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Our Hero and That Kind of Woman: Imaginaries of Sexuality, Masculinity and Femininity in the Discussion of the Rape Allegation against Cristiano Ronaldo in Portugal

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Abstract: Kathlyn Mayorga’s rape allegation against Portuguese football star Cristiano Ronaldo was mostly met in his home country with disbelief, prompting a strong wave of support for the national icon. Mayorga was often perceived as a ‘gold digger’. This article explores how traditional gender norms, sex scripts and rape myths underpinned the resignification of the rape allegation into a case of extortion, naturalizing sexual abuse regarding ‘immoral women’. It examines how the intersection of local patriarchal traditions with the neoliberal order produced a morality which normalized the commodification of women’s and men’s bodies as a path to social mobility. It looks at the commodification of Ronaldo’s body, his key to success as a ‘super-body’ whose exceptional sports performance granted him respectability, an exceptional social status and access to women’s sexualized bodies. Then, it examines the construction of Mayorga’s body as a sexualized body with less moral and/or commercial value, operating in an area perceived as indecent (sex as a ‘gold digger’ or sexual transactions as a prostitute) and whose inflicted harm could be compensated through money.

Keywords: sexual violence; #MeToo; Cristiano Ronaldo; narrative immunity; Portuguese media



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1. Introduction

1.1. *Der Spiegel's Investigation*

On 29 September 2018, as part of an investigation triggered by documents disclosed by the whistleblowing platform Football Leaks,¹ *Der Spiegel* published a piece of investigative journalism about Kathlyn Mayorga, an American woman who had signed a non-disclosure settlement with Portuguese football star Cristiano Ronaldo (Buschmann et al. 2018). The settlement involved the payment of \$375,000, prohibited her “from ever speaking about the incident” and required “her to drop all accusations against Ronaldo” (*idem*). Mayorga told *Der Spiegel* that she had met Ronaldo in a Las Vegas nightclub in summer 2009, followed him to his hotel suite with other people and, once there, he tried to force her to perform oral sex and then raped her anally. A medical examination attested to her injuries: “a circumferential swelling with bruising and a laceration” (*idem*). The case was reported to the police, but Mayorga refused to name her assailant. She told *Der Spiegel* that she had signed the settlement deal “out of fear [. . .] out of impotence, the inability to stand up” to Ronaldo, and that it was the #MeToo context that gave her self-confidence to name him and request the case to be reopened in 2018. Ronaldo denied the accusations, claiming that the sex had been consensual. He said that, following his advisors’ recommendations, he had signed the agreement only to avoid attempts “to destroy his reputation” (BBC 2018). In July 2019, Las Vegas prosecutors decided not to pursue criminal charges against Ronaldo, arguing that, “Based upon a review of information at this time, the allegations of sexual assault against Cristiano Ronaldo cannot be proven beyond a reasonable doubt” (BBC 2019).²

Der Spiegel's investigation was translated and widely discussed in Portugal. It made headlines and triggered a wave of editorials, op-eds, debates on TV, posts and memes

on social media, whereby positions were openly expressed. The rape allegation was met mostly with disbelief, prompting a strong wave of support for the national icon in social media and among media personalities from the most diverse political spectra (e.g., [Rádio Renascença 2018](#); [Sapo 2018](#)). The President, government members, politicians, celebrities and sports personalities were asked to comment on the case. Many reactions avoided discussing the rape allegation, saying that it was up to the courts to ascertain the truth, and stressed instead Ronaldo's talent, accomplishments and status as a national hero (e.g., [O Jogo 2018](#)); others openly expressed their support for the football player regarding the allegation (e.g., [Ribeiro 2018](#)). Several feminists and journalists engaged in anti-rape and anti-sexual harassment agendas, though refraining from commenting on the rape allegation, denounced the activation, dissemination and normalization of sexism and rape myths in the public discussion of the case (e.g., [Lopes 2018](#)).

Portuguese media coverage focused on the impacts of the rape allegation on Ronaldo's reputation and career, while neutralizing sexual victimization ([Silveirinha et al. 2020](#)). Ronaldo's popularity in Portugal, his home country, underpins the hostile reaction against Mayorga, which resembles what [Waterhouse-Watson \(2013\)](#) had observed in Australian press: the media construction of narrative immunity for footballers with a celebrity status against allegations of sexual assault by discrediting the women who accused them as 'gold diggers', 'scorned women' and 'predatory women' and ascribing them sole responsibility for the events. As I argued elsewhere ([Garraio et al. 2020](#)), the construction of narrative immunity for Ronaldo in the Portuguese mediascape operated through the representation of Ronaldo as a positive role model: the hero of a 'rags to riches story', the good son, the good father, the sexy athlete, the national hero, and the generous charity ambassador. In this process, #MeToo was often depicted as a platform for false allegations and opportunists.

The efforts to discredit Mayorga as a liar and opportunist capitalized on particular information provided by *Der Spiegel*: at the time of the incident, Mayorga was "a budding model and one of her jobs was to hang out with other young, beautiful women in front of bars to lure in guests" ([Buschmann et al. 2018](#)). This depiction, alongside the Portuguese media reproduction of pictures and video footage of Mayorga drinking and dancing with Ronaldo at the nightclub where they met, nurtured a narrative circulating in social media and informal conversations which suggested that Ronaldo was a virile man who had been seduced by an experienced woman. Mayorga's reported injuries were ignored, as she was perceived as a model looking for an affair with a world celebrity or as a prostitute looking for a billionaire client. Both interpretations pictured her as a 'gold digger' and an opportunist, who was trying to take advantage of the #MeToo moment to get 'even more money' from her sexual encounter with Ronaldo. Hence, subscribing to Ronaldo's version of that night, the whole affair was reinterpreted as a case of extortion after consensual sex.

1.2. #MeToo in Portugal

As a process consisting of the significant sharing of experiences of sexual harassment and violence in (social) media, #MeToo arrived in Portugal only in 2021, following the actress Sofia Arruda's testimony about her experiences of sexual harassment on Portuguese TV. In 2022 and 2023, debates about sexual harassment and abuse in Portuguese academia gained significant media attention in the context of the Lisbon Faculty of Law and the Center for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra's cases.³ Despite these late arrivals, the global #MeToo movement had been articulated previously in Portugal on several occasions through different approaches and with different outcomes ([Almeida 2019](#); [Cerqueira et al. 2023](#); [Garraio et al. 2020](#); [Garraio et al. 2023](#); [Luppi 2021](#); [Magalhães 2021](#); [Prata 2021](#); [Silveirinha et al. 2020](#)). Despite the reduced expression of #MeToo in the country, some studies suggest that the media coverage of the initiative contributed to the questioning of power structures and legislation ([Almeida 2019](#)) and to the revitalization of Portuguese feminist movements ([Prata 2021](#)).

Weinstein's case and the allegations against prominent personalities from American cinema and politics (e.g., Brett Kavanaugh, Kevin Spacey, Woody Allen) were widely

covered in Portuguese media (Almeida 2019), because they involved celebrities who are very popular in the country and because American politics garner significant attention in Portuguese news. With the exception of *la manada* case in neighboring Spain,⁴ which obtained significant attention by Portuguese media, the repercussions of #MeToo in other geographies, namely in countries of the Global South, such as Egypt and India, and its intersections with other feminist initiatives and movements (e.g., #NiUnaMenos), remained almost absent from mainstream media. The sensationalism and glamorizing tone which marks the coverage of the Hollywood stories further contributed to narrowing the perception of #MeToo as celebrity stories about rich men and beautiful women. Since coverage was focused on particular events, the initiative was not articulated as a social phenomenon (Faustino et al. 2020), hence sidelining not only the history of activism underlying #MeToo (e.g., Tarana Burke's activism), but also the potentialities of feminism hashtags and alliances between victims.

