

Adultification in Childhood: A Look at the Forms of Violence and Early Maltreatment and Their Impacts on Child Development

Adultização na Infância: Um Olhar Sobre as Formas de Violências e Maus-Tratos Precoces e Seus Impactos no Desenvolvimento Infantil

Adultificación en la Infancia: Una Mirada a las Formas de Violencia y Maltrato Temprano y Sus Impactos en el Desarrollo Infantil

RESUMO

Objetivo: Este estudo teve como objetivo analisar, por meio de revisão da literatura científica, os impactos da adultização na infância e suas repercussões biopsicossociais no desenvolvimento infantil. **Método:** Realizou-se uma revisão integrativa entre março e maio de 2025, nas bases SciELO, MEDLINE, BVS e LILACS, utilizando descritores dos DeCS e MeSH relacionados à criança, adultização, violência, maus-tratos, saúde mental e desenvolvimento biopsicossocial, combinados por operadores booleanos. A busca identificou 423 estudos, dos quais oito foram incluídos após aplicação dos critérios de elegibilidade e etapas do PRISMA. **Resultados:** Os resultados evidenciam associação entre adultização infantil, superexposição digital, erotização precoce, influência mercadológica e uso excessivo de tecnologias. **Conclusão:** Observou-se convergência quanto aos impactos biopsicossociais, incluindo fragilização da identidade, vulnerabilidade emocional, redução do brincar e riscos à saúde mental e ao desenvolvimento sexual saudável, indicando repercussões negativas persistentes no ciclo de vida.

DESCRIPTORIOS: Hipersexualização infantil; desenvolvimento infantil; impactos de telas; adultização de crianças.

ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to analyze, through a review of the scientific literature, the impacts of adultification on childhood and its biopsychosocial repercussions on child development. **Method:** An integrative review was conducted between March and May 2025 in the SciELO, MEDLINE, BVS, and LILACS databases, using DeCS and MeSH descriptors related to children, adultification, violence, maltreatment, mental health, and biopsychosocial development, combined with Boolean operators. The search identified 423 studies, of which eight were included after applying the eligibility criteria and stages of PRISMA. **Results:** The results show an association between childhood adultification, digital overexposure, early eroticization, marketing influence, and excessive use of technology. **Conclusion:** Convergence was observed regarding biopsychosocial impacts, including weakening of identity, emotional vulnerability, reduced play, and risks to mental health and healthy sexual development, indicating persistent negative repercussions throughout the life cycle.

DESCRIPTORS: Child hypersexualization; child development; impacts of screens; adultification of children.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Este estudio tuvo como objetivo analizar, a través de una revisión de la literatura científica, los impactos de la adultificación en la infancia y sus repercusiones biopsicosociales en el desarrollo infantil. **Método:** Se realizó una revisión integrativa entre marzo y mayo de 2025 en las bases de datos SciELO, MEDLINE, BVS y LILACS, utilizando descriptores DeCS y MeSH relacionados con infancia, adultificación, violencia, maltrato, salud mental y desarrollo biopsicosocial, combinados con operadores booleanos. La búsqueda identificó 423 estudios, de los cuales ocho se incluyeron después de aplicar los criterios de elegibilidad y las etapas de PRISMA.

Resultados: Los resultados muestran una asociación entre la adultificación infantil, la sobreexposición digital, la erotización temprana, la influencia del marketing y el uso excesivo de la tecnología. **Conclusión:** Se observó convergencia con respecto a los impactos biopsicosociales, incluyendo el debilitamiento de la identidad, la vulnerabilidad emocional, la reducción del juego y los riesgos para la salud mental y el desarrollo sexual saludable, lo que indica repercusiones negativas persistentes a lo largo del ciclo de vida.

DESCRIPTORIOS: Hipersexualización infantil; desarrollo infantil; impactos de las pantallas; adultización infantil.

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INTRODUCTION

Childhood, defined as the period from birth to just before age 12, is a critical phase for human growth and development, encompassing physical, emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions. During this period, through interactions and learning, children build mental functions, develop autonomy, and consolidate essential skills for adulthood⁽¹⁾.

Children's psychological development depends directly on the quality of the relationships and care they receive. Inappropriate interactions or those marked by neglect can significantly compromise a child's neurological, emotional, and social maturation⁽¹⁻²⁻³⁾.

