

# Disputes and impasses in the media representations of skateboarder Rayssa Leal

## *Disputas e impasses nas representações midiáticas da skatista Rayssa Leal*

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to discuss the disputes and impasses imposed on forms of communication that contribute to the consolidation of young people as social actors, in all their complexity, in the media representations of the notion of “youth.” The Interpretive Content Analysis method was applied in journalistic articles about skateboarder Rayssa Leal before, during, and after the Olympics. Serge Moscovici, Rossana Reguillo Cruz, and José Machado Pais, among others, collaborate for theoretical reflection. Comparing articles published in the newspaper *O Globo* and other periodicals, it is concluded that the representations analyzed undergo a process of subjectivation, but aspects that reinforce the idea of youth as a homogenizing concept remain.

**Keywords:** Youth, media representations, youth cultures, Rayssa Leal, skateboarding

### RESUMO

O objetivo é discutir disputas e impasses que se impõem sobre formas comunicacionais que favoreçam a consolidação dos jovens como atores sociais, em toda a sua complexidade, nas representações midiáticas da noção de “juventude”. Aplica-se o método da Análise Interpretativa de Conteúdo em matérias jornalísticas sobre a skatista Rayssa Leal antes, durante e depois das Olimpíadas. Serge Moscovici, Rossana Reguillo Cruz e José Machado Pais, entre outros, colaboram para a reflexão teórica. Comparando-se matérias publicadas no jornal *O Globo* e outros veículos, conclui-se que as representações analisadas passam por um processo de subjetivação, porém permanecem aspectos que reforçam a ideia de juventude como conceito homogeneizante.

**Palavras-chave:** Juventude, representações midiáticas, culturas juvenis, Rayssa Leal, *skateboarding*

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OLLIE, FLIP, POP shove-it, kickflip, boardslide, tailslide, flip backside indy air. These linguistic maneuvers, which invaded the early family mornings during the 2020 Olympics, held in July 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, are some of the countless terms that circulate naturally within the skateboarding culture but which proved to be quite challenging for those who just wanted to cheer for Brazil. The specialized sports media made a great effort to bring the lay audience closer to the skateboarders, including didactic resources that showed the urgency of making familiar social representations (Moscovici, 2011) that only circulated in skateparks, bowls, tracks, and magazines. Despite the near impossibility of incorporating the slang and denominations that populate the universe of this sport debuting at the Olympic Games in such a short space of time, Brazilian crowds have embraced skateboarding and do not seem to want to let go, thanks to the athletes who brought “home” three silver medals: Kelvin Hoefler and Rayssa Leal in the “street” category and Pedro Barros in the “park” category. But it was Rayssa, the 13-year-old “fairy,” who captured everyone’s heart and attention, and this article focuses on this relationship built between the skateboarder, Brazilian society, and the media.

This study aims to discuss the relationship between contemporary Brazilian society and youth cultures from the media representations of the skateboarder Rayssa Leal that circulated before, during, and after the 2020 Olympics in journalistic reports. This article especially observes how such representations reiterate the homogenizing notion of “youth,” becoming impasses imposed on communicational forms that would favor the consolidation of young people in all their complexity as social actors. In Rayssa’s case, her media visibility and the subjectivity built from the Olympic experience shed light on some communication issues addressed by this article. The method applied is Interpretive Content Analysis. The corpus includes six journalistic articles published between 2019 and 2021 in the *O Globo* newspaper and other periodicals – *Diário do Nordeste*, *Estado de Minas*, and *Exame*.

On July 26, 2021, the day Rayssa Leal won the silver medal in the Olympic Games, *Claudia* magazine reported on her trajectory in one of the dozens of articles observed in the first phase of the research. Instead of rewriting her journey and already considering the media representations that consecrate the skateboarder as a public figure, I decided to reproduce an excerpt from the magazine, which reveals some of the aspects analyzed throughout this study.

Also known as “*Fadinha*” [“Little Fairy”], Jhulia Rayssa Mendes Leal was born in 2008 in the city of Imperatriz, Maranhão. Her first contact with the sport was at the age of 6, when, influenced by a friend of her father, she started skateboarding. At the age of 7, Rayssa won over Brazil and the world when a video of herself went viral on the Internet. In it, the girl dressed as Tinker Bell, the fairy from the film *Peter Pan*, performed a skateboard maneuver known as heelflip. That was when she got her nickname and gave Brazilians hope that a big sporting name was on the way.

The following years only confirmed what was already known: the girl from Maranhão, who until then had only practiced the sport for fun, had a great chance of becoming an Olympic athlete.

At age 11, already dedicated to major competitions in the sport, Rayssa won a Street League Skateboarding (SLS) tournament and made history by becoming the youngest skateboarder to accomplish the feat. At the competition in Los Angeles, the “little fairy” even topped another great name in Brazilian skateboarding, Pamela Rosa. (Paixão, 2021)

The *Exame* magazine adds:

But, besides going viral in Brazil, the video of Rayssa, the new “little fairy,” was shared by none other than Tony Hawk, one of the greatest legends in the history of skateboarding. At the time, still unknown, Rayssa caught the attention of the veteran, who wrote only, “I don’t know anything about this, but it’s awesome”. (Gavioli, 2021)

## **INTERPRETIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS: RAYSSA LEAL IN JOURNALISM**

Many journalistic articles were published about Rayssa Leal before, during, and after the Olympics. This study draws questions from the observation of part of that content available on the Internet.