The very few Portuguese media women who spoke about the phenomenon in 2017 never named sexual harassers: they basically acknowledged the existence of the problem in Portugal and positioned themselves as having resisted sexual harassment. By resorting to a specific vocabulary from the realm of shame (embarrassing, uncomfortable), their testimonies are pervaded by a subtext which suggests a dichotomy between 'decent women' who 'know how to say no' and those 'who take advantage' of the sexual interest of powerful men to boost their careers (Ventura 2020). The negative reactions to this timid articulation of an incipient Portuguese #MeToo movement were very strong. Among them are statements by several media women who strongly rebuked the allegations, and those like popular journalist Clara de Sousa, who downplayed them by saying that she had experienced "funny situations of harassment" at the workplace (Silveira 2018). Hence, this brief engagement with #MeToo was not only unable to bring society to discuss the behavior of powerful men who sexually harass women at the workplace in Portugal, but also harbored a problematic (and often voyeuristic) tendency to focus on women's agency by policing their sexuality and morals with the subtext that sexual transactions can be a key for women's successful careers.

Just a few days before the publication of *Der Spiegel's* investigative report about Mayorga, a verdict triggered a significant dialogue between national feminist aspirations and the global #MeToo movement.⁵ The crime occurred in a nightclub in Gaia, a city near Oporto, and the victim was in an alcoholic coma. Her assailants, a bartender and a security guard, were sentenced for sexual abuse, instead of rape. The judges argued that the woman did not suffer serious injuries, there had been a climate of seduction before the crime and the aggressors were well integrated in society. In a country with a history of problematic rape sentences,⁶ this verdict was met with widespread anger and criticism of the judiciary. The analysis of the media coverage, especially media outlets like the center-left daily newspaper *Público*, suggests that there were efforts to discuss the social and legal implications of the verdict and to raise awareness of the problem of sexual violence. The case was used to scrutinize prevailing legal practices, while a significant part of the coverage focused on feminist protests, reproducing activists' criticism and understandings of rape (Santos et al. 2022).

While the media coverage and public discussion of the Gaia sentence denoted openness towards feminist understandings of sexual violence, refraining from activating rape myths and tending to frame the global #MeToo movement as a moment of deeper awareness of sexual injustice, the opposite can be observed in Ronaldo's case (Garraio et al. 2023). In order to grasp these different reactions, we have to look briefly at the profound transformations which Portugal underwent in recent decades in terms of legislation, gender norms and cultural imaginaries and which contribute to the instability of the understanding of sexual violence in Portuguese contemporary society.

Portugal has witnessed the consistent implementation of legislation for the protection of women's rights, gender equality and justice (Poiares 2016; Wall et al. 2016) in recent decades, especially following the country's ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2013

(GREVIO 2019). Feminist mainstreaming, media visibility of gender-based violence and public awareness of the seriousness of sexual violence have also been increasing (Simões 2016; Cerqueira and Gomes 2017). Nonetheless, Portugal is still framed by widespread sexism and pervasive patriarchal structures and practices. The tensions resulting from this complex legislative–social context make sexual violence a contested space for the negotiation of meanings concerning what is ‘real rape’, with the concomitant contestation or activation of ingrained rape myths. In this unstable context, what makes an act be socially perceived as sexual violence and a man as a rapist can often be related to the identities at issue.

This applies also to the judiciary. Despite successive amendments in legislation concerning rape, scholars argue that “inertia and resistance are still felt at the level of social norms and organisational cultures of those applying the law” (Torres et al. 2018, pp. 69–70). The legal discourse often considers that the victims of sexual violence are co-responsible for the (circumstances leading to the) violence inflicted on them (Ventura 2018). Patriarchal conceptions of masculinity, femininity and sexual morality and the enacting of traditional hierarchies of privilege and discrimination regarding class, gender, race and nationality may determine who is perceived as a sexual aggressor and who is credible as a rape victim. When a woman presses charges of rape, she is “scrutinized for the veracity of her story, in terms of her perceived character, her sexual history, mode of dress or attitudes which may be seen as contextual to rape” (Silveirinha et al. 2020, p. 212). Women whose accusations are validated in court tend to conform to a specific pattern: modesty regarding dress code and social attitudes, no signs of ‘sexual promiscuity’, exhibition of marks of inflicted violence proving physical resistance, a social status that is superior to the rapist’s. On the perpetrator’s side, men convicted of sexual crimes tend to be associated with marginality, deviancy and/or social subalternity (unemployed, low-paid work, single, without sexual appeal, from minorities, psychotic and/or uneducated) (Ventura 2014, 2017, 2018).

In a similar way to what happens in other contexts (Benedict 1992), media reinforces the othering of sexual aggressors by depicting them as deviant masculinities and imbuing them with traits of monstrosity (Ventura 2014, 2017). These patterns reinforce the pervasive understanding of rape as a crime committed by a stranger to the victim and rapists as men from the social margins and deprived classes, thus converging in the validation of expectations regarding sexuality that pervade Portuguese society: the assumption that a particular type of woman would not engage in sex voluntarily with a particular type of man is central to the credibility of a rape allegation. In this context, accusations targeting men with considerable social, economic and sexual capital tend to be met with suspicion.

The divergent reactions to the Gaia verdict and the rape allegation against Ronaldo expose precisely the heterogeneity and complexity of social perceptions and imaginaries of rape in contemporary Portuguese society. The Gaia verdict echoes familiar scripts: both men were working-class, which positions them as part of the masculinities that are socially perceived as more prone to sexual violence, but the fact that they knew the victim and were ‘well integrated in society’ (had jobs and no prior convictions) worked decisively in their favor. The vitality of the feminist protests against the verdict signals that this later script was being contested in some sectors of society. As the debates about Ronaldo’s rape allegation suggest, that contestation operated successfully as long as it did not involve men in positions of power and/or with strong symbolic capital.

2. This Study

This article aims to identify and examine the imaginaries of sexuality, femininity and masculinity that underpin the discursive reconfiguration of the rape allegation against Ronaldo into a case of extortion following consensual sex. The analysis is informed by the following research questions: which notions of worthiness, entitlement and privilege were mobilized in Ronaldo’s defense? How do these notions underpin the enactment of particular sex scripts and rape myths in the debate? How is the context of ‘unromantic’ and/or commercial sex—sex deprived of emotional/romantic engagement and/or framed

by the market—perceived in such a way that the reference to these contexts contributes to the normalization of sexual violence as sex? How did the interactions between local patriarchal traditions and the neoliberal order and values enact particular understandings of sexual morality and hierarchies of personal value and credibility while discussing the rape allegation? To pursue these questions, I will look at the gendered commodification of bodies in the neoliberal age.

On one hand, I will look at the commodification of Ronaldo's body, his key to success as a 'super-body' whose exceptional performance in an area (professional football) that is perceived as decent and hardworking grants him an exceptional social status and access to women's sexualized bodies. On the other hand, I will examine the construction of Mayorga's body as a sexualized body with less moral and commercial value, operating in areas perceived as indecent (sex as 'gold digger' and sexual transactions as a prostitute) and whose inflicted harm can be compensated through money.

