

## feature

### Soccer, Sex and Scandal in Brazil

*Don Kulick*

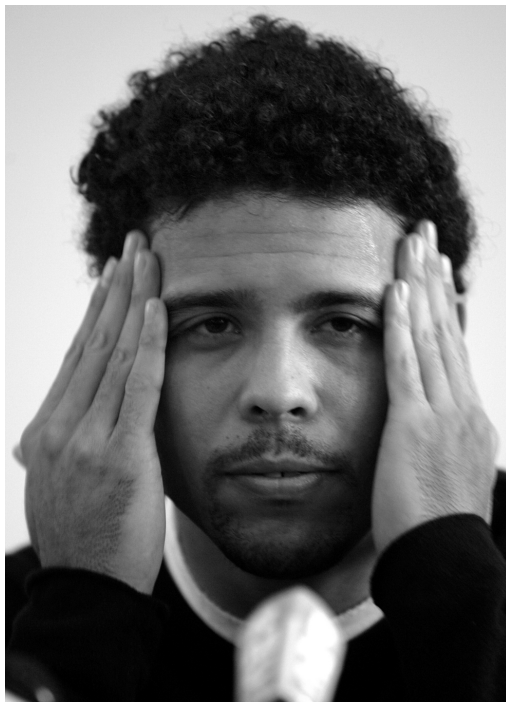
Anthropologist Don Kulick brings his ethnographic experience in Brazil to bear on a story that made headlines around the world. The sensational scandal of a famous soccer star caught playing with too many balls is about much more than the possible sexual predilections of a global celebrity. It reveals that cultural understandings of what it means to be a heterosexual male in Brazil are undergoing a significant shift.

Scandal is the mother of celebrity, and last year, a new birth occurred in Brazil. From out of nowhere, a *travesti* (transgendered prostitute) in her twenties named Andréia Albertini suddenly had the undivided attention of the entire country. Andréia had been working the streets in the pre-dawn hours of April 28, 2008, when a car pulled up beside her. The driver asked her to get in and she did. As she set about detailing her tariffs and explaining that sex with her in the nearby Papillon love motel would be more expensive than sex in the car, the driver, she later told reporters, interrupted.

"Money isn't a problem for me," he informed her curtly. "I'm Ronaldo. I'm 'the Phenomenon.'"

Little did Ronaldo "the Phenomenon" know at that point that by the end of the evening in the love motel, money would indeed be a problem for him. Because by the end of the evening, Andréia Albertini had demanded 50,000 reais (about \$32,000) to keep quiet about the encounter that she and two of her *travesti* colleagues had had with Ronaldo. When Ronaldo flatly refused, Andréia's shouts and abuse brought the police and the press to the Papillon. To Ronaldo's chagrin and Andréia's delight, the result was headlines around the world.

Brazil is a country where soccer is a national obsession, and in that country Ronaldo Luis Nazário de Lima is a deity. Ronaldo, 32 years old, was a key player in two of Brazil's five World Cup victories. He has been named FIFA (International Federation of Association Football, i.e., soccer in the United States) World Player of the Year three times. Only one other person, the French midfielder Zinedine Zidane, has ever been accorded this honor. He is the highest goalscorer in the history of the World Cup. After Pelé (who at 68 years old is regarded as a national treasure), Ronaldo is the most famous and respected soccer player in the country. He is routinely referred to as—and he is not shy about referring to himself as—Ronaldo "*Fenômeno*," Ronaldo "the Phenomenon." His estimated worth is 250 million dollars. He has a known predilection for supermodels, and he is co-owner of the Brazilian Grand Prix formula racing team. For over a decade, Ronaldo has been an object of adulation and identification for millions of



Ronaldo "Fenômeno." Source: AP.

Brazilian men. He's like Michael Jordan, only bigger.

Now Ronaldo was suddenly in the headlines again—but this time not for soccer or formula 1 racing or dates with supermodels. Ronaldo was in the news for having spent a night with three prostitutes. This event was ventilated in newspapers, tabloids, and magazines. It was discussed and dissected on television programs and radio talk shows, on buses, in queues, in bars, on the beach, at the dinner table, in elevators, in love motel rooms, at urinals—anywhere two or more people happened to meet for even a few seconds. What Brazilians publicly and anxiously debated was not the

morality of Ronaldo's having paid for sex. That was irrelevant; in fact, whenever that issue did come up, the general consensus was that if Ronaldo had been revealed to have paid three female prostitutes for sex, his prestige as an icon of masculinity would only have been fortified. The ominous and disturbing dimension of Ronaldo's night was not that it had been spent with prostitutes. It was that all three of those prostitutes had penises.

