Characters who take part in the plot, such as the antagonist, protagonist, and supporting character, are referred to as characters in movies.

Through their decisions, actions, and interactions, they advance the plot. Emotions are subjective reactions to certain experiences characterized by psychological or behavioral changes. Aquino (1976:32) states that characterization was brief but concise. When interacting with other characters, a character always uses a way to communication.

Characterization on the other hand is the process by which a writer or filmmaker brings a character to life, imbuing them with distinctive traits and depth. This process involves both direct characterization where traits are explicitly stated and indirect characterization, where traits are revealed through dialogue, behavior, and interactions. The combination of these techniques helps audiences perceive characters not merely as fictional constructs but as psychologically complex individuals.

In film, characterization is enhanced by visual and auditory elements. A director may use camera angles, lighting, costume, facial expressions, and tone of voice to communicate aspects of a character's inner world. As Kenney (1996) explains, film as a visual medium offers dynamic opportunities to externalize internal emotions and motivations, allowing audiences to interpret character psychology through performance. Thus, a well-developed character in a film is not solely shaped by the script but also by cinematic choices that emphasize their psychological state and personal evolution.

In the context of *The Whale* (2022), character and characterization are particularly significant in

conveying the theme of identity crisis. The protagonist, Charlie, is portrayed through multifaceted characterization that combines physical, emotional, and moral dimensions. His physical condition morbid obesity symbolizes the burden of guilt and emotional pain he carries. His manner of speaking, gentle yet filled with remorse, reveals both intellectual depth and profound sadness, through his limited movement, confined setting, and interactions with other characters such as Ellie, Liz, and Thomas, the audience gains insight into his internal struggle and fragmented sense of self. Each supporting character also serves a symbolic role in illuminating different aspects of Charlie's identity. Ellie representing his guilt and hope for redemption, Liz embodying compassion mixed with resentment, and Thomas signifying moral and spiritual confrontation.

Characterization in *The Whale* also operates through emotional expression and symbolic behavior. Charlie's tendency to overeat, his reluctance to seek help, and his fixation on reconnecting with Ellie function as external manifestations of his psychological turmoil. These traits embody Erikson's concept of "identity versus role confusion," demonstrating how unresolved emotional conflict can distort one's perception of self and relationships. His characterization evolves gradually, moving from denial and isolation toward acceptance and emotional honesty in the film's climax. This transformation highlights how characterization can serve as a vehicle for exploring deeper psychological and existential questions.

2.3 Identity Crisis in Erik Erikson's Perspective

Erik Erikson is widely recognized for his psychosocial theory of human development, which outlines eight stages individuals must navigate throughout their lives. Each stage presents a central conflict that shapes personality and identity. One of Erikson's most influential contributions is the concept of identity crisis, a psychological condition in which individuals experience confusion, instability, and uncertainty about their sense of self. Erikson (1968) defines an identity crisis as a period of intensive self-exploration, during which individuals attempt to understand their values, roles, and beliefs while dealing with emotional or social pressures. Although Erikson initially associated identity formation with adolescence, he later emphasized that identity crises can reappear in adulthood, especially when individuals face trauma, loss, or disruption of meaningful social roles (Erikson, 1994). In Erikson's view, identity is shaped through the interaction of personal experiences and social validation. When these elements conflict or become unstable, individuals may experience role confusion, emotional distress, self-doubt, and disengagement from relationships or responsibilities.

Erikson identifies several indicators of identity crisis, including withdrawal from social interactions, difficulty making decisions, emotional instability, and the inability to maintain consistent roles in family or society. Individuals experiencing this crisis often struggle to reconcile their past with their present circumstances,

leading to behaviors such as avoidance, self-punishment, or regression into unhealthy coping mechanisms. According to Erikson (1950), failure to resolve identity conflict can lead to prolonged confusion and hinder one's psychological development.

