

**Colorism's affect on the African American community**

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## **Abstract**

The Black Community has been deeply damaged by the effects of Racism and Eurocentricity. Racism imposed on Black people globally, especially within The United States, caused intra-racial colorism where they discriminate amongst themselves based on skin shade. This article covers the originality of Racism in the United States and the exact factors that lead to colorism within the Black community. I will explain Jennifer Hochschild's Skin Color Paradox, the Colorism hierarchy, and Eurocentric influence on Black beauty standards, and show examples of ways in which the black community projects colorism. The article will then conclude by providing a solution to how colorism can be reduced.

## **Introduction**

Human beings face daily adversity that can sometimes make them feel set apart from the rest of society; it can be easy to overlook the fact that humanity in its entirety is the cause of the adversity we experience. As a black woman living in the United States, it is easy to see that the challenges that the black community faces are very different from our White, Asian, and Hispanic counterparts. The dehumanizing history of Racism in America has caused long-lasting effects on the black community. The hatred and oppression forced on Black people for centuries have created internal damage where they portray a variation of the oppressor's hostility toward each other; this is called colorism.

Colorism is the discrimination towards those of a darker skin color usually expressed among people of the same ethnic group, according to the Oxford dictionary; an ongoing battle that is well and alive in the Black community. I have heard the stories my dark-skinned friends have experienced, especially in dating, where guys have deemed them less attractive due to their darker skin. My best friend had even told me that she found dating hard in high school because the guys she was attracted to "usually went for the light-skin girls." One time in my senior year of high school, I asked a dark skin black guy whose past four ex-girlfriends were light-skinned why he seemed more attracted to them. He responded, "I don't know. To me, they look good and just seem softer". Another time I was having a conversation with another dark-skinned guy who was a sophomore in college at the time, something he told me that stuck with me for some time was that his mom always told him to date girls lighter than his skin, though his mom was dark herself. These statements reveal that this issue runs deeper than just innocent preferences.

## **Origin of Colorism**

Among many social issues that manifest within the black community- as an ethnic group- colorism has come about from the damaging history of European colonialism and African people's enslavement. It is a known fact that Black Slaves in America have experienced extremes, such as abuse, mutilation, rape, and hanging. In addition to that treatment, their oppressors created a division between the enslaved people due to their preferential treatment to those with a fairer complexion because those slaves were usually relatives to the enslaver, born from rape by an enslaver to his slave. Light skin enslaved people were typically given domestic work inside the enslavers' homes, while dark skins were tasked with manual labor in the fields (Ware, 2014). Colorism persisted even after Slavery was abolished. Later on, around the 19th century, the practice of the "brown paper bag test" was introduced in the company hiring process. In comparison to the paper bag, "colored" people that were the same color or lighter than the bag would be considered for hire, while those who were darker were immediately declined (Pilgrim, 2014). These historical events constituted the disparity within the African American community based on something as minimal as one's attributes; skin tone.

## **The Skin Color Paradox**

Colorism discrimination affects almost every area of an African American's life. Jennifer L. Hochschild, Ph.D., a professor in African and African American studies, put together an article where she explains the issue of The Skin color Paradox, which focuses on the disparity between the treatment of Dark-skinned minorities and political attitudes in America (Hochschild, 2007). Hochschild points out that the Dark-skins in the United States have been disproportionately disadvantaged for centuries and suffer lower socioeconomic status. Relative to

their lighter-skinned counterparts, dark-skinned Blacks have lower levels of education, income, and job status; they are less likely to own homes or to marry, and dark-skinned blacks' prison sentences are longer. Dark-skin discrimination occurs within and across races (Turner 1995, as cited in Hochschild, 2007).

A study from the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA) and the Multi City Study of Urban Inequality (MSCUI) observed the wages of black people based on categories of skin tone (Light, Medium, and Dark). The data summarized that the Mean hourly wages decreased from Light skin to Dark. Light-skinned blacks had an hourly pay of \$14.72, \$13.23 for blacks with a medium skin shade, and \$11.72 for Dark skinned blacks (Goldsmith et al., n.d.). Just like wages decrease as skin shade darkens, other variables, such as high school graduation rates, also drop. Due to Light skin blacks having an appearance closer to that of whites gives them a higher success rate compared to Dark-skinned blacks in America.

### **Eurocentric Influence on Black Beauty Standards**

For years Eurocentricity has heavily influenced black beauty standards as black people attempt to suppress their “blackness.” With these racialized beauty standards and women naturally feeling forced to conform, it became a dangerous and expensive global phenomenon for dark-skinned black people to bleach and retexturize their curly or kinky hair. Countries in west Africa, like Ghana, began to ban skin-lightening creams due to excessive use in the population and to prevent the risk of skin cancer (Cooper, 2016), which reveals that white beauty standards have a vast global influence where even Dark-skin Africans question their natural beauty. However, they live at the source of melanated people. Similarly, many black people perm their hair to attain more “manageable” hair, negatively associating black hair with being rough,

coarse, and untameable. In contrast, European-derived straight hair, which perms work to mimic, would be described as soft. However, excessive perms and relaxers expose the scalp to harmful chemicals causing burns and lesions while also putting women at high risk of reproductive issues, such as miscarriages and uterine fibroids (Wise et al., 2012). It is sad that even though black people are stigmatized for altering their natural beauty, the need to look more European is still an ideal pushed onto them, so that attractiveness may compensate for minority status.