Drawing on my previous research about the rape allegation against Cristiano Ronaldo, this study contributes to the scarce bibliography about the repercussions of #MeToo in Portugal (Almeida 2019; Cerqueira et al. 2023; Garraio et al. 2020, 2023; Luppi 2021; Magalhães 2021; Prata 2021; Silveirinha et al. 2020), more specifically about the role of the rape allegation against Ronaldo in shaping Portuguese subjectivities and perceptions of #MeToo (Garraio et al. 2020, 2023; Silveirinha et al. 2020). In that sense, it is a contribution to the under-researched area of sexual violence in Portuguese society and mediascape. Informed by the relevant literature in the area—specially Ventura's (2018) work on the legal system and media representations of rape—this case study contributes to the mapping and critical examination of sex scripts and rape myths in contemporary Portuguese society and their enactment and performance in the neoliberal age. The importance of this case study is not limited to the Portuguese context, though. Informed by research about media's coverage of #MeToo (e.g., De Benedictis et al. 2019) and #MeToo's potential for social change (e.g., Boyle 2019; Fileborn and Loney-Howes 2019; Mendes et al. 2018; Tranchese 2023), it is a contribution to research about #MeToo which focuses on one of the high-profile international celebrities who was accused of rape in the context of the initiative. Drawing on the critical study of celebrities (e.g., Jorge et al. 2021; Littler 2004, 2008) and football in enacting social imaginaries of success, morality, (national) belonging and consumption (e.g., Billig 1995; Coelho 2001, 2004; Whannel 2002), this study contributes to research about the role of football in shaping subjectivities about the entanglements between sexuality, entitlement, masculinity and violence.

It is important to note that this study is not intended to inquire about Ronaldo's culpability or innocence or the credibility of the allegation nor examine the US legal procedures that led to the dismissal of the lawsuit. This study is about the imaginaries of sex and sexual violence that the accusation of rape triggered in Portuguese debates. It assumes that the qualitative analysis of the rhetoric, sex scripts and rape myths enacted in Portuguese media debates about the case can be examined independently of the evaluation of the legal procedures against him in the US jurisdiction.

2.1. Methods, Approach and Key Concepts

This study is anchored in qualitative methods (critical discourse analysis, content analysis, frame analysis, visual semiotic analysis), research on the correlations between power, language, culture and gender and the vast bibliography on the cultural representations of sexual violence. It is particularly informed by research about the implications of positionality, perspective and identity in rape narratives (e.g., Higgins and Silver 1991; Horeck 2004). My analysis assumes that language is a representational system which functions as a construction of meanings (Hall 1997) and that, as a practice of communication, it functions as a series of performative acts in a given social context framed by power relations. As such, texts, discourses and images are constructions of realities, anchored in social, political, historical and cultural contexts. Therefore, this study is informed by the principles of critical discourse analysis, which understands language as a form of social practice and

examines the relationship between text, interaction and social context (e.g., Fairclough 1995) and the role of discourse in the reproduction of power and dominance (e.g., van Dijk 2008). My analysis is also informed by the conceptual framework from gender studies which postulates that sex and sexuality are socially constructed (e.g., Foucault 1978), explores the entanglements between gender, power and sexuality (e.g., Abbott and Wallace 1991; Jónasdóttir et al. 2011) and understands gender as performative (Butler 1990).

This study is informed by the vast feminist research about sexual violence, which since the 1970s has been exposing the prevalence of rape in our societies, the bias and shortcomings of the legal system in prosecuting and combating rape, and examining how pervasive gendered imaginaries of sexuality, femininity and masculinity may normalize certain forms of sexual violence as sex and contribute to generating suspicion towards victims and silencing them (e.g., Bourke 2007; Brownmiller 1975; Ventura 2018). My analysis is indebted to the conceptual framework of sex scripts and rape myths and to the research which examines how conceptions that link what it means to be a man with sexual audacity, dominance and the exercise of violence underpin some pervasive rape myths which are deeply embedded in the social fabric (e.g., Schwendinger and Schwendinger 1974). I use the concept of rape myths as those cultural assumptions, imaginaries and expectations about sexual assault which are ingrained in the symbolic and normative sphere of societies, and which contribute to excuse and/or invisibilize some forms of sexual aggression, ultimately creating hostility towards some victims. Among pervasive rape myths, the myth of the perfect or ideal victim stands out. The concept was coined by criminologist Nils Christie (1986) to examine how society operates with hierarchies of victims whereby some individuals are more readily given the legitimate status of being a victim. In the case of rape victims, notions of respectability and sexual morality operate with expectations of vulnerability and weakness. As such, the category tends to function as a fictitious profile that ends up by contributing to the silencing and discrediting of individuals who are subjected to sexual violence and, as such, nurtures victim blaming (e.g., Randall 2010). This study is also informed by research about the role of media in producing narrative immunity for celebrity athletes (Waterhouse-Watson 2013), as well as research about himpathy, a concept widely used in feminist research about #MeToo, which was coined by Kate Manne (2017) to refer to “the inappropriate and disproportionate sympathy powerful men often enjoy in cases of sexual assault, intimate partner violence, homicide, and other misogynistic behavior”.

This study assumes that opinion pieces, such as editorials and op-eds, as well as debates on TV, blogs, posts and memes on social media, are particularly relevant when examining the subjectivities, reactions and emotions on issues and events that have significant media visibility and provoke heated debates, as it was in the case of the rape allegation against Cristiano Ronaldo in Portugal. Furthermore, mainstream newspapers' opinion pages tend to be associated with the voices of the powerful and dominant discourses (e.g., Wahl-Jorgensen 2004). This study of memes, which is particularly relevant when examining public perceptions, has exposed how humor can be mobilized to construct and sustain gender stereotypes, ideologies and imaginaries of sexuality (e.g., Herbenick et al. 2023; Lomotey 2020). This type of material is therefore well suited to examine the imaginaries that fueled the discussion of the rape allegation against Ronaldo: which gender norms and notions of sexuality, masculinity, femininity, morality and respectability were mobilized to sustain opinions or, in the case of memes, to seek the humor effect? These questions are crucial for my analysis of the construction of narrative immunity for Cristiano Ronaldo in Portuguese mediascapes through the valorization of Ronaldo's professional exploits in tandem with the degradation of Mayorga as an immoral woman.

My positionality as a Portuguese citizen who consumes media on a daily basis, who is active on social media (especially on Facebook and Instagram) and whose main focus of research for over 15 years has been narratives and media representations of sexual violence was crucial in the development of the methodological process. As such, I have been closely following the repercussions of #MeToo in Portugal and collecting materials for research

on the topic. As someone who grew up in Portugal and spent most of my life there, I am very aware of the role of football in Portuguese society as a privileged enactment of banal nationalism (Billig 1995; Coelho 2001, 2004). As someone who is 15 years older than Cristiano Ronaldo, I closely followed his career from the time when he, as a poor boy from the Isle of Madeira, was a promising teenager footballer among others in the Sporting football academy (Lisbon) until he was celebrated as one of the best football players of his generation (in Portugal as the best), while becoming a world celebrity and a sex symbol. When news about the rape allegation broke out, I immediately inferred that this case would profoundly affect the dynamics of #MeToo in Portugal and that the analysis of the debate about the case could offer a most pertinent opportunity to scrutinize entrenched and pervasive imaginaries of sexual violence, sexuality, masculinity and femininity in contemporary Portuguese society. Therefore, I immediately started collecting materials from mainstream media (news, op-eds, interviews), from popular blogs and informal material circulating in social media (memes, posts), especially via Facebook groups and other collectives that participated in the debate. As I was collecting data, I immediately started exploring the topic for future research and identifying lines of analysis, whereby I mapped themes, narratives, strategies of rhetoric to create empathy and to discredit women who spoke out in the context of #MeToo. In late 2019, as I was writing an essay about the backlash against #MeToo through the public discussion of the rape allegation against Ronaldo (Garraio et al. 2020), I proceeded to a systematic collection of the op-eds on the case in four mainstream newspapers (*Público*, *Observador*, *Expresso* and *Diário de Notícias*) by searching the keywords “Cristiano Ronaldo”, “Mayorga” and “MeToo” in the websites of these newspapers in the three weeks following the *Spiegel*’s publication. For the current article, I expanded this search to other newspapers and tabloids (*Jornal de Notícias*, *Correio da Manhã*) and information and entertainment magazines (*Visão*, *Sábado*, *Flash*). I also reviewed the main Facebook group that was created to support Ronaldo immediately after the disclosure of the rape allegation (Grupo de apoio a CR7).

