

ABSTRACT

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SKIN COMPLEXION AND SOCIAL
OUTCOMES: HOW COLORISM AFFECTS THE LIVES OF
AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN

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Colorism continues to be a relevant topic of study because of its capacity to stratify within a marginalized community. The color hierarchy that values light complexions over dark specifically affects African-American women as these women are often treated and evaluated based solely on physicality. Empirically, women with light skin experience greater success in relationships, education, and employment. Furthermore, they report high levels of confidence. This quantitative study examines how colorism affects African-American college women's social capital and self-esteem. Utilizing Cooley's concept of the looking glass self as well as Goffman's concept of stigma, a theoretical framework is established showing how society's judgments of dark-skinned African-American women negatively affect their self-perceptions. Results indicate that colorism is still a sensitive and complex phenomenon in the lives of African-American women.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SKIN COMPLEXION AND SOCIAL
OUTCOMES: HOW COLORISM AFFECTS THE LIVES OF
AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN

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CHAPTER 1

PURPOSE AND OVERVIEW

Unless the question of Colorism...is addressed in our communities and definitely in our black "sisterhoods" we cannot, as a people, progress.

—Alice Walker, *In Search Of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*

There is an existing beauty standard characterized by skin complexion among African Americans that ubiquitously erodes the framework of cultural identity, inclusion, mobility, and social acceptance. This phenomenon has plagued the African-American community since the time of slavery and unfortunately has persisted and continues to hold true in society today. Although it is well established that American society has a long and dramatic history in regards to race relations, an equally important matter has not been given as much significant attention. The main characteristic that continues to separate dominant groups from the non-dominant groups is skin color. Positive characteristics and traits are attributed to those with lighter skin while those who possess darker complexions are frequently placed into stereotypical categories and judged harshly by their physical appearance. Specifically, this relates to the color stratification that has been formed within the African-American community.

Among African Americans there exists an arrangement of skin tones with varying degrees from light to dark; some shades are considered more acceptable than others. Historical research indicates African Americans with lighter skin tones have fewer

societal barriers not only in white America, or interracial, but also among African Americans themselves. This *intra*racial discrimination is termed *colorism*, coined by Alice Walker in 1982.¹ In essence, color hierarchies have formed and cause negative evaluations of dark complexions. The influence of these color perceptions exists at both the personal and institutional level. While the associations of skin complexions affect both men and women of African descent, it has been thoroughly suggested that these biases lead to greater harm for African-American women. Research specifies that skin complexion affects women in the sectors of beauty ideals, partner selection, and social and socioeconomic status.² Further, distinctions made about skin tone or color can negatively influence the mental state and self-perceptions of women beginning as early as the preschool years.³ Despite the overwhelming number of scholars who agree that colorism is an issue, there remain some theorists who believe the African-American community is united as a group regardless of individual color differences. Proponents of this theory suggest that in the modern society, stratification of skin complexion has become less of an issue than in previous eras. This study addressed this theory during the research process.

The present study investigated *colorism* and its affects on African-American women's life outcomes. Numerous findings have established that the lightness of a

¹ Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall. *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* (New York: Anchor Books, 1993), 164.

² Natalie Brown, Angela Gillem, Steven Robbins, and Rebecca Lafleur. 2003. "The Effect of Black Women's Skin Tone on College Students' Ratings of Their Employability: A Preliminary Study," *Journal of Psychology and Behavior Science*, (2003), <http://alpha.fdu.edu/psychweb/Vol16-17/Brown.pdf> (accessed March 3, 2012); Mark E Hill, "Skin Color and the Perception of Attractiveness among African Americans: Does Gender Make a Difference?" *Social Psychology Quarterly* 65, no.1 (2002): 77-91.

³ Hill, 77-91.

woman's skin leads to higher personal self-esteem and social capital (i.e. social resources and status;) while women of darker hues develop lower self-esteem as well as social capital.⁴ This study extends to this research by providing current data about young women's perceptions (ages 18-23). In addition, this study has examined if there is a correlation between women with high self-esteem (regardless of their skin complexion) and high achievements in measures of social capital. Finally, this study considered that in the present day, skin complexion has a greater indication of poor social capital if a woman's self esteem is also significantly low. Several research questions were used as the guidelines for this study:

1. Is skin tone a predictive factor for African-American women's social outcomes?
2. To what extent do African-American women distinguish between light and dark complexions?
3. Is there a significant relationship between a woman's skin complexion and her self-esteem?
4. Is the issue of colorism still relevant in the 21st Century?

Implications of this study include the development of more open dialogue within communities of color. In addition, the present analysis serves to further the research and

⁴ Alfiee M Breland. "A Model for Differential Perceptions of Competence Based on Skin Tone Among African Americans," *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 26 no. 4 (1998): 294-311; Margaret L. Hunter, "Colorstruck: Skin Color Stratification in the Lives of African American Women," *Sociological Inquiry* 68, no. 4 (1998): 517-535; Keith et al., "Discriminatory Experiences and Depressive Symptoms among African American Women: Do Skin Tone and Mastery Matter?" *Sex Roles* 62, no. 1 (2010): 48-59; Maxine S. Thompson and Verna M. Keith, "The Blacker the Berry: Gender, Skin Tone, Self-Esteem, and Self-Efficacy," *Gender and Society* 15, no. 3 (2001): 336-357; Tracey Owens Patton. "Hey Girl, Am I More than My Hair?: African American Women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image, and Hair," *National Womens Studies Association Journal* 18, no. 2 (2006): 24-51; Hill, 77-91; Hunter, 175-193; Brown et al., 1-36.

illuminates the importance of this issue. Colorism has had confounding effects within the entire African-American community. This has ranged from the negative mental states that women hold against themselves, to the subconscious preference of African-American men to desire women with lighter complexions. It is a deep-rooted problem in society to base character, value, and respect on a universal color pyramid.⁵ The existing beauty standards that have historically been detrimental to African Americans should be challenged at a minimum, and eradicated as a solution.

Definition Of Terms

Colorism: A “system” that grants privileges and opportunities to those that possess lighter complexions *within* the African-American community.⁶ Colorism is a function of skin color stratification, along with the function of intra-racial discrimination.

Racism: An ideology that supposes specific positive characteristics to a race and upholds that these characteristics infer superiority over other races.

Self-Esteem: The individual perceptions (positive or negative) that are held about oneself. Positive self-esteem “consists of feeling good, liking [oneself], and perceiving that [one is] like[d] and treated well.”⁷

Skin Color Stratification: Distinguishing a person by the lightness or darkness of skin tone. This phenomenon has the ability to operate because of racism and historical

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Margret L Hunter, “ ‘If You’re Light You’re Alright,’ ” *Gender & Society* 16, no. 2 (2002): 175-193.

⁷ Verna M. Keith, “A Colorstruck World: Skin Tone, Achievement, and Self-Esteem Among African American Women,” in *Shades of Difference: Why Skin Color Matters*, ed. Evelyn Nakano Glenn. Stanford, (California: Stanford University Press, 2009) 33.

ideologies that favor those with light complexions (whites) over those with dark complexions (people of color).⁸

Skin Complexion (Tone, or Color): “The shade of skin with which an individual has been genetically endowed.”⁹

Social Capital: “A form of prestige related to things such as social status, reputation and social networks.”¹⁰ In reference to the present study, social capital is related to skin complexion as skin complexion affects how a person is viewed by society.

⁸ Hunter, 175-193.

⁹ Sylvia Nassar-McMillan et al., “Ebony and Ivory: Relationship Between African American Young Women's Skin Color and Ratings of Self and Peers,” *Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Education and Development* 45, no. 1 (2006): 79-94.

¹⁰ Hunter, 177

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The History of Colorism

Who taught you to hate the texture of your hair? Who taught you to hate the color of your skin to such extent that you bleach to get like the white man? Who taught you to hate the shape of your nose and the shape of your lips? Who taught you to hate yourself from the top of your head to the soles of your feet? Who taught you to hate your own kind? Who taught you to hate the race that you belong to so much so that you don't want to be around each other... you should ask yourself who taught you to hate being what God gave you.

—Malcolm X

Colorism is a “system” that grants advantages and opportunities to those that possess lighter complexions within the African-American community.¹ Colorism is directly related to skin color stratification, which both function as a result of racism in society. Skin color stratification essentially preserves racial categories; it is the classification of human skin tones that results in differential treatment based on lightness or darkness. While these terms can be easily confused and interchanged, it is important to pinpoint the distinguishing factor that colorism specifically operates within the African-American community (i.e. *intra*-race discrimination). Skin color stratification is a bias controlled by whites that results in positive or negative behavior toward African Americans (and other people of color) based on skin tone.² African Americans with light

¹ Margret L. Hunter, ““If You're Light You're Alright,”” *Gender & Society* 16, no. 2 (2002): 175-193.

complexions have been historically and presently favored over those who are dark. Stratification based on skin complexion originated with the enslavement of Africans by Europeans. Referred to as “White supremacy ideology,” Hill explains that the institution of slavery was justified by a belief system that marked whiteness as superior to all.³ Thus, blackness was a sign of shame, immorality, and unpleasantness. This dichotomy of blackness and whiteness is an example of what W. E. B. Du Bois would later specify as “the problem of the color line.”⁴ This color line was the dividing factor that pitted lighter shades against those who were dark and began the social construction of what we know today as race. Despite society’s attitudes towards those considered as Black, white slave owners had unconsented sexual relations with African women. As chronicled by Russell, Wilson, and Hall, “[r]ape was a fact of life on the plantations. At any time and in any place, female slaves were subject to the drunken or abusive sexual advances of a master...Few Black women reached the age of sixteen without having been molested by a white male.”⁵ This perverted sexual behavior created generations of descendants who possessed light brown complexions. Referred to as “Mulattos,” these half African and half white individuals had the “privileges” of working as house servants instead of the

² Keith B. Maddox, and Stephanie A. Gray, “Cognitive Representations of Black Americans: Re-exploring the Role of Skin Tone,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 28 (2002): 250-259.

³ Mark E. Hill, “Skin Color and the Perception of Attractiveness among African Americans: Does Gender Make a Difference?” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 65, no.1 (2002): 77-91.

⁴ W.E.B. (William Edward Burghardt) Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (2011), Kindle edition.

⁵ Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall, *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* (New York: Anchor Books, 1993), 18.

typical field labor of their darker skin counterparts.⁶ Many had the opportunity to attain education and access to personal and material possessions. Typically, mixed race slaves were also bought and sold at higher prices, signifying that light skin was a valuable commodity and thereby more desirable. "According to Frazier, mulattoes were conscious of the distinctions between themselves and darker slaves and believed that their white blood did indeed make them superior... the negative stereotypes associated with 'blackness' and the value placed on 'lightness' of skin by whites became widely accepted by the slaves."⁷ Female slaves with light skin in particular were considered to be "gentler, kinder more [attractive], smarter and more delicate."⁸ Despite interracial marriage being taboo, white men would deliberately seek out light complexioned (biracial) mistresses while still claiming a white wife and family.⁹

Although the institution of slavery was brought to an end, the color caste remained in place as it became internalized within both the African-American and white population.¹⁰ Lighter skinned African Americans worked in a higher socioeconomic

⁶ Natalie Brown et al., 2003, "The Effect of Black Women's Skin Tone on College Students' Ratings of Their Employability: A Preliminary Study," (2003), <http://alpha.fdu.edu/psychweb/Vol16-17/Brown.pdf> (accessed March 3, 2012); Stephanie I. Coard, Alfiee M. Breland, and Patricia Raskin, "Perceptions of and Preferences for Skin Color, Black Racial Identity, and Self-Esteem Among African Americans," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 31, no.11 (2001).

