
From Tweet to Conflict: Critical Discourse Analysis on Daryl Morey's Tweet about Hong Kong Protest

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ABSTRACT

The research focuses on the hidden reason that made Daryl Morey's tweet controversial in America and China. This research uses a descriptive qualitative method. The primary data are response tweets of Daryl Morey's tweet about the Hong Kong protest and Daryl Morey's initial tweet about the Hong Kong protest. This research also applies a transnational perspective; Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA is used to analyze and answer two research questions: how Morey's tweet about Hong Kong became a political issue between the NBA and China and how this issue affected the NBA. The research finding shows five reasons on how Morey's controversy became a political issue between the NBA and China: There are differences in interpretations of the tweet; where the U.S. interpreted it as freedom of speech and expression, but the Chinese interpreted it as a challenge to their sovereignty. Basketball's popularity in China expanded the escalation of the conflict. Moreover, by using Transnational as perspective and CDA as theory, researcher able to demonstrate how a single tweet can incite a global uproar and become the catalyst for a costly conflict between two superpower nations.

Keywords: *cda; fairclough; hong kong; money; nba; us-china conflict*

Article information
(Filled by Editorial
Management)

Received: 06 Dec, 2023

Revised: 23 Apr, 2024

Accepted: 27 Apr, 2024

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.22146/rubikon.v11i1.91458>

Available at <https://jurnal.ugm.ac.id/rubikon/article/view/91458>

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INTRODUCTION

Sports and media is something that cannot be separated. The role of the media in the growth of sport, particularly in American sport, is significant. According to Boyle and Hayne's book, *Power Play: Sport, the Media, and Popular Culture*, stated that: newspapers, movies, radio, and television broadcasts have all had a significant impact on moulding popular and political culture (2010, p.1). Sporting events, sports teams, and athletes have evolved into worldwide brands and a significant industrial company with obvious economic power, for example: the NBA.

Recently, basketball has become a sport that is shared and loved by many people around the world. Basketball's impact on America is so significant, as we know popular culture, such as sport, through their athletes is able to influence people or their audience, because sports (popular culture) are something that is shared and played by many people. According to Mukerji (1998, p.10) "Popular culture refers to the beliefs and practices and objects through which they are organized, that are widely shared among a population".

The NBA itself has done many strategies to make basketball more worldwide and become a global culture, such as: their economic strategy by selling NBA costumes, Basketball shoes, and engaging music and entertainment in NBA games. Because of that, NBA basketball players are often used by the US government to be "U.S ambassadors" across the world to influence worldwide audiences. Basketball players from the United States were frequently transported to other nations, such as: China, Philippines, South Korea, etc. to perform coaching clinics.

The popularity of the NBA in other countries, such as China is something that is undeniable. The arrival of Chinese players to the National Basketball Association boosted the sport's appeal (NBA). Yao Ming of the Houston Rockets, the most valuable Chinese basketball player at that time contributed to increased popularity of basketball (NBA) in China, because seeing these sportsmen play in the NBA was a source of pride for Chinese people. Moreover, China is known as the most populated country, it has promising economic benefits for the NBA." The N.B.A. has targeted China – and its population of

1.4 billion – for roughly a half-century. China now has more fans of the league than there are in the United States, a country of 330 million. Before the pandemic, the N.B.A.'s top stars routinely travelled to the country between seasons to promote sneakers. Since 2004, the N.B.A. has played dozens of games there.” (Deb, 2022)

As NBA (basketball) becomes “closer” to people, nowadays NBA often becomes a platform for their players to express and deliver social issues, such as: injustice, racism, freedom, democracy etc. This thing falls under the umbrella of “freedom of speech” that is important for Americans. This thing also becomes a proof of how basketball or sport in general is not just a game or a job field to get some money. It also has the political power to unite people, no matter what your skin colour, gender, and sexual orientation. For example during the #BlackLivesMatter many NBA players conduct in supporting the movement inside and outside the field. The NBA gives full support to all of the players regarding the issue by allowing them to do “kneeling”, changing their jersey name, and etc. The NBA known as one of the most “friendly” sport organization

went talking about freedom of speech and social issues (VanOpdorp, 2020).

But, in 2019, Daryl Morey (Houston Rockets' GM) tweeted about his support toward the Hong Kong protest against the Chinese government in his personal twitter. Morey's tweet went viral and made Chinese people and the government mad at the NBA. As response to the issue, the NBA labelled Morey's tweets "regrettable," and Morey subsequently apologized for insulting China. Since then, protests have erupted in and around NBA venues, because they believe it is a violation toward freedom of speech. Numerous demonstrators were dragged out of games after holding placards or shouting support for Hong Kong, others had their signs taken due to a league rule that prohibits “political” signs from being shown during games. This treatment becomes such a surprise because the NBA and the basketball player are typically vocal on freedom of speech and human-rights issues, but in this case the NBA is silent (Deb, 2019).

Based on that, the problem which undermine this research is formulated as; why Morey's personal tweet about Hong Kong Protestor can become a political issue and how it

affected the NBA. Researcher also interested because, this topic because basketball (NBA) is one of the most popular sports in the world, and one of the sports (Baseball, American Football and Basketball) that represented "America." This topic also will examine how a sport, especially basketball, is not just a game, but has many issues in it, including: social and cultural issues. Just like what is portrayed during the conflict of Daryl Morey's personal tweet about Hong Kong protest, a single personal tweet from Morey can create conflict between two nations.