In possession of these significant data in my private archives, I focused my attention on opinion from quality and popular media from October 2018, in the aftermath of *Der Spiegel*’s piece (29 September): comments on national TV channels, editorials and op-eds in newspapers and magazines, blog entries and posts and memes on social media. I conducted a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) of the different materials, a method that allowed for the “identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns (themes) in the data”, and the examination of implicit and explicit meanings of the texts (Guest et al. 2012). My map of the analysis corroborated previous studies which argued that there was widespread support for Ronaldo regarding the rape allegation (Garraio et al. 2020; Silveirinha et al. 2020). I identified two main themes in the texts that expressed support for Ronaldo: the heroization of Ronaldo as a national icon; and the discrediting of Mayorga as an unreliable woman. I also identified the sub-themes of each theme. These sub-themes were related to the understandings of sexuality, sexual morality, masculinity and femininity that sustained the main themes. The adoption of inductive, qualitative analysis (Corbin and Strauss 2008) allowed me to identify narratives and rhetorical strategies in the media discourses about the case. I used purposive sampling to construct a corpus of analysis for this article. In the analysis of the selected materials, I adopted qualitative methods which have been widely used in studies about sexual violence in the media (critical discourse analysis, content analysis, frame analysis, visual semiotic analysis). In this article, I also refer to media texts outside this period to exemplify certain traits of Ronaldo’s pervasive public image in Portugal (for instance, his popularity as a national hero and womanizer).

2.2. Imaginaries of Sexuality, Masculinity and Femininity in the Construction of Narrative Immunity for Ronaldo

2.2.1. Ronaldo: The Super-Body of the Nation

Ronaldo’s origins are working-class,⁷ which could position him as part of the masculinities that are socially perceived as more prone to sexual violence. However, his status as a

national icon, sex symbol and world celebrity were decisive in making the rape allegation against him unbelievable for significant sectors of Portuguese society. Even a 2005 rape allegation against him was barely mentioned in Portuguese media in 2018.⁸

Our national hero

Ronaldo's popularity prompted the immediate activation of ingrained imaginaries of sexuality, according to the script that affirms 'a man like him does not need to rape'. This script certainly pervaded the international debates about the allegation; nonetheless, in Portugal, it was intensified by the fact that it "is in relation to the nation that sport-related morality is most conspicuously determined by positionality" (Whannel 2002, p. 163). In his home country, Ronaldo is much more than just one of the many celebrities caught in the #MeToo movement; he is a national hero of a 'rags-to-riches story' whose status as a national icon, anchored in the popularity of football in contemporary Portuguese society, emblematically mobilizes the intersection of banal nationalism (Billig 1995) with notions of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) and vortextuality (how celebrities represent our fantasies of lifestyle, luxury, conspicuous consumption and display) (Whannel 2002).

In a small country reduced to political irrelevance as a poor, peripheral EU member state, harboring large social sectors pervaded by post-imperial nostalgia for the so-called Discoveries and the colonial past (e.g., Cardina 2016; Peralta and Góis 2022; Vecchi 2020), the national football team prompts the most vigorous enthusiasm and euphoria embodying emblematic performances of a shared sense of national belonging (Coelho 2001, 2004). Ronaldo stands out as the most accomplished icon of this national celebration. See, for instance, memes celebrating Portugal's victory over France in the Euro 2016 (Funchal Notícias 2016), as well as a montage posted by the hyper-nationalist formation Nova Portugalidade after an important match in the Euro 2020. This montage depicts Ronaldo by using the iconography of Emperor Napoleon and includes the following inscription:

Our Cristiano Ronaldo, son of a humble gardener and a modest cook, is really important in this era of the eclipse of Portugal in the world. There is no European, North American, Asian or African channel that doesn't talk about him today. The Portuguese people have long felt the need to see themselves through a humble and brave man. Tonight, CR gathered in a single pulse the fullness of Portugality. (Nova Portugalidade 2021)

Ronaldo's world fame made him an icon of aspirations of national grandeur, as he is perceived as someone who makes you proud of being Portuguese (Garraio et al. 2020). Support for Ronaldo in the rape allegation was therefore often articulated as an act of deserved national gratitude. On 7 October 2018, a week after *Der Spiegel's* publication, the Facebook "Group of support for CR7" was created with the aim of supporting "our Cristiano Ronaldo in retribution for the joys he gave to all of us, the Portuguese people, and to show that we stand by him regarding the sad accusations against him in the public sphere" (Grupo de apoio a CR7 2018a).⁹ One of their first posts consisted of a close-up photo of Ronaldo wearing the Portuguese national team outfit and these printed words: "He has always supported us. The time has come for us to support him. I support Ronaldo" (Grupo de apoio a CR7 2018c). Pedro Almeida Sande's op-ed in the conservative newspaper *Observador* echoed the mood among large sectors of Portuguese society: "Cristiano Ronaldo is one of Portugal's modern heroes, perhaps his greatest name, and that's why the Portuguese, more than any other people, should make a profession of faith in his innocence" (Sande 2018).

Embodying hegemonic masculinity

Ronaldo's status as a national hero may cause perplexity since national heroes usually embody notions of hegemonic masculinity and sexuality which conform to and reproduce traditional gender norms. However, several aspects of Ronaldo's media profile do not comply with Portuguese traditional gender norms regarding what 'a real man should

be', making him differ from the role models which pervade Portuguese society, namely among the working classes where his popularity is so strong: his pose as a metrosexual, the use of surrogacy procedures for three of his children; his avoidance of marriage; his emotional reactions to frustration and defeat (crying in public). Although some of these traits are articulated and discussed in Portuguese media and among his Portuguese fans, these elements tend to be sidelined in favor of traits that comply with hegemonic notions of masculinity (Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005): heterosexuality (sex with many beautiful women), wealth (cars, villas, luxury products) and protective masculinity (charity work, providing for his large family). His famous 3m40cm statue on the island of Madeira with very protruding genitalia—inaugurated in 2014 and now a tourist attraction—is revealing of the celebration of Ronaldo as a hyper-virile man (Marques 2014). Ronaldo's reputation as a womanizer and heartthrob who 'conquered' gorgeous women, many of whom are not Portuguese—there are online lists of his girlfriends and lovers, including those he had affairs with during his 5-year relationship with Russian top model Irina Shayk (Flash n.d.)—interacts with the imaginary of masculinity as a source of national pride in a context of post-colonial emasculation.