⁷ E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro in the United States*, New York: Macmillan, 1957, quoted in Keith, Verna M., and Cedric Herring, "Skin Tone and Stratification in the Black Community," *American Journal of Sociology* 97, no. 3 (1991): 760-778

⁸ Audrey E Kerr, "The Paper Bag Principle of the Myth and the Motion of Colorism," *The Journal of American Folklore* 118, no. 469 (2005): 273.

⁹ Kerr, 271-289.

¹⁰ Hill, 77-91.

division than did those with dark skin.¹¹ Persons with light skin held better jobs and many times were able to access those jobs in part by claiming to be white. Some African Americans were in fact so light they were able to successfully “pass” or “escape from their ‘proper’ inferior position” unknowingly to the white population at the time.¹² Because skin complexion resulted in elevated positions in the social setting, African Americans with lighter tones began to purposely reproduce among themselves in order to create offspring that would be considered “beautiful” and more socially advantaged.¹³ This physical attractiveness was limited to having a “light skin color, [and] facial features and straighter hair [that] were similar to European features.”¹⁴ Imitating whiteness was not limited to positive social outcomes; it was additionally a form of safety against discrimination and violence from whites.¹⁵ Although today African Americans with light complexions are not always biracial, they continue to receive what is considered preferential treatment in society. Hochschild and Weaver explain that persons with dark complexions suffer from both primary and secondary marginalization.¹⁶ That is, African Americans with dark skin receive adverse treatment because of their race (primary), as

¹¹ Stephanie I. Coard, Alfiee M. Breland, and Patricia Raskin, "Perceptions of and Preferences for Skin Color, Black Racial Identity, and Self-Esteem Among African Americans," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 31, no.11 (2001).

¹² Echeruo, Michael J.C. "Edward W. Blyden, W. E. B. Du Bois, and the 'Color Complex'." *Journal of Modern African Studies* 30, no. 4 (1992): 669-684.

¹³ Brown et al., 1-36; Kerr, 271-289.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Tracey Owens Patton. "Hey Girl, Am I More than My Hair?: African-American women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image, and Hair," *National Womens Studies Association Journal* 18, no. 2 (2006): 24-51.

¹⁶ Jennifer L. Hochschild and Vesla Weaver, "The Skin Color Paradox and the American Racial Order," *Social Forces* 86, no. 2 (2007): 643-670.

well as their skin tone (secondary). These outcomes are perhaps most influential in the lives of women of color.

Skin Complexion and Social Capital

[D]istinctions based on skin tone...influence how African American and other women of color evaluate themselves, who they will date and marry, how much education they will attain, what kinds of jobs they will have, and what overall standard of living they will achieve.

—Verna M. Keith, *A Colorstruck World*

Physicality is a predominant facet that affects how others view an individual. In other words, attractiveness is important. Having a light complexion is considered an indication of desirability and a sign of beauty. This hue alone can advance one both socially and politically because it has been translated and understood as “better.” For African-American women in particular, it can be a determining factor of social capital. As defined by Hunter, social capital is “...a form of prestige related to things such as social status, reputation, and social networks.”¹⁷ This prestige can be additionally translated into economic and educational gains. Since light complexions have been socially construed to define beauty, African-American women who possess this trait benefit from an elevated social capital. A woman’s social relationships (i.e. social ties or social network) can additionally affect how many and how advantageous her resources are to other outlets (such as employment and/or education).¹⁸ As women are judged excessively by their physical appearance, those considered to possess more beauty will have better chances when encountering the social world. Bias preferences for skin color

¹⁷ Hunter, 177.

¹⁸ Rochelle Parks-Yancy, The Effects of Social Group Membership and Social Capital Resources on Careers,” *Journal of Black Studies* 36, no. 4 (2006): 515-545.

can lead equally qualifying women to dramatically different life outcomes.

If having a light complexion is considered as a form of beauty, using the stereotype of “‘what is beautiful is what is good’...creates a ‘halo’ effect for light skinned persons. The positive glow generated by physical attractiveness includes a host of desirable personality traits.”¹⁹ Consequently, light complexions are more readily connected to intelligence and employability.²⁰ Accordingly this means that women with dark complexions are regarded in opposition, leaving their chances and opportunities in the social world at odds. In the employment sphere, women with greater Afrocentric features are often placed into stereotypical categories such as lazy and or incompetent.²¹ These types of associations explain why there are an overwhelming number of African Americans with light skin in administrative positions.²² When women with dark complexions do acquire equal career positions, they often additionally report a high level of occupational discrimination. Women with darker complexions are “...treated with less courtesy, insulted or called names, and [receive] poorer service on a persistent basis.”²³ Employment discrimination is more often a variable of skin color stratification because it is whites that have the most control in those status areas.²⁴ Brown et al. additionally

¹⁹ Maxine S. Thompson and Verna M. Keith, “The Blacker the Berry: Gender, Skin Tone, Self-Esteem, and Self-Efficacy,” *Gender and Society* 15, no. 3 (2001): 339.

²⁰ Alfiee M Breland, “A Model for Differential Perceptions of Competence Based on Skin Tone Among African Americans,” *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 26 no. 4 (1998): 294-311; Hill, 77-91; Keith et al., “Discriminatory Experiences and Depressive Symptoms among African American Women: Do Skin Tone and Mastery Matter?” *Sex Roles* 62, no. 1 (2010): 48-59.

²¹ Keith et al., 48-59.

²² Brown et al., 1-36.

²³ Keith et al., 55.

explain that this is caused by the “similar-to-me” effect.²⁵ In essence, light complexions translate as “racially similar” to whites and therefore whites feel more comfortable accepting these shades of African Americans.²⁶ After all, “one is white as one is rich, as one is beautiful, as one is intelligent.”²⁷ By contrast, individuals with dark complexions induce feelings of uneasiness; this apprehension can trigger racist attitudes leading to more discrimination against darker complexioned African Americans. It should be understood that this is just *one* example of how whites perpetuate the cycle of skin color stratification. However, as Jones warns, neither skin color stratification nor colorism can be resolved until both African Americans and whites fully understand their impact.²⁸

It can be asserted that, in general, light complexioned African Americans are treated far better by both whites and fellow African Americans in the social world.²⁹ Occupational discrimination may also explain the gap in employment between women with light and dark skin complexions. Hersch reports that there is a 15 to 20 point percentage break in the employment rate between women with very dark tones and

²⁴ Alfiee M Breland, “A Model for Differential Perceptions of Competence Based on Skin Tone Among African Americans,” *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 26, no. 4 (1998): 294-311.

²⁵ Brown et al., 1-36.

²⁶ Trina Jones, “Shades of Brown: The Law of Skin Color,” *Duke Law Journal* 49, no. 6 (2000): 1487-1557.

²⁷ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann, London: Pluto Press, 2008, PDF e-book, 36.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Joni Hersch, “Skin Tone Effects among African Americans: Perceptions and Reality,” 2006, Discussion Paper 545, Harvard Law School, Cambridge, MA.

women of lighter shades.³⁰ Moreover, light complexioned African Americans earn almost 65% more than those with dark skin.³¹ This leads to the conclusion that the reputation and social status of dark skin women is received in considerably low favorability. A closer look at educational capital will decipher if this difference is based on merit or pure preference.

Educational opportunities and advancement have strikingly dissimilar conclusions when comparing variations in skin tone. Light complexioned African Americans are found to consistently hold higher educational attainment than African Americans of darker shades.³² What is fascinating about findings in education is that as attainment increases, skin color appears to lighten.³³ In fact, at each increment of lighter skin (from very dark to very light) there is almost half of a supplementary year of education.³⁴ Hersch asserts that possible explanations of these differences can be traced to the perceptions of beauty held by society.³⁵ In general, attractiveness is associated with greater economic and educational outcomes. Evidence that American society values physicality over merit can be seen as the gap for education and occupation between African Americans with light and dark skin tones is almost indistinguishable from the

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Verna M. Keith and Cedric Herring, "Skin Tone and Stratification in the Black Community," *American Journal of Sociology* 97, no. 3 (1991): 760-778.

³² Hersch, Discussion Paper 545.

³³ Ibid; Keith and Herring, 760-778.

³⁴ Keith and Herring, 760-778.

³⁵ Hersch, Discussion Paper 545.

gap between white Americans and African Americans in general.³⁶ Stated differently, racial discrimination in the workplace and in schools is nearly equal to differences in skin tone in these same sectors. If a woman's success is outweighed by her "beauty," one must question the system that advertises hard work and dedication. Based on the current research, the conclusion to be drawn is not that African-American women with darker skin tones have fewer aspirations in education, but rather they are discriminated against in a way that pushes them out of the race. The relationships among people of differing skin tones may explain how bias against skin complexion has risen to the institutional level.

Social relationships are similarly affected by skin complexion. Recall that it is women of color with light complexions who are found to be able to translate their skin color into more advantageous outcomes. Studies find an association between a higher status of spouse coupled with elevated scholastic levels and better monetary positions in women with light skin.³⁷ This means that light complexioned women are more likely to marry men who already possess a high amount of social capital. Incredibly, these studies are fairly recent which indicates that the ideologies concerning skin tone have failed to decline in over a century. Reasoning behind these perpetuations rest in colorism being

³⁶ Alfiee M Breland, "A Model for Differential Perceptions of Competence Based on Skin Tone Among African Americans," *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 26, no. 4 (1998): 294-311.

³⁷ Selena Bond and Thomas F. Cash, "Black Beauty: Skin Color And Body Images Among African-American College Females," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 22, no. 11 (1992): 874-888; Hunter, 175-193; Aaron Gullickson, "The Significance of Color Declines: A Re-Analysis of Skin Tone Differentials in Post-Civil Rights America," *Social Forces* 84, no. 1 (2005): 157-180.

largely ignored as a “salient sociological topic.”³⁸ It is questionable how something with such devastating consequences can continue to be in its infancy of sociological study. Furthermore, there has been evidence of favoritism of complexion for generations.

In the early and mid-1900s, the association between skin tone and social capital was exercised heavily within the social relationships of people of color. African-American establishments frequently fell victim to discriminating against their own people. Organizations and societies, including churches, would only accept members who passed the notorious “paper bag test.” This was a practice of inequality that declared those who were darker than a brown paper bag could not and would not be accepted.³⁹ It is actions like these that demonstrate the internalization of the skin color hierarchy. As Patton explains, “beauty is a commodity” and thus the justification for these practices lay in the need for social organizations to reflect the standards of the mainstream.⁴⁰ This in-group discrimination has and continues to stratify “Black America.” Based on rigorous works of other scholars, it is well established that African-American women with light skin have been socially advantaged for generations. However, it should be noted that these evaluations of complexion were originally a practice by whites in order to prevent very light hued African Americans from “‘passing into’ white organizations, institutions and even families.”⁴¹ Whites also used methods of inspecting a person’s hair roots and

³⁸ Margaret L. Hunter, “Colorstruck: Skin Color Stratification in the Lives of African American Women,” *Sociological Inquiry* 68, no. 4 (1998): 517-535.

³⁹ Brown et al., 1-36; Hill, 77-91.

⁴⁰ Patton, 25.

⁴¹ Kerr, 277.

eye color.⁴²

Skin Complexion and Self Esteem

Should she have been a boy, then color of skin wouldn't have mattered so much, for wasn't her mother always saying that a black boy could get along, but that a black girl would never know anything but sorrow and disappointment?

