Manifestations of Colorism in Interpersonal Relationship Preferences of Black Men

Julie Corso

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/aas_theses

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/aas_theses/24
MANIFESTATIONS OF COLORISM IN INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP PREFERENCES OF BLACK MEN

by

JULIE CORSO

Under the Direction of Dr. Makungu Akinyela

ABSTRACT

The exclusionary nature of colorism and how it affects personal awareness of self-identity behooves us to explore the socio-psychological interplay of life choices and racial socialization. This exploratory research is positioned within the context of black males’ relationship preferences and sought comprehension of how and why their perceptions inform their choices and inclination for lighter skin tones. The manifestations of colorism in these men’s experiences influence their interactions with women and how they perceive themselves. Findings of this phenomenological study informed the researcher of various dynamics that shape interactions of race, gender and colorism and utilized Black Feminist Thought as an epistemological framework. Purposeful sampling was used for recruitment and narrative interview methods highlighted perspectives and experiences of twenty, Atlanta black males, aged 21 and older for an overall essence of their phenomenon. Hopefully, this work will prompt analytical conversations to extend research of colorism within similar group dynamics.

INDEX WORDS: Colorism, Black males, Relationship preferences, Socialization, Self-concept, Racial identity
MANIFESTATIONS OF COLORISM IN INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP
PREFERENCES OF BLACK MEN

by

JULIE CORSO

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2014
MANIFESTATIONS OF COLORISM IN INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP
PREFERENCES OF BLACK MEN

by

JULIE CORSO

Committee Chair:       Makungu Akinyela

Committee:             Cora Presley
                       Cassandra White

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
May 2014
DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my two, miraculous sons. Without their existence and life experiences, this idea for research would never come to fruition; as it would not have been realized, the significance of colorism’s impact on identity and the quality of life. It is owed to their struggles with skin tone as much as it is to their triumphs over discrimination.

To my family (and my church family), who have given me their unequivocal support throughout, in all things, for which my mere expression of thanks simply does not suffice. All of you have been instrumental in instilling confidence and strengthening my determination. It is your good support system that kept me sane and level-headed.

To the men who made this research possible; without your voices, your stories, your experiences, this thesis research would have no meaning or validity. I graciously thank you for accepting and trusting me while sharing your life choices, history and emotions. Your strength and courage for speaking up and out on an uncomfortable issue is most commendable!

To all of the women who have experienced sorrow and doubt as it pertains to the hue of your complexions, may you always know that beauty is NOT simply skin deep. Beauty is who you are through to your very soul. Perhaps this supplemental research will be the beginning of a long-needed healing from skin tone discrimination and become the onset of the end of the valorization of whiteness. In challenging the politics of skin color, I hope this work will be a starting point for critical dialogue that will lead to change in action as well as consciousness.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Completing this initial work would have been all the more daunting had it not been for my untiring thesis committee members: Dr. Makungu Akinyela, Dr. Cora Presley and Dr. Cassandra White. The trio tolerated my talking about all of my excitement, problems and realizations in all stages of my research.

To Dr. Akinyela, I am most appreciative that you have no fear in taking on a challenge and accepted me (‘the problem child’) with all of my passion and flaws. Your faith in my production of work and character allowed me to get through the hardest of times. You bettered my scholarly development by asking the ‘hard’ questions and our discussions have been life-changing. Always being available (even when you did not have time) fostered trust in perspective and respect for my inquisitive nature. I know that your honesty was always in my best interest. I finally ‘jumped off of the fence,’ thank you for believing in me!

To Dr. Presley, you have been an invaluable mentor on both an academic and personal level for which I am extremely grateful. Your constructive advice paired with tireless encouragement allowed me to realize what you were doing for my future, academic career. Your meticulous attention to detail inspires my desire to be part of an academic family. Most importantly, seeing me for who I am, rather than what I am not was foundational to my perseverance. It was your guidance that allowed me to stay the course and never lose sight of the goal.

To Dr. White, I attribute this level of my graduate career to your conscious reminders of how to integrate my anthropological skills with African-centered methodology, to always be reflective and for providing me with the fundamentals of research in my undergraduate years. I am indebted to you for teaching me how to take interview and field notes, how to be a participant observer, learning the intricacies of (self) coding and how not to be an outsider. Your lessons
combined with the methodologies employed in my current department helped to bridge the gap between being an ethnocentric investigator and a respectful, scholarly researcher.

To Dr. Sarita Davis, I have a special thank you for impressing upon me to find my voice and place amidst the research. You helped me to bring out the ‘truth’ in the reasons for my research, as well as to see that I do not exist apart from my participants. It is because of our last meeting when the clarity arrived regarding that ‘extra’ layer of analysis after my data had been presented and analyzed. Introspection makes all the difference!

To the staff in the African American Studies Department, thank you for tolerating all of my copier needs, hasty requests and morning moods. Our conversations were a much needed escape from the daily, academic grind. To Tiffany Bullock and Ms. Futrell, you should be given honorary psychology degrees for all the advice you give and all of the issues we bring to you for resolutions.

Lastly, if not for the pioneering work of Dr. Yaba Blay, this research would not have been relevant. Thank you for having the passion to force the hard conversations out into the open about colorism. Your poignant statement regarding men’s participation in the cycle of intraracial discrimination authenticated my scholarly inquiry. Your indirect influence over my research interest has served as a guide to help me examine all forces at play with respect to colorism.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................... v

LIST OF TABLES ..................................................................................................................... xi

LIST OF FIGURES .................................................................................................................... xii

PROLOGUE ............................................................................................................................. 1

1 INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 6

1.1 Background to the Problem ............................................................................................. 9

1.2 Statement of the Problem ............................................................................................... 10

1.3 Significance of the Study ............................................................................................... 11

1.4 Nature of the Study ........................................................................................................ 14

1.5 Research Questions ........................................................................................................ 16

1.6 Theoretical Framework ................................................................................................. 16

1.6.1 Reflexivity & Ethics ................................................................................................... 21

1.7 Definition of Terms ........................................................................................................ 24

1.8 Assumptions .................................................................................................................. 24

1.9 Scope, Limitations, and Delimitations .......................................................................... 25

1.10 Summary ...................................................................................................................... 28

2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ..................................................................................... 29

2.1 Defining Colorism ......................................................................................................... 29

2.2 History and Context of Colorism .................................................................................. 31
2.2.1 Global Manifestations of Colorism Across Time ................................................. 33
2.2.2 Colorism and Employment .............................................................................. 35
2.2.3 Colorism and Interpersonal Relationships ...................................................... 36
2.3 Whiteness and Blackness .................................................................................. 38
2.4 Self-Esteem, Self-Concept and Value Standards of Skin Tone ....................... 44
2.5 Role of Skin Tone in Shaping Identities .............................................................. 47
2.6 Role of Skin Tone to Relationships .................................................................... 49
2.7 Summary ............................................................................................................. 50

3 METHODOLOGY .................................................................................................... 52
3.1 Research Design ................................................................................................. 52
3.2 Participants .......................................................................................................... 53
3.3 Interviews ............................................................................................................ 55
3.4 Procedures ........................................................................................................... 55
3.5 Instrument ........................................................................................................... 57
3.6 Data Analysis ...................................................................................................... 60
3.7 Reliability and Validity ...................................................................................... 61
3.8 Summary ............................................................................................................. 62

4 FINDINGS ............................................................................................................... 62
4.1 Data Analysis ...................................................................................................... 70
4.2 Socialization ...................................................................................................... 71
4.2.1 Primary Socialization ................................................................. 72
4.2.2 Secondary Socialization ............................................................ 75
4.3 Identity Construction ..................................................................... 77
  4.3.1 Social Psychological Influences of Colorism ............................. 80
  4.3.2 Participants’ Concept of “Self” .................................................. 81
  4.3.3 Self-Concept and Self-Esteem .................................................. 83
  4.3.4 Stigmatized Identities ............................................................ 85
4.4 Embedded Idealizations ............................................................... 88
  4.4.1 Application of Values or Adherence to Societal Norms Established Within a White Racist Structure ............................... 90
  4.4.2 Return to Valorization of Whiteness ........................................ 92
4.5 Conclusion ................................................................................... 94
4.6 Summary ..................................................................................... 96
5 DISCUSSION .................................................................................... 97
  5.1 Conclusion .................................................................................. 97
  5.2 Implications ................................................................................ 105
  5.3 Recommendations for Future Research ....................................... 106
  5.4 Summary ................................................................................... 107
EPILOGUE ........................................................................................... 107
REFERENCES ................................................................................... 110
APPENDICES ......................................................................................................................... 128

Appendix A: Informed Consent ................................................................................................. 128

Appendix B: Recruitment/Roundtable “Conversation on Colorism” Ad .......................... 130

Appendix C: Survey Questions and Interview Guide .............................................................. 131

Survey Information and Details ............................................................................................... 131

Scales & Measures: Demographics ......................................................................................... 131
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 Participants........................................................................................................... 64

Table 2 Self-Esteem Survey Results.................................................................................... 84
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 Participants’ Ages................................................................. 65
Figure 2 Participants’ Place of Origin ............................................. 65
Figure 3 Participants’ Self-Identified Skin Tones ............................ 66
Figure 4 Participants’ Breakdown of Income Range to Skin Tone .... 66
Figure 5 Participants’ Self-Reported Income .................................. 66
Figure 6 Participants’ Relationship Status....................................... 67
Figure 7 Participants’ Educational Backgrounds ................................ 67
Figure 8 Participants Who are Fathers ........................................... 68
Figure 9 How a Participants’ Identity is Influenced by Socialization .... 74
Figure 10 Participants’ Responses to Desirability ............................ 95
PROLOGUE

My research interest developed out of many personal experiences. However, it was not until my children’s experiences with colorism and racism did I realize the magnitude of the shade of one’s skin shaping their social realities. When my oldest son was born in 1993, I recall un-swaddling him when the staff left my room, to be sure that he had ten fingers, ten toes and all the necessary ‘boy’ parts. My attending nurse was a ‘black’ woman (light-skinned), in her fifties and worked with my midwife for nearly fifteen years. She returned with a diaper supply and noticed me inspecting my newborn. While she re-swaddled him, she excitedly pointed out the edges of his ears, his knuckles and his nail beds. She told me that his ‘coloring’ would be a “glorious, golden yellow” and that I should not worry about him being able to “pass.” Aside from the awe and shock of becoming a new, young mother, I became confused and curious about what she meant and why it was so significant. After all, the color of my son’s skin made no difference to me – what mattered most was that he was healthy.

A few hours later, I awoke to find three more nurses (also women of various colors and ethnicities) fawning over my sleeping infant and his “thick, dark eyelashes” and “porcelain skin.” The women chattered on about how he would retain his lightness, that his hair would be a dark brown rather than black and there was a possibility that his brown eyes would remain a shade lighter than most. They praised me for having such a beautiful baby and told me how fortunate I was that he had my nose and lips. Again, I was somewhat speechless. When the night shift of nurses came in, they were white women. One of them (while helping me out of bed) whispered to me that I should be thanking God for passing my Italian genes onto my son because
“if one didn’t know better, your baby could pass for white or at worst Italian, you came out lucky because he is not dark.” Promptly, I asked her to leave my room and not to return.

My personal miracle of giving life and basking in the glow of motherhood had been reduced to racist notions of skin tone and body politics by a bevy of strangers. My confusion and curiosity about the first shift of nurses’ comments were swiftly realized. Their remarks demonstrated an unrealized tradition; ritualistic practices that signify and reinforce the cycle and pervasiveness of colorism. I never held animosity for them as I did for the second shift of nurses, because had it not been for my attending nurse I may have remained naïve to this social hierarchy predicated on the color and shade of one’s skin. My first shift of nurses were making observations and affirming my son’s life chances and quality of life in a simple display of a skin check due to their own lived experiences, whereas the second shift were merely appalled that I had crossed the taboo color line and produced non-white offspring. As I contemplated who this little child would grow up to become, my first nurse evaluated his success to be high simply because of his light complexion and ambiguous features. She told me I would have no worries about the color of his skin, he would do” just fine.” Prior to my discharge the following day, the birth certificate was presented for me to sign. As I scanned it for correct spelling, I noticed that it listed my newborn son as “black” – interesting. My rationale at the time was that my son was neither black nor white, he was both. I knew what racism was but colorism was a new realization to me. The ink was dry on my son’s classification of hypo-descent or the one-drop rule.

Although I was unaware that a single word named and defined these customs of checking for lightness and darkness at the time, I was cognizant and ready to challenge those practices with the birth of my second son. This child was a challenging birth and due to the complications, I had a team of professional strangers in my delivery room, varied in ethnicities and gender.
Aside from my ‘black,’ female obstetrician, the ‘black,’ male neonatologist was the only other medical professional who did not make an ordeal about my son’s weight, color or features. When I held him for the first time, I did not look at his ears, knuckles or nail beds, I looked at his eyes and smiled. I thanked God for his life and passed him back to his father. After I was stabilized and moved to another suite, friends, family and nurse shifts arrived. No comments on color tone were made (perhaps it was due to his father staying in the room with me), but several were made about his “silken, dark locks” of hair and his lips. I was told how fortunate we were for him to have my hair and nose, but that his lips more resembled those of his father. We were congratulated on having another child whose skin tone was so beautiful and at the same time indirectly informed of his phenotypic ‘blackness’ in the shape of his mouth and lips. His birth certificate arrived for me to sign and as I laughed quietly to myself about his race being pre-selected as black, I knew that colorism and comparison to Eurocentric phenotypic features would operate again to determine this child’s social status whether I wanted it to or not.

Oddly, the determining ‘one drop’ rule of labeling my children “black” also came with another meaning. My children were neither just black nor just white. The social institution defining and creating the racial categories with which to designate ‘personhood’ was not considering the cultural factors to which their origination would differentiate them. To what identity are my children supposed to claim and cling to? The binary nature of white and black as a racial system offers no intermediary categorization. The cultural concept behind one’s racial identity faces social psychological conflict if only two divisions exist. Society’s understanding of race was flawed and imposed. This codified law (that claims not to be enforced) reproduces racism by establishing my children to be black (regardless of the percentage of African-descended blood) and at the same time, not to be white. Preservation of whiteness and its associated privi-
leges remain protected by our racialized social structure. Should we not question then who is white in America?

Over the years, I have watched my boys grow into their own characters and colorism has always been present to dictate how they maneuver through society based on the shade of their skin tones. There have been instances of stereotypes, identity interrogations, authenticity of racial and ethnic character and restrictive privilege. The most common micro-agression directed towards my children is “what are they?” My snarky yet honest answer is always, “they are simply boys.” Shocked apologetic tones emerge and the inquirers always come back with references to the color of their skin and how ‘international’ or ‘exotic’ their appearances are. When I feel like dignifying their curiosity, I inform them that my children are mixed with Black and Italian. The response typically shuts down further communication. Skin tone has caused limited income opportunities, assumptions of thievery and preferential treatment in institutional settings for my boys and my husband. The discriminatory practices of others towards my family echo countless other families’ injustices based on the tint and tone of their complexions.

My family’s experiences and social realities became the root for my research interest into colorism. My sons’ skin tones are criticized to be too light to represent the experiences of the black race and my husband’s skin tone is said to be too dark to break through the color line of class status acquisition (in spite of his degree and experience). To bridge the gap between my sons’ experiences, my husband’s reality and this thesis research, I found myself wondering how I was able, (being a white woman and mother) to not only shape my children into black men, but also to explore my own interpersonal relationship preferences. Much introspection and self-reflexivity took place in realizing where I am amidst this research and in addressing who I am at home and within society. I had to reach into my past to investigate how my own relationships
developed. Did my racial privilege play a role in my preferences? What prepared me for social and racial biases? Were my experiences of racism different in challenges or did they fall into the same categorizations of struggle? I had to revisit all aspects of my own upbringing and socialization to understand years of racial messages that may have affected or shaped my preferences as well as prejudices. As this research will look at the psychosocial development of my co-researchers (participants), I will look back at myself and reflect on my life. How did I build the relationships and trust that I have with people close to me? What decisions were made by my family about whom I would become and what impact did they have on my future legacy? What images and messages were reinforced throughout my life that would later serve to inform my decisions? This necessary reflexive process helped me to situate the roots of my research interest, my concerns for my sons’ social perceptions and pending personal life choices as well as to better understand how racial realities were complicit in the participants’ unconscious perpetuation of colorism.

Since I am acutely aware of the realities my boys must face within society, cognizance and positionality have afforded me the skills and resources to help them navigate their lives. Just as black mothers help their children to confront discrimination, understand issues of race and reinforce cultural values, I too can offer relevant insight and provide my children with all the tools necessary to support and empower them to become confident, proud ‘black’ men. I have never shielded my children from the reality of being ‘black’ in America and have refused to veil their vision with ideas of a post-racial nation or colorblind ideologies. While I do not have the same past or encounter the same experiences as black mothers, I recognize my limitations and make it my mission to expose white racial, societal perceptions to help my boys develop healthy racial attitudes and self-identities. As to my regards for the insightful men in the study, I consider this
research interest as more than just exploration as I seek hope and transformation; it is a plea for a means to stop reproducing hegemonic racism that in turn fuels colorism.

