



**EARLY ADULTIZATION: A CRITICAL NARRATIVE REVIEW OF A
MULTIFACTORIAL PHENOMENON IN CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE**

**ADULTIZAÇÃO PRECOCE: REVISÃO NARRATIVA CRÍTICA DE UM
FENÔMENO MULTIFATORIAL NA INFÂNCIA E ADOLESCÊNCIA**

**ADULTIZACIÓN TEMPRANA: UNA REVISIÓN NARRATIVA CRÍTICA DE UN
FENÓMENO MULTIFACTORIAL EN LA INFANCIA Y LA ADOLESCENCIA**



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ABSTRACT

Early adultization is a historical and multifactorial phenomenon that has become increasingly evident in contemporary societies. This study aimed to critically analyze the concept of adultization in children and adolescents, considering its historical background, aesthetic, digital, and chemical manifestations, as well as psychosocial and health implications. It consists of a critical narrative review, interdisciplinary in nature, based on indexed literature (1980–2025), including historical, sociological, medical, and psychological studies. The results indicate that adultization persists in new, more sophisticated and diffuse forms, expressed through media eroticization, early digital device ownership, aesthetic

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consumption, and exposure to endocrine disruptors. Consequences include anxiety, depression, eating disorders, body image distortions, early pregnancy, and higher suicide risk among adolescents. We conclude that public policies, regulation of cosmetics and media industries, and strengthening of family education are essential to mitigate the impacts of adultization and protect integral development.

Keywords: Adultization. Childhood. Adolescence. Early Sexualization. Mental Health.

RESUMO

A adultização precoce constitui um fenômeno histórico e multifatorial, cada vez mais evidente nas sociedades contemporâneas. O presente estudo teve como objetivo analisar criticamente o conceito de adultização em crianças e adolescentes, considerando sua historicidade, suas manifestações estéticas, digitais e químicas, bem como as implicações psicossociais e de saúde. Trata-se de uma revisão narrativa crítica, de caráter interdisciplinar, fundamentada em literatura indexada (1980–2025), incluindo estudos históricos, sociológicos, médicos e psicológicos. Os resultados apontam que a adultização persiste sob novas roupagens, mais sofisticadas e difusas, expressas pela erotização midiática, pela introdução precoce de dispositivos digitais, pelo consumo estético e pela exposição a disruptores endócrinos. Entre as consequências destacam-se ansiedade, depressão, transtornos alimentares, distorções de autoimagem, gravidez precoce e maior risco de suicídio em adolescentes. Conclui-se que políticas públicas, regulação da indústria de cosméticos e da mídia, e fortalecimento da educação familiar são essenciais para mitigar os impactos da adultização e proteger o desenvolvimento integral.

Palavras-chave: Adultização. Infância. Adolescência. Sexualização Precoce. Saúde Mental.

RESUMEN

La adultificación temprana es un fenómeno histórico y multifactorial, cada vez más evidente en las sociedades contemporáneas. Este estudio tuvo como objetivo analizar críticamente el concepto de adultificación en niños y adolescentes, considerando su historicidad, sus manifestaciones estéticas, digitales y químicas, así como sus implicaciones psicosociales y para la salud. Se trata de una revisión narrativa crítica e interdisciplinaria basada en literatura indexada (1980-2025), que incluye estudios históricos, sociológicos, médicos y psicológicos. Los resultados indican que la adultificación persiste bajo formas nuevas, más sofisticadas y difusas, expresadas a través de la erotización mediática, la introducción temprana de dispositivos digitales, el consumo estético y la exposición a disruptores endocrinos. Las consecuencias incluyen ansiedad, depresión, trastornos alimentarios, autoimagen distorsionada, embarazo precoz y un mayor riesgo de suicidio en adolescentes. La conclusión es que las políticas públicas, la regulación de las industrias cosmética y mediática, y el fortalecimiento de la educación familiar son esenciales para mitigar los impactos de la adultificación y proteger el desarrollo integral.

