During the politically-charged periods of the 1960s and ‘70s, many African American athletes spoke out against perceived injustices (Powell, 2007). Notable examples include Muhammad Ali, Bill Russell, Tommie Smith, John Carlos, Jim Brown, and Kareem Abdul Jabbar—all of whom spoke out against human rights injustices and civil rights inequalities, among other issues. Despite this notable history of athlete activism, many athletes today choose to remain silent on prominent social issues. According to Powell (2007) and Jackson (2006), this deafening amongst today’s athletes is financially motivated, as they stand to lose monies that were not available to athletes 30-40 years ago. As Cunningham (2007) notes, “opining about hot-button topics can polarize an individual, resulting in fewer sponsorship dollars and endorsement deals” (p. 243). As an illustrative example, when explaining why he was reticent to endorse someone for political office, Michael Jordan famously responded, “Republicans buy shoes too” (Kellner, 2001, p. 52).

Thus, from these perspectives, athletes are silent about prevalent social issues today because of the potential negative impact taking such a stance would have on their image and endorsement potential. Unfortunately, such a hypothesis has not been subjected to empirical scrutiny. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the influence of African American athlete activism on people’s attitudes toward that athlete as a product endorser.

We drew from multiple theoretical frameworks, the match-up hypothesis and prejudice-distribution theory, to formulate our hypotheses. According to the match-up hypothesis, endorsers are considered a good fit for a product when they are perceived as an expert, attractive, and trustworthy (Ohanian, 1990). This fit is then associated with positive attitudes toward the product, as well as intentions to consume it (Fink et al., 2004). We extended this literature by also including the underlying tenets of prejudice-distribution theory. From this perspective, people who do not conform with the prevalent status hierarchy are likely to be viewed negatively (Kaiser & Pratt-Hyatt, 2009). For example, racial minorities who strongly identify with their race are often presumed to reject status-legitimating worldviews and, thus, face more prejudice from Whites than do minorities who do not strongly identify with their race. We expected a similar pattern in the current study, such that athletes engaged in controversial activism would be seen in a negative light, relative to their counterparts who were not.

In the current study, we conducted an experiment to examine these possibilities. Specifically, participants received information about an Olympian endorsing New Balance products. We varied the level of racial identity (high or low) and the controversial nature of the activism in which the athlete was otherwise engaged (anti-war or anti-obesity). Based on the aforementioned literature, we predicted that low racial identity (Hypothesis 1), non-controversial activism (Hypothesis 2), and the interaction between those two variables (Hypothesis 3) would predict the trustworthiness of the athlete. (Note that expertise and attractiveness were held constant). Trustworthiness was then expected to hold a positive association with endorser-product fit (Hypothesis 4).

We collected data from 103 undergraduate students (57% women, 41% men, 2% who did not provide their sex) at a large, public university in the Southwest United States. The sample was largely White (73%), followed by Hispanic (14%), Asian American (6%), African American (4%), persons who listed other (2%), and persons who did not provide their race (4%). The mean age was 20.60 years (SD = 1.77).

Participants received a study packet that contained the manipulation and the questionnaire. The first page contained a consent form, and information on the second page informed participants that New Balance was considering adding Charles Smith (a fictitious name) as an endorser. Smith’s accomplishments, which included several world championships, were also included. Participants were then asked to review profile information (in which the manipulations were embedded) on the following pages and to respond to the questionnaire items on the last page. The third page contained his responses to items measuring group identification, extraversion, and agreeableness, as well as his community activities. Following Kaiser and Pratt-Hyatt (2009), racial identity was manipulated by varying his responses to the group identification items (e.g., “I am strongly identified with my racial group”). We varied the activism by indicating that he volunteered for the Stop the War Coalition (a group aimed at ending the war on terror) or the Obesity Society (a group focusing on the prevention and treatment of obesity). On the last page, participants responded to items measuring trustworthiness (Ohanian, 1990) and fit with the product (Fink et al., 2004), as well as items measuring the efficacy of the manipulation and participant demographics.
Preliminary analyses indicated that the manipulations were successful. The hypotheses were tested through structural equation modeling. Results indicate that the model was a close fit to the data: $\chi^2 (df = 28) = 1.09, p = .34$; confirmatory fit index = .99; root mean square error of approximation (90% CI = .00, .08) = .03, $p$-close = .67. Hypotheses 1 and 2 were not supported, as racial identity and type of activism did not independently affect trustworthiness. However, in support of Hypothesis 3, there was a significant racial identity x type of activism interaction ($\beta = .33, p = .05$). When racial identity was low, the type of activism did not matter. However, when racial identity was high, the athlete was seen as more trustworthy when he was involved with anti-obesity events than when he was involved with anti-war events. Finally, in line with Hypothesis 4, trustworthiness was positively associated with fit perceptions ($\beta = .38, p < .05$).

Results of the study suggest that, all else equal, having a strong racial identity or engaging in potentially controversial activism did not negatively affect African American athlete endorsers. However, when racial identity was high and the activism was contentious, participants viewed the athletes as less trustworthy than their counterparts—perceptions that negatively affected fit perceptions. This finding is consistent with prejudice-distribution theory (Kaiser & Pratt-Hyatt, 2009) and suggests that participants might view such endorsers as going against predominant worldviews. From a practical perspective, results suggest that such athletes might be best suited to endorse products that focus on specialized, niche markets. For instance, Steve Nash teamed with Nike to wear and promote a basketball shoe made of completely recycled materials (takepart.com). While not applicable to all consumers, this connection was relevant to environmentally-conscious sport fans. Similar applications are relevant in the current context.