Interpretive Content Analysis proposes a methodological path that begins with the construction of the research object, a step that corresponds to the first contact with the set of collected materials, followed by five other steps:

Interpretive Content Analysis (ICA) aims to select, classify, and typify media content, whether advertising, journalistic, or digital (online social media) content, by the following steps [...], which may coincide with each other, that is, overlap, going back and forth implementing actions:

1. Construction of the research object: identification of words, expressions, or images, explicit or not (hence the “interpretive” character of the method) that share the same semantic link.
2. Understanding the context: elaboration of a historical, cultural, and social perspective that comprises the content identified as the research object.
3. Focus within the research object: definition of the corpus under analysis.
4. Identification of expressive elements: search for terms and references that are recurrent and non-recurrent in the whole and grouped parts of the material.
5. Categorization: classification and typification of expressive elements in interpretive analysis categories.
6. Theorization: construction of ideas from the theoretical-conceptual perspective adopted.

#### Construction of the research object

The search for journalistic articles for this research occurred from February 20 to 22, 2020, in the *O Globo* Digital Archive website and using the Google search tool. The first platform was a facilitator for the research, thanks to remote access and the availability of all editions of the newspaper in an accurate and fast way. Google allowed the analysis by a comparative perspective, including a diversity of other journalistic periodicals, preventing any bias from affecting the results, which could have become conditioned to an editorial line exclusive to *O Globo*.

The filters applied on both search platforms were “Rayssa Leal” and “*fadinha do skate*” [“skate fairy”].<sup>1</sup> From the results obtained, the selection contemplated only articles published in the digital medium in journalistic periodicals that have or had had in the past printed correlates, excluding blog posts and other web pages not linked to the journalistic segment *a priori*. Moreover, the selection disregarded texts that only mentioned the skateboarder without developing any ideas about her (such as rankings, for example, or publicizing her participation in cultural and sports programming). Based on the criteria, the selected set totaled 82 journalistic reports published between March 18, 2018, and February 14, 2022, 64 from the newspaper *O Globo* and 18 from other periodicals. Still, for comparison purposes, the material was classified into three moments, as previously mentioned: before the Olympics, during the Olympics, and after the Olympics. For now,

<sup>1</sup>“*Fadinha*” is a diminutive form of *fada* (fairy) and literally translates as “little fairy.”

the first stage of construction of the research object does not consider that classification. When applying the method, the researcher’s interpretation and entire cultural background come into play. It is when the pre-constructed object is deconstructed to become a constructed object (BOURDIEU, 2007). It is the moment of discovery and “falling in love” with the object of research, when all body senses seem focused on hunting and collecting materials that may later become the corpus of analysis.

In practice, the method involves searching for words, expressions, and images articulated by a semantic nexus that results from the interpretation of those observing.

Starting with the newspaper *O Globo*, Rayssa Leal appears associated with notions of “childhood,” “adolescence,” “growth,” “development,” “joy,” “fun,” “relaxation,” “play,” “charisma,” “innocence,” “phenomenon,” “responsibility,” “lightness,” “talent,” “promise,” “prodigy,” “inspiration,” “enchantment,” “heroism,” “overcoming,” “dream,” “fairy tale,” “humor,” “family,” “school,” “celebrity,” “change of life,” among others.

To organize these elements, these words and expressions will be approximated and separated by a given semantic link (Table 1), resulting from the interpretation:

**Table 1**  
*Words and expressions arranged according to their semantic nexus – O Globo*

Life stage	Attributes	Everyday life	Gifts	Feats
childhood	joy	family	promise	change of life
adolescence	fun	school	inspiration	overcoming
growth	relaxation	change of life	enchantment	dream
development	play	responsibility	phenomenon	fairy tale
prodigy	charisma		heroism	celebrity
	humor		fairy	
	talent			
	innocence			

Note. Elaborated by the author

Based on this arrangement, the images of the articles published in *O Globo* reinforce and complement some of these sets of words and expressions (Figure 1).

The photographs that illustrate the newspaper articles show a thin, small body, so childlike that her skateboarder friends can easily carry her. The image of the “fairy” appeared only once although the written texts repeatedly refer to the nickname: the persistence of this figure, the 7-year-old “fairy,” underlines the childhood still present in Rayssa, despite her rejection of it. An element that never goes unnoticed in the frames made by the photographers is the braces on the skateboarder’s teeth, denoting that she is still growing up, which, by contrast, reinforces her potential as an athlete “who looks like an adult.” The last image in the sequence of Figure 1 appears in an article in which Rayssa states, “I’ve grown up, you can call me Rayssa Leal” (*Eu cresci*, 2021), marking the transition from her childhood to adolescence, to distance herself from “fairy,” the nickname that made her famous.

**Figure 1**

*Life stages: childhood, adolescence, prodigy*



Note. *O Globo* Digital Archive

Rayssa’s personality, recognized as cheerful, fun, and relaxed, always enthusiastic with the public, the cameras, and her opponents in tournaments, emerges in the smiling braces in her mouth and her charismatic gestures. The classic photographs of maneuvers that are part of the skateboarding culture, now spread by non-specialized periodicals, such as *O Globo*, combined with other images of the skateboarder, highlight the talent of her still growing body (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*Attributes: joy, fun, relaxation, charisma, talent, humor, innocence*



Note. O Globo Digital Archive

The achievements, of course, also color the reports that record the championships in which Rayssa participates. In Figure 3, the first photograph stands out, occupying almost a third of a page in *O Globo*, as if trying to demonstrate the gigantic size that the little skateboarder came to occupy in the minds of Brazilians, just like an inspiring and charming heroine.

**Figure 3**

*Gifts: heroism, phenomenon, promise, inspiration*



Note. O Globo Digital Archive

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*O Globo* mentioned several times the skateboarder’s expectations regarding the changes that would start to happen in her life after she won the silver medal in the Olympics. One of these transformations results in contracts with major brands, inside and outside the sports market, affirming Rayssa’s place as a sought-after celebrity. Of all the articles observed, only one had an image of her in her new “poster girl” role (Figure 4).

**Figure 4**

*Feats: change of life, celebrity – Rayssa Leal in Nike’s advertising campaign*



*Note. O Globo Digital Archive*

By way of comparison, there are other words, expressions, and images that join those presented by *O Globo* so far (Tabela 2).

