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SKIN COMPLEXION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: THE IMPACT OF COLORISM ON AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

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Abstract: Skin completion has impacted the lives, life chances, and life choices of African American women for centuries. Skin complexion partiality has been an entrenched issue in the African American community. More generally, skin complexion has a history of impacting race relations in America. In fact, positive characteristics are attributed to those with lighter skin while those who with darker complexions are frequently placed into stereotypical categories and judged severly by their physical appearance. The authors investigate colorism and its effects on African American women's life outcomes. This article provides current data on young women's (between the ages of 18-23) perceptions of colorism. This article also examines the correlation between women with high self-esteem (regardless of their skin complexion) and high achievements in measures of social capital. The study was guided by four research questions: 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? And 4) Is the issue of colorism still relevant in the twenty first century. Because colorism is further complicated by racism, classism, and sexism, its paradoxical consequences impact African American women's self-esteem, identity, and social capital.

Keywords: skin complexion; colorism; self-esteem; racism; skin color stratification; African American women

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There is an existing beauty standard characterized by skin complexion among African Americans that erodes the framework of cultural identity, inclusion, mobility, and social acceptance. This phenomenon has plagued the African-American community since the period of slavery continues to hold true in today's society. Although it is well established that American society has an intricate history in regards to race relations, an equally important matter has not been given significant attention. The main characteristic that continues to separate the dominant groups from the non-dominant groups is skin color (Hunter, 2002; Azibo, 2014). Moreover, it "is apparent that colorist ideology is based on not just skin pigmentation but all highly correlated physical trait[s]—hair texture, eye color and facial features" (Cain, 2006:1). In addition to macro (societal) influences, colorism is also imparted at the mirco level as one's family shapes a person's identity, perspectives, and life experiences, materializing within the socialization process (Wilder & Cain, 2011).

During one of his many powerful speeches Malcolm X provided us with thought provoking questions linked to the effects of colorism:

> Malcolm X replies that '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' (This is Africa 2014:1; A Voice for Men, 2014:1)

It is demonstrated that positive characteristics and traits are attributed to those with lighter skin, while those with darker complexions (Thompson & Keith, 2001; Corso, 2014) are frequently placed into stereotypical categories and judged severely by their physical appearance (Hill, 2002; Coard, Breland, & Raskin, 2001; Keith & Herring, 1991; Maddox & Gray, 2002). Though discrepancies between light and dark complexions speak generally to categorizations of race, colorism is a specific phenomenon of 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 (Thompson & Keith, 2001; Maddox & Gray, 2002; Keith et al., 2010). Historical research indicates African Americans with lighter skin tones have fewer societal barriers not only in white America, or interracially, but also among African Americans themselves (Bowman, Muhammad, & Ifatunji, 2004; Gullickson, 2005; Jones, 2000). This *intra*racial discrimination is termed *colorism*, coined by Alice Walker in 1982 (Russell et al., 1993). In essence, color hierarchies have established negative evaluations of darker complexions that influence perceptions both personally and institutionally. 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 (Brown et al., 2003; Hill, 2002;Snider & Rosenberg, 2006). 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 (Hill, 2002:77-91). 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 expressive than in previous eras. This study addressed this theory during the research process.

The present study investigates *colorism* and its affects on African-American women's life outcomes (Mathews, 2013). Numerous findings have established that the lightness of a 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 (Breland, 1998; Hunter, 1998; Keith et al., 2010; Thompson & Keith, 2001; Patton, 2006; Hill, 2002; Hunter, 1998; Brown et al., 2003). This study extends to this research by providing current data concerning young women's perceptions (ages 18-23). In addition, this study has examined the possible correlation between women who hold high self-esteem (regardless of their skin complexion) and high achievements in measures of social capital. Finally, this study questioned if 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? To what extent do African-American women distinguish between light and dark complexions?
2. Is there a significant relationship between a woman's skin complexion and her self-esteem?
3. Is the issue of colorism still relevant in the 21st Century?

Implications of this study include the development of an earnest dialogue within the African-American community and the extension of research and illuminating the importance of this issue. Colorism has palpable effects ranging from the negative mental states that women hold against themselves, to the subconscious preference of African-American men to desire women with lighter complexions. The existing beauty standard, historically induced, remains detrimental to African Americans. Colorism must be challenged to facilitate its eventual eradication.