Furthermore, Erikson explains that unresolved guilt, shame, or emotional trauma can intensify an identity crisis. When individuals cannot integrate painful experiences into a coherent self-narrative, they may become stuck in patterns of isolation or hopelessness. Successful resolution of an identity crisis requires both internal reflection and meaningful support from others. Honest communication, emotional acceptance, and restored social ties are essential for rebuilding a stable and authentic identity. Erikson's theory is highly relevant to the analysis of *The Whale* movie.

3. METHOD

This study used a qualitative method to analyze identity crisis in *The Whale* movie. Qualitative research is a strategy for characterizing the meaning, understanding, concepts, symptoms, and descriptions of a natural phenomenon and prioritizing quality in several ways and presented in narrative forms, such as a movie. Qualitative research is a means to explore and understand the meaning of individuals or groups that are ascribed to social or human problems. The study process involves questions and procedures that arise. This research employs a descriptive qualitative method to analyze the representation of identity crisis experienced by

Charlie in Darren Aronofsky's *The Whale* (2022). The primary data consist of selected scenes, dialogues, character actions, emotional expressions, and interactions that indicate Charlie's identity crisis. The data were identified based on their relevance to Erik Erikson's theory of identity crisis, particularly indicators of identity confusion, guilt, self-blame, diminished self-worth, withdrawal, avoidance, emotional conflict, and difficulties in maintaining social roles. Data were collected by repeatedly watching the film, identifying relevant sequences, recording the corresponding dialogues and actions, and documenting the selected scenes through screenshots and field notes. The collected data were then classified according to the research focus and analyzed through Erikson's theory, supported by narrative and cinematographic elements. This procedure enables the study to examine how Charlie's identity crisis is constructed through his language, behavior, relationships, and cinematic representation. It can also be interpreted that qualitative research understands social problems based on different methodologies. In this case, the writer composes a complex setting, analyze it scene for scene and arrange the research results moderately or by the facts. Furthermore, the data generated from this research are then presented in the form of essays or narrative texts. To analyze the issue of identity crisis experienced by the main characters in the movie, the writer uses data source of this study entitled *The Whale* by Darren Aronofsky (2022) as the object of the thesis. *The Whale* premiered at the 79th Venice

International Film Festival on September 4, 2022.

The author used several of ways to produce data relevant to the research objectives in order to gather the data presented in this study. Data collection is the process of gathering and measuring information about the variables of interest in a systematic way that enables the writer to answer research questions and evaluate the result. The author of this study employed multiple data collection methods, including watching, analyzing, and classifying. First one, watching the movie several times to understand the whole story and analyze any problems or conflicts that arise is a step to finding problems in the movie. Next, analyzing the movie can be used to uncover the central themes, messages, and moral lessons conveyed by the film. then, classifying the data and developing it into an appropriate unit.

The writer started by analyzing the data in this data analysis, and there are several steps in the analysis process. First, the writer watches the film. Next, based on their argument, the writer interprets and thoroughly examines the data by consulting a number of sources in an effort to gain a comprehensive understanding of the film and the story as a whole. Stories are classified and identified based on Erikson identity crisis theory data. In the second step, several research references that aided in the analysis of the problem formulation were gathered by the writer. The writer adds the references list includes articles from journals, the internet, and books as well. In the third step, the author thoroughly answers the problem and

examined the narrative to find the solution to the issue. After seeing the film and consulting the identity crisis theory, the writer annotates the statements by collecting sentences. Lastly, a narrative text is used to present the data that were gathered for this research.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The movie directed by Darren Aronofsky, focusing on the life of Charlie, a reclusive English professor who lives with severe obesity. The film takes place almost entirely within the confines of his small apartment, mirroring the confinement of his own emotional and psychological state. Isolated from society and estranged from his family, Charlie grapples with intense guilt, grief, and a profound identity crisis triggered by the death of his partner and the broken relationship with his teenage daughter, Ellie.