METHODOLOGY

There are many previous articles or researches that have similarity with the topic of this research. For example: *"Silencing the crowd: China, the NBA, and leveraging market size to export censorship"* (2022), by: William D. O'Connell. This research analyses the "Censorship" in China that is not a new phenomenon. By examining the dispute between China and the National Basketball Association over a single tweet in support of pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, this article demonstrates the conditions under which censorship efforts

may be outsourced to private, foreign actors in jurisdictions other than China. The NBA scandal implies that censorship may extend beyond China's borders to Western corporations with a presence in the Chinese consumer market. The similarity with present Researcher is about the usage of Morey's tweet as the data, while the difference is; in the article, O'Connell talked about the Chinese Government "censorship" in social media, while present Researcher will analyse how a tweet from Morey can heat up the relationship between China, USA and the NBA.

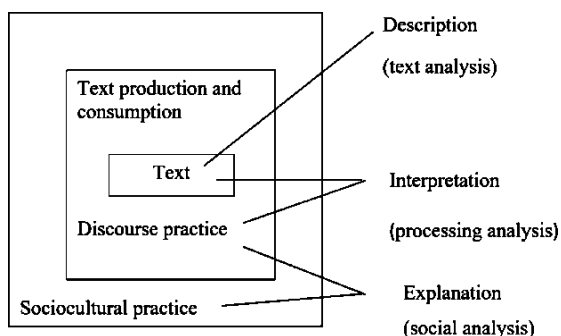
This research fell under the descriptive qualitative method supported by American Studies. The Primary data for this research is the response to Morey's Hong Kong protest tweet and Morey's initial tweet about the Hong Kong protest. This research is also conducted through the transnational perspective. Transnationalism is a phenomenon that occurs as people become more connected and borders between countries become increasingly blurred (borderless society). This perspective can be used to analyse social and political and America influence and effect toward the world (Adi,

2020 p. 49). In this case, it has correlation with the Morey Tweet about Hong Kong that became a viral and trending topic, even creating protests in both countries.

This research also conducted with the Critical Discourse analysis /CDA (Fairclough's Three-dimensional Model of CDA) as theory to see how Morey's personal tweet about Hong Kong protest become a political issue between the NBA and China and How this the issue affect the NBA", because CDA is not just about text, it can be used to analyse many things, such as: power and dominance which it controls society, complex social structures, political issues, and social problems within the society.

Fairclough (1989, p.26) distinguishes three aspects (Three-dimensional model), or phases, of critical discourse analysis in his book "language and power":

Image 1. Fairclough's 3D model of critical discourse analysis



Source: Zahid Ahmed in researchgate.net

The three CDA dimensions are linked and iterative. The procedure begins with a description of language traits, which is then interpreted to reveal underlying meanings and ideologies. The explanation situates the discourse within a larger social framework, showing its role in relations of power and social behaviours. Fairclough's Three Dimensions of CDA give an effective analytical framework for understanding how "text" is involved in the creation, maintenance, and change of social reality through this comprehensive approach. This analytical approach enables academics to critically evaluate the use of language in a variety of discourses and domains, showing the links between language, power, and society, as Fairclough considers any instance of language to be a communicative event. Fairclough's method claims that language may create change and can be used to change behaviour.

CDA seeks to investigate the frequently oblique connections between discursive practices, texts, and events and larger social and cultural structures, interactions, and processes. CDA enables

researcher to understand the conditions behind a specific problem. In order to connect the political and social background of Daryl Morey's tweet, the CDA is used. This research uses CDA by Fairclough to analyse why Daryl Morey tweet about Hong Kong Protest created conflict between China and U.S, is not just a text, but has many issues and contexts in it, which is why single personal tweet from Morey turn into political problem between US, NBA and China.

DISCUSSION

Textual analysis of the Daryl Morey's tweet conflict

Daryl Morey is a former general manager of the Houston Rockets in the United States. Morey caused a sensation in October 2019 when he tweeted his support for Hong Kong pro-democracy activists. The tweet, which included a photo with the words "Fight for Freedom, Stand with Hong Kong," The post referenced the Hong Kong protest movement, which angered Chinese fans. Morey deleted it shortly after. But it already prompted uproar in China, where the government and many people saw it as an attack on their "sovereignty" and support for separatists.

Image 2. Morey personal tweet about supporting Hong Kong Protest



Source. @dmorey, 04, Oct, 2019

The Chinese and Chinese government responded so negatively that it cancelled several NBA events in China, including preseason games and media appearances, as well as halting commercial relations with the NBA. The NBA, as the entity in charge of basketball in America, was the one who caused and suffered the most from the disagreement, but the incident continues to be a subject of contention in the realms of sports and politics. The American response to the Daryl Morey, NBA, and China situation has been mixed. Many Americans support Daryl Morey's right to free expression and believe China's actions violate that freedom. At the same time, numerous Americans have expressed concern about the conflict's potential consequences. Because of the controversy Morey deleted his original tweet about support Hong Kong

protest and need to make clarification, as below:

"1/ I did not intend my tweet to cause any offense to Rockets fans and friends of mine in China. I was merely voicing one thought, based on one interpretation, of one complicated event. I have had a lot of opportunity since that tweet to hear and consider other perspectives. 2/ I have always appreciated the significant support our Chinese fans and sponsors have provided and I would hope that those who are upset will know that offending or misunderstanding them was not my intention. My tweets are my own and in no way represent the Rockets or the NBA." (Daryl Morey clarification on his personal Twitter account, @dmorey, October 6th, 2019)

However, the tweet already sparked outrage in China, where the government and many individuals interpreted it as an attack on their sovereignty and a promotion of secession. The Chinese government retaliated by cancelling many NBA activities in China, including preseason games and media appearances, as well as cutting connections with the Houston Rockets. In an attempt to lessen the impact of Morey's comments, Tilman Fertitta, the owner of Houston