**Table 2**

*Words and expressions arranged according to their semantic nexus – Other periodicals*

Attributes	Potential	Visibility	Vulnerability
assurance	Strength of Northeastern Brazil	digital engagement	protection

Continua...



Continuação

Attributes	Potential	Visibility	Vulnerability
relaxation	made history	social media success	mental health
maturity		visibility	too young
childlike shyness		big audience	
fairy			
vibes			
lightness			
joy			

Note. Elaborated by the author.

The periodicals *Quem, Veja, Exame, Istoé, Vogue, Claudia, Marie Claire, Forum, Lance, Diário do Nordeste, Correio (Bahia), Folha de São Paulo, and Estado de Minas* were selected. A recurrence of words, expressions, and images identified in *O Globo* is noticeable, but other representations appear here.

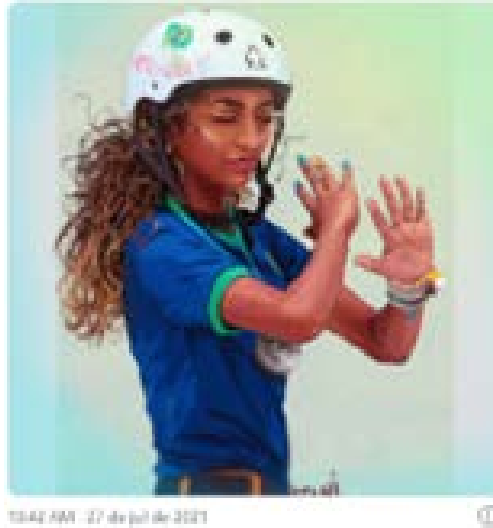
In contrast to the lightness, joy, and relaxation of the skateboarder, her “assurance and maturity” stand out, despite her “childlike shyness.” The figure of the “fairy” appears much more than in the newspaper *O Globo* and the video that gave rise to the nickname is also frequently shown. Rayssa’s potential as a strength of Northeastern Brazil and someone who is making history enhances these personal attributes, despite her young age. Another aspect that stands out is the media visibility obtained by the athlete. In this context, the number of followers on social media recognizes her enormous digital engagement. At the same time, 13-year-old Rayssa is seen as someone who needs (emotional and legal) “protection” and care for her mental health, since she is exposed to a “large audience.”

The images accompany the meanings identified, which are articulated with the representations of the skateboarder, highlighting other relevant issues.

With fair recurrence, articles highlight Rayssa’s identity as a Brazilian from Maranhão. An article in *Estado de Minas* (Rodrigues, 2021) reports the reaction of Twitter followers to a representation of the skateboarder that they considered too whitened, which would have led to illustrations that brought phenotypic traits closer to her skin color and hair texture (Figure 5).

**Figure 5**

*Rayssa's Black representativeness becomes controversial and encourages other artistic representations*



Note. *Estado de Minas* (Rodrigues, 2021)

Almost all the articles analyzed in this set of periodicals emphasize Rayssa's attributes corresponding to adolescence, configuring, as in *O Globo*, a recurring representation (Figure 6).

**Figure 6**

*Persistent attributes relate Rayssa Leal to the "fairy" image to her "lightness", "relaxation", and "joy".*



Note. "Brasileiras para ficar de olho" (2021) / "Rayssa Leal celebra" (2021) / "Rayssa Leal entra para livro dos recordes" (2021)

The *Vogue* magazine, in turn, portrays a young but more mature Rayssa Leal (Figure 7), which can be interpreted by the absence of the skateboarder's trademark in the media: her smile. In a sober pose for a fashion editorial, we can assume that the intention was to hide her braces because, on that occasion, it was not so interesting to show her more childlike side.

### Figure 7

*In a fashion editorial, Rayssa Leal appears more “mature” and her smile with braces disappears*



*Note. Vogue (Sordi, 2021)*

### Understanding the context

In this stage of Interpretive Content Analysis, we must consider the historicity of the social representations present in the material collected in the previous step. We will not always work with media content that is current, contemporary, or part of our culture. In these cases, in particular, it is necessary to study the context of the collected texts, images, records [...]. (Author, submitted for publication)

To contextualize the analysis, it is worth starting with a brief historical perspective of skateboarding. Its origin is attributed to Californian surfers in the 1950s, who, finding no waves at sea, adapted a wooden board to wheels with axles and thus began to descend the famous slopes of San Francisco. Leonardo Brandão (2014) states that surfing influenced the composition of the board, the body movements, and the culture of the practitioners. In 1960, the number of skateboarders around the world increased significantly, and there were many of them in Brazil already in the 1970s. Skateboarding established itself as a sport and cities created new spaces for it, such as skate-parks, bowls, and tracks, and modalities expanded. Besides the sporting character, which suffered a severe crisis in the early 1980s, punk and other youth

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cultures embraced skateboarding, attributing new cultural and urban values to it and, thus, consolidating street skateboarding. Due to the easy access, street skateboarding became even more popular among young Brazilians. In the early 1990s, a financial crisis during the Collor Plan strongly shook its industry, but even so, skateboarding managed not only to survive but also to solidify itself throughout the decade (Brandão, 2014).

A newspaper article published in *O Globo* in the mid-1980s (Figure 8) presents skateboarding as a thriving practice in the country. The piece highlights the values of “friendship” and “sincerity,” so characteristic of the culture of its practitioners, as well as the predominance of men.

Figure 8

Newspaper article about skateboarding in *O Globo* on November 2, 1986



Note. *O Globo* Digital Archive (Skate & Destroy, 1986)

Estimates indicate that 8.5 million people practice skateboarding in Brazil today.<sup>2</sup> The world market is worth around US\$ 3 billion, with US\$ 300 million in Brazil. Sports-related companies treat the modality as the second most practiced by men in the country, behind only soccer.<sup>3</sup> However, women have entered the world of skateboarding in recent decades, resulting in Rayssa Leal, who had Leticia Bufoni, Pamela Rosa, and, before them, Karen Jonz as examples, among many others.

