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**Turning the game to politics: From an NBA economic-oriented profile to a political influence generation**

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Master in International Studies

Supervisor:

PhD Marcelo Moriconi Bezerra, Integrated Researcher,  
CEI-Iscte – Centre for International Studies

November, 2021



SOCIOLOGIA  
E POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS

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**Department of History**

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## RESUMO

Quando consideramos desporto de uma forma global, não o associamos diretamente a política, no entanto, ao longo da história, o desporto tem sido utilizado como uma estratégia diplomática e como uma ferramenta de poder suave. Se há um exemplo perfeito da utilização deste tipo de estratégias, é o exemplo dos Estados Unidos da América, visto que foram um dos primeiros estados a utilizar o desporto para fins diplomáticos através do famoso caso da “diplomacia do pingue-pongue” com a intenção de estabelecer uma relação positiva com a China. Os EUA são também conhecidos pela grandiosidade e espetacularidade das suas ligas e dos seus eventos desportivos, o que ultimamente pode ser utilizado com uma forma de poder suave pelo país. Tendo isso em conta, a presente tese irá estudar como é que uma das mais importantes ligas desportivas dos EUA, a Associação Nacional de Basquetebol Americana (NBA), poderá ter usado o seu próprio poder suave para protestar contra o governo em função. Mais especificamente, irei explorar como é que a temporada 2019/2020 da NBA, e todos os eventos à volta dessa temporada, podem ter provocado uma atitude política e ativista por parte da comunidade da NBA, que por fim poderá ter afetado as eleições Americanas de 2020.

**Palavras-chave:** Estados Unidos da América, Associação Nacional de Basquetebol, ativismo, poder suave, diplomacia desportiva

## **ABSTRACT**

When considering sports in its globality, one wouldn't probably directly associate it with politics, however throughout history sports has been used both as a diplomatic strategy and as a soft power tool. If there is a perfect example for this type of strategies, is the United States of America, they were one of the first to utilize sports for diplomatic outcomes with the famous case of "ping-pong diplomacy" with the intent of stablishing a beneficial relation with China. The US are also known for their spectacular, grandiose and impressive sporting leagues and sporting events, that can ultimately be utilized as a form of soft power by the country itself. With that being said, the following thesis will study how one of the most important sporting leagues of the U.S., the National Basketball Association, may have utilized its own soft power to protest the acting government. More specifically, I will explore how the 2019/2020 NBA season, and all of the events surrounding that season, may have triggered a political and activist stance by the NBA community and, ultimately, affected the US 2020 Presidential election.

**Keywords:** United States of America, National Basketball Association, activism, soft power, sports diplomacy

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## **Glossary of acronyms**

NBA – National Basketball Association

US/USA – United States of America

UK - United Kingdom

BAA - Basketball Association of America

NBL - National Basketball League

ABA - American Basketball Association

WNBA - Women's National Basketball Association





## Introduction

Countries invest time and money to be the best at different sports competitions, to win the right of hosting a sporting mega-event and to expand their sporting culture across their borders into the rest of the world. Even though the feeling of patriotism and pride when seeing your country winning or hosting some of the most important sporting competitions/events, there is something that governments value even more, power. Sport is an important tool of influence. Hosting a sporting mega-event is an opportunity to send a specific message to the rest of the world, the same applies to winning sporting competitions.

One of the countries that best utilizes its resources to display an image of dominance in sports is the United States of America: multiple medals in every Olympic competition, gigantic amounts of money spent in the most advanced and well-equipped sporting facilities, leagues and sporting arenas where the show and grandiosity rule. In addition to their facilities, their leagues, their sporting accomplishments as a country, they also have some of the most famous athletes and ex-athletes in the world, such as LeBron James or Michael Jordan. I refer to these two athletes as I consider the American basketball league to be one of the leagues most watched in the whole world. In addition, the NBA league is considered to be the best basketball league in the world and the American basketball team to be the best national basketball team in the world. Besides these characteristics, the NBA as an organization is one of the most successful not only at a national level, but also at an international level. A league with such reach and power, rapidly became one of the US's best weapons when it comes to soft power or even sports diplomacy.

The influence and power that the US have through sports it's an interesting enough topic by itself, however during 2020 a set of events have created an incredible opportunity to explore and study the political influence that may come from a sport organization against the government.

The US have always lived through a harsh reality of racism, discrimination and police brutality against minorities. The systemic racism deep rooted within the history of the US as oppressed said communities for way too many years. This is something that is felt in all sectors of society, and sports is no different from the rest. During 2020 there were several cases of Black people in the US that were severely injured or killed due to police

brutality. The never-ending sequence of this type of cases led to several protests in the US. However, something was different. This time, more than ever before, professional athletes were utilizing their platforms not only to share messages of supports but to also organize protests in their cities, to fight racism, to fight discrimination and to fight police brutality. One of the most represented American sport leagues was the NBA, with multiple athletes getting in on the action.

That is what I propose myself to study, to analyse how NBA athletes made a difference during such difficult times, how the NBA as an organization supported its athletes, and what were the consequences of the actions taken by the NBA community as a whole. The question that I intend to answer is: *did the NBA community actions have a direct effect in the results of the US 2020 Presidential election?*

In order to answer that question I have divided the following thesis in several chapters: in chapter 1, I elaborated a small literature review based on the concepts of soft power and sports diplomacy. In addition, I also present the story of the NBA, its national and international growth and how the activism as grown in the league throughout time; in chapter 2, I present the methodology that I will be utilizing to achieve an answer to my research question; in chapter 3, I present the data that I collected throughout this process, firstly in terms of the relation between the NBA and Donald Trump, secondly the action taken by the NBA community amidst the 2020 protests and finally, how the public reacted to the actions taken by the NBA community; in chapter 4, I will relate the findings and discuss the results; and finally, in chapter 5, I will leave my final remarks regarding this theme.

# Chapter 1. Literature Review

## 1.1. Conceptual Framework

In order to better understand how the National Basketball Association (NBA) has transformed from an important soft power tool of the United States of America to an institution which advocates for values and ideals grounded on its actors' beliefs, even if those go against the Government itself thus exposing the country's flaws to a global audience, I will develop on multiple concepts and theories which I find crucial to understand the previously mentioned process of transformation. With that being said, I intend to elaborate on the concepts of soft power and sports diplomacy.

### 1.1.1. Soft Power

Soft power, as it was famously described by Nye (2004), is the ability to shape the preference of others and get them to do what you want through attraction and without the use of payments or military force. However, that is only the foundational definition of the term, soft power is a way more complex term that may manifest itself in different form and in different areas of study. With that being said, Nye (2004) proceeds to elaborate on the three main resources in which the soft power of a country rests on: its culture, its political values and its foreign policies. Culture may be defined as the set of values and practices that create meaning for a society, and when those values and practices are universal (shared by other countries) there is an increased probability of obtaining desired outcomes due to the relationships of attraction that they may create (Nye, 2004). A government's political values or the way the government of a certain country behaves itself within their own country and in relation to other countries, international institutions and/or foreign policies is also a soft power source as it strongly affects the preference of others (Nye, 2004). Finally, the last resource of soft power considered by Nye, government policies. Government policies not only at home but in the international context can present itself as a source of soft power. The broader and more associated a country is with the interests of other states, the closer it is to reinforce their own soft power globally (Nye, 2004).

Following the previous definition, it is fair to assume that soft power is represented through states capability to communicate and share universal values (Grix & Lee, 2013) in a way that a country can benefit from an international relation by aligning those same values to their own preferences and interests.

The definition given by Joseph Nye may present itself as a reasonable and suitable one, however, to this day there are debates around the meaning of soft power. Definitions of soft power are often linked to a nation's interests and its policies nationally and internationally even though characteristics such as attraction appear harder to associate to a nation in that context, making it unclear how they may lead to power or influence on the global context (Fan, 2008). As so, it may be more interesting to associate soft power to a form of power based on a country's cultural resources (Fan, 2008) because "cultural concepts will always influence the way national leaders regard political issues, and often determine the solutions they choose to solve the issues, both individually and collectively" (Haneş & Andrei, 2015).

Still, it is crucial to further explore, determine and measure a country's soft power in order to better understand it as a concept. With that in mind, a more current and incisive definition of soft power includes not only cultural power but also political power, educational power and diplomatic power (Haneş & Andrei, 2015).

Taking that into account, for Haneş and Andrei (2015) the main characteristics of soft power are: traditionality, temporality, spreading, change and dependency. They consider that a nation's soft power is related to its historical development, its background and its domestic and international relations, to the spreading of information through different tools such as the internet which facilitates the interaction between different states, to the dynamic quality intrinsic to soft power as it is always changing due to the different fields in which it operates, and to the dependency factor as the soft power of a nation is interdependent of the hard power of that same nation (they rely on each other to keep developing). Nevertheless, it is still given a great deal of importance to the cultural aspect of soft power as it comprises the materials and spiritual wealth created in the history of human society (Haneş & Andrei, 2015) ending up affecting all the other previously mentioned aspects of soft power.

In summary, soft power has tremendous importance on the current global context as it is a valid and efficient alternative to the use of hard power. It is highly influenced by culture and it can present itself in different forms depending on the ultimate objective of its use. Despite being mostly referred to as a method to improve relations between states

it is not exclusive to them as it may be used by individuals, groups of peoples or even organizations.