### Prostitutes with Penises

The Portuguese word *travesti* is perhaps most easily translated as "transgendered." Or, because the overwhelming majority of travestis are sex workers, it can also be rendered as "transgendered prostitute." But translations like those really only muddy matters. In English these days, "transgendered" is used by many people as a polite euphemism for what used to be called a "transsexual"—a person who has undergone or plans to undergo sex-reassignment surgery in order to "change sex."<sup>1</sup>

Travestis like Andréia Albertini and her two colleagues, though, are not transsexuals. They are members of a highly visible social group in Brazil that probably numbers in the tens of thousands. Travestis are males who often in childhood find that they prefer female activities, behavior, sensibilities, and objects of desire to the things they are told that boys should like. And so, between the ages of 7 and 13, in an early manifestation of the kind of fearless tenaciousness that

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will serve them well for surviving in a violently homophobic society, these young boys begin letting their hair grow out, wearing makeup, dressing discretely but visibly in female clothing, and adopting characteristically effeminate gestures. As one might imagine, this kind of dress and behavior usually doesn't go over too well with parents, neighbors, and classmates. Distressingly often, parental opposition to their son's obvious effeminacy results in the boy's either leaving or being expelled from his home in his early teens or even younger.

Abandoned by their families, these boys usually find their way to a big city if they don't already live in one. There they inevitably meet older travestis, who exist in every Brazilian city of any size and who are always very visible at night as they stand on the streets or trawl the city squares looking for clients who will pay them for sex. In these older travestis, boys find people who accept them, encourage them, "baptize" them with a female name and talk to them using feminine grammatical forms. They

provide them with a place to stay and show them the ropes of earning a living working as a prostitute. These older travestis also educate the boys as to how they can become more feminine by ingesting estrogen—often in the form of contraceptive pills or injections, which are easily obtained over the counter at most pharmacies—and paying other travestis to inject them with several gallons of industrial silicone.

As a result of all these changes, the boys emerge looking like women. Estrogen gives them rounded features and small breasts; silicone enhances those breasts but is mostly used to create the kinds of arrestingly big *bundas* (butts) that are the hallmark of feminine beauty in Brazil. Intensive attention to their appearance and clothing fashions them into often quite alluring feminine figures.

What sets those Brazilians who define themselves as travesti apart from transsexuals is that travestis have no desire to modify their genitals.<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, a defining characteristic of a travesti is that she is deeply attached to her penis. She likes it for the same reason most men like theirs: it gives her sexual pleasure. And this is something travestis see no reason to sacrifice. Because, despite the fact that they have female names, appearances, and body parts, travestis never say that they are women. They look an awful lot like women—in many cases, they look better than women, they will be the first to tell you. Unlike transsexuals, though, who say that they are "a woman trapped in the body of a man," travestis

aren't trapped in anyone else's body. Instead, they readily agree that they are male. But they are a special kind of male. They are what Brazilians call *viados*—homosexuals, faggots. They are males who spend an enormous amount of time, effort, and pain to enhance and augment their bodies so that they will appear beautiful and desirable to the kind of masculine men they like: nonhomosexual macho men who desire women—and them.

### The Fateful Night

Although many of the details of what happened in the early hours of April 28 are both unclear and contested, what is undisputed is this: after having watched a soccer match earlier that evening, Ronaldo went to a dance club in Rio's Barra de Tijuca neighborhood. Shortly after 4 in the morning, he left the club and drove up to 21-year-old Andréia Albertini, who was working the streets in the area. He agreed to her price for sex, and drove her to the nearby Papillon love motel. At some point soon after this (accounts diverge as to whether this occurred before or after their arrival at the motel) Andréia called two of her travesti colleagues, who joined her and Ronaldo in the motel room. What happened next differs according to the teller.

