

Psychological Trauma and Stress as Factors Influencing Elly Conway's Fluid Identity in Matthew Vaughn's *Argylle* (2024)

Muthiah Qalbu Zhafirah¹, Rindrah Kartiningsih², Hariyono³

¹ English Literature Program, Universitas Dr. Soetomo, Surabaya, Indonesia

zhafirah25nada@gmail.com

Abstract

This research analyzes the identity fluidity of the character Elly Conway in Matthew Vaughn's movie *Argylle* (2024). This study aims to identify the evidence of Elly Conway's fluid identity based on Jane Kroger theory, observe the factors that cause Elly to keep changing her identity, and analyze the reasons Elly chooses one dominant identity at the end of the film. This research employs a qualitative descriptive method with data sources consisting of Elly Conway's dialogues throughout the film. The data were analyzed using Jane Kroger identity development theory and James Marcia identity status theory. The findings reveal that Elly Conway experiences fluid identity characterized by changes in personal identity, social identity, and cultural identity. Psychological trauma and stress proved to be the primary drivers of identity change, followed by sociocultural factors and life transitions. By the end of the film, Elly achieves identity achievement by choosing her identity as a novelist who integrates her experiences as a secret agent. This research contributes to the development of identity theory in film and literary studies by demonstrating that identity can be fluid and can be stabilized through processes of exploration and integration.

Keywords: *Argylle*, Fluid identity, Identity Achievement, Psychological trauma, Personal Identity

INTRODUCTION

Identity formation is a fundamental aspect of psychological development that explains how individuals perceive, define, and understand themselves across different social contexts and stages of life. Fluid identity emphasizes that identity is dynamic rather than fixed. Research shows that identity development continues beyond adolescence throughout adulthood, as individuals continuously revise their self-understanding in response to new experiences and changing circumstances (Crocetti et al., 2008; Schwartz et al., 2013). Kroger (2007) also views identity as an active and lifelong developmental process. Psychological trauma and stress can destabilize an individual's established sense of self and encourage identity shifts as a coping mechanism (Kroger, 2007). Traumatic experiences may create emotional distress and disrupt identity continuity, causing individuals to reconstruct or redefine themselves. This process is represented by Elly Conway in Matthew Vaughn's *Argylle* (2024). As an adult woman, Elly experiences unexpected revelations about her past that challenge her established identity and force her to confront competing versions of herself.

Previous studies have examined identity and dissociation from different perspectives. Aulia and Sari (2024) focused on Elly's dissociative amnesia, while Tlonaen (2023) examined achieved identity in *Moana*. Mansoor et al. (2025) investigated identity crises using Marcia's theory, and Rajaei and El-Ammouri (2026) explored adolescent identity development through cinema therapy. However, these studies do not comprehensively explain how psychological trauma and stress influence adult identity fluidity and reconstruction. Therefore, this research focuses on psychological trauma and stress as factors influencing Elly Conway's fluid identity. Using Kroger's (2007) framework and qualitative descriptive methods, this study examines identity destabilization and identity shifting throughout Elly's journey. The research contributes to literary and film studies by showing that trauma can function as a catalyst for identity transformation and a pathway toward a more authentic understanding of the self.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method to analyze psychological trauma and stress as factors influencing Elly Conway's fluid identity in Matthew Vaughn's *Argylle* (2024). The purpose of using a qualitative approach is to describe and interpret psychological meanings presented in the film rather than to measure them numerically. The primary data are obtained from Elly Conway's dialogues, actions, and narrative contexts in the film, while secondary data are collected from books and journal articles related to identity development and psychological trauma, particularly Jane Kroger's identity development theory. The data analysis process involves carefully observing the film, selecting relevant scenes, classifying the data, and interpreting them based on the theoretical framework to explain how psychological trauma and stress motivate Elly's identity destabilization and shifting.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Psychological Trauma and Stress in Elly Conway's Fluid Identity

The findings demonstrate that psychological trauma and stress are the most dominant factors influencing Elly Conway's fluid identity. The psychological factor operates through a sequence: an apparently coherent identity is established, traumatic information challenges that identity, emotional stress weakens confidence in the former self-concept, and the resulting uncertainty encourages exploration of an alternative identity. The thesis identifies this pattern through two indicators, identity destabilization and shifting identities.

a. Identity Destabilization

Identity destabilization begins before Elly consciously accepts that her identity has changed. At first, she speaks confidently about memories that appear to explain her life. The later revelation that these memories have been manipulated changes the meaning of earlier experiences. Thus, psychological trauma is represented not only by a dramatic emotional reaction but also by the gradual collapse of the narrative that previously organized Elly's sense of self.

