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# Adolescent Identity Formation Under Terminal Illness: A Psychosocial Education Approach

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose of the study:** The primary purpose of this research is to investigate the struggle of forming adolescent identity through terminal illness as depicted in the film *Clouds* (2020), directed by Justin Baldoni. The study analyzes the real-life story of Zach Sobiech, who was diagnosed with osteosarcoma, through the lens of Erikson's psychosocial theory, specifically focusing on the stage of identity versus role confusion. **Materials and methods:** This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach using content analysis methodology. Primary data was collected from the film *Clouds* (2020) through systematic viewing and dialogue analysis. Secondary data included scholarly articles, theses, and relevant literature discussing the film and psychosocial development theory. Data analysis focused on identifying elements related to Erikson's identity versus role confusion stage, examining how Zach's limited life expectancy influenced his identity formation process.

**Results:** The analysis reveals that terminal illness significantly accelerates the adolescent identity formation process. Despite facing osteosarcoma, Zach Sobiech demonstrated remarkable resilience in pursuing his dreams of becoming a singer, maintaining relationships, and creating meaningful experiences. The study identifies three key themes: the intensification of identity exploration under time constraints, the role of creative expression in identity formation, and the impact of terminal illness on developmental priorities and life meaning.

**Conclusions:** Terminal illness does not necessarily impede adolescent identity formation but rather transforms and accelerates the process. The research demonstrates that when faced with mortality, adolescents may develop a more focused and purposeful approach to identity development, prioritizing authentic self-expression and meaningful relationships. This study contributes to understanding how extreme life circumstances can influence psychosocial development and provides insights for educators and healthcare professionals working with terminally ill adolescents.

## Keywords

adolescent identity formation, terminal illness, psychosocial development, Erikson's theory, osteosarcoma, identity versus role confusion, film studies.

## INTRODUCTION

Adolescence represents a pivotal developmental stage characterized by profound psychological, social, and identity transformations (Frisén & Eriksson, 2019). According to Silvers, (2021) adolescence is a dynamic period in the development of emotion regulation, involving implicit and explicit skills used to observe, classify, and modify emotional responses according to one's goals. Within Erikson's psychosocial development framework, this stage is defined by the critical crisis of identity versus role confusion, where young individuals actively seek to establish their sense of self and find their place within society (Block, 2011; Heim et al., 2020; Waterman, 1982). This quest for identity involves exploring various roles, beliefs, and values, ultimately leading to a coherent and stable sense of self (Pérez-Torres, 2024). However, when this intricate process of identity formation is intersected by the formidable challenge of a terminal illness, the normative developmental trajectory is significantly altered, presenting unique psychosocial complexities that demand specialized attention (Žiaková et al., 2017). However, when adolescence intersects with terminal illness, this already complex developmental process becomes significantly more challenging and accelerated.

The film *Clouds* (2020), directed by Justin Baldoni and based on the true story of Zach Sobiech, provides a compelling case study for examining adolescent identity formation under extreme circumstances. Zach Sobiech, diagnosed with osteosarcoma at age 14, navigated the typical challenges of adolescent development while confronting his own mortality. His journey, documented through the film adaptation of his mother Laura Sobiech's book "Fly a Little Higher," offers unique insights into how terminal illness influences the identity formation process during this critical developmental stage.

Previous research has explored various aspects of adolescent development and the impact of chronic illness on psychological growth. Several studies have examined the application of Erikson's psychosocial theory in different contexts. Anjeliani & Muhajir, (2025) analyzed psychosocial development in the character Merida from the film *Brave*, demonstrating how cinematic narratives can illuminate developmental processes. Similarly, AGM et al., (2020) explored character development through Erikson's framework in *Gifted Hands*, showing how feelings of inferiority can be transformed into resilience with proper support systems.

Furthermore, studies have highlighted the significance of identity resolution in emerging adulthood for subsequent psychosocial stages, indicating the long-term implications of adolescent identity formation (Mitchell et al., 2021). While this body of literature addresses general developmental theories and the impact of chronic illness, there remains a significant gap in understanding the specific nuances of identity formation in adolescents facing terminal illness, a condition that introduces an immediate and profound sense of finitude (Gavaghan & Roach, 1987).