—Wallace Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*

From their initial entrance into the United States, African-American women possessed an ambiguous sense of womanhood. During slavery, African women were expected to perform the same harsh physical labor as African men and were given equal punishments as their male counterparts. Dark skin was used by slave owners to distinguish which female slaves would become field laborers with dark complexioned males.⁴³ Additionally, African women were perceived sexually as “animalistic” and coitus with any member of the African population was parallel to “bestiality.”⁴⁴ After the emancipation, African women still carried similar roles of African men as they needed to work to support their families. Stereotypes such as the “sexless black mammy” and the “emasculating black matriarch” became popular characters, while white women became synonymous with beauty and social grace.⁴⁵ To avoid the pigeonholes associated with the African American identity, many women have accepted that they cannot remain true to their natural state. As Fanon explains, “the colonized is elevated above [her] jungle status

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Russell, Wilson, and Hall, 18, 13.

⁴⁵ Hill, 77-91; Patton, 24-51.

in proportion to [her] adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. [She] becomes whiter as [she] renounces [her] blackness, [her] jungle."⁴⁶

In order to take part in femininity, African-American women have had to emulate all that is white. This has led to confusing identities with the extremes of the rejection of one's biological attributes. Even today, some African-American women remain ashamed of their complexion and physiognomy, an obvious sign of a shattered self-concept. As Russell explains, "every American black girl experiences some degree of shame about her appearance. Many must submit to painful hair-combing rituals that aim to make them look, if not more 'White like,' at least more 'presentable.'"⁴⁷ That African-American women feel they must manipulate their identity demonstrates that these women have "no true self-consciousness;" they have taken on the view of society and can "only...see [themselves] through the revelation of the [white] world."⁴⁸ This is an example of what Du Bois coined as *double-consciousness*: the "duality" of the self as it breaks into two. It additionally describes a "paradox" as it clouds the individual from understanding her location in society.⁴⁹ Half of the African American self is limited to a view from the negative white perspective; a dark being (figuratively and literally) who is different, and

⁴⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann, London: Pluto Press, 2008, PDF e-book, 9.

⁴⁷ Russell, Wilson, and Hall, 43.

⁴⁸ W.E.B. (William Edward Burghardt) Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (2011), Kindle edition, 2.

⁴⁹ Thomas C Holt, "The Political Uses of Alienation: W. E. B. Du Bois on Politics, Race, and Culture, 1903-1940," *American Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (1990): 301-323.

that difference is problematic.⁵⁰ Although the double-consciousness that Du Bois described is a phenomenon that impacts African Americans of all hues, it can be especially felt by women (and men) with dark complexions as they are the most visibly identified members and must endlessly withstand being a black anomaly in a white world.

Conversely, Du Bois argued strongly against the “bleach[ing] of [the African American] soul in a flood of white Americanism.”⁵¹ Although this referencing to the whitening of personhood was meant figuratively, many African-American women choose to literally decolorize their bodies, and ultimately themselves. This practice was adopted and became popular over a century ago and is still being used today among women of color. Bleaching creams (to lighten one’s skin complexion) and hair straightening products remain as prominent ways for women to alter their appearance.⁵² These behaviors can be extremely dangerous to one’s health as they involve harsh chemicals that are absorbed into the body. Patton further explains these behaviors as “The Lily Complex” which is “altering, disguising, and covering up [one’s] physical self in order to assimilate, [and] to be accepted as attractive.”⁵³

Acceptance of white beauty standards subconsciously suggests that African American beauty is not good enough, or non-existent.⁵⁴ Moreover, “the media has

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 3.

⁵² Brown et al., 1-36.

⁵³ Patton, 26.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

encouraged greater negative self-appraisals for dark-skinned women.”⁵⁵ Thus, with little to no representation of “Black beauty,” women of color will continue to live by far reaching norms. The prominent ideologies that declare white beauty as the natural standard have become increasingly self-injurious for African-American women.⁵⁶ A majority of the referenced literature asserts that there is a significant relationship between the high self-esteem of African-American women with light skin complexions and the low self-esteem of women with darker complexions.⁵⁷ This is because dark skin has been deemed “as a ‘mark of oppression’” or blackness as a consequence.⁵⁸ Du Bois additionally explained the significance of dark skin using the analogy of a veil.⁵⁹ The veil is a symbol that causes whites to discount and berate as it disguises and separates African Americans from members within the larger society.⁶⁰ However, there appears to be another layer to this veil as within the African-American community where dark skin is further stigmatized. Historically, the dark skin of African Americans was an identifying point for racial inequality; however, among African Americans themselves, a dark complexion invariably results in color inequality or colorism.

⁵⁵ Thomson and Keith, 339.

⁵⁶ Hill, 77-91.

⁵⁷ Alfiee M Breland, “A Model for Differential Perceptions of Competence Based on Skin Tone Among African Americans,” *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 26 no. 4 (1998): 294-311; Hunter, 517-535; Thomson and Keith 336-357; Hill, 77-91; Hunter, 175-193; Brown et al., 1-36; Patton 24-51; Keith et al., 48-59.

⁵⁸ Coard, Breland, and Raskin, 2257; Kerr, 271-289.

⁵⁹ W.E.B. (William Edward Burghardt) Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (2011), Kindle edition, 3.

⁶⁰ Charles Lemert, “A Classic From the Other Side of the Veil: Du Bois’ Souls of Black Folk,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (1994): 383-396.

African Americans have traditionally provided their own explanations (via folklore) for differences between skin complexions.⁶¹ For example, describing dark skin as “being burnt in ‘God’s oven’ or forgotten under God’s sun...serve[s] to disable stereotypes by assigning them functions established within the social context of the black community tradition.”⁶² Nevertheless the labels assigned to light skin (“*red, red-bone, high yellow, and light bright*”) take on completely different imagery than the labels assigned to dark skin (“*skillet blonde, coal black, tar baby, and blue-black*”).⁶³ In combination with skin tone, facial features (such as the broadness of nose and lip structure) and hair texture are also used as indicators of beauty within the African-American community. Both men and women use these characteristics as judgments; however the outcomes remain the most detrimental to the self-image of women.

In the 1960s and 70s, African-American communities took a stand against the prevailing and unmerited standards of beauty. The “Black is beautiful” movement was taking place and sought to eliminate the connotations associated with skin tones in an effort to join all African Americans as one people.⁶⁴ Proudly displaying thick Afros and dark complexions, this campaign filled a long desire and need to feel proud to be an African American of any shade. Unfortunately, this movement would be short-lived and relatively ineffective. African-American women would continue to be placed into a destructive skin color hierarchy, pitting lighter shades against their darker sisters.

⁶¹ Kerr, 271-289.

⁶² Kerr, 280-281.

⁶³ Coard, Breland, and Raskin, 2257.

⁶⁴ Ibid; Brown et al., 1-36.

Because society continues to discount African-American women, mentalities have shifted to a state of despondency and learned helplessness. In addition, studies have found many women of color are suffering from salient depression and expectations in one's personal mastery are significantly dwindling.⁶⁵ Keith et al. explain that mastery is the "...belief that one can control important circumstances affecting one's life...".⁶⁶ Holding negative beliefs about one's personal mastery is significantly related to low psychological resiliency. Furthermore, because women are instructed to rely on external validation relating to outward appearance and capability, skin complexion becomes key in self-perception and ratings of femininity.⁶⁷ Thompson and Keith have stated that "in the clinical literature...issues of racial identity, skin color, and attractiveness [are] central concerns of women." This can be especially damaging among women with dark complexions as society rewards those who look more Eurocentric in their appearance. Especially dark toned women "...are often encouraged to 'marry light,' with the implied message that if you can't save yourself the hurt that comes with having a dark complexion...at least you can 'save your children.'"⁶⁸

As skin tone is a characteristic of an African-American woman's physicality, it holds imperative significance to how she regards herself. Thus, "a dark skin black woman who feels herself unattractive...may think that she has nothing to offer society, no matter

⁶⁵ Keith et al., 48-59.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Thomson and Keith, 336-357.

⁶⁸ Verna M. Keith, "A Colorstruck World: Skin Tone, Achievement, and Self-Esteem Among African American Women," in *Shades of Difference: Why Skin Color Matters*, ed. Evelyn Nakano Glenn. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009): 25.

how intelligent or inventive she is.”⁶⁹ It follows then that skin complexion can even be more important for self-esteem than personal success.⁷⁰ Nassar-McMillan et al. extends on this research with findings that suggest African Americans with dark complexions long to be lighter at a rate almost 3 times higher than African Americans wishing to be darker.⁷¹ Women of color are constantly “...ponder[ing] only what could *be*, unable to seek out what *is*.”⁷² These women face the everyday clash of society’s standards and their genetic appearance, “simply wish[ing] to make it possible for a [wo]man to be both [an African] and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by [white society], without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in [their] face.”⁷³

The Role of the African-American Male

One theory holds that the fact that White women were historically forbidden to Black men made them that much more desirable. It was a “power trip” for a Black man finally to possess this ideal beauty...he was now the master and she the slave.

—Kathy Russell, *The Color Complex*

It has been repeatedly stated that colorism has a stronger affect in the lives of African-American women versus the lives of African-American men; according to Hill, this can be labeled as “gendered colorism.”⁷⁴ A significant proportion of African-American men consciously and subconsciously practice bias in relation to skin

⁶⁹ Russell, Wilson, and Hall, 42.

⁷⁰ Hunter, 517-535; Thomson and Keith, 336-357.

⁷¹ Nassar-McMillan et al., 79-94.

⁷² Ibid., 80.

⁷³ W.E.B. (William Edward Burghardt) Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (2011), Kindle edition, 3.

⁷⁴ Hill, 77-91.

complexion. This form of intraracial discrimination creates relationship conflicts between men and women, and further devalues positive African-American female self-esteem through rejection and humiliation. Indeed young African-American girls are conscious "that most Black men prefer their women to be 'light, bright, and sometimes White.'"⁷⁵ Further, as Thompson and Keith note, "girls as young as six are twice as likely as boys to be sensitive to the social importance of skin color."⁷⁶ Scholars explain the reason for this preference in males is likely due to the overrepresented images in the media and the generational approval of light complexions. However the skin tone of a woman can be just as politically and socially advantageous for her male partner as it is for her own circumstances. Many African-American men choose to marry women with lighter shades in order to increase their own social standing.⁷⁷ Thus, if an African-American man is judged by the physical appearance of his spouse, being tied to a woman that has been deemed attractive and pleasing to society elevates his own status. This phenomenon between personal preference and societal pressures is confounding.

According to African-American Film director Spike Lee, it is often indistinguishable:

Whether black men admit it or not, they feel light-skinned women are more attractive than dark-skinned, and they'd rather see long hair than a short Afro, because that's closer to white women. That comes from being inundated with media from the time you're born that constantly fed you white women as the image of beauty. That's both conscious and unconscious...But on the whole, talking to my friends and knowing men, I see that a premium is put on light-skinned sisters with long hair.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Russell, Wilson, and Hall, 107.

⁷⁶ Thompson and Keith, 339.

⁷⁷ Brown et al., 1-36.

As shown in the aforementioned, the unremitting image of white women as the standard of beauty can negatively impact the psyche of an African-American man, just as it can suppress positive self-esteem in African-American women. While many women attempt to alter their physical appearance in order to gain male acceptance, African-American men believe that involvement with white women can counterbalance their own feelings of inferiority.⁷⁹ Fanon, a French man of African descent, rationalized that the African male (in any society where he is considered a minority) wanting to be white is driven by his personality and actions towards this unfeasible goal. Fanon arrived at this supposition based on the environment and situations in which white males, in relative terms of power and position, had everything and African males had less, if any power at all. Therefore, this desire to be white is a result of specific racial, social, and political conditions that privilege whites and consistently harm the African man. Thus, according to Fanon, the African male covets the white language, white culture, and the white wife or sexual partner.⁸⁰ Fanon provides a vivid glimpse of the psychological conflict that affects how some males select their partners:

Out of the blackest part of my soul, across the zebra striping of my mind, surges this desire to be suddenly *white*. I wish to be acknowledged not as *black* but as *white*...who but a white woman can do this for me? By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man. Her love takes me onto the noble road that leads to total realization...I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness. When my restless hands caress those white

⁷⁸ Spike Lee, interview by Jill Nelson, "Mo Better Spike," *Essence*, August 1990, quoted in Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall, *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* (New York: Anchor Books, 1993), 109.