Review of Literature

It is not uncommon for colorism to become conflated with established (racial) hierarchies of skin color stratification. Colorism is a "system" that grants advantages and opportunities to those that possess lighter complexions *within* the African-American community (Hunter, 2002). Divergently, skin color stratification preserves racial categories, namely, the classification of human skin tones that results in differential treatment based on lightness or darkness. Nevertheless, colorism is directly related to skin color stratification, which both function as a product of racism. 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 (Maddox & Gray, 2002). African Americans with light complexions have been historically and presently favored over those who are dark. This 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 (Hill, 2002). 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." (DuBois, 2011) This color line was the dividing factor that pitted lighter shades against those who were darker 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"(Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1993:18). This perverted sexual behavior created generations of descendants who possessed light brown complexions. Referred to as *Mulattos*, these half African and half European individuals had the "privileges" of working as house servants instead of the typical field labor of their darker skin counterparts (Brown et al., 2003). 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"(Frazier, 1991:760-778). Female slaves with light skin in particular were considered to be "gentler, kinder more [attractive], smarter and more delicate"(Kerr, 2005:273). Despite interracial marriage being taboo, white men would deliberately seek out light complexioned (biracial) mistresses while still claiming a white wife and family (Kerr 2005:271-289).

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 (Hill, 2002:77-91). Lighter skinned African Americans worked in a higher socioeconomic division than did those with darker skin (Coard, Breland, & Raskin, 2001). Persons with light skin held better jobs and many times were able to access those jobs in part by claiming to be white. In fact, some African Americans were so light they were able to successfully "pass" or "escape from their 'proper' inferior position" unknowingly to the white population at the time (Echeruo & Blyden, 1992:669-684). 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 (Brown et al., 2003:271-289). This physical attractiveness was limited to having a "light skin color, facial features and straighter hair [that] were similar to European features" (Brown et al., 2003:271-289). Imitating whiteness was not limited to positive social outcomes; it was additionally a form of safety against discrimination and violence from whites (Patton, 2006:24-51). Although today African Americans with light complexions are not necessarily biracial, they continue to receive what is considered preferential treatment in society. Hochschild and Weaver (2007) explain that persons with dark complexions suffer from both primary and secondary marginalization (Hochschild & Weaver, 2007:643-670). That is, African Americans with dark skin receive

adverse treatment because of their race (primary), as well as their skin tone (secondary). These outcomes are perhaps most influential in the lives of women of color.

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 superior. 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" (Hunter, 2002:177). 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)(Parks-Yancy, 2006:515-545). 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 can lead equally qualifying women to dramatically different life outcomes.

The Role of the African-American Male

It has been 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" (Hill, 2002:77-91). A significant proportion of African-American men consciously and subconsciously practice bias in relation to skin complexion. This form of intraracial discrimination creates relationship conflicts between men and women, and further negates a woman's 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"(Russell, Wilson, & Hall 1993:107). 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 (Thompson & Keith, 2001:339)." 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 (Brown et al., 2003). Thus, if a Black 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 (Lee, 1993:109).

The unremitting image of white women as the standard of beauty can negatively impact the psyche of an African-American man just as 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 (Fanon, 2008). 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 (Fanon, 2008). 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 breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine (Fanon, 2008:45).

The aforementioned passage is telling. It suggests 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 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 as many explicitly attest to favoring light complexioned women (Dark Skin Black Women Word Press, 2011). 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* (*Dark Skin Black Women WordPress, 2011*). There are even examples in R&B, such as Jagged Edge's *Tip of My Tongue* that states "he like them red bone" and Chris Brown's *Look At Me Now* which opens with "yellow model chick"(*Dark Skin Black Women WordPress, 2011*). Women with light complexions are more likely to be praised through lyrics and are distinctly displayed and coveted in the music videos of these artists. African-American men appear to have adopted and therefore become perpetrators 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. Similarly, Kerr (2005) 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'…"(Kerr 2005: 287). 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 whites.

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 among African Americans (Hill, 2002:77-91). 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 dominant (Breland, 1998; Coard, Breland, & Raskin, 2001). Also recall that during slavery dark skin was an indication of unmixed ancestry, positioning those individuals to field labor that involved robust physical toil. The early writing 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 (Echeruo, 1992:669-684)." 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" (Breland, 1998).

