‘Cristiano Ronaldo is cheap chic, Twilight actors are special’: young audiences of celebrities, class and locality

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Fieldwork was conducted with a total of 48 respondents in Portugal. Participants were aged between 12 (who show greater autonomy as they enter the teenage years) and 17 years (who do not yet have the right to vote, which comes at 18)

# Abstract

Taking a broad perspective on the audiences of celebrity culture, this article investigates the ways in which Portuguese young people participate in the social construction of celebrity, their own identities and ultimately their country’s place in global culture. Looking at the negotiation processes that occur among young people aged 12–17 around local and global celebrities, mostly from entertainment and sports, the respondents held different perceptions depending largely on the celebrities’ cultural origins. The relationships that young people establish with celebrities also help them to project a social position and negotiate their ambitions. While perceptions of class are more accentuated among general audiences and enthusiasts regarding local celebrities, there is a more dramatised view of the life narratives of teen stars and global celebrities, which is even stronger among fans. The discussion surrounding Cristiano Ronaldo, a local celebrity turned global, showed that the meanings they attribute to celebrities link class and the semi-peripheral position that Portugal occupies in the global circuits of culture.

# Outcome

"In this article, I have argued that investigations into audiences of celebrity should take both class status and locality into consideration. The fact that young fans of national celebrities could not be located, as they are very poorly organised and do not create social media around their idols as much as fan groups of global celebrities do, in itself, shows not only how fan communities are constructed by (global) industries (Gamson 1994) but also how the connection with national celebrities is more dependent on the initiative of the media, even if the market is small. This helps to create ‘localebrities’ (McElroy and Williams 2011) who are mostly seen by young audiences as having an attributed celebrity, with a limited impact, and thus considered as lesser. The national origin and scope of their celebrity is perceived as depending largely on television and local celebrity media, with greater superficiality and reliance on image and gossip, and even on activism as a form of
reiteration of the celebrity. The class significations are more evident in the case of national
celebrities as they are confined to the circulation in a small-scale, semi-peripheral country" (Jorge, A., 2015: 50).

"By contrast, the life narratives of foreign celebrities, coming from the main centres of cultural production, inspire a more dramatised view among fans, but also among general audiences. While I prompted and discussed celebrity cases mainly from sports, where authenticity is perceived as stronger (Andrews and Jackson 2001, Smart 2005) and entertainment mostly targeted at youth, young fans seem to appropriate these celebrities as inspirational models of success and authenticity on a global scale, in a social void that associates these celebrities with cosmopolitanism (Duits and Vis 2009) and that makes respondents’ own social strata seem possible to overcome with equal personal strength.
Young people from lower-class and some middle-class families tend to highlight the status that has been achieved by celebrities, although they exert vigilance over their behaviour or do not attribute to them a relevant social value. They demand a social performance of humility.
Also, in the case of Ronaldo, middle-class youths’ opinion that his fortune is immoral and
lower-class youths’ feeling that he should distribute his money more to charity relate to an
Anglo-Saxon solidarity model that has been influenced by United Nations-style celebrity and that does not find parallel in the social, political and civic cultures of southern Europe (Jorge 2011). The spread of a ‘neoliberal selfhood’ (Allen and Mendick 2013), in other words, is not only permeable down to young audiences and how they construct the social world, but also to their expectations towards what national celebrities’ behaviour should be. The celebrification of the national culture brings its original globally-oriented rules with it. So not only does celebrity culture impose a model of individualism, it also reifies the cultural geographies of power. By negotiating their positions regarding national and global celebrities, as well as a national-gone-global celebrity such as Ronaldo, young people incorporate Portugal’s position in the global culture, but tend to be resigned to the fact that theirs is a small part of a global arena" (Jorge, A., 2015: 51).