Taking into account the context of the presented dissertation it is clear how crucial it becomes to explore the linkage between soft power and sports. Sports have always had a major role (as a tool of soft power) to influence and assert some type of global dominance or influence. Some of the big stages to display the image of a country belong to sporting events, those may be the football World Cup or the Olympic Games, for example. Normally the countries in charge of hosting such events take advantage of the attention that it is centered in them to demonstrate a specific image of their country, a image of development, a image of wealth or even a image of power. As so, elite sport performance and the staging of sporting mega-events (such as the ones previously mentioned) are seen as sources of international prestige and opportunities to “brand” the host’s country, therefore making soft power in this cases a tool to shape and leverage international relations by affecting the external perceptions of a country (Grix & Houlihan, 2013).

In fact, soft power is seen as an increasingly important power within the global context and culture represents a key field for the pursuit and exercise of soft power, specially through sport, art, education and media. Considering that, the hosting of sporting mega events provides national governments a great opportunity to increase their soft power through the showcase of its culture to a global audience, thus attracting tourists and increasing national pride (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015).

Furthermore, the resultant international prestige generated through the successful hosting of a mega sporting-event or by having one’s national team perform well (or both) can then be converted into soft power, making a state’s culture and political values more attractive to the global audience (Grix & Houlihan, 2013).

For instance, Germany has played an crucial role on the political use of sport as part of their public diplomacy strategy. In 2006, Germany was responsible for hosting the FIFA World Cup, which presented itself as a valuable opportunity to improve the country’s often negative external image (Grix & Houlihan, 2013). Through campaigns to prepare the country to receive millions of fans from around the world, campaigns which promoted the tourism in Germany and attracted foreign investment, investments in the public transportation system and by orchestrating an extremely organized, secure and welcoming sporting mega-event (not to mention the football dominance itself displayed during the competition by the hosting country), Germany capitalized on the opportunity and ended up improving the perception that other states may have had of the country

before the event, while also becoming a more attractive place for citizens from all around the globe to visit and get to know its history and culture (Grix & Houlihan, 2013).

Nevertheless, the use of sporting mega-events to capitalize on soft power it is not exclusive to countries who once had an external bad image and are trying to improve it. Countries may also use this type of events to achieve objectives other than the ones mentioned previously. For example, in 2012 London was responsible for hosting the Olympic Games even though the United Kingdom already had a favourable external image. However there was a perception that the UK was a “arrogant, overbearing, cold” (Grix & Houlihan, 2013) nation. Thereafter, in this case, the main objectives were: to show that the UK was a “modern, open, connected, creative and dynamic” nation, to bolster the economy by increasing commercial opportunities for British business in target countries while also securing high value inward investments, to enhance the nations security by utilizing the global appeal of the Olympics and to reinforce the values of tolerance, moderation and openness specially amongst young people (Grix & Houlihan, 2013). Taking that into consideration, and considering that the UK’s external image was already a positive one, UK took a calculated risk by hosting the Olympics as the difference between the benefits of hosting an successful event are significantly outweighed by the possible negative impact of hosting an unsuccessful one. Still, UK took the risk and benefited as it portrayed an image of a modern UK while exhibiting its organisational capacity (Grix & Houlihan, 2013).

The previously mentioned examples represent countries which have a cemented role on the global international relations field. However, it is also interesting to look at countries which use the soft power associated with hosting sporting mega-events and are yet to be considered global actors. That is when the case of Brazil becomes particularly pertinent. Brazil was responsible for the hosting of the two most important global sporting events in the world: the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games. For Brazil, the opportunity to host such events is not only to show that it can be considered finally a advanced state but that it is trying to evolve from a regional actor into a global actor in international affairs thus following the footsteps of countries like China (2008 Olympics) and South Africa (2010 FIFA World Cup) (Grix et al., 2015). This particular case demonstrates that even though Brazil did not suffer from a negative image abroad, it still found a purpose on the hosting of these sporting mega-events as it used the soft power associated with it to stablish its power position on the global stage (Grix et al., 2015).

Those examples demonstrate the potential within sporting mega-events which can contribute to the soft power development of a country not only as a branding tool for states to emphasize their qualities on the international stage (which may become attractive to those watching), but also by allowing there to be a spread of culture by the hosting country as it is a perfect opportunity to attract the attention of millions of people to their language, their knowledge, their art or their history (Grix & Houlihan, 2013). Additionally, and despite the precise mechanisms through which a country gains soft power are still not clear, the ability to deal with the logistics of sporting mega-events appears central to how hosts are viewed by others (Grix et al., 2015).

Even though major sporting event may carry a great potential for there to be soft power to be used, the power within the concept of soft power it is not exclusive to these type of events. With the amount of flow of data all through different channels of communications, those being either traditional media or new media, any type of organization or individual has the potential to produce its own soft power. For example, sporting leagues, brands, or even athletes all have huge platforms and huge followings because the audience enjoys either watching a certain sport or wear a specific brand or idolizes an athlete. That attractiveness allows all those types of collectives or individuals to have influence over their audience. Considering that, it is clear to see why the soft power capability of a country it is not exclusively held by the state or even by major global events, the reasoning being that it has become much easier for “anybody” or “anything” to have a platform (through social media platforms, for example) which allows them to have an audience available to receive their messages.

### 1.1.2. Sports Diplomacy

When approaching the concepts of Sports and Diplomacy by themselves it may be difficult to see how they could relate as one of them is normally associated with competition, winning, exposition and adrenaline, the other is often related to dialogue, discretion and peacefulness. Nevertheless, Sports Diplomacy may be broadly defined as a soft power shaped resource which may produce either positive or negative outcomes in their targets depending on “the context, the target and the qualities of the power-conversation strategies” (Abdi et al., 2018). Despite their differences, there is a long-lasting history of states using sports for diplomatic ends, as at its simplest form,



international sports create opportunities for governments to demonstrate various types of superiority, those being: athletic abilities, ideology of states systems or the logistical capacity to organize and host sporting mega-events (S. Murray, 2018).

A deeper analysis of the previously mentioned concepts also makes us realize the similarities between them and why they may complement each other thus being used together as one of the state's tools in the international relations context. For example, looking into sports and diplomacy both of them are ancient, civil and social institutions which help mediate and overcome estrangement between states, thus "intentionally and effortlessly sublimating conflict between separate governments" (S. Murray, 2018). In addition, both diplomats and sportspeople are representatives of their nations in the international relations system, both are part of an exclusive part of society, both compete with "opponents" leaving the audience in expectation of the final result (even if with different types of audiences and different types of exposure), both embody and are driven by ideal human qualities, and it seems fair to assume they are both driven by a strong patriotic sentiment (S. Murray, 2018). In summary, Sports and Diplomacy can lessen the danger of physical conflict by conducting metaphorical battles either in the stadium or around the negotiating table (S. Murray, 2018).

Furthermore, the amount of research and implementation of sports diplomacy has increased throughout time, which is particularly important in order for the concept to become clearer. With that being said, according to Murray (S. Murray, 2012), there are several reasons which explain why governments have been more keen to adopt sports diplomacy strategies, those being: first, the post-Cold War environment forced governments to experiment new forms of conducting their diplomacy, second, the relevance and power associated with sport and sporting organizations has increased with time, third, the fact that sport is the perfect vehicle to bring together nations, states and people who were once apart, fourth, the potential that sport has to get the global audience attention, fifth, sport in itself has qualities and values that appeal to governments and their diplomats, sixth, the similarities between the objectives of representing your country both as a diplomat or as a national athlete in the international stage have brought this two types of careers closer together and finally, estranged states can explore the use of sport as a form of normalizing or developing diplomatic relations.

According to Murray and Pigman (2014), it is possible to distinguish two types of sports diplomacy categories. The first, which is also known as traditional sports diplomacy, refers to the cases in which international sport is deliberately used by governments as an instrument of diplomacy allowing states to amplify a diplomatic message, to ease tensions between states or to create opportunities for there to be dialogue between estranged nations (S. Murray & Pigman, 2014). Its opportunistic use and strategic exploitation may lead to the advance of a state's foreign policy objectives, thus using sports to complement (or in some cases, damage) a diplomatic relationship (S. Murray, 2018). There are several ways to apply this type of sports diplomacy, and in fact they have been used (and still are) by several states, which allow us to look into some examples in order to better identify those different strategies. One of these strategies refers to nations' hijack of different sporting events or tours for political, ideological or national reasons, for example, in 1936 the Berlin Olympics were famously used to spread the Nazi party ideology and demonstrate that Germany was back "bigger, stronger, fitter than ever before and (...) better than everyone else" (S. Murray, 2018). Another mechanism related to the traditional sports diplomacy is the act of rebranding, that meaning that a nation would use a sporting event to demonstrate to the world its new image, its development and its growth and capability to be able to influence the world. China, particularly, made good use of this strategy in 2008. After being awarded the privilege of hosting the 2008 Olympic Games, the Chinese Government could not waste this opportunity to show its progress, and, as so, with roughly 1.1 billion people looking, the opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing impressed and stunned the global audience with their luxurious production, modern designs and monumental sporting facilities thus rapidly replacing the previous perception of China as a "poor nation of farmers" with the image of a "progressive, prosperous, civilised, urban, modern, worldly economic powerhouse, proud new China" (S. Murray, 2018). Another common manner in which traditional sports diplomacy may represent is through boycotting, meaning that states (acting alone or in group) may ban other states from international competitions, boycott those competitions by not attending a determinate event or by not allowing athletes from a certain nation to "set foot on domestic, sovereign soil" (S. Murray, 2018). There are several examples of the use of boycotting by different states, however one of the most notorious ones is the boycott of South Africa during apartheid. It is not only notorious because of the dimension of the problem and the place that occupies in history, but also because the boycotting was extremely impactful on South African's sports. Considering