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 views her or himself is parallel to how she or he confront the external world. While individuals with high self-esteem interpret their lives as malleable, feelings of low self-esteem often lead to beliefs that personal positions are fixed, outside of one's own control, and negative evaluations by others are grounded in fact (Burton et al., 2010). Thus, the understanding of one's self is closely related to life outcomes. "Skin color is more important as a predictor of self-esteem among women than among men; lighter skin tones are positively related to higher self-esteem, particularly for women with lower socioeconomic status" (Wilder & Cain, 2011:581; Thompson & Keith, 2001). Further, "skin tone along with other correlated characteristics such as hair texture and facial features has more bearing in the lives of women" (Wilder & Cain, 2011:581). To reiterate, 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 the external world 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 views herself. The present article 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 one 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" (Cooley, 1983:26-30). 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* (Cooley, 1983:26-30).

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 (Cooley, 1983:28).

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 (Cahill, 2007:26).

Again, Cooley's theory centralizes the reactions from others and how the individual appropriates those signs mentally. Consequently, 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 perceive 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*" (Sardar, 2008). In fact, because the words "black" and "white" are such polar

opposites, blackness registers "in the collective unconsciousness … [as] ugliness, sin, darkness, and immorality"(Sardar, 2008). "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"(Sardar, 2008). 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 examination of the self explicates that the meaning ascribed to words is significant, and that it "is learned by associating them with other phenomena"(Cooley, 2007:28). 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 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 (Fanon, 2008:21). 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 language of the oppressor. In all, it is the acceptance of the dominant group's cultural values. This acceptance crates a "self- division" for African Americans, both mentally and physically (Fanon, 2008:8). 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. 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"(Kenneth, 2011:330). 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" (Cahill, 2007:110). 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]"(Goffman, 2007:26-30). 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 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"(Collins, 1991; Morris, 2009). 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 (Allan, 2011:334).

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"(Goffman, 1963; Morris, 2009). With this description, dark complexions as a stigma designate the individual with immediate 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 her or him from general society (Kenneth, 2011). 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"(Kenneth, 2011:334). 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 (Link & Phelan, 2001:367).

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 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"(Allan, 2011:334). 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.

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, 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 (Goffman, 1963; Morris, 2009).

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, 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 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 compassions, the self-esteem of African Americans will be partly based on how they compare themselves to whites" (Morris, 2009:20). In the area of skin complexion alone, light-skinned women have more in common with white women than do dark-skinned women.

Methodology

This study is part of a larger research project conducted by Tayler J. Mathews. This section 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 life chances 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 (Nassar-McMillan et al., 2006:79-94). 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 (Rosenberg 1989). The majority of the collected data is quantitative and includes general demographic questions along with questions related to the four main hypotheses. A brief qualitative section was included at the end of the questionnaire for voluntary comments from participants. 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. Consent forms were distributed to notify participants of the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, and the confidentiality of their involvement. Participants additionally had their consent forms read aloud to them by the researcher. The participants were also notified that it would take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete the questionnaire. 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 College/University, or HBCU. This southern university offers Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctoral Degrees. A total of 3,941 students (undergraduate and graduate) were enrolled at the time the research took place. The HBCU is 71% female and 29% male. For the purposes of this study, 95 currently enrolled female undergraduate students ranging in ages from 18-23 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 total 100). There were 7 students aged at 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 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 while dark and light participants maintained roughly equal representation.

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 included 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 were reported.

Self Esteem: Questions from the Rosenberg's Self Esteem Scale were used to evaluate participants along with additional questions proposed by the researcher (Rosenberg, 1989). Participants were asked to answer questions using a 5-item Likert scale (Strongly Agree, 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 complexions of *light, medium, and dark* (Nassar-McMillan et al, 2006:79-94). Although the questionnaire only included three response options, upon final analysis it was revealed 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 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*. Participants in the *high and involved* categories were reported as having a higher social capital than participants who did 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.

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 leading 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 in extracurricular activities 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.

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.

Table 1*: Mean Comparison of Social Capital by Skin Complexion*

	Social Capital			
	Friendship	**Relationship Status**	**GPA**	**Involvement**
Skin Complexion				
Light	2.86 (.351)	1.45 (.510)	3.67 (.7.96)	1.50 (.511)
Medium	2.66 (.519)	1.42 (.497)	3.52 (.923)	1.58 (.497)
Dark	2.66 (.485)	1.26 (.452)	3.32 (.885)	1.61 (.501)

Note. Standard deviations are given in parenthesis.[a]Scores grouped by 1 (*low*), 2 (*moderate*), 3 (*high*). [b]Scores grouped by 1 (*single*), 2 (*involved with a significant other*). [c]GPA based on a 4.0 scale. [d]Scores group by 1 (*not involved*), 2 (involved

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 $\varepsilon^2 = .061$. 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 $\varepsilon^2 = .188$. 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 $\varepsilon^2 = .174$. 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.