Rockets, separated the club and its shareholders from it. Fertitta's first decision to create a separation between the Rockets and Morey was motivated by his recognition of the significance of distinguishing between Morey's personal opinions and his role as a representative of the Houston Rockets organization. He wrote on his personal twitter account:

Image 3. Houston Rockets owner Comment about the conflict



Source: @tilmanJFertita, 05, Oct, 2019

"Listen....@dmorey does NOT speak for the @HoustonRockets. Our presence in Tokyo is all about the promotion of the @NBA internationally and we are NOT a political organization." (October 5th, 2019)

Following the Daryl Morey incident, the NBA published a statement supporting free speech and protecting Morey's right to express his opinions. The statement, issued on

October 6, 2019, read as follows:

"We recognize that the views expressed by Houston Rockets General Manager Daryl Morey have deeply offended many of our friends and fans in China, which is regrettable. While Daryl has made it clear that his tweet does not represent the Rockets or the NBA, the values of the league support individuals' educating themselves and sharing their views on matters important to them. We have great respect for the history and culture of China and hope that sports and the NBA can be used as a unifying force to bridge cultural divides and bring people together." (NBA.com, 2019).

The NBA made an apology for Morey's tweet and expressed regret for any offense it may have caused Chinese fans. The NBA's statement begins with a distinct message; one appears to be a soft apology for Morey's tweet, while the other appears to be a strong rebuke.

As respond of the incident, CBA (Chinese Basketball Association), Chinese government, and sponsor, decided to cut tie with Houston rockets and the NBA. Yao Ming, a former NBA All-Star who played for the Rockets from 2002 to 2011, and now is the CBA's president,

respond as follows: "The Chinese Basketball Association strongly disagrees with the improper remarks by Daryl Morey, and has decided to suspend exchanges and cooperation with the team," the CBA said in a statement on its official account. (Perper, 2019). Moreover, the Chinese consulate general in Houston wrote responded as follows:

Image 4. The Chinese consulate general in Houston comment



Source: globaltimes.cn, 2019

"We have lodged representations and expressed strong dissatisfaction with the Houston Rockets, and urged the latter to correct the error and take immediate concrete measures to eliminate the adverse impact". Chinese consulate general".

These incidents became more political as American politicians reacted and criticized the NBA for separating itself from the league manager (Daryl Morey)

and American freedom of speech value.

Image 5. Ted Cruz comment about Morey conflict



Source: @tedcruz, 07, Oct, 2019

"As a lifelong @HoustonRockets fan, I was proud to see @dmorey call out the Chinese Communist Party's repressive treatment of protestors in Hong Kong, Now, in pursuit of \$\$, the @NBA is shamefully retreating." Texas Republican Senator Ted Cruz stated on Twitter.

Image 6. Tom Malinowski comment about Morey conflict



Source: @Malinowski, 07, Oct, 2019

New Jersey Democratic Rep. Tom Malinowski also criticized the NBA for "apologizing" to China. "And the #NBA, which (correctly) has no problem with players/employees criticizing our gov't, is now apologizing for criticizing the Chinese gov't. This is shameful and cannot stand," Malinowski tweeted.

American Interpretation on the Tweet and Freedom of Speech Propaganda

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution guarantees the profoundly ingrained American values of freedom of speech and expression. These values have substantially influenced the nation's history, culture, and legal system. The First Amendment of the US Constitution states: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances" (Constitution of the United States of America, in Moore, 2021, p. 1). This amendment is the foundation of the United States' free speech and expression rights. The United States has a long history of recognizing and defending the

freedom of speech and expression as a fundamental right. As it is guaranteed by the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, it is interpreted as including various forms of expression, such as political speech and social commentary. Individuals have the right to freely express their thoughts, ideas, opinions, and beliefs without fear of punishment from the government when exercising their right to freedom of speech. This right includes expressing themselves through words, writing, and symbolic speech (such as burning flags or participating in protests).

The American value of freedom of expression was a crucial factor that contributed to the tension of the conflict involving Daryl Morey. Freedom of expression is a core American principle that the First Amendment of the United States Constitution protects. Daryl Morey's tweet expressing support for pro-democracy demonstrators in Hong Kong was a clear example of him practicing his freedom of speech. The tweet that Morey sent out was an expression of his personal ideas and a statement on a political matter.

Morey's tweet about: "Fight for Freedom. Support Hong Kong" was consistent with

American values of freedom of speech and expression, which ensure that individuals can express their opinions on political and social issues without fear of censorship or punishment by the government. This tweet directly expressed his personal opinions and exercised his right to free speech, a fundamental American value protected by the US Constitution.

The National Basketball Association (NBA) initially released a statement expressing regret by labeling Morey's tweet as "regrettable" and stating that Morey's views did not represent the Rockets and the NBA. The response from the NBA shows the attitude that the NBA must compromise American freedom of speech for the sake of their financial interests. This things than fuelled many American. They responded with "Angry" toward NBA' respond toward the respond, because they see it as betrayal toward the Freedom of speech and expression values. Those who believed the league put its financial interests ahead of the values of free speech and human rights were angry and delivered direct criticism to the NBA.