Repeating the words of every Brazilian man who has ever been publicly revealed to be in the company of a travesti, Ronaldo claimed that he had no idea that the prosti-



Andréia Albertini talks to journalists on April 28, 2008.  
Source: AP.

tutes he had taken to the love motel were male. "When we got to the motel," he told an interviewer, "I confirmed that it was a matter of travestis (*eu comprovei que se travava de travesti*), and I tried to stop everything so that I could go home."

Andréia told a very different story. She maintained that Ronaldo knew that he had picked up travestis and had sex with her two colleagues.<sup>3</sup> Those colleagues and Ronaldo had also smoked marijuana and snorted cocaine. High and wanting more drugs, they asked Andréia to go buy cocaine. She agreed because she was the only one among them who wasn't high ("I don't drink, I don't

smoke, I don't sniff," she told interviewers, "I didn't even drink any champagne at the Papillon"<sup>4</sup>). Her trip to buy drugs took longer than she expected, because she said that she was stopped by police after she had bought the drugs, and it took her time to talk her way out of the situation. When she returned to the hotel room several hours later, she said, her colleagues had already departed, and Ronaldo was on his way out.

At this point, Andréia said that Ronaldo told her that he had paid her colleagues 1,000 reais (about \$640) each but that he was out of money and that if she gave him her telephone number and her bank account, he would deposit the money and call her. "I'm not stupid" was her reaction to this. Ronaldo, in his statement to the police, admitted to having paid the others 1,000 reais, and he says he offered the same amount to Andréia. She, however, countered with a demand of 50,000 reais in order not to go to the press with the story. Ronaldo refused, and the police were called.<sup>5</sup>

A piquant detail about the evening that occupied the Brazilian public at some length was the fact that no matter what activities actually occurred in the motel room, it seems indisputable that Ronaldo remained there with at least two of the travestis for a total of between 3 to 5 hours. This is evident partly from the timeline presented by Andréia, who, police confirmed, did indeed leave the room, but not to buy drugs—they said she left to go around to different newspapers to tell them that Ronaldo was back at a hotel with travestis. (This, by the

way, is doubtless the only time in history that Brazilian police have tried to convince the public that a travesti *did not* try to buy drugs.) Additionally, Andréia made a video recording of Ronaldo with her cellphone when she returned to the hotel room, so that she could prove that she was with him. This recording immediately appeared on YouTube, and it was featured prominently in the initial news reports on the event.<sup>6</sup> In the video, the door to the motel room is open and it is a bright sunny day outside, which confirms Andréia's claim that she arrived back at the room at about 9:30 a.m. Brazilians laughed uproariously about the amount of time it apparently took Ronaldo to discover that he was in the company of three travestis. "What were they doing all that time in the motel room?" went a popular joke repeated throughout the country, "Praying?"

## What Happened Next

After the story broke, Ronaldo and his public relations team went into emergency damage control mode. He granted an exclusive, carefully choreographed *mea culpa* interview to the popular—and in this case very aptly named—television program *Fantástico*.<sup>7</sup> During the 15-minute interview, Ronaldo confessed to making the worst mistake of his personal life, asked for sympathy and understanding ("I'm a human being; I'm a person. Behind this image that I carry, I have my weaknesses, I have my fears, I have everything that a normal person has"),

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claimed that the three travestis appeared to be part of a gang that preyed on famous men and blackmailed and “terrorized” them, and repeated his assertion that he had absolutely no idea that the prostitutes he picked up were travestis. He assured Brazilians that he was “completely heterosexual” (*completamente heterosexual*) and, therefore, could never have wanted to have sexual relations with a travesti. The interviewer, who is married to the president of Globo International (the fourth largest television network in the world and the one that produces *Fantástico*), fawned throughout the interview. She accepted Ronaldo’s responses at face value and didn’t press him on any issue, including the amount of time he actually spent in the company of the three travestis.

One week after the interview, in an announcement that raised many eyebrows, Ronaldo’s mother proclaimed to the press that his girlfriend of six months, an engineering student named Bia Anthony, was pregnant. Anthony had reportedly left Ronaldo when she heard about the travesti incident—Ronaldo himself mentioned in his

interview on *Fantástico* that she had “cursed” him (*me xingou*). Now, though, the media reported that the couple had reconciled and were thrilled with the prospect of a baby.