4.1 Identity Crisis Depicted in *The Whale* Movie

In *The Whale* (2022), the concept of identity crisis is vividly portrayed through the emotional, psychological, and behavioral struggles of the main character, Charlie. As defined by Erik Erikson in his psychosocial theory, identity crisis is a stage where individuals face internal conflict regarding their role, purpose, and self-concept.

4.1.1 Charlie's Psychological Symptoms of Identity Crisis

Charlie's identity crisis is rooted in profound loss and unresolved emotional conflict, as his inability to fulfil and sustain his roles as a father, husband, and educator due to

abandonment, grief, and withdrawal results in the collapse of the social identities that once gave meaning and continuity to his sense of self, ultimately leading him to live in complete isolation. His physical condition marked by extreme obesity serves as a metaphor for his emotional burden. Rather than seeking help or connection, Charlie chooses to shut himself off from the world, using food as a form of self-punishment and control. This behavior aligns with Erikson's view of identity crisis as a regression into despair and confusion, where the individual loses a stable sense of self.

4.1.2 Charlie's Behavioral Manifestations of Identity Crisis

Behavioral manifestations of Charlie's identity crisis in *The Whale* appear through his patterns of avoidance, self-neglect, dependence on maladaptive coping mechanism, and inability to maintain meaningful social roles. According to Erikson (1968), individuals experiencing identity crisis often exhibit behavioral disorganization as they lose the sense of structure that once guided their actions. Charlie's behaviors throughout the film reflect his psychological disorientation and demonstrate how unresolved guilt and trauma have disrupted his capacity to function in daily life.



One of the earliest behavioral indicators appears in the scene where Charlie refuses to go to the hospital during a critical health. Despite being unable to breathe and visibly near collapse, he insists, "I'm not going to the hospital." This refusal of care reflects a form of self-abandonment and suggests that Charlie no longer believes he is worth saving. In Erikson's terms, Charlie has entered a state of identity regression, where behavioral decisions are guided not by self-preservation but by self-punishment. This behavior does not merely indicate physical denial, but reflects a deeper psychological condition marked by diminished self-worth. From Erikson's perspective, such behavior represents identity regression, in which individuals no longer perceive themselves as valuable or deserving of care.

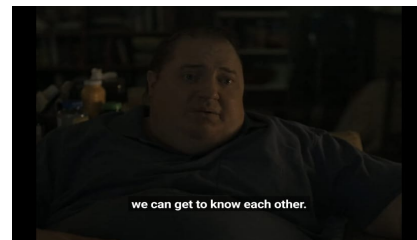
4.2 How the Main Character Faces Identity Crisis in *The Whale* Movie

One of the primary ways Charlie confronts his identity crisis is through his repeated attempt to restore the broken relationship with his daughter, Ellie. According to Erikson, individuals experiencing identity confusion often search for external validation as a way to reconstruct a stable sense of self. Charlie's desire to reconnect with Ellie is grounded in his need for forgiveness and the hope that repairing the past will restore meaning to his life.

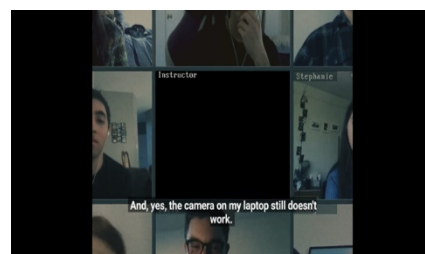
4.2.1 Seeking Emotional Resolution Through Relationship

One of the primary ways Charlie confronts his identity crisis is

through his repeated attempt to restore the broken relationship with his daughter, Ellie. According to Erikson, individuals experiencing identity confusion often search for external validation as a way to reconstruct a stable sense of self.



This line reveals Charlie's profound longing for moral and emotional redemption. Charlie's becomes the symbolic anchor of the identity he once had—a father, a husband, and a partner capable of love and responsibility. His attempt to rebuild this relationship is both an act of emotional courage and a desperate effort to reclaim a coherent identity. This effort is most clearly demonstrated through Charlie's persistent attempts to reconnect with his estranged daughter, Ellie. From the beginning of the film, Charlie repeatedly invites Ellie to visit him, despite her hostile and confrontational attitude.