For example, politician Tom Malinowski criticized the NBA for "apologizing" to

China; for him, the NBA should not have apologized. He called the NBA statement something shameful. "This is shameful and cannot stand." Another politician, Julian Castro from Texas, also criticized how the NBA responded toward China, as he sees the NBA "bowed" to China. On his personal Twitter account, he gave a very bold statement about the disagreement with the NBA: "The United States must lead with our values and speak out for pro-democracy protest in Hong Kong and not allow American citizens to be bullied by an authoritarian government." (@JulianCastro, 7, Oct, 2019)

After the first official statement from the NBA was criticized by many people from both China and the US, Adam Silver as the NBA commissioner, released a response regarding the tension between China and the NBA (08, Oct); he stated:

"We have seen how basketball can be an important form of people-to-people exchange that deepens ties between the United States and China. At the same time, we recognize that our two countries have different political systems and beliefs...But for those who question our motivation; this is about far more than growing our

business. Values of equality, respect and freedom of expression have long defined the NBA - and will continue to do so. As an American-based basketball league operating globally, among our greatest contributions are these values of the game...It is inevitable that people around the world - including from America and China - will have different viewpoints over different issues. It is not the role of the NBA to adjudicate those differences...However; 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..." (NBA.com, 2019)

Silver realized that the initial NBA statement did not alleviate the tension caused by Morey's controversial remark in China and the United States. As the Chinese perceive Morey as a threat to their sovereignty, they do not experience remorse regarding the NBA's statement. In America, the NBA's statement was interpreted by many people as prioritizing the power of the dollar and betraying fundamental American values, such as freedom of speech and expression. The NBA is an American sports organization that belongs to the American people. According to the statement, Silver emphasized

that there is no way in the world that the NBA will apologize for Daryl expressing his right to freedom of speech and expression.

Silver expressed sadness that Chinese NBA fans are offended, but the NBA "did not apologize" for Morey's tweet despite Silver's statement. Because there are values that have been upheld for a very long time and are deeply rooted in the NBA's DNA, those values encourage freedom of speech and expression and freedom for members of the NBA community. The National Basketball Association's (NBA) second statement above indicates that the NBA will not impose any restrictions on what its players and other individuals involved with the league can and cannot say, especially regarding China.

The NBA's response to Morey's tweet and the criticism revealed contradictions between American and Chinese values and between the NBA and Chinese corporate interests. As a result, American fans began to question the league's commitment to social justice and human rights. Many NBA fans who were already furious about the situation responded by protesting in many places during the NBA games. For example, On 10 Oct 2019, when

the Guangzhou Long-Lions, a team from the Chinese Basketball Association, played the Washington Wizards in Capital One Arena, U.S. Numbers of demonstrators showed their support for Hong Kong by holding up posters and handing out T-shirts bearing Free-Hong Kong messages. The security personnel removed some signs from the building while allowing others to remain there. In addition, the supporters booed while playing the Chinese national anthem and cheered for the Hong Kong protesters (Toropin, 2019).

Image 7. Hong Kong protestors during NBA game.



Source: The Canadian Press

On another occasion, during the NBA Pre-Season games of the Dallas Mavericks and the Los Angeles Clippers in Vancouver. The Hong Kong demonstrators wore clothing and masks while carrying signs and chanted slogans like: "Stand with Hong Kong," "Freedom for Hong Kong," "Hong Kong police brutality," Shame! Shame! Shame! Inside the Arena, Protesters even held

demonstrations outside NBA arenas to express their displeasure with the league's handling of the controversy. This peaceful protest was focused on free speech and human rights issues. The protestor even gave pamphlets to the fans who entered the arena. The pamphlets have a highlighted message: *The NBA bowed to totalitarian China. We won't. let's show the world freedom matters more than money*" this messages is sign to demonstrate their support for the Hong Kong citizens who were fighting for their freedom and democracy not to disrupting the game (Chiu, 2019).

Image 8 .Thread about pro-Hong Kong protest in NBA game



Source: @joannachiu, 18, Oct, 2019

The conflict between Morey and China reflected the different views and values of the two countries regarding freedom of expression, democracy, sovereignty, and human rights. Morey's tweet

was seen as an expression of solidarity with the Hong Kong protesters, demanding more autonomy and democracy from Beijing. China's response was seen as an attempt to silence dissent and impose its will on Hong Kong. The NBA was caught in the middle of this clash of ideologies, trying to balance its business interests with its social responsibility. It brought to the forefront the complexity of conducting business in a worldwide world with various cultural and political values. It prompted a debate about whether or not businesses should prioritize morals over profits.

Chinese Interpretation of the Tweet and Nationalism Propaganda

The controversy of the Daryl Morey issue was significantly affected by the values of both countries. The Chinese are well known for their nationalism, and the Americans are well known for their freedom of speech and expression. "Chinese nationalism" refers to the strong sense of national pride and identity many Chinese citizens experience. This strong sense of national pride and identity is frequently accompanied by an intense loyalty to the Chinese government and sensitivity to perceived challenges to

China's sovereignty and reputation. (Zheng, 2012, p.9-11).

Chinese nationalism fuelled Daryl Morey's conflict with China. Politically, Morey's tweet supporting the Hong Kong protests challenged China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, which are key values of political nationalism. China considers Hong Kong part of its territory and any interference in its internal affairs a violation of its national rights and interests. Many Chinese interpreted Daryl Morey's tweet supporting the Hong Kong protests as a direct threat to China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. They thought it was an attempt to get involved in China's domestic affairs and disrespect for the country's unity.

In the case involving Morey, the government gave a forceful response, condemning Morey's tweet as a violation of China's internal affairs. For example, the Chinese Consulate General in Houston uploaded an official response to their website. The Chinese Consulate expressed extreme dissatisfaction with the Houston Rockets (statement on Page 51). It argued for the Rockets' responsibility to correct the error and take

immediate concrete measures to eliminate the adverse impact. Just like tread from @YuFuTroy (06 Oct 2019) described, the Chinese officials, companies, and state media quickly responded to Morey's tweet with strong condemnation. The official position only inflamed public opinion and escalated the conflict's tension. Chinese social media platforms have significantly contributed to the mobilization of emotions among the Chinese people. Citizens used these platforms to express their anger, frustration and demands for action against the NBA and the Houston Rockets. For example, CBA's official statement delivered by Yao Ming, the President of CBA, stated:

Image 9. Screenshot of Yu Fu's thread about the response from CBA



Source: @YuFuTroy, 06 Oct, 2019.