Earlier that same week, Andréia and one of the other travestis, Carla Thamine, recanted their original version of the events. They told police and the press that they had lied about the sex and the drugs. (The third travesti, identified by Andréia as someone with the—to Brazilian ears—amusingly florid name of Veida Ganzaroli, never appeared in public and only her name ever appeared in any journalistic account.) The local police chief, who made it clear from the beginning that he believed that “Ronaldo’s version of events is more trustworthy than that of the travestis”<sup>8</sup> threatened to indict Andréia for robbery, extortion, and threatening behavior.<sup>9</sup> Ronaldo declined to press charges, but Rio de Janeiro’s public prosecutor insisted on holding hearings to see whether Andréia could be charged with extortion, a serious crime that in Brazil carries a 4 to 10 year prison sentence.<sup>10</sup>

The general consensus among Brazilians was that the travestis had been bought off and that Bia Anthony’s pregnancy was a bluff, a transparently duplicitous attempt by Ronaldo to recuperate some shred of his lost masculinity. People talked about how they expected to hear news of a “miscarriage” as time passed and the travesti story died down.<sup>11</sup> As for the three travestis, the travesti grapevine in Rio reports that Carla and Veida took the money paid to keep them quiet and smuggled themselves into



Europe, which is where Brazilian travestis go to make their fortune.<sup>12</sup> Carla and Veida were never heard from again.<sup>13</sup>

Andréia Albertini, on the other hand, energetically fashioned herself into a national celebrity. "My life has turned from rags to riches (*de lixo para o luxo*)," she breathlessly told the newspaper *Diário de São Paulo* a month after her encounter with Ronaldo.<sup>14</sup> She no longer worked the streets, she said; instead she had become a highly paid escort whose only clients were "executives." In June, she marched in São Paulo's Gay Pride parade (the largest Gay Pride parade in the world) to clamorous attention; she was featured in a play about travestis and their clients titled *I Am the Star* (*A Estrela Sou Eu*), and she signed a contract with a production company to star in four pornographic films. With the money she earned from that contract (which "would have been enough to buy a Hilux pickup truck," she bragged), she paid to have two 350 ml implants (about 1.5 lbs) inserted into her breasts. The first of her pornographic films, released at the beginning of July 2008, had the mischievous title *Andréia Albertini—She is a Phenomenon* (*Ela é Um Fenômeno*). The cover shows her standing on a soccer pitch holding a soccer ball, and licking her lips.<sup>15</sup>

### Of Fags and Men in Brazil Today

In a self-pitying moment during the *Fantástico* interview, Ronaldo lamented that his night with the three travestis had probably

received more press than his World Cup victories. He also predicted that he would not be hearing the last about the incident from soccer fans around the world. Ronaldo was right to feel laughed at, and he did undoubtedly emerge from his misadventure with his reputation considerably tarnished. Satirical television programs mercilessly lampooned his professed inability to tell the difference between a woman and a travesti, and the Brazilian weekly newsmagazine *Veja* ran a cover story cautioning that Ronaldo's legacy was beginning to look more like Maradona's—the scandal-ridden Argentinian soccer star—than Pelé's.

Nevertheless, in the long term, the real casualty of this affair is probably not Ronaldo. With a brilliant sports career behind him and 250 million dollars in the bank, Ronaldo need not care excessively about the derision of others, and undoubtedly he will retain his status as an idol to many soccer fans. The real casualty of this case, instead, may prove to be the particular form of Brazilian masculinity that Ronaldo represents, and the tacit cultural understandings that help support it. This is a masculinity which can only really exist in a world that doesn't divide everyone into gay or straight; a world where one sexual orifice is as serviceable as any other for a man seeking sexual release, and where a man might have sexual relations with a travesti and not have his masculinity and his sexuality challenged—as long as it is certain that he assumed the role of the penetrator during the sexual encounter.

This, in other words, is the traditional

Brazilian sexual system, the one in which travestis first emerged and flourished. In such a system, it makes sense for travestis to maintain, as they do, that while they are homosexuals, the men who are attracted to them aren't. Although travestis acknowledge that some of their clients may be closeted homosexuals who don't dare approach other men, they insist that the majority of the men who pay them for sex are married men or men with girlfriends. They are men who genuinely desire women. Travestis say that these men are attracted to them not necessarily because they have a penis but because they are oftentimes more beautiful than most women. They have more exuberant female forms, they take better care of their appearances, and, they are, they all emphasize, much more sexually skilled than most women. Travestis know exactly what a man likes in bed, they say, because they share with their partner the same set of sexual equipment.