the segregation in South Africa was particularly evident in sports, it was considered that the best way to sanction the country would be through sport itself. As so, between 1964 and 1988, South Africa was banned from participating in the Olympics and excluded from multiple other international competitions of different types of sports. Despite the amount of time it took for the sanctions to be effective, in 1990 they were finally successful as the apartheid started to slowly unravel (S. Murray, 2018). One final common mechanism of traditional sports diplomacy is the organization of what is known as informal sports diplomacy summit. It consists on the meeting of estranged nations leaders at sporting events, thus utilizing the occasion as an intermediate for the leaders to socialize, watch sports and (in the best of cases) clear tensions between their respective nations. The most well-known example which better represents this type of summit is the “cricket diplomacy” practiced between India and Pakistan. In 1987, following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan tensions escalated between India and Pakistan and at that point a war seemed closer to happen than not to as both countries had their troops mobilised all through the border which they share (S. Murray, 2018). However, in an attempt to deescalate tensions between those countries, President General Zia-ul-Haq from Pakistan and Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi from India met in Jaipur to watch a cricket game between India and Pakistan and, hopefully, improve the diplomatic relations between them and their respective states. The meeting was a success, not only because the match ended up in a draw (a loss by any of the countries could have changed history), but also because the two leaders finally agreed to remove their troops. This represents a classic example in which sporting events may present themselves as an excellent opportunity to moderate diplomatic relations between states (S. Murray, 2018).

The second type of sports diplomacy, also known as non-traditional sports diplomacy, and refers to the “diplomatic representation, communication and negotiation between non-state actor that takes place as a result of ongoing international sporting competition” (S. Murray & Pigman, 2014). This second type of sports diplomacy includes not only the effect of international sport on diplomacy, but also the diplomatic activities that occur thus making international sporting competition possible (S. Murray & Pigman, 2014). As time goes by it is only normal and expected that processes evolve, and, as so, sports diplomacy is no exception to the rule. That’s the importance of distinguish the different types of sports diplomacy, because it helps us to better understand how they evolved and how these new strategies may be both an adequate complement to other strategies and

even if they may be more impactful by themselves. The main factor that differs non-traditional sports diplomacy from traditional sports diplomacy is its change in model, non-traditional sports diplomacy is a more “inclusive, amateur and networked model that embodies the type of state, non-state and public partnerships characteristic of twenty-first century diplomacy” (S. Murray, 2018). That means that the objective is not to completely reformulate what sports diplomacy should be, and thus forgetting how it began, the main objective is to modernize the processes and to find new tools to operate in order to achieve what it is intended. With that being said, one of the new processes of sports diplomacy explored by several Ministries of Foreign Affairs from different states is the utilization of non-state sporting actors, whom may range from “amateur to elite sports-people, to local, national and international sporting administrations, to clubs (...)”, and which have the potential to influence their audiences according to the state’s diplomatic interests (S. Murray, 2018). With that in mind, the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the United States of America developed the SportsUnited program with the objectives of complementing the American public diplomacy, disseminate cultural values through American sportspeople and, hopefully, extend the American government reach to “young, disenfranchised populations” where the United States of America may have a negative image (such as Muslim countries) (S. Murray, 2018). In order for the program to be successful in its objectives, three activities were developed: first, the Sports Visitors program where American Ambassadors nominate sportspeople from their hosting countries to travel to the United States of America where they would receive specialised training and treatment; second, the Sports Grants, which are awarded to civil society organizations in the USA. who propose and manage international exchange programmes for neglected or underprivileged young athletes, coaches and administrators of youth sports; and third, the Sports Envoy, this activity consists on the sending of athletes and coaches to represent the USA overseas with the main function of leading various programmes developed by the USA embassies and consulates for underserved youth athletes (S. Murray, 2018).

## 1.2. The National Basketball Association

### 1.2.1. History

The National Basketball Association was not always as it is today. In fact, there were once two organizations responsible for the basketball competitions in the United States of America: the Basketball Association of America (BAA) and the National Basketball League (NBL) (Jozsa, 2010). The NBL surged first in 1938, though it was rather rudimentary only including small midwestern cities with those teams playing in small gymnasiums (Jozsa, 2010). However, the BAA appeared to change the scenery, anticipating the profitable success within playing the game of basketball, it established itself in bigger cities and held its games in large major-market arenas such as the Boston Garden and New York City's Madison Square Garden (Jozsa, 2010). While the NBL was the initial American basketball association, the BAA used its power and dimension to attract the country's best players and even four former NBL franchises (Jozsa, 2010). With the possibility of becoming irrelevant or left in second plan, in 1949 the NBL representatives met with the BAA representatives in New York to finalize the merge between the two leagues which was formally known as the NBA (Jozsa, 2010). The NBA was then composed by 17 teams which represented both small and big markets of the country (Jozsa, 2010). Through the 1950s the NBA league loss of its initial audience as well as a lot of its teams, the game was found by the fan to have become rather boring to watch (Jozsa, 2010). With that in mind, the league transformed completely the game of basketball by implementing the 24-second clock rule which made the game more fun and fast-paced, thus becoming more entertaining (Jozsa, 2010). Fans then returned and the league flourished once again as an attracting sport to watch and a profitable business to invest in (Jozsa, 2010). Despite that, soon enough the NBA would face a new competition in the form of the new American Basketball Association (ABA) in 1967, who fully potentiated the flashy and attractive side of basketball by utilizing a ball with bright red, blue and white colours, having cheerleaders utilizing bikinis, referring to their players with distinctive and charismatic nicknames, allowing the trash-talking and fights between players on the court and applying its own rules (Jozsa, 2010). All these changes had the ultimate goal of promoting the entertainment side of basketball in the United States of America and even though the NBA often dismissed the ABA as a serious rival, the fact

was that the best, most known and most loved basketball players of the USA were in the ABA (Jozsa, 2010). However, the ABA lacked something to make it a sustainable business: money. There was no television contract and the teams had difficulties in selling enough tickets to remain financially viable, which ultimately led to the several teams abandoning the competition itself. In 1976 there were only nine teams in the ABA, and despite the organization of the first ever slam-dunk contest (one of the most beloved events of the All-Star game), by the end of the season the ABA was practically insolvent, therefore finally agreeing to merge with the NBA (Jozsa, 2010). From that point on, there was only the NBA. The former ABA teams were either absorbed by the NBA or disintegrated with their players being contracted by other NBA teams as free agents (Jozsa, 2010). As so, the NBA in late 1970s consisted of 22 franchises divided into two conferences, the Eastern Conference and the Western Conference, with 11 teams each. However, the NBA organization felt there was an opportunity to expand its reach by exploring other markets within the USA or even in Canada, therefore new teams were added to the league and existing teams changed their locations in order to find better opportunities to thrive financially (Jozsa, 2010). With that being said, the National Basketball Association is currently constituted by 30 teams (15 in each Conference) including one team in Canada (the Toronto Raptors). In retrospect the NBA could only grow from that point on. With the appearance of not only greater players but also greater teams and greater generations, the influence and fame of the NBA grew throughout time all across the globe. From the Showtime Lakers with Magic Johnson to the Chicago Bulls led by Michael Jordan or even, more recently, the Golden State Warriors guided by the back-to-back Most Valuable Player Stephen Curry, the NBA truly became a league like no other. Despite the value that these players and their teams added to the league, as we will see next the NBA's strategy to increase their impact on a national and international level was also crucial for the evolution of the organization and the league.

#### 1.2.2. National and International growth

Generally speaking, it is normal for the different existing sport leagues all around the world to develop and implement projects not only for the development of the league itself but also allowing the league and its participants to get involved in different social causes as it is seen not only as a benefit for the community but also as a way for the organization

to increase their “popularity, market share, revenue and profit” both on the short and long run (Jozsa, 2010). As so, those initiatives may be executed at two different levels: at the national level or at the international level.

As it was said previously, the different projects may vary between the goal of developing the NBA organization and the goal of engaging in social matters. For example, in terms of development of the organization (NBA) itself one may see the making of the Summer League and the Development League (G-League) or the creation of the Women National Basketball Association as initiatives which help the organization to develop and engage at different levels (NBA) (Jozsa, 2010).

The development league was created as a project which would allow for players who were not yet ready to enter the NBA to develop in a satellite club with the opportunity of eventually being called up for an actual NBA team (Jozsa, 2010).

The Summer League was created with the purpose of not only allowing the NBA rookies and other players with small experience as professionals in the sport to adapt to the NBA game reality before the actual season begun, but also as a way for the NBA to display its new players to the world. The Summer League has been played in several locations, however the most popular and attractive one occurs in Las Vegas.