1 INTRODUCTION

Colorism, according to Alice Walker, is “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same race people based solely on their color” (1983, p. 290). Colorism is not exclusive to African Americans and can be documented throughout global history through colonialism and imperialism. Gradations of skin tone still determine social, political and economic statuses and circumstances. In the United States, a study of colorism’s effects on the lives of African Americans was conducted by Russell, Wilson and Hall and they defined this bias phenomenon as “a psychological fixation about color and features that leads Blacks to discriminate against each other” (1992, p. 2).

As author Angela P. Harris states, “Colorism operates sometimes to confound and sometimes to restructure racial hierarchy. Meanwhile, the circulating meanings attached to color shape the meaning of race. . . . Colorism as a series of symbolic economies is embedded in material economies of production, exchange, and consumption.” (2009, p.2) With that being said, it is fair to say that skin tone operates as capital for socioeconomic mobility and status markers within the white racial frame. Understanding this racist positioning, we can try to make sense of the cyclical, intraracial oppression that is occurring within the black community spurred on by colorism.

Over the last few decades, there have been several studies focused on the effects of colorism. The majority of those studies have explored the impact of the skin tone bias as it relates to socioeconomic and sociopolitical opportunities. There has not been an abundance of research that has investigated areas of male-female relationships and what influences their preferences as it relates to skin tone. In the mid-1990s, Ronald Hall conducted a study on socio-psychological
effects of skin bleaching and concluded that African-Americans idealize light skin as a reference standard for attractiveness and that it had an impact on their mate selection preferences (1995). Prior studies on interpersonal relationship selections have provided acknowledgement of the significance of skin tone and attractiveness in terms of hue and preferences for light skin partners (Coard, Breland & Raskin, 2002). In 2002, Margaret Hunter conducted a study that revealed higher values and privileges to women with lighter skin and was conceptualized to operate as social capital for these women (2002). However, these seminal studies have focused mainly on women’s experiences and reactions.

The pioneering work of Dr. Yaba Blay honed in on the detriments of skin bleaching experienced by women of darker skin tones, as a means to physically change their circumstances and alter their identities. She has asked a poignant question to the academic community recently, “instead of asking women why they bleach, why aren’t we asking men why they prefer light-skinned women? Or why they feel emboldened to make public statements about their preferences?” (Blay, 2013) It is at this juncture that this research becomes valid and enters the academic discourse. Scholars need to be looking at the causes of pain and devaluation that black women feel when black men make statements that objectify and marginalize.

Colorism is an unrelenting intricacy of racism that globally impacts people of color. Understood as a historical and social construct, colorism divides people into categories of color, race and ethnicity. Studies have been conducted on manifestations of colorism, which revealed universal determinants that cross multiple ethnic groups; yet few have focused attention toward cultural antecedents such as racial socialization and identity development (Keith & Herring, 1991; Hill, 2002; Russell & Hall, 1992; Hochschild, 2007). At what point(s) in one’s lifetime are their views on culture and self-identity interrupted or altered by colorism? Additionally, the
majority of scholarly studies on colorism have highlighted the effects experienced by black
women; however, suggestions for furthering the knowledge and filling in the gaps call for us to
look toward black men and expand the query to gender colorism in the arena of relationships and
identities.

The discrimination of colorism affords privileges and places value on the lightness of
skin tone. Colorism is the idealization of social values and self-worth manifested in one’s skin
tone (Jones 2001). There is a distinct, socio-psychological struggle that develops out of color-
ism’s high regard for light complexions and an antipathy for darker complexions; thus establish-
ing an antithesis of cultural ideals and standards of beauty and acceptance. As this distortion is
accepted, forms of assimilation occur that are harmful to African Americans’ and can result as
implications for desirability and affect interpersonal relationship preferences. A sense of signifi-
cance and cultural attitudes of “blackness” are often compromised by colorism and one’s skin
tone becomes a characteristic of social hierarchy, acceptance, success, education and overall as-
essment.

Social values or standards of the dominant group within a society are embedded in beliefs
and attitudes that ascribe worth, significance and acceptance to members of the non-dominant
group. Examples of such principles would include economic, political and social attributes by
which the members of society operate within. The social norms for a community guide manner-
isms and rules for mobility in a given society; these rules are generally dictated by its social va-
ues. For people of color, value is assigned to a person’s skin color and tone by white racist ide-
ologies, and can determine their lived experiences. Therefore, we can conceptualize colorism to
be more destructive than its progenitor, racism. Racism is placed upon one’s identity but color-
ism is accepted, incorporated and self-perpetuated within the collective African Ameri-
can/African-descended community. Using personal data of twenty black men over the age of twenty-one, I extend the current body of scholarship, arguing that socialization and identity development within a white racial frame contributes to preferences for lighter skin tones.

1.1 Background to the Problem

The color of our skin is not a feature that we can easily exchange. While there are products that will alter appearances, though in most cases not safely or permanently, skin tone has permanence. This thesis aims to ponder how black men are participating in the cycle of colorism and if they are conscious of their involvement. An inquiry into Black males displaying a propensity for Black females with light complexions was desired to establish a cause for the effect of darker skinned females’ perpetual struggle with standards of beauty and both parties’ self-worth and cultural and racial identities. There is a need to understand the way in which these men form this distinct preference and how it informs their ideas about race, self-concept and relationships. This study advances sociological social psychology by taking account of the exclusionary nature of colorism and how it affects personal awareness of self and racial identity and construction. The problem of colorism behooves us to explore the socio-psychological interplay of life choices, self-concept and racial socialization. Additionally, a revealing of blurred lines between preference and prejudice emerged from the participants’ narratives that are substantially supportive of counter-cultural values and beliefs. The prevalence of colorism has been operating as a ‘secondary’ form of discrimination parallel to that of racism as it relates to racial identity (Hill, 2000; Hochschild & Weaver, 2007).

Skin tone preferences perform a critical function in relationship selections among these men. It is common to think that we often seek out partners with like characteristics; ethnicity, race, culture and socioeconomic status (Hughes & Hertel, 1989); however, our socialization may
often prove to be a stronger criterion in mate selections (Hughes & Demo, 1989). Additionally, inferences associated with the advantages and disadvantages of skin tone often correlate with one’s self-esteem and self-worth (Ross, 1997; Hunter, 2002). Even though prior studies have indicated that self-esteem and skin tone were less affective in the interpersonal relationship preferences of black men than those of black women (Hill, 2002), there is evidence of a negative effect on these participants’ self-concept in their subconscious reluctance engaging in relationships with darker skin tones.

Keith and Herring’s study on skin tone and stratification in the black community highlights the implications and negative effects left behind by colonization, enslavement, legal discrimination and social segregation (2001). Psychological meanings have been slowly emerging regarding the internalization of such discriminatory practices and their socioeconomic impact upon the black community (Clark, 1940; Martin, 1998). Racial hierarchies have been informed over time by historical caste systems and hegemonic dominance to privilege lighter skin colors (Fanon, 1965; Darity, Dietrich & Hamilton, 2005). Structuring racial hierarchies was the culmination of colonization efforts because the establishment of a societal system was devised to benefit colonizers (who were typically not of color) and privileged social statuses were granted to those with lighter complexions (Fanon, 1965; Hall, 1998).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The acceptance and incorporation of racist social values in one’s daily life bolsters colorism and by extension influences life decisions. Colorism reconciles our preferences and judgments, therefore it is paramount to review how our understandings develop. For this inquiry, investigative significance was placed on the influences of decisions that black men make in terms of interpersonal relationship preferences and selection. Choosing a partner for life and creating a
family are milestones in a person’s life that should not be taken for granted nor made on fallacies of counter-cultural standards. In discovering one’s inclination for accepting counter-cultural ideals would present liberation from the entanglement of colorism and return racial solidarity and positive affirmations back to the collective African-descended community.

Increasing awareness on the issue of colorism became prominent as I re-entered academia. The issue of skin tone privilege became more noticeable to me as a scholar in all areas of life. With much consideration to how my children might be affected, I considered their participation in its perpetuation. As my sons continue to grow into men, I feel it is my duty to raise them as respectful, black men, conscious of both heritages and the social constructs framing their futures. It is of grave significance that as they embark upon their personal life choices, they do so understanding the implications of racial and intraracial discrimination, visual objectification and marginalization of women. Should I allow them to take their social cues solely from the media, popular culture or their peers, I would fail to expose the implications of internalizing hegemonic ideologies. This realization allowed me to question how I can effectively address the parental guidance and racial literacy in ways that empower their views and choices on personal relationships that remains void of oppression and discriminatory practices.

1.3 Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study was to glean a deeper knowledge about the pervasiveness and influence of internalized ideologies maintaining colorism and its manifestation in interpersonal relationship preferences of black men. In order for this exploration to be of benefit to the members of the collective black community, cultural grounding of the research was essential. The production of the resulting knowledge potentially offers a means to reclaim cultural values, beliefs and ideas relative to partner selection preferences and standards of beauty, thereby severing
the white hegemonic worldview. The intention of this research was to transform the consciousness of colorism, identify its affective implications to partner selection and motivate action for change. The ensuing knowledge sought to provide a means of change for African American/African descended people’s life chances by providing a new lens with which to see themselves.

The current body of academic knowledge has generated useful data on the effects and phenomenon of colorism, very little scholarship has directed focus on men’s positions within skin tone discrimination, especially within their relationship preferences. The aims of the study contributed to the existing knowledge and research regarding interpersonal relationship preferences, yet positioned the study solely in the hands of the black male perspective. Additionally, its purpose was to examine the intraracial aspect of interpersonal relationship preferences as a variation on those who have previously researched biracial relationship selection and preferences. The direction intended for the research was one with an exploratory angle that made sense of social constructs (i.e. racial identity, cultural orientation, skin tone bias, socioeconomic status and social hierarchies) and self-concept issues that affect preferences for light skin relationship partners.

The ideal results of this study would allow the African American/Africana Studies discipline as well as related interdisciplinary fields of study to glean a deeper comprehension of the effects of colorism on racial identity, black male self-esteem and self-concept, the selection process of intraracial male-female relationships and the imposing effects of social mobility and hierarchy. There is hope that this research will broadly contribute to sociology, psychology and women’s studies. With new evidence predicated on psychological components of identity formation, the knowledge that is currently known will be expanded for purposes of social change,
family and male-female relationship investigations and therapy and revisiting economic and social stratification motives. Perhaps the data will provide comprehension and display the fundamental attributes of colorism within this century that will aid the development of a theoretical analysis that can examine historical and gender experiences as cross-comparisons. Within the research agenda, this author views the intricacies of intraracial perceptions to exist within a micro-level of survival conditions inside the dominant, white culture and racial identity to be situated at a macro-level outside the African worldview. The recovery of ethnic constructs can only be achieved through a transformative process.

The value of insight is rooted in revealing why colorism is still pervasive in the gender relations between black men and women of varying skin tones. Ignoring the causal relationships at play tends to place the blame on these men instead of pursuing comprehension of their exclusionary ideologies. Discovering reasons, allow for us to strive for a transformative resolution that brings harmony, respect and balance back to male-female relationships within the collective black community while Black Feminist Thought provides the practices to achieve this goal. It is imperative to realize that colorism is not pathology of the black community; it is imposed upon the black community by a white racist superstructure.

Although it was exploratory, the data ascertained from this study could be valuable to researchers seeking explanations for understanding the impact of colorism on black women, as well as how to improve awareness and education of colorism’s destructive nature to the black community. Including discussions of black men’s internalization and inadvertent participation within discriminatory acts of colorism can increase the communal knowledge to black youth and women who are affected by the harmful representations of light-ness, beauty standards and the disempowerment of cultural ideals.
The research provides an added layer of variables to consider, whereas prior studies have not. For instance, the researcher aimed to connect a relationship between the cultural orientation and closeness to Afrocentric ideology with stronger self-esteem, self-concept and resistance to skin tone bias. In measuring the proclivity for acculturation, the interpreted data discerned this hypothesis. It is my suggestion that self-esteem and self-concept are shaped by the following influences: media, popular culture, generational or family, peers and socioeconomic status. Therefore, this study expected to find that most male participants would preference or value lighter complexioned black women as partners or wives.

1.4 Nature of the Study

Narrative research, according to Creswell (2013), encompasses individuals’ stories that provide insight to the participants’ self-identities and accompanying self-perceptions. It is an approach that he confirms to have a psychological orientation and establishes context. Born out of interdisciplinary backgrounds, narrative research can be articulated in oral histories, life histories, varied forms of personal affirmations and auto-ethnographies (Creswell, 2013). As a researcher seeking data that speaks to an individual’s personal perspectives and experiences within a specific time context and relevant cultural norm, collecting personal stories are optimal for details and causality. With respect to this researcher’s questions, the narrative approach can serve as a hermeneutical frame of reference and reveal links between social and personal interactions.

This study was geared to explore a small number of participants and the narrative approach is optimal for focusing on their detailed stories. Creswell (2013) also asserts that narrative research aids us in understanding thematic analysis with the development of patterns or commonalities between participant stories. By using this approach, the testimonies of my participants can offer validation of how colorism denotes prejudice, privilege and value-stripped iden-
ties. The research questions work within this approach because their contexts are rooted in continuity of time and experiences. Since the viewpoints of my participants are varied on some issues, a narrative approach can reveal connections of common ideas. My interview questions were designed to account for details related to the individuals’ past and present experiences from cultural and socio-psychological standpoints.

Additionally, Creswell (2013) presents phenomenology as a research approach that collapses individuals’ experiences with a common situation or occurrence into one larger theme that embodies their combined experience. Phenomenology is a perspective focused in psychology and it marries the subjective encounters with the objective commonality. Creswell (2013) explains that this approach’s textual descriptions answer questions of what they experience while structural descriptions relay information about how they experience the situation. My study is phenomenologically-structured and narratively supported.

Creswell (2013) also asserts that a “narrative can be both a method and the phenomenon of the study” (p. 54). Considering that the research could benefit from either methodological approach, narrative or phenomenological, this researcher embraced both. Narrative as a method begins the active research process with the stories of the interviewed participants. In my analysis, the narratives provided the distinctions between the lived experiences and theming of the data into suggestions of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013, p.55). Within the narrative inquiry analysis, I studied and interpreted the connections their lived experiences provided for as reason. I explored the lives of these participants to better understand the essence of their experiences (Creswell, 2013, p.78). In making sense of the interviews, I have preserved their voices and perspectives while I established a background of their experiences within a structural description of racial conditions and context that exhibits an overarching aspect of their phenomenon.
1.5 Research Questions

The guiding questions of this research are:

Why do black men, who exclusively select light-skinned women, marginalize darker complexioned women?

- What are the reasons why these men favor fair skin over darker skin?
- What are the effects of internalized colorism and racism on the perceptions of black women in relation to medium to darker skin tones?
- Are there gender specific standards that influence beauty as a light skin standard and if this is true, how can these archetypes be challenged and transformed?

1.6 Theoretical Framework

The objectives for this thesis research were three-fold: to explore colorism as a phenomenon materializing in black men’s relationship preferences; to situate these men’s voices as the focus of inquiry; and to generate information that will influence empowering dialogue, social change and cultural healing. The goals for the application of methodology and theory are to provide a philosophical basis for an African-centered orientation to the data. An African-centered methodology encourages reciprocity, turning the participants into co-researchers while providing the means for exploratory queries as well as for the participants’ empowerment (Kershaw, 1992). Through the employment of an African-centered lens, knowledge production through this study aids and empowers those affected to shift away from negative social forces toward positive socialization as it impacts the collective and self-identities. This methodology brings the participants’ experiences and voices to the center of analysis. Utilization of these methods also validated the participants’ lived experiences as being of value to the collective community in an instructive value that is a synthesis of historical and contemporary experiences. There is fundamental
significance of experiential consciousness because it is through reflexivity that people understand their lived experiences.

Contrary to positivist, objective research methods, having an African-centered methodology is active in highlighting the understanding of participants’ positions while promoting the totality of their experiences. This methodology critiques exploitative social science measures and supports an epistemological viewpoint that allows the researcher and the participants to co-produce knowledge without marginalization and respects the research process’ diverse approaches to understand various phenomena and problems. The guiding principle of this framework acknowledges the structure of racism and its practices; thereby knowledge produced will not be positioned as deleterious. The emotions and values of this research’s participants will be useful in challenging exploitative science that treats its participants as objects rather than allowing for introspective subjects.