⁷⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann, London: Pluto Press, 2008, PDF e-book.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine.⁸¹

The last line of the aforementioned passage is telling. It evokes an image, in this example, that a relationship with a white woman is an opportunity to be recognized and respected. It is a small illustration of what racism and the denial of opportunity and access can do to the psyche of a man. Unable to change his skin color, the African-American male may conceptualize one method to assimilate or liberate his oppression by forming an intimate and once taboo relationship.

A compromised racial identity and the denial of full social and economic opportunity have worked in concert to ravage the psyche of the African-American male. However, as a result of his internal chaos the African-American male has projected his feelings onto the African-American female. He attributes his self-worth to the physicality of his partner, and if she cannot be white, she can at least be light. Therefore, the role of the African-American male in regards to colorism is his blatant preference for light complexioned women. While it is recognized that African-American males encounter psychological conflictions in their role in general society, they nevertheless benefit from a male privilege that allows them esteem and authority over how African-American women view themselves. Again, American society places high importance on women's physical appearance and it is an unfortunate fact that what is visually acceptable for women is controlled by the opinions of men.

Partiality to light complexions, and often white complexions, becomes furthered vocalized by African-American males through hip-hop culture. In fact, it is theorized that African-American men today are the major contributors to the phenomenon of colorism

⁸¹ Ibid., 45.

as many explicitly attest to favoring light complexioned women.⁸² It is undeniable that musicians, especially “Rappers” or “Hip-Hop” musicians, have an incredible influence in communities of color. These males objectify and exploit women of all shades, however there is evidence of severe degradation of women with dark skin. Hip-hop music is said to be a “subliminal” mediator of the ideas of colorism as evidenced by the following lyrics: “Beautiful Black woman, I bet you that --- look better red” Lil Wayne, *Right Above It*; “And groups of pretty --- with them light skin complexion” Fabulous, *Light’s Out*; “I like a long hair thick red bone” Lil Wayne, *Every Girl*; “I don’t touch dark ---, dark --- got fleas” Big Sean, Freestyle; “She a red bone but her cousin is dark. A little out of shape but you’ll --- in the dark” Kanye West, *Take one for the Team*; “I tell a dark skin chick I’m allergic to chocolate” Lil Wayne, *Ride With the Mack*.⁸³ There are even examples in R&B, such as Jagged Edge’s *Tip of My Tongue* that states “he like em red bone” and Chris Brown’s *Look At Me Now* which opens with “yellow model chick.”⁸⁴ Women with light complexions are more likely to be praised though lyrics and are distinctly displayed and coveted in the music videos of these artists. African-American men appear to have adopted and therefore become a casualty of the beauty standards of white America. They have internalized how the “ideal” woman should appear and inadvertently set the stage for discrimination among women in their own community.

⁸² Dark Skin Black Women, “Adolf Hitler Was A Black Man: Hip Hop and Colorism,” Dark Skin Black Women: Still One-Eighth Women. <http://darkskinblackwomen.wordpress.com/2011/04/05/adolf-hitler-was-a-black-man-colorism-in-black-music/> (accessed September 15, 2012).

⁸³ Ibid; HOT 97, “G.O.O.D. Music Freestyle on Funk Flex.” HOT 97 Web site, <http://launch.vidaroo.com/18281/> (accessed September 22, 2012).

⁸⁴ Dark Skin Black Women, “Adolf Hitler Was A Black Man: Hip Hop and Colorism,” Dark Skin Black Women: Still One-Eighth Women. <http://darkskinblackwomen.wordpress.com/2011/04/05/adolf-hitler-was-a-black-man-colorism-in-black-music/> (accessed September 15, 2012).

Similarly, Kerr offers an irrefutable description: "That the black male artists themselves may have chosen lighter-skinned black women as the targets of their video exploitation is in-separable from a related truth—that music industry leaders sell an image that conforms to a traditional and still [near] white beauty standard and, moreover, that women, in general, are 'targets'..."⁸⁵ The preferential treatment of women with light skin tones underscores the psychology that emphasizes why women of color search out various means to alter their own characteristics to reflect those of Europeans.

Although the focus of the literature has been on how colorism affects African-American women, it is additionally important to note the differences that occur between the sexes. Among African-American males there is an opposite ideal concerning skin complexion. That is, while having light skin is beneficial for African-American women, many researchers suggest that lighter tones on African-American males are a disadvantage within the community. Hill refers to this as the "double standard" that exists in the African-American community.⁸⁶ African-American women predominantly favor their partners to have darker complexions. This is because darker tones are more likely to be associated with the "macho" male critique, and these tones also are regarded as more prevailing.⁸⁷ Also recall that during slavery dark skin was an indication of unmixed ancestry, positioning those individuals to field labor that involved robust physical toil.

⁸⁵ Kerr, 287.

⁸⁶ Hill, 77-91.

⁸⁷ Alfiee M Breland, "A Model for Differential Perceptions of Competence Based on Skin Tone Among African Americans," *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 26 no. 4 (1998): 294-311; Stephanie I. Coard, Alfiee M. Breland, and Patricia Raskin, "Perceptions of and Preferences for Skin Color, Black Racial Identity, and Self-Esteem Among African Americans," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 31, no.11 (2001).

The early writings of Du Bois, a very light-skinned African American himself, additionally voiced the importance of the lineage of dark skin. Du Bois believed that "the 'pure-blooded' black was the model African-American. The [colored], or 'in-between' people, were in a different category...it was black people with curly hair, flat noses, and blubber lips that constituted the African race."⁸⁸ For these reasons dark complexions in males are held with higher admiration in the African-American community. Males with light skin are subsequently pigeonholed as not being powerful, "Black enough," or "not having strong ties to their ethnic identity."⁸⁹

Opposition to Colorism

I will be black as blackness can—
The blacker the mantle, the mightier the man!
For blackness was ancient ere whiteness began

—W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Song of the Smoke*

Although a majority of scholars have maintained that colorism is a severe setback in the African-American community, others suggest that the issue is being viewed incorrectly. Recent studies have implied that the previous stereotypes concerning differentiation among complexions have subsided, and a new middle ground preference has emerged. Nassar-McMillan et al. reported that African Americans (both men and women) equally rated themselves as lower in self-esteem when compared to persons who viewed their skin tone as "in between."⁹⁰ Coard, Breland, and Raskin have found similar

⁸⁸ Michael J.C. Echeruo, "Edward W. Blyden, W. E. B. Du Bois, and the 'Color Complex'." *Journal of Modern African Studies* 30, no. 4 (1992): 669-684.

⁸⁹ Alfiee M Breland, "A Model for Differential Perceptions of Competence Based on Skin Tone Among African Americans," *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 26, no. 4 (1998): 294-311.

results indicating that a stronger preference may be attributed to medium tones, rather than either of the extremes.⁹¹ This contradiction serves as evidence to theories that regard light and dark skin at odds. Furthermore, Hochschild and Weaver assert that although darker toned African Americans have an inferior place in mainstream society, it is overlooked within the African-American community.⁹² Rather, African Americans as a group unite and ignore the inner color stratification. Moreover, higher social achievement ratings for light-skinned women have declined because of overall gains in education and career opportunities (a position in stark contrast to the work of Hunter).⁹³ Some scholars affirm that differences in skin tone seen in occupation and education were already declining by the 1940s.⁹⁴ Research such as these strongly argue against conceptions such as "Black self-hatred," and explain that the negative mental states of African Americans regarding themselves has been taken to the extreme and exaggerated.

Although there are fewer studies rejecting the notion of colorism, it has been stressed that many African Americans do in fact have positive self-attitudes and view racial images separately from their own self-esteem.⁹⁵ There is also research that incorporates both self-esteem and social capital while additionally suggesting positive

⁹⁰ Nassar-McMillan et al., 79-94.

⁹¹ Stephanie I. Coard, Alfiee M. Breland, and Patricia Raskin, "Perceptions of and Preferences for Skin Color, Black Racial Identity, and Self-Esteem Among African Americans," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 31, no.11 (2001).

⁹² Hochschild and Weaver, 643-670.

⁹³ Keith et al., 48-59.

⁹⁴ Gullickson, 157-180.

⁹⁵ Stephanie I. Coard, Alfiee M. Breland, and Patricia Raskin, "Perceptions of and Preferences for Skin Color, Black Racial Identity, and Self-Esteem Among African Americans," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 31, no.11 (2001).

outcomes for African-American women with darker complexions.⁹⁶ Fortunately, these scholars suggest that women with high mastery can overcome personal distress and society barriers, regardless of their skin tone. Therefore, if a woman possessing a dark complexion has high self-esteem she may be able to translate this self worth into social gains. Keith et al. explains that “[t]hose high in mastery are more likely to view themselves as being competent, to anticipate and avoid problems, possess skills that assist in resolving difficult issues, and are less likely to ruminate when problems do occur.”⁹⁷ Thus, dark-skinned women who reject the inferior ideology, and believe they are as valuable to society as their lighter (and whiter) equivalents, have just as much self-ability as the next. Ultimately, self-esteem is the determining factor of how one interprets her chances in the social world.

Furthermore, there are studies that suggest that having a light complexion is not always the most common desirable trait. That is, light skin can be a negative characteristic. In many cases, dark complexioned African Americans regard their skin tone as something to be proud of. This often leads to distinctions of their light-skinned counterparts as not “black enough.” Keith et al. describe that women with light complexions can face rejection at the hands of dark-skinned women.⁹⁸ Similarly women with light complexions are repeatedly challenged on their racial legitimacy and questioned about their group membership, much like that of lighter toned males. Ordinarily, light complexioned African Americans are assumed to face fewer and less

⁹⁶ Keith et al., 48-59.

⁹⁷ Keith et al., 50.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

impactful incidents with racism than individuals with dark skin. This causes the resentment of those who are darker and the denunciation of those who are lighter. For example, in an autobiographical essay, Dr. Adrian Piper, a conceptual artist and philosopher, expresses that her fair skin has been an interference to her acceptance by other African Americans. Dr. Piper recounts that she would often have to “prove [her] blackness by passing the Suffering Test” in which her experiences of racism were scrutinized for authenticity.⁹⁹ Her experiences of hostility are not uncommon; other light-toned African-American women account being stereotyped as egotistical and conceited. “Yet while some light-skinned women are raised to think that they are better than others and do develop an ‘attitude,’ many others resent the stereotype and simply want to be accepted for who they are...”¹⁰⁰ These illustrations complicate the perception of a hierarchy with light complexions as superior. Yet, it just as equally separates, labels, and creates negative distinctions within an already disadvantaged community.

Theoretical Framework

The psychological consequences of colorism for dark-skinned African-American women cannot be completely understood without understanding how important the individual’s own evaluation of the self is to her self-concept. Self-esteem plays a critical role in the everyday life of a person. How one sees her or himself is parallel to how they confront their outer world. Individuals with high self-esteem interpret their lives as malleable; they know they have influence and control. (Whereas feelings of low self-

⁹⁹ Adrian Piper, “Passing for White, Passing for Black,” Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin, <http://www.adrianpiper.com/docs/Passing.pdf> (accessed September 5, 2012).