When a child is exposed to situations that threaten their well-being, this constitutes maltreatment, defined as actions or omissions that harm their overall development⁽³⁾. Child abuse includes physical aggression, psychological abuse, neglect, abandonment, and exposure to social and environmental risks⁽⁴⁾.

Among the most complex forms of

violence is the adultification of children, characterized by the imposition of responsibilities, behaviors, and experiences incompatible with their stage of development⁽⁵⁾. This phenomenon, frequently associated with neglect and psychological exploitation, compromises the child's physical and emotional health and violates rights guaranteed by the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA)⁽⁵⁻⁶⁾.

In recent decades, adultification has been intensified by cultural and technological transformations, particularly by the early use of social media, exposure to inappropriate content, aesthetic pressure, and digital monetization⁽⁶⁻⁷⁾. These factors bring forward behaviors typical of adulthood and reduce the protection necessary for childhood⁽⁷⁻⁸⁾.

The problem is exacerbated by the lack of effective safety mechanisms on digital platforms, whose algorithms favor risky content⁽⁹⁾. Furthermore, exposure promoted by caregivers, often for financial gain, contributes to the normalization of adult norms, undermining children's identity and self-esteem and increasing the risk of

psychological violence and sexual exploitation⁽¹⁰⁻¹¹⁾.

The gravity of the issue gained visibility in 2025, following public reports of sexual exploitation of minors shared on social media, highlighting the need for greater oversight and accountability⁽¹²⁾.

Given this scenario, it is urgent to adopt preventive strategies involving families, schools, government agencies, and digital platforms⁽¹²⁻¹³⁾. It is essential to guide caregivers, promote digital education in schools, and strengthen public policies for the regulation and oversight of social media, in order to protect children from premature adultification and its psychological and social consequences⁽¹⁴⁻¹⁵⁾.

In light of the above, the present study aims to analyze, through a review of the scientific literature, the impacts of adultification in childhood and its biopsychosocial repercussions on child development.

METHOD

This is an integrative literature review guided by the following research question: "What are the impacts of

adultification in childhood and its biopsychosocial repercussions on child development?"

An integrative review is a method that allows for the synthesis and systematization of scientific knowledge produced across different methodological designs, whether theoretical or empirical, enabling a comprehensive and interpretive analysis of the available evidence. Unlike more restrictive reviews, this type of study allows for the inclusion of research with qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches, fostering a broader understanding of the phe-

nomenon under investigation.

The search for studies was conducted between August 2025 and February 2026 in the *PubMed/MEDLINE*, Latin American and Caribbean Health Sciences Literature (LILACS), *Scientific Electronic Library Online* (SciELO), and Virtual Health Library (VHL) databases. Scientific articles published in Portuguese and English between 2018 and 2025 were included.

Controlled and uncontrolled descriptors were used, extracted from the Descriptors in Health Sciences (DeCS) and *Medical Subject Head-*

ings (MeSH): "Child"[MeSH] OR "Children" OR "Infant" OR "Child development" OR "Child Abuse"[MeSH] OR "Violence" OR "Child maltreatment" OR "Psychological abuse" OR "Neglect", "Adultification" OR "Early adultization" OR "Premature exposure", "Mental Health"[MeSH] OR "Psychosocial impact" OR "Biopsychosocial factors" AND "Child Adultification", "Early Adultification", "Child", "Childhood", "Child Violence", "Maltreatment", "Neglect", "Sexual Exploitation", and "Psychosocial Impacts", as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 - Search strategy for studies included in the integrative literature review (2018 to 2025), Porto Velho, Rondônia, Brazil (2026).

PubMed/MEDLIN	("Adultification" OR "Early adultization" OR "Premature exposure") AND ("Child"[MeSH] OR "Children" OR "Infant") AND ("Child Abuse"[MeSH] OR "Violence" OR "Child maltreatment" OR "Neglect") AND ("Mental Health"[MeSH] OR "Psychosocial impact" OR "Development")
LILACS	("Adultização Infantil" OR "Adultização Precoce") AND ("Criança" OR "Infância") AND ("Violência Infantil" OR "Maus-tratos" OR "Negligência") AND ("Desenvolvimento Infantil" OR "Saúde Mental")
SciELO	("Adultização Infantil" OR "Adultização Precoce") AND ("Criança" OR "Infância") AND ("Violência" OR "Maus-tratos") AND ("Impactos Psicossociais" OR "Desenvolvimento")
BVS	("Adultização" OR "Adultização Infantil") AND ("Crianças") AND ("Violência Infantil" OR "Exploração" OR "Negligência") AND ("Desenvolvimento Psicossocial")

Source: Author's own work (2026).

