
NEYMAR, HERO OF CHILDRENS

NEYMAR, O HERÓI DAS CRIANÇAS

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RESUMO

O objetivo geral deste estudo é analisar as estratégias utilizadas em uma matéria do programa Esporte Espetacular para relacionar Neymar à imagem de herói e o modo de apropriação dessa mensagem por jovens universitários. Fez-se uso da técnica de grupos focais e do método analítico descritivo para coleta e análise dos dados. A amostra foi constituída por 24 jovens universitários, na faixa etária entre 18 e 24 anos. Conforme os jovens universitários, a intenção da matéria ao afirmar que Neymar “cuida das crianças” é mostrar o jogador como um exemplo a ser seguido por seus valores éticos e morais.

Palavras-chave: Televisão. Futebol. Criança. Jovem.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to analyze the strategies used in a report of Esporte Espetacular program to relate Neymar to the image of the hero and the appropriation of that message by university students. There was use of the technique of focus groups and analytical-descriptive method for collecting and analyzing data. The sample consisted of 24 university students, aged between 18 and 24 years. According university students, the intent of the EE to say that Neymar "cares for the children" is to show the player as an example to be followed by its ethical and moral values.

Keywords: Television. Soccer. Child. Young.

Introduction

The role of the media is no longer understood as that of reproducer of events, but as that of a mediator, since it selects information to be conveyed, as well as its perspective of analysis. In this mediation process, the trajectories of idols are edited, with the highlight of some aspects and disregard for others¹.

Sports allow the construction of a spectacle scenario with whimsical plots, emphasizing contemporary actions/leisure/consumption. In this sense, sports and the media produce – or name – heroes and villains, linking the image of characters to a social group and bringing fans/viewers closer to the emotions experienced.

The objective of this article is to analyze strategies used in a news story broadcasted by the Brazilian TV show *Esporte Espetacular* to link the football player Neymar to the image of a hero, and how young university students took that message.

Methods

Participants

The study sample was composed of 24 young university students aged between 18 and 24 years old, of both sexes.

Procedures

The analyzed news story², produced by *Esporte Espetacular* (EE) and titled “*Em Brasília, seleção arrasa Austrália para alegria de pais e filhos fãs do futebol-arte*” [In Brasília, the national football team defeats Australia to the joy of parents and children, fans of the art of football], was broadcasted on September 8, 2013.

Data were collected by means of focus groups, where subjects watched the story and verbalized their impressions.

Data analysis

For analysis of the story and responses obtained through the focus groups, the analytical descriptive method was used.

Results and discussion

Esporte Espetacular's discourse on Neymar

The news story portrays the idolatrous relationship between Neymar and Brazilian children. First, it shows images of a protest held in front of Mané Garrincha stadium on the day of the last exhibition game of the Brazilian national football team in 2013. The images depict the joy of fans, adults and children, when seeing Neymar. It is as though in the midst of chaos, more than 90 minutes of joy, the player gave Brazilians a moment of peace and hope for better days. The dramatic tone used to describe Neymar leaving the playing field praises his image as an idol and turns him, at least on that day, into a hero.

The media is an institution whose social purpose is to disseminate information, which, according to Charaudeau^{3:19}, “is essentially a matter of language, and language is not transparent to the world, it has its own opacity through which a view, a particular sense of the world is constructed.” The media passes on information, stimulates imagination and transmits elements for the interpretation of the world, oftentimes defined by market and audience interests through symbols, words, gestures, expressions and other communication resources.

The story's discourse suggests to children – and consequently to parents – the consumption of products and reproduction of habits related to Neymar by exposing the idol as a special, affectionate, funny, sincere human being. Many children in the story copied Neymar's look and/or wore uniforms and other products linked to the player. Such an attitude was seen in the story as an act of “love” for the idol, but it can also be perceived as an attempt to be like or at least share some of his characteristics.

The news story states that for four days students from *Colégio Militar Dom Pedro II* [Dom Pedro II Military College] had their “dream break”, as they could see Neymar training. It shows to viewers, including children, a playful, talented and humble Neymar. Since children are still developing their personality, they consume whatever is shown and, unless convinced otherwise, are influenced by the image attributed to Neymar.