¹⁰⁰ Russell, Wilson, and Hall, 111.

esteem can lead to beliefs that personal positions are fixed, outside of one's own control, and negative evaluations by others are grounded in fact.) It can be said, then, that the understanding of one's self is closely related to life outcomes. This thesis has discussed how self-esteem can support or compromise a woman's ability in the social setting and affect her social capital. A woman who views herself in a positive light can translate this self worth into gains in education, occupation, and social relationships. However, the opposite interpretation of self leads to lower mastery, thus less profitable social outcomes. Prominent sociologists have theorized the importance of the self and underline that it is the external world that supports the development of an individual's self esteem. This is critical in understanding how colorism and skin color stratification affect the psyche. It is the messages from others that a woman receives about her skin complexion that affects how she will view herself. The present study relies on two fundamental theories: Cooley's *looking glass self* and Goffman's concept of *stigma*. These sociological theories highlight how and why the self (and thus self-esteem) is affected by the external social world.

Charles Horton Cooley believed that a person comes to know her- or himself via the social cues that are given by their environment. Consciousness of the self arises in childhood when a person interprets the signals and opinions of others and applies them to her- or himself. Put another way, the thoughts towards oneself is contingent on the positive or negative associations one *believes* others reflect; it is an *imagined* judgment. During interactions with others, we visualize what the other person is thinking about us by the sense or feeling we receive from them. In a more detailed explanation, Cooley

states that “in imagination we perceive in another’s mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it.”¹⁰¹ We are *affected* by what is shown to us by those around us. This mirror like origin of an individual was conceptualized by Cooley as the *looking glass self*.¹⁰²

One of Cooley’s main conclusions on the subject of self was its reliance on relationships with others; hence, the self is neither an isolated or independent object of its own. In detailing the theory of self, Cooley pointed to its three principal elements:

the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification. The comparison with a looking glass hardly suggests the second element, the imagined judgment, which is quite essential. The thing that moves us to pride or shame is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves, but imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this reflection upon another’s mind. This is evident from the fact that the character and weight of that other, in whose mind we see ourselves, makes all the difference with our feeling.¹⁰³

In a similar, but more straightforward interpretation, Cahill states,

The individual images how he or she must appear to someone, imagines how that person must be judging his or her appearance and behavior and consequently feels either pride or shame. Such socially reflected images inform the individual of who and what she or he is, and the consequent feelings of pride and shame provide the grounds for her or his sense of self-worth or esteem.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Charles Horton Cooley, “The Self as Sentiment and Reflection” 1983, in *Inside Social Life Readings in Sociological Psychology and Microsociology*, 5th ed., ed. Spencer E. Cahill (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 26-30.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 28.

¹⁰⁴ Spencer E. Cahill, *Inside Social Life Readings in Sociological Psychology and Microsociology*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 26.

It should be underlined again that Cooley's theory is centralized around the reactions from others and how the individual appropriates those signs mentally. Thus, if a woman believes others think of her as unattractive, she is likely to accept this as fact. It is in others that we come to know ourselves.

Like a reflection in the mirror we see what others think about us. Similarly, African-American women are influenced by the messages they receive from society. The low self-esteem that is experienced by women of darker complexions is only what her society mirrors; that she is not worthy of feeling appeal in herself. These negative judgments are twofold—brought about by the upholding of white beauty standards and the continuation of racism. "Whiteness, Fanon asserts, has become a symbol of purity, of *Justice, Truth, [and] Virginity*."¹⁰⁵ In fact, because the words "black" and "white" are such polar opposites, blackness registers "in the collective unconsciousness...[as] ugliness, sin, darkness, and immorality."¹⁰⁶ "This is why a white lie is excusable; and a black lie is all that is wicked and evil. Evolution itself moves from black to white."¹⁰⁷ Analysis such as the aforementioned explains why an African-American women's self-esteem begins to deteriorate as soon as she understands the racial guidelines of American culture. Moreover, the word "dark" (as in *dark skin*) is filled with similar signification as the word "black" with the additions of forbidden, hated and hateful. Why would this affect a *Black* woman who is further characterized as *dark*-skinned? Cooley's

¹⁰⁵ Ziauddin Sardar, foreword to *Black Skin White Masks* by Frantz Fanon, trans. Charles Lam Markmann, vi-xx, London: Pluto Press, 2008, PDF e-book.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

examination of the self explicates that the meaning ascribed to words is significant, and that it “is learned by associating them with other phenomena.”¹⁰⁸ Therefore, a *Black* woman categorized as dark-skinned confronts the unfortunate circumstance of associating herself with what is immoral, forbidden, and hated.

Word significance, along with idiom denotation, is part of the structure of that forms the English language. Yet English was not the native language of enslaved Africans upon their entrance into the United States. It is in the forced proficiency of the English language that people of African descent ceased any cultural perseverance of their countries of origin. As a result African Americans have been seized of, and alienated from, both heritage and mental faculties.¹⁰⁹ Fanon explains this as an inevitable consequence of the colonized. That is, assuming the vernacular of the oppressor is the equivalence of compliance, or being forced into compliance, of the collective consciousness of the dominant group (i.e. white Americans). This is pertinent to understanding why labels such as *black* or *white* and *dark* or *light* have such an exceptional affect on an African-American woman’s self-esteem. These words denote the positive or negative assessments from the collective society.

As explained above, the word *black* is attributed to unpleasant representations. Fanon suggested that persons of African descent attempt to break away from opposing identifiers by bearing a white mask. This mask can take many forms. As reviewed, it may be physically imitating white women in appearance, or as Fanon puts forth, perfecting the

¹⁰⁸ Cooley, 28.

¹⁰⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann, London: Pluto Press, 2008, PDF e-book, 21.

language of the oppressor. In all, it is the acceptance of the dominant group's cultural values. This acceptance creates a "self-division" for African Americans, both mentally and physically.¹¹⁰ This also augments further support to why some African-American women have striven to lighten their skin with hazardous bleach products. Undertaking the collective conscious of the dominant groups creates an internal separation and struggle within her. Furthermore, she continues to depend on society's decree of her social acceptability. As a result, African American women, with darker skin in particular, have a compromised view of the self.

Lighter complexioned women can offset the negative self feelings associated with the word *black* as the word *light* implies encouraging overtones: radiant, natural, and sunny. While they too are subjugated in the collective conscious of white culture, they have the benefit of being more psychically admired by both African Americans and whites. Therefore, they have greater chances of an elevated self-perception. They are aware that the existing stereotypes of skin complexion place them in a "worthier" position and, as previously discussed, have better life outcomes because of it. Erving Goffman recognized the importance of the categorizations that are placed on the individual from society. His theory of *stigma* further illustrates not only the dependence on others for self-esteem but also why their views can affect multiple facets of life.

According to Goffman, people present a self in daily interactions. Similar to Cooley, Goffman believed that the self is the product and consequence of social communication. People learn what is appropriate for their self through social cues. The self, then, is acted out publicly and is explained by Goffman as dramaturgical.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 8.

Dramaturgy is a method of communication where the world is considered to be a series (or scenes) of dramatic constructions: “people are seen as performers who are vitally concerned with the presentation of their character (the self) to an audience.”¹¹¹ Without the self there can be no social interaction.

Generally speaking, most individuals attempt to present themselves in a well-favored manner. However, it is the judgments made by others that cause a person’s ideal presentation to go askew. People come into interactions with preconceived ideas or stereotypes of an individual based on her or his exterior because initially “our knowledge of each other is limited to what we can observe. Our definition of one another’s self is necessarily based on appearance, conduct, and the setting in which we interact.”¹¹² When applying this theory to colorism, a woman with a dark skin is automatically put into category “X” because of her skin complexion. Despite being superficial, physical appearance serves as information, and “information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know...what they may expect of him [or her].”¹¹³ Consequently, even if one attempts to present themselves graciously they can be met with opposition and disapproval by society. Because the self cannot be maintained without correspondence from the outer audience, an individual who once believed she was an

¹¹¹ Allan Kenneth, *The Social Lens: An Invitation to Social and Sociological Theory*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press), 330.

¹¹² Cahill, 110.

¹¹³ Erving Goffman, “The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life 1983,” in *Inside Social Life Readings in Sociological Psychology and Microsociology*, 5 ed., ed. Spencer E. Cahill (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 26-30.

equal will begin to doubt herself. Eventually she will take on the view that has been broadcast to her.

The self is a continual process. Throughout an individual's life one is recurrently forming ideas about the self by internalizing what they have gathered from their audience. In the case of African-American women, the audience is society and society sees a dark complexion as subordinate to light or white skin. Again, the standard of beauty in the United States is to celebrate whiteness while African American beauty is discredited. Patricia Hill Collins drew attention to the fact that "identity is relational, and those who are defined as beautiful are only beautiful in relation to others who are defined as ugly...white beauty is based on the racist assumption of black ugliness."¹¹⁴ As has been reviewed, dark skin is linked to adverse stereotypes such as uneducated and underserving. Although inaccurate, these attributes mark dark skin with what Goffman referred to as a *stigma*. Stigmas are a taxing part of society because they symbolize mainstream ideologies and concern.¹¹⁵

A common way to describe a stigma is as a symbol of dishonor or disgrace. Goffman noted, "the Greeks originated the term stigma to refer to bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier."¹¹⁶ With this description, dark complexions as a stigma designate the individual with immediate

¹¹⁴ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, New York: Routledge, 1991, quoted in Brian Kenneth Morris, "Perceptions of Complexions: Consciousness and Self-Identification Among Dark-Skinned Blacks" (master's thesis, University of New Orleans, 2009).

¹¹⁵ Allen, 334.

¹¹⁶ Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963, quoted in Brian Kenneth Morris, "Perceptions of Complexions: Consciousness and Self-Identification Among Dark-Skinned Blacks" (master's thesis, University of New Orleans, 2009).

disapproval by others. Goffman further explicated that stigmas largely fall into two categories: *discredited* and *discreditable*. A person who experiences discredited stigma usually has a psychical mark or blemish that separates him or her from general society.¹¹⁷ Accordingly, dark skin is a discredited stigma. Light skin on the other hand is discreditable. A discreditable stigma is a mark that is less obvious; however these individuals run the risk “in every situation with the potential of being stigmatized.”¹¹⁸ For example, a light-skinned woman can be stigmatized for her race, but may avoid the repressive effects of colorism.

In fitting stigma squarely with the African American phenomenon of complexion, Link and Phelan summarize that stigma

exists when the following interrelated components converge. In the first component, people distinguish and label human differences. In the second, dominant cultural beliefs link labeled persons to undesirable characteristics—to negative stereotypes. In the third, labeled persons are placed in distinct categories so as to accomplish some degree of separation of “us” from “them.” In the fourth, labeled persons experience status loss and discrimination that lead to unequal outcomes. Finally, stigmatization is entirely contingent on access to social, economic, and political power that allows the identification of differentness, the construction of stereotypes, the separation of labeled persons into distinct categories, and the full execution of disapproval, rejection, exclusion, and discrimination.¹¹⁹

African-American women with dark skin are affected by all of the components described in the preceding description. To begin, these women are conspicuously branded as “dark skinned.” They are stereotyped with undesirable and dismissive traits that can result in

¹¹⁷ Allan Kenneth, *The Social Lens: An Invitation to Social and Sociological Theory*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press).

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 334.

¹¹⁹ Bruce G. Link and Jo C. Phelan, “Conceptualizing Stigma.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (2001): 367.

having different life experiences than their lighter counterparts. The ways in which dark-skinned women face a disadvantage in the areas of employment, education, and social relationships can easily be described as “unequal outcomes.” Subsequently, it is a fair suggestion that women with dark complexions do in fact experience the disapproval, rejection, exclusion, and discrimination that are described by the researchers above.