The articles collected for this research between 2018 and 2022, before, during, and after the 2020 Olympics, held in 2021. That was the debut of skateboarding in the Olympic Games, with three silver medals for Brazilian athletes.

On January 1st, 2019, Jair Messias Bolsonaro assumed the presidency of Brazil, acting, as of the time of the writing of this article, as a right-wing conservative, causing numerous controversies and becoming involved in polemic episodes, creating a political polarization that the country had not seen for decades, since the 1964 coup.

On March 16, 2020, Brazilians went into social isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a situation that lasted for two years with ups and downs. Even though vaccines arrived in 2021, controlling the expansion of the disease's lethality, the Olympics took place in Japan a year later than scheduled, steeped in health protocols.

Along with other athletes like Rebeca Andrade, who won a gold medal in Artistic Gymnastics, and the other athletes who brought 19 more, totaling 21 medals for Brazil, it is important to emphasize that Rayssa Leal emerges amidst this context of profound political dissatisfaction and national mourning for the more than 600,000 who died from COVID-19.

The articles analyzed were published not only in sections dedicated to sports, but also in spaces for more general subjects, including fashion. In several of them, Rayssa was the main character, but the articles often linked her to other skateboarders, such as the aforementioned Pamela Rosa, Leticia Bufoni, Sky Brown, among others.

### **Focus within the research object**

The corpus of this research constitutes the result of the interpretation of the entire selection, the organization of words, expressions, and images with a semantic nexus, and the understanding of the context. The third step involves selecting how many and which articles will undergo a deeper analysis

<sup>2</sup> In 2009, there were 3.8 million skateboarders in Brazil. Information available at: <https://blogs.oglobo.com/ancelmo/post/aumenta-o-numero-de-praticantes-de-skate-no-brasil-aponta-pesquisa.html>. Access on May 20, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Information available at: <http://esporte.uol.com.br/skate/ultimas-noticias/2012/02/10/antes-vagabundos-esportes-radicaais-viram-aposta-segura-no-mercado-esportivo.jhtm>. Access on June 10, 2018.

from now on. The periodicals *Quem, Veja, Exame, Istoé, Vogue, Claudia, Marie Claire, Forum, Lance, Diário do Nordeste, Correio* (Bahia), *Folha de São Paulo*, and *Estado de Minas* were used. Moreover, the moment of publication under consideration comprises before, during, and after the last Olympics, held in July 2021.

Therefore, six selected journalistic articles will proceed to the next stage of analysis, two for each moment of publication, one for each set of periodicals. The selected articles are: from before the Olympics, in *O Globo, Brasileira de 11 anos mira pódio em estreia do skate nos Jogos* (Lester Filho, 2019), and in *Diário do Nordeste, Quem é Rayssa Leal, a 'Fadinha do Skate' de 13 anos candidata ao Ouro nas Olimpíadas* (Azevedo, 2021); during the Olympics, in *O Globo, Rayssa busca a realização de seu conto de fadas* (Alexandrino, 2021), and in *Estado de Minas, Rayssa Leal é desenhada com traços brancos por ilustradores* (Rodrigues, 2021); after the Olympics, in *O Globo, Eu cresci, podem me chamar de Rayssa Leal* (Leal, 2021), and in *Exame, Em que o fenômeno de Rayssa Leal pode ajudar a sua empresa?* (Barros, 2021). The choice follows the observation described in step (1), which highlights the media content that deals with the life stage of the teenage skateboarder, her attributes, her gifts as a “fairy,” her humor and Brazilianness, and, finally, her feats, leading to enormous media visibility.

### Identification of expressive elements

From the selection of articles, we move on to the identification of expressive elements, which depends on objectivity, since it must align with what the construction of the problem and research goals propose, but also depends, and considerably, on interpretive sensitivity. This step combines the quantitative perspective, usual in CA, since it selects the “expressive elements” repeated many times, with the (predominant) qualitative perspective because what is not recurrent, what appears once or twice, can also advance to the next phase due to its pertinence in the research corpus as a whole.

Before listing the “expressive elements” of the six journalistic articles, it is worth mentioning that there is a trend that marks the three moments referring to the Games when the theme is Rayssa Leal, according to the observation of the 82 articles. Before the event, most of them pointed to the skateboarder’s potential for a good performance in the Olympics, always highlighting her young age, but she appeared among other names that gained more space

and visibility, mainly Pamela Rosa and Leticia Bufoni. In other words, Rayssa was one more in the ranking among many athletes and what the articles presented was her result (except for the articles chosen for analysis). During the event, and especially when she wins the silver medal, the skateboarder begins to gain more space in the articles and, furthermore, another form of representation that focuses more on her subjectivity than, as before, on her performance. After the Olympics, Rayssa appears as someone who changed, grew, and began to generate profits for herself and the brands.

Now, observing the six selected articles, we make a new classification (Table 3) with the “expressive elements” for the analysis.

**Table 3**  
*Expressive elements*

Before the Olympics	During the Olympics	After the Olympics
ranking	fairy tale	“I’ve grown up”
comparison with other skateboarders	youngest athlete	“I know that [ ... ] ”
overcoming and sacrifice	childhood dream come true	encouragement to other girls
precocious talent	arrived in Tokyo making history	“I’m no longer a child”
skateboarding fairy	a child who just wants to have fun	“I’m about to turn 14”
girl wonder	she does not want to waste the opportunity	her whole life changed
playing skateboarding	only 1.45 m and 35 kg	time limit on social media
premature talent	meteoric career	the family helps, her mother is always around
comparison with prodigy athletes	everything happening so fast	selecting positive messages
amazing trajectory	reconciling study and athlete routines	her TikTok timeline has only little dances
assurance, relaxation and lightness	buying her house	“ <i>dou meus paranauês</i> ” [ “I can pull my moves”]
congeniality and maturity	dream	she competes and takes tests at school
youngest representative of Brazil	she does not even look Black in the illustration	excellent grades
inspired by other female skateboarders	Rayssa without her original traits	living a dream

Continua...