The relationship between fan and idol was called by John Thompson⁴ as “intimacy at a distance”. Instead of a face-to-face experience, there is no mutuality in it: the fan loves alone but, on the other hand, does not have the duties of a traditional romantic relationship. However, just as in face-to-face interactions, in this one the individual also takes from it elements for the construction of his or her identity. This relationship is portrayed when, while using a language of intimacy through which child fans really seem to know their idol, the story shows that interaction will hardly go beyond a parasocial relationship. A “special” group of children will “remember in the future” that “they were the mascots chosen to enter the field alongside the Brazilian national team.” They all ask to enter with Neymar, but the news story highlights that “only one will succeed” and be proud of it. By perpetuating these senses,

children also form their own concepts of success and themselves, which may lead them to relate to those senses or not. The story's discourse brings at its core the symbology of competition, by generating in children the senses of dispute for the object of desire: to be close to Neymar.

With language being the most typical mediation and expression of representations legitimized in the consensual universe of interaction between subjects, the media has to be taken as an important instance of power and appeal to social culture in the construction of knowledge, values and meanings about some subjects. Allied to football – phenomenon that is entangled with the ideological and cultural constitution of Brazilians –, the media has a notable influence by disseminating values and senses about this sport, founding part of its agenda of discussion and social interaction and influencing the understanding of its concept and of what it means to be an athlete. However, it must be remembered that individuals are capable of filtering messages and making a judgment about them.

The children interviewed for the news story showed they had information about Neymar and even fought for the position of number 1 fan based on the amount of objects related to the player each one boasted. Such consumption can be seen as a way of generating identification, either by the search for a single subject or, as in the case of that story, for a group of children that seek to show off through their greater capacity of consumption. In this way, consumption can reveal a form of social distinction⁵.

Before the match started, all the boys were looking forward to entering the field next to Neymar. The valuation of the idol is widely seen in the story when the children's attitudes and words refer to the player – “Neymar is the best, man,” said one of the boys. Driven by the positive and functional view of sports and the patriotism developed during the pre-Cup time, the children's speeches included the following predicatives: competitiveness, individualism and, mainly, exaltation of the idol.

It is worth stressing that Neymar is pointed as an idol in the pre-Cup period – years 2013 and early 2014 –, when the national team tried to establish itself as a favorite for the title. For this reason, the story highlights the characteristics that shape Neymar as special, reference of behavior and paradigm of social desires. The representation of Neymar as a social actor goes beyond the sports domain to reach social values intrinsic to “being an athlete”. This initiative of the news story aims at increasing ratings during the World Cup, broadcast by *Rede Globo*, Brazilian television network. The exaltation of Neymar is a narrative strategy of the sports agenda so as to personify the exhibit game and, later, the 2014 World Cup. Neymar is invoked as the star of the national team, the one who could give the Brazilian people the world champions title – images show the player singing the national anthem, scoring a goal and passing, cheering. Feijó⁶ states that the belief in the hero's competence to produce history is always the concern about the subjects' competence to organize themselves in order to achieve their goals. The wait for the hero is the hope that somebody else will do for a group what they think is impossible to accomplish by themselves. Whether in fictional narratives or in real life, the search for the hero is continuous in Brazilian culture.

The success of heroes in mass culture is, according to Eliade⁷, a projection of the ideal man. Thus, Neymar satisfies the secret nostalgias of a certain subject who, recognizing himself as limited, wishes that one day he proves himself an exceptional man. The story contributes to Neymar becoming a national hero deeply identified with the definition of Brazilianness marked by irreverence and roguery, according to DaMatta⁸, and incorporated into the national cultural imaginary.

In the construction of the narrative about Neymar, the story uses the classic structure of the mythological hero saga proposed by Campbell⁹: separation, initiation and return.

Finding that the meaning of his existence is not satisfied in his place of origin, Neymar leaves it symbolically and ventures into a region of continuous challenges: football. There, Neymar would have acquired almost supernatural forces and had the victory – to stand out in the sport and to raise his economic status. After a succession of varied experiences and victories, Neymar would then put his knowledge to the service of his mates, bringing benefits to them.