Palabras clave: Adultificación. Infancia. Adolescencia. Sexualización Temprana. Salud Mental.



1 INTRODUCTION

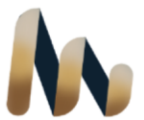
Early adultization can be defined as the process by which children and adolescents are exposed to the codes, roles, and practices of adult life before the appropriate time for their biological, psychological, and social maturation. It is a multifactorial phenomenon, which includes aesthetic eroticization, excessive responsibility, insertion in consumption patterns, and exposure to digital content that compresses the latency period and anticipates maturity demands (APA, 2007; BUCKINGHAM, 2011; UNICEF, 2019). The medical and psychological literature points out that adultization compromises the formation of identity, increases the risk of anxiety and depression, and weakens social protection, configuring itself as a public health problem (WHO, 2021; SBP, 2021).

Although the expression is recent, adultization is not a new phenomenon: it accompanies the history of childhood. In Western Antiquity, the child was seen as an extension of the family and heritage. In Rome, the *"pater familias"* (head of the Roman family - usually the father) had power over the lives of his children, and the value of childhood was linked to military, economic or succession utility (RAWSON, 2003). In the East, Confucian, Buddhist and Hindu traditions attributed early ritual roles to children, reinforcing their community function without recognizing their individual autonomy (EISENSTADT, 2003).

In the European Middle Ages, according to Philippe Ariès (1981), childhood was transitory: the child was portrayed as a **"miniature adult"**, sharing clothes, games and work with adults. Cunningham (2005) points out that collective survival required early productive participation, and affectivity did not translate into legal or social protection.

From the Renaissance and the Modern Age, the emergence of schooling and the valorization of scientific knowledge introduced the notion of childhood as a differentiated stage, but practices such as early arranged marriages and work learning reveal that adultization was still present (HEYWOOD, 2001). During the Industrial Revolution, adultization acquired an economic character. Children were incorporated into factories and mines, subjected to long and unhealthy hours, in one of the most dramatic moments of anticipation of adult life (HUMPHRIES, 2010). This context motivated protection legislation, such as the Factory Acts in England, but child exploitation persists (NARDINELLI, 1980).

In the twentieth century, the World Wars again exposed minors to adult responsibilities: they acted as messengers, caregivers, and even combatants, experiencing violence, hunger, and death before maturity (FASS, 2011; WINTER, 2006). It was only in the post-war period, with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) and public protection policies, that the recognition of childhood as a stage that requires specific care was consolidated.



However, adultization has not disappeared: it has morphed into more sophisticated and diffuse practices, linked to consumer culture, digital media, and children's aesthetics. Today, it manifests itself in the eroticization of clothes and dances, the early use of social networks, and the introduction of cosmetics that can act as endocrine disruptors, reinforcing involuntary sexualization (APA, 2007).

In contemporary times, international organizations and national legislation have sought to clearly delimit the periods of life. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) defines children as individuals aged 0 to 9 years and adolescents as those between 10 and 19 years of age. UNICEF (2019) adopts a similar criterion, extending adolescence to 18 years of age in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989). In Brazil, the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA) considers a child to be a person up to 12 years of age, and an adolescent between 12 and 18 years of age (BRASIL, 1990). The Brazilian Society of Pediatrics (SBP, 2021) also recognizes pre-adolescence (9 to 12 years old), a phase particularly vulnerable to adultization.

Despite such conceptual and normative advances, adultization remains a problematic reality. Unlike the explicit forms of the past, child labor, wars or arranged marriages, today it is presented in a naturalized way, mediated by digital platforms, advertising and cultural products. Children and adolescents are constantly exposed to sexual and aesthetic codes that compress their psychosexual latency, weaken mental health, and increase vulnerabilities, such as abuse, early pregnancy, and suicide risk (SMITH et al., 2020; WHO, 2021).