After several years of attempting to create women’s professional basketball leagues which eventually would dissolve and disappear, the NBA considered that the creation of a professional women’s basketball league was crucial for the development of the game. As so, in 1996 the WNBA was created with the first games being played in 1997 (Jozsa, 2010). The league was composed by eight teams located in midsized-to-large metropolitan areas such as Salt Lake City in Utah or New York City in New York. The WNBA is currently composed by 12 teams divided into two conferences (Western and Eastern) (Jozsa, 2010). Despite not having the dimension that the NBA has, the WNBA has grown since its creation, and, has a promising future ahead considering the television deal that it has already signed and the exposition that comes with those (Jozsa, 2010). The level of play, arena attendances, merchandise sales and players talent are also crucial factors which may contribute for the development of the league (Jozsa, 2010).

These three initiatives, the Summer League, Development League and the WNBA were central for the NBA to become a more inclusive league (Jozsa, 2010). Besides allowing players to adapt to new realities and to develop into the best versions of themselves, it created a platform with the potential to display and elevate women’s sports to a global level, thus creating equal opportunities for both genders to exceed at their craft.

Besides the objective of developing the NBA organization and league, the NBA also saw value in investing their resources on the communities all across the USA. With that being said, it is common for NBA clubs and their coaches and players to spend some of their time visiting “hospitals, nursing homes, and retirement facilities” to meet and talk with senior and infirm citizens, and visiting local schools to educate students on the importance of behaving, learning and studying (Jozsa, 2010). The best way to lead is by doing, and, as so, the NBA considers these small gestures or actions to have a major positive effect on the community, region or even nation. With that being said, the NBA wanted to go further, and in order to achieve its “social responsibilities domestically” into multiple projects (Jozsa, 2010). One of the most remarkable ones is the NBA Cares (NBAC), which was created with the intention of be more active and participative on the improvement of all different stratum of society (Jozsa, 2010). Following the creation of the NBAC, four primary affairs were established to guide their mission: first, NBAC Programs that should involve social issues like education, literacy, environmental protection, family, youth development and, furthermore, they should also promote health and wellness; second, NBAC Events which were created in order for the NBA to get closer to the different communities with the objective of becoming the most “generous, popular and respected sports league in the world”; third, the NBAC’s Campaigns which are concerned with both current and important matters, such as the promotion of literacy and the education on several health related issues, such as malaria and HIV/AIDS; fourth, NBAC’s Team Programs developed to highlight the social problem within society and to educate people on their substance and how to cope with them (Jozsa, 2010). Additionally, the NBA has played a significant role on assisting in several national and international crises by providing “money, resources and other type of economic aid and financial support” (Jozsa, 2010).

In addition to the different domestic affairs supported by the NBA within the USA, the NBA also plays a major role at the international level by developing numerous activities and programs abroad and by interacting with several foreign companies, social institutions and populations all across the globe.

Ever since David Stern became the NBA Commissioner in 1984, he saw the benefit of expanding the NBA beyond national borders. As so, David Stern became one of the innovators when it came to increasing the “exposure, popularity, and programs” of the NBA in other nations (Jozsa, 2010). For example, between 1985 and 1995 NBA teams performed preseason or exhibition games all over the world, in countries such as:



England, Italy, Puerto Rico, Spain and in various locations within the Soviet Union (Jozsa, 2010). Due to the success of such events, the NBA, from that moment moving forward, became extremely interested in further globalizing its brand and expand the sport to the rest of the world. All throughout the 2000s, the NBA organized basketball programs, tournaments, tours, and even encouraged NBA players and coaches to create camps, clinics and workshops all over the globe to teach young players how to better their game (Jozsa, 2010). Moreover, the league's foreign affairs have: broadcasted multiple NBA All-Star games in over 30 countries and territories through 100 international telecasters, created opportunities for amateur, semi-professional and professional basketball teams from China, France, Germany or Spain to travel to the USA and compete in exhibition games against NBA teams, and developed and implemented together with the Federation of International Basketball the global program Basketball without Borders which aimed to unite young basketball players in different nations and encourage them to participate and promote not only sport but also social changes in education, health and wellness (Jozsa, 2010). However, the NBA didn't stop here, once David Stern stepped down and Adam Silver was elected by the NBA council as the new NBA Commissioner in 2014, the league would only intensify its efforts to reach a global audience. The NBA has done plenty to expand and showcase its league to more than just the American population, that being through the organization of NBA games in Europe, by planning preseason trips to China or even by playing a game in Africa (NBA Africa game), nevertheless, for Adam Silver it was clear that broadcasting would be the ultimate and most important resource to reach a global audience. Taking those efforts into account, the NBA has been extremely successful in accomplishing its objectives, proof of that is: the 2017-2018 NBA season reached more than 1 billion unique viewers and more than 35% of the people visiting NBA.com were fans from outside North America and the NBA game played in London in 2019 was broadcasted in 215 countries and 34 languages (P. Murray, 2019). In addition to those numbers, the NBA has increased the number of games available for European fans to watch live (by airing them on Saturdays and Sundays in primetime) and has developed the NBA league pass in order to allow fans to watch any game live (or on delay) and making it accessible to fans in more than 200 countries all across the globe (P. Murray, 2019). The increase of international players playing in the NBA (107 international players from 41 countries in the 2020-2021 NBA season (NBA, 2020)) has also had an impact in both the internationalization of the league and in luring

international fans to watch some of their favourite basketball players playing at the highest of levels.

### 1.2.3. NBA and Activism – a timeline

Currently, the NBA is well-known for being one of the sports organizations in the world which more support gives to their players and the social causes they defend. It is no surprise that when it comes to what one may call “athletes’ activism”, NBA players are one step ahead. However, things weren’t always this way. If in today’s society we still see and feel the power and impact of racism, only a few decades ago the amount of discrimination was much higher. With that being said, some NBA figures became particularly important, or even iconic, by starting the movement of athletes utilizing their platform and their stardom to aim for something bigger than “just sports”.

In 1959, Elgin Baylor was playing his first season in the NBA. At the time, he played for the Minneapolis Lakers, who were scheduled to play against the Cincinnati Royals in Charleston, West Virginia. When Elgin and his teammates arrived at their hotel the clerk looked at the team and said: “the three colored boys (Elgin Baylor and his Black teammates Boo Ellis and Ed Fleming) will have to go somewhere else; this is a nice, respectable hotel. We can’t take the colored boys” (Thomas, 2020). This type of discrimination that now is absolutely unreal and unacceptable, at the time was some of the day-to-day situations that Black people had to go through. Baylor, Ellis and Fleming had to stay in an all-Black hotel, but that would not be the end of it. Elgin Baylor decided to boycott the game that would take place in the next day (Thomas, 2020). His decision had an immediate effect with NBA commissioner Maurice Podoloff promising to make sure that the mistreatment of Black players at hotels would never happen again (Thomas, 2020).

Despite all promises, problems wouldn’t be solved that easily. In 1961, once again, racism spoke louder. Ahead of a game between the Boston Celtics and the Saint Louis Hawks, two Boston Celtics’ players, Sam Jones and Thomas Sanders were refused service in the coffee shop at their team hotel due to the color of their skin. (Bieler, 2020) At that time, Bill Russell was the one leading the boycott. He, Sam Jones, Thomas Sanders, K.C. Jones, Al Butler and two players from the Saint Louis Hawks decided to leave town (Lexington, Kentucky) has a form of protest against the discrimination felt by Sam Jones

and Thomas Sanders (Bieler, 2020). The game ended up being played anyway (Bieler, 2020).

30 years went by, the league had grown through the emergence of some of the greatest Black players to ever play the game, such as Magic Johnson and Michael Jordan. It definitely felt like Black athletes never had so much influence or a bigger platform than the one they had in the 90's. Nonetheless, the same problems rose every so often reminding all of us of the harsh reality of systemic racism and racial inequality in the United States of America. In 1992, Craig Hodges (former Chicago Bulls player), went through efforts to plan a protest against racism and police brutality on game 1 of the 1991 NBA finals between the Michael Jordan's Chicago Bulls and Magic Johnson's Los Angeles Lakers (Gleeson, 2020). Jordan and Magic quickly dismissed Hodges of his plan (Gleeson, 2020). After the Chicago Bull's emphatic win by 4-1, they were invited by President George H.W. Bush to visit the White House (Gleeson, 2020). In a new effort to raise awareness to his cause, Hodges wore a dashiki (a traditional African garment) and handed a letter to President Bush addressing the racism that Black Americans face in the U.S. every day (Gleeson, 2020). Hodges played his last NBA game for the Chicago Bulls in 1992 at age 31 (Gleeson, 2020). After the end of that season, he was waived, and no other team signed Craig Hodges to a new NBA contract (Gleeson, 2020).

Craig Hodges was neither the first of the last Black athlete to be removed from their position at an organization due to their political positions. For the better part of the 1996 NBA season, Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf (who then played for the Denver Nuggets) either stayed in the locker room or didn't stand up during the anthem (which is always played before all NBA games) as a form protest against the "oppression and tyranny" that the song represented (Yang, 2020). After receiving backlash from the public, the NBA contacted Abdul-Rauf in order to find a way to in which for him to still be able to protest without violating the rule that mandates all players, coaches and team staff to stand during the playing of the national anthem (Yang, 2020). Finally, a deal was made, Abdul-Rauf would have to stand during the national anthem, however, he was allowed to hold his hand out in prayer (Yang, 2020). From that point on, his career suffered the consequences of his beliefs (Yang, 2020). Abdul-Rauf was traded at the end of that season to the Sacramento Kings, and after only two years he was out of the league (Yang, 2020).