Data 1

Elly: "Oh, my goodness, I know how hard that can be. Um, for me, when I was a waitress, I was juggling so many shifts. I never had the time to really write until the, um... well, the the skating accident, which I've obviously spoken about."
(00:09:13)

This quotation demonstrates Elly's belief in a stable and coherent life narrative. Identity stability is maintained through personal stories that provide continuity and meaning to an individual's life (Kroger, 2007).

Data 2

Elly: "Gosh, I wish. I wish. That would make everything so much easier, but no. As boring as it may seem, the secret is research, research, research."
(00:10:21)

This quotation reflects Elly's strong belief that her abilities originate entirely from research and creativity. Identity is supported by beliefs individuals hold regarding their talents, experiences, and achievements (Kroger, 2007).

Data 3

Elly: "Mama's got to get to work."
(00:12:08)

This quotation reflects the structured routine that supports Elly's sense of identity. Stability in identity is often reinforced through predictable behaviors and daily activities (Kroger, 2007). Elly's routine as a writer provides a clear sense of purpose and direction, following familiar patterns that strengthen her understanding of who she is.

Data 4

Aidan: "You know, I meant it when I said I was a fan. But the next fan that comes over, he's not just dropping by for a selfie, if you catch my drift."
(00:21:48)

This quotation represents the first major threat to Elly's sense of security. Identity destabilization often begins when individuals encounter experiences that challenge their expectations about reality (Kroger, 2007).

Data 5

Elly: "Oh, what is happening? Are you okay?"
(00:23:29)

This quotation demonstrates Elly's confusion during a traumatic event. Identity destabilization is often accompanied by uncertainty and disorientation (Kroger, 2007). Elly cannot understand why she has become involved in violence.

Data 6

Aidan: "It sure as shit does to predict they'd go rogue. Yeah. Somehow, you wrote a story that's still unfolding as we speak. Book five."
(00:30:14)

This quotation introduces information that directly challenges Elly's understanding of herself. Identity destabilization occurs when individuals encounter evidence that contradicts their established self-concepts (Kroger, 2007).

Data 7

Elly: "No, this doesn't make sense. Why, would the Division care about me?"
(00:29:59)

Identity destabilization is characterized by confusion when individuals encounter experiences that contradict their self-concepts (Kroger, 2007). Elly cannot understand why a powerful intelligence organization would target an ordinary novelist.

Data 8

Alfred: "Those books you write? Aidan told you they were predictions. Well, they're not. They're memories of who you truly are."
(01:13:28)

Identity destabilization intensifies when core beliefs about the self are directly contradicted (Kroger, 2007). Alfred reveals that Elly's novels are not fictional predictions but memories from her forgotten past.

Data 9

Elly: "This is BS."
(01:13:58)

This quotation reflects Elly's immediate rejection of information that threatens her identity. Denial is a common response when individuals encounter evidence that conflicts with deeply held beliefs (Kroger, 2007).

Data 10

Aidan: "Yeah. Let's go. How fast are you?"
(01:15:16)

Identity disruption becomes more intense when individuals encounter evidence that contradicts their beliefs about their own abilities (Kroger, 2007). Aidan challenges Elly to participate in a fight, expecting her to demonstrate skills she does not realize she possesses.