It is worth looking at certain spheres and discourses about national sexual virility which are articulated through humor, gossip and anecdotes involving tourist nightlife spaces. The virile dark-skinned macho who accumulates sexual 'conquests' among tourists from richer countries from the North—blond women who experience sexual satisfaction in these encounters—is a well-ingrained cliché in post-dictatorship Portugal associated with the tourist industry. Zezé Camarinha is an emblematic expression (albeit in a carnivalesque register) of this imaginary: contrary to Ronaldo, Camarinha does not correspond to dominant patterns of male attraction; however, this man from Algarve is known to the Portuguese public due to the claim that he had slept with hundreds of *bifas* (Correio da Manhã 2003). The slang word *bifas* derives from the English beef and refers to female (blond) tourists from the North, especially British. In this imaginary, *bifas* are perceived as trophies and their sexual gratification with Portuguese men empowers a narrative about national traditional virility. The economic deprivation behind many situations of working-class 'beach seducers' is not silenced in this imaginary, but rather transfigured into a narrative of male potency. Camarinha's autobiography—*The Last Portuguese Macho Man* (Camarinha 2008)—echoes precisely this celebratory narrative.

This imaginary was enacted in the context of the public discussion of the rape allegation against Ronaldo through the circulation of memes of Zezé Camarinha with (indirect) references to the case. One consisted of a famous photo of Camarinha looking over the beach with the inscription "[Foreign] Women should know that, when they come to Portugal, they have to stand in the dog position" (Mais Tabaco 2018). The intended humor of the meme operates on two intertwined levels: the celebration of national virility via heterosexual anal sex as a form of dominance, whereby foreign women became sexual trophies; and a subtext which implicitly inscribes Ronaldo's 'sexual encounter' with Mayorga in the pattern of the sexual exploits of the national caricature of the Southern lover (Camarinha). What might be a derogatory meme for the sex symbol—Ronaldo—actually reinforces his narrative immunity: it frames the footballer's 'encounter' with Mayorga as sex within the constellation of Portuguese men having sex with tourists from the North.

The (sexual) entitlement of successful men

Ronaldo's sexual conquests and wealth, being mediated as fruits of his accomplishments as a most talented football player, are part of a narrative whereby he epitomizes a story of success in the neoliberal age. Informed by research about the role of celebrities in legitimizing the values of capitalism and socio-economic inequality (e.g., Dyer 1979; Littler 2004; Cross and Littler 2010), Jorge et al. (2021) argue that Ronaldo's public image as someone who, against all odds, achieved privilege thanks to his hard work and talent paradigmatically embodies Western individualism and the capitalist myth of upward social mobility through meritocracy. Indeed, in a country marked by deep socioeconomic inequalities and processes of social reproduction (Bourdieu 1979)—which were aggravated

in the period of 2010–14 by the Euro-crisis and the austerity measures imposed by the 2011 Troika¹⁰ intervention—, Ronaldo personifies the possibility of success and upward social mobility which in turn empowers him to have access to the commodities associated with powerful men: beautiful women, expensive cars, luxury villas; it also grants him the possibility of fulfilling a key role of hegemonic masculinity, namely, the exercise of protective masculinity as the provider for his large family (children, mother, siblings and other relatives) (VIP 2019b) and as a generous charity donor (RTP 2015).

These traits produce a sense of entitlement for Ronaldo which shapes reactions to his breaches of the law. Jorge et al. (2021) examined the significant support for him in Portugal when he was sentenced in Spain in 2018 for fraudulently evading almost €15 million in tax. Exploring Portuguese quality and popular news media (including readers' comments), they identified widespread sympathy for Ronaldo in tandem with "quasi-dismissive and congratulatory reactions for hiding taxes from the government", which in turn deflated "the scandal, while implicitly expressing a suspicious position regarding the role of the State with the rise of neoliberalism and libertarian values" (Jorge et al. 2021, p. 185). His public image as a generous charity spender plays a major role here. Celebrities who 'give back' to the most deprived enact an imaginary of charity "as a way of wealth distribution based on individual decision-making and voluntary donations", which "solidifies the neoliberal regime by appearing to address inequality" (*idem*) while fostering the "delegitimization of the welfare state" (*idem*, p. 188). Widespread negative attitudes towards the State and government spending (the suspicion that they are inefficient and corrupt) were crucial for the perception in Portugal that Ronaldo's tax evasion was not serious villainy against the collectivity; after all, so the claim went, he had been helping 'directly' those who need the most throughout his whole career. Probably unsurprisingly, this narrative echoed among the working classes and Portuguese diasporas, which emanate significantly from the most deprived sectors in Portuguese society. References to this charity work, which was framed as proof of his good character, were very common in social media following the rape allegation. See, for instance, several posts of the Facebook group "Grupo de apoio a CR7", such as the post about how he paid for the expensive surgery of a child (Grupo de apoio a CR7 2018b) and his engagement with the Portuguese Association Against Cancer (Grupo de apoio a CR7 2018d).

Hence, public support for Ronaldo regarding the rape allegation was informed by the intersection of different layers in the footballer's media profile—post-imperial nostalgia, notions of hegemonic masculinity, celebration of neoliberal values—, and by how this intersection produces a national consensus whereby class and gender inequalities tend to blur. As a poor boy from an impoverished island who became an extravagant millionaire, Ronaldo embodies a dream of social mobility through honest, hard work, talent and self-sacrifice that is practically unattainable for working and middle classes in Portugal's strongly stratified society. For Portuguese audiences, Ronaldo is also the son of a working woman who sacrificed herself to raise her children, a 'mother courage' who now has access to luxury shops and is a regular presence in women's magazines and talk shows. Through him and his family, wealth and luxuries are not represented as a symptom of Portuguese society's deep social asymmetries and injustice, but as deserved rewards for hard work and success, hence naturalizing and legitimating structural inequality, economic privilege and neoliberal consumerism. In sum, while fascination for Ronaldo's consumerism fosters the dilution of the deep social inequalities in Portuguese society, the glamorization of his sexual 'conquests' of 'hot women' nurtures an imaginary of national male potency which dilutes class differences in the economy of sex which pervaded Portuguese traditional society: traditionally upper-class men had access to the sexuality of the women of the lower-class men, while upper-class women were 'not for' lower-class men. These sexual boundaries dissolve with Ronaldo. These subtexts underpinning Ronaldo's media profile help to understand as well why, in spite of the openly sexist tones underlying the wave of support for Ronaldo in Mayorga's case, so many women—public figures like journalist Judite de

Sousa (Sapo 2018) and women on social media—reproduced this rhetoric to express their support for the national icon.

2.2.2. Mayorga: The Unreliable Woman

The exculpatory Portuguese narrative about Ronaldo as a figure of positive masculinity became intertwined with a narrative about Mayorga as the ‘kind of woman’ who is not credible. While video footage of her dancing with Ronaldo the night of the events was read as an indication that she was a seductress, the payment of \$375,000 involved in the non-disclosure agreement was perceived as a sign that she was a woman whose testimony was for sale. Both elements were signified as evidence that she was a predatory woman, a ‘gold digger’ and even fueled rumors claiming that she was a luxury prostitute. The following examples from influential media personalities from different backgrounds and with different political views and symbolic capital in Portuguese society signal that these diversified enactments of the unreliable woman trope were widely disseminated in the Portuguese mediascape and interacted with each other through different combinations.