Players faced several hurdles along the way, the efforts made by Black athletes appeared to bring more harm to themselves than they did good for their communities. Despite the continuous frustration felt, NBA players wouldn't stop fighting for their

causes. Yet again, in 2012, tragedy would hit. Trayvon Martin, an “unarmed Black teenager wearing a hoodie was shot and killed by George Zimmerman” (a neighborhood watch volunteer) (Zillgitt, 2021). The NBA community soon reacted to that event with LeBron James and his Miami teammates posting a photo on twitter of “themselves wearing hoodies, heads bowed in support of Martin” (Zillgitt, 2021). This was a moment of change when it comes to athletes utilizing their social media platforms to address racism. In 2012 Twitter was still growing as a platform and “viral posts” were still rather unknown to humankind. From that point on, it was not only an opportunity but also a responsibility for athletes to utilize their platform and its reach to protest and raise awareness to racism and racial inequalities in society.

In 2014 a new controversy surged, but this time it came from inside the NBA league. Los Angeles Clippers owner, Donald Sterling, was in the center of the scandal. Sterling was caught on tape by TMZ making racist remarks regarding Black people (Zillgitt, 2014). The NBA community was quick to react and to ask for sanctions on this matter, NBA Commissioner Adam Silver (who had only been nominated Commissioner less than 90 days before) had to be assertive and to set the precedent for the rest of the NBA (Zillgitt, 2014). The final decision by Silver was to fine and ban Donald Sterling for life from the NBA (Zillgitt, 2014). Once again, this became a very important moment in NBA history with NBA Leadership showing support to their players in the fight against racism (Zillgitt, 2014).

Besides setting the tone on how the NBA would respond to this type of behavior within its league/organization, Adam Silver was able to capitalize this moment and to create a better relationship between league office and the rest of the league. Nevertheless, only a few months after the Donald Sterling incident, another episode related to U.S. police brutality against the Black community took place in Staten Island, New York. Eric Garner was murdered at the hands of a New York Police Department Officer who resorted to a chokehold in order to control Garner (Adande, 2014). Eric Garner said “I can’t breathe” as he lost his consciousness (Adande, 2014). He was later pronounced dead at a hospital with the medical examiner ruling his death as a homicide by suffocation (Adande, 2014). As a form of protest multiple players, such as LeBron James, Kevin Garnett, Kyrie Irving and Deron Williams, wore black t-shirt with the text “I Can’t Breathe” written on them during their pregame warm-ups (Adande, 2014). When asked about it, LeBron James said: “It’s just for us to make a statement to understand what we’re going through as a society” and “It’s more of a shout out to the family more than anything, because

they're the ones that should be getting all the energy and effort" (Adande, 2014). Despite league rules require that players wear attire of Adidas (who provided NBA apparel at the time), Adam Silver and the NBA decided not to fine the players who wore said t-shirt as he "respect(s) Derrick Rose and all of our players for voicing their personal views on important issues" even though he (Adam Silver) prefers that "players to abide by our on-court attire rules" (Adande, 2014).

As the 21<sup>st</sup> century went by, world athletes understood and recognized increasingly the power and impact that the messages they share had. Social media is now the preferred way to communicate and share your thought with thousands (or even millions) of people. Regardless of the power that words may have, actions often speak louder. That is why in 2015 Carmelo Anthony felt the need to march alongside several other people who were protesting against the abuse of force by police officers against the Black community (Kay, 2015). This time, Freddie Gray was the victim, a 25-year-old man who died at the hands of the Baltimore police (Kay, 2015). Carmelo Anthony, a Baltimore native, felt that more than to share a message with his audience, he needed to be with his community through such a difficult time (Kay, 2015). In addition to all the support that Carmelo Anthony got from around the league, the National Basketball Players Association Executive Director (Michele Roberts, at the time) also expressed her backing of Carmelo Anthony's actions and words: "It's actually refreshing to see players not merely be engaged in their business – and that is basketball – but to express themselves as members of our community" (Kay, 2015).

Athletes can make a difference just by acting as individuals, but as everything, they are even stronger if working together. That was exactly what LeBron James, Dwyane Wade, Chris Paul and Carmelo Anthony had in mind when they opened the ESPYS Award Show in 2016 (Messer & Caplan, 2016). At the start of the ceremony that gathers some of the best athletes in the U.S., the four NBA players addressed the audience and called for action for "all professional athletes to educate (themselves), explore these issues, speak up, use (your) influence and renounce all violence" (Messer & Caplan, 2016). The call was made, the athletes had listened, now it was time to reflect and understand how each one of them could make a difference.

## Chapter 2. Methodology

The Qualitative Descriptive research is a method based on the exposition of known facts related to a particular experience or event, although one should notice that a description will always depend on the “perceptions, inclinations, sensitivities, and sensibilities of the describer” (Sandelowski, 2000). In order to describe said experience or event, the researcher selects the information that considered to be essential to portray it as accurately as possible (Sandelowski, 2000).

With that being said, the main focus when utilizing qualitative descriptive research is to describe in a candid, yet detailed, manner the events experienced by individuals or group of individuals. To achieve that objective, it is necessary to collect relevant data which can provide useful information that produces a factual characterization of which actions may have had an impact on the thematic that is being studied in this dissertation.

Although Qualitative Descriptive research is based on description, there is always the tendency for the researcher to include its own interpretation. As so, and to assure the integrity and precision of the facts exposed, there should be a low-inference level of interpretation, the kind of interpretation that can easily create a consensus amongst different researchers (Sandelowski, 2000). What that means is that, even if two researchers feature different facts in their description of a case, they can still agree on the facts presented by each other. In addition, the descriptions (even if they single out different facts) must always “convey events in their proper sequence, or have descriptive validity, and the meanings participants attributed to those events, or have interpretive validity” (Sandelowski, 2000).

In summary, the main objective in Qualitative Descriptive Research is to present the facts of a case in everyday language (Sandelowski, 2000).

This method proves to be effective in addressing events occurred in past as it gathers information from different sources. This approach is also characterized by its necessity to “stay close” to the data, and, as such, to minimize the interpretation of the data collected making the information more objective and reliable, not only to the researcher but also to all those who wish to read it (Sandelowski, 2000).

Another extremely important component of Qualitative Descriptive Research is language, the language used should not be an interpretation in itself, but instead a communication vehicle that guides the reader (Sandelowski, 2000).

As part of the process, the researcher must collect the data necessary to achieve its main objective, which means that the researcher looks for information that is typically directed toward discovering the “who, what, and where of events or experiences, or their basic nature and shape” (Sandelowski, 2000).

Additionally, I will follow a case study approach that will allow me to “closely examine the data within a specific context” (Zainal, 2007). The case study approach is almost a complement to the Qualitative Descriptive Research as it also aims to explore and investigate a real-life phenomenon taking into account the conditions and relationships withing said phenomenon (Zainal, 2007). Even though the case study is fairly used as a method in which we can generalize the conclusion for other similar events to the one that is being studied, I chose to utilize a single-case design as I consider my theme of study to be quite unique.

In order to collect the necessary data, I will employ a triangulation method that is based on the combination of multiples methods of data collection regarding one same phenomenon (Carter et al., 2014). With that being said, in this dissertation I will utilize the following methods of data collection: contextualization, document analysis and content analysis.

In order to achieve the necessary to achieve the objectives that I set for my methodological approach, I firstly researched for news articles that would assist me in building a narrative of the relation between the NBA community and former U.S. President Donald Trump, since the moment he was elected. Afterwards, I gathered information on how the upcoming 2020 U.S. Presidential elections, the COVID-19 pandemic and the several cases of racism, discrimination and police brutality against the Black community may have triggered the athletes’ activism that we saw throughout 2020 by the NBA community. Finally, I gathered information related to how the public reacted to this new environment in which athletes and sports are combined as we never seen it before.

## Chapter 3. Findings

### 3.1. The NBA, Donald Trump and the 2020 political scene

On November 8<sup>th</sup> of 2016, the presidential election of the United States of America would determine the appointment of Donald Trump as the new USA President defeating the Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton. Soon enough the sports world started voicing their opinions through social media. Between messages of disappointment due to the results but also unity and respect, several NBA personalities, such as Mark Cuban, Evan Turner, Ricky Rubio or Enes Kanter (between others) expressed their opinion.

However, the most notorious statements of frustration, dissatisfaction and disbelief with the nomination of Donald Trump as the new USA President would come a few days after with the San Antonio Spurs iconic coach Gregg Popovich and NBA super star LeBron James sharing their opinion on the matter in hands.