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 2: *Mean Comparison of Social Capital by Self-Esteem*

	Social Capital			
	Friendship	**Relationship Status**	**GPA**	**Involvement**
Self-Esteem				
Low	1.66 (.577)	1.33 (.577)	1.33 (5.77	1.33 (.577
High	2.75 (4.35	1.40 (.494)	1.52 (.502)	1.57 (.497)

Note: Standard deviations are given in parenthesis.[a]Scores grouped by 1 (low), 2 (moderate), 3 (high). [b]Scores grouped by 1 (single), 2 (involved with a significant other). [c]Scores grouped by 1 (low), 2 (high). [d]Scores grouped by 1 (not involved), 2 (involved).*p<.05.

Table 3: *Frequency and Percentage 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 3 reflects the majority of responses of those who answered each question. Valid percentages shown as whole numbers

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 4 reflects the majority of responses of those who answered each question. Valid percentages 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%)*.

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* (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 an additional 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%).

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 (Hill, 2002:77-91). Most young women reported desiring a dark complexioned mate, which was consistent among all skin tones. Perhaps this is because 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 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"(Thompson & Keith, 2001:339). 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 having a dark complexion reported the highest instances of skin tone discrimination. This provides substantial evidence that colorism remains as a relevant topic of social science.

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 (Keith et al., 2010:48-59). Likewise, Coard, Breland, and Raskin found that medium skin complexions were favored over both light and dark (Coard, Breland, & Raskin, 2001). 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.

A noteworthy finding surrounding the perceptions and preferences of women

was 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 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 reposes given their "superior" status? Or, was this an action to compensate "blackness" and alignment within the community? Russell et. al have emphasized that many fair and light-skinned African Americans long for acceptance by their darker complexion counterparts (Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1993). However, it is important 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 attempt a comprehensive study of factors related to colorism. This is a noteworthy limitation as explicit personal information and experiences could not be elicited and measured. Conversely, an interview design may provide evidence of the emotional aspects of the phenomenon. This study also relied on self-reported data yielding the possibility of dishonest responses. This serves as a threat to the validity of the research and underscores the issues of social desirability. Other limitations include the small sample size as well as incomplete questionnaires resulting in gaps of data and limited analysis. Hypotheses that were not found to be significant may have held significance had more participants been utilized. As previously stated, this study employed a convenience sample. Accordingly, the representativeness and equal random selection was compromised. Although convenience sampling facilitates 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, threatening 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.

Future studies should further investigate "gendered colorism"(Hill, 2002:77-91) as considerable research is needed 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 equally address the male perspective of skin complexion concerning attractiveness in women and examine the influence of media and hip-hop culture. Additionally, further research and awareness of the internalization of white beauty standards necessitates exploration. Women in the present study believed that white Americans wrongly influence how African Americans perceive their own skin complexion. As discussed, white standards of beauty have been normalized within American society with minimal or incorrect representations of beauty regarding women of color. Supplementary 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.

Conclusion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the affects of colorism in relation to African-American women's life outcomes (Mathews, 2013; Wilder & Cain, 2011; Cain, 2006; Wilder, 2008). An overwhelming majority of scholars agree that women are treated, regarded (or disregarded), and evaluated based on skin complexion. 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 (Hill, 2002), 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 relatively recent nature of the literature, it is disturbing that little to no change has taken place regarding the stratification of skin tones (Echeruo, 1992; Keith & Herring, 1991; Gullickson, 2005; Corso, 2014). 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 (Keith et al., 2010:48-59).

The study of colorism remains crucial. The manifestation of the phenomenon serves as evidence of societal stratification based on racial measures of skin tone that date back to pre-abolition. Colorism, (entrenched by negative images, deep-rooted stereotypes of African American and white beauty, and subordinate racial relationships) has grown to divide the community in ways that muddle the establishment of a just society. Because colorism is also complicated by racism, classism, and sexism, it produces 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 (Coard, Breland, & Raskin, 2001). 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, notwithstanding the recognition of these issues 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 African roots as can be seen with the reclaiming of natural hairstyles and Afrocentric fashion.

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Note

[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.

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