The values attributed to Neymar and the attention and admiration from little João Pedro – boy chosen to enter the field next to the player – establish forms of power. Thus, when the story says that “João Pedro sang the anthem looking at Neymar from head to foot,” it gives the player an essence that is directly linked to the plane of passions, to something that would not be on a material but on a mythological plane. The idol would be the representation of a divine being to be worshiped. Even though he was on the pitch beside Neymar, João Pedro could not have a conversation with him. According to the news story, “Neymar said a lot to João Pedro, with his feet.” The story’s message is based on the idea that the player is for the new generation a representative of Brazilianness and the pride of being Brazilian. The message passed on to João Pedro is for him to be a serious, focused, happy, family-oriented boy and bet on his talents, because he will be successful, just like Neymar. Even opponents would have been “kindly invited” by Neymar to a football “class”. All this, only and exclusively, to the joy of João and the other Brazilians.

According to Maingueneau¹⁰, the discourse is one’s mode of action over the other. To declare, to repudiate, to promise, to insinuate are acts that constitute an enunciation and seek to produce changes in the receiver. That news story strengthens the idolatry surrounding Neymar by taking advantage of the upcoming World Cup to report the young player’s career. As an idol, Neymar is raised to the position of star of the match against Australia. His presence becomes indispensable, after all, it was he who fascinated the crowd and led the latter to identify with that event. Without Neymar the game would no longer be attractive and, consequently, would be less profitable. EE knows this and, in order to achieve its goal – to construct a convincing discourse – made use of strategies that were thought out to hold the viewer’s attention and lead him or her to buy the idea of Neymar’s idol status.

The news story made an effort to present Neymar’s talent as an individual gift that could beat other players and surprise the crowd. The football Neymar plays is valued by the TV show, he is taken as the successor of Pelé and, at the moment, is inferior only to the Argentine player Messi. The story reports that Bernard and Jô are excellent players, scored goals in the match against Australia, but live in the shadow of Neymar, as a clear demonstration that the latter was the focus of attention of the program. According to it, “what João Pedro wanted to see so badly was Neymar scoring.” When characterizing the national idol, the story describes Neymar’s performance in the match, step by step. From this perspective, the athlete’s perfection while passing and dribbling, his concentration and patriotism in the beginning when national anthem echoes are highlighted.

The discourse comprises not only language but also the way of saying it through proper actions and interactions. Common items in the news story, adjectives, for being a form that expresses an explicit opinion, are discursively characterized as an argumentative strategy³. An adjective can turn a goal into a remarkable event for a victory. Some adjectives are common in the story: skillful, star, talented and supportive. One needs to be careful when using adjectives and, consequently, reading the message because, if frequent, they can become Neymar’s characteristics in the eyes of viewers.

Television is color, sound, movement, a sense-producing discursive machine with significant capacity to attract and monopolize the viewer’s attention. As Charaudeau^{3:109} states, television is “image and speaks of such a solidarity that one could not say on which of the two the structuration of the sense depends.”

Seeking to bring the idol closer to the audience, Neymar's relationship with his son is highlighted, combining speech and image. The story attempted to focus on Neymar's son by showing the boy's entering the playing field in her father's arms, with the following message: "Entering the pitch with the players is so important for children that Neymar takes his 2-year-old son, Davi Lucas." Neymar was introduced as someone that has a family and is committed to training. The news story's discourse shows that, despite being very young, Neymar is an exemplary father.

Neymar is recognized as an idol for his good image revealed by the media, which does not mean that it is false. When sports coverage emphasizes a positive or negative face of a player, the latter will be remembered that way. In this case, it is possible to mention Neymar's image of a "family man" and skilled player portrayed by the story. All the times he was mentioned in the story, the player is considered to be a good boy. He is also shown as the hero of children. It is possible to perceive then that the news story acts as an instrument in the construction of Neymar's idolatrous image, not only for his sports performance, but also for the way he is shown to viewers, thus influencing public opinion.

The young university students' modes of appropriation

The search for the constitution of identity moves part of the subjects towards the consumption of symbols, placing the representation in the position of the represented¹¹. Such situation was described by the research subjects, who stated that Neymar stood higher than the national football team.

I do not remember what team the match was against. I got lost with the number of times I saw Neymar in close-up. Why did they start saying that that was the last exhibition game of the team? It would have been much more frank if they said: this is Neymar's last exhibition match of 2013. (Student 4, G1)

For the students, the way the game played by the Brazilian national team against Australia was approached is paradigmatic of the notion of a mediated access to reality. As the news story's discourse articulates certain meanings to events while masking others, a version of reality is generated in this discourse, which, given its immense social diffusion, has a great possibility of becoming hegemonic, thus helping preserve a given relationship of forces in society. In the news story, EE appropriates the event through successive mediations, overlapping interpretations and metadiscourses, choosing Neymar as protagonist.