"The Chinese Basketball Association strongly disagrees with the improper remarks by [Rockets general manager] Daryl Morey and has decided to suspend exchanges and cooperation with the team," the CBA,

Yao, said in a statement on its official account on Weibo, per South China Morning Post.

Morey's tweet supporting Hong Kong demonstrators opposing a law to transfer prisoners to mainland China for trials, According to the SCMP, China believes the demonstrators are part of a Western "revolution" that could spread to the mainland (Hon, 2019) . Many Chinese have requested Morey to apologize and the league to "act." Chinese state-run media launched a concerted, aggressive campaign against Morey and the NBA. This media campaign contributed to the controversy and provoked anger in China. For example, a "strong response from People.cn (People's Daily Newspaper), a Chinese newspaper produced by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, is available online worldwide. People's Daily gives a powerful statement that also can be read as a government statement, where they argue that: "Morey is touching China's Bottom line" (@YuFuTroy, 06 Oct, 2019).

Image 10. Screenshot of Yu Fu's thread about the response from People.cn



Source: @YuFuTroy, 06 Oct,2019.

"[People's Daily Online Comment: Morey touches China's bottom line, we will never agree!] #Morrey's Hong Kong-related remarks angered fans #The Rockets have attracted countless fans in China over the years, and Morey is naturally a beneficiary....it's strange that the fans are not angry. Moreys should know that there is absolutely no way to challenge the bottom line of the Chinese people while enjoying the dividends of the Chinese market!"

Moreover, Tencent Sports, a Chinese sports broadcaster, also responded to the conflict; Tencent Sports not only gives news and information about sports in China but also sports around the world. The most important thing Tencent Sports has done to open its market is work with the NBA in the US to

broadcast all NBA games. It has helped the NBA grow in China. Tencent Sports, just like other Chinese companies, gave very harsh comments toward Morey, as stated below:

Image 11. Screen Shot of Yu Fu's thread about the response from Tencent Sport



Source: @YuFuTroy, 06, Oct, 2019.

"We are seriously indignant and resolutely resist the wrong remarks made by Houston Rockets general manager Morey on social media! We immediately expressed our strong protest against Morey's remarks to the Houston Rockets and the NBA. Although sports have no borders, patriotism is above all else. We firmly oppose and will never tolerate any inappropriate words or deeds related to national interests. Before Morey gives a reasonable reply, Tencent Sports has decided not to report any relevant information about Morey, and will continue to maintain communication with the NBA, hoping to get a clear reply on this

incident as soon as possible."

That response above, from the "Chinese side," shows how Chinese government is addressing the issue by appealing to the nationalism of its citizens. The Chinese people are recognized for their strong beliefs and ability to unite against what they see as interference from other sources. Those who cross the line regarding China's sensitive topics—such as Taiwan, Tibet, Tiananmen Square, and Hong Kong, have to pay the price" for their actions, as the Chinese government views this as a "punishment to pay." In the name of nationalism, the response of the Chinese government indeed exacerbated the dispute. Chinese officials framed the problem in a nationalistic way, saying that those who supported the protests in Hong Kong were a threat to China's sovereignty and unity. This framing hit a nerve with the Chinese people and led to a rise in patriotism, which made the Chinese people even angrier. As a result, the conflict became even worse.

There was a significant amount of backlash over Morey's tweet on Chinese social media networks. The escalation of the conflict can

be inferred from a comment made on a tweet by Daryl Morey that is unrelated to the controversy. Fans shared their thoughts, and when they were furious or frustrated, they frequently expressed it through the use of harsh language. Morey's personal Twitter account (@dmorey) became "crowded," with many Chinese and Americans arguing about the controversy he had created. For example, Morey tweeted a picture in Japan a day after the viral tweet, got 898 retweets and 8k likes, and exploded the comment section with more than 10k comments that mostly come from US and Chinese netizens commenting about the issue.

Image 12. Morey's tweeted picture about Japan



Source: @dmorey, 05, Oct, 2019.

By using the keywords: "Morey," "Daryl Morey," and "Morey Hong Kong Protest" on Twitter, researchers found

many comments regarding this issue. Chinese fans were angry about Morey's tweet because it was a clear threat to China's sovereignty and an endorsement of the Hong Kong protests, which the Chinese government was strongly against. They thought it was a sign of support for the protests in Hong Kong, which Morey had already said he agreed with. Fans in China thought Morey had violated their trust and loyalty and degraded Yao Ming's legacy and reputation when he tweeted in support of the Hong Kong protests. They also believed he had damaged the NBA's connection with China, one of its biggest and most profitable markets. It made them even angrier since the NBA is a respected organization in China. For example:

Image 13. Comment about Morey's conflict on Morey's personal twitter account by @ChrisUF23



Source: @ChrisUF23, 05, Oct, 2019.

@ChrisUF23 wrote: "... We support rockets since Yao and apparently rockets

earned a large amount of revenue from whatever, sponsorships from China in the last decade. You just can't do that bro, it hurts our feelings.