### Continuação

Before the Olympics	During the Olympics	After the Olympics
victorious career	removal of the athlete's racial identity	she can make history
force of Northeastern Brazil	fitting into a white beauty standard	she wants and continues to have fun
her résumé does not look like that of an adolescent	how the public sees and recognizes her	she likes listening to music
accompanied by someone responsible for her	charisma, enthusiasm, and youth	she continues to have friends by her side
unusual routine	Brazilian phenomenon	she and her friends like going to the shopping mall
studying		not old enough to date
		interviews, fans, campaigns, brands
		followers gained on Instagram
		Marie Claire and Vogue magazine covers
		she misses her family
		childlike shyness
		she reached a large audience
		community and belonging
		Nike increased its sales
		media exploits inspiring stories
		her challenge will be to keep the novelty effect

Note. Elaborated by the author.

### Categorization

We now turn to the analysis of the “expressive elements” presented in the previous step. According to the Interpretive Content Analysis method, the analysis is a dense description of each “expressive element”, and it is their description that establishes links, giving rise to “interpretive categories of analysis”.

Our analysis maintains the classification in the three moments. First, we resume the expressive elements of the two articles published before the Olympics, one from *O Globo* and another from *Diário do Nordeste* (Figure 9).



Figure 9

## Representations of Rayssa Leal before the Olympics



Note. *O Globo* (Leister Filho, 2019); *Diário do Nordeste* (Azevedo, 2021)

We will group the expressive elements related to the first column of Table 3 into two “interpretive categories of analysis”: (a) “instrumented youthful vitality” and (b) “signified youthful vitality.” The image of “youthful vitality” is used here because it is a recurrent way of representing the notion of youth as a social construction based on her strong body and “natural” energy.

The category “instrumented youthful vitality” brings together the following expressive elements (words and expressions): “ranking,” “comparison with other skateboarders,” “overcoming and sacrifice,” “comparison with prodigy athletes,” “impressive trajectory,” “youngest representative of Brazil,” “victorious career,” “her résumé does not look like that of an adolescent,” “precocious talent,” “premature talent,” “inspired by other female skateboarders.” From the point of view of those who write, and that is the task of “dense description” at this step, “instrumented youthful vitality” emerges from a perspective that seeks to eclipse the vulnerabilities of youth, valuing in young people what, by contrast, belongs to the “adult world.” For instance, the articles refer to “career,” “résumé,” and “prematurity.” When ranking and comparing athletes, they have their subjective aspects removed, becoming just elements in a list, and each one is assigned numerical values, some more positive, some more negative.

In turn, the category “signified youthful vitality” synthesizes this set of expressive elements: “strength of Northeastern Brazil,” “girl wonder,” “assurance,” “relaxation and lightness,” “congeniality and maturity,” “skateboarding fairy,” “playing skateboarding,” “accompanied by someone responsible for her,” “unusual routine,” and “studying.” Paradoxically, the first category seeks to highlight universal values

attributed to young people who also have their subjectivity removed. At the same time, their vulnerabilities become positive, which are symbolically part of the life stage in which they are.

**Figure 10**

*Representations of Rayssa Leal during the Olympics*



Note. *O Globo* (Alexandrino, 2021); *Estado de Minas* (Rodrigues, 2021)

Moving on to the column in Table 3 that refers to the two newspaper articles selected for the moment “during the Olympics,” from *O Globo* and *Diário do Nordeste* (Figure 10), we arrive at three “interpretive categories of analysis.” Namely, (c) “public rite of passage,” (d) “objective legitimation of ambiguity,” and (e) “collective configuration of identity.”

“Public rite of passage” is to be understood as the grouping of the following elements: “fairy tale,” “childhood dream come true,” “arrives in Tokyo making history,” “she does not want to waste the opportunity,” “meteoric career,” “everything happening so fast,” “buying her house,” “dream,” and “made history in sport.” Rites of passage are part of societies and mark the transition from one status to another – in the case of life stages and, specifically, adolescence, anthropological studies have already showed their importance for delimiting the social roles of individuals within groups. The category “public rite of passage” is a tautology, since rites of passage are always collective and, therefore, public. However, here the emphasis is placed on “public” in the sense of the media audience: it is the exposure and visibility of the transformation processes that children, adolescents,

and young people undergo, most of the time, in an engaged way. In Rayssa's case, the fairy makes her dream of winning the medal come true and this takes her to another place, which is no longer that of a child, but of someone who makes history or even buys their own house. And that is what matters to journalism and advertising. That is what "delights."

The category "objective legitimization of ambiguity" encompasses the expressive elements "youngest athlete," "a child who just wants to have fun," "only 1.45 m and 35 kg," "reconciling study and routine," "charisma," "enthusiasm," and "youth." Looking from the perspective of those who wrote the article, it is understood that it is necessary to reinforce aspects inherent to the athlete's life stage, whether related to her body configuration or her behavior, to make the "public rite of passage" even more "dramatic," so to speak. After all, she is a child of "1.45 m and 35 kg" who "just wants to have fun" but "is making history." About to meet Rayssa on the "other side" of her path, after the rite of the Olympics, which transforms ordinary people into demigods, the public begins to claim her multiple belongings and social roles. The case of the illustrations of the skateboarder with white traits and the public reaction on social media is a good example. Thus, the category "collective configuration of identity" refers to the elements: "Brazilian phenomenon," "she does not even look Black in the illustration," "Rayssa without her original traits," "removal of the athlete's racial identity," "fitting into a white beauty standard," and "how the public sees and recognizes her." Not only her Brazilianness, but also her phenotypic traits are the object of control and, above all, collective elaboration, which happened, in practice, in the response given by the artists who created Black representations of the skateboarder.