Afrocentric scholar, Ruth Reviere, also offers support and guidelines for an Afrocentric methodology aimed at transformative research (2001). As a basis for research orientation and positive interpretation of the data, the trajectory is themed with the concept of “nommo.” It means “the productive word” and is utilized for knowledge as a means of improvement. According to Reviere, this focus will drive the research to “challenge the use of the traditional Eurocentric research criteria of objectivity, reliability and validity in the inquiry process” and produce empowering data to uplift lived black experiences (2001, p. 710). She has introduced five, Afrocentric research canons to guide, interpret and explain research inquiries. She asserts that by utilizing these canons, the researcher can maintain the best interests of the members involved and allows for “introspection and retrospection” (Reviere, 2001, p. 715). Kujitoa eliminates objectivity in research. This research endeavor met this canon in that the study was derived from per-
personal experience and maintained authentic connections to the issue as well as allegiance to improving the benefits of life chances. **Utulivu** is the “concept of justice required for legitimate research” (Reviere, 2001, p. 717). This research met the standard in that the study yielded a sense of agency to the participants and strove to achieve unity amidst colorism’s dissolution of racial solidarity. **Ujamaa** is obtained by endorsing the lived experiences of the participants and by recognition of communal interests. The results of this study will uplift and place these men’s narratives in a positive spotlight that implicates the white racial frame rather than personal prejudice. **Uhaki** speaks to the participants’ protocol and protections. This study has tested validity of its measurements and surveys as well as strove to respect the personal interests of its participants. Lastly, **Ukweli** is consummated in this researcher’s ability to center the exploration and analysis within an African worldview and interpret the knowledge gleaned through an African-centered lens.

With respect to the intents of promoting knowledge for racial and gender empowerment, the theoretical context is best influenced by the core tenets of Black Feminist Thought. Black Feminist Thought provided an appropriate and unique framework for how this phenomenon of black male rationale directly impacts black females’ self-worth and esteem. As an analytical tool, Black Feminist Thought reveals the bidirectional influences of the environmental factors (family, peers, popular culture, and media) and the evolution of these men’s notions and preferences for partners’ identities. The gendered processes that colorism implicates, develops a consciousness among both men and women; yet, reduces many black women to feelings of inadequacy, self-loathing and extreme alternatives to changing their body images. Black Feminism provides a space for healing to both genders, opens dialogues with the participants in an explanatory structure that reaffirms women’s values and offers resolution closure to cycles of oppressive
behavior. As a theoretical approach, the ideology of Black Feminist Thought believes in making the intersection of oppressions apparent through the standpoint of those being marginalized or objectified. While its philosophy is representative of black women, the research process can benefit from the production of knowledge via black men as colorism is an intricate discriminating force that affects the male-female relationship, among other concerns. Black men and women are locked into this oppression of colorism together.

Most research on colorism is ‘visible’ in its effects on women. By using Black Feminist Thought’s elements of visibility and standpoint, the research process can bring to light the lesser known familiarity of colorism’s effects on the interpersonal lives of black men. A cycle cannot be broken without understanding the totality of influences informing its participants. As the researcher, if I succeed at revealing the men’s experiences and voices to a larger audience with the analysis grounded in their everyday realities of racism and colorism, their visibility and standpoint will provide validation and agency. The participants’ voices can lead to a connection to the larger issue of colorism and increase awareness and perhaps alter consciousness. My mini-dialogues with these men revealed challenges, controlling images and stereotypes to overcome; however, their willingness to share their experiences signifies a desire to challenge the larger social force of racism. Sociologically speaking, these men’s realities may be viewed on a micro-level of society, but their collective voices speak to a macro-level of societal oppression and result in racial expressions.

The coded data speaks to tenets of Black Feminist Theory in that patriarchal structures are perpetuated. Women may continue to be seen as commodities with values placed upon their skin tone. Standards of beauty and definitions of fairness and attractiveness will be maintained by European principles. Issues of whiteness versus blackness are pervasive historically and can
be projected to be so contemporarily, as the internalization of colorism is hypothesized to be passed socially, intergenerationally and mentally. The impact of intraracial skin tone bias negatively affects men and women and the maintenance of inseparable oppressions (race, class, gender, and skin tone) will assuredly be present. A common cause, consciousness and group solidarity is needed to break the cycle of colorism and gender inequities, otherwise social transformation cannot be attained (Collins, 2000). Most significantly, Patricia Hill Collins avers that a black feminist epistemology offers a subjective framework for social understanding, healing and empowerment, which is crucial to this study’s aim to prevent any additional pathologizing of black men and women (2000, p. 269).

Furthermore, the marginalization and exclusion of black women’s experiences within research fails to produce truthful perspectives, therefore with the inclusion of a black, feminist research standpoint provides a platform to challenge racism, sexism, classism and for this study, colorism. While the voices of black men are explicitly heard in this study’s analysis, the indirect exposure of black women’s experiences are represented; as the two are symbiotic in their relationship with one another as well as within the cycle of perpetual skin tone bias. By including black men into the colorism conversation, we are able to establish a cause and effect relationship that is rooted in white supremacy and subconsciously demonstrated through visual (and racial) objectification. When revealing the psychosocial determinants of these men’s aesthetic preferences, body politics and ideals surrounding skin tone, Black Feminist Thought integrates transformation and activism within the research process that directly impact the male-female relationship as well as racial solidarity and identity.

A conclusive factor in the methodology of this research involves the understanding of reflexivity. Introspection, personal understanding and representation are fundamental to affect
empowerment and systemic, social change. Researcher, Nancy Deutsch (2004) discussed her work in relation to her participants, her race, her class status and her gender. She discovered that the positionality of the researcher is crucial to avoiding objectivity and that personal reflection and experience impact one’s study in a positive manner (Deutsch, 2004). On positioning one’s self amid their research, Deutsch (2004) discusses the ‘bidirectional’ flow of research:

“I am subject, object and researcher. To assert otherwise is to be disingenuous about the process of research, especially of qualitative research” (p. 889).

Patricia Hill Collins also advocates for a duality in playing the role of the researcher and the participant. Within black feminist thought, one’s social location informs their connection to and passion for their research while at the same time determines their methods and theory (Collins, 2000). The theoretical standpoint upon which a researcher premises their work should not be a conflict to what one’s personal experience is and what social science requires. It does raise eyebrows of traditional social scientists, but to be dispassionate in one’s role as a researcher solidifies an outsider status and may falsely represent the data collected.

1.6.1 Reflexivity & Ethics

My social location to the research topic and my participants provided advantages and disadvantages. In spite of my personal experiences adding significance and passion to the research, I was cautious in terms of power, racial and gender dynamics during the interviews. My initial ethical dilemma was relevant to the research subject matter, colorism. As quite a sensitive case for the black community, my very presence and discussion of the issue was controversial. I realized there would be ambivalence on a concern so personal that I prepared for criticism and rejection. I had to ask myself many times, how can I as a white woman conduct research on black men that characterizes them in a negative manner? I had to be sure that I would not advance negative stereotypes surrounding colorism or men’s participation in its cycle. As Collins’ work
illuates, social science has traditionally pathologized black people and promoted whiteness over blackness, men over women and object over subject (2000). As a white academic researcher, mother to biracial children and wife to a black man, I felt compelled to utilize my ‘outsider with insider knowledge’ status to guide me rather than allow it to become a conflict of interest. I began with a series of self-examining questions: Do I invoke the methods training from my anthropological background guide my process or do I flow with my passionate concern as a mother of young men who may perpetuate colorism in their personal relationships? For whom will my research be relevant? Will it be taken seriously by the black community, by the academic community? Who will benefit from this research? After its completion, will I have avoided the “who cares, so what” rhetorical question and given purpose to these men’s personal narratives?

To maintain an ethical environment, I attempted to always be mindful of my actions, assumptions and perceptions. I came to terms with my position as a white woman (although I am often told I have ambiguous features). The perceived power relationship between a white female and black male could have stereotypically gone afoul. Fortunately, I was seen as a trustworthy comrade amongst the clients of the barbershop. My time spent there over the last year allowed me to build an understanding among the men who were employed there as well as their usual clientele. Unfortunately, the same rapport did not carry over to some of the women stylists who occupied the other side of the building, but I understand their distance.

Overall, my own skin tone played a role in how I hurdled the racial divide. It is possible that my Italian ancestry caused curiosity within my participants, but I remained honest and assured them of my racial categorization. Additionally, I guaranteed them that they could always speak freely about their ideas and opinions without upsetting me or making our time awkward. I was very open about my own family and our experiences with racism and colorism, but ex-
plained that their experiences were what would make this research be of value; I was there to learn from them. I also made a point to ask each participant why he chose to be part of my study.

Sociologist, Alvin Gouldner (1970) also set forth an idea that social science should be self-critical and self-conscious so as to expose the researcher’s assumptions and biases, which corresponds with Black Feminist Thought. This idea is extended by authors Boss, Dahl and Kaplan (1996) in their article on the use of phenomenology in qualitative methods; at the onset of a research project, a researcher should reveal their values and beliefs (p. 86). As this phenomenological study is narratively supported, it nonetheless is an exploration of a fundamental effect of an existing, deliberate occurrence. The need for this intertwined epistemology is for meaning-making while interpreting the participants’ lived experiences and truths to be relevant. Phenomenology aids in our understanding these men’s frames of reference; what they believe about the world and its social hierarchy (Boss, Dahl and Kaplan, 1996). Phenomenology, similar to Black Feminist Thought, encourages the researcher to co-construct the knowledge or data with the participants to provide for an interpretation that allows both the researcher and the participant to glean a better understanding of the issue and the world around them.

Lastly, to ensure that I was conscious to the ethics of this research, I focused on my own personal accountability; understanding and self-reflection; and to ensure that they were supportive of empowerment and raised consciousness. It is a daunting task to develop awareness on such a personal level without revealing the negative data that led to the production of relevant knowledge. My decision to utilize Black Feminist Thought helped me to bridge the gap between exploitative and empowering knowledge as it provides a space for transformation (individual as well as societal) and healing.
1.7 Definition of Terms

Colorism = form of prejudice or discrimination in which human beings are treated differently based on the social meanings attached to skin color.

Skin Tone Bias = value placed on lighter skin over that of darker skin.

Intraracial = occurring within a race.

Whiteness = socially constructed ideology tied to social status within the context of white racial superiority, the norm of social privilege and societal standards or ideals are prefaced with.

Blackness = socially constructed identifier that reduces status, devalues worth (in this study’s context).

White Racial Frame = concept coined by Joe Feagin, critical aspect of the societal reality of "systemic racism,” the white racial frame is a generic meaning that the ‘system’ has long been propagated and held by most white Americans—and even, at least in part, accepted by many people of color, framing is deeply held, broad, and encompasses many pieces of racialized knowledge and understandings that in concert shape human action and behavior in a myriad of ways that are often automatic or unconscious.

Intergenerational = occurring between, or passed on intended for individuals in different generations.

1.8 Assumptions

The research provides an added layer of variables to consider, whereas prior studies have not. For instance, I aimed to connect a relationship between the cultural orientation and closeness to an African-centered ideology with stronger self-esteem, self-concept and resistance to skin tone bias. In measuring the proclivity for acculturation, the data discerned this hypothesis. I believe that self-esteem and self-concept are compromised by the following influences: media,
popular culture, generational/family, peers and socioeconomic status. Therefore, this study expected to find that most male participants would demonstrate a propensity for selecting females of a lighter complexion.

1.9 Scope, Limitations, and Delimitations

The small scope of this study is a recognizable limitation as the representation of data will be narrow and cannot be considered universal to all black men who meet the research criteria. It is important to note that this is but a sliver of the broader issue of skin color significance. The small sample and the men representing the study are not intended to assume the role for all black men. Knowing this, it is safe to assume that their experiences may render certain perspectives, but their data must not be interpreted as a generalization.

To my surprise, my ethnic and racial identity as an Italian-American did not hamper my ability to recruit my participants, nor did it appear to impact the participants’ personal testimonies during our interviews. I was asked many times if I was mixed. I always responded with, “no I am white by race, Sicilian by ethnicity.” Most of the men viewed me more as a curiosity than as an outsider or threat. Bringing honesty into the research removed the concerns of objectivity about the topic and our experiences. My relation to the participants could have interrupted agency and reflection, but thankfully, the power relations that are generalized under race and gender were not issues.

Generalization of this study’s results could be reconsidered if given to a different population sample with consideration to socio-demographic factors – possible issues of age, geography and exposure and engagement to popular culture could be further explored. The possible variants of participants in another part of the country may not assign the same values or meanings to social contexts. Additionally, there are possibilities that participants may take issue with trusting
the researcher; being a female and not of the same ethnicity. Related to the participants’ complexions, perhaps a more stratified sample representation should be considered for future research to allow for further delineation of how their own skin tones may impact decision-making.

Identifying limitations can also be found in coding, there was a degree of difficulty not succumbing to assumptions on cause and effect; self-reflexivity was useful. This could be prevented in a larger scale study as the amount of data would augment “credibility and trustworthiness through nuanced analysis and/or strategic in-depth interviewing that explores with participants the subtle dynamics of attributions in action” (Saldana, 174).

It could also be argued that the theoretical framework would be better served under the psychological lens of Erickson’s theory of identity development as it distinctly looks at how external factors (socialization) influences the development of one’s identity and belief systems. However, the decision to place a feminist lens on this study closes the loop of colorism’s oppressions existing in black male-female relationships and offers a perspective that encourages social transformation. Developmental Systems Theory could have also been used to evaluate the relationships between the micro levels of socialization agents to the macro level effects of socially constructed racial hierarchies. Systemic or institutional practices of racism are primarily connected with skin tone, and the internalization of white, supremacist ideologies affect oppressed individuals at a structural or macro level of agency. Yet again, it was my intention to focus more on the communal, transformative values of data collection for raised consciousness and social change.

As for the reliability and validity of the data, qualitative research through an African-centered approach can be considered valid if the centrality of African values is used for acquiring and interpreting the data (Reviere, 2001). Transcription and coding software will be used to
document and code the interviews to aid in the reliability of the data. A model of criteria that is applicable across a widened research setting that can compare and contrast these preliminary findings with a larger analysis would further validate any consistencies in the inferential data.

At present, I do not have a theoretical sample population with which to compare results. In the future, should this study provide valuable insight, it might be worth the opportunity to re-study the issue with a theoretical sample. Glaser & Strauss (1967) suggested the use of such a sample to triangulate data comparisons in qualitative research for in depth analysis and understanding. I think that this idea could be useful in a future, theoretical sample that included black women’s interpersonal relationship preferences in the same context.

Furthermore, I find it necessary to justify the relevance and importance of researching the issue of colorism. A perception exists that colorism is not an issue for people of color nor is there a debate worthy of investigation. However the contemporary, scholarly literature demonstrates otherwise (Hall, 1995, 1998; Hughes & Hertel, 1989; Hunter, 2002, 2007; Jones, 2000; Keith & Herring, 1991, 2004; Kerr, 2005; Wade, 1996). As a socially constructed concept, the phenomenon must be understood as an intentional and convoluted process of racism. Within this acceptance, colorism can warrant awareness and efforts may begin to rectify the associated social injustices. As seen in several research studies on the latent effects of colorism, prevalence is reproduced most often within one’s family (Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992; Graham, 2000; Thompson & Keith, 2001). The unconscious and conscious propagation of colorism’s ideologies need to be addressed first on the home front to be effective. Change must begin within our families and ourselves for productive change; acceptance, admittance and reclamation of self will aid in trying to rectify the issue of colorism and eradicate the valorization of whiteness.
1.10 Summary

Whiteness and blackness have discriminating meanings ascribed to them and some men innately append nescent preferences to women. An obscuring of the lines between typological preferences and partiality for whiteness leads to skin tone privileging. Furthermore, many black women are relegated to the fringes of unwanted-ness on the lone criteria of the gradation of their skin. An imbalanced life cycle of self-hatred, self-respect and self-esteem ultimately affects both men and women. Women’s reactions to the effects of colorism in this regard, can manifest in skin bleaching, cosmetic surgeries and by extension, deconstruct their identities. Men’s participation in colorism could conceivably bring forth an indicator of low self-esteem, an absence of self-respect to the collective race and an internalization of self-hatred as well.

The concept supersedes that of general attractiveness and the ‘typing’ of women; this group of participants maintain that a higher value is affixed to light skin. It can be argued that some men have preferences for ‘types’ of women: busty, large butt, thick thighs and so on. However, the participants in this study emphasized a particular consciousness; that light complexions are the premium standard of beauty and that their preferences go beyond considerations of attractiveness to the partitioning of black women’s bodies into parts, viewing skin tone as the sole ideal rather than acknowledging women’s identities as whole persons that are more than just the pigment of their skin. The connotations of gendered and intra-racialized declarations about physical beauty have been found to influence black women’s self-esteem and self-worth (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997); hence, the internalization of destructive cultural standards of beauty and desirability.