In the context of terminal illness and adolescent development, research has primarily focused on coping mechanisms and psychological adaptation. Hamman & Hendricks, (2005) examined the role of generational influences in identity formation, particularly relevant for educators working with adolescents. Additionally, research highlights the significance of "making good use of illusions" as a psychological coping mechanism for adolescents with terminal cancer, allowing them to navigate their anguish through non-rational and fictional dimensions (Clerici et al., 2020). Despite these contributions, there is a distinct lack of comprehensive psychosocial education approaches tailored to assist adolescents in constructing a robust sense of identity amidst the existential challenges posed by a terminal diagnosis. However, the intersection of terminal illness and identity formation during adolescence remains underexplored in academic literature.

Regarding the film *Clouds* specifically, existing studies have approached it from various angles. Hartman et al., (2000) examined moral values in the film's character personalities. Riles et al., (2021) analyzed educational value representations, while Dewi et al., (2023) focused on language style analysis. Hasanah (2021) explored Zach's struggle to achieve his dreams amid cancer from an individual psychological perspective, and Bit, Gemilang, and Prastanti (2022) conducted personality analysis of Zach Sobiech's character.

Despite the substantial body of literature on adolescent development and the growing interest in the film *Clouds*, several significant gaps persist in current research. First, while previous studies have examined various aspects of the film, none have specifically applied Erikson's psychosocial theory to analyze the adolescent identity formation process depicted in Zach Sobiech's story. This represents a critical oversight, as the film provides a unique case study of identity versus role confusion under extreme circumstances that could significantly contribute to psychosocial development theory. Furthermore, existing research has not adequately explored how terminal illness specifically influences and potentially accelerates the identity versus role confusion stage of adolescent development. Most studies on chronic illness and adolescence focus on coping mechanisms and medical compliance rather than examining the fundamental impact on developmental processes. This gap is particularly significant given that terminal illness may fundamentally alter the timeline and priorities of identity formation during this crucial developmental period. Additionally, previous studies have approached the film from fragmented perspectives, examining moral values, language style, and individual psychology without providing a comprehensive psychosocial framework for understanding adolescent development under extreme circumstances. This fragmented approach fails to capture the complex interplay between developmental needs and life-limiting conditions, missing opportunities to develop holistic understanding of how young people navigate identity formation when confronted with mortality. Finally, there is insufficient research examining how understanding identity formation in terminally ill adolescents can inform psychosocial educational approaches for both affected individuals and their support systems. This gap limits the practical application of developmental theory in educational and therapeutic settings, potentially overlooking valuable insights that could improve support mechanisms for adolescents facing similar challenges.

This research addresses the identified gaps by providing a comprehensive psychosocial analysis of adolescent identity formation under terminal illness conditions. The study is significant for several reasons: Theoretical contribution: By applying Erikson's identity versus role confusion framework to analyze Zach Sobiech's story, this research contributes to understanding how extreme life circumstances influence normal developmental processes. Educational relevance: The findings can inform educators, counselors, and healthcare professionals working with terminally ill adolescents, providing insights into how to support identity development during this critical period. Practical implications: Understanding how terminal illness impacts identity formation can help develop more effective psychosocial interventions and support strategies for adolescents facing similar challenges. Methodological innovation: Using film analysis as a lens for examining real-life psychosocial development provides a unique methodological approach that can be applied to other biographical films and case studies.

This research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of adolescent identity formation under terminal illness conditions through multiple interconnected objectives. The primary objective is to analyze the manifestation of Erikson's identity versus role confusion stage in Zach Sobiech's adolescent development as depicted in the film *Clouds* (2020), providing a theoretical framework for understanding how psychosocial development unfolds under extreme circumstances. Building upon this foundation, the study seeks to examine how terminal illness, specifically osteosarcoma, influences and potentially accelerates the identity formation process during adolescence, contributing to our understanding of how life-limiting conditions impact normal developmental trajectories.

The research further aims to identify specific strategies and mechanisms that Zach Sobiech employed to navigate identity development while confronting mortality, offering insights into resilience and adaptive behaviors that may be applicable to other adolescents facing similar challenges. Additionally, this study explores the role of creative expression, particularly music, in facilitating identity formation for terminally ill adolescents, examining how artistic endeavors can serve as vehicles for self-discovery and meaning-making during this critical developmental period.

