



Fall 2018

## What is Colorism?

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# What is Colorism?

## **Abstract**

Analyze any advertising campaign colorism, dark-skinned, skin lightening, skin bleaching or notice the types of people represented in the media and on television and one major conclusion will be made clear -- Colorism is a prevalent issue worldwide. When the complexity of colorism transpires within a race it causes an even greater societal struggle, making it almost impossible to eliminate.

## **Keywords**

Colorism, Dark-skinned, Skin lightening, Skin bleaching

## **Disciplines**

African American Studies | Communication | Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication | Mass Communication | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies

## **Comments**

Written for AFS 250: Black Feminism in Film and Hip Hop.

## **What is Colorism?**

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## Introduction

Analyze any advertising campaign or notice the types of people represented in the media and on television and one major conclusion will be made clear -- Colorism is a prevalent issue worldwide. Colorism is the idea that light skin people have privilege over dark skin people in America as well as other places in the world (Charles, 2011, p. 121). In America, colorism stems from slavery because mulattos and lighter skinned slaves had the "privilege" of being in the house and performing less strenuous work (Uzogara, 2014; Glenn, 2008, p. 286). Other places in the world such as India, the Philippines, Japan, China, Korea, and Mexico have their own reasons for aspiring to be light, but they all have this goal of looking lighter (Glenn, 2008). Throughout history, lighter skin has always been viewed as superior, sexier, more attractive, purer, and healthier when compared to darker skin (Charles, 2011, p. 375; Glenn, 2008). Colorism is multifaceted with racism, classism, and sexism, making it difficult to break down and eliminate (Matthews, 2015, p. 273). When isolated, each of these is a complex and difficult issue that takes decades for a society to solve. When the complexity of colorism transpires within a race it causes an even greater societal struggle, making it almost impossible to eliminate.

When individuals within the subcategories of a race are concerned with looking a certain way or are upset with the way they look, it can be difficult to be happy at all. Individuals will always strive to be better in order to fit into their social group, which will often end in more stress and disappointment. This vicious cycle can be never ending for some people, and it disproportionately affects women. Men are also affected, but their role in perpetuating colorism is more subtle than women's. Today, the media has a huge influence on young people

and even adults when it comes to what “pretty” women look like. Beauty products are sold to convince women that they need the product to achieve the ideal standards of beauty, and for dark people one of those products is skin lightening cream. It is essential to investigate the effects that the media has on individuals’ perceptions of beauty to understand the aspects of colorism and dissolve its prevalence in society.

### **Why Bleach Skin?**

Skin bleaching products are used to decrease levels of the dark melanin pigment in the skin in order to make an individual’s complexion appear lighter (Charles, 2011, p. 122). Skin lightening products are overwhelmingly popular among dark-skinned communities across the world. In a study done in Harlem, New York in 2010, the images and representations of skin bleaching products were found to be mostly derogatory against darker skin (Charles, 2011, p. 134). This type of propaganda is effective, but also a huge problem. It makes dark individuals feel worse about themselves and want to keep buying the product in order to look lighter and not look like the ugly dark person on the label. This is not an issue unique to the African-American community in Harlem, New York. It is a worldwide problem that a lot of dark-skinned (and even light-skinned) individuals face.

Blackness has been historically devalued in America, but the globalization of white, Western beauty standards has influenced the desire of black people around the world to bleach their skin in order to conform to beauty standards (Charles, 2011, p. 118). This influence takes its form in some especially dehumanizing messages. Some of the first advertisements for skin bleaching cosmetic products in 1968 included sayings like “free your mind” suggesting that dark people were in a state of mental slavery (Charles, 2011, p. 118). These types of sayings impact

people's way of thinking and self-image. They may not consciously believe they are in this mental state of slavery, but they could relate to the person in the commercial, and the idea of "freeing their mind" could subconsciously be appealing. Promoters of these products have led consumers to believe that this lightening could validate African-Americans that they would appear acceptable to white people (Charles, 2011, p. 123). They took advantage of people's insecurities by attacking them, but then giving them an outlet so that they did not have to live with this insecurity. This early ideology influenced the culture to stigmatize dark skin and expanded into the colorism issue that is still prevalent in society today.