Lebron James, who formally endorsed Hillary Clinton to be the next USA President, took his thoughts to Instagram the day after the election, where he shared a message of hope and perseverance for all the Americans and specially for the women and minorities of the country. Following a different speech than the one shared by Lebron James, Gregg Popovich, in November 11<sup>th</sup> of 2016 at a conference prior to a game against the Detroit Piston, did not hold back and expressed how much this decision had hurt him and how it showed the intolerance within the American population claiming that even though he (Gregg Popovich) is a “rich white guy” the decision made him “sick to my (his) stomach (...) I can’t imagine being a Muslim right now, or a woman, or an African American, a Hispanic, a handicapped person. How disenfranchised they might feel” especially considering the “comments that have been xenophobic, homophobic, racist, misogynistic” made by the newly elected President Donald Trump in the past (Rohlin, 2016). Not too long after, in December 7<sup>th</sup> of 2016, Lebron James and multiple others of his teammates from the Cleveland Cavaliers who had a game against the New York Knicks (in New York city) would refuse to stay at the Trump SoHo (designated hotel for the team). In a statement, Lebron James insisted he was not trying to make a statement and that it was simply his “personal preference” (SportsIllustrated, 2017).

Moving forward, there would be an opportunity for people to react to the newly elected president, Donald Trump, decisions as he signed an executive order (number



13769) with the intention of protecting the country against terrorist acts and which would prevent individuals from seven Muslim-majority countries (Sudan, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Syria and Yemen) from entering the USA in the following 90 days (starting January 27<sup>th</sup> 2017). Many would voice their opinions within the sports world, however Luol Deng's (Los Angeles Lakers player at the time) voice would speak louder than many others as he spoke on growing up as a refugee in Egypt and how this decision would affect so many people who saw their opportunity getting closer: "To really see a light at the end of the tunnel and to go toward that light and then that light is turned off is very difficult" (Holmes, 2017). Others would speak on the issue such as LeBron James who would state that "Diversity is what makes this country so great (...) the NBA is a global league; every team has at least one international player, with more than 35 countries represented and many Muslim-American players (...) it's important that we as athletes continue to use the platform we have to speak up for what we believe in" (Guthrie, 2017); Detroit Pistons' coach Stan Van Gundy would also criticize Donald Trump's decision by saying "We're getting into the days of, now we're judging people by their religion (...) trying to keep Muslims out. We're getting back to the days of, you know, putting the Japanese in relocation camps and Hitler registering the Jews" (Holmes, 2017).

On February 8<sup>th</sup> 2017 Stephen Curry's name would be the big title on the news after Under Armour CEO Kevin Plank praised Donald Trump as the new President referring to him as a "real asset" to the nation. Stephen Curry, who is the face of Under Armour Basketball having a whole line of shoes dedicated to him, was quick to respond to Kevin Plank's words by making his own assessment of the situation stating "I spent all day yesterday on the phone (...) trying to understand what was going on and where everybody stood on the issue (...) It's a fine line but it's about how we're operating, how inclusive we are, what we stand for". Furthermore, Stephen Curry would add that the if leadership of the company is not in line with his core values "(...) then there is no amount of money, there is no platform I wouldn't jump off" (Thompson II, 2017). Nevertheless, the situation was eased with Kevin Plank explaining that his statement was solely coming from a business perspective and that he distanced himself from President Donald Trump policies and comments (Thompson II, 2017).

Donald Trump had only been elected 3 months ago and he already had multiple moments of tensions associated with his name and his actions. From that point on it was only expectable that those moments would keep on happening has the hesitation with Donald Trump as USA President always existed.

Nevertheless, one of the biggest moments of insurgence against Donald Trump would come in August throughout the Charlottesville rally organized by far-right protesters who were protesting against the removal of the statue of General Robert E. Lee in Emancipation Park (Charlottesville). The referred protest would culminate on the death of Heather Heyer (civil rights activist) and injury of other 19 people after James Alex Fields Jr. (one of the far-right protesters) drove into a crowd of people who were protesting against the rally itself. The situation would go bad from bad to worst after Donald Trump comments during a post-Charlottesville press conference in which he stated that there were displays of “hatred, bigotry and violence on many sides” and also stating that there were “very fine people on both sides” (SportsIllustrated, 2017). Such comments made waves of discontentment around the world, comments which can be summarized by the tweet published by LeBron James accusing Donald Trump of making hate in America “fashionable again” (SportsIllustrated, 2017).

With the hostility rising between several NBA actors and Donald Trump, the NBA champions Golden State Warriors, were now reluctant to visit the White House as it is traditional for the champions of sports leagues in the USA to do. The most prominent player to express that desire was Golden State Warrior’s super star Stephen Curry who would involve himself again in a feud regarding Donald Trump by voicing that he didn’t “want to go” to the White House because he didn’t stand for “what our President has, the thing that he has said and the thing that he hasn’t said in the right times” and that he would hope these decision would “inspire some change when it comes to what we tolerate in this country and what is accepted and what we turn a blind eye to” (Amick, 2017). Stephen Curry would also be supported by several of his teammates and team staff who also reiterated their unwillingness to visit the White House. President Donald Trump wouldn’t react lightly to these comments and would take, once again, his frustrations to twitter by publishing a tweet withdrawing the invite for the Golden State Warriors to visit the White House (SportsIllustrated, 2017). Such tweet would only fuel more the discussion and negative sentiment between the NBA community and Donald Trump, with several former and current NBA players criticizing him through that same social media network, with comments such as the one made by LeBron James who called the Donald Trump a “bum” (the most retweeted athlete’s post of 2017) and stated that going to the White House was only a great honour “until you (Donald Trump) showed up”, or the one made by Kobe Bryant expressing how Donald Trump’s name alone created “division and anger”, or even the one made by Chris Paul (president of the NBA Players Association

since 2013) stating that Donald Trump should be more worried about the problems of the country and not about “who’s kneeling and visiting the White House” (Wang, 2017).

This tendency would remain in 2018, with both LeBron James and Stephen Curry, ahead of the NBA finals between LeBron’s Cleveland Cavaliers and Stephen Curry’s Golden State Warriors, stating that independently of who wins the NBA championship, neither team would participate on the traditional visit to the White House (Ostler, 2018). Donald Trump wouldn’t take too long to say his piece on this subject stating that the White House had already made its decision and that it wouldn’t “invite neither team” regardless of the winner (Imbert, 2018). Yet another bitter chapter of the history between Donald Trump and the NBA, however, and as we will see, it would not be the last and it wouldn’t take long until more controversy developed between both parts. Between the end of July and the beginning of August of 2018, LeBron James would have an interview with Don Lemon from Cable News Network (CNN) in which he would initially speak on the new elementary public school he opened in his hometown Akron, Ohio, in a partnership between his philanthropic foundation and the city’s public schools (Caron, 2018). Nevertheless, as the interview would advance it was only expectable for there to be time to talk about racial issues in America to which LeBron James said that Donald Trump was a big part of the divide in the USA and that “he (Donald Trump) has used sports to divide us” to which LeBron James couldn’t relate to as sports should unite people and that, in fact, the first time he was “around someone white” was through playing sports, giving him (LeBron James) “the opportunity to see them and learn about them and they got the opportunity to learn about me, and we became very good friends” (Caron, 2018). Donald Trump would respond shortly after the interview being aired, saying on Twitter that “LeBron James was just interviewed by the dumbest man on television”, referring to Don Lemon, and also added that Don Lemon made LeBron James “look smart, which isn’t easy to do” (Caron, 2018). Several came to LeBron’s defence, including NBA players Karl-Anthony Towns, Donovan Mitchell, Bradley Beal or Stephen Curry or even former NBA superstar, Michael Jordan (David, 2018). However, the most surprising supporter of LeBron James’ work would come from the White House itself with first Lady Melania Trump saying that LeBron James “is working to do good things on behalf of our next generation” (David, 2018).

However, in 2019, for once, Donald Trump actually wished that the NBA would not just stick to sports and that it would act on the international context. In October 4<sup>th</sup> 2019, Houston Rockets’ General Manager Daryl Morey published a tweet in support of the

Stand With Hong Kong group, group which has asked for foreign government intervention amidst the growing hostilities between Hong Kong and China (Perper, 2019b). The tweet sent out by Daryl Morey would start a international crisis between China and the NBA, which was highly inconvenient as basketball is China's most popular sport and considering that 640 million people in China have watched the 2017-2018 NBA season making it one of the biggest and most important NBA international markets (Perper, 2019a). Trump's biggest criticism of the NBA was that its players and coaches would disrespect their own country (USA) regularly, yet, in this situation, they avoided taking a political stance on the matter as China represents a big economic influence in the NBA league (Pramuk, 2019). The NBA commissioner, Adam Silver, would address the issue by stating that "it is not the role of the NBA to adjudicate" the differences that may exist between different people around the world, however the commissioner also stated that the NBA "will not put itself in a position of regulating what players, employees and team owners say or will not say on these issues. We simply could not operate that way" (Pramuk, 2019).

As the information above demonstrates, since his election (and even before his election), there was always an animosity between Donald Trump and different personalities from the NBA community. That negative sentiment would only grow on both sides as Donald Trump's presidential years went by. However, it would be on his last year of presidency that the NBA would officially express its political side triggered by a set of events related to the racism chronic and systematic problem deep-rooted in the USA history to this day.

The year of 2020 was unforgettable, not only due to the Coronavirus pandemic that affected humanity at a global level but also due to the anti-racism protests that started in the USA related to the deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. As previously said, racism was always a problem in the USA. Every year several people of the African American community are killed by cops in what is usually found to be excessive police brutality and an abuse of force. However, at that time, when tensions were already high due to the pandemic the American population reached its tipping point as it was absolutely fed up of the inequality and injustice that the minorities of the USA were subjected to.