The propaganda using nationalism in this conflict is used by the Chinese government to increase nationalism in its society and is also used as a tool to oppose America. Especially during the last few years as US-China relations have gotten worse; that is why the conflict escalated so quickly. Just like portrayed by the Bloomberg Original (@bboriginal, 10 Oct 2019) interview video with Chinese people about how Chinese fans react strongly to the Daryl Morey controversy. In the interview, Chinese people were disappointed and angry at the same time by the NBA, especially Daryl Morey. One of the Chinese people stated: *"I am Chinese I love my country, Hong Kong is Chinese, the ball (basketball) is just ball, but the country (China) must be loved deeply"* another NBA lover from China on the interview argued about how he felt betrayed by the way NBA handled the controversy. Because in his opinion, what Morey tweeted is something that should not happen, as it already crossed the "red-line", he stated:

"National sovereignty is the red line for Chinese people and should not be challenged just like racial equality in the U.S that is not allowed to be discussed. Adam Silver (NBA commissioner) banned Donald Sterling for life from any association with the Clippers (NBA team) or the NBA after sterling expressed racial discriminatory remarks against black people in 2014. This is similar case with China, moreys tweet offended lots Chinese people's interest. Now they feel we have freedom of speech, we can say whatever we want, that is not the case." (@bboriginal, 10, October, 2019)

Chinese fans, who were already unhappy with Morey's tweet, were finally made even angrier by the issue of "nationalism" played by the Chinese government in this Conflict with Morey, the NBA, and China. It ultimately made people in China even angrier. Not only were protests carried out on social media platforms, but they were also carried out first-hand, for example, when NBA teams (Los Angeles Lakers vs Brooklyn Nets) were playing preseason matches in China.

Image 14. A photo about Chinese fans Protest toward Morey.



Source: AFP via Getty Images.

Chinese official statements and various government agencies that swiftly condemned Morey's tweet demands for apologies and "appeals to nationalism" all contributed to heating the Daryl Morey conflict. Chinese public opinion is profoundly influenced by government control of television broadcasting, internet, and domestic publishing, and an overall situation in which even those with access to outside sources of information refrain from publicly expressing a view of world events that contradicts the government's official line. Consequently, any backlash among Chinese fans to Morey's comments would reflect the Chinese government's propaganda efforts. The Chinese government has worked to persuade the Chinese public that Hong Kong demonstrators are leading a separatist movement backed by foreign powers rather than fighting for the rights they were

promised under the terms of Hong Kong's reunification with China. (Yglesias, 2019).

This combination of those factors escalated the situation into a major diplomatic dispute between the NBA and China. A Twitter tweet by Daryl Morey raised a politically sensitive issue, causing a disagreement that hurt the NBA's popularity and business in China. The conflict illustrated how sports, politics, and national pride are all connected in today's globalized world. It also showed how emotionally committed Chinese fans were to the NBA and how a single event can affect people's behavior, attitudes, and thoughts. It also showed how a single event may influence people's feelings and lead to changes. NBA popularity can clash with free expression, human rights, and political problems. The disagreement showed that the Chinese government will use whatever means to influence international groups and individuals who criticize China's policies or actions.

Double edge sword of NBA popularity in China

Over the last two decades, globalization has accelerated over the globe. Globalization is causing nation-state borders to decrease, the speed

of human existence to accelerate, and the world increasingly interconnected and bonded. China, the world's most populous country, is emerging as a significant actor in the global community (Luo et al., 2015). China is seen as the most important market in sports, including basketball. The sport has a long history in China, dating back to the 1890s, and has been popular. The YMCA sent missionaries from the United States to China. They carried basketballs with them when they journeyed to China. Since then, basketball's popularity quickly extended throughout China. In 1935, it became recognized as a national sport, and the first official Chinese Olympic basketball team was formed the following year (Polumbaum, 2002, p.184-187).

With an estimated 300 million individuals participating in the sport, basketball is one of the most popular sports in China. The sport gained popularity in the 1980s when the Chinese national basketball team attained worldwide success. Nowadays, the NBA regularly sends high-profile players (Hardens, Klay Thompson, Curry, Paul Gasol, LeBron, and many other NBA big names) to China for exhibition games and

coaching clinics to satisfy Chinese fans. (Huang, 2013, pp.268-269).

The rise of Chinese basketball players in the NBA, such as Yao Ming, a 7'6" (229 CM) Chinese center, rose to prominence in the league in the early 2000s. The arrival of Yao was the perfect moment for the NBA to build its business in China; since then, the NBA's attention and influence in the Chinese market have increased dramatically. He was a powerful force on the floor with the Houston Rockets. Yao Ming's NBA success helped to promote the sport in China, paving the path for more Chinese players to follow in his footsteps. Since then, the NBA has taken a proactive approach to marketing the sport in China. The league has formed alliances with many Chinese firms using Yao as an agent to promote the sport on social media channels such as Weibo and WeChat. The NBA has also organized pre-season games in China and has invested in basketball courts and training facilities throughout the country. Yao was the face of the new marketing idea for professional sports and consumer goods. He also set up the NBA's key plan for

expanding its global reach (Huang, 2013, pp.276-281).

Basketball's popularity in China significantly affected the conflict involving Daryl Morey. China is one of the NBA's greatest markets, and the league has made significant investments to promote the sport there. As basketball becomes popular, especially in China, it becomes "a double-edged sword." The popularity helped the NBA economically by gaining more sponsors, fans, etc., but it also harmed them. Because of its popularity in China, the tweet from Morey instantly became viral, and the incident strained fan sentiment. Many Chinese fans expressed anger and disappointment over the perceived support for the Hong Kong protests, leading to a decline in interest in NBA-related content.