A relationship exists between dating selection criteria, physical attraction and skin tone amid the black community that should not be neglected. A study and review of the color hierar-
chy existing between light and dark skin tones showed that skin tone biases and beauty ideals were gendered discriminations that have ramifications for African Americans in the context of dating and partner selections (Baynes, 1997). Therefore, the values that black men give to ethnicity, race, gender and beauty standards may influence beliefs about the desirability of possible partners and their interpersonal relationship preferences (Stephens & Phillips, 2003).

The investigation into the experiences of colorism relates to the intersectionality of race, gender, class and skin tone. The research is necessary in order to explore the ideology or thought processes of how and why these men exclude a large percentage of the available dating pool of women simply based on the lack of fairness in their skin tone. This researcher is interested in how they frame their identities within a white, racist social structure; how the roles of socialization accommodate their racial and social perspectives; and how they negotiate self-esteem and self-respect when they apply their rationale to the greater black community.

2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1 Defining Colorism

Colorism is best understood as a socially created hierarchy that is tiered on the nuances of skin tone that affords privilege and preference to those representing the lightest shades (Maddox, 2004; Glenn, 2008). As an added layer of racism, its complexity as a social stigma has consequences affecting in-group (intraracial) and out-group (interracial) discrimination (Harvey, 1995; Harvey et al, 2005). Sociologist, Cedric Herring (2004) provided a working definition of colorism that summarily speaks to this thesis’ research:

“Colorism” is the discriminatory treatment of individuals falling within the same “racial” group on the basis of skin color. It operates both intraracially and interracially. Intraracial colorism occurs when members of a racial group make distinctions based upon the skin color between members of their own race. Interracial colorism occurs when members of one racial group make distinctions based upon skin color between members of another racial group. (3)
The definition that Herring furnishes explains the connection between racism and colorism and how white supremacist notions inform and reproduce another dividing factor of discrimination. Colorism devalues all associated physical features of African ancestry or of any other cultures’ darker pigmentation (Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992; Herring, 2004). Prejudices against dark skin have not only existed in the United States, but there are long-standing histories of preferences for whiteness and light complexions in Africa, Central and South America, the Caribbean, the Middle East and throughout Asia (Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992; Herring, 2004).

In addition to skin tone, colorism can be correlated with phenotypic features such as hair texture, color and length, eye shape and color, mouth or lips shape and size and nose shape and size (Maddox, 2004; Thompson & Keith, 2001). The social privileging of one’s skin tone or Eurocentric facial features set up a covert, communal stratification among people of color around the world (Glenn, 2008). The discrimination within one’s ethnic group is much more manifest and visceral than the binary qualities of black versus white racism (Hochshild & Weaver, 2007). Societies’ processes of racial classification and identification attempt to place people into characteristic divisions that are supposed to have some social and political meaning (Maddox, 2004). Consequential appearances offer advantages and disadvantages that protect self-interest and racist framing.

Social stratification maintains the conditions of superiority and inferiority on a racial determining factor (Smedley, 1998). Social status markers become physical features and internalization of the value of skin color becomes a prominent aspect of one’s identity. The synonymous applications of race and skin color skew the concepts behind the desire to determine ‘race’ (Jones, 2000). We can see this evidenced with the usage of terms such as ‘black’ or ‘white’ and the appended qualities and meanings when they are applied to members of ethnic groups.
2.2 History and Context of Colorism

Colorism is a pandemic phenomenon born from an intricate past with diverse roots. Colorism sets apart individuals by the sheer determinant of the shade of their skin; societal status and mobility becomes a result of the lightness or darkness of one’s skin. Intraracial discrimination has existed within African American/African-descended communities long before slavery and colonialism (Bryant, 2001; Fears, 1998; Hill, 2002; Kerr, 2005). The hierarchical nature of fairness or whiteness of skin tones can be found in many cultures, globally and historically (Frost, 1990; Hunter, 2002). Cultural preferences for lighter toned skin, mostly among women, equated to social mobility, advanced socioeconomic statuses, greater opportunities for education and employment and increased desirability (Bodenhorn, 2006; Frazer & Wiersma, 2001; Frisby, 2006; Frost, 1990; Hall, 1998; Hill 2000 & 2002; Herring & Keith, 1991; Hunter, 2002; Rockquemore, 2002; Waters, 1991). In America, lighter complexioned African Americans have been perceived to be the recipients of more economic, political and social privileges than those of darker complexions (Hall, 1998; Hill, 2000; Hughes & Hertel, 1989; Keith & Herring, 1991). Unfortunately, this physical trait of skin color became the criterion for maneuvering through social structures and affording stability as well as life opportunities to black people within the United States.

Colonial expansion into the Americas cultivated a hegemonic ideology that culturally imposed foreign customs, institutions and language which in turn privileged qualities of whiteness (Feagin, 2004). Notions of inferiority correlated with blackness shaped the social hierarchy that determined opportunities, status and most importantly identity. Colonizers utilized the biological distinctions related to phenotypic features and skin tone to legitimate their enslavement missions and social hierarchies. Enslaved children born out of the rapes committed by slave
owners added to the complexity and variability of skin tone variations. Multiracial classifications resulted in further valorization of Eurocentric features, such as lighter skin tones, nose width, lip shape and size and hair texture qualities (Keith & Herring, 1991; Gullickson, 2005). The physical features closest to those of the slave owners and colonizers afforded lighter complexioned individuals different labor assignments, reduced severity of punishments and educational opportunities (Keith & Herring, 1991; Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992; Jones, 2000). The socioeconomic and aesthetic politics of whiteness maintain privilege, elite statuses and furthers white supremacist ideology (Bodenhorn, 2006). Subsequent results of the social divisions based on skin color led to intraracial discrimination or colorism.

The history of colorism in the United States furthered the racist ideology through institution of racial classification to keep separate white from black (Omi & Winant, 1986; Feagin, 2004). The hypo-descent rule or ‘one-drop’ sanction restricted black people with any history of white heritage from having equal status and privilege as those who were fully white (Omi & Winant, 1986). According to author Nobles (2002), further designations of the degree of African-ness in one’s blood were classified in the following terms and employed to rationalize the use of scientific racism: Black (having ¾ or more African ancestry); Mulatto (having 3/8 to 5/8 of African ancestry); Quadroon (having ¼ or less African ancestry); Octoroon (having 1/8 or less African ancestry). The effects of these categorizations caused some lighter complexioned individuals to take on the ideals of their oppressors, internalize the racist principles and create their own social class amongst the collective black community (Graham, 1999; Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992).

Labor assignments during enslavement reinforced racial attitudes. Treatment of the enslaved was divided much of the time on the basis of skin tone; how much whiteness was discern-
ible determined their duties, placement, resources and later freedom or manumission (Keith & Herring, 1991; Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992). Post-Reconstruction, skin tone continued to operate as a divisor among black individuals as it determined opportunities for employment, land or education (Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992; Graham, 1999). Classism began to reinforce racism as economically, well-to-do lighter complexioned black people garnered new wealth, social status and property. Mixed race, black people stood to socially benefit from having membership in a separate, racial status (Kerr, 2005). In an effort to solidify their new-found social acceptance, various clubs, churches, schools and organizations implemented eligibility tests that were based on separatist ideals (Kerr, 2005). These tests included: the pencil test (for determining hair quality), the brown paper bag test (to measure the darkness of skin tone), the door test (one had to be lighter than the wooden door), the ruler test (to measure the straightness of one’s hair) or blue vein membership (determined if one was light enough if their veins were visible and blue through their skin) (Graham, 1999; Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992). These stereotypical practices were carried across generations of lighter skinned blacks to maintain a skin tone hierarchy and the exclusionary nature of social clubs, churches and educational institutions.

2.2.1 Global Manifestations of Colorism Across Time

Colorism is not unique to African American/African-descended communities. The effects of colorism have been found in ancient cultures such as Asian (Hunter, 2007), Arab, African and Latin (Gabriel, 2007). Historical references note that the lighter one’s skin tone was the greater the importance. In North Africa and the Middle East, nobility were typically of lighter skin complexions (Gabriel, 2007). The Indian cultures of Asia (Bhattacharya, 2012) as well as the Chinese, Japanese and Indochinese (Hunter, 2007) all had representations of superiority in
whiteness or lighter skin tones. They manifested these values in spiritual gods and goddesses, nobility and in social hierarchal systems.

Japan, China, Thailand, India, Philippines, Malaysia, Jamaica, Saudi Arabia and Africa have all been complicit in valuing whiteness and Western ideals. The preferences for lightness or whiter skin tones in these non-Western nations have been in existence for centuries, some even prior to colonization or imperialism (Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992). As the examples noted by Russell, Wilson and Hall detail that, Indians of the subcontinent enforced their caste system with skin tone markers to structure the hierarchy of classes; upper class or elite status Arabians were representative of lighter complexions and lighter skinned women were sought after in their culture; the Japanese gendered colorism by placing a standard of beauty upon women to uphold flawless, white skin; and in Central America, Aztec culture encouraged women to use mixtures that would give their darkened skin a golden hue as a means to lighten (1992, p. 57). In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, colonial Spanish had encountered mixing of ethnicities and their subsequent establishment of a societal caste system in North America gave evidence of their involvement of colorism (Hunter, 2002). All of these historical origins of colorism produced racial attitudes and created very discriminating implications for people who did not have light to white skin tones. The ideological patterns of racism shaped the experiences of people of color globally and facilitated the formation of a ‘colored’ social stratification system.

In contemporary settings, beliefs embedded in colorism are revived and can still be seen as psychological effects of history’s social and cultural constructs. For example, an article as recent as August 2012, found in the New York Times, detailed new activity on the beaches of Qingdao, China. The New York Times’ journalist, Dan Levin, reported women were seen with full head and shoulder coverings. The reason given for this added skin protection was to protect
the wearers from getting tanned or dark. One of the women interviewed, Ms. Yao, stated there is an unspoken but common cultural desire to have fair skin as an indicator of separate social statuses. She revealed that dark or tanned skin signifies peasantry or laborer status. If Chinese women of middle to upper class status allow this to happen, a denigration of their socioeconomic statuses and perceptions of family position would be stigmatic (Levin, 2012).

The assignment of race, skin tone differences and social mobility clearly predated slavery in the Americas and has survived millennia. The problem that colorism poses contemporarily is proof that time has stood still for oppression, exclusion and discrimination.

2.2.2 Colorism and Employment

Research has shown that lighter complexioned individuals have often acquired higher salaries, occupational advancement and better chances at desirable jobs (Bodenhorn, 2006; Harrison, 2009; Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Keith & Herring, 1991). Results from the Hughes and Hertel (1990) research indicate implications in the workplace spurred by colorism. The data displayed preferences by white employers and colleagues for light skinned black employees as they were thought to be more agreeable to whites and held a higher competency than those who were darker (Hunter, 2002). Employment practices are also gendered within colorism whereas lighter complexioned women fare better than all darker applicants and light skinned men (Ross, 1997; Hunter, 2002). The hiring practices for black applicants supported these findings in a later study by Harrison and Thomas (2009) that indicated skill level, degrees or certification of darker skinned men still took a backseat to lighter skinned men who lacked the same credentials.

Colorism translated into the workforce also impacts advancement and salary opportunities. An unspoken preference appears to operate amid white employers and lighter skinned employees that suggests the degrees of blackness determines work detail, pay level and interoffice
acceptance (Hunter, 2002). A revealing example of this form of discrimination was documented by Thompson and Keith (2001) in which women who were not only lighter in complexion, but possessed more Eurocentric phenotypic facial features and hair textures and styles were paid more and advanced more frequently than those who were darker and showed physical features representative of African ancestry. As for male employees, the preferences for hiring lighter toned men outweighed darker skin tones due to racialized notions of aggressiveness and criminality regardless of skill level and educational degrees (Hall, 1995). While these studies provided substantiation in increased benefits due to skin tone, research conducted by Gullickson (2005) challenges the older data to show that light skin preference in the occupational arena was on a decline post-1963. At the same time, this could be attributed to the ideologies developing from the Black Power Movement or by the ensuing Black is Beautiful campaign; the research was not continued for comparative analysis. Perhaps a follow-up study to that of Harrison and Thomas would consider compare variables over the last five years of hiring practices and skin tone to see if the trend has increased or declined.

2.2.3 Colorism and Interpersonal Relationships

Privileges of whiteness can be apparent at times in partner selection. Eurocentric phenotypic features paired with lighter complexions have been evidenced to be more desirable or preferable in the processes of intimate, relationship building (Harvey, 1995; Glenn, 2008; Thompson & Keith, 2000). Ideas related to assimilation and socioeconomic advancement has commonly been used to justify marriageability or in entering relationships with light skinned partners (Thompson & Keith, 2000; Herring, 2004; Gullickson, 2005). Findings from subsequent studies suggested that black women’s self-esteem and agency are more affected than that of black men
(Harvey, 1995; Hill, 2002; Thompson & Keith, 2001; Wade, 1996). Gendered colorism is contingent on the social construction of beauty and informed by racist views (Hunter, 2004).

While physical attraction is a main focus when expressing interest in an individual, colorism informs sexual attraction through perceived notions about skin tone values. As evidenced in other studies (Fanon, 1967; Hill, 2002; Hunter, 2005; Masi De Casanova, 2004), the association of skin color with sensuality and eroticism is reinforced through visual, racially-infused cues. For centuries, non-white women have been “othered” in exotic meanings, sexually tabooed and seen as hyper-sexualized (Fanon, 1967). Skin tone and color become identifiers in their values through a form of sexualization driven by racism which normalize or idealize the perceptions surrounding their self-worth and character. These ideas are supported by men’s expressions of interest based solely on appearance rather than personality (Feingold, 1992).

Albeit the disparities of colorism affect black women more often than black men, the onus of ending the cycle of discrimination falls upon the shoulders of these men (Thompson & Keith, 2001). Black women must endure racial, class and gender discrimination, the shade of their skin tone becomes another concern. The work of St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton is among the first empirical data to document the implications of skin tone of black women and marriageability (1945). Since black males are not held to the same standards of beauty that black women are held to, the pressures of self-worth are reduced and not seen as a requirement for social value (Wilson, 2007). Desirability of black men is more equitable than of black women as seen in entertainment roles, print media and in selection processes. Men may experience negative effects of beauty standards in the form of stereotypes such as aggressiveness, ignorance or being hypersexual (Harvey, 1995). Furthermore, darker complexioned men may also take an
assumed lead over lighter complexioned men in that they are perceived to be more masculine, possess more African-ness and maintain a higher sexual aptitude (Harvey, 1995).

A plethora of scholarly work has focused on how colorism frames and influences the lives and experiences of black women. Colorism affecting family roles and generational messages has been discussed by Harriet McAdoo (1997) and Nancy Boyd-Franklin (2003). Historical synopses and therapeutic solutions have been offered by scholars, Neal and Wilson (1989) and Okazawa-Rey (1987). Skin color preferences among college students were conducted by Ronald Hall (1998) who found that women were negatively impacted due to the correlation of beauty to skin tone. Surveys on skin color satisfaction of women indicated that a very low percentage of respondents desired to have darker skin and an emphasis on skin color was a suggested preference to dating (Bond & Cash, 1992). Sociologist Margaret Hunter has covered colorism in the black and Hispanic communities (1998; 2002; 2005) while narrative-producing authors have published personal accounts of their experiences of colorism and coping strategies (Golden, 2004; Harris, 1994; Zook, 1990). Patricia Hill Collins (1986; 2000), bell hooks (1989), Audre Lorde (1984) and Deborah King (1988) have written about colorism through their black feminist writings and highlighted the intersectional prejudices imposed upon black women. Therefore, the critical need for situating this male-focused research amid a black feminist lens provides for an oppositional framework that reveals converging oppressions that are in conjunction with black men’s and women’s experiences.

2.3 Whiteness and Blackness

The concept of whiteness is a marker of social status and often ascribed to identity and privilege (Fanon, 1965; McIntosh, 1988). Blackness becomes an entity and characteristic to abhor, vilify and devalue. Frantz Fanon grieved that “as painful as it is for us to have to say this:
there is but one destiny for the black man. And it is white” (1965, xiv). He was referring to the liberties and distinction that comes out of whiteness and having a white identity. His acknowledgement of the “vicious cycle of trying to whiten the race” provides evidence to the destructive essence in which colorism erodes self-concept and racial identity (Fanon, 1965, xiv). In his historical reference, he alluded to “whitening the race” by practices of cultural and racial assimilation, however it is prefaced through colonial miscegenation (Fanon, 1965). Even though he was speaking of his homeland of Martinique, the concept as well as the cycle is applicable and identifiable across geographical borders and history for people of color suffering under racial disparities.

The physical demarcation of skin tone also lends itself to power dynamics; darker skin tones are presumed to be inferior while lighter tones prevail as having control (Fanon, 1965; Harvey, 1995). With skin tone structuring a social hierarchy during enslavement, a color caste system governed the colonized people. To this degree, social status and privileged opportunities were relegated to those with the most defining degrees of whiteness (Harvey, 2005).