I believe that, although it does not determine behaviors, Esporte Espetacular certainly acts as a factor of influence in the social field. So, as soon as he gives Neymar superpowers and importance to the detriment of his teammates, this can indeed become a truth. Do they not say that a lie told a thousand times becomes the truth? So, in all news stories we have seen so far Neymar is a miracle-working saint that can lead the team to have the grace of winning the World Cup. (Student 7, G2)

The way the football match was treated by EE manifests a singularity of facts conveyed by the media: the football match is a narrative construction of the enunciator (*Esporte Espetacular*), a representation. Evidently, the report is said to be loyal to the facts but, even if it was a live broadcast, it would be a representation. The displayed images are chosen according to a codification that is proper of the vehicle (for instance, passes, dribbles and goal scored by Neymar).

Soares¹² tells a story that describes this event construction by the media. In 1960, when the Brazilian national team played a game in Algeria, a radio host did not have enough

wire available to go with his microphone to the field, thus failing to see the game he would have to narrate. He then invented a stratagem: the former player Leônidas would stand at the edge of the field and come to the commentator when a goal was scored. Meanwhile, the commentator reported to his listeners an imaginary match, where he put the moves that led to the goals.

In television, the artist is treated so that he or she becomes an idol. For this reason, it highlights a relevant point of himself or herself, such as excessive charisma, good performance in his or her profession or a pleasant appearance, for instance. When considering the possible reasons for EE's preference for Neymar, the students stated that the player represents the Brazilian way of being, has high financial profitability and is a skilled football player.

Dear, how many individual sponsors does Neymar have, just for him? 11. He is no joke. It is very profitable for any broadcaster to talk about Neymar because it is another advertising time. And, as far as I know, the seconds for advertising during Globo's business hours are super expensive, so imagine that in a show. (Student 6, G3)

We have already remarked here that Neymar has that notorious Brazilian way. He is bold, cheerful, dances – if you can call that dancing – he is stylish. (Student 3, G3)

For the research subjects, the news story produces effects by presenting a discourse dense in meanings that can lead people to excessive consumption and become followers of Neymar. Alongside these questions, receivers need to establish a less naive relationship with language, which is crossed by ideologies that, in this specific case, meet the desires of a society that lacks representation.

The story makes a very strong image of Neymar, the team's big boss. Children, teens and even adults who are not careful and critical to interpret what they say have big chances of falling into this trap and turning into neymarzetes (Neymar fans). (Student 4, G3)

One of the students said that Neymar is the product of a fad. Neymar is now the national idol most talked about in the media, but years ago it was Ronaldo, Ronaldinho Gaúcho and Pelé. That idol of the past is devalued from the moment he does not meet the demand, and a new product that meets a growing demand begins to be sold. In this context, a product is not consumed for its use value, but for its symbolic value, that is, for the social position it confers.

It is like fashion. It changes nonstop, but not everything changes literally because several adaptations are made of the old fashion so that it looks like novelty. In the past, Ronaldo was in the media. The day came when he was no longer trendy because a new sensation of the moment arose: Neymar. Neymar is a revamped and 'fit' version of Ronaldo. (Student 5, G3)

According to Marcelo Kischinhevsky¹³, the insertion of the media into the football field was the incentive that made it reach the level of profitable business on a global scale. Thus, a club can, through the media, reach a much larger number of people, maximizing its profitability. Sponsors also become interested in this visibility promoted by media coverage, so they also engage with the football medium in order to raise their earnings. Finally, the very means of communication make a profit through the publication of sports news, because fans

want to feel close to football and its characters in order to build a closer relationship with their teams, idols, etc.

About Neymar's image portrayed by the news story, the research subjects consider that EE presented Neymar as a brave young man with exemplary behavior, a humble, warm, supportive, skillful and charismatic person that defends his people and his family at all costs. Neymar, according to the group, is shown to viewers as much more than just an athlete. He would be "almost like a god who, through his talent, brings joy to a people hungry for heroes and food" (Student 4, G3). For the students, this is the image that EE expects its audience to internalize, value and identify with.