It must be noted that stigma has been analyzed thus far in its application to the circumstances of colorism. Yet, colorism falls under the larger umbrella of racism. Unquestionably, light skin is advantageous within communities of color, however, it does not completely disassociate a person from the race. Being African American in general is still a very obvious stigma. Goffman’s theory explains that those who fall within the lines of discreditable stigma can and do make efforts to separate themselves from their stigmatized unit. This gives way to reasoning of why some very fair skin African Americans have chosen to “pass” as whites. According to Allen, “*passing* is a concerted and well-organized effort to appear normal based on the knowledge of possible discrediting.”¹²⁰ In terms of race, *normal* equates to white or European ancestry. Passing was especially popular during the times of segregation, as fair skin African Americans would try to appear as white Americans to avoid the barriers of segregation and the blatant experience of discrimination. The important difference between discredited and discreditable stigma is that discreditable individuals can enact certain strategies to try to escape from the stigma surrounding them. Persons who have dark complexions cannot change their skin from very dark to very light, however a light complexioned person can pass, or downplay their African ancestry.

¹²⁰ Allen, 334.

It must be emphasized that being an African American of any shade is a stigma. Noticeably, people of color are conscious of the different status awarded to those of lighter hues; thus the birth of colorism. But how is it that African Americans as a stigmatized group can take on the characteristics of the oppressor and participate in intra-race discrimination? Goffman explained that

the stigmatized individual exhibits a tendency to stratify his 'own' according to the degree to which their stigma is apparent and obtrusive. He can then take up in regard to those who are more evidently stigmatized than himself the attitudes the normal take to him...it is in his affiliation with or separation from, his more evidently stigmatized fellows, the individual's oscillation of identification is most sharply marked.¹²¹

African Americans, mindful of their second-class status in society, have internalized the negative messages they have been given throughout generations. Both Cooley and Goffman's theories propose that the self is inseparable from the ideas of others. It is the product of the environment, and the social environment for African Americans is racism. Thus, people of color have mirrored the actions of discrimination among themselves in an effort to relieve the tension of being considered a worthless people. Unfortunately, as outlined by this thesis, this oppression is broken down along the lines of gender as well.

Self-esteem is an important element of an individual's existence. It serves as an informative tool among interactions within society as well as shapes a person's identity and future and present goals. The theoretical framework provided by Cooley and Goffman asserts that a person cannot encounter the social world without reflecting the judgments and opinions of others on their self. Consequently, what society thinks of the

¹²¹ Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963, quoted in Brian Kenneth Morris, "Perceptions of Complexions: Consciousness and Self-Identification Among Dark-Skinned Blacks" (master's thesis, University of New Orleans, 2009).

individual affects the individual's perceptions and actions throughout her or his life.

"Because self-esteem is influenced by the social comparisons we make and the reactions to those comparisons, the self-esteem of African Americans will be partly based on how they compare themselves to whites;" this is especially true in regards to women of color.¹²² In the area of skin complexion alone, light-skinned women have more in common with white women than do dark-skinned women. However, there may likely be considerably more similarities depending on a woman's eye color, hair texture, and facial features. What is reflected to light-skinned women is that they are closer to the ideal (i.e. white beauty standards), "white is right," while dark-skinned women must face that they fall short as in "black get back." To reiterate, what others offer about one's external self becomes one's own self view. Thus, the self-esteem of African-American women with dark complexions is likely to be lower as they are constantly battling adverse images of themselves. In addition, these women meet the discrimination that follows being a part of a double stigmatized group (being both African American and dark-skinned).

¹²² Brian Kenneth Morris, "Perceptions of Complexions: Consciousness and Self-Identification Among Dark-Skinned Blacks" (master's thesis, University of New Orleans, 2009), 20.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the research design, research instrumentation, population, setting and sampling procedure, and statistical analyses. First the rationale of the study is addressed. Second, the basis for choosing each of the research instruments is described. Third, the setting and sampling procedures are explained. Fourth, the population and participant demographics are examined. Finally, the plan for statistical analyses is presented.

Study Design

The present study was designed to explain and describe how colorism affects the daily lives of African-American women. Previous literature suggests that skin complexion is a significant factor in the daily lives of these women; this is the primary rationale for the current investigation. This study's initial guidelines inquired (a) if skin tone was a predictive factor for African-American women's social outcomes, (b) the extent to which African-American women distinguished between light and dark complexions, (c) if there was significant relationship between a woman's skin color and her self-esteem, and (d) if colorism was still relevant in the 21st Century. After a thorough review of literature, it was predicted that the current research would find the following hypotheses to be supported:

H1: African-American women will have lower social capital if they possess dark complexions, while women with light skin tones will measure higher in this area.

H2: Women with light complexions will have higher levels of self-esteem, while women with dark skin tones will have lower levels of self-esteem.

H3: Women with high self-esteem (regardless of their skin color) will equally measure as high in social capital.

H4: Perceptions and preferences will be more positive for medium complexions as opposed to dark or light.

Instrumentation

Survey research was chosen as the appropriate measurement technique. A mixed methods approach was utilized via a questionnaire to provide both quantitative and qualitative data. Several questions were borrowed from a study conducted by Nassar-McMillan et al. to measure the participants' perceptions and preferences for skin complexion; these questions were formatted for a response of light, medium, or dark.¹ Questions from the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale were used as measures of self-esteem, along with numerous questions developed by the researcher for greater analysis of perceptions, self-esteem, and social capital.² The majority of the collected data is quantitative and includes general demographic questions along with questions related to

¹ Nassar-McMillan et al., "Ebony and Ivory: Relationship Between African American Young Women's Skin Color and Ratings of Self and Peers," *Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Education and Development* 45, no. 1 (2006): 79-94.

² Morris Rosenberg, *Society and the Adolescent Self-Image*, Rev ed., Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989.

the four main hypotheses. A brief qualitative section was included at the end of the questionnaire for voluntary comments from participants. All questions can be found on the survey instrument in Appendix A. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 20) was used to analyze and interpret data.

Description of the Setting and Sampling Procedure

This study utilized a convenience sample of two predetermined seminar classes. The sampling technique was purposive, as it was known to the researcher that the selected classes have a higher population of students. Course enrollment data were electronically obtained by the University's online registration system in the preliminary development of this study. Once the two classes were identified, it was predicted that a larger sample of women could be measured due to the high student count. The research took place in the second semester of the 2011-2012 academic year. The questionnaire was administered to the two classes during normal seminar hours on the University's main campus. Permission from the instructor was requested prior to the execution of this study. Consent forms were distributed to notify participants of the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, and the confidentiality of their involvement. Participants were also informed that withdrawing (failing to complete the entire questionnaire) or selective participation (responding only to questions that were comfortable) would not result in any penalization. Participants additionally had their consent forms read aloud to them by the researcher. Those who agreed to cooperate were to sign their name along the bottom of the consent form before beginning the questionnaire. The participants were also notified that it would take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Consent

forms were collected by the researcher before the distribution of the survey instrument and were placed in a designated folder to ensure confidentiality. The participants completed the questionnaire in one sitting and returned it to the researcher in the front of the room. Each participant's questionnaire was numerically pre-coded to ensure all copies were returned to the researcher. The questionnaire was conducted with the permission of the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). No risks were involved with participation in this study.

Population

The population for this study consisted of female undergraduate students at a private Historically Black University, or HBCU. This southern university offers Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctoral Degrees and enrolls a total of 3,941 students (undergraduate and graduate). The HBCU is 71% female and 29% male. For the purposes of this study, 95 currently enrolled female undergraduate students ranging in ages from 17-23 were selected as the unit of analysis. The numerical population was based on the number of students who attended class the day the questionnaire was executed. Males were excluded from the analysis as the primary focus of this study was to demonstrate how skin complexion affects the lives of African-American women. Three women chose not to participate bringing the total population to 92 students. The classifications of the population included 11 first year students (12%), 33 sophomores (35%), 20 juniors (21%), and 28 seniors (30%). (Percentages were kept as whole numbers and do not equal to 100). There were 7 students between the ages of 17 and 18 (7%), 40 between the ages of 19 and 20 (43%), 37 between the ages of 21 and 22 (40%), and 8 students age 23+

(8%). Thirty-seven participants identified their hometown regions in the North/Midwest (40%), 32 in the South (34%), 6 in the eastern United States (6%), and 17 in the western United States (18%). The participant breakdown by self-selected skin complexion was as follows: 22 light (23%), 51 medium (55%), and 19 dark (20%). This data indicates that there was an overrepresentation of medium complexioned participants with dark and light participants with roughly equal representation. Ideally, the three complexion groups would contain equal numbers of participants; however, the skin tone makeup of the class was outside of the researcher's control.

Statistical Analysis

The key independent variable of the current research was skin tone. This variable was measured along the attributes of light, medium, and dark. The key dependent variables include the perception of and preferences for skin complexion, self-esteem, and social capital. All variables were measured as follows:

Skin Tone- Each participant was asked to self-select their skin tone from a predetermined list. Options included light, medium, and dark.

Demographics- Each participant was asked to self-select their hometown region from a predetermined list. Additionally, participant age and undergraduate classification was reported.

Self Esteem- Questions from the Rosenberg's Self Esteem Scale were used to evaluate participants along with additional questions proposed by the researcher.³ Participants were asked to answer questions using a 5-item Likert scale (Strongly Agree,

³ Ibid.

Agree, Neutral, Disagree, or Strongly disagree). During analysis these questions were used to create a self-esteem index (Low self-esteem vs. High self-esteem). Questions worded negatively were reverse coded so that responses of strongly disagree/disagree were indicators of high self-esteem. Cronbach alpha's reports a relatively high internal consistency, $\alpha = .89$. This index was run with participants' skin tone in order to determine if differences existed between complexion groups.

Perceptions of and preferences for skin tone- Several questions were borrowed from a study conducted by Nassar-McMillan et al. along with questions developed by the researcher which asked participants their personal opinions concerning the skin hues of *light, medium, and dark*.⁴ Although the questionnaire only included three response options, upon final analysis it was seen that many participants chose to circle all skin tones. Thus, a fourth category of *all* was added to the SPSS (version 20) inquiry to include the responses of participants who indicated they felt the question addressed the three skin complexions equally.

Social Capital- Social capital was examined along four variables in the areas of education and relationships. Measures included social relationships, membership in group activities, and scholastic achievement. Specifically, participants were asked questions pertaining to their extracurricular involvement, GPA (based on a 4.0 scale), friendships, and relationship status (single or involved with a significant other). Questions assessing friendship were measured using 5-item Likert scale. During the final analysis friendship questions were collapsed into an individual index with data categorized into three categories; low, moderate, or high. A high internal consistency was found within this

⁴ Nassar-McMillan et al., 79-94.

variable, $\alpha = .89$. GPA was divided into two categories; *high* (3.0 and higher) and *low* (2.9 and below). Involvement was grouped into *involved* and *not involved* and relationship status was reported as *single* or *involved with a significant other*. For participants with who fall into the *high and involved* categories the variables were reported as having a higher social capital than participants who do not. All measurements of social capital were analyzed with the self-esteem index and participants' skin tone to determine any significant effects.