Data were extracted in a standardized manner, including title, author/year, and study objective. No quantitative assessment of methodological quality was performed due to the heterogeneity of the studies, with priority given to descriptive and critical analysis.

The synthesis was conducted thematically, organizing the findings into three categories: determinants of adultification, associated forms of violence, and biopsychosocial impacts on development and health throughout the

lifespan.

RESULTS

In the initial literature search, 423 scientific articles were identified in the databases included in the study. After applying filters regarding publication period, language, and adherence to the topic of interest, 364 records remained for analysis. The exclusion of 100 duplicates resulted in 264 studies eligible for screening through the reading of titles and abstracts, of which 161 were ex-

cluded for not meeting the established criteria.

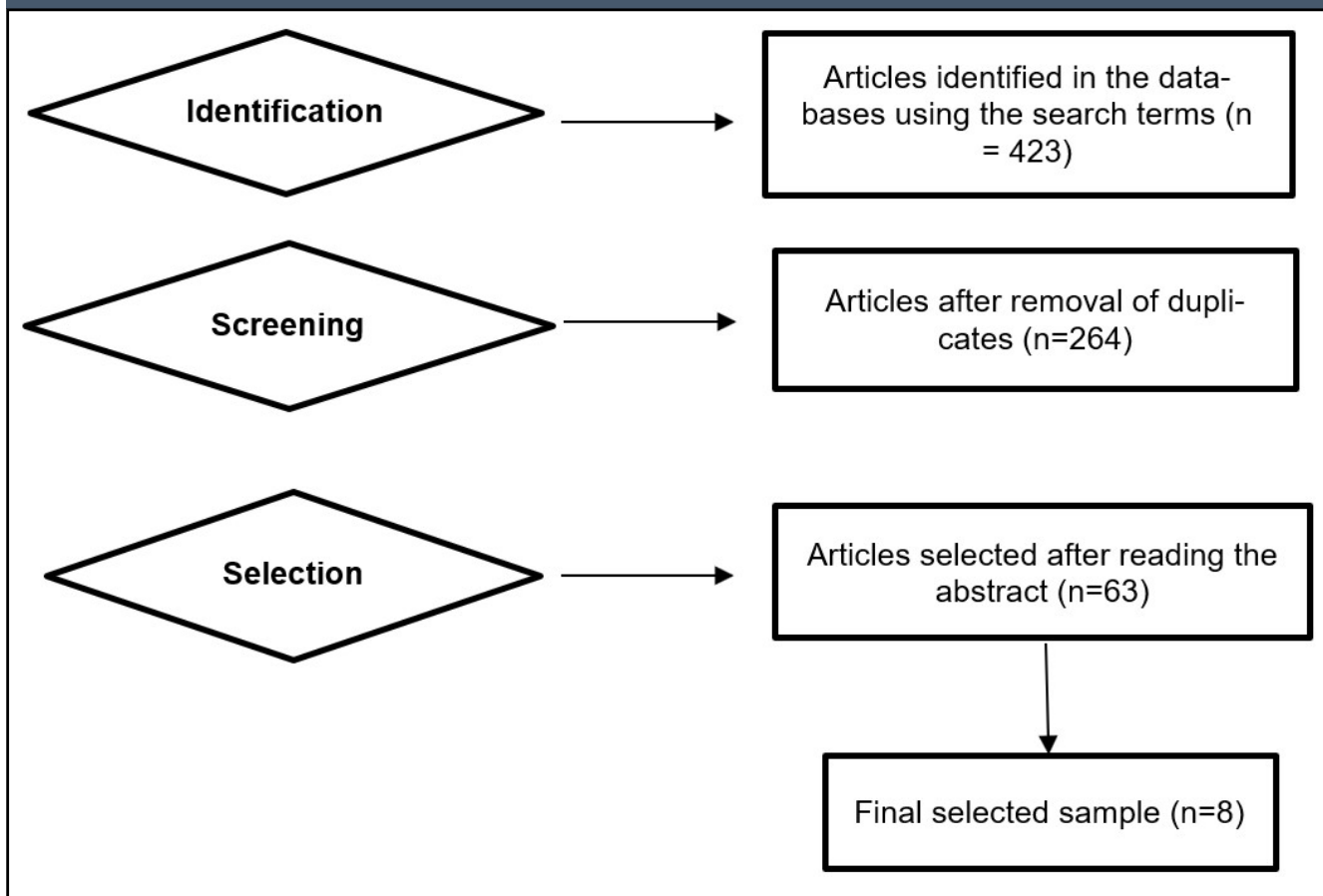
During the full-text reading stage, 63 articles were evaluated, with 54 excluded for not directly addressing factors associated with the investigated phenomenon (n = 21), for being ineligible publications (n = 11), for presenting a population outside the scope of the review (n = 8), or for methodological insufficiency/inadequate data (n = 6). Ultimately, eight studies comprised the sample for this review (Figure 1).