He is shown as the hero who stands in front of his people to protect them. Who faces the opponent team wholeheartedly, ready for everything. (Student 1, G2)

Neymar is considered by many to be the 'good guy', exemplary behavior, affectionate, charismatic, humble. In short, perfect. (Student 5, G3)

Neymar is regarded as a winner, skilled, strong in the face of difficulties, serious, and all the other qualities on the planet. (Student 5, G1)

The 'good guy' concept is characterized by a morality marked in the body through gestures, which becomes site of examination of the spiritual domain over the body, over the instincts¹³. The students' narrative highlights the news story's effort to emphasize Neymar as the good guy, a characteristic it postulates as a reference for social behavior. This does not mean that Neymar does not have the characteristics mentioned by the news story, but that the emphasis on certain qualities makes the player to be remembered that way. In the story under analysis, the social role of good guy intended to be represented through Neymar to the viewers.

The identification of people and groups with a certain way of living is mediated by the media. It produces the markets of goods circulation and symbolic identification. In the news story, children want, in some way, to have a bit of Neymar, to consume material and symbolic goods that, somehow, make them equal to their idol.

The focus on the good guy image spans the use value, because it is through it that Neymar's body is taken as a commodity. When one's image is scratched by problems there may be a loss of use value. It is worth emphasizing that football is also interested in the way Neymar's image is presented, since it can cause a boost in the popularity and quality of the modality.

Despite the drama and numerous arguments, the participants opposed to the discourse conveyed in the news story. Among all characterizations it brought, only the skill item was recognized by the research subjects as Neymar's real quality.

They exaggerate in everything. How can you say that Neymar is affectionate and warm with children if he did not even talk to Pedrinho. He barely looked at the boy. He may be affectionate with his son, but not with other children apparently. (Student 7, G3)

Solidary, just because he passed the ball once. Come on. This is a matter of tactics. What is worse: missing a goal or passing the ball for another player to score? If you want to call Neymar something, call him smart. (Student 2, G2)

Honestly, of all that was said, the only thing you can say 'is true' is his ability. He really is an excellent player. That is it. If they only talked about the facts about Neymar and did not waffle, that story would last only 30 seconds. (Student 1, G1)

For Fromm¹⁵, the idol is an essential figure to people, as he or she has as attribution to give support and strength. According to the author, imitating the idol is a way for children to reach their self. From these stimuli, they begin to expose their desires, to distinguish themselves and, therefore, to construct and reconstruct their identity. Such a stance is shared by the research subjects. One of the participants stated that:

The role of the media in the attachment of children to their idols and heroes is very active, because the way it portrays the image of these beings, associated with special effects, jingles, bright and vibrant colors, lead children to imitate behaviors. This imitation can be used to construct the identity of these children. (Student 8, G3)

According to the students, the image the news story makes of Neymar has a strong playful and magic connotation, with the player being characterized as strong and a warrior, catching the attention of children and keeping them in front of the TV screen.

When Neymar appears even the colors in the image change. They get more vibrant, visually appealing. The sounds change too. He (Neymar) is shown running around trying to beat his opponents, who would be the villains. (Student 2, G1)

Lipovetsky¹⁶ states that the media exerts power by transforming tastes and behaviors. The behavior of idols is usually imitated by children and applied to everyday life. According to the students, the news story's intent by stating that Neymar "cares for the children" is to show the player as an example to be followed for his ethical and moral values.

EE depicts Neymar as an important person at this stage of development (childhood) and speaks of the positive influence he can have on a child's behaviors and attitudes. (Student 4, G1)

When they show Neymar as the most perfect guy on the surface of the Earth, they encourage all those children to fight to be the number one fan. (Student 3, G2)

In the relationship with their idols, it is possible that children learn values such as ethics, courage, strength, generosity and humility. That is what EE wants us to believe that happens with Neymar. He would be this perfect idol for children. (Student 1, G3)

In this dimension, it was verified that the research participants pointed out determination as value to be transferred by Neymar to the children.