In this sense, the central problematization of this study lies in understanding how historical, social, digital, aesthetic and hormonal factors maintain active adultization in the twenty-first century, under new guises. The objective is to carry out a critical narrative review that situates adultization in the historical course of childhood and adolescence and analyzes its current forms, with an emphasis on biopsychosocial impacts and prevention strategies that ensure integral development (SBP, 2021; OECD, 2025).

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 TYPE OF STUDY AND METHODOLOGICAL JUSTIFICATION

This study is a critical narrative review of a historical-social and interdisciplinary nature, involving the fields of history, sociology, developmental psychology and medicine. Critical narrative review was considered the most appropriate approach, allowing the integration of different traditions of knowledge and offering a broad interpretative reading, without giving up scientific rigor (ROTHER, 2007).



2.2 SEARCH STRATEGY AND SOURCES CONSULTED

The bibliographic research was carried out between March and August 2025, covering both indexed databases of scientific journals and documents from international organizations. The following databases were consulted: SciELO, PubMed, Web of Science, JSTOR and Google Scholar, as well as open access documents from the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations (UN) and the Brazilian Society of Pediatrics (SBP).

Descriptors in Portuguese, English and Spanish were used, combined with Boolean operators: adultization of childhood; childhood history; adolescence social construction; socialization and childhood; puberty and adulthood; sexualization; digital exposure; cosmetics and endocrine disruptors. The objective was to contemplate both historical and biomedical and sociocultural aspects.

Classical reference works were also included, such as Philippe Ariès's *Social History of Children and the Family* (1981); *The Disappearance of Childhood*, by Neil Postman (1999); and *Studies in Modern Childhood*, by Jens Qvortrup (2005), which offer fundamental interpretative bases to understand the phenomenon from a historical perspective.

In order to organize the historical findings in a systematic way, a comparative synthesis of the social conceptions of childhood and adolescence throughout the main historical periods was elaborated, ranging from Ancient Rome to contemporary times.

This systematization is presented in **Table 1**, which summarizes the contexts, predominant social views and forms of adultization described in the literature.



Table 1

Historical conceptions of childhood and adolescence

Period/Context	Social vision of childhood/adolescence	Characteristics of adultization	References
Ancient Rome	Children as an extension of the family and heritage	Early marriages, participation in rituals, domestic/military work	RAWSON, 2003
Middle Ages	Short childhood; Child as "Miniature Adult"	Wearing adult clothing, early insertion into trades, and wars	ARIÈS, 1981; CUNNINGHAM, 2005
Modern Age (century. XVI–XVIII)	Most recognized childhood; Emergence of formal schooling	Persistence of early labor and arranged marriages	HEYWOOD, 2001
Industrial Revolution (century. XIX)	Children seen as factory labor	Exhausting work in factories and mines; Strict discipline	HUMPHRIES, 2010
World Wars (century. XX)	Children mobilized in conflict contexts	Acting as messengers, caregivers, and even combatants	FASS, 2011; WINTER, 2006 APA, 2007;
Contemporaneity	Childhood as a subject of rights, but under market pressure	Digital adultization, aesthetics and chemistry (fashion, social networks, cosmetics)	UNICEF, 2019; BUCKINGHAM, 2011

Source: Authors.

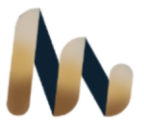
2.3 INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA

2.3.1 Inclusion criteria

Original articles, reviews, books, and technical reports published between 1970 and 2025, from a historical, sociological, pedagogical, psychological, or medical perspective, which addressed childhood, adolescence, or adultization, were included. Studies that analyzed practices of early sexualization, child consumption, digital exposure, anticipation of puberty or use of cosmetics with potential endocrine disruptors were also considered, as well as official documents from international organizations, such as the United Nations (UN), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO), as well as documents from medical societies, such as the Brazilian Society of Pediatrics (SBP).

2.3.2 Exclusion Criteria:

Opinion essays without academic basis, journalistic materials without scientific support, and religious texts that did not have articulation with historical or social analysis were excluded.