Colorism and Eurocentric beauty have been projected onto children from a young age. With the use of fair and light-skinned examples of minorities in children's cartoons and commercials, kids understand this as a representation of beauty or a model of society. In a 2010 study conducted by CNN, children were asked to pick a skin tone that they attributed to either positive or negative characteristics (CNN, 2010). Most children chose lighter skin tones when asked which one was "pretty," "nice," or who they'd want to be friends with. Meanwhile, they'd associate darker skin tones with negative characteristics. Similarly, black children would carry that ideology throughout their life.

### **Colorism Hierarchy**

The Colorism Hierarchy is a theory based on physical attractiveness and superiority, ranked by skin tones, within the colorist black community. Contrary to popular belief, dark skin/brown, black men are at the top of the hierarchy since they usually suffer from identity issues but are still able to display the image of a "strong black man" with its association to muscularity, that black women desire despite their skin tone (Brown, 2018). They tend to undermine women of their skin tone due to their self-worth issues while uplifting those with a lighter complexion. Light-skinned and Biracial women are in the second to highest rank since

they reap the benefits of having natural features that comply with feminine eurocentric beauty standards. Since these women are seen as “exotic” to the black community, they are also put on a pedestal for their features by black men, especially the colorist dark-skinned men. However, biracial women are in a higher position because they are directly mixed, while light-skinned black girls are indirectly mixed. Following light-skinned and biracial women are their male counterparts. Light-skinned and biracial men, though they may appear more “white”, features do not benefit them as it would outside the black community because their lighter skin takes away from the blacks’ view of masculinity similar to their desirability. Uniquely Light-skin and biracial men can challenge the hierarchy since they hold a position of superiority outside of that hierarchy. Dark-skinned and brown-skinned black women are in the lowest rank of the order because they don’t naturally benefit from “light-skin privilege” or any privileges outside the hierarchy.

Colorism projections among black people adhere to the colorism hierarchy, where those in higher ranks oppress those in the lower levels to maintain their position. An example of this can be seen when Lighskin women and biracial women project their superiority complex by calling dark-skinned black women “jealous” of them because they are seen as more desirable. In many instances, dark-skinned black women are stereotyped with negative characteristics like “bitter,” “aggressive,” or even masculine. Dark-skinned men usually put light-skinned women on a pedestal over dark-skinned women and disguise their colorist projections as preferences. However, preferences become colorist when associating skin tones with characteristics. Those in the higher ranks either mask colorism as a preference or deny it exists to keep the lower ranks beneath them, which explains why many black celebrities are examples of dark-skinned or

brown-skinned black men with a light-skinned women, considering them as “trophy wives” or a symbol of status. But what does that say for dark-skinned black women?

### **Marriage Rate of Dark-skinned Women**

Dark-skinned women’s rank in the colorism hierarchy and the upliftment of light skin women by colorist men cause their marriage rates to drop. In General, African American women are 25 percent less likely to get married than white women (Besharov & West, n.d.). Additionally, 22 percent of African American women stay in marriages life-long, which is estimated to be half the amount of time white women stay married (44 percent) (Cherlin, 1992, as cited in Besharov & West, n.d.). A study conducted by MSCUI, focusing on the black “intra-racial disparity in marriage outcomes,” shows that the rate of dark-skinned that had ever been married is 23 percent (the lowest of both medium and light-skinned women). In contrast, light-skinned women had the highest percentage at 53 (Goldsmith et al.,2009). Colorism works to keep dark-skinned black women as the most inferior group within the black community; black men become “unmarriageable” to these women, but their preference for lighter skin tones remains as they continue to turn their back on melanated counterparts.

### **Colorism’s Affect on Social Media**

Platforms like Instagram and YouTube have become popular sources of instant-gratification entertainment for beauty and fashion to market their audience to a broad audience. Although in recent years, black features have been appreciated much more as social media tends to popularize Black beauty, associating them with “Instagram baddie” culture. As many viral fashion trends are influenced by African American style, sharing the message of



black is beautiful; with popular Instagram hashtags such as “melaninpoppin” and “brownskingirl.” It is safe to say that social media has become inclusive of black culture, but that does not mean colorism doesn’t exist on these kinds of platforms as well.

Colorism seems to remain no matter the environment because of the lasting belief that “light is right.” For example, Beyoncé is the most followed black female celebrity on Instagram right now with 286 million followers, then Nicki Minaj has 206 million followers; both considerably light-skinned or light-brown, and Beyoncé is a prime example of a “trophy wife.” Since both are mainstream celebrities with a broad audience, fans of all races contribute to their follower count. Two of the most popular black Instagram influencers directly appealing to the black community and influence many fashion trends and material beauty culture are Jayda Cheaves and Aria Fletcher (8 million followers for Cheaves and 5.7 million for Fletcher). Those are examples of influential people of lighter skin tones who gained much of their fame from dating and giving birth to famous black rappers’ children. So even if social media has begun to popularize black culture, light-skinned black people are still used as a representation of black beauty. Since social media is a platform where the users maintain the fame of the influencers by supporting their content, nobody else but the black community is to blame for this.

## **Conclusion**

Due to the events of slavery, colorism has had a long-lasting effect on the black community. But the question is, can colorism be corrected? If the black community continues to spread awareness of this issue and those that benefit from it start to forfeit their internalized superiority, it could be at least reduced. Yet it is doubtful, due to human nature, that those in a superior position would even want to acknowledge their superiority to continue to reap the

benefits. Just as how many prejudiced white people may deny white-privilege. Not to say that there is entirely no hope, but a unique approach can be taken when spreading awareness. Instead of condemning those in higher ranks of the colorism hierarchy, continue to educate the black community while emphasizing that this issue derived from slavery and the treatment of oppressed ancestors. Prejudice is a burden that confuses the past, threatens the future, and renders the present inaccessible (Angelou, n.d.). There is no way for the black community to heal from racism if they keep the hatred alive within themselves.

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