The problem with whiteness relating to identification lies in its associated definitional references to being pure, fair, honorable, counter-revolutionary, morally unblemished and benevolent (World English Dictionary). When countered with the opposing definitions of blackness, such as without hope, angry, dirty, wicked and dishonorable, associated attributes become derogatorily assigned to people of color. These stereotypical associations are pathological and have negative connotations for individuals with darker skin tones. The less ambiguous one’s ethnic features, the inclination for social privilege is higher (Maddox, 2004). The imposed attributes of blackness upon non-whites, specifically darker complexioned people, tend to be correlated with criminality, poverty, being hypersexual, exaggerated masculinity and beastliness
Contrarily, people with medium to light skin tones are equated to be wholesome, intelligent, mannered, agreeable and less promiscuous (Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992). Consider the 1940s doll test by the Clarks, men and women representing their ‘race’ within the media, film and entertainment industries or conversely look to the racialization of our prison population within the justice system.

Ideas of whiteness are carried into standards of beauty as well. There is an overlapping of this concept that influences women of color (and men indirectly). Media, advertising and body products are common targets of whiteness ideals. The standards or white norms are perceived to be points of reference that encourage inferiority and racial superiority. Rather than inquire what the needs are of the consumers of skin bleaching creams or cosmetic foundations, companies offer solutions that are inconspicuously racist, physically and psychologically harmful. Take notice of the example of Nigerian singer, Dencia and her recent skin bleaching product line. Review the myriad of individuals in the athletic and entertainment industry who are users (or accused to be) of skin lightening creams or bleachers: baseballer Sammy Sosa, Jamaican dancehall artist Vybz Cartel, actress Tempest Bledsoe, rapper Lil’ Kim, model Iman, or singer K. Michelle. While some of these instances may not be valid truths, the use of lighter toned facial cosmetics or magazine airbrushing are also to blame for paler appearances. This practice leads to problematizing whiteness as a natural or normal beauty standard. The focus is placed upon meanings or values behind the visual messages of whiteness.

Skin bleaching product advertisements (Leong, 2006) combined with pages of black females exhibiting lighter complexions, long flowing hair, Eurocentric phenotypical features and associations of wealth, prestige, privilege or happiness all weigh heavily on the psyches of its intended black female audience (Strutton, Lumpkin & James, 1993). The ideas subliminally
passed through the media convince consumers that beauty perceptions are structured to reflect whiteness. While most studies (Cash, 1984; Darity & Hamilton, 2009; Fokuo, 2009) referenced these examples for displays of black female self-esteem, it can be conceived that their male counterparts are equally affected by these ingrained images and associations. In September of 2008, the Tyra Banks Show had a headliner of “Black Women and their Children Bleaching their Skin” (Banks, 2008). The shock of children whose distorted self-esteem were manifestations of colorism revealed an awful shame of self-worth and racial pride.

Magazines are also guilty of falsely representing skin tone of the celebrities on their pages while indirectly supporting whiteness. The historic carryover of assigned worth and societal worth is also perpetuated in various media outlets. Print media, marketing and advertising ploys, music, videos and movies provide a springboard for the subtleties of discrimination and skin tone bias. For example, a familiar men’s magazine, Maxim, released its top 100 picks for desirable females and while only seven of those “hot” women were black females, five of the seven were light complexioned (Harris, 2009). The seven selected females were: Rihanna, Beyoncé, Christina Milian, Zoe Saldana, Ciara, Gabrielle Union and Michelle Obama. This magazine’s portrayal of beauty and desirable women has a target audience of men and presents the selected women as models of social norms. Among 93 white women, only 7 black women held honors for being included in American’s representation of standards of beauty in terms of whiteness. In another example of media-driven white beauty standards, Essence magazine printed an article on colorism. The author, Denene Millner, published the article, “Color Trends of the Skin” in the Essence magazine, December 2011 issue which discussed the idealization of skin tone, standards of beauty and social values that are passed on generationally. Clearly the issue of skin tone discrimination is still afflicting black society.
Pop culture is also contributing to the perpetuation of colorism and is compromising the mindsets of African American youth. An examination of the music industry lends credibility to a sphere of colorism influences. For example, many music videos highlight the light skinned females and fill the background and peripheries with darker skin toned girls. A point of contention in deciding who will be featured in music videos waffles between the casting directors and the music artists themselves. Regardless, the issue remains that representation and images are projected that validate the influences of colorism, whiteness over blackness. Music lyrics also echo the sentiments of colorism. For instance, Lil Wayne’s song “Right Above It” evokes a desire for lighter shades: “How do he say what’s never said? Beautiful black woman, I bet that bitch look better red.” An African American who is defined to be ‘red’ or a ‘red bone’ is determined to be of light skin. Hence, the insinuation made by Lil’ Wayne is that black women look better if they are not brown or dark in complexion. There are several other music artists with similarly preference lyrics: Kanye West, Nikki Minaj, and T.I. just to name a few.

Cinematic Hollywood contributes their ‘fair’ share to the reproduction and maintenance of colorism as well. Movies portray light skin and likenesses of fairness in leading roles. Examples of casting preferences can be evidenced in movies such as *School Daze*, *Precious*, the *Color Purple*, *Coming to America* and *Feast of All Saints*. More recently, casting calls for an upcoming biopic on Nina Simone were conducted and the lead role was awarded to Zoe Saldana. This is an example of skin tone bias in that Nina Simone was not light skinned or even shaped like Zoe Saldana, let alone racially categorized as Latina. Slowly, we are beginning to see counter responses to Hollywood’s skin tone bias in the actions and words of artists, actors and models. Actor Taye Diggs addressed his own experiences with skin tone and self-esteem a couple years ago by writing a children’s book, *Chocolate Me!* as a means of healing and validation of beauty
in any skin tone. This year, Oscar winning actress, Lupita N’yongo revealed her very personal testimony on praying for lighter skin and learning to overcome the shade of her skin.

The entertainment world that guides much of America’s aspirations, fashions and economic desires is also affecting our views and judgments on social norms. One would be hard-pressed to find someone who is not looking up to a celebrity of sorts and idealizing his or her lifestyle. Turning our attention to black celebrities and athletes, it is becoming quite difficult to tease out those who do not display light skin mate preferences. Celebrity artists such as Sean Combs, Jay Z, and Chris Brown all have light skinned women as common denominators. Black athletes like Chad Johnson, Michael Jordan, Kevin Garnett, Michael Strahan and Carmelo Anthony have also been color struck. Controversy also swirls around medical pigmentation issues experienced by the late Michael Jackson and most recently, Tempest Bledsoe and Tamar Braxton (which feeds back into accusations of skin bleaching and whiteness issues).

With respect to language and terminology, colorism in song lyrics, in naming of characteristics or in the use of identity descriptors has negative attributes associated with skin tone. Internalization of the images that language or names describing skin tone can occur unconsciously. The vocabulary related to colorism intrinsically signifies definition, assigns social location and creates identity. Author, Marita Golden (2004) implied that descriptors used to assign meaning to skin tones are passed generationally. While referencing her experiences as a child, she advised that those used with the most frequency were “more specific descriptive terms that separate Blacks and create castes and cliques” (2004, p.7). The word “colorism” had never been described or used to assign value or meaning to skin tone among daily encounters; however, terms such as redbone, honey brown, dark chocolate or jigaboo have loaded connotations attached not only to color but also to worth. If one repetitively hears that they are “ugly” or that beauty and
desire are made up of something fair and bright, that person will likely internalize that image and believe it. Through the process of socialization, these symbolic terms gain power as they are strengthened through various institutions such as school and church and in entertainment sources.

Recognizing that there is an unrelenting, intraracial discrimination that breeds on social hierarchy, distorted valuations of skin tone’s worth and confounded self-esteem (Averhart & Bigler, 1997; Bond & Cash, 1992; Clark, 1939; Dion, 1990; Feingold, 1992; Harvey, 1995; Michael, n.d.; Nassar et al, 2006; Porter, 1979; Porter, 1991; Porter, 1993; Rocquemore & Brunsma, 2002); pending research behooves us to investigate these causal relationships. Knowing that colorism is still thriving in black communities and is affecting numerous psychosocial processes, distinctions and correlations must be made. This researcher desires to begin with the African American male population, review the external influences affecting their skin tone preferences and levels of self-esteem. Is mate selection in African American/African-descended males driven by a psychological disconnect created by socioeconomic and sociocultural influences? More directly, does colorism affect mate selection preferences in African American/African-descended males? The study’s main research question asks: Does self-esteem and perceived self-identity directly affect mate selection preferences in African American/African-descended males as it relates to colorism?

2.4 Self-Esteem, Self-Concept and Value Standards of Skin Tone

Self-esteem and skin tone equal one’s self-worth (Harvey et al, 2005). Several studies related the issue of self-esteem to gender and skin tone (Hill, 2002; Thompson & Keith, 2001; Hughes & Demo, 1989; Hunter, 2002). Most findings have shown that women are most affected by skin tone whereas with men, skin tone appeared to matter less (Harvey et al, 2005; Hill, 2002;
Thompson & Keith, 2001; Hunter, 2002). Lighter skin tends to be seen as more desirable and feminine therefore, darker skinned women exhibited less self-esteem (Hill, 2002; Thompson & Keith, 2001). The relationships existing between perceptions of beauty, self-worth and desirability are examined mostly within samples of African American women. Reviewing a counter study that focused on the self-esteem black women had based on differences in skin color and how they perceived standards of beauty in their social mobility provided a foundation to reposition this proposed study in terms of measuring similar factors with black males (Nassar-McMillan et al, 2006). The results of their study indicate a need for honesty in feedback about feelings of skin color.

Another lens to look through viewed impositions of Eurocentric standards of beauty was found in studies and projected women and the fairness of the skin as a form of social capital (Fokuo, 2009; Hall, 1995; Hochschild & Weaver, 2007; Hunter, 2002; Jha-Nambiar, 2008; Jones, 2001; Morrison, 2010). The influences of skin tone and color found within the aforementioned studies project associations with whiteness to be good and desirable, whereas associations with darkness or blackness to be undesirable. The negative connotations and assigned stereotypes of darker skin tones have explicit differential effects on self-esteem and self-definition which in turn affect life choices (Herring, 2002). Lowered self-esteem and feelings of inferiority are documented to affect women more so than men, however this researcher believes that a man’s self-concept is quite affected by colorism and is expressed differently. The placement of skin tones on a hierarchy of light to dark likens light skin as the embodiment of beauty (Hunter, 2002). A concept known as the “beauty que” was conceptualized by sociologist, Margaret Hunter. She states that a black woman’s desirability and allure coincides with where her skin
tone is positioned on the spectrum of lightness to darkness (Hunter, 2002). In using the “beauty que” a woman can determine her proximity to whiteness and by extension, to perceived beauty.

In her later work, Hunter (2005) finds that skin tone operates as social capital for women in marriageability, education, employment and overall social positioning. Her results have shown that black women who are of light complexions are perceived as the most beautiful, have the most opportunities and are the most enterprising in economic opportunities. The internalization of these ideas of light skin privilege is racist as well as sexist and is reestablished in the minds of black men as well as black women. Just as socially constructed ideas of black women objectify and oppress, when personalized colorism operates as a tool to sustain hegemonic racism. Furthermore, while the majority of the literature emphasizes advantages and disadvantages of light and dark skin tones, little focus is given to medium skin tones (Drake & Cayton, 1945; Coard, Brelan & Raskin, 2001). There is a usefulness to exploring the colorism notions as they pertain to individuals’ identity and social location who are in the middle of the “beauty que.”

The socialization process by which nonwhites are forced to participate in selection of favor for whiteness or blackness is a cyclical rejection of self-definition and further monitored by legal and social privileges. To allow whiteness and white privilege to remain blameless, ignorant and unaware of their perceptions and assertions to skin tones ascribes a lifetime of an identity-apart from the nonwhite faced with the contrived choice to claim a side of racial reality. The possession or property owning aspects of whiteness by nonwhites are further scrutinized in perceptions of intelligence, morality, speech, level of education, familial background and more. The laws predicated on these perceptions of tinted identities only serve to further oppress nonwhites and place them in subordinate slots among the socially constructed hierarchy without regard to the damaging effects this may have on their self-concept or self-definition. In considering the
rejection of blackness for socioeconomic survival or the unconscious passing perception for an improved quality of life seems to be an extensive strain upon an individual. This psychology of racial passing can diminish one’s self-definition and self-concept; it reveals a meta-layer, if you will, of racial discrimination. My analyses are positioned amidst sociological, historical and cultural consequences.

Black people have never legitimately been able to claim the advantage of self-defining. With skin color holding such significance, those who fall out of the typologies of whiteness, fall out of legal and social favor. Racial limitations of power can be simply defined as differential distributions of resources thereby, negotiated identities are constructed situationally. In social psychology, the presentation of self (Goffman, 1959) combined with role identities, psychological identities and identity salience (Stryker, 1994) and applying motivational significance of self-concept (Gecas, 1986) adequately summarizes the social costs of invoking whiteness into one’s identity. Nonwhites who are faced with having to perform outside their ‘blackness’ to accommodate social privileges of ‘whiteness’ are often behaving out of internal motives because their self-efficacy is compromised with the realization of negative experiences and alienation (Gecas, 1986) stemming from racial frames.

2.5 Role of Skin Tone in Shaping Identities

Contemporary idealizations of skin tone necessitates a further exploration of the social psychological factors upholding these standards and whether skin tone bias is still shaping the racial identities and affecting the self-esteem of African Americans. Racial dynamics are at play when a non-white individual advances through the social structures of society (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002). Skin tone, which should remain a phenotypic feature, becomes a social feature that often influences identity development within a group and this triggers socialization, the crea-
tion of racial attitudes and self-esteem and definition. As a result, acculturation may occur, ethnic identification may be split and racial consciousness is altered and often denied (Tummala-Narra, 2007). The whole experience brings forth questions of ‘who am I, what am I, who should I be and why am I different.’ The internalization of this form of racial divide upsets one’s sense of self and role which further impacts their life opportunities and choices (Tummala-Narra, 2007).

In the 1940s, an experiment of dolls and racial preferences was conducted by Clark and Clark (1947) that created a flurry of follow-up studies to test black children’s rejection of racial identities in favor of white idealized identities. Thirty years later, William Cross devised a model of ‘blackness’ that sought to explain the psychological stages of racial identity development (1971, 1991). This paradigm provided a means to explain and measure the socialization, group membership and cultural orientation of an African American within a white society. The choices one would make would be contingent on where that person was in the development process structure proposed by Cross (1971, 1991).

The research study, “Perceptions of and Preferences for Skin Color, Black Racial Identity and Self-Esteem Among African Americans” completed by Coard et al (2001), sets the stage for the direction of this researcher’s aims in linking self-esteem, self-perception and external idealizations of skin tone together. While their study’s aims and objectives were focused more on racial identity development, this study will hone in on identity perception and development through mate selection preference within a framework of cultural grounded-ness and outlined by Cross (1971, 1991).
2.6 Role of Skin Tone to Relationships

Research targeting mate selection preferences among African American college students was conducted by Ross that examined racial attitudes, skin tone and social status (Ross, 1997). Their work investigated the relationship between men and women, socioeconomic statuses and skin tone bias attitudes (Ross, 1997). The findings produced by this study indicated that males were more focused on skin tone and physical attractiveness in selecting mates; the data showed that 38.3% of men favored marriage with a light skinned female and 33.3% of men were inclined to date women with fair complexions (Ross, 1997). While these figures may be nominal in the bigger picture, the study noted that its variables did not look at racial socialization or self-esteem directly in its methodology and demonstrates a need for revisiting the contributing determinations.

A study of mate selection and preferences conducted by Hall (1995) suggested that African American males’ motive for dating outside their race was a psychological means to incite ire within the white male population as well as to increase their socioeconomic standings in the class structure. The intended research for this study is to seek validation that socio-psychological determinants are present, are generationally ingrained and are legitimated by the lasting legacy of colorism. An explanation that speaks to this aim is presented in the study by Ross (1997) that evidenced black males having a penchant for lighter skinned partners. Homogamy also comes under investigation in this determination and supports the survival of colorism in mate selection. The implications and future stability ideals of homogamous unions were explored and found to produce intergenerational class status, economic gains, and maintenance of group membership values (Bodenhorn, 2006; Kalmijn, 1991). Notions of similar characteristics or attributes may also influence partner selection (Hughes & Hertel, 1990). Skin tone and marriageability (on a
global scale) has exhibited leverage for lighter complexions; however, for the purpose of this research, the focus is aimed toward the black community (Udry, Bauman & Case, 1971). Finding a man or woman with complementary features and inclinations, such as race, ethnicity, skin tone, religion, culture, socioeconomic background or goals, may also account for preferences. As a challenge to this norm, anthropologist Peter Frost proclaimed that people are apt to choose the very opposite of what they are accustomed (2006).