Not a real rape victim

Miguel Sousa Tavares (born 1952), a high-profile lawyer from an influential family, journalist, writer and media commentator, argued on the 8 o’clock TV news that the reported facts indicated that there had been a rape and that, by paying for Mayorga’s silence, Ronaldo himself had indirectly acknowledged it. Additionally, Tavares had, nonetheless, harsh words regarding Mayorga:

She did not want to punish him for his deeds, she just wanted to receive compensation. She considered that she had been compensated. If she wanted to punish him, she would pursue the charges, would receive no compensation and he would have been judged [...] Her offended honor was worth \$375,000 and she was content [...] Nine years later, capitalizing the #MeToo movement, she and her lawyer [...] decided that this amount was not enough anymore and so they fell over Ronaldo to change the hundreds of thousands of dollars for millions of dollars. That’s what this is about. [...] Do I agree with his attitude? No. Do I agree with her attitude? No. (Tavares 2018)

Tavares echoes a traditional discourse that positions sexual violence in the domain of honor and makes the social response to rape depend on the character of the victim. Echoing the entrenched rape myth that devalues the gravity of sexual violence when it is committed against women ‘without dignity’—the myth of the ‘perfect victim’ (Christie 1986; Randall 2010)—, Tavares concludes that both Ronaldo and Mayorga behaved wrongly, thus leveraging rape with financial compensation.

Another example of downplaying the seriousness of rape comes from Luís Pedro Nunes, writer, columnist and acclaimed journalist with experience covering some war zones in the Global South. In his chronicle for the national newspaper *Expresso* (Nunes 2018), he claims that there are two types of women who speak out about rape in the context of #MeToo: women who are frightened to go outside for fear of verbal abuse and “survivors of CR7 and Kavanaugh” who try to get money from their assailants. He contrasts these experiences with the path embodied by Nadia Murat, who had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize just a few days after *Der Spiegel’s* investigative report. He extensively describes “the horror of horrors” that Murat and other “Yezidi sex slaves” went through as victims of rape as a weapon of war (repeated rapes, forced impregnation, ostracism from their communities) in order to devaluate experiences articulated through #MeToo as “problems of whites”, meaning petty concerns by privileged women who have no awareness of what “real rape” is and the violence that women in the Global South face. Hence, for him, Western feminist attempts to bring Murat and #MeToo together within the frame of sexual violence result in the banalization of rape.

As we know, the assumption that rape is not an isolated atypical phenomenon in women’s lives, but the most severe outcome of an environment of patriarchal oppression

and sexual harassment and violence, which in some circumstances culminates in rape, has been a key element in feminist scholarship about sexual violence since the 1970s (e.g., [Brownmiller 1975](#); [Kelly 1988](#)), which underpins the related concept of ‘rape culture’ (e.g., [Connell and Wilson 1974](#)). This idea of a continuum of gender-based violence is at the core of #MeToo. As [Boyle \(2019, p. 51ff\)](#) argues, it functioned as an umbrella that enabled women from widely different backgrounds and with widely different experiences to join the same hashtag; however, the idea of the continuum became also a nerval point of contestation by its detractors. Nunes echoes precisely one of the most pervasive anti-#MeToo narratives which was epitomized in Deneuve’s letter: the claim that #MeToo distracts public attention from ‘real rape’ ([Collectif 2018](#)). The particularity of Nunes is that he adopts postcolonial jargon to reframe it through the North/South divide, positioning the Global South as the place where ‘real rape’ happens.

Deneuve’s letter also echoes in the rhetoric adopted by Raquel Varela when she wrote about the rape allegation against Ronaldo. Raquel Varela (born 1978) is a history professor in Lisbon and a Portuguese media personality associated with the left. She is a regular presence on TV, magazines and newspapers and has had a popular blog since 2013. On 3 October 2018, she wrote in her blog:

A woman with whom C. Ronaldo had an affair blackmailed him saying she wouldn’t tell anything about them in exchange for nearly \$ 400,000. [...]

Well, I don’t know if she was raped or not. This is up to the courts. [...] But I know that this type of woman does not represent me at any time, nor can she represent any battered woman. In fact, she is the kind of woman I would never like to meet in my life, never, for example, I will walk side by side with these women in a demonstration for equality. [...]

Now seeing a woman who has received more than \$ 300,000 from a man to keep silent and who has accepted it, well this demonstrates the moral sewage that Metoo is. [...]

Now let’s look at the serious consequence of all this—rape is a very serious crime, with very low convictions in chauvinist judicial systems, judged in court by professionals without the slightest notion of what that means, and what we have to represent ourselves are these women? Which from any point of view as a sociological category fall into the obvious category of money-relations, luxury prostitution, or sale of moral values?

We women have to break female loyalty agreements and say enough to these women who can never represent any denunciation of social or gender injustice. What unites us is much smaller than what separates us—gender unites us, all the rest separates us, starting with honor. ([Varela 2018a](#))

Following criticism by some feminists and human rights activists, Varela tried to clarify her position as an ‘opposer of rape’ by criticizing #MeToo, which she described as a “reactionary movement led by women without character who have been taking pictures on the red carpet for 30 years with the men they accuse now of having raped them” ([Varela 2018b](#)). As a guest on an emission of the popular TV show *Prós-e-Contras* dedicated to #MeToo ([RTP 2018](#)), which was broadcast two weeks after the publication of *Der Spiegel*’s investigation, she resumed her criticism of #MeToo and insisted on the need to prosecute ‘real rape’, demanding harsher sentences for rapists, as well as the conviction of women who make false allegations. Varela reproduced one of the most problematic beliefs according to which complaints of rape can be divided in two groups: real rapes, which she equates as the ones that can be proven in court, and false allegations. Her words implicitly boost the myth of false allegations—the overestimation of false reports of sexual assault ([Lisak et al. 2010](#))—that marked the discussion of the rape allegation against Ronaldo in Portugal. As journalist Aline Flor exposed in an in-depth news article of the same period, quoting official sources, no more than 3% to 4% of complaints are proven to be false allegations in the Portuguese

context. According to the quoted sources, the fact that only a tiny percentage leads to a conviction has other reasons: victims give up and withdraw the complaint, police investigations do not gather sufficient evidence, the accused are acquitted for lack of evidence (Flor 2018).

The hoax of raping a prostitute

Quintino Aires (born 1967) is a controversial psychologist and regular guest on sensationalist TV shows and the yellow press. In an op-ed for the yellow magazine *Flash*, he reproduced a rumor that circulated in social media and informal conversations: the claim that Mayorga was a prostitute. He argued that video footage “proved” that she was harassing a rich client and should be prosecuted for false allegations. Here some excerpts of his op-ed:

Of course, there may well have been a crime of rape. But it may rather be a crime of false allegations. Based on what we know, both are possible. The latter is more likely according to statistics that indicate that three out of four complaints are false. [...]

After all, the lady was a prostitute. [...] Escort or “model” only means that paid sex must be agreed on as a second step if they go up to a hotel room. [...] In the case of a professional woman working in heterosexual sex, it is the offer, for money, of oral sex, vaginal sex or anal sex. And in this regard, it is a good practice to start by refusing so that you can raise the price. [...]

In my opinion, and that of millions of other people who weren't in that room that night either, it all started with anger following jealousy. She thought she was the prettiest and then he didn't propose to her. (Aires 2018)

Considering that the accusation of rape involved not only Mayorga's testimony and the non-disclosure agreement, but also medical exams, the pervasive non-discussion of her injuries seems to suggest that they were perceived to be irrelevant as evidence. Aires may be implicitly normalizing them by suggesting that refusal is a way of raising the price in the context of sex work, i.e., he apparently assumes that Mayorga may have resisted anal sex, but this could have simply been a strategy to ask for more money when cashing in for the sexual transaction. In the second part of his op-ed, Aires advances another interpretation: he depicts Mayorga as a false naïve who was looking for an affair with a celebrity and felt scorned. The accusation of rape was signified hence as the revenge of a ‘gold digger’ who had her expectations defrauded. In his interpretations of the case, Aires claims that the sex was consensual, but suggests that there might have been discrepancies in the expectation regarding the performance of sex and its aftermath: she might have resisted anal sex; she might have wanted him to call back. These subtexts assume that violence may be a common part of male sexuality and sexual pleasure with ‘that kind of woman’.