Crosstabulation, analysis of variance, and the chi-square test were utilized depending on the particular research questions posed. Crosstabulation analysis was chosen as it provides percentage comparisons to determine the relationships between various demographic, independent, and dependent variables. Analysis of variance was used to test the significance of any differences found between the light, medium, and dark complexioned groups. Chi-square was specifically utilized to analyze group differences for perceptions and preferences of skin tones. A .05 level of significance was used as the criterion of rejection for each of the asserted hypotheses.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The first hypothesis predicted that women with dark complexions would have lower social capital than women with lighter complexions. Social capital was measured along the four variables of friendship, relationship status, GPA, and involvement. The 3 skin complexions were analyzed with each variable of social capital using analysis of variance (ANOVA). All mean comparisons can be found in Table 1. Social capital was not found to be significantly different between the 3 skin tones along the variable of friendship, $F(2, 87) = 1.489$, $p = .231$. However, percentage results do indicate a possibility within this measure. Recall that friendship was assessed via index with scores ranked in high, moderate, or low. Within the *high* category of friendship, percentages ascended among the complexions of dark (66%), medium (68%) and light (86%) (Note—Percentages are presented as whole numbers). It would appear then, that light-skinned women report feeling more valued in their social relationships. Percentages also show increases from dark to light along the variable of relationship status. That is, 23.5% of dark-skinned women reported being involved with a significant other with ascending results for medium (41%) and light (45%) tones. Nevertheless, the differences between skin tones was not found to be statically significant, $F(2, 89) = .872$, $p = .421$. ANOVA results additionally did not support that having a high or low GPA was distinctive between light, medium, or dark complexions, $F(2, 87) = .755$, $p = .473$. Examination of

percentages displayed women with light skin with the topmost reports in the *high* GPA category (54%), followed by medium (52%), and dark (42%) complexions. Analyses of percentages point out that both medium (58%) and dark (61%) skin participants are slightly more involved than the light complexioned group (50%). Statistically, skin complexion was not a significant factor on involvement, $F(2,88) = .308, p = .736$. Overall, although there were several contrasts of skin complexion in percentage data, the current research does not support that women with dark complexions have lower measures in social capital than their lighter complexion peers. H1 was not supported.

Table 1

Mean Comparisons of Social Capital by Skin Complexion

Skin Complexion	<u>Social Capital</u>			
	Friendship ^a	Relationship Status ^b	GPA ^c	Involvement ^d
Light	2.86 (.351)	1.45 (.510)	3.67 (.796)	1.50 (.511)
Medium	2.66 (.519)	1.42 (.497)	3.52 (.953)	1.58 (.497)
Dark	2.66 (.485)	1.26 (.452)	3.32 (.885)	1.61 (.501)

Note. Standard deviations are given in parenthesis.

^aScores grouped by 1 (*low*), 2 (*moderate*), 3 (*high*). ^bScores grouped by 1 (*single*), 2 (*involved with a significant other*). ^cGPA based on a 4.0 scale. ^dScores group by 1 (*not involved*), 2 (*involved*).

Hypothesis 2 stated that women with light skin tones would have higher levels of self-esteem when compared with dark skin tones. ANOVA results of skin tone and the self-esteem index indicate that the participant's skin tone did not have a significant effect on their level of self-esteem, $F(2, 84) = 1.196$, $p = .307$. In fact, between-groups review of both light and dark-skinned participants had mean scores of 2, placing them in the *high* group for self-esteem with a marginal difference in the mean score for medium tones at 1.94 (Self-esteem index: 1 = low, 2 = high). H2 was not supported.

The third hypothesis suggested that women who measured high in self-esteem would also measure high in social capital, irrespective of skin complexion. Data analysis indicates that this hypothesis was partially supported. In order to examine the multiple variables that comprise social capital and to control for covariance of participants' skin tone, MANCOVA was utilized. For this analysis, self-esteem was treated as a second independent variable in that it is the cause of the high or low social capital status. There was not a significant difference between the 3 complexion groups and their social capital, $F(4, 81) = 1.306$, $p = .275$; Wilk's $\lambda = .939$, partial $\epsilon^2 = .061$. Alternatively, there was a statistically significant difference between participants with high and low self-esteem and their social capital, $F(4, 81) = 4.695$, $p = .002$; Wilk's $\lambda = 0.812$, partial $\epsilon^2 = .188$. Table 2 indicates that along the social capital variable of friendship, tests of between subject differences (ANOVA) show self-esteem is a statistically significant factor in how valued participants feel within their friendships $F(1, 84) = 17.695$, $p = .000$; partial $\epsilon^2 = .174$. Self-esteem was not found to have a significant difference on the remaining variables

measuring social capital (relationship status, GPA, and involvement). H3 was partially supported.

Table 2

Mean Comparisons of Social Capital by Self-Esteem

	<u>Social Capital</u>			
	Friendship ^{a*}	Relationship Status ^b	GPA ^c	Involvement ^d
<u>Self-Esteem</u>				
Low	1.66 (.577)	1.33 (.577)	1.33 (.577)	1.33 (.577)
High	2.75 (.435)	1.40 (.494)	1.52 (.502)	1.57 (.497)

Note. Standard deviations are given in parenthesis.

^aScores grouped by 1 (*low*), 2 (*moderate*), 3 (*high*). ^bScores grouped by 1 (*single*), 2 (*involved with a significant other*). ^cScores grouped by 1 (*low*), 2 (*high*). ^dScores grouped by 1 (*not involved*), 2 (*involved*).

* $p < .05$.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that medium complexions would be perceived more favorably when compared to dark or light skin tones. The frequency data analysis shown in Table 3 supports this hypothesis as the majority of participants indicated *medium* for the following questions: The skin tone of smart Blacks is (41%), I want my children's skin to be (50%), The skin tone of Blacks who are kind (37%), I wish my skin were (44%). For the question *The skin tone of pretty women is*, participants were divided between the responses of *medium* and *dark* complexions, both receiving a valid percentage of 37%. What is interesting is that while pretty women were considered to be of both medium and dark complexions, for the question *pretty skin is* just as many

participants chose to indicate they believed all complexions were attractive (37%). H3 was supported.

Table 3

Frequencies and Percentages of Questions Favoring Medium Complexions

Question	N	%
The skin tone of smart Blacks is	34	41
I want my children's skin to be	42	50
The skin tone of Blacks who are kind	31	37
I wish my skin were	36	44
The skin tone of pretty women is	32	37

Note. Table reflects the majority of responses of those who answered each question. Valid percentages are shown as whole numbers.

Other questions measuring participants' perceptions and preferences of skin complexion also provided thought-provoking results. As displayed in Table 4, the majority of women in this study indicated that their ideal spouse's skin tone is dark (42%). Over half of the participants also indicated that having a dark skin tone is the most difficult (for women) to find a spouse (64%). The most common selection for the following questions was *light skin: it is easier to find a job if your skin is* (73%), *it is easier to make friends if your skin is* (37%), *people with ___ skin tend to be more lazy* (42%), *women with ___ skin are attention seekers* (56%), and *women with ___ skin think highly of themselves* (64%). Dark skin was the most prevalent selection for the question *people think ___ skin is unattractive* (77%).

Table 4

Frequencies and Percentages of Selected Questions

	N	%
Dark complexion as the most common response		
My ideal spouse's skin tone	35	42
It is more difficult to find a spouse if your skin is	53	64
People think ___ skin is unattractive	64	77
Light complexion as the most common response		
it is easier to find a job if your skin is	62	73
it is easier to make friends if your skin is	31	37
people with ___ skin tend to be more lazy	33	42
women with ___ skin are attention seekers	47	56
women with ___ skin think highly of themselves	53	64

Note. Table reflects the majority of responses of those who answered each question. Valid percentages are shown as whole numbers.

Cross tabulation revealed that many of the responses to perception and preference questions were dependent upon the participants own skin complexion. For the question *pretty skin is*, the chi-square test indicated that there was a statistically significant difference in response by skin tone, $\chi^2(6, N = 83) = 15.493, p = .017$.¹ Both light (40%) and medium (37%) skin participants were more likely to select that *all* skin tones were equally attractive, while just over half of the participants with dark skin chose *dark*

¹ Note that the sample figure is less than the total number of participants as some women chose not to respond to all questions presented on the questionnaire.

(52.9%). A significant difference between skin complexion was also found for the question *the skin tone of smart Blacks is*, $\chi^2(6, N = 83) = 22.228, p = .001$. The majority of participants with light complexions chose *all* (40%), while medium toned participants selected *medium* (47%), and participants with a dark skin tone chose *dark* (52%). A variation by skin tone was additionally found concerning the question *the skin tone of pretty women is*, $\chi^2(6, N = 80) = 18.745, p = .005$. While those with light skin more commonly chose *all* (42%), both medium (45%) and dark (46%) complexioned participants were more likely to choose their own skin complexion. Thus, women perceived by other women as attractive are more likely to be of the same skin tone. According to the present research, women further desire their children to be the same or a similar skin complexion to themselves. A statistically significant difference between skin tones indicates that both light (60%) and medium (58%) wish for their children to be a *medium* complexion, while dark-skinned participants overwhelming chose *dark* (70%), $\chi^2(6, N = 83) = 42.180, p = .000$. *The skin tone of Blacks who are kind* was another question that differentiated between light/medium and dark participants, $\chi^2(6, N = 83) = 15.510, p = .017$. Fifty-five percent of light complexioned participants selected *medium*, with the majority of those with medium skin agreed (39%). Slightly over half of participants with dark skin chose to respond with *dark* (52%). Furthermore, the chi-square test indicated a variation in skin complexion for the question *I wish my skin were*, $\chi^2(6, N = 83) = 62.703, p = .000$. Over half of all the participants chose their own skin complexion for this question; light chose *light* (65%), medium chose *medium* (64%), and dark chose *dark* (68%).

A discrepancy was found between what skin tone participants describe themselves as and how others view their skin complexion. The most variation was found between participants with a medium complexion: 35% are viewed by others as light, 58% are viewed by others as medium, and 5% are viewed by others as dark, $\chi^2(4, N = 92) = 83.686, p = .000$. An additional central finding to the current research was found; there was a significant difference between the 3 complexions when considering the experience of discrimination based on skin tone, $\chi^2(2, N = 90) = 7.556, p = .023$. Dark-skinned participants were more likely to report being discriminated against because of their complexion (77%), were as half of the light-skinned participants report maltreatment (50%), and medium skin tones reporting the least (40%). Frequency distributions show that the majority of all participants agree that: there should be more discussions about skin tone (73%), African-American males (95%) and whites (88%) contribute to the perceptions women have about skin tone, and that complexion issues have been occurring for generations (96%). Finally, results suggest that the participants in this study did not feel that society's preferences for skin complexion could be resolved or eliminated (58%).

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The overall findings of this study suggest significant interpretations and telling details relating to colorism in the African-American community. While not all hypotheses in the present research were verified, this study does indicate that the "double standard" of colorism, discussed by Hill, continues to exist.¹ Most young women reported desiring a dark complexioned mate, which was consistent among all skin tones. As previously discussed, dark skin as a male attribute has been historically associated with masculinity, strength, and praise; whereas possessing a dark complexion for African-American women has been shown to have less favorable perceptions. The women in this study were also not naive to the ideologies and politics of skin complexion. The high confidence perceived in women of light complexions is likely associated with the belief that women with light skin are privileged, in that they hold a more elevated status in society. As previously reviewed, having lighter skin more often exposes women to favorable characteristics including the impression of having "higher self-esteem and self worth."² A significant number of women in this study acknowledged society's belief that dark skin is an unattractive female trait. Furthermore, study participants who self-identified as

¹ Mark E. Hill, "Skin Color and the Perception of Attractiveness among African Americans: Does Gender Make a Difference?" *Social Psychology Quarterly* 65, no.1 (2002): 77-91.

² Maxine S. Thompson and Verna M. Keith, "The Blacker the Berry: Gender, Skin Tone, Self-Esteem, and Self-Efficacy," *Gender and Society* 15, no. 3 (2001): 339.

having a dark complexion reported the highest instances of skin tone discrimination.

This provides substantial evidence that colorism remains a relevant topic of sociological importance.