The formation of skin tone preferences have been researched through studies and findings indicated that socialization and environment inform these choices (Ross, 1997; Hughes & Demo, 1989). Ross asserted that people who grow up or reside for large portions of their lives in communities that are ethnically or racially diverse exhibit less skin tone bias (1997). The most prominent reason illustrated was early, childhood socialization and acceptance of others. Conversely, secondary, environmental socialization, such as college life, may have the reverse effect on skin tone preference. Attending a historically, black college or university (HBCU) may offer stronger opportunities for racial solidarity, but may also foster a greater emphasis on skin tone in cases of dating or sexual encounters (Harvey, 2005).

2.7 Summary

Current as well as historical literatures on colorism highlight the manifestations and situate its divisive effectiveness within latent effects of racism. The empirical data emphasizes the careful construction and prevalence of colorism to be enduring in all aspects of life for people of color (Hochschild & Weaver, 2007). Similar and numerous studies on mate selection and racial attitudes have produced a breadth of knowledge that in some form speaks to colorism and racism (Batson et al, 2006; Childs, 2002; Hamilton et al, 2009; Hill, 2002; Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Kalmijn, 1998; Qian et al, 2012; Yancey, 2007). The gaps addressed in these research studies all
convey a further need for socio-psychological analysis of African American males’ self-esteem and internalized self-definition. The above literature review provides the necessary platform to delve past the prior studies and focus exclusively on whether skin tone matters to African American males and if their personal identities play a role in their mate selection preferences.

A lack of research on personal perceptions of one’s skin tone and racial identity is acknowledged by Coard et al (2001) that could eliminate the inferences of racial identity and more thoroughly measure them. This calls for a study that will examine racial attitudes and identities from a socio-psychological perspective within the confines of a sociocultural environment (Parham & Helms, 1985). Many of the aforementioned studies and research maintained a focal point in the interests of colorism’s negative experiences of females and neglected the roles of males in this circular oppression. This absence represents a gap in the literature worthy of investigation in acknowledgment and discovery is an opportunity to initiate change and transformative healing from the effects of colorism.

Healing from and eradication of colorism can only begin with understanding its roots in racism and in critically engaging the subject matter at all levels of society. Conversations on colorism expose the discriminations and stereotypes in which we become entwined (Harrison & Thomas, 2009). An honest progression toward extinguishing colorism is conditional to acknowledgment of participation and education of its effects.

Lastly, when looking at the current empirical data and scholarship on race theory, there seems to be an absence of theoretical studies on colorism. Critical race scholars have attempted to develop frameworks for comprehending colorism, but the results have only yielded discussions on colorism and systemic inquiries.
3 METHODOLOGY

The intentions of this thesis research were to explore colorism as a phenomenon occurring among interpersonal relationship preferences of black men, to position their stories and voices as the focal point of interpretation and to generate critical dialogue that is useful knowledge that advise advocacy for cultural, racial and gender empowerment. An exploration of the concepts of whiteness and blackness will provide a backdrop to understanding the participants’ life experiences and social psychological effects of colorism. The core tenets of Black Feminist Thought supported by an African-centered framework are most suitable for this investigation.

3.1 Research Design

This qualitative, exploratory study is a story-telling and reasoning of the interpersonal relationship preferences of twenty, black men who have experienced or sustained the effects of colorism. Using an African-centered methodology situated in a Black Feminist theoretical frame, I examined the influence of colorism on partner selection preferences of twenty men who have demonstrated a proclivity for only light skinned women. Semi-structured interviews were prearranged and conducted using open-ended questions to conduct data. An interview guide was implemented and can be found in Appendix B. The interviews were digitally recorded for clarity, transcribed after each meeting and stored in a password protected file on the student investigator’s computer to ensure confidentiality. The time expectation for each interview averaged ninety minutes. Three third-party companies, *Matchless Transcription*, *Wordzexpressed* and *SameDay Transcriptions*, were used to transcribe and document the interviews, while the software offered by *Dedoose* was used for coding.
3.2 Participants

The sample was composed of twenty, self-identified black, heterosexual men who were at least 21 years of age and exclusively date or enter relationships with light complexioned, black women. A separate, pilot study with a sample of 4 participants, meeting the same criteria, was conducted 4 months prior to this study, to ensure viability and relevance of the subject matter and to test the survey data.

The site for this study was a metro-Atlanta barber shop’s break room, as it was also the site for the preliminary investigation of the practicality of the issue in a roundtable discussion named “Colorism Conversation” hosted by the researcher that covered definitions, manifestations and history of colorism within the black community. Historically and socially, barber shops serve as a platform for men of all backgrounds to discuss current events, social issues and personal stories without having to filter their conversations. It is a ‘place’ that can be interpreted as a communal ‘safe’ ground and creates a ‘space’ for forum style communication (Harris-Lacewell, 2004).

The participants for this study were recruited from the prior roundtable discussions, “Colorism Conversation.” The pre-interview strategy took form as a roundtable (round-room) discussion on the basic elements, perceptions and perpetuation of colorism. After discussing with attendees the common assumptions and attitudes associated with skin tones, we surveyed videos and brief YouTube documentaries highlighting colorism. Snowball sampling from the initial interviews furnished the extra participants. Overall, three types of purposeful sampling were employed for this study: criterion, convenience and snowball sampling. Creswell’s qualitative research design strategies inform researchers that qualified participants provide the best means to study an anomaly (Creswell, 2013).
The intent for the snowball sampling was two-fold: to locate participants with whom the researcher had little to no access, due to an ‘outsider’ status, and to find participants who could establish response input for filling in the gaps of the current working knowledge. Otherwise, without the specificity of rationale offered by these distinct participants, the data could have lacked relevance in understanding motives for the research endeavor. Convenience sampling allowed this researcher to construct an almost natural setting for men to speak freely on a skeptically-received topic of concern. The logic of selecting criterion sampling was assurance that the interested participants were qualified to contribute knowledge in that their predetermination met the requirements for evaluation and opportunity.

At the close of the first “Colorism Conversation,” roundtable participants were given a flyer with the researcher’s contact information and a sign-up sheet was available for interested men who maintained exclusive preferences for light-skinned women. In the interest of privacy for the participants, the registration form indicated that only a pseudo-name, telephone number and/or e-mail address were needed. Participants selected their own pseudo-names.

Since Atlanta is considered to be the “diverse hub of the south,” I had several participants representative of a range of skin tones, economic backgrounds, ages and places of origin. With consideration to the city of Atlanta and its long-standing history of black education, arts, music and culture, the demographics of its black population draws in people from across the country. We have a large consortium of historically black colleges and universities as well as a strong representation of black politicians. The significance of this backdrop provides an overlay to comparative analysis of racial solidarity, pride and opportunity as well as it provides a blend of socio-economic classes as a population sample.
3.3 Interviews

Initially, I thought of using focus groups to acquire knowledge. Figuring that within a group setting, building upon participant responses through collective memory would be suitable, however I realized that time and attention to detail of depth of one’s narrative would be limitations. Additionally, I was concerned that my need to establish a trust and rapport with the participants would be hampered by a less personal approach such as a focus group. With consideration to the participants of a focus group, I also worried that the dynamics of personality may isolate some and prevent the opportunities for participation. Rather than group members feeding off of one another’s answers to the questions to contribute a brief two to three minute response, I desired an in-depth story-telling of their personal experiences, not a generalized snippet. Besides, my “Colorism Conversation” round table discussions allowed for this style of dialogue and helped to introduce the study’s focus and topic. The choice for interviews proved to be the best approach for individual agency, insightful reflections and reduction of peer pressure.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted and averaged about an hour and a half. Twenty interviews were conducted in the first quarter of 2014 and by the fifteenth interview, the data collected began to mimic much of the content and experiences of the men prior. I had reached a ‘saturation’ point of emerging themes and patterns in so few participants (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). With this realization, I felt confident that colorism was still a prevalent issue and the study would serve a valid purpose.

3.4 Procedures

Consent was secured with the informed consent document prior to commencing the interviews. As another precaution, consent given by all participants to contact them post-interview for
verification or further discussions will ensure cross-validation of interview content and extension of questions beyond the interview.

Prior to conducting any surveys, all participants were given a formal Statement of Consent Form to read and the form was verbally read and explained by the interviewer. Participants signed the form indicating that they understood that they were being asked to participate in a research study, that they understood the risks involved in participating, that they could refuse to answer any question that they were not comfortable with, and that the information they provided would be kept strictly confidential.

Identifying information from any of the participants in the community survey was kept separately from the survey website and forms on which they recorded their responses to the questions. Records were linked to individuals only through a unique, numeric identifier and the information used to link records with identifying information remained in a securely locked file drawer only accessible to project staff.

Interviews were directed with an interview guide to administer a series of responsive and semi-structured questions. To aid responses that were unclear to the researcher, probes were arranged for each question. The interviews were consensually audio-taped as well as the researcher taking notes. In the instance that a participant was uncomfortable with researcher being of a different race or ethnicity or even a different gender, three research assistants were available to facilitate. The research assistants included two females and one male. The female assistants also represented different skin tones: one self-identified light complexioned and the other medium brown.

Coding was computerized by a software program and within a coded notes log that utilized self-selected, pseudo-names of the participants for cross-checking of facts (participants
were asked to choose a name of their liking as an identifier for the purposes of anonymity in the interviews and surveys). The interview notes were maintained in a lock box at the home office of the researcher until data collection was complete and analysis was finalized.

### 3.5 Instrument

Scheduled interviews took place in the meeting room at the back of the barbershop and lasted no more than 90 minutes to conduct. The space allowed for privacy and came with a large, round conference room style table. The circular design of the table and the seating allowed for the participant and the researcher to be comfortable sitting across from one another and promoted a feeling of co-researchers embarking upon a project. The conversational interview approach established opportunities for clarifying questions, open dialogue and reflexivity. Throughout the interview process, in addition to the audio recording, the researcher made notes about salient issues that emerged, body language and expressed emotions.

An introduction to the research motive was repeated prior to acquiring the informed consent forms for all interviewees. Data was collected using an interview guide, however there was not a strict adherence or scripted focus. The interview guide was compiled of questions that fell into three categories of exploration, other than demographics: knowledge of colorism and its impact on the community, self-identity with respect to personal esteem and racial affinity and socialization values and norms. The guide furnishes a schema for creating and arranging a series of purposeful yet adjustable inquiries (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Probing questions were prepared for each question as a backup to elicit comprehensive responses in the event that the participant failed to provide understandable data.

All interviews were audio recorded with a Brother brand digital recorder that was connected to a laptop via USB cable and saved as a digital file. Transcriptions were completed by
Matchless Transcription Services, Wordzexpressed and SameDay Transcriptions and coding was aided through the use of software, Dedoose. All data was saved on a password protected file on the computer of the primary investigator at Georgia State University and will be destroyed upon completion of this project.

Prior to a selected participant’s interview, they were given instructions and links to a pre-interview survey. Online survey construction was outsourced to SurveyMonkey who specializes in generating surveys. The need for this survey to be completed prior to the interview was to enhance the researcher’s knowledge of her participant and set the stage for their dialogue. Should the participant not have access to a computer, and additional time allotment to our interview was added for the participant to utilize the researcher’s laptop to complete the survey.

Demographical information was obtained by use of a brief questionnaire. The demographic form included questions of age, ethnicity, education level, income level, origins and childhood upbringing. This background information provided necessary data for comparative analysis on the impact of colorism across time and space of the participants’ lived experiences.

Once they completed the demographic personal data form, clearance to complete the skin color assessment was prompted. Across their computer screen, an image of non-descript body types appeared with a variation of skin tones. They were numbered one through six. This measure has been adapted slightly reproduced from Coard’s methods as well as Bond & Cash’s studies (Bond & Cash, 1992; Coard et al, 2001). The simulated image of colors were selected and based off of the Fitzpatrick Scale of dermatological skin care chart. This color chart gauged gradations in six categories and can encompass several more shades; in the interest of brevity and in keeping with Bond & Cash’s study measure, the range is suitable for self-identification (Bond & Cash, 1992). The skin tone images were projected onto the computer screens for participants to
answer 5 questions: (1) self-identify their own actual skin tone, (2) skin tone they would prefer to have, (3) skin tone of their desired mate, (4) skin tone that they believe their male friends/peers prefer to be the most desirable, and (5) skin tone perceived to be the most preferred by their family members.

A self-esteem evaluation was part of the study as well. The purpose for this measure was to determine if the level of self-esteem was compromised and if so, did this reflect logic in the partner preference selection criteria for these participants? Ways in which self-esteem can be compromised have been indicated in the aforementioned overview. This measure incorporated social/racial identity, psychological and economic status questions. The personal self-esteem survey was an adaptation from and augmentation to the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and was a set of 20 questions (17 answered on a 2 point scale and 3 answered on a 3 point scale.)

As a supporting evidentiary test of partner selection preference based on skin tone and external influences, 6 color images of photo quality appeared to the participant on the computer screen. The participant was asked to select the most preferred photo for his desired selection. The purpose of the color photo selections were to test for consistency in their answers from the skin tone questions in the beginning and their forthcoming interview questions.

Lastly, a set of five (5) questions related to cultural orientation was asked to determine if there is a familial-supported and racial pride influence affecting these preferences. These questions were an abbreviated selection from the Scale of Racial Socialization for African Americans (SORSA) from its subsection on cultural pride.

Upon completion of the computerized survey content on the researcher’s laptop, the personal interview began. Prior to answering any of the questions, this researcher reiterated to the participant: that he could withdraw at any time without explanation or penalty, refuse to answer
any questions and could request a break at any time during the interview process. My academic
contact information was offered again on a business card to the participant if he desired to follow
up with the results of the study. Finally, this researcher offered the participant much apprecia-
tion for their time, life stories and honesty.

3.6 Data Analysis

The recording of the self-esteem, skin tone/social desirability/mate selection, and cultural
orientation surveys have coded answers that distinguish between a compromised self-esteem lev-
el and a strong sense of self. With the exception of one question (#10) in the skin tone/social de-
sirability/mate selection section, all answers that indicate the first choice (1) are coded to indicate
a low or compromised self-esteem level affected by Eurocentric standards set by white hegemo-
y. Pie charts and summarization tables have been implemented to illustrate some of the find-
ings.

After initial analyses of all measures were completed, participants’ age attributes were
broken down to examine whether the role of age has any bearing on skin tone preferences in
partner selection. The breakdown of age range grouped participants into two segmented views:
ages 21-45 and ages 46 and up. The idea behind defining the age groups accordingly is to refer-
ence historical context in the black community and values of self-worth brought on through Civil
Rights Movement, Black Nationalism, Black Pride and the Black Student Movement. The
younger cohort of participants are grouped to reflect a more contemporary setting that may or
may not be influenced by assimilation ideals or culturally centered traditions. It is the research-
er’s desire to discover how colorism has manifested itself post-Civil Rights Movement and in the
interim of a so-called “post-racial” or “color-blind” society.
The goals of this research were to: find out how these men were affected in their lifetimes to inform their opinions; how did colorism manifest within them; how do they truly feel about skin color; what reflects beauty for these men; and what does skin tone do for them in their relationships.

3.7 Reliability and Validity

The reliability of the skin color assessment, borrowed from Bond & Cash (1992) has a coefficient reliability of 0.90. The self-esteem survey derived from the Rosenberg (RSES) Scale has a coefficient reliability of 0.97. The SORSA/racial socialization and cultural orientation scale has a coefficient reliability of 0.71. For the skin tone preference color photo survey and the skin color/social desirability/mate selection survey, a pilot test was conducted for reliability and validity purposes and had a coefficient reliability of 0.86. The reliability of the Fitzpatrick Skin Tone Scale for use in the skin color assessment has a coefficient factor range of 0.77 to 0.82.

The internal validity (0.83) of the RSES instrument examines the degree to which the items are interconnected and can attest to a level of socio-psychological definition. A pilot test was conducted four months prior to the actual recruitment and data collection of qualified participants. The purpose of the pilot study was to determine if the surveys would actually measure the intended target areas of research: self-esteem, socialization and skin color satisfaction. A post-test interview was administered to the pilot study participants inquiring the ease of use and understanding of the surveys. Based on their responses, the instruments met the requirements for validity. Coding in the data analysis also offered a secondary validity as the researcher had employed the use of software designed for content analysis; being able to refine variables found in the transcriptions that correlated with her codebook of thematic evidence.
3.8 Summary

The research objectives for this study were threefold. I wished to explore and connect the social psychological influences of racial identity, compromised self-concept and skin tone bias or colorism for black males’ mate interpersonal relationship preferences. The study intended to associate embedded idealizations of skin tone bias with external factors such as acculturation, socioeconomic influences and peer perceptions. Lastly, the research was hopeful to be considered a seminal study that incorporates pertinent elements of prior studies on mate or partner selection, complexion homogamy and racial identity from the black male perspective.

Colorism begs questions that deserve exploration. Why does a preference for lightness exist? What are the influences that contribute to the socialization of this particular group of men’s preferences and choices? Why are we not examining the racial attitudes that create this culture of exclusion? We cannot begin to understand the psychological and social nature of colorism until we begin to investigate the global processes that maintain the prevalence of colorism.