2.4 ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

The selected material was analyzed in three stages:

1. Exploratory reading – initial survey to identify relevant works.
2. Selective reading – evaluation of the relevance of the concept of adultization and its application in historical and contemporary contexts.
3. Analytical reading – organization of information into thematic categories:
 - Childhood in ancient civilizations (Greece, Rome, Judaism).
 - Childhood in the Middle Ages and Modern Age.
 - The Industrial Revolution and the World Wars as contexts of explicit adultization.
 - Contemporary adultization: media eroticization, digital exposure, early use of cosmetics, aesthetic pressures.
 - Biopsychosocial impacts: mental health, eating disorders, early pregnancy, suicide risk.
 - Protective factors: family, school, religiosity and community values.

The process sought to identify convergences and divergences among the authors, valuing both the descriptive dimension (what is adultization in each context) and the analytical dimension (how the phenomenon transforms and what its current implications are).

2.5 ETHICAL ASPECTS

As this is a literature review, without primary data collection or identification of individuals, this study did not require submission to the Research Ethics Committee, in accordance with **Resolution No. 510/2016** of the National Health Council. In addition, all sources used were duly cited, respecting the principles of academic integrity.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the literature shows that early adultization is a multifactorial and persistent phenomenon, which takes on new forms in contemporary societies. Multicenter studies (UNICEF, 2019; WHO, 2021; SBP, 2021) indicate that the process tends to emerge between 7 and 9 years of age, precisely in the period when sexuality should remain in latency. This anticipation occurs both due to cultural factors and biological conditions, such as the anticipation of pubertal milestones in girls with a higher body mass index (KAPLOWITZ, 2001; BRANDÃO, 2021).

In girls, aesthetic effects predominate: early use of makeup, sexualized clothing, digital filters, and eroticized poses on social networks. In boys, performative attribution is more



strongly observed: early exposure to pornography, eroticization in digital games, and pressure to adopt toxic masculinity patterns (APA, 2007; BUCKINGHAM, 2011; UNICEF, 2019).

The digital vector is central. Ownership of own cell phones occurs, on average, from the age of 10, reaching almost universality at 15 (OECD, 2025). This factor increases exposure to sexualized content, cyberbullying, and social comparisons intensified by algorithms, phenomena directly linked to anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (WHO, 2021).

The hormonal dimension should also be considered. Cosmetics, shampoos, and lotions containing parabens have weak estrogenic activity and can act as endocrine disruptors (BIRA et al., 2016). Although they are not the sole cause or frequent, their early use in girls can contribute to anticipating pubertal milestones, reinforcing involuntary sexualization (BRANDÃO, 2021).

The family and social environment works as a catalyst or inhibitor of the process. Permissive families, little present or that encourage the aesthetic exposure of children tend to reinforce adultization. At the same time, fragile educational environments, the constant presence of reality shows, and sexualized dances on social networks contribute to normalizing early eroticization (UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF, 2019).

To synthesize these findings and clarify the relationship between the contemporary factors that sustain adultization and its main consequences, **Table 2 was elaborated**, which organizes the central elements identified in the literature analyzed.

Table 2

Contemporary factors of adultization and their consequences

Contemporary factors	Specific examples	Observed consequences	References
Early digital exposure	Heavy use of social networks, online games, <i>streaming</i>	Anxiety, cyberbullying, sleep disorders, attention deficit	APA, 2007; UNICEF, 2019; BUCKINGHAM, 2011
Media eroticization	TV shows, sexualized advertising, digital influencers	Hypersexualization, early sexual initiation, distortion of self-image	POSTMAN, 1999; ANDRADE, 2020
Aesthetic and cosmetic pressures	Use of makeup, aesthetic procedures, restrictive diets	Eating disorders, low self-esteem, risk of depression, and self-harm	TIGGEMANN; SLATER, 2014; WHO, 2021
Early puberty	Exposure to endocrine disruptors, childhood obesity	Increased risk of early pregnancy, emotional changes, social vulnerability	Brandão.2021; KAPLOWITZ, 2001;

Source: Authors.