### **Physical Consequences of Bleaching**

Colorism does not only affect a woman's success, mental health, and personal relationships -- its consequences also carry serious physical harm. Many people are willing to overlook the harsh side effects of skin lightening products in order to look lighter and be more acceptable according to societal standards. Skin lightening products are not good for women's self-esteem or confidence, but they also contain harmful chemicals. Mercury and hydroquinone are two of the major harmful toxins found in skin lightening products (Charles, 2011, p. 123). Mercury is an extremely dangerous neurotoxin that can lead to numerous health complications. Mercury, hydroquinone, and many of the other harmful chemicals found in skin bleaching products have been known to cause damage to the peripheral and central nervous system, lead to diseases such as tuberculosis, and cause damage to the kidney system and requiring dialysis, just to name a few ailments (Charles, 2011, p. 123). It is barbaric for societies to devalue dark skin to the extent that they advocate for harsh products that cause serious health complications.

## **Mental and Emotional Consequences of Skin Lightening**

There is a lot of baggage associated with being dark and feeling the pressures of having lighter skin. There was a study done that determined those who frequently survey their skin tone are more likely to be dissatisfied with it (Choma, 2018, p. 171). It is not surprising that anxiously analyzing one's own appearance is unhealthy, but it is important to recognize where this anxiety and insecurity comes from. Western ideals of beauty praise light, fair skin, which leaves people with dark complexions to constantly examine their skin tone and find more reasons to be unhappy with it. This dissatisfaction, as also seen in this study, can lead to the desire for lighter skin and the use of skin lightening products (Choma, 2018, p. 170). This feeds the issue of colorism and continues to validate light skin as the standard of modern-day beauty. People with dark skin can get discouraged by the scrutiny and judgement they can expect to face as a result of their complexions. Skin tones have been shown to have an effect on self-esteem among black women (Matthews, 2015, p. 248). It is not surprising that lighter women report higher self-esteem than darker women (Matthews, 2015, p. 273). As a result, these women with higher self-esteem get higher achievements and have more income than those with lower self-esteem (Matthews, 2015, p. 248). This is a huge issue because dark black women can be just as smart, or even smarter, than their lighter counterparts and can still be less successful in life. Having confidence in oneself is often a big factor in being successful and moving up in any given career. When dark women are systematically discriminated against, they are already put at a disadvantage. Whether these women are consciously aware of it or not, they are not supposed to be confident, so the way they present themselves can be affected.

Although these achievements are significant, it is important to recognize that self-esteem can make or break a woman and can be associated with much more than just achievements. A person's mental health can suffer as a result of low self-esteem. Carrying a constant belief that one is lesser due to the color of their skin, whether it be conscious or subconscious, can be emotionally and mentally taxing. It is important that mental health practitioners understand colorism in order to shape thinking around it in their communities and encourage intervention and prevention activities (Ya Azibo, 2014, p. 94). These types of actions, from different types of stakeholders, are necessary for undermining colorism in communities.

Colorism thrives on the concept that individuals who identify more strongly with a certain group are more susceptible to the negative stereotypes associated with that group (Townsend, 2010, p. 282). The feelings and emotions of those who have dark (or lights) skin are damaged when they experience discrimination from their black counterparts. With this hurt comes retaliation and the perpetuation of colorism. The fact that both light and dark-skinned people can identify as black adds a layer of complexity to the discrimination. Hate can be more damaging coming from the people that someone feels like they should be identifying with. Confusion and lack of motivation to fix this issue can result from the fact that the problem is within a race. Believing colorism is normal and is supposed to play out in this way is common because it is so deeply rooted.

Some studies show that romantic relationships and marriages are less common among women who are dark skinned when compared to their light skinned counterparts (Jha, 2009, p. 76). This can be discouraging for dark skinned individuals when searching the dating pool. This idea of lighter being superior can be seen in models such as the mulatto hypothesis. The

mulatto hypothesis is the notion that the greater amount of white ancestry an African has, the better they will be at adapting in their environment (Ya Azibo, 2014, p. 92). Critiques of this hypothesis explain why we must challenge and move past it in order to break down colorism (Ya Azibo, 2014). It is necessary to educate societies about the mulatto hypothesis so that colorism can be challenged and reduced. Ya Azibo argues, it is necessary that schools and religious organizations start with the education and the rest will follow (Ya Azibo, 2014, p. 92). Without being aware of the issues rooted in colorism, individuals will continue to believe being dark is wrong.