Ultimately, this research endeavors to provide practical insights for psychosocial educational approaches that can support identity development in adolescents facing life-limiting conditions. Through achieving these interconnected objectives, this study aims to enhance theoretical understanding of adolescent development under extreme circumstances while simultaneously contributing to more effective support mechanisms for terminally ill young people navigating the critical task of identity formation, thereby bridging the gap between developmental theory and practical application in educational and therapeutic contexts.

## MATERIALS FOR ANALYSIS

### Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design with a content analysis approach to examine adolescent identity formation under terminal illness conditions. The qualitative methodology is particularly appropriate for this research as it allows for in-depth exploration of psychological development processes and enables the researcher to capture the complexity of identity formation experiences as depicted through cinematic narrative. The descriptive nature of this study focuses on providing a comprehensive understanding of how Erikson's psychosocial theory, specifically the identity versus role confusion stage, manifests in the context of terminal illness during adolescence.

### Research Approach and Theoretical Framework

The research adopts a psychosocial education approach grounded in Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory, with particular emphasis on the fifth stage of development: identity versus role confusion (ages 13-18 years). This theoretical framework provides the analytical lens through which Zach Sobiech's developmental journey is examined and interpreted. The study utilizes film analysis as a methodological tool to investigate real-life psychosocial development processes, recognizing cinema as a legitimate medium for exploring human psychological experiences and developmental challenges.

### Data Sources

**Primary Data Source:** The primary data source for this research is the biographical film *Clouds* (2020), directed by Justin Baldoni and produced by Justin Baldoni, Mad Chance Productions, Warner Bros, and Wayfarer Studios. The film was released on October 16, 2020, and is available through Disney+. This 121-minute biographical drama is based on the true story of Zach Sobiech, a teenager diagnosed with osteosarcoma who pursued his dream of becoming a musician despite his terminal illness. The film serves as the central text for analysis, providing visual and dialogue-based evidence of identity formation processes during adolescence under extreme circumstances.

**Secondary Data Sources:** Secondary data sources include scholarly articles, academic papers, theses, and credible online publications that discuss the film *Clouds*, Zach Sobiech's life story, adolescent development theory, and psychosocial approaches to terminal illness. These sources provide contextual background, theoretical support, and comparative perspectives that enhance the analysis of the primary data. Key secondary sources include Laura Sobiech's book "Fly a Little Higher," which inspired the film, and various academic articles examining psychosocial development, terminal illness in adolescence, and media representation of psychological processes.

### Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted through systematic and repeated viewing of the film *Clouds* (2020), with specific attention to scenes, dialogues, and visual elements that demonstrate aspects of identity formation and psychosocial development. The data collection process was organized in multiple structured phases as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Data Collection Procedures

Phase	Activity	Duration	Focus Area	Data Collected
Phase 1: Initial Viewing	Comprehensive film viewing	121 minutes	Overall narrative understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>General themes related to identity formation</li> <li>Key character developments</li> <li>Narrative structure and timeline</li> </ul>
Phase 2: Targeted Analysis	Multiple focused viewings of key scenes	3-4 viewings per scene	Specific identity formation moments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Scene 1 (15:44-16:12): Cancer diagnosis and acceptance</li> <li>Scene 2 (34:44-35:54): Creative expression through songwriting</li> <li>Scene 3 (1:40:28-1:40:37): Commitment to life experiences</li> </ul>
Phase 3: Dialogue Documentation	Systematic transcription	2-3 hours	Verbal expressions of identity struggle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Direct quotes revealing psychological processes</li> <li>Dialogue indicating identity development</li> <li>Conversations showing developmental responses</li> </ul>
Phase 4: Visual Element Analysis	Non-verbal cue examination	2-3 viewings	Cinematic representation of psychological states	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Character expressions and body language</li> <li>Symbolic visual elements</li> <li>Interaction patterns and relationships</li> </ul>
Phase 5: Data Validation	Cross-referencing with secondary sources	1-2 hours	Accuracy and context verification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Comparison with biographical information</li> <li>Alignment with theoretical framework</li> <li>Supporting evidence from literature</li> </ul>

This systematic approach ensured comprehensive data collection while maintaining focus on the research objectives and theoretical framework of Erikson's psychosocial development theory.