Breonna Taylor was killed on March 13<sup>th</sup> 2020 in Louisville, Kentucky. George Floyd was killed on May 25<sup>th</sup> 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Both African American, both killed by cops during police interventions. Their names and their stories would echo around the world. The video of the death of George Floyd begging for his life as a cop

would press down on his neck unbaling him (George Floyd) of breathing would be crucial to trigger the events that happened next. The American population went to the streets, despite the lockdown imposed by the government, to protest those killings and to demand more accountability to those who commit these murderers. Once again, the NBA community would play a major role on the protesting and on the spread of the message. At this point the NBA was interrupted due to the pandemic, and players used their time the best way possible. Between tweets, interviews and even organizing protests, they did it all. Stephen Jackson, NBA former player and close friend to George Floyd, led a protest in Minneapolis where he was joined by Karl-Anthony Towns and Josh Okogie from the Minnesota Timberwolves. In that protest Stephen Jackson would ask for the cops responsible to be held accountable for the death of his friend (Golliver, 2020). Other protest would follow, with Boston Celtic's star Jaylen Brown organizing a peaceful protest walk in Atlanta while carrying a sign that read "I can't breathe" (words said by George Floyd moments before dying) (Golliver, 2020). Malcolm Brogdon from the Indiana Pacers, Dennis Smith Jr. from the New York Knicks or Tobias Harris from the Philadelphia 76ers would all participate on protests in their respective cities. The former NBA superstar Michael Jordan also released a statement saying how "deeply saddened", "truly pained" and "plain angry" he felt with the events that occurred and led to the death of George Floyd (Golliver, 2020). Nevertheless it was not only the players that said their piece, multiple coaches spoke on the matter, such as Los Angeles Clippers coach Doc Rivers stating that "Being black in America is tough" also accounting for the numerous times that he suffered from "racial slurs" or being pulled over because of the "colour of (his) skin", or even having his home burned down as an act of racism, additionally Coach Rivers would finalize his message with a pledge for change, saying "Silence and inactivity are not acceptable anymore. Now is the time to speak. November is the time to vote" (Golliver, 2020). NBA teams would also support their players and coaches messages with several of them (NBA teams) releasing official statements criticizing the actions of those who promote and instigate racism in the USA and compromising themselves in being part of the solution in order for there to be peace and freedom for all (Golliver, 2020).

In the beginning of June 2020, NBA commissioner released his own memo regarding the situation on the NBA official website. Silver would start by acknowledging the current events by saying that "Racism, police brutality and racial injustice remain part of the everyday life in America and cannot be ignored", the commissioner would also recognize

those within the NBA “family” who spoke to “demand justice, urging peaceful protest and working for meaningful change” (Silver, 2020). As a final remark, Adam Silver acknowledged this as a time of “introspection, from those of us, including me, who may never know the full pain and fear many of our colleagues and players experience every day” and committed to create more “programs and partnerships in every NBA community that address racial inequity and bring people together” (Silver, 2020). Adam Silver would do more than just use his words. Upon the restart of the NBA season, which was previously interrupted by the pandemic, the commissioner would dedicate much of the attention that the NBA platform holds to spread the message of tolerance, peace and freedom that he had referred to in his memo. The NBA would restart in a “bio-secure bubble” setting at Disney World in Orlando, this decision was made as a precautionary measure to prevent the spread of the virus between NBA teams. In this setting, teams would be in a closed environment in Orlando, getting tested for Coronavirus everyday and playing the final games of the regular season and the playoffs until one team was crowned the new NBA champion. Teams would start arriving as soon as July 7<sup>th</sup> 2020 with the first game official game being played on July 30<sup>th</sup> between the Utah Jazz and the New Orleans Pelicans. This first game would set the tone for what the remaining of the NBA bubble would be, a social activism platform to protest the racial injustice and police brutality felt in the USA. As part of the protest, before the start of the game between the Utah Jazz and the New Orleans Pelicans, coaches, players and game officials would gather and take a knee. Furthermore, Black Lives Matter was also written on the game court and players displayed messages in their native languages in the back of their shirts (where usually they would have their names), with examples of those messages being: “Equality”, “Say Their Names”, “Vote”, “Black Lives Matter” and “How Many More” (Carroll, 2020). As said previously, that set the tone for the remaining of the games in the bubble, and in some part the tension had decreased, and players and their respective team staff were satisfied that they could display their beliefs and support the African American community in such a troubled time. Nonetheless, everything would stop, and protest would rise once again with the shooting of Jacob Blake. On August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2020, Jacob Blake, 29 years old African American, was shot 7 times in the back in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Even though it seemed that it was only a matter of time until yet another one of these shootings would happen, no one could believe that so shortly after the unrest caused by the death of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd another member of the African American community could suffer such violence and such disdain. The NBA globe would

answer rapidly and effectively, but this time the decision came only from the player and their respective team staff. Three days after the latest police shooting of a young Black man, NBA players made a statement, in that day there were scheduled multiple NBA playoff games (still inside the NBA bubble in Orlando) between the Milwaukee Bucks and the Orlando Magic, the Oklahoma City Thunders and the Houston Rockets, and between the Los Angeles Lakers and the Portland Trail Blazers (Hayes, 2020). However, none of the players or team staff would step up to the arena as they agreed to boycott the NBA season at that time as a protest against what happened only a few days earlier with Jacob Blake. With the perspective of negotiating and salvaging the NBA season, the NBA organization officially postponed everything until it was possible to arrange a meeting with the players (Hayes, 2020). On August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the NBA gathered with players, coaches and team governors in order to negotiate “collective efforts and actions in support of social justice and racial equality” (NBA & NBPA, 2020) that would satisfy all the parties evolved in order to restart the NBA season that had been suspended. From that gathering, the NBA league and the players committed to three decisions: first, “the NBA and its players have agreed to immediately establish a social justice coalition, with representatives from players, coaches and governors” which will focus on several issues such as increase access to voting, promoting civic engagement, and advocating for meaningful police and criminal justice reform (NBA & NBPA, 2020); second, “in every city where the league franchise owns and controls the arena property, team governors will continue to work with local elections officials to convert the facility into a voting location for the 2020 general election” (NBA & NBPA, 2020); and third, “the league will work with the players and our network partners to create and include advertising spots in each NBA playoff game dedicated to promoting greater civic engagement in national and local elections and raising awareness around voter access and opportunity” (NBA & NBPA, 2020). This agreement would allow the NBA season to resume in the bubble setting in Orlando, which would finish with the Los Angeles Lakers being crowned as the new NBA champions after beating the Miami Heat in the finals.

Considering all of the information above, the main objectives of the then finished NBA season were to use the NBA’s platform to bring attention to the issues of social injustice, such as the systemic racism felt in the USA, to expand the educational and economic opportunities across the African American community, to promote police and criminal justice reform and to promote a greater civic engagement (Deng, 2020), especially in the 2020 USA presidential elections to be held in November. The NBA

community would continue to work on those objectives through multiple initiatives: 23 NBA franchises made their facilities available to be used as voting centres, early voting sites or ballot-drop locations thus making voting more accessible to the general public (Poole, 2020); incredible strides were made regarding NBA players voting. In 2016 only 22% of the NBA players vote (according to the NBA players' association) (Schlosberg & Davis, 2020). However, in 2020 the president of the NBA players' association, Chris Paul, announced that "over 90% of our league registered to vote" and that "15 teams are 100% registered" (Feldman, 2020); Earlier, in June 2020, LeBron James had also formed an organization called "More Than A Vote" that would not only register African American voters for the November election, but also educate them on how to vote and how to "counter voter suppression" (Helin, 2020); Additionally, LeBron James would also join other celebrities in paying off 27 million dollars in fines and fees for about 40 thousand felons in Florida, allowing as many as 13 thousand of them to be eligible to vote in the 2020 USA presidential election (Menon, 2020).

### 3.2. NBA's political stance and its implications

As we saw previously, the NBA's 2019/2020 season was definitely an atypical one. From the COVID-19 pandemic that led to the official interruption of the season on March 11<sup>th</sup> 2020, to the emergence of NBA players in the activism paradigm, fighting for the rights of their community, utilizing their platforms not only to spread a message but to organize protests against racism, discrimination and police brutality. With that being said, the NBA as an organization chose to support their actors by developing several initiatives, that we described in the previous subchapter, amidst the restart of the NBA season in Orlando. With that being said, and after analysing several articles, I will now present what one may consider as the outcomes of the initiatives against racism, discrimination and police brutality taken by the NBA and its actors during the 2019/2020 NBA season.

#### 3.2.1. Ratings

According to an article written by Sports Media Watch (Lewis, 2020), the 2020 NBA's playoffs have felt a decrease when compared with the 2019 NBA playoffs, with the viewership numbers falling from an average of 2,39 million viewers in 2019 to an average



of 1,68 million viewers in 2020. Additionally, according to a Bloomberg article (Palmeri, 2020), the NBA's 2020 finals, that had the Los Angeles Lakers playing against the Miami Heat, averaged 7,5 million viewers per game over a six-game span, thus feeling a 51% decline when comparing with the 2019 NBA finals.