The tweet from Morey, expressing support for the Hong Kong protesters, created a "maelstrom" of controversy, and it had a dramatic impact on the way Chinese basketball fans saw both Morey and the NBA as a whole. The message was about Morey's support for the Hong Kong protests. During the confrontation with Daryl Morey, the general reaction among Chinese fans was a combination of rage,

disappointment, and dissatisfaction. Chinese supporters believed Morey's tweet expressing support for the Hong Kong demonstrators interfered with their country's internal affairs.

Borrowing the data from Xu et al. (2020) shows that the data from 4-25 October, as soon as Morey tweeted about supporting the Hong Kong Protest, his tweet became viral on almost all social media such as Twitter, where he uploaded the original tweet, and in every Chinese based social media (Weibo, Baidu, etc.), Xu etc. stated:

"Soon after Morey published his Hong Kong tweet, Chinese Rockets fans criticized him in the comments and expressed their extreme discontent with Morey's speech on Twitter, which led to an increase of Morey-related tweets. Later, Chinese netizens uploaded a screenshot of Morey's tweet to Weibo, which drew wide and immediate attention in Mainland China. From 4-5 October, Morey-related tweets increased from 141 to 1,672 per day. Yet, Morey-related Weibo content increase dramatically from 22 to 8,621. Many we-media began to spread this tweet and relevant discussions remained the dominating topics on Weibo. Meanwhile, Morey's Baidu index surged

from 202 to 76,808, whereas his Google Trends increased from 1 to 8. Finally, Morey-related news increased in Nexis News database from 2 to 62...this procession partially demonstrates how a transnational public sphere was stimulated by Morey's tweet." (Xu et al, 2020, p. 143-144)

Based on that, the popularity of basketball in China has become an important aspect that made Morey's tweet become political. This incident had a significant impact because The NBA is popular, especially the Houston Rockets, one of China's most famous NBA teams. The legendary Yao Ming, the first player picked in the 2002 NBA draft by the Houston Rockets, gave the team "popularity" among Chinese fans. Even after Yao Ming retired from basketball, the Rockets still made much money in China. The NBA, especially the Houston Rockets, saw Yao Ming as a critical part of its plan to grow its business in China (Keeler, 2005, p. 210-211).

The Chinese interpreted the tweet as sign of betrayal toward their love for the NBA and the Houston Rockets. They believe that the Houston Rockets, in this case, Morey as the GM of the team, should

not have promoted "separatism" in Hong Kong because it damaged the feelings of the Chinese supporters, who are responsible for making the Houston Rockets a top-rated basketball team in China. That is why Chinese social media platforms had an increase of criticism directed towards Morey and the NBA, with numerous Chinese fans expressing feelings of rage and disappointment. As described above by Xu (2020), after Morey tweeted the pro-Hong Kong tweet from 4-5 October, Morey-related tweets increased from 141 to 1,672 per day. It shows that the NBA's popularity in China has a harmful effect. As it becomes popular, people quickly "consume it." As shown during the Morey controversy, people pay much attention to talking and protesting the controversy because of that the escalation of the conflict become wider.

Social Media War and Fan Polarization

The controversy surrounding Daryl Morey on social media illustrates the digital age problem, which is how comments and actions on social media can rapidly escalate and become international tensions. The social media war that occurred during the Daryl Morey conflict also had a significant impact on NBA fans

and their engagement. Social media played an important role in this conflict. Social media sites like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram made it easy for news about Daryl Morey's tweet and the reactions to it to spread quickly.

It also influenced public opinion, increasing tensions during the Daryl Morey conflict. Fans, players, and other individuals connected to the NBA utilized social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to share their perspectives. There were many different points of view on the controversy because fans, media outlets, and people all shared their opinions, reactions, and analyses. The opinions were amplified by social media platforms, sparking extensive discussions and debates among fans. Consequently, the NBA was pressured to navigate the consequences and find a middle ground between upholding its employees' freedom of speech and preserving its relationship with China, a vital market for the league's worldwide growth.

The conflict resulted in disagreements among NBA fans. Some fans supported Morey's right to free speech and agreed with his stance on human rights issues. Others held a different perspective, arguing that the league should stop focusing on politics that overshadow the essence of the game. The phenomenon of polarisation has significantly

impacted various aspects of online communication, including discussions, social media interactions, and fan communities. (Horowitz-Rozen, 2019)

There was chaos of exchanging comments on social media sites such as Twitter and Instagram due to the heated conditions. People on both sides of the debate were very intense about expressing their points of view. Every post regarding this conflict received extreme attention. Malinowsky's (@Malinowski, 7 Oct 2019) NBA condemnation tweet has over 500 comments, 3000 reposts, and 8000 likes. Ted Cruz's (@tedcruz, 7 Oct 2019) tweet supporting Morey and criticizing the NBA received 1800+ comments, 6000+ reposts, and 18.3k likes (photo and explanation of both tweets on pages 6-7). Tweets against Morey, such as @Rachel_Nichols (15, Okt, 2019) post on LeBron's interview saying Morey was uneducated, received 1600+ comments, 1400+ reposts, and 2,600+ likes. The LeBron (@kingJames, 15 Oct 2019) tweet regarding his dispute with Morey received 7000+ comments, 11,4k reposts, and 66.3k likes.

Image 15. Tweet about Morey's conflict.



Source: James @kingJames 15 Oct, 2019.

All of this shows how people are "attracted" to this fight. Morey's tweet was praised by people involved in the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong as a sign of freedom of speech and human rights. While Chinese nationalists and people who support the Chinese government were critical of him and the NBA because they saw that Morey's tweet threatened Chinese sovereignty, those fans from both countries were actively exchanging opinions and words in social media.