### Data Analysis Method

The data analysis employs thematic content analysis guided by Erikson's psychosocial development theory, utilizing a systematic and iterative approach to examine adolescent identity formation under terminal illness conditions. The analytical process begins with theoretical coding, where Erikson's identity versus role confusion framework is applied to identify and categorize scenes, dialogues, and character behaviors that demonstrate specific aspects of adolescent identity formation. This deductive approach ensures that the analysis remains grounded in established psychological theory while allowing for the emergence of unique patterns related to terminal illness experiences.

Following the initial coding phase, the analysis proceeds to pattern recognition, systematically identifying recurring themes, behaviors, and responses that illustrate how terminal illness influences the identity development process. This involves examining consistencies and variations in Zach Sobiech's developmental responses across different contexts and time periods depicted in the film, paying particular attention to how his responses to identity challenges differ from or align with typical adolescent development patterns. The pattern recognition phase also involves identifying unique adaptive strategies and coping mechanisms that emerge specifically in response to life-limiting conditions.

The analysis then incorporates comparative analysis, examining Zach Sobiech's developmental responses in comparison to typical adolescent identity formation patterns as described in Erikson's theoretical framework. This comparative approach highlights both similarities and unique aspects related to terminal illness, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how extreme circumstances may accelerate, modify, or intensify normal developmental processes. The comparative analysis also considers how external factors such as family support, creative expression, and peer relationships contribute to identity formation under these extraordinary circumstances.

The final stage involves interpretive analysis, providing deep interpretation of the data within the psychosocial theoretical framework and examining how life-limiting conditions influence the fundamental aspects of identity development. This interpretive phase synthesizes findings from previous analytical stages to develop comprehensive understanding of the relationship between terminal illness and adolescent identity formation. Throughout all phases of analysis, attention is paid to maintaining theoretical consistency while remaining open to emergent themes that may expand or refine understanding of psychosocial development under extreme circumstances. The analytical process is documented systematically to ensure transparency and enable verification of findings through potential replication studies.

### Validity and Reliability Considerations

To ensure the validity and reliability of this qualitative research, several interconnected measures are implemented throughout the research process. Triangulation serves as a fundamental strategy, employing multiple data sources including primary film content and secondary literature to provide comprehensive understanding and verify findings. This multi-source approach allows for cross-validation of interpretations and reduces the risk of bias that might arise from relying solely on cinematic representation, thereby strengthening the credibility of the research outcomes.

The research maintains systematic analysis through the consistent application of Erikson's psychosocial development framework throughout the entire research process, ensuring methodological rigor and theoretical coherence. This systematic approach provides a stable analytical foundation that guides data collection, interpretation, and conclusion-drawing processes, while maintaining focus on the specific developmental stage of identity versus role confusion. The consistent application of this theoretical lens ensures that findings are grounded in established psychological theory and can be meaningfully compared with existing research in the field.

Reflexivity is incorporated as an essential component of the research design, involving explicit acknowledgment of the researcher's perspective and potential biases in interpreting cinematic content and psychological processes. This reflexive approach requires ongoing self-examination of assumptions, preconceptions, and interpretive choices that may influence the analysis, particularly given the sensitive nature of terminal illness and the emotional impact of the subject matter. By maintaining awareness of these potential influences, the research strives to achieve greater objectivity and authenticity in its findings. Furthermore, the research emphasizes transparency through clear and detailed documentation of all data collection and analysis procedures, enabling future researchers to replicate and verify findings. This transparency extends to explicit description of analytical decisions, interpretation processes, and the rationale behind thematic categorizations, creating an audit trail that supports the dependability and confirmability of the research. Through these combined measures, the study establishes a robust methodological foundation that enhances confidence in its findings and contributions to the field of adolescent psychosocial development.

### Ethical Considerations

This research involves analysis of publicly available cinematic content based on a true story. While the film depicts real individuals and events, the analysis focuses on publicly shared information and does not involve direct contact with participants or access to private information. The study treats the subject matter with appropriate sensitivity and respect, recognizing the personal nature of terminal illness experiences while maintaining academic objectivity in the analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This segment of the paper clarifies about extensive discussion regarding the struggle of forming adolescence identity in 'Clouds' Movie (2020), directed by Justin Baldoni using A Psychosocial Approach.