4 FINDINGS

Patterned categories emerged into three analysis themes of: socialization, identity construction and application of values or adherence to societal norms established within a white racist structure. I hypothesized that the largest category of variables would be discovered in relation to their families or significant others weighing the most in terms of influencing socialization with popular culture and media following. Moreover, I theorized that participants who had experienced more white, racial socialization (acculturation and assimilation) would have a higher tendency to select light skinned females and participants who had lower self-esteem (thereby a compromised ideal of self-worth and self-concept) would be more likely to favor lighter complexioned females.
Developing categories and patterns contextualized the theoretical concepts embedded within the narratives. Since thematic coding laid the foundation for the theoretical framework, attention was focused on emerging relationships between the contexts, categories and concepts for explanations that will speak to the overarching research question. This is the point at which the main three themes (socialization, identity construction and assimilation/acculturation within a white racist structure) became interconnected in a manner that suggested an explanation for behavior. Emerging from a socio-psychological context, evidence shown that skin tone was operating as an identity supplement for social mobility and hierarchy as it pertained to life chances in the eyes of the participants.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Place of Birth</th>
<th>Self-Identified Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Self-Identified Skin Tone</th>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Income Level</th>
<th>Relationship Status</th>
<th>Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1 – “Will”</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Caramel</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>$0-10K</td>
<td>Single, never married</td>
<td>1 - daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2 – “Baron”</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Tennessee, raised in Detroit</td>
<td>Black-American</td>
<td>Light yellow</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>$20-30K</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>5 – 2 sons, 3 daughters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3 – “Mike”</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Brown</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>$40-50K</td>
<td>Single, never married</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4 – “Kareem”</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Brown</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>$25-35K</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2 – 1 son, 1 daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5 – “Fritz”</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Cap-Haitien</td>
<td>Haitian</td>
<td>Dark</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>$15-20K</td>
<td>In a relationship</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6 – “Bastian”</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Kingston</td>
<td>Jamaican</td>
<td>Dark brown</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>$30-35K</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>1 - daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7 – “Mackwell”</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Johannesburg</td>
<td>South African</td>
<td>Light brown</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>$20-25K</td>
<td>Married, twice</td>
<td>4 – 3 daughters, 1 son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P8 – “Fabian”</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Light brown</td>
<td>Bachelors degree</td>
<td>$35-40K</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>1 daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P9 – “Samuel”</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Calabar</td>
<td>Nigerian</td>
<td>Dark brown</td>
<td>Secondary school</td>
<td>$25-30K</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>3 - daughters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P10 – “Damani”</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>St. Ann’s Bay</td>
<td>Jamaican</td>
<td>Bronze brown</td>
<td>Bachelors degree</td>
<td>$25-30K</td>
<td>In a relationship</td>
<td>1 - son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P11 – “William”</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>Black-American</td>
<td>High yellow</td>
<td>Middle school</td>
<td>$25-30K</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>5 – 1 daughter, 4 sons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P12 – “Alvin”</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Brown</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>$30-35K</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2 - daughters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P13 – “Jean-Pierre”</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Port-au-Prince</td>
<td>Haitian</td>
<td>Dark</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>$15-20K</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>1 - son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P14 – “Darren”</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>San Diego</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Medium brown</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>$45-50K</td>
<td>Divorced, twice</td>
<td>3 – 2 sons, 1 daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P15 – “Gerald”</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Mocha brown</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>$55-60K</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1 son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P16 – “Baruti”</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Cape Town</td>
<td>South African</td>
<td>colored</td>
<td>Bachelors degree</td>
<td>$30-35K</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2 – 1 daughter, 1 son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P17 – “Brian”</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Seattle</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Coffee brown</td>
<td>Masters degree</td>
<td>$50-55K</td>
<td>In a relationship</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P18 – “Ali”</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Houston</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Light skinned</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>$10-15K</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P19 – “Santana”</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Spanish Town</td>
<td>Jamaican</td>
<td>Brown-black</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>$50-55K</td>
<td>Divorced, three times</td>
<td>7 – 3 daughters, 4 sons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P20 – “Ahmad”</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Chocolate brown</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>$20-25K</td>
<td>In a relationship</td>
<td>2 - sons</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1 Participants’ Ages

Figure 2 Participants’ Place of Origin
Participants' Self-Identified Skin Tones

![Pie chart showing skin tones distribution: Light 20%, Medium 50%, Dark 30%]

Figure 3 Participants' Self-Identified Skin Tones

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>LIGHT SKIN</th>
<th>MEDIUM SKIN</th>
<th>DARK SKIN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LOW INCOME</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MODERATE INCOME</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIGH INCOME</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4 Participants' Breakdown of Income Range to Skin Tone

Participants' Self-Reported Income

![Pie chart showing income distribution: 15% make less than $20K, 55% make between $20K-$35K, 15% make between $35K-$50K, 15% make between $50K-$75K]

Figure 5 Participants' Self-Reported Income
PARTICIPANTS' RELATIONSHIP STATUS

- Single, never married: 25%
- In a Relationship, never married: 20%
- Divorced: 20%
- Married: 35%

Figure 6 Participants' Relationship Status

PARTICIPANTS' EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUNDS

- High School Diploma: 45%
- Some college: 25%
- College Degrees: 25%
- Middle School: 5%

Figure 7 Participants' Educational Backgrounds
During the time that the interviews were conducted: five men were single, four were in relationships (two of which were monogamous), four were divorced and seven were married. The participants’ education levels included: one who exited the school system in the seventh grade, nine who had high school diplomas and ten who had attended college with five of those holding degrees. The geographical demography of the participants was represented by: six (6) men from the southern region of the United States, three (3) men from the northern region of the United States, two (2) men from the western region of the United States, one (1) man from the Midwestern region of the United States, five (5) men from the Caribbean and three (3) men from the African continent. Three participants did not have children at the time of the interviews while the other seventeen did. It is also important to ponder that twelve out of the seventeen men had daughters, as this could complicate racialized and gendered messages of self-worth and value derived from colorism.

The three emergent themes found and examined in this study are affected divergently by intervening variables within stages of socialization occurring in childhood and adulthood. This
suggests that the data is multifaceted and conceptually different to black people outside of this study’s criteria. My assumption that participants who exhibited lower self-esteem on the survey outcome would be more likely to favor lighter complexioned females was true in all cases except one, Baron’s narrative. Baron tested high on the self-esteem survey and still maintained his strong preference for light skinned women. Perhaps his example is the exception that exhibits a confident instance of physical preferences or it may be a developed prejudice of socialization that is not an influence to his self-concept. Measures of Baron’s self-esteem did not indicate compromises; however his rationale pointed the finger toward darker skinned black women having low self-esteem:

Dark & brown skinned girls are self-conscious, always insecure & lack confidence – they’re still mental slaves on the plantation. They’re always complainin’ blamin’ & overcompensatin’ for their blackness – they just act out whereas my light skinned sistahs are calm & secure. They’ve got no issue with society & ain’t tryna’ lock a man down or holla ‘bout what’s owed to them. I ain’t gonna get with no chick darker than me, I ain’t gonna have my kids go through no mental slavery and as long as I’ve been black, this mentality has never sidelined me. Ever since I can remember, my folks always been light. We ain’t never had no dark folks down the line. Due to the way these darker girls behave, supported by things my family elders told me and how my family history looks, I don’t see the point in tryin’ something new [meaning dating someone darker.] These dark skinned sistahs gotta try and gain credit by changing up their looks, adding hair, lightening their skin and it still don’t change their mindset or confidence levels ‘cuz they still want approval from society about their looks. Light skinned sistahs don’t gotta go through all that so they’re mindset, like mine, is sound and strong. We look good, we can glide through life and be happy. (Baron, age 46, from Michigan)

All participants tell of childhood messages on socialization with whites and other blacks. Additionally, further evidence of racial identity, self-concept and age variants contribute to the correlations of intraracial discrimination found in each hypothesis. Consequently, the more strongly the participants felt about idealizing lightness, the more strongly they invoked the values of the in-group (white) as part of their individual identification.
4.1 Data Analysis

The data from the participants’ narratives incorporated into this analysis has hopefully rendered answers to the following questions: (1) Where does racial socialization and identity construction fit into the relationship between colorism and interpersonal relationship preferences? (2) What are the perceptions that these men have of social and racial constructs, dominant culture and sociocultural agency? The values instilled, ingrained and acted upon by these participants has hopefully provided cues to their evolution of socialization throughout their youth into adulthood; intergenerational beliefs, peer assimilation and popular culture formed the dominant cultural ideals they maintain about the centrality of skin tone in their interpersonal relationship preferences.

Each interview was audio-taped and transcribed verbatim by outside transcription services. The compilation of interview notes also added a layer of validity to the narratives. The process of data analysis for this research study relied on procedural coding methods because of the provisional means of “analyzing qualitative data” (Saldana, p. 150). The implementation of causation coding allowed me to look for answers to the questions of “why” by concentrating on answers that would reveal causal beliefs. The initial descriptive coding allowed me to look at what norms, values and social rules guided the participants’ choices, emotions and actions. My second level coding allowed me to refine, expand and exclude codes into a smaller number of representations of ideas. As I moved forward in my analysis, I employed pattern coding because of its explanatory purposes in identifying specific themes and its utility in seeking causes within the data (Saldana, p. 210). The content began to affirm that a participant’s preferences in light skinned women were the results of external interventions that would not be altered regardless of how attractive he may think a darker skinned woman might be. My third level of coding provid-
ed my textual data with salient support for the themes discussed in the narratives: socialization, identity construction and application of values or adherence to societal norms established within a white racist structure.

Since thematic coding lays the foundation for theoretical framework, I was able look to the emerging relationships between the contexts, categories and concepts for explanations that were relevant to my research question. It is at this point that my themes became interconnected in a manner that suggested an explanation for their behavior. Growing out of a socio-psychological backdrop, I was able to see how skin tone is operating as an identity supplement for social mobility and hierarchy as it pertains to life chances in the eyes of my participants.

4.2 Socialization

Socialization encompasses influences of family, peers and media or popular culture. Behavioral labels & perceived statuses, privileges and values will make up the dominant societal norms theme. The construction of self and racial identity theme may be broken down into self-worth and concept, standards of beauty, racial descriptors and sexual scripting. It is significant to this research to understand how these participants are socialized into understanding themselves as black men and all associated stereotypes that may come with that racialization.

Research by Hughes and Demo (1990), focused on racial identity, socialization and what it means to be black within society. They argue two things: (1) that being “black in American society means occupying a defined status;” and (2) that a “psychological consequence of being black is black group identity” in which experiences shift in terms of situations (Hughes & Demo, 1990, p. 364). The significance of their findings indicate that the collective black community realizes differences in terms of skin color, which contribute to the factors that affect black identity. The literature evidences that an adult’s social processes, racialized identity, attitudes and val-
ues originate from parental (or primary) socialization as well as inter-cultural socialization (secondary socialization and racial experiences). Directing attention to social practices and environment are critical to self and racial identity.

### 4.2.1 Primary Socialization

My findings have suggested that family plays a large part in the influence of socialization. The upside though, with foresight, is this role could also be part of the solution and healing. Baron’s recollection of family influences illustrated how strong influences of one’s significant others can be:

My grandma would always say to my cousins...you know when the whole family would get together at her house for birthdays or holidays...”we can’t celebrate until my pretty, light skin babies get here.” “My momma would always tell us that we’d have an easier life ‘cuz we were lighter than most. We were our grandma’s favorites, so we got all the privileges – better gifts, we got to stay over almost every weekend, but my grandma said my cousins acted like animals, so they didn’t get to stay as much. *(Baron, age 46, from Michigan)*

In all of the participants’ interviews, the family role was a negative antecedent variable due to their perceptions of skin tone values and perpetuation of the hurtful stereotypes aimed at dark skin. The interactions of family members with either light or dark skinned members revealed unspoken biases and preferential treatment. Mike describes the advice he was used to getting during his youth:

We was always told not to bring home no dark-skinned ladies for dinner because they weren’t for settling down with. If we wanted to have a chance in life, we needed to act more like the successful, rich white folks, get a respectable gal with light skin and good genes...seemed like it didn’t even matter if the girl was pretty or not, long as she had good hair & light skin, she had a better chance of getting out of the ghetto. All the women in my family would check the new babies’ ears & fingers to see how light or dark they’d be. *(Mike, age 26, from Georgia)*

Charles Cooley (1902) suggested that the values, morals and ethics of one’s primary socialization group should reflect those of the larger society. The findings of this study suggest this
idea could be problematic as it relates to the larger hegemonic influences of white supremacy and European standards of beauty. Ali illustrates this idealization:

A brave black man [points to himself] will tell you the truth about what we all fantasize and desire. None of us want a dark skinned, wig wearin’ woman with hella kids, bad credit, gettin’ stamps and living in Section 8 rentals. We want that special diamond in the rough; a natural, (bright yellow) beauty with smooth skin, long, real hair that falls around her shoulders, good curves, high cheekbones. Women like this never fall victim to trifling economics; they got good jobs, might have a kid but not a lot, they got college degrees or are in school and ain’t tryin’ to make a living on the handouts of DFACS. Besides, these successful companies like you talked about (referring to Unilever and L’oreal) are just responding to the demands of skin bleaching items, they wouldn’t make them if there wasn’t a market for them. If they don’t make them, someone else will and if the women using them are going to keep on, they why not profit from something that is in demand and improves a person’s looks. Women buy shit all the time to improve their looks. They can’t escape being black, but those who are using the creams are able to escape being dark, and by getting lighter they are getting access to things they had not before – it’s like their way up and out. *Ali, age 23, from Texas*

Race and color are major factors in beauty ideals and in social consciousness. Racialized attitudes or perspectives provide a climate in which new types of racism can emerge and subsist covertly. Latent circumstances create an environment for the evolution of a racialized consciousness. For the participants’ socialization by their significant others to have a foundation within a racist structure, decenters their racial and ethnic identities. Cooley’s suggestion was more than likely a generalization of socialization, yet in terms of this study it could have real consequences. The men expressed values and beliefs comparable to those of the larger, white society in spite of their being black. The valorization of whiteness wages a war against blackness for these participants that results in negative socialization and a compromised collective, racial identity. The consequence of socialization for Cooley (1902) was to develop a healthy self and by extension a favorable self-concept.

Returning to Gecas’ (1986) work on socialization and self-concept illuminates the participants’ motives for behavior. He states that “socialization makes the individual want to do what
he has to do (from the point of view of the group or society)” and this transformative process aids in one’s self-control (Gecas, 1986, p.133). This idea lends support to explaining how and why these men prefer their women in this manner. Gleaned from the messages across their life course, the participants’ assume they are in control of their choices and do not equate preference with prejudice or view the socialization process negatively.

My fetish for light skin is no different from another man’s fetish for pretty feet or big titties. My choice to only check out, date, have sex with or marry with girls who are light complected isn’t a prejudice; it’s proven that dark complected girls have a lot more issues to deal with. Just like the advice and stories my family has told and retold over the years, just like what we see among celebrities’ personal preferences – the majority who have preferences like I do all can’t be wrong, it’s way too common for it to be some prejudicial construction. (Fabian, age 28, from Louisiana)

The affective ties they have with their family members (as significant others) have influenced their self-esteem and self-respect into adulthood (Bengston & Roberts, 1996). The consequences of this long-term primary socialization are extended by social agents of secondary socialization (pop culture, media, entertainment and athletic figures and so on). A small model to illustrate these ideas show how a participant’s identity is influenced by components in a cyclical process and are in a constant, relational flow.

Figure 9 How a Participants’ Identity is Influenced by Socialization
4.2.2 Secondary Socialization

The age range of participants also revealed how trends of intraracial discriminations have shifted from the home life into the public life. Secondary socialization is the occurrences of continued learning and application of values in adulthood. Meanings from our social interactions provide us with intentions and develop perspectives and worldviews. Secondary socialization provides us with social cues to navigate in the larger society and it is built upon the foundation of our primary socializing agents. Most instances of this form of socialization begins in our late adolescence and early adulthood phases of life. We learn how to behave or react in particular settings such as school or work. The values and understandings learned from primary socializing agents are integrated with the influences of secondary socialization.