Charlie's avoidance behavior is further demonstrated in his relationship with his students. As it

can see in the figure 2 when he is teaching with his webcam off, he maintains emotional distance and avoids social accountability. His behavior indicates an attempt to hide from any role that requires confidence or visibility. When a student asks whether he will ever appear on screen, Charlie deflects by stating, "My camera's not working today,".



Charlie's binge-eating behaviors are another critical manifestation of his crisis. In the figure during the intense binge sequence, he consumes large quantities of food rapidly and emotionally, treating the act as both a coping mechanism and a form of self-inflicted harm. His shaking hands, labored breathing, and tears underscore the emotional desperation behind the behavior. Instead of confronting his grief, Charlie numbs it through self-destruction. Erikson notes that individuals who cannot resolve identity conflicts often engage in behaviors that reflect internal chaos, and Charlie's binge-eating serves as a physical representation of this psychological turmoil.

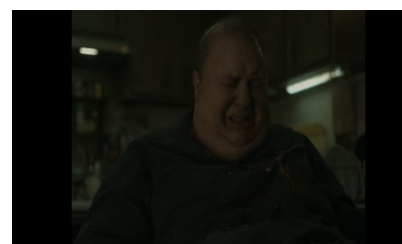
4.2.2 Self-Destructive Coping Mechanisms as a Response to Identity Fragmentation

In *The Whale* (2022), the intersection of self-destructive coping and identity fragmentation is best

understood through the lens of chronic trauma and the "deconstruction" of the self. Charlie's life is a profound example of how individuals who experience profound loss and the subsequent fragmentation of their social and personal identities often turn to maladaptive behaviors to manage an unbearable internal reality.



In the figure, Charlie's behavior further illustrates Erikson's concept of Identity Confusion, which occurs when an individual cannot reconcile their internal sense of self with their social reality. Erikson (1968) noted that when a person feels their identity is terminally fractured, they may seek a "negative identity," which is an identity "perversely based on all those identifications and roles which, at critical stages of development, had been presented to them as most undesirable or dangerous" (p. 174).



The figure shows Charlie is depicted in a state of emotional withdrawal, shown through his passive posture, minimal movement, and lack of engagement with his surroundings. The visual composition emphasizes

Charlie's isolation, reinforcing the idea that his behavior is marked by detachment rather than active participation in life. This scene reflects how Charlie's identity crisis extends beyond internal psychological struggle and becomes evident in observable behavioral patterns. Charlie's withdrawn behavior in this figure indicates a failure to maintain identity coherence, as his actions are no longer guided by a clear sense of purpose or self-direction.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of the depiction of identity crisis in *The Whale* (2022), this study concludes that the film presents the identity crisis of the main character, Charlie, as a deeply complex and prolonged psychological condition arising from unresolved emotional conflict, significant personal loss, and moral guilt. These factors collectively hinder his ability to fulfil and sustain his fundamental social roles as a father, husband, and educator. Psychologically, Charlie's identity crisis manifests in persistent feelings of guilt, self-blame, emotional instability, and diminished self-worth, while behaviourally it is expressed

through withdrawal, passivity, avoidance of responsibility, emotional dependency, and self-destructive actions. Although Charlie makes several attempts at emotional reconciliation, these efforts remain fragmented and incomplete.

Therefore, the film ultimately portrays Charlie's identity crisis as unresolved, positioning it as the central force that shapes his character development, determines his interpersonal relationships, and drives the emotional and narrative structure of the story in accordance with Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. Based on the findings of this research, it is suggested that future researchers further explore *The Whale* (2022) by applying alternative psychological perspectives such as trauma theory, existential psychology, or psychoanalytic approaches, as well as by examining additional cinematic elements including cinematography, symbolism, and narrative structure to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of psychological representation in film. Future studies may also expand the scope of analysis by comparing *The Whale* (2022) with other films that portray similar psychological themes.

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