Regarding the moment after the Olympic Games (Figure 11), we can propose another three interpretive categories based on two articles published on *O Globo* and *Exame*: (f) "subjective legitimation of ambiguity," (g) "commercialization of youth subjectivities," and (h) "regulated consensual autonomy." All three concern the impact of the media visibility that Rayssa acquired during and after the Olympics.

**Figure 11**  
*Representations of Rayssa Leal after the Olympics*

**EU CRESCI, PODEM ME CHAMAR DE RAYSSA LEAL'**

Após 12 anos, a medalhista olímpica pode se tornar hoje a mais jovem campeã mundial de skate entre as atletas atuais de destaque. Ela é favorita na final, em Jacksonville (FL), a partir das 14h (hora de Brasília) transmitida pelo canal ESPN Brasil. Rayssa tem 13 anos e é a skatista brasileira mais jovem a ganhar uma medalha olímpica. Ela também é a primeira brasileira a ganhar uma medalha olímpica em uma modalidade de esporte individual. Ela também é a primeira brasileira a ganhar uma medalha olímpica em uma modalidade de esporte individual. Ela também é a primeira brasileira a ganhar uma medalha olímpica em uma modalidade de esporte individual.

**Em que o fenômeno de Rayssa Leal pode ajudar a sua empresa?**

A ideia básica é atingir de maneira a audiência sempre relevante de qual público, como usar isso e o tipo de mensagem?

**Por Bruno Barros\***

Exatamente amplificada de skate (Urban Sports Park, onde a final aconteceu de novo) em meio às Olimpíadas de Tóquio, quando um grupo de jovens se aproximou, em meio às câmeras, com skate nos pés. Eles se juntaram ao brasileiro que estavam torcendo na briga que misturava.

De uma maneira a Leticia Buitoni, o Felipe Gustavo e o Daniel Heineke e Rayssa Leal. Princesa fora do Brasil, Rayssa se transformou, aos 12 anos, de skatista de rua para a quadra de skate.

Leticia Buitoni era a grande estrela do Brasil naquele momento. Rayssa, uma atleta que estava para ser descoberta. Não possui qualquer título. Chamada Rayssa para não quebra a tradição. Ela, com o título de campeã olímpica, tornou-se a nova estrela. Ela é a primeira brasileira a ganhar uma medalha olímpica em uma modalidade de esporte individual. Ela também é a primeira brasileira a ganhar uma medalha olímpica em uma modalidade de esporte individual.

Por isso, Rayssa, desde os primeiros dias de skate, tem uma presença mais voltada ao que ela quer. Sempre em uma posição que é a primeira a ser descoberta e a mais almejada de todos os fãs. Ela é a primeira brasileira a ganhar uma medalha olímpica em uma modalidade de esporte individual. Ela também é a primeira brasileira a ganhar uma medalha olímpica em uma modalidade de esporte individual.

Em menos de 24 horas, Rayssa teve o número de seguidores no Instagram multiplicado por 10. Ela tem 10 milhões de seguidores no Instagram. Ela tem 10 milhões de seguidores no Instagram. Ela tem 10 milhões de seguidores no Instagram.

**A audiência do jovem de 12 anos é hoje maior do que se viu no perfil de Fátima S. Paulo. O Globo e Exame estão com ela. Com ela que o público de skate em um nível internacional. Ela é a primeira brasileira a ganhar uma medalha olímpica em uma modalidade de esporte individual. Ela também é a primeira brasileira a ganhar uma medalha olímpica em uma modalidade de esporte individual.**

A Nike, que patrocinou Rayssa, divulgou na sexta-feira que a empresa vai fazer de skate o novo foco em seu site nos dias seguintes à conquista da medalha de Rayssa. Já a Puma também anunciou o retorno do skate ao site nos dias seguintes à conquista da medalha de Rayssa. Já a Puma também anunciou o retorno do skate ao site nos dias seguintes à conquista da medalha de Rayssa.

Além do público, a atenção das pessoas é maior porque ela é a primeira brasileira a ganhar uma medalha olímpica em uma modalidade de esporte individual. Ela também é a primeira brasileira a ganhar uma medalha olímpica em uma modalidade de esporte individual.

**Audiência sempre vale mais do que dinheiro. Essa é a regra dos grandes papas de redes sociais.** Ela é a primeira brasileira a ganhar uma medalha olímpica em uma modalidade de esporte individual. Ela também é a primeira brasileira a ganhar uma medalha olímpica em uma modalidade de esporte individual.

Da mesma maneira que empresas e perfis corporativos se acionam para ter a atenção do público, Rayssa tem um novo desafio: manter o status de atleta para não perder sua credibilidade. Ela é a primeira brasileira a ganhar uma medalha olímpica em uma modalidade de esporte individual. Ela também é a primeira brasileira a ganhar uma medalha olímpica em uma modalidade de esporte individual.

A rede social não é um lugar de trabalho, mas um ambiente social de interação. As pessoas seguem as pessoas, principalmente pela personalidade delas. As empresas precisam aproveitar a oportunidade para entrar no debate e gerar visibilidade também. Ela é a primeira brasileira a ganhar uma medalha olímpica em uma modalidade de esporte individual. Ela também é a primeira brasileira a ganhar uma medalha olímpica em uma modalidade de esporte individual.

Claro, não existe uma fórmula mágica. A entrada do digital não é uma linha reta. Ela é a primeira brasileira a ganhar uma medalha olímpica em uma modalidade de esporte individual. Ela também é a primeira brasileira a ganhar uma medalha olímpica em uma modalidade de esporte individual.

Os sites são feitos para serem parceiros de marcas e de produtos. Sempre há espaço para quem quer ser visto. Ela é a primeira brasileira a ganhar uma medalha olímpica em uma modalidade de esporte individual. Ela também é a primeira brasileira a ganhar uma medalha olímpica em uma modalidade de esporte individual.