Another central point is the relationship between early adultization and adolescent suicide, already considered the fourth leading cause of death between 15 and 19 years of age (WHO, 2021). Among the associated factors are depression, eating disorders, anxiety, abuse, neglect, and bullying, and the anticipation of adult roles contributes to bodily frustration and weakening of self-esteem (SMITH et al., 2020). National data indicate a worrying increase in suicide attempts among girls in Brazil, in parallel with the intense use of social networks (MINISTRY OF HEALTH, 2022).

The phenomenon occurs in all social classes, but with different motivations: in low-income families it is related to economic exploitation and digital vulnerability, while in medium and high-income families it is manifested by aesthetic search, exposure in social networks and consumption (BUCKINGHAM, 2011; UNICEF, 2019). Protective factors, such as strong family ties, trust-based supervision, clear cultural values and, in some contexts, religiosity associated with postponing sexual initiation, reduce the intensity and impacts of this process (RESNICK et al., 1997; ROSTOSKY et al., 2004).

Although it has transformed over time, the phenomenon persists in more sophisticated, diffuse, and naturalized forms, varying in intensity according to the regulation of children's advertising, the performance of the cosmetics industry, and the degree of digital penetration (OECD, 2025). In the legal sphere, **Law No. 15,211/2025**, known as "**ECA Digital**", **stands out**, which imposes obligations on applications, electronic games, social networks, and digital services, including age verification, family supervision, removal of content related to child abuse, and restrictions on advertising aimed at minors, with penalties that can reach BRL 50 million per infraction and the creation of a national authority for inspection (AGÊNCIA CÂMARA DE NOTÍCIAS, 2025).

In addition, there is a global trend of restricting the use of cell phones in school environments as a protective measure against early digital exposure. In Brazil, **Law No. 15,100/2025** limits the use of portable devices during classes and breaks, except for pedagogical, health, or accessibility purposes, reflecting concerns about impacts on students' learning and mental health.

4 CONCLUSION

Early adultization is a historical and persistent phenomenon, which has accompanied humanity since Antiquity, but which takes on new clothes in contemporary times. If in other periods it was expressed through explicit forms such as child labor, arranged marriages or the mobilization of minors in wars, today it manifests itself in a more sophisticated, diffuse



and naturalized way, articulating digital, aesthetic, hormonal and social vectors (ARIÈS, 1981; BUCKINGHAM, 2011; UNICEF, 2019).

The body of evidence analyzed demonstrates that the anticipation of phases in the lives of children and adolescents has profound impacts on biopsychosocial development, including erosion of the psychosexual latency period, intensification of anxiety, depression, and eating disorders, increased risk of early pregnancy, and increased vulnerability to suicide, especially in girls subjected to aesthetic and digital pressures (WHO, 2021; SMITH et al., 2020; MINISTRY OF HEALTH, 2022). Factors such as early exposure to digital devices, use of cosmetics with potential endocrine disruptors, media sexualization, and fragility of family ties reinforce these effects; however, solid affective bonds, trust-based parental monitoring, media literacy and, in some contexts, religious belonging, function as protective factors, reducing the intensity and damage of adultization (RESNICK et al., 1997; ROSTOSKY et al., 2004).

This scenario must be understood not only as a cultural phenomenon, but also as a matter of public health and social protection, demanding integrated policies that regulate children's advertising and digital marketing, restrict the use of endocrine disruptors in cosmetics aimed at children, promote media education programs in schools, and strengthen family and community bonds. From a scientific point of view, longitudinal and multicenter studies are still needed to deepen the understanding of the effects of adultization in different cultural and socioeconomic contexts, while socially it is essential to foster a broad debate involving families, educators, health professionals, and policymakers, in order to preserve childhood as a legitimate stage of protection, growth, and healthy development (SBP, 2021; OECD, 2025).

Finally, early adultization, although resignified throughout history, remains an ethical, health, and educational challenge of the twenty-first century. Overcoming this problem requires not only accurate diagnoses, but also collective and interdisciplinary actions that give back to childhood and adolescence the right to be fully lived.

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