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Figure 1 – PRISMA selection flowchart of the articles included for the construction of the integrative review (2018–2025)



Source: The authors, 2026.

The selected studies were systematized in Table 2, organized by title, authorship/year of publication, and objectives, in order to provide a structured overview of the main theoretical and empirical approaches to child adul-

tification. It is observed that the studies encompass different analytical perspectives, including digital exposure, early sexualization, excessive use of technologies, sexual violence, and psychosocial implications for development and sexuality. This organization allows for

a visualization of the methodological and thematic diversity of the included studies, as well as the identification of the main lines of discussion related to the biopsychosocial impacts of adulthood in childhood.

Table 2: Summary of the selected articles, organized by title, author/year, and objectives, respectively.

Title	Author and year	Objectives
Children’s exposure on social media in light of human rights: an analysis of privacy protection and child development	Ribeiro, Filho (2024)	To delve into the current scenario in which children are frequently exposed online from birth and analyze the ethical, legal, and psychosocial ramifications of this phenomenon.
Excessive screen use by children post-COVID-19: psychological and child development impacts	Crispim et al (2022)	To analyze and present information related to the impact of new technologies on child development
Children on TikTok: an analysis of children’s exposure on the social media platform	Almeida (2024)	To analyze children’s exposure on TikTok, focusing on the risks associated with overexposure on the platform

Early adulthood: a critical narrative review of a multifactorial phenomenon in childhood and adolescence	Bonilha et al (2025)	To critically analyze the concept of adulthood in children and adolescents, considering its historical context, its aesthetic, digital, and chemical manifestations, as well as its psychosocial and health implications
Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Female Sexuality	Scweta (2018)	To analyze four distinct psychological case studies to assess the long-term impact of childhood sexual abuse, which differ in terms of age, education, and socioeconomic status
Early Adulthood in Contemporary Media: Where Does Family Responsibility Lie?	Rocha, Ferreira (2024)	Understand how the media serves as a powerful tool for influence and manipulation in the education and shaping of these new, adultified individuals through music, dance, products, television programs, and digital influencers
Childhood adulthood and sexualization: social influence	Pereira, Trombetta, Adriano (2019)	Presenting adultifying and eroticizing forms of childhood and their implications.
The impact of anticipated factors in childhood and adolescence on the development of sexuality	Voicu (2024)	To investigate the hidden aspects of sexuality during these stages of development, addressing various perspectives and challenges, and proposing integrative approaches

DISCUSSION

The findings of this review indicate that the adulthood of children should be understood as a multifactorial and contemporary phenomenon, intensified by hyperconnectivity and the growing centrality of childhood in digital, market-driven, and cultural dynamics. Taken together, the selected studies suggest that the anticipation of behaviors, social roles, and symbolic references from the adult world occurs primarily in environments mediated by technologies and visibility strategies⁽¹⁶⁾.

In this context, children are no longer merely recipients of content but also become producers and “characters” in a permanent public presence. This early and continuous immersion in the digital world redefines family and social relationships, increases exposure, and creates new vulnerabilities, with significant repercussions for biopsychosocial development⁽¹⁵⁾.

Regarding digital exposure, Ribeiro and Filho (2024)⁽¹⁴⁾ and Almeida (2024)⁽¹⁷⁾ highlight that children’s use of social media and video platforms involves not only psychosocial risks but also ethical and legal challenges related to privacy, identity, and image protection.