To grasp why this interpretation of the rape allegation resonates among some sectors of Portuguese society, one has to look at both the imaginaries of heterosexual anal sex and of prostitution. Maria João Faustino (2018, 2020) examined the discursive normalization of heterosexual anal sex through a corpus of women magazines, which suggest, on one hand, that anal sex with a woman is perceived as a heterosexual ‘spicy’ experience denoting virility and male sexual capital, according to an imaginary that assumes that only some men are able to convince their girlfriends to do it. Faustino argues that the gendered scripts behind this apparently sex-positive approach may mask situations of sexual coercion and violence: men are depicted as those who want this kind of sex, experiencing it as the trespassing of a boundary, as a conquest and enactment of virility; women, on the other hand, tend to be depicted as reluctant, as having to be convinced into it, and sometimes as having reported pain and admitting that they only did it because the boyfriend was used to it with an ex-girlfriend. Faustino argues that the sensationalism and derision that marked the articulation of anal sex in the discussion of the rape allegation against Ronaldo echoes precisely this imaginary: Ronaldo's ‘naughty’ virility makes him want to engage in

experiences that can be painful for women who are not used to it (Faustino et al. 2020). The above-mentioned meme with Camarinha participates precisely in this narrative.

The discrediting of Mayorga was also informed by perceptions of prostitution as indecency, which are ingrained in understandings and practices regarding the activity as an institution aimed at the control of women's sexuality through the differentiation between good/private women and bad/public women (Osborne Verdugo 2004). The perception of sex for sale as indecent affects the social perception of the subjectivities of the women who engage in the activity: the fact that a woman sells her sex, understood as her most intimate part, is signified as suggesting that her words are also for sale and therefore not reliable. This imaginary of indecency lies at the core of the stigmatization of women involved in the activity and their high vulnerability to violence (Oliveira 2010, 2017; McGrow 2017; Ribeiro and Sacramento 2005; Teixeira and Oliveira 2017). Therefore, sex workers' associations and some activists and scholars argue that the best way to tackle sexual violence against these women and their social isolation is to dissociate the activity from the idea of immorality by legalizing it and defining it as sex work.

As we know, #MeToo has been accused of not addressing the violence and harassment experienced by sex workers and victims of sexual trafficking (e.g., Cooney 2018). The situations of sexual violence associated with #MeToo (both in 2006 and 2017), specifically regarding workplaces, were framed by the consensus that, in that type of social environment, the imposition of sex is not ethical and means violence. Sex workers and activists defending the rights of sex workers argue that the same rules apply for sex work: however, for significant sectors of society, this consensus does not exist when sex is part of the activity. The abovementioned persistent imaginaries of sexuality anchored in the degradation of the body associated with 'only sex', intertwined with the effects of economic logics on the safety of women who exercise the activity in some neoliberal contexts (Bindel 2022), sustain perceptions according to which the 'imposition' of sex (or of certain forms of sex) is 'part of the job of any prostitute'. Aires' comments precisely echo this mindset.

The discursive construction of Mayorga as a 'gold digger' and/or luxury prostitute operated in connection with the media mobilization of the gendered voices of the women in Ronaldo's life: his mother, his sisters and his girlfriend (and mother of his youngest daughter at the time). All were very vocal in (social) media supporting him and asking the Portuguese to do it. When expressing their distress over the allegation, they also adopted gendered notions of what an (in)decent woman is. For instance, one of his sisters posted on Facebook a photo of herself in a restaurant owned by her family with the inscription: "While some whores try to make a living with the money of the others. . . I make sandwiches for the best Portuguese restaurant in Brazil" (Flash 2018). The implicit dichotomy between the 'good decent women' who are part of Ronaldo's (daily domestic) family life and the 'bad indecent women' of his casual sexual encounters resonates in the rhetoric adopted by Ronaldo's mother, sisters and girlfriend, reinforcing the narrative about Mayorga as a 'gold digger'. The traditional (and pervasive in Catholic contexts) disconnection/duality between sex and romance/love and its concomitant archetypes—whore/seducer versus decent/family woman—is emblematically enacted in these speech acts.

3. Conclusions

Since media simultaneously reflects and (re)produces dominant cultural norms, ideologies and imaginaries (e.g., Goffman 1974; Santos 2018; Shoemaker et al. 2001), it is a key disseminator and (re)producer of sex scripts and rape myths and can function as a (re)producer of narrative immunity for particular types of individuals who are accused of sexual assault (Waterhouse-Watson 2013), thus reinforcing existing power and gender relations. Therefore, writing and speaking about rape implies not only struggling with perspectives over the meaning of the event and selecting or privileging some perspectives over others, but also navigating in entrenched social imaginaries regarding sexuality, masculinity and femininity.

In this paper, I have argued that particular sex scripts and rape myths—which are ingrained in Portuguese gender and cultural norms and imaginaries—were activated in the reconfiguration of the rape allegation into a case of extortion: the policing of women’s behavior and bodies which enables the sexual coercion of immoral women and imposition of ‘rough sex’ on them to be perceived as not ‘real rape’ (or at least not the most serious kind of rape); the perception of heteronormative anal sex as an exploit for virile men; and the assumption that some violence, discursively conflated with ‘rough sex’, is part of the work of a prostitute. These scripts were crucial in the operationalization of the media rumors claiming that Mayorga was a prostitute and/or a ‘gold digger’, which in turn nurtured the construction of narrative immunity for Ronaldo. As I have previously underlined, the present study is not about *the truth* of Ronaldo’s or Mayorga’s statements. My focus was on how those statements were represented, perceived and interpreted in Portugal.

As I stated in the section about methods, my analysis is framed, on the one hand, by my positionality as a Portuguese media consumer who is part of the sociocultural context where the debate about the rape allegation took place, and, on the other, by my feminist lens informed by debates and scholarship about sexual violence. I openly stated my positionality and lens because I assume that scientific research is not immune from political motivations and ideologies even when it claims to be neutral (Fairclough and Wodak 1997). Since I assume that critical discourse analysis is inevitably biased (van Dijk 2001, p. 96), it is important to clarify them. There are also methodological constraints that may have affected the results. While the collection of op-eds was systematically carried out through searches in the newspapers and magazines sites, the same cannot be guaranteed for memes and Facebook posts, due to privacy settings and to the fact that the discussion of the rape allegation was not restricted to Facebook groups created for that purpose. Finally, this paper refers to a period when Ronaldo was at the peak of his career. Public attitudes and media coverage of allegations of rape against ‘fallen stars’ have their own particularities and dynamics: the processes of narrative immunity are less pronounced and effective, and the media can easily turn them into ‘ideal perpetrators’ (Boyle 2019; Tranchese 2023, p. 224ff). Therefore, as Ronaldo’s career comes to an end and his sports performance is increasingly criticized, one cannot exclude the possibility that Portuguese perceptions of the rape allegation, in tandem with developments in national debates about sexual violence, might have changed. The findings of this paper refer solely to a time when he was celebrated as an ‘uncontested’ star in Portugal.