Figure 1. Zach was diagnosed with terminal cancer; Time stamps: 15:44 – 16:12

In the photo above, the doctor explains that the tumor has been treated, indicating that the cancer has spread to Zach's lungs. The doctor also explains that Zach is cancer-free, but osteosarcoma is very persistent and unpredictable. Even if he undergoes further outpatient treatment, the cancer may not respond to medication because Zach is already in the final stage. The

explanation for this part, as explained by the doctor, relates to the psychosocial approach theory, which explains that Zach has been battling cancer since he was 14 years old.

The dialogue "But you said the surgery was successful" and "We were able to fix the collapse, but I'm sorry" explains Zach's struggle with cancer as a teenager.

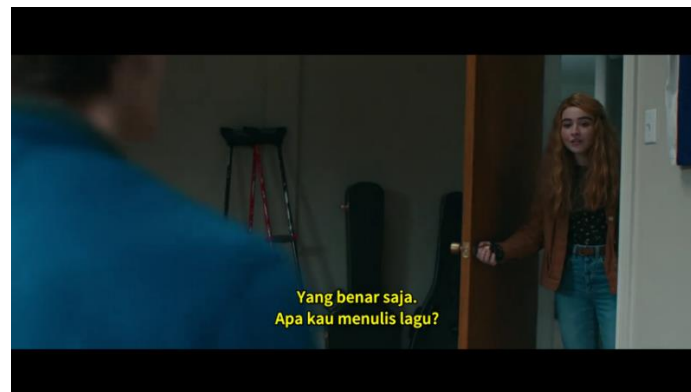


Figure 2. Sammy Brown knows that Zach likes to write songs; Time Stamps 34:44 – 35:54

In the photo above, Sammy Brown sees Zach writing a song, a fact he hadn't previously known. He then asks Zach to sing the song he wrote, "Coffee Cup," which is about Zach's life experiences. The explanation in this section demonstrates the connection between the movie "Clouds" and Erikson's psychosocial theory of adolescence.

The dialogue, "Shut the front door. Are you writing a song?" "Um, kind of. The beginning of a song. It's just lyrics right now, but yeah," explains Zach's deep dream of pursuing his dream of becoming a singer.



Figure 3. Zach shows that he can come to prom even though his body is getting worse; Time Stamps 1:40:28 – 1:40:37

In the photo above, Zach says he's going to prom with Amy Adamle. Amy then tells him he should stay in bed and not go, but Zach assures her he will.

The explanation of this part in the movie "Clouds" relates to Erikson's psychosocial theory, as he explains his struggle with his illness to go to prom. The dialogue, "You're supposed to be in bed. What are you..." "You're going to get your prom, Amy Adamle". "Are you sure? I don't need a prom". "We're going" explaining that even though his body is getting worse, he will still realize his dream of going to prom with his girlfriend, Amy.

In conclusion, struggle is a form of hard work to achieve what you desire. This struggle also requires a look at each person's personality, whether they are passionate about pursuing their dreams or not. In the film "Clouds," which was part of the research, the main character, "Zach Sobiech," explains that Zach is a very ambitious person in achieving his dreams despite his cancer as a teenager, and Zach has a very positive impact on those closest to him.

## CONCLUSION

The preceding discussion elucidates the intricate interplay between terminal illness, adolescent identity formation, and the imperative for comprehensive psychosocial education within a supportive healthcare framework. This research has highlighted that a multidisciplinary approach, integrating medical, psychological, and spiritual care, is not merely beneficial but essential for navigating the complex psychosocial challenges faced by adolescents in these circumstances. It further underscores the critical need for robust psychosocial support systems, not only for the affected adolescents but also for the healthcare professionals who tirelessly provide their care. Furthermore, this study posits that the psychosocial education model, when tailored to the unique developmental stage of adolescence and the specific challenges posed by life-limiting conditions, can significantly foster adaptive coping strategies and identity consolidation. This model aims to empower adolescents to confront their illness with greater agency and resilience, ultimately enhancing their quality of life and facilitating a more integrated sense of self amidst adversity.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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