**Bruno Barros** é jornalista. Trabalha na FCB Comunicação com cobertura nos principais eventos esportivos mundiais: três Jogos Olímpicos de Verão, dois Jogos Olímpicos da Juventude, três Jogos Pan-Americanos e o Games.

Note. *O Globo* (Eu cresci, 2021); *Exame* (Barros, 2021)

In a statement by Rayssa Leal herself, reproduced in *O Globo*, we see ambiguous aspects in relation to her adolescent status: on the one hand, the affirmation that she is no longer a child and her declared awareness of what that means; on the other hand, the reference to practices that show her permanence in an almost childlike status, still. Thus, we propose the category “subjective legitimization of ambiguity,” which includes the following aspects listed in Table 3: “I’ve grown up,” “I know it [...]”, “encouragement to other girls,” “I’m no longer a kid,” “I’m about to turn 14,” “she likes listening to music,” “she continues to have friends by her side,” “she and her friends like going to the shopping mall.” These aspects contrast with the skateboarder’s statement that “she wants and continues to have fun,” “she is not old enough to date,” and her “TikTok timeline has only little dances.”

It is important to emphasize that the athlete’s statement to the newspaper *O Globo* is presented as a first-person text, very informal, referring to her way of expressing herself. However, we must assume that there was a strategy in the construction of the representations that she seeks to fixate about herself. We also perceive ambiguity when the journalist, in the *Exame* article,

attributes “a childlike shyness” to her and, at the same time, discusses her potential as a valuable “brand” in the market, which leads to the next category.

The “commodification of youth subjectivities” brings together these expressive elements: “community and belonging” (which is like a “special sauce” of skateboarding culture, according to the journalist), “Nike increased its sales with Rayssa’s success,” “the media explores inspiring stories,” and “her challenge will be to keep the novelty effect and the accomplished follower count.” All these elements appeared in the *Exame* article, the journalist’s point of view, indicating what Rayssa can “teach companies.” The “commercialization of youth subjectivities” is, so to speak, fueled by the “subjective legitimization of ambiguity,” as the permanence of more childlike or adolescent aspects can be a value for brands that wish to anchor themselves in it.

The last category is “regulated consensual autonomy,” which, since it is consensual, presupposes two actors negotiating: “the young person” on the one hand and “the adult” responsible for them on the other. This category associates terms from Rayssa’s point of view: her achievement “changed her whole life,” “*dou meus paranauês*” [I can pull my moves], “she can make history,” “she is living a dream,” “interviews,” “fans,” “campaigns,” “brands,” “growth in the number of followers on Instagram,” “*Marie Claire* and *Vogue* magazine covers,” and “she reached a large audience”. But, for all this to happen, she had to “continue to take tests at school while competing in the United States,” get “excellent grades,” “miss her family,” and be still subject to control by the imposition of “time limits on social media,” having her “mother always around” and relying on her parents to “select the positive messages” on social media to show her.

### Theorization

In brief, the previous stage constructed eight interpretive categories of analysis: “instrumented youthful vitality,” “signified youthful vitality,” “public rite of passage,” “objective legitimization of ambiguity,” “collective configuration of identity,” “subjective legitimization of ambiguity,” “commodification of youth subjectivities,” and “regulated consensual autonomy.” The theorization will be based on these representations, considering the analyzed media content,

and developed in the next section, in which we will finally add to these categories some theoretical reflections that support this study.

### REPRESENTATIONS AND DISPUTES IN RAYSSA LEAL'S IMAGE

From the beginning, we must conduct the final discussion based on some theoretical assumptions: social representation and youth.

Serge Moscovici (2011, p. 54) elaborates his social representation theory stating that these representations seek to “make something unfamiliar, or familiarity itself, familiar” (Moscovici, 2011, p. 54). For him, there are “consensual universes” that confer a kind of security and harmony in terms of ideas and knowledge, which become consolidated with the repetition of situations, gestures, and ideas.

On the whole, the dynamics of relationships is a dynamic of familiarization, where objects, individuals and events are perceived and understood in relation to previous encounters or paradigms. As a result, memory prevails over deduction, the past over the present, response over stimuli and images over “reality.” (Moscovici, 2011, p. 55)

Moscovici's theory, for which social representations are prescriptive but not static and, therefore, in permanent transformation, inspires this study, since it motivates the search for its own elaboration process. His contribution is mainly the perspective of a social representation that emerges from a collective construction in different spaces of the everyday world, including the media, cementing the social, reaffirming the power of memory, seeking familiarity, and stimulated by the moment when unfamiliarity rises against the established forms, even if momentarily, to undergo modification, approximation, identification, and, finally, defeat due to the need for a consensual universe. The example of Rayssa Leal in the Olympic Games seeks to follow how the transformation of her representations in the media, before, during, and after the event, unfolded.

The “fairy” figure rose the 7-year-old child to enormous media visibility. Since then, she has gained space in the skateboarding culture, winning over veterans, such as Tony Hawk and Bob Burnquist, and in the media, appearing on television news, becoming the “girl wonder” of the tracks in Imperatriz, her hometown in Maranhão. By the time the International Olympic Committee announced the inclusion of skateboarding in 2016,

Rayssa Leal was one of several skaters who stood out in national and international championships. From that moment on, she became a “promise” and, as her age advanced, a “hope for an Olympic medal”. Until then, however, journalistic articles mentioned her only in the rankings and when covering the main championships with the participation of women, where Pamela Rosa and Leticia Bufoni were the ones in the spotlight. The social representations constituted by an “instrumented youthful vitality” worked together, in which the young prodigies and off-the-charts talents stand out both *for* being young and *despite* being young. At the same time, the aspects that are part of “signified youthful vitality,” which reinforces the universal values that are part of the common sense about youth, are present in all media places but always sediment the idea that there is youth.