Travestis and their allure are artifacts of an understanding of masculinity, femininity and sexuality that remains salient throughout Brazil, especially among the working classes and the poor, who make up the overwhelming bulk of Brazil's population. Ronaldo, who was raised in the poor Bento Ribeiro neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro, would have grown up with this view of sexuality—as well as in the company of actual travestis, who for the most part come from poor communities not unlike Bento Ribeiro.

But even though it is old and still widespread, this view of sexuality has a built-in weakness. It can only operate in an atmos-

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phere of tacitness and silence. It depends for its existence on cultural attitudes of don't-ask-don't-tell. As long as a man doesn't have to produce a justification for having sex with a travesti, he can enjoy her breasts, her *bunda*, her hair, and her erotic expertise, and remain convinced, at least if he doesn't touch her penis, that he is "completely heterosexual." But as soon as he is called on to explain himself, he finds that a travesti's penis can't be avoided: Wait a minute, people will ask, if you really don't desire a penis, why did you seek out a travesti and not a woman?

The time-tested response to this query is for men to deny that they had any idea that the person they picked up for sex was a travesti. This is almost invariably a lie: travestis work particular streets, apart from female prostitutes, and anyone who has spent even a short time in Brazil is usually able to spot a travesti, especially on the street at night as she works, by the way she dresses, moves, looks, and talks. That Ronaldo did not know that the *three* prostitutes he brought to his hotel room were travestis is utterly implausible. For that to be true, he would either have



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to be culturally incompetent, or intellectually impaired.

To fortify his slight defenses and add weight to his improbable denials, Ronaldo claimed to be “completely heterosexual.” But this, in reality, is no defense at all. The men who pay travestis for sex are not men who identify as gay: gay men don’t want travestis—they want other gay men. The men who go to travestis *all* claim to be heterosexual. So when Ronaldo attempted to exonerate himself during the *Fantástico* interview by protesting that he could never desire a travesti because he is *completamente heterosexual*, he in fact inadvertently confirmed, rather than cast doubt on, the possibility that sex with travestis was precisely what he was itching for on that late-April night. A much more convincing denial would have been for the Phenomenon to say that he is gay.

The near universal skepticism that greeted Ronaldo’s denials and excuses is a symptom of an old sexual system being eclipsed by a new one. Because of increased openness in talking about sex, widespread media cover-

age of other kinds of sexual cultures, travel by Brazilians to other countries and of people from other countries to Brazil, and changes during the last twenty years in Brazilian gender roles, the cover has been blown on the kind of masculine sexuality with which Ronaldo was raised. In the new configuration of sexuality, sexual practice is no longer separable from sexual identity. You can no longer have sex with a homosexual and not be considered a homosexual yourself. That was the take-home message of the Ronaldo affair, and it sent a tremor through the already creaky foundation of Brazilian masculinity. Millions of men who have not only spent years identifying with Ronaldo—with his victories, his defeats, his money, his models, his racing cars, his life—but who also share many dimensions of his cultural upbringing and sexual attitudes—were made to confront the possibility that their object of identification might be a *viado*, a homosexual, a fag. And the nation shuddered as those men meditated on the Phenomenon and asked themselves, uneasily, “*Porra* (Shit)—if Ronaldo’s a *viado*, could I be a *viado* too?”

## Acknowledgments

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## Notes

1. The term “transgendered” arose in the 1990s among sexual rights activists as an umbrella term for a wide variety of gender-variant behavior. It was never meant to replace “transsexual,” but it quickly became a politically correct codeword. This has made it both useful and problematic, in ways that are detailed in David Valentine, *Imaging Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

2. For more on travestis in English, see Don Kulick, *Travesti: Sex, Gender and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); and Don Kulick and Charles Klein, “Scandalous Acts: The Politics of Shame among Brazilian Travesti Prostitutes,” 2003, in *Recognition Struggles and Social Movements: Contested Identities, Agency and Power*, ed. Barbara Hobson, 215–38 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

3. One of these travestis initially confirmed this, scandalously adding that the sex occurred without condoms. See França, Ronaldo, “Uma

escorregada fenomenal,” *Veja*, 7 May ([http://veja.abril.com.br/070508/p\\_132.shtml](http://veja.abril.com.br/070508/p_132.shtml)).