Children’s online presence, in many cases constructed by adults from the earliest stages of life, tends to solidify a “digital identity” before they have the maturity to understand the consequences, which strains the boundary between caregivers’ freedom of expression and the child’s right to the protection of personal data, privacy, and image⁽¹²⁻¹⁴⁻¹⁵⁾. This scenario becomes more critical when exposure is linked to the pursuit of engagement and social recognition, reinforcing typically adult aesthetic and performative standards and contributing to the normalization of adult-like behaviors⁽¹¹⁾.

The reviewed literature also suggests that the digital environment does not operate neutrally: it is permeated by advertising, marketing, and consumerist logics that take advantage of children’s increasingly early connectivity⁽¹⁸⁾. Rocha and Ferreira (2024)⁽¹⁶⁾ examine how cultural products (music, dance, programs, trends, and influencers) can act as devices for influencing and shaping behavior, while Plat and Oliveira (2019)⁽¹⁹⁾ identify eroticization as one of the most visible manifestations of adulthood, frequently associated with social pressures and external expectations regarding appearance and behavior.

In this context, children come to simultaneously occupy the role of both consumers and promoters of consumption, including through content that displays routines, purchases, and lifestyles, reinforcing social learning guided by public validation and a desire for belonging⁽¹⁷⁻¹⁸⁻¹⁹⁾.

Another relevant element is excessive screen use and its impacts on development, especially in the post-pandemic period. Crispim et al. (2022)⁽²⁰⁾ point to psychological and developmental harms associated with increased screen time, including alterations in emotional regulation, attention, and social interactions.

The gradual replacement of play, face-to-face socializing, and recreational activities with screen-mediated experiences may restrict fundamental opportunities for socio-emotional development, while simultaneously increasing exposure to age-inappropriate content⁽¹⁴⁾. Thus, adulthood can be exacerbated by continuous exposure to high-intensity stimuli and by cultural norms that encourage the early adoption of behaviors, language, aesthetics, and practices typical of adult life⁽⁶⁻⁸⁾.

The discussion takes on greater gravity when adulthood intersects with violence and exploitation. Scwe-

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ta (2018)⁽²¹⁾, in exploring the impacts of childhood sexual abuse, points to lasting repercussions for mental health, self-esteem, and the experience of sexuality, suggesting that early sexual experiences, especially when violent, can produce persistent effects throughout the life cycle.

Voicu (2024)⁽²²⁾ emphasizes that early-life factors in childhood and adolescence affect psychosexual development and can influence future trajectories, making adultification—when associated with early sexualization, eroticized exposure, or vulnerability in digital environments—a significant risk factor for psychosocial harm.

In light of the Brazilian legal framework, the findings directly align with the principle of comprehensive protection and the absolute priority guaranteed by the Federal Constitution (Art. 227) and the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (Law No. 8,069/1990)⁽⁵⁻²³⁾. The ECA establishes the child as a subject of rights and determines that the family, soci-

ety, and the State must ensure conditions for their physical, mental, moral, spiritual, and social development, in freedom and dignity, in addition to protecting them from all forms of neglect, exploitation, and violence⁽⁵⁾.

In this sense, digital overexposure, the monetization of children's images, premature sexualization, and the imposition of adult-like behaviors may constitute practices incompatible with the guarantee of privacy, respect, and dignity, especially when there is no supervision, educational mediation, or assessment of the risks involved⁽¹⁸⁻²⁴⁾. The discussion also reinforces the centrality of family responsibility, not as an exclusive duty, but linked to institutional mechanisms of protection and oversight, as well as the shared responsibility of digital platforms regarding safety, data processing, and the circulation of risky content⁽⁵⁻²³⁻²⁴⁾.

CONCLUSION

This review highlights that the adultification of children intensifies

at the intersection of hyperconnectivity, consumer culture, and media exposure, producing significant repercussions on biopsychosocial development. The premature adoption of adult behaviors, responsibilities, and role models is associated with identity fragility, early aesthetic pressure, reduced playtime, and emotional and relational changes, which may result in harm to mental health and the development of healthy sexuality throughout life.

In light of the ECA and the principle of comprehensive protection, the findings reinforce the need for intersectoral strategies involving families, schools, the State, and digital platforms, with a focus on digital education, parental guidance, and the strengthening of public protection policies. Such measures are fundamental to ensuring privacy, dignity, and healthy development, preserving childhood as a unique and protected stage of human development.

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