Image 16 & 17. Pictures of pro and contra comment toward Morey's tweet from.



Source: @Hker_cady, @LauTim10664652, 7, Oct, 2019 and @Jason33531135.

Fans took to various social media sites to voice their arguments. As a result of the direct conduit offered by social media, fans were able to share their ideas, which led to heated disputes and conversations between fans that were pro and contra. The issue led to more than just a social media war in both countries; it also caused suspended broadcasts of games and strained relations between the NBA and Chinese partners. It made it difficult for Chinese fans to follow the league, affecting their engagement levels. The NBA considers China to be a vital market. The fallout from the incident harmed the league's visibility in China, especially after the suspension of broadcasts and the strained relationships with Chinese partners (Perper, 2019).

The NBA faced significant challenges in repairing relationships and regaining the trust of Chinese fans, which directly impacted the NBA's economic aspects and overall relation with the country. It also worsened because social media made

organizing campaigns supporting free speech and political expression easier, as well as boycotts directed against the NBA and the companies sponsoring the league. Hashtags and internet campaigns were utilized to mobilize support for various causes connected to the debate. While American fans protest NBA games, the fans protest and campaign in social media to boycott the NBA games and products; this has a big impact on declining Chinese fan engagement. The decline in NBA jersey sales harmed NBA-related event attendance and viewership in China. (Beer, 2019)

Every year, the NBA plays two pre-season games in China, and seats usually go in a flash. Along with ticket sales to NBA games in China, advertising fees for those games also bring in a lot of money. It is thought that the league makes about \$500 million a year. Due to this issue and the boycott movement by Chinese fans, the NBA, especially the Houston Rockets' income from China dropped significantly (Stein, 2019). Also, due to the social media war during this conflict, people's perceptions of the NBA as a "brand" have changed globally due to the incident. The NBA was considered a sporting organization that supported human rights activism. Now, many fans see the league put business ahead of human rights.

The fans then have their creative way to protest it. Fans on social media are also protesting by using memes to mock the NBA's decision that triggered public sentiment. Memes have become a tool for NBA fans to express their dissatisfaction with how the NBA handles conflicts. These fans use memes as a means of protest. Some fans believe that the NBA prioritizes apologizing and pleasing China for expressing opinions that are not mistakes.

Image 18 & 19. Memes criticizing NBA during the Daryl Morey's conflict



Source: @butterflyyanyan, 07, Oct, 2019 and @eznova2 07, Oct, 2019.

Those memes illustrate the response of internet users to the crisis. The meme that was spread by fans of Hong Kong

emphasized how, in their view, the NBA prioritizes revenue ahead of human rights. As influential figures with a global following, NBA players were also impacted. Their remarks and actions surrounding the issue were constantly scrutinized, which played a role in determining how fans saw individual players and the league as a whole. Some of the athletes were called out for their comments, which ultimately affected their overall popularity. Because of these things, the debate over Morey conflict on social media has become more heated. This meme protest also targeted NBA players that netizens feel silent and afraid of China, for example, LeBron James, who openly criticized Morey by saying he is uneducated and misinformed.

Image 20. Memes that mockig Lebron James during the Morey's conflict.



Source: @Ansoncky1, 17 Oct, 2019.

A significant amount of criticism was directed at James on various social media. Some NBA fans were upset with him because James' words had the potential to damage his reputation as possibly the most prominent advocate for

social justice found in sport. Some fans make fun of LeBron by portraying him as "standing" with money instead of with Morey in this controversy, while others satirize LeBron pandering to China. Because all of this, James needs to make clarify statement as below:

"Let me clear up the confusion," "I do not believe there was any consideration for the consequences and ramifications of the tweet. I'm not discussing the substance. Others can talk about that." LeBron James, he wrote in one of his posts, referring to his take on Morey's tweet. (@KingJames) October 15, 2019 (Cacciola, 2019).

The Daryl Morey conflict brought to light the immense influence of social media in escalating international conflicts. The controversy's reach was expanded beyond traditional media channels due to the influence of social media. The incident garnered global attention through online news coverage and discussions, effectively informing people worldwide about the situation and the resulting reactions. Because of this controversy, the NBA became the center of a social media war that created fan polarization. Due to these contrasting perspectives, NBA fans were divided into pro and contra regarding Morey's tweet.

Some stood by Morey's freedom of speech, while others voiced concerns about the potential consequences for the league's business and the separation between sports and politics. The incident brought attention to the intricate connection between sports, politics, and business, leading to ongoing discussions within the NBA community and beyond.

CONCLUSION

Because of its popularity in China, Morey's tweet went viral on almost all social media, such as WeChat, Baidu, Instagram, and Twitter, where he uploaded the original tweet. This controversy becomes more intense and complex when this problem intersects with the differences between the two countries, such as culture, perspective, and ideology. Many Americans see Morey's tweet supporting Hong Kong pro-democracy protests as expressing freedom of speech. The American fans became heated when the NBA called Morey's statement "regrettable." Many Fans Reacted and criticized the league's response. They saw the statement as a sign of the NBA prioritizing financial interest over human rights and freedom of speech. For China, Morey's tweet "cracked" China's positive bond with American basketball culture. They interpreted Morey's tweet

supporting the Hong Kong protests as challenge to China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. In the Morey case, Chinese government using nationalism issue in provoking their people. That is why the government strongly condemned Morey's tweet as a violation of China's internal affairs and support for separatist groups. As this issue escalated, it became a political problem between the NBA and China, which created many "costly" effects on the NBA.

COMPETING INTEREST STATEMENT

Herewith the author declares that this article is totally free from any conflict of interest regarding the assessment, review and revision, and publication process in general.

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