Youth, as we know it today in the media, especially in consumer narratives, is an advertising concept (Pereira, 2010) that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, after the Second World War, when the basis of mass media settled on the ground of “youth culture,” a very lucrative market for the emerging “mass culture” (Morin, 2006). Currently, symbolic and representational boundaries are much less marked, with much less immediate signs: “youth,” as a social construction and lifestyle, pervades modern-contemporary cultures, expanding as an ideal for all ages.

As Morin (2006) taught us, mythologies present in mass culture expand and persist in other media platforms even today. One of them concerns the inspiring stories of overcoming and sacrifice. The “public rite of passage” serves this purpose, exploiting in the media girls and boys who become celebrities overnight. There are many examples in sports and various other fields, from Michael Jackson and Nadia Comăneci to Justin Bieber, Macaulay Culkin, and, why not, Rayssa Leal. The representations of the “objective legitimation of ambiguity” also collaborate for that when the media contents emphatically reify the vulnerabilities of youth, whether physical or psychological, as do the representations of the “subjective legitimation of ambiguity” when the media contents give voice to adolescents and young people who, imbued with social representations that make them spokespersons of common sense, confirm

such vulnerabilities, reproducing them in an endless vicious circle. Thus, paradoxically, the power of “youth” as a sign has been silencing young people in the mass media for several decades.

According to José Machado Pais (1990), everyday life is a privileged social space for the configuration of “youth cultures” by leisure, “doing nothing,” and “killing time.” On the one hand, in everyday life, the practices of “leisure culture” place young people within a symbolic unit, the “youth,” limiting their possibilities as social actors. On the other hand, “leisure culture” practices allow youths to elaborate important bonds of sociability, original creative actions, and links to multiple belongings, elaborating plural subjectivities.

Urban cultures, in which skateboarding is inserted, are advantageous for the emergence of such plural subjectivities. That is not the case for Rayssa Leal, whose disputed representations indicate that the homogenizing notion of “youth” as a concept prevails. As prevention, representations often seem configured by “regulated consensual autonomy,” trying to reconcile the strict routines of “celebrity” children and adolescents with the declared family care.

As an example, in contrast, we can refer to skateboarder Pedro Barros, also an Olympic medalist in 2021, in the Games was active in bringing out the inconsistencies of the inclusion of skateboarding in something as mainstream as the Olympics. Moreover, Pedro Barros draws attention to the care that Rayssa Leal and other athletes her age should take regarding their mental health (Gabriel, 2021). In the terms of the present discussion, Pedro Barros refers to the risk of exposure to the “commodification of youth subjectivities,” as we named it here. Rayssa Leal rose to celebrity status, emerging from skateboarding rankings to start appearing in advertising campaigns, fashion editorials, magazine covers, going from being one more to becoming unique. Unlike subjectivities authentically emerging from youth cultures, this manufactured subjectivity is anchored in market narratives since its birth.

Mexican social scientist Rossana Reguillo Cruz also discusses the disputes that occur concerning the idea of “youth” as a social construction and the role of young people in society. The work of the institutions in this process is active and decisive. According to the author, the way in which young people are classified in contemporary times is due to three central conditions: the



system of training and socialization for the labor market, the legal discourse, and the “cultural industry.” Of these three conditions, the first two, which concern work and the legal system, along with the institutional discourses of the school and the government, among others, end up establishing limits and norms that reduce the field of possibilities for young subjects. For Reguillo Cruz (2000, p. 52), cultural industries, on the other hand, end up favoring ethical and aesthetic expressions, opening possibilities for inclusion and diversity, “(...) a field of meanings, goods, and cultural products where the young individual acquires its different specificities and shows their visibility as a socially situated actor with representation schemes that configure different fields of action” (Our translation).<sup>4</sup>

According to Reguillo Cruz, there are “fields of meanings” in which young people invest for their role as “socially situated actors”. In this case, it is their self-expression and not a representation of “youth” – with voice and agency (Reguillo Cruz, 2000, p. 52): “It is, therefore, in a privileged way, in the field of cultural expressions where youths become visible as social actors” (Our translation).<sup>5</sup> Pedro Barros is, one could say, a “socially situated” young actor, as the analyzed interview shows.

With millions of followers on social media, disputes over media representations of Rayssa Leal lead to a “collective configuration of identity” when discussions related to representation (of race, gender, or sexual orientation, for example) cut across the others. As the analyzed article showed, part of the audience claimed Rayssa’s Blackness while countless others referred to her role in disseminating skateboarding among women.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The application of Interpretive Content Analysis allowed the precious exercise of constructing the research object, guided by the objective initially proposed, namely, to discuss the role of media representations in the relationship between society and youth cultures, focusing on the reiteration of a homogenizing notion of “youth” and the resulting impasses imposed on forms of communication that favor the consolidation of youth people, in all their complexity, as social actors. When the research in journalistic articles began, the expectation was to find a “happy ending”: the “fairy” comes out of the cocoon and becomes an

<sup>4</sup> In the original: “*Es en el ámbito de los significados, los bienes y los productos culturales donde el sujeto juvenil adquiere sus distintas especificidades y donde despliega su visibilidad como actor situado socialmente con esquemas de representación que configuran campos de acción diferenciados.*”

<sup>5</sup> In the original: “*Es pues, de manera privilegiada, en el ámbito de las expresiones culturales donde los jóvenes se vuelven visibles como actores sociales.*”

adolescent with a voice. However, along the way, at least within the observed context, considering all possible limitations, the analysis found a process of subjectivation guided by reductionist representations of youth. Despite the passion we all have for Rayssa Leal in our imagination, in the face of the political and pandemic context in Brazil, at the end of this study, some of the representations of the Olympic medalist reveal an athlete born in the complexity of “youth,” amidst the transgressive skateboarding culture, but sustained by a disciplined and disciplining media discourse that not only serves her sport, but also the reproduction of the universalized concept of “youth.” ■

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