### 3.2.2. Public reaction

When it comes to sports fans reaction to the combination of sports and politics, the results are diverse. According to a Marist Poll (Beer, 2020), around 70% of Republicans have expressed that they are less likely to watch sports due to athletes call for racial justice, however, 61% of Democrats and 47% of Independents have expressed that athletes' activism has not changed their viewing habits. Actually, 31% of Democrats and 24% of Independents have stated that they have watched sports more often due to the player's social activism.

In addition, Forbes (Wakefield, 2020) had also developed a national online poll with 956 respondents which identify themselves as sports fans. The sample of respondents was composed by 40% Democrats, 39% Republicans and 21% Independents. Besides exploring several topics, the poll also intended to discover which fans were considered "at-risk fans", at-risk fans are fans that watch sports occasionally, often or frequently in the past but that have watched less frequently now. According to the results from this poll (Wakefield, 2020), 73% of Republicans, 62% of Democrats and 71% of Independents all agree that they watch sports to escape from everything else. The results also show that 50,2% of the respondents disagree with the statement that "when I tune into sports I want to hear about political opinions", while 27% of fans agree with said statement (Wakefield, 2020). Additionally, 37% of respondents want to hear about social issues when tuning in into sports, while 39% do not. The interest in social issues during sports broadcasts drops to 31% for at-risk fans in the NBA (Wakefield, 2020). Around 67% of respondents have answered "no" when asked if they care about the politics of an individual athlete, while 79% of at-risk fans of the NBA reported that they had no interest in the politics of a given individual athlete (Wakefield, 2020). Overall, the numbers in this poll show that 60% of all fans do not agree that "pro athletes should use their platforms to promote political issues". Another interesting number is that 60% of the NBA's at-risk fans are unsatisfied with "the balance of social and political issues presented within the broadcast since the return of live sports" (Wakefield, 2020).

However, an ESPN conducted online survey (ESPN, 2020), with 837 respondents who identify themselves as sports fans found different results. The survey found that 71% of fans support athletes speaking out, while 44% “strongly support it”. When questioned regarding “where should this conversation take place”, 51% of respondents said that players should share their views during sporting events, while 49% said they should speak away from the field or the court (ESPN, 2020). When asked how long they would want to see athletes speak out on social justice issues, 51% of NBA fans answered, “for the rest of the NBA season”, 25% said “not at all” and 24% said “only during the first games of the season” (ESPN, 2020). Finally, more than half of the NBA fans (55%) supported the NBA’s decision of writing “Black Lives Matter” on the court and allowing NBA athletes to write social justice messages on the back of their uniforms (ESPN, 2020).

When it comes to the public reaction to the mixture of sports and politics, the last survey that we will be looking at was developed by YouGov in collaboration with Yahoo News and was composed by a sample of 1606 U.S. adults (Inman, 2021). This survey found that 34,5% of respondents tuned out of sports when athletes began supporting social causes on the courts and fields, while 11% stated that they now watch more sports as a result of political and social messaging (Inman, 2021) (the remaining of the respondents have not changed their viewing habits). When divided by political parties, 13,7% of Democrats claim to have watched more sports following the influx of social just messaging (while 19% have watched less); as for Republicans, the survey found that 53% of respondents have watched less sports in the wake of social justice movements (Inman, 2021).

### 3.2.3. Voter Turnout

Besides ratings and public reaction, another extremely important factor to consider is to understand if the activist/political initiatives promoted by the NBA community may have had an effect on the 2020 U.S. Presidential election. With that being said, I will now present the data that I have gathered related to the voter turnout in the 2020 U.S. Presidential election.

According to a Pew Research Centre Poll, 63% of Black registered voters were extremely motivated to vote in the 2020 U.S. Presidential election (Budiman, 2020). This number becomes particularly important considering that one third of the total Black Americans eligible to vote live in nine of the U.S.’s most competitive states, which in any

given year may be republican or democratic: Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

Another extremely important article, is the one published by USA TODAY, that found that 298 thousand people have casted their vote at a professional sport stadium or arena (Peter et al., 2020). This number does not include the New York votes as New York's elections official did not provide that data.

## Chapter 4. Discussion

The aim of this discussion is to be able to address all of the information gathered in order to formulate an answer to the research question that I proposed myself to answer, that being: *did the NBA community actions have a direct effect in the results of the US 2020 Presidential election?*

First and foremost, let us analyse the NBA and its actors as an important soft power and sports diplomacy tool for the US government.

When we addressed in the beginning of this thesis the concept of soft power, we came to the realization that soft power is composed by the following characteristics: it's the ability to influence or shape the preference of others Nye (2004); it's the ability to communicate and share universal values in a way that a country can benefit from an international relation by aligning those values to their own preferences and interests (Grix & Lee, 2013); it's also a representation of cultural power, political power, educational power and diplomatic power (Haneş & Andrei, 2015); and it is not exclusive to a country as it may be used by individuals, groups of people or even organizations. When it came to sports diplomacy, we realized that it is a variation of soft power, as it allows states to communicate between themselves through a safer space.

As we saw previously, the NBA is a highly successful league and organization not only at a domestic level but also at an international level. The game and the athletes are known worldwide, and their platforms reach millions of people from around the globe. It is with no surprise that the NBA itself takes advantage of the level of popularity of their athletes by creating several programmes and events throughout the world in which NBA teams either play or do trainings, camps or basketball demonstrations in other countries. In addition to these programmes, the NBA is a league becoming increasingly international, even though the majority of players are in fact Americans, there is an increase of players coming from all over the world to play in the best basketball league in the world against the best players in the world. All these aspects allow the NBA, and the USA, to have an extremely beneficial international influence over other countries. For example, the fact that NBA teams are traveling all over the world creates a channel of communication between the USA and other countries; another example is that a major part of NBA revenue comes from the Asian market, more specifically from China, which then allows the USA to have relation of mutual interest with China. With that being said, it is clear that the NBA plays a big role on the internationalization of the American culture

throughout the world and that it creates an open channel of communication between the USA and other countries.

Now that we have established that influence, we can analyse the NBA by itself. The NBA has experienced an amazing growth throughout the years, the game has evolved, the players have become better, and the game is now more exciting and commercial than ever. The games are transmitted in several countries throughout the world and the athletes are recognized in every “corner of the globe”. With the growth of the league and the organization, the players have also experienced a growth of their platforms. With the development of social media platforms specially, players can now share their messages with the whole world in just a few seconds. What that means is that athletes by themselves have the power to influence groups of people, to share their thoughts, and to fight for what they believe in.

That’s exactly what happened in the 2019/2020 NBA season. Amidst the civil unrest caused by several cases of racism and police brutality against Black people in the US, athletes started utilizing their platforms to ask for a change. In this case, a change in the government. The relation between the NBA and former US president Donald Trump was never good, Donald Trump had always criticized the political or activist acts performed by athletes and athletes always criticized a president that made several inappropriate comments throughout his presidency. In 2020, NBA athletes had enough, and started contesting the former president and his governments. Through several initiatives described above in the subchapter “The NBA, Donald Trump and the 2020 political scene”. Initiatives that were taken not only by the athletes but by the NBA organization itself.

Let us now analyse the result of those initiatives. Previously we looked at how TV ratings, public reaction and voter turnout in the 2020 US election were affected by the NBA community’s activism and political actions.

The TV ratings actually demonstrate that there was a decrease in viewership between the 2019 and 2020 season NBA playoffs and finals. Those decreases were not directly associated to the fact that the NBA organization had become more political, but yes to the delay of the NBA season that led to an overlap of sport competitions happening at the same time that may have increased the division between sports fans (Palmeri, 2020). Another interesting fact is that the racial composition of the NBA audience during playoffs and in 2020 barely changed (Palmeri, 2020), which demonstrates that no specific population stopped watching the NBA league.

As for public reaction, the numbers do show some division, as a few surveys demonstrate discontentment with the fact that the NBA and its athletes were highly engaged in political and activist activity, however other survey showed that actually some fans started watching more NBA games due to its political side.

However, the aspect that better illustrates the influence that the NBA may have had in the US presidential election is the voter turnout (Peter et al., 2020). We saw previously that more 298 thousand people casted their vote in a sports stadium or arena, which was one of the NBA initiatives, which may be particularly important considering that multiple states in which those arenas are located were decided by a small difference of votes between the Democratic and Republican parties (Peter et al., 2020). For example, in the city of Atlanta, almost 40 thousand Fulton county residents casted their votes at the Atlanta Hawks home – Atlanta belongs to the state of Georgia, which Biden won by less than 15 thousand votes .(Peter et al., 2020).

Another contributor was Los Angeles Laker's superstar LeBron James, who launched the More Than a Vote platform with the main objective of fighting racism, voter suppression and to educate, energize and protect the Black community. That same platform was successful in recruiting 40 thousand poll workers who helped to register voters with felony records and directed resources into competitive states (Peter & Zillgitt, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is impossible to say surely that the NBA impacted the US presidential election with its actions. However, it is fair to assume that the NBA was successful in allowing more people to vote, in sharing their own message with the rest world in which they distance themselves and criticize the acting government and their ability to deal with crisis and in supporting their actors and allowing them to express their feelings and beliefs towards a situation of continuous discrimination. As a final note, it is important to further study this thematic as there has been critiques to both the NBA and its for being selective on the type of social causes they fight for.

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