### **The Media**

Technology and the media have taken over the world for the better and, in a lot of ways, for the worst. It is adding new dimensions to colorism, racism, and other systemic issues that are prevalent today (Phoenix, 2014, p. 98). With media outlets such as twitter and Instagram being readily available with the raise of a device, people are able to express themselves constantly. When expressions become negative, condescending, or hateful messages, they fuel the fires of issues like colorism. Twitter has been a platform for many to express their beliefs about almost anything whether others want to listen or not. Tweets regarding colorism include things like “No dark skin allowed”, “Can’t trust most dark skin girls, they lie, steal, and don’t practice good hygiene #facts”, and “All dark skin girls aren’t ugly, and all light skin girls aren’t cute” (Phoenix, 2014, p. 97). Technology is becoming more and more available to young people and when young dark-skinned children see tweets like the first two, they believe this is standard and an acceptable way to talk about dark people. Colorism is ingrained in children at a young age due to the repetitiveness and the satirical nature of the

language surrounding skin tones. The third tweet is an attempt to defend dark girls, but fails to breakdown the problematic concept of colorism. The solution is not to simply say the opposite of what is wrong. Instead, the focus should be on the fact that beauty is in everyone and it is not determined by the color of their skin (Phoenix, 2014, p. 97).

Changing this language could be particularly helpful for encouraging young children. This leaves a different message ingrained in them instead of the hate that they are accustomed to. Little light and dark girls will begin to feel better about themselves and everyone will be able to use less hurtful language when addressing them.

Skin lightening can often be seen on magazine covers featuring dark skinned people. One example is when *12 Years a Slave* star, Lupita Nyong'o, was featured on the cover of *Vanity Fair* appearing much lighter than she actually is (Phoenix, 2014, p. 99). It was not Nyong'o who was accused of lightening her skin using cosmetic products, but *Vanity Fair* was accused of digitally altering the photograph and making her appear lighter (Phoenix, 2014, p. 99). Either way, skin lightening is immoral when portraying a black woman on such a public platform, as the cover of a magazine, for her accomplishments. This case is not isolated by any means. Many celebrities including India.Arie and Beyoncé have been accused of appearing lighter on magazine covers (Phoenix, 2014, p. 99). This incident is just particularly notable because Nyong'o was recognized for playing her role as a slave in the film. It seems to be contradictory when an individual seems to be receiving praise for their achievements, yet they are not recognized as who they truly are and in their own skin. In order for celebrities to be proud of who they are, where they have been, and where they are now, they should be portrayed as their true self.

## Conclusion

Breaking down these concepts of colorism is difficult in the day and age we live in. The media makes rare and unattainable skin types the most desired and technology and the cosmetics industry makes it possible to buy products in order to try and achieve this ideal skin tone. Colorism is a descendant of white racism and as long as it remains intact, so will colorism (Phoenix, 2014, p. 103). Without this idea of white being superior to black, there would be no urge for black people to be their lightest selves. In order to break down colorism, it is crucial that society organizes culturally and politically in an academic way that challenges racism along with the companies that gain profit from exploiting colorism (Phoenix, 2014, p. 103). Educating, asking questions, and creating dialogue about this issue is the best way to make people aware.

Awareness is a huge component in combating any type of discrimination. Once people are aware of how harmful the effects can be for others, they become more invested. Ya Azibo (2014) writes about the mulatto hypothesis and how awareness of this concept is essential in breaking down colorism. If society uses the media as a helpful tool for this task as opposed to a hurtful tool, it could be quite powerful. Social media is so powerful because of present day technology. The effective “Black Lives Matter” movement started on twitter and quickly caught on to raise awareness nationally. These kinds of movements are made possible by just small groups of individuals caring about the issue and taking action against it. They are effective because people are made aware of the issue, which encourages them to have empathy. Movements with slogans like “black is beautiful” could be empowering for African-American people of all skin tones (Matthews, 2015, p. 273). These types of sayings place a positive, all-

inclusive emphasis on being black...whatever that may be. It may look different in different people, but everyone's skin is valid.

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