Although women with dark complexions tended to agree that society devalues their skin tone, they indicated that if given the option to change their complexion they would remain as is. Therefore, their concept of self, or self-esteem has not been as intensely compromised as a result of perceived discrimination by others. This may be a contributing factor in the study findings as there was not a significant difference in self-esteem and social capital between light, medium, and dark complexions. This finding supports Keith et al. who suggested that women who are high in personal mastery can translate their self-worth into personal achievement.³ Likewise, Coard, Breland, and Raskin found that medium skin complexions were favored over both light and dark.⁴ The analysis of women's preferences in the current research has similar findings as "medium" was reported for questions addressing women's ideas associated with children, attractiveness, intelligence, and compassion.

An interesting finding surrounding the perceptions and preferences of women in this study was that women who self-identified their skin tone as *light* provided the most egalitarian responses. That is, they were more likely to indicate that *all* skin tones are equally favorable, beautiful, and desired. On the contrary, women who self-identified as

³ Keith et al., "Discriminatory Experiences and Depressive Symptoms among African American Women: Do Skin Tone and Mastery Matter?" *Sex Roles* 62, no. 1 (2010): 48-59.

⁴ Stephanie I. Coard, Alfiee M. Breland, and Patricia Raskin, "Perceptions of and Preferences for Skin Color, Black Racial Identity, and Self-Esteem Among African Americans," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 31, no. 11 (2001).

having a *dark* complexion were more likely to choose dark skin for positively phrased questions. This finding does not support the stereotypical view of light complexion women as egotistical. However, it does induce further inquiry. For instance, did light complexion women feel obligated to provide seemingly unbiased responses given their “superior” status? Or, was this an action to compensate “blackness” and alignment within the community? Recall that Russell emphasized that many fair and light-skinned African Americans long for acceptance by their darker complexion counterparts.⁵ It is important, however, to remember that interpretations of skin complexion are highly subjective and what one believes is light may be dark in another’s eyes.

In the context of previous study findings, this research did not corroborate all past factors related to colorism. This is a noteworthy limitation as explicit personal information and experiences could not be elicited and measured; whereas an interview design may provide support of the emotional aspect of the experience. This study also relied on self-reported data and despite being emphasized to participants to provide responses that are truthful, there remains the limitation that responses were not honest. This serves as a threat to the validity of the research and underscores the issues of social desirability. Other limitations include not having a larger sample size. Many of the women who participated in this study did not fully complete the questionnaire, which left gaps of important data out of analysis. Hypotheses that were not found to be significant would have most likely held significance if more participants had been used. As previously stated, this study utilized a convenience sample of two predetermined seminar

⁵ Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall, *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* (New York: Anchor Books, 1993).

classes. Accordingly, the representativeness and equal random selection was compromised. Although convenience sampling provides easier access to study participants, it does not guarantee that these participants are reflective of the target population (all African-American women). This makes generalizing results to the target population more difficult and thus threatens the external validity of the study. Additionally, the sampling technique for the study was purposive, as it was known to the researcher that the selected classes had a higher population of female students.

Implications for future studies should be to further investigate “gendered colorism.”⁶ More in depth research is need to discern the specific differences between the sexes. The current research corroborates that most women believe that African American males are a major contributor to the perpetuation of colorism. Future studies should address the male perspective of skin complexion concerning attractiveness in women and investigate the influence of media as well as hip-hop culture. Additionally, more research and awareness of the internalization of white beauty standards should be explored. Women in the present study believed that white Americans wrongly influence how African Americans perceive their own skin complexion. As discussed earlier, white standards of beauty have been normalized within American society with minimal or incorrect representations of beauty regarding women of color. Further research on the psyche of African-American women is suggested in order to better understand the impact of colorism as it relates to the concept of society’s perpetuation of beauty standards.

⁶ Hill, 77-91.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the effects of colorism in relation to African-American women's life outcomes. An overwhelming majority of scholars agree that women are treated, regarded (or disregarded), and evaluated based on their different skin complexions. The influence of these undesirable attitudes and biased judgments toward African-American women has resulted in ambiguous internalized messages and standards. This has resulted in dangerous self-behaviors and self-destructive mentalities. African-American women are in a constant battle with society and self; as noted in previous literature, selfhood is often sacrificed. While it may appear that this struggle is alleviated for women with lighter complexions, they too are impacted and faced with the need to fit into an image that is difficult to achieve. Despite the seemingly advantageous asset of light skin, these women still possess the facial features, body structure, and textured hair that are frequently disparaged by white American society. It can be substantiated that African-American women who have darker tones experience a disproportionate amount of social and cultural pressure and are impacted by the pervasiveness of the prejudice. Considering the very recent nature of the literature, it is disturbing that little to no change has taken place regarding the stratification of skin

tones. This leads to the conclusion that these views are not only held at the personal level, but are also well developed within the institutions of the United States.¹

What makes the current research and related studies so crucial is that it provides evidence of societal stratification based on racial measures of skin tone that date back to pre-abolition. Colorism, rooted in negative images, deep rooted stereotypes of African American and white beauty, and subordinate racial relationships, has grown to divide the community in ways that confound the establishment of a just society. Because colorism is also complicated by racism, classism, and sexism, it is a confusing and paradoxical aftermath. Colorism also has a profound affect in the lives of adolescents and very young children of color as they are exposed to the ideologies concerning skin tone, race, and privilege. There is a need for unity between African-American women of all complexions. However, it is imperative that African Americans as a group begin to discuss and take action against issues that affect the community but are not recognized by mainstream society. A present day "Black is Beautiful" movement would be a valuable tactic. Indeed, more and more women are beginning to embrace their innate natural roots as can be seen with the popularity of natural hairstyles and Afrocentric fashion.

It is important that research similar to the study presented in this thesis continues to occur as it provides the focus towards helpful initiatives. As stated in the words of Hill, "...if Eurocentric standards of beauty continue to be applied to persons of African descent, dark-skin African American [women] are likely to suffer substantial social

¹ Keith et al., "Discriminatory Experiences and Depressive Symptoms among African American Women: Do Skin Tone and Mastery Matter?" *Sex Roles* 62, no. 1 (2010): 48-59.

disadvantage both outside and within the black community.”² It is anticipated that the results of this study will enrich the body of knowledge on the subject of colorism and African American women, and question the acceptance of colorism formed within the African-American community, as well as the relevance of color stratification in the 21st Century. Colorism is a multidimensional sociological and psychological phenomenon and more empirical studies of skin tone bias among African Americans are critical to understanding the internal and external racial conflicts that continue to exist in our society.

² Mark E. Hill, “Skin Color and the Perception of Attractiveness among African Americans: Does Gender Make a Difference?” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 65, no.1 (2002): 88.

APPENDIX
QUESTIONNAIRE

For the following questions, please choose one answer:

1. What is your year in school?

- ☐ First Year
- ☐ Sophomore
- ☐ Junior
- ☐ Senior

2. How old are you?

- ☐ 17-18
- ☐ 19-20
- ☐ 21-22
- ☐ 23+

3. What is your GPA?

- ☐ 4.0-3.5
- ☐ 3.0-3.4
- ☐ 2.9-2.5
- ☐ 2.0-2.4
- ☐ 1.9 or below

4. Which describes your relationship status?

- ☐ Single
- ☐ Involved with a significant other

5. What is your hometown region?

- ☐ North
- ☐ South
- ☐ East
- ☐ West

6. You consider your skin tone to be

- ☐ Light
- ☐ Medium
- ☐ Dark

7. Other people consider your skin tone to be

- ☐ Light
- ☐ Medium
- ☐ Dark

8. Have you ever been discriminated against because of your specific skin tone?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

9. If you could change your skin tone, you would make it

- ☐ Darker
- ☐ Lighter
- ☐ I would not change my skin color

10. Are you involved in any extracurricular activities? (*Check all that apply*)

☐ I am not involved in any extracurricular activities

☐ Church/Religious group

☐ Band and/or Choir

☐ Sorority

• Please List _____

☐ Athletic Team

• Please List _____

☐ Athletic Club

• Please List _____

☐ Other organizations

• Please List _____

Beside each of the statements presented below, please circle Light, Medium, or Dark

- | | | | |
|---|--------------|---------------|-------------|
| 11. Pretty skin is | <i>Light</i> | <i>Medium</i> | <i>Dark</i> |
| 12. The skin tone of smart Blacks is | <i>Light</i> | <i>Medium</i> | <i>Dark</i> |
| 13. The skin tone of pretty women is | <i>Light</i> | <i>Medium</i> | <i>Dark</i> |
| 14. My ideal spouse's skin tone is | <i>Light</i> | <i>Medium</i> | <i>Dark</i> |
| 15. I want my children's skin to be | <i>Light</i> | <i>Medium</i> | <i>Dark</i> |
| 16. The skin tone of Blacks who are kind | <i>Light</i> | <i>Medium</i> | <i>Dark</i> |
| 17. I wish my skin were | <i>Light</i> | <i>Medium</i> | <i>Dark</i> |
| 18. It is easier to find a job if your skin is | <i>Light</i> | <i>Medium</i> | <i>Dark</i> |
| 19. It is more difficult to find a spouse if your skin is | <i>Light</i> | <i>Medium</i> | <i>Dark</i> |
| 20. It is easier to make friends if your skin is | <i>Light</i> | <i>Medium</i> | <i>Dark</i> |
| 21. People with ____ skin tend to be more lazy | <i>Light</i> | <i>Medium</i> | <i>Dark</i> |
| 22. Women with ____ skin are attention seekers | <i>Light</i> | <i>Medium</i> | <i>Dark</i> |
| 23. Women with ____ skin think highly of themselves | <i>Light</i> | <i>Medium</i> | <i>Dark</i> |
| 24. People think ____ skin is unattractive | <i>Light</i> | <i>Medium</i> | <i>Dark</i> |

Beside each of the statements present below, please circle whether you Strongly Agree (1), Agree (2), Neutral (3), Disagree (4), Strongly disagree (5).

	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
25. I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others	1	2	3	4	5
26. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.	1	2	3	4	5
27. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.	1	2	3	4	5
28. I am able to do things as well as most other people	1	2	3	4	5
29. I feel I do not have much to be proud of	1	2	3	4	5
30. I think I am pretty	1	2	3	4	5
31. I think I am smart	1	2	3	4	5
32. I like my skin color	1	2	3	4	5
33. I take a positive attitude towards myself	1	2	3	4	5
34. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself	1	2	3	4	5
35. I wish I could have more respect for myself	1	2	3	4	5
36. I certainly feel useless at times	1	2	3	4	5
37. At times I think I am no good at all.	1	2	3	4	5

38. I am a good person 1 2 3 4 5

Beside each of the statements present below, please circle whether you Strongly Agree (1), Agree (2), Neutral (3), Disagree (4), Strongly disagree (5).

	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly disagree</i>
39. I feel close to my friends	1	2	3	4	5
40. I feel I can go to my friends in times of need	1	2	3	4	5
41. My friends are emotionally supportive	1	2	3	4	5
42. I have many close friends	1	2	3	4	5
43. My friends respect my ideas	1	2	3	4	5
44. I can trust my friends	1	2	3	4	5
45. My friends value me	1	2	3	4	5
46. My "friends" are more like associates	1	2	3	4	5
47. Friendship is not important to me	1	2	3	4	5
48. I make more effort with my friends than they do with me	1	2	3	4	5

For the following questions please choose one answer

49. Your female peer group consists of mostly

☐ Dark skin women

☐ Medium skin women

☐ Light skin women

50. Do you believe there should be more discussions regarding the issue of skin tone among African American women?

☐ Yes

☐ No

51. Do you believe African American males contribute to the perceptions women have about skin tone?

☐ Yes

☐ No

52. Do you believe whites contribute to the perceptions women have about skin tone?

☐ Yes

☐ No

53. The issue of skin color within the African-American community

☐ Is a new problem

☐ Has been occurring for generations

☐ Is not an issue at all

54. Do you believe that skin color preferences can be resolved/eliminated?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Comments:

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