The discussion of the rape allegation took place within a broader context of profound transformation in gender norms, notions of sexuality and understandings of sexual violence in Portugal. Against the backdrop of #MeToo, a timid presence in Portugal at the time, Ronaldo’s case contributed strongly to the backlash against #MeToo in the country (Garraio et al. 2020) in tandem with the reinvigoration of particular rape myths. The debates generated by this highly mediatic case expose precisely the instability and fluidity of the perceptions of rape in this context of social change, allowing for the identification of key factors that contribute to a situation being perceived as (not) rape. The recurring efforts by those who openly defended Ronaldo against the allegation to position themselves as opposers of ‘real rape’, alongside their constant efforts to define rape in opposition to the scenario of the rape allegation, signal precisely the instability with regard to the meaning of rape. They also show how perceptions of rape are deeply intertwined in the subjectivities generated by the identities at stake in each particular allegation. The discourse analysis of the efforts to dissociate the elements of the rape allegation from ‘real rape’ exposes the strength and pervasiveness of particular rape myths identified in the literature about sexual violence, specifically the myth of the ‘perfect victim’ (Christie 1986; Schwendinger and Schwendinger 1974). This case study emblematically exposes how rape myths exist as a cultural repository of discourses and imaginaries that can be activated when particular types of men are accused of sexual assault. The case reveals how football, as a space where national belonging (Billig 1995; Coelho 2001, 2004) and subjectivities of worthlessness and privilege (Whannel 2002) are forged, operates as a privileged trigger of processes of

narrative immunity (Waterhouse-Watson 2013), whereby its heroes become “unimaginable rapists” (Garraio et al. 2020). This case study corroborates Ventura’s insights (Ventura 2018) about the imaginary of the rapist that pervades Portuguese society and which excludes successful men with sex appeal from the category of perpetrators of sexual assault.

Therefore, the critical analysis of the discussion of the rape allegation against Ronaldo leads us to a key ambivalence of #MeToo and more broadly to the discussion of the potential of celebrity culture for social change. It was the notoriety and symbolic capital of actresses involved in the complaints against Harvey Weinstein and the hashtag that contributed to the (at least initially) popularity of the initiative and the transnational dissemination of debates about sexual violence and harassment in 2017; however, precisely the same celebrity culture can work against the credibility of the debates generated by #MeToo when the accused are celebrities with strong symbolic capital like Ronaldo. Hence, Boyle’s insight: #MeToo has the potential to effectively contribute to social change as long as it is linked to broader feminist activism, knowledge and research and is not exclusively dependent on celebrities and individual mediatic cases (Boyle 2019, p. 120).

Finally, this case study shows how deeply entrenched patriarchal imaginaries, sex scripts and rape myths can intersect with neoliberal values and be reinvigorated by them. As we know, the derogation of the women perceived as ‘only for sex’ sustains the persistent tradition of social degradation of prostitutes and ‘easy women’ and violence against them in patriarchal settings. The abuse of the object of sex becomes normalized in the performance of sexuality as a form of male (sexual) dominance. This has contributed to the establishment of hierarchies regarding women who are subjected to sexual violence, namely, the differentiation between the ‘real victims’ and ‘lesser victims’ or ‘not victims’. In Portuguese debates about the rape allegation against Ronaldo, the enactment of these notions of gender, sexuality and morality interacted with understandings of entitlement and personal and sexual worth, which were framed by capitalist values at a time when Portugal was undergoing deeper integration into the neoliberal economy and forms of consumption in the aftermath of the Euro-crisis and IMF intervention. The exculpatory narratives for Ronaldo based on the assumption that Mayorga was a ‘gold digger’ and/or a prostitute signal precisely that traditional norms of male entitlement and female morality could be reinvigorated by the neoliberal economy of sex and consumption, which enables those who succeed to benefit from procedures of exception whereby their wrong-doing and the harm and injustice they cause can be ‘easily’ compensated through extra-judicial procedures and money.

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Notes

- ¹ Football Leaks consisted of documents exposing tax tricks and financial transactions in European professional football. The platform has been associated with a series of investigations by media partners of the European Investigative Collaborations since 2016. The Portuguese Rui Pinto, author of Football Leaks, was arrested in Budapest in January 2019 at request of the Portuguese authorities and transferred to a Portuguese prison. He was released in August 2020 and is currently awaiting trial for suspicion of attempted qualified extortion, violation of secrecy and illegally accessing information.

- ² Mayorga had also filed a civil lawsuit in Nevada. In October 2021, federal magistrate judge Daniel Albrechts recommended that the lawsuit be dismissed, saying that Mayorga’s lawyer, Leslie Stovall, “acted in bad faith by asking for, receiving, and using Football Leaks documents to prosecute” the case and that there was no evidence that Mayorga had been intimidated by Ronaldo’s lawyers to sign the 2010 settlement (Ritter 2021). The lawsuit was dismissed in June 2022: Judge Jennifer A. Dorney considered that the use of “cyber-hacked attorney-client privileged documents” represented “abuses and flagrant circumvention of the proper litigation process” (Deutsche Welle 2022). Judge Dorney ruled that Stovall had to pay Ronaldo over \$300,000 for legal fees he paid while defending himself, saying that “Stovall’s repeated use of stolen, privileged documents to prosecute this case has every indicia of bad-faith conduct” (Close 2023).
- ³ In April 2022, it was reported that 10 percent of the professors of the Faculty of Law of the University of Lisbon had been identified in complaints, made by students, for sexual harassment and discrimination (Câncio 2022). In 2023, a publication of three former researchers at the Center for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra described situations of sexual and moral harassment and exploitation at a center which they did not name (Viaene et al. 2023), but which could easily be identified as the Center for Social Studies. Following media attention on the publication, other women reported situations of sexual harassment involving scholars from the center.
- ⁴ *La manada* [the wolf pack] refers to the gang rape of an 18-year-old woman in 2016 by 5 men, including a policeman and a member of the Spanish Army. The verdict triggered protests and demonstrations, as the men were found guilty only of sexual abuse, because the prosecution argued that there was no proof that they used force to subjugate the victim. In 2019, the Supreme Court reversed the sentence, and the men were found guilty of rape.
- ⁵ On 20 September 2018, *Público* was the first newspaper to report about the Gaia verdict. *Der Spiegel*’s publication was on 29 September 2018.
- ⁶ See, for instance, a 1989 sentence for the rape of two foreign tourists. The judge considered that the women were co-responsible for the rape, because they must have been aware of the risks of hitchhiking in the “hunt area of the Iberian male”. The verdict prompted strong feminist criticism (Ventura 2015). The case is still remembered as a landmark checking the advances and setbacks in women’s struggles and the prosecution of rape (Câncio 2014).
- ⁷ Ronaldo is the fourth child of a deprived couple from one of the poorest and most unequal regions in Portugal, the Isle of Madeira. Ronaldo positions himself as a man who is not ashamed of his origins (e.g., VIP 2019a) and who is very proud of his mother. Dolores Aveiro is depicted in the media as a ‘mother courage’—precisely the title of her autobiography (Aveiro 2014)—who bravely raised her children. Ronaldo’s father died following health issues related to alcoholism.
- ⁸ Only a few Portuguese news sources reported that, in 2005, Ronaldo had been accused of rape in a London hotel. At that time, Ronaldo denied the allegation, and the case was dropped due to a lack of evidence (Sol 2018).
- ⁹ The group continues to be very active, showing support for Ronaldo not only regarding his problems with the law, but also in the context of the criticism of his performance as a football player.
- ¹⁰ The Troika was composed of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the European Commission (EC).

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