Data 11

Elly: "I wanna know everything."
(01:15:47)

Individuals often begin reconstructing their identities after recognizing the limitations of their previous self-concepts (Kroger, 2007). Rather than continuing to deny new information, Elly expresses a desire to understand the truth.

b. Shifting Identities

Shifting identities refer to the process in which individuals alter their self-concepts, behaviors, and perceptions in response to changing circumstances, experiences, and psychological pressures. The following data illustrate how psychological trauma and stress contribute to the shifting of Elly's identity throughout the movie.

Data 1

MC: "Elly Conway, ladies and gentlemen. All right."
(00:08:52)

Identity transformation often starts when individuals encounter information that conflicts with their existing self-concepts (Kroger, 2007). Elly cannot understand why an intelligence organization would be interested in her because she still views herself as an ordinary novelist.

Data 2

Aidan: "It sure as shit does to predict they'd go rogue. Yeah. Somehow, you wrote a story that's still unfolding as we speak. Book five."
(00:30:14)

This quotation reflects a significant change in Elly's perception of the world around her. Identity shifts often occur when trusted relationships are challenged or disrupted (Kroger, 2007).

Data 3

Aidan: "Because you're a goddamn fortune teller, Elly."
(00:30:03)

This quotation demonstrates an early attempt by Elly to explain abilities she does not fully understand. Identity shifts often begin when individuals encounter aspects of themselves that do not fit their existing self-concepts (Kroger, 2007).

Data 4

Elly: "What you're asking me to do takes months of research. Years. Reading, interviewing, memorizing maps, getting to know a city. I've never even been to London before."
(00:34:08)

This quotation reflects a crucial moment in Elly's identity transformation. Identity shifts often involve active exploration when individuals recognize that their previous self-concepts are incomplete (Kroger, 2007).

Data 5

Elly: "He picked the chip to lead us to his satellite."
(00:41:19)

This quotation demonstrates Elly's commitment to discovering the truth about herself. Identity shifts become more pronounced when individuals actively seek information that challenges existing beliefs (Kroger, 2007).

Data 6

Aidan: "You're not a half-bad spy either. Yeah."
(00:57:19)

Identity transformation occurs when individuals integrate new information into their self-concepts (Kroger, 2007). By introducing herself as Rachel Kyle, Elly accepts a part of herself that she previously rejected.

Data 7

Alfred: "Because, Elly Conway, it's time for you to meet the real Agent Argyll."
(01:13:19)

This quotation demonstrates Elly's acceptance of experiences associated with her former identity. Identity shifts involve integrating difficult or previously rejected aspects of the self (Kroger, 2007).

Data 8

Elly: "I am not! I am Elly. Elly Conway."
(01:14:45)

This quotation demonstrates Elly's attempt to maintain the identity she has known for years despite the emergence of contradictory information. Identity becomes unstable when individuals encounter evidence that challenges their established self-concepts (Kroger, 2007).

Data 9

Elly: "Why all the lies? I mean, why didn't you just come out and tell me?"
(01:16:27)

This quotation reflects Elly's growing awareness that the reality she believed in has been constructed through deception. Identity development often involves questioning the validity of previously accepted beliefs and experiences (Kroger, 2007).

Data 10

The Keeper: "Too well, it often seemed. So, tell me, who are you really? Agent Kille or Elly Conway?"
(01:30:37)

This quotation directly challenges Elly's understanding of who she is. Identity transformation frequently occurs when individuals are confronted with competing self-definitions (Kroger, 2007). The Keeper's question forces Elly to consider two different identities that cannot easily coexist.

Data 11

Elly: "My name is Rachel Kille."
(01:42:31)

This quotation represents the culmination of Elly's identity transformation. Identity development involves integrating new information into a revised and more coherent self-concept (Kroger, 2007). By introducing herself as Rachel Kille, Elly accepts an identity that she previously rejected.

The Influence of Psychological Trauma and Stress on Elly Conway's Fluid Identity

Psychological trauma and stress significantly influence Elly Conway's fluid identity by destabilizing her established self-concept and encouraging changes in how she understands herself. At the beginning of the film, Elly believes that she is an ordinary novelist with a stable personal history. However, the discovery that her memories and life story have been manipulated creates confusion, denial, and psychological pressure. Identity is not fixed but can change when individuals experience significant psychological challenges and conflicting information (Kroger, 2007). In Elly's case, these experiences challenge her established beliefs and gradually disrupt her sense of identity continuity.