4. “Travesti conta sua versão da noitada com Ronaldo,” *Extra Online*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OW953sqQoPg>.

5. In none of the reports that emerged was it ever clear who called the police. In several it is said or implied that Andréia called them (e.g., <http://salvadornoticias.blogspot.com/2008/04/caso-ronaldinho-travesti-teria-furtado.html>); in one, it is first reported that Ronaldo called, then later in the same article, it is claimed that Andréia called (<http://www.repubblica.it/2008/04/sezioni/sport/calcio/ronaldo-travestiti/ronaldo-travestiti/ronaldo-travestiti.html>). The most common formulation in both print and television journalistic reports is that the police “were called” (*foi chamada*).

6. E.g., [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8h1ltUx\\_vCA&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8h1ltUx_vCA&feature=related).

7. Interview with Patrícia Poeta, *Fantástico*, 4 May 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U4ZBgZPq6Gs&feature=related>, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwaU2ZHcYVY&feature=related>.

8. *Jornal da Bande*, 28 April 2008, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8h1ltUx\\_vCA&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8h1ltUx_vCA&feature=related).

9. <http://www.emtemporeal.com.br/index.asp?area=2&dia=07&mes=05&ano=2008&idnoticia=51451>.

10. “MP denuncia travesti do caso Ronaldo por extorsão,” 21 May 2008. <http://g1.globo.com/Noticias/Rio/0,,MUL488112-5606,00-MP+DENUNCIA+TRAVESTI+DO+CASO+RONALDO+POR+EXTORSAO.html>. After many delays, witnesses, including Ronaldo, began being summoned to testify in September 2008. Andréia in her testimony reverted to her original story, claiming that she had retracted it because the police threatened her. She now threatened, if she

were to be convicted of any crime, to release a video of Ronaldo she says she recorded in the love motel room (*Travesti afirma que Ronaldo estava drogado*; <https://seguro.lancenet.com.br/futebol/FUTEBOL-INTERNACIONAL/noticias/08-09-26/392831.stm?travesti-afirma-que-ronaldo-estava-drogado>). The last new reports of this case that I have been able to find are all from the end of September 2008, so as of February 2009, when this article went to press, it is still not clear when the hearings will conclude and whether they will result in Andréia actually being charged with a crime.

11. The pregnancy was real, however, and carried to term. Bia Anthony gave birth to a girl, Maria Sofia, on 24 December 2008 in Rio de Janeiro. Ronaldo was reportedly not only present during the birth; he even “cut the umbilical cord” (<http://revistaquem.globo.com/Revista/Quem/0,,EMI20237-9531,00-NASCE+MARIA+SOFIA+A+FILHA+DE+RONALDO+E+BIA+ANTONY.html>). Whether or not Ronaldo is actually the father of the child, on the other hand, is a topic that remains under debate among Brazilians.

12. European men pay much more for sex than Brazilians—and they pay in euros, to boot.

13. Carla did later turn up, though, listed among the performers in Andréia’s pornographic film *Ela é Um Fenômeno* ([http://loja.tray.com.br/loja/produto-99763-3425-dvd-andreia\\_albertini\\_ela\\_e\\_um\\_fenomeno](http://loja.tray.com.br/loja/produto-99763-3425-dvd-andreia_albertini_ela_e_um_fenomeno)).

14. “Caso Ronaldo: ‘Minha vida mudou do lixo para o luxo,’ diz travesti Andréia,” *Diário de São Paulo*, May 26, 2008 ([http://oglobo.globo.com/rio/mat/2008/05/26/caso\\_ronaldo\\_minha\\_vida\\_mudou\\_do\\_lixo\\_para\\_luxo\\_diz\\_travesti\\_andreia-546504806.asp](http://oglobo.globo.com/rio/mat/2008/05/26/caso_ronaldo_minha_vida_mudou_do_lixo_para_luxo_diz_travesti_andreia-546504806.asp)).

15. <http://ego.globo.com/Gente/Noticias/0,,MUL476881-9798,00-TRAVESTI+ENVOLVIDO+NO+CASO+RONALDO+LANCA+DVD+PORNO.html>.

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