Of all the things, or rather, of the nothing that Esporte Espetacular spoke of, I think one good thing that Neymar passes on to children is determination. He went through difficulties in his life but did not stop fighting for his dreams because of that. This can be an encouragement for children. (Student 4, G2)

For Fromm¹⁵, the idol is necessary for the child – and for all the other age groups – being an important identification figure for interaction and socialization with others, because it is with this contact that the child deals with everyday dilemmas, becomes stronger, controls his or her emotions and understands the world.

Sports have been present in the life of humans since the Ancient Greece times, when games were explored for the assertion of ideologies. In Ancient Rome, emperors and the Senate also employed sports to reduce social tensions; it was the famous bread and circuses (*panis et circenses*) policy¹⁷. The research subjects affirmed that this practice continues to

occur in the present day and harshly criticized how sports are spectacularized. According to the students, such technique is used in the sense of alienating the viewer and thus disseminating and maintaining a perverse and excluding social order.

Through the media individuals can be controlled at a distance because they can internalize norms and values that constitute the interests of a portion of society and that are passed on through the media. (Student 5, G2)

That news story treated protesters as anti-patriots, as people who only wanted to end the joy of “the people.” For such a purpose, they showed the police and the protesters in conflict, as if the police were just trying to control thugs who have nothing to do. While the stadium would be where the good people were, those who want to see the greatest symbol of the country, the national football team. (Student 2, G3)

The students’ speeches evidence that they stand contrarily to the superpatriotism that usually takes a big portion of the country during a match, no matter if it is an exhibition game, played by the Brazilian national team, and masks many of Brazil’s social problems, like hunger and corruption.

It is by resorting to memory – theorized by Pêcheux¹⁸ as a place for inscribing ideologies and discourses, or rather, the meanings inscribed in it – that the media interprets and oftentimes engenders current events in order to determine and give strength to certain attributes and feelings of belonging that identify subjects in a group and, at the same time, set boundaries with other collectivities, differentiating these individuals from others, belonging to other groups¹⁹.

The news story’s discourse, according to the students, returns to a common place, a memory that celebrates the talent, the *ginga* and the joy of national players, reinforcing these marks as referring to Brazilianness. However, the group members denied the consensus that football is the greatest asset of Brazilian culture by criticizing the conduct of Brazilian fans and the mercantilist appropriation of football by the media.

The way the media shows sports today, especially football, distorts their original purpose. Sports should be used as a pedagogical tool, a tool to make people think. But, what we see is them being used as a ‘tranquilizer’. Brazilians are forgetting the real needs of our country just because of a game. (Student 7, G3)

We are a failure when it comes to the economy, politics and as a society, but for Esporte Espetacular what matters is that we beat Australia. Since they only talk about sports, why don’t they address the unbridled corruption in the CBF? That would be way more important than talking 8 minutes about Neymar. (Student 8, G3)

Conclusions

The forms of an idol generate manifestations in the media and the audience that follows it. The media shows portions of the everyday life that cause a reaction in the receiver, which, on the other hand, also influences what the media conveys about idols.

The cyclical process of building an idol is determined by the interests of the audience, means of communication and sports. In spite of preserving standards initially set by the agents (media and sports, in this case), this relationship is dynamic, as it extends according to social interactions. An individual only becomes an idol when wanted and desired by others – the fans. Therefore, there is no manipulator or manipulated, but interests, actions and dispositions.

It is worth stressing herein that the university environment as mediation can influence subjects in their thinking, acting and behaving. The research participants are aware that it is the Physical Education's duty to clarify the processes of creation of narratives on sports idols; to contextualize the figure of the sports hero based on the interests that span the athlete's life.

The story's discourse reflects its intent to affect the individual and collective imaginary by extolling the image of an idol compatible with the interests of the entertainment industry, but also of the sports culture, which is nowadays a commercial relationship.

The narrative constructed around Neymar presents a feuilleton style when employing aspects of drama, heroism, spectacle and the classic "happy ending". In addition, it reproduces the victory/success discourse that maintains the *status quo* not only of the athlete in modern sports, but of humans in contemporary society. Attributing forms to the hero is a conducive medium to the development of a sports culture personified in the athlete. Holding Neymar accountable for the victory in the match, for the happiness of not only a child, but of an entire nation, is a way of singularizing his heroic nature that achieves the goal of his community.

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Received on Mar, 06, 2016.

Reviewed on, Jul, 29, 2016.

Accepted on, Dec, 15, 2016.

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