The data demonstrate that Elly's identity destabilization and shifting identities are closely connected. Her memories, abilities, routines, and beliefs are repeatedly challenged by unexpected experiences and revelations about her forgotten past. Initially, Elly rejects the possibility that she has another identity and insists on maintaining her identity as Elly Conway. However, as the psychological pressure increases, she begins to question her previous self-understanding and explore the possibility of another identity. Her movement between Elly Conway and her recovered identity as Rachel Kille illustrates the process of identity shifting caused by conflicting realities and traumatic revelations.

Therefore, psychological trauma and stress function as significant factors in shaping Elly's fluid identity. Trauma first destabilizes her established identity and then encourages her to question, explore, and reconstruct her understanding of herself. Rather than eliminating her sense of self, these experiences create a process through which Elly gradually integrates previously suppressed aspects of her identity. This demonstrates that fluid identity can emerge through psychological disruption and subsequent efforts to develop a more coherent understanding of the self.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of Elly Conway's character in Vaughn's *Argyle* (2024) using Jane Kroger's theory of identity development, this research demonstrates that psychological trauma and stress are significant factors influencing Elly's fluid identity. The findings show that manipulated memories, betrayal, and revelations about her hidden past as Agent Rachel Kille destabilize her established identity as a novelist, resulting in confusion, denial, emotional distress, and uncertainty. This identity destabilization gradually develops into identity shifting as Elly begins to question her previous self-concept, recognize her extraordinary abilities, confront competing identities, integrate recovered memories, and accept previously suppressed aspects of herself. The eleven data points on identity destabilization and eleven data points on identity shifting demonstrate that these processes are interconnected and occur gradually through repeated psychological challenges. Therefore, trauma does not merely destroy identity but can also create conditions for identity reconstruction and a more authentic understanding of the self. The findings contribute to identity studies by demonstrating the dynamic and adaptive nature of identity in film and literary studies, particularly how traumatic experiences can initiate processes of exploration, integration, and identity development. Practically, this research provides insight into understanding identity confusion following psychological trauma and emphasizes the importance of viewing identity transformation as a complex and adaptive process. Future researchers are encouraged to examine trauma-induced identity fluidity in other films, media, and cultural contexts, as well as explore the influence of supporting characters and social relationships on identity transformation. Ultimately, Elly's journey demonstrates that identity is not fixed but can be negotiated, reconstructed, and stabilized through self-discovery and the integration of multiple aspects of the self.

REFERENCES

- Bruskin, S. (2019). Identity fluidity and psychological resilience. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 14(5), 612–625.
Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.

- Ferrer-Wreder, L., & Kroger, J. (2018). Identity in adolescence and adulthood: A lifespan perspective. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 33(4), 439–464.
- Forman, J. (2014). Qualitative descriptive research. *Journal of Human Lactation*, 30(2), 173–179.
- Kroger, J. (2007). *Identity development: Adolescence through adulthood* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Marcia, J. E. (1980). Identity in adolescence. In J. Adelson (Ed.), *Handbook of adolescent psychology* (pp. 159–187). John Wiley & Sons.
- McAdams, D. P. (2001). The psychology of life stories. *Review of General Psychology*, 5(2), 100–122.
- Meeus, W. (2011). The study of adolescent identity formation 2000–2010: A review of longitudinal research. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 21(1), 75–94.
- Rajaei, S., & El-Ammouri, A. (2026). Adolescent identity development in Lady Bird: A cinema therapy perspective. *Journal of Film Therapy and Psychological Development*, 9(1), 34–51.
- Sandelowski, M. (2000). Whatever happened to qualitative description? *Research in Nursing & Health*, 23(4), 334–341.
- Schwartz, S. J., Luyckx, K., & Vignoles, V. L. (Eds.). (2015). *The handbook of identity theory and research* (2nd ed.). Springer.
- Vaughn, M. (Director). (2024). *Argylle* [Film]. Universal Pictures.