With consideration to how college life has shaped Bastian’s perspectives on the skin color variety of women, he references that variety was limited to girls who were no darker than Halle Berry or Alicia Keys. His complexion paired with his Jamaican heritage served as a reminder to him that “history returns and the future can only be bright.” When I asked him what did that mean, he explained that “in his world” success, happiness and the good life were not “sending out invites to us black a** immigrants.” Again, I asked for clarity on his ideas of success and on his experiences as a Jamaican-American. Bastian responded with:

Whether we live here or back home [Jamaica], dark skinned brothers have to find ways to get a leg up on what these light skinned brothers got…you see when you turn on the tv or listen to the music, its never about dark, black men having money, having nice shit, having respect; they got to follow the cues of those who do got it. Them cues are how close they get to white, through their connections and through their women – its all about networking and emulating. Otherwise, I’m seen as just that dark a**, lower class working [expletive]. I went to university here in the States and women was not about the dark skinned brothers, UNLESS they found out I was from the islands, then they was about it – liked my accent ya’ know. But brothers was skeptical somewhat and those who were cool with me only dated light skins. Back home we like ‘em light too, it’s a sign of class if a gal is lighter. Since I’m not about changing my skin color, I gotta change what I
can and that’s who I am with, personally and professionally. So, you see light skins fit the image whereas dark skins don’t – and they’re a bit on the loud and aggressive side, always carrying anger between their shoulders. (*Bastian, age 30, from Jamaica*)

Bastian’s response supported Collins’ (2000) controlling images of black women and at the same time illustrated an internalization of racial messages regarding social status. His words also give meaning to the racialized social structure in which skin color demarcates economic categorization. He furthered his position on success by explaining how achievement is represented within the black community here in America, as well as Jamaica.

Have you considered the power of messages through the media? I mean its so real that its even got men back home getting’ white [referring to skin bleaching soap] with that shit meant for females [suggests that only women should bleach their skin]. When you think about movies or TV shows, how many dark skins do you see playing good roles? When you go out to the clubs, how many dark skins do you see sittin’ round waitin’ for someone to pay attention to them? When you watch the music videos, do you see any dark skins gettin’ on with the artists? The answer is NO to all the above. That’s what I’m talking ‘bout, success. It ain’t comin’ for dark skins, its reserved for light skins and those they bringing up with them. Whites ain’t too scared to be ‘round someone close to their complexion, but you put a brother like me in the same room and they sweatin’ makin’ excuses to leave. (*Bastian, age 30, from Jamaica*)

Bastian places the entertainment industry and college fraternization as reference points for what is reputable in society and what will advance his social status. The incorporation of sexism and racism against black women exhibits his participation in colorism. His subjugation in a white racist structure is unknown to him as his internalization of racial attitudes reinforces his subordination as well as that of the “dark skins” (women) that he disparages. He is correct in his identification of colorism in popular culture and the media, but he does not see himself to be a victim of it nor does he feel he is participating in its perpetuation. For his understanding is that of survival. His experienced reality is that one’s proximity to whiteness frames education, employ-
ment, residential location and places value on personal partner selections. Another participant, Kareem, also gave an opinion that spoke to secondary socialization, peer pressure and emulation:

In considering the role that athletes play or celebrities, their lives are on the up & up financially and to have a trophy wife or girl on your arm is big! If you got some dark skinned chick hanging on you, your partners are gonna talk about you, exclude you from guys’ get togethers…especially if she’s darker than you! Every dude wants a chick that is outside the race or at least mixed with something else, more exotic and rare. Otherwise, a dark chick is gonna be like – status quo – the girl from the hood who’s stuck on ghetto-nomics, a chick with a bunch of kids, a gold-digger and when these men are on their financial come up, the last thing they want is a common burden. It just makes for good sense; black people making money, establishing themselves, making a name for themselves aren’t tied down to chicks who don’t look white. (Kareem, age 31, from Illinois)

My hypothesis was positively confirmed in that all participants experienced counter-cultural socialization within and outside their familial influences. Their childhood socialization experiences spoke to prejudicial awareness messages and implicit themes on the differentiating societal beliefs and values between whites and blacks. Their adult socialization indicated different social psychological processes were affecting their identities in terms of social relationships, socioeconomic statuses, age and media-enhanced dimensions of black identities. The significance in this hypothesis lies within the participants’ perceived self and external determinants of self-esteem and racial identity. It was important to try and pull out how these men differentiated meanings of being black individually versus a black group identity. Their perceptions indicated a separation of selves and group when it came to positive and negative characteristics and stereotypes.

4.3 Identity Construction

Within this study, the participants’ identities are rooted in how they view themselves as a subject and object as well as how they situate their self-concept. Peter Burke stated that identities “are the sets of meanings people hold for themselves that define what it means to be who they are as persons, as role occupants and as group members” (2004, p. 5). For the purpose of this study, his
notion of how the social structure provides resources to people in certain positions has relevance.

The participants’ identities are indeed tied to the social structure in a way they view stratification being a way to work around skin tone stigma. Burke’s (2004) definition of identity verification within a group serves to explain the obvious intraracial divide as well as the larger social structure of in-group (whites) and out-groups (blacks). This process links a participant’s social self to self-esteem, their personal self to intrinsic meanings or authenticity and their role identities to the level of agency or self-efficacy they have in the larger societal structure (Gecas, 1995). Two participants who self-identified as ‘brown’ skinned expressed a desire to be lighter in the skin color satisfaction survey. In their interviews, both participants seemed to focus on the social privileges that would be afforded them if they were of a lighter skin tone due to the racial inequalities they have experienced in their life course. Jean-Pierre complained of not being light-complexioned:

If I had lighter skin, I’d have everything; a better job, no worries for having kids that may look like me, a chance at getting a girl who is black but could pass for something else, cops wouldn’t f**k with me… (Jean-Pierre, age 24, from Haiti)

Darren felt that by being lighter, he could have:

had more babies ‘cuz there wouldn’t be no worries if they came out darker…had a better experience in school with my teachers and might’ve gotten better grades but they just hated us and only listened to what the redbones had to say…not been a target for security in all the uppity malls ‘cuz they assume I ain’t got no money to shop with the white folks, but them light skinned Uncle Toms working up in there ain’t got no probs with security. (Darren, age 47, from California)

Where these men felt their stigmatized identities have impacted their social mobility, they have employed unique stigma management strategies to negotiate racial and social complexities (Kaufman & Johnson, 2004). They abandon components of their racial and ethnic identities and reevaluate their cultural values, norms and beliefs. They justify their choices by negotiating and adjusting their social identity to the norms of white social standards. Some of the participants discuss how they have been accused of ‘performing’ white or ‘acting white’ and reconciling their
behavior and attitudes to those of white racists. According to the participants’, there are accusations by peers that they do not identify with problems facing and interests within the black community. There is criticism aimed at them for differentiating themselves from the ‘group’ to gain approval from and membership into the white community. Brian describes an instance where his college peers ostracized him for his ideology on success and survival within a predominantly white university and a competitive job market:

Look at my skin, I ain’t light and I have worked my a** off to get a higher education and make more than $40K a year. And I couldn’t even get a pat on the back from my fellow black folks, they just place me in a box and label me “Uncle Tom” and say I forgot what color I am. I have always preferred light women, always had a good opportunity at education [because I wasn’t ashamed to get good grades] and was determined to not live in a Section 8 rental. As a teen, I worked in the white sections of town because they paid more. In high school, I was an athlete and the majority of dudes on the wrestling team were white, I hung out at their homes and rode to a lot of matches with their families. But I still had to go home and I still had to watch my mom struggle financially. So, since I chose to change my life’s direction and upgrade from what we’ve always had, I’ve lost my blackness?! So, the way I see it now is that whites aren’t missing the target too much…my fellow black men and women ARE happy to be self-destructive and unmotivated. There’s no need to act up, be crazy loud and always blame the “white man” for what we don’t have. We SHOULD be speaking properly and politely, we SHOULD place more emphasis on working hard to get ahead, we SHOULD be naming our children respectable names that won’t bring them shame or embarrassment later, we SHOULD break out of the stereotype of being ‘hood’ and on welfare and we NEED to stop using the race card for everything that doesn’t go our way. I’d rather be that token ni*** in white suburbia than that typical ni*** in jail, selling drugs or paying child support. (Brian, age 27 from Washington)

His statement contains isolating experiences just as much as it contains condemning and discriminatory experiences. Brian’s position displays his version of coping strategies within an academic setting but also among his peers. His account discloses how he negotiates hurtful labels from people within his racial group and how the school itself serves as a means of oppositional socialization. Peers can be regarded as significant others, in which Brian’s situation have run counter
to his racial identity as his social ties are influenced more so with those of white, significant others.

In consideration of social ties, significant others and identity development, Stryker’s and Serpe’s (1994) idea of commitment is related to the social costs of identities, the role salience and the link to one’s affective ties. The participants in this study modeled identity salience that could be measured by their prejudicial choices which in turn influenced the outcomes of their female selections. Participants’ indicated that they invoked various identities when interacting with other races or gender as well as the contextual factors of a given situation. Alvin explains:

When I’m at work I get my white on, you know speak proper, dress right and act like I’m all serious. When I’m hanging out with the guys, I can be relaxed, be myself, be black. When I’m at church or with my mama in public, I gotta turn on that humble, good boy charm. When I was single, I’d try all sorts of approaches and identities to attract a chick. You gotta adjust your temperament when it comes to different types of chicks; with dark chicks you can pretty much be anything and they’ll be settin’ up plans; with light chicks you gotta work at it, play the role like you got a 5 year plan, like white folks. (Alvin, age 56, from New York)

4.3.1 Social Psychological Influences of Colorism

Social psychology lends itself to the analysis of the explanations for external, cultural divergences. Research has shown that people possess different social identities; gender, occupational, ethnic, parental and so on (Turner, 1985). The environments we are in influence which identities we invoke and define our performance and preference within those environments. Additionally, the social and racial identities we form are created and shaped over our life courses. There exists a “multidimensionality” that exists of racial identity that is impacted by “in-group variables” and “out-group variables” (Hughes & Demo, 1990, p. 372). The variables at play intercede with racial solidarity and cultural assimilation at both the micro and macro levels of society.
Institutional or systemic racism (macro level of society) impacts and inhibits the self-efficacy of this group of black men while challenging their self-perceptions, self-esteem and self-concept. Discriminatory practices persist toward darker complexioned individuals because of historical roots of racism and influences of social agents. The perpetuation of racial attitudes and practices are reinforced generationally as well as daily.

4.3.2 Participants’ Concept of “Self”

Kenneth Gergen and Chad Gordon’s (1986) analysis of the “The Self in Social Interaction” aids this study by situating the participants within the “relational self.” Their work looks at the variability in their identities and factors influencing their “selves” and behavior. In understanding facets of their “selves,” we are provided with a richer understanding and deeper meaning for their choices. The explanatory concept proposed by Gergen and Gordon establishes a real connection between identity and behavior. The findings indicate that these men maintain “multiple selves” due to their variable performances when around different people, as well as the “singularity of self” because their baseline for viewing who they are impacts their behavior across time and space (Gordon & Gergen 1968, p.6). Damani describes how he manipulates his behavior on cue to accommodate situations:

Being Jamaican doesn’t help me in the work field. I gotta think about how I talk before I open my mouth in front of people like bosses, educateds [his word], elders, women and so on. I feel like if I sound black AND foreign that it’s a double negative. Sometimes, my accent excites the ladies but not always. When I’m around a lot of white people, I try to pull up my pants, straighten my back, pull my locks back and keep a smile on my face. I break out that “yes sir, no ma’am” talk, offer help and just be available to them. I don’t like it but it’s what you do. It’s not who I am all day, but I gotta play the part to get through the day. *(Damani, age 29, from Jamaica)*

The participants seem to view their “selves” as constructs since it is explanatory in that social agents influence their self-concepts (Gordon & Gergen 1968, p.3). Additionally, their
“selves” are more in line with processes due to the long-term influences and dynamics of racism and hegemony (Gordon & Gergen 1968, p.5). Lastly, these men view themselves as “objects” due to the social factors affecting their “selves,” hence the “relational self” that is held to standards non-reflexive to their racial identities. Fritz quietly avers that black men (and women) have no intrinsic value to white society in his eyes and are often devalued by other black people:

> We are nothing to the white man. It is no different now than it was back then. No different if we are in America or back in Haiti. Black people always remain in the background and under the feet of white people. When they pass you on the street or in the store, they expect you to defer to them or assume you are the employee and must help them. We can still be bought or sold but just on different terms and in different contexts. Black people are not essential to whites in this world, but those who look more like them can at least have an easier time in it. Sometimes it is just as bad to have black people hate on you too. *(Fritz, age 23, from Haiti)*

Relational selves speculate that connections to one’s significant others are interwoven within our “selves.” This suggests that behavior may be a variant process as it relates to the affective ties one has with their significant other or primary socialization group. The findings from the study evidenced desires or motives to preference light skinned women on implicit and explicit messages from significant others even when a difference of opinion presented itself. If a female who was darker was found to be of interest to the participant, their motive for selection was still premised on the cautions from their socializers. Mackwell’s memories of an interest in a female who was “medium brown” continues to make him feel guilty:

> Wanda was really niicce [emphasis added]; she had a perfect body, strait teeth, pretty smile and big brown eyes. She made me laugh and we had a good time when we went out, but...I had to cut her loose. There was no future for us because I couldn’t dishonor my family’s wishes in keeping with the goals of light and fair skin. Wanda never did anything wrong to deserve being shoved off by me, but if I had gotten closer I may’ve been shut out by those I love. *(Mackwell, age 32, from South Africa)*
4.3.3 **Self-Concept and Self-Esteem**

Self-concept, according to Gecas and Burke “is composed of various identities, attitudes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences, along with their evaluative and affective components (e.g., self-efficacy, self-esteem), in terms of which individuals define themselves” (1995, p.42). Rosenberg (1979) asserted that self-concept was comprised of an individual’s thoughts and feelings they maintain about themselves in the perception of the self being an object. Overall, self-concept emerges as a series of processes within one’s life course. The processes require perceptions of the self and a reflexive consciousness. One’s self-concept incorporates his or her identity and the attachment of meanings to that identity derived from the socialization processes. The decreased self-esteem found in sixteen out of twenty participants (80%) also suggested a lack of agency and decreased self-efficacy (Gecas, 1995).

Rosenberg (1971) summarized self-esteem to be a general positive or negative attitude towards one’s self. It summarily is how one perceives or regards one’s self. Self-esteem is a fundamental component of authenticating who you are, to yourself and socially. As individuals within a social structure, healthy self-esteem would suggest that self-identity is congruent to that of the larger group. Social psychologist, Peter Burke found that when individuals are self-verifying their identities, “they simultaneously produce and reproduce the social structure arrangements that are the original sources of those meanings” (2002, p.1042). This group of participants focus much of their energy on defining who they do not want to be perceived as, while ideologically positioning themselves within the social hierarchy by nature of the personal associations with women embodying whiteness. Most of the men attribute the negative connotations of blackness to the meanings they have learned and show disdain towards brown or dark skinned women. In asserting these ideas about the values of skin tones, these men are actually reproduc-
ing racism on an intraracial level. They are also affecting their own self-esteem as they are setting themselves apart from the larger, racial “in-group” (black community) by advocating counter-cultural ideals and rejecting blackness. Results from the participants’ Self-Esteem Survey indicated the following:

Table 2 Self-Esteem Survey Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Responses: Self-Esteem</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>65%</td>
<td>Grew up in predominantly black communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80%</td>
<td>Attended predominantly black schools through high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20%</td>
<td>Felt religious values influenced life decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100%</td>
<td>Affected by family members’ opinions to interpersonal relationship preferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60%</td>
<td>Affected by peers’ opinions to interpersonal relationship preferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100%</td>
<td>Preferred physical traits over personality traits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75%</td>
<td>Claimed one’s looks are more important than one’s attitude on a 1st date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90%</td>
<td>Claimed that their sense of self-worth came from the approval of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75%</td>
<td>Felt unattractive unless others’ praised or noticed them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95%</td>
<td>Struggled with feelings of inferiority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80%</td>
<td>Felt that other’s opinions mattered more to them than their own</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90%</td>
<td>Hesitated to do things because of what other people might think</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85%</td>
<td>Self-criticized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60%</td>
<td>Felt others criticized them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35%</td>
<td>Felt like a person of worth &amp; had equal status as others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5%</td>
<td>Felt satisfied with themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>Survey Responses: Cultural Orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75%</td>
<td>Felt they were average &amp; unsure of themselves when looking in the mirror</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85%</td>
<td>Stated age mattered when looking for a partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90%</td>
<td>Would change their look if they could</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65%</td>
<td>Would change their race/ethnicity if they could</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35%</td>
<td>Defined their cultural orientation as Afrocentric</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Were unsure of their cultural orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15%</td>
<td>Defined their cultural orientation as Eurocentric</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55%</td>
<td>Stated their parents did not have a strong sense of racial pride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100%</td>
<td>Have been victims of racial epithets due to the color and/or tone of their skin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100%</td>
<td>Aware of racial differences between themselves &amp; others as children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70%</td>
<td>Said racial solidarity &amp; ethnic culture are unnecessary in mainstream society</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4.3.4 Stigmatized Identities

With consideration to skin tone, these men can also be viewed in having a stigmatized identity. Erving Goffman (1963) discussed “spoiled” or stigmatized identities in terms of the attainment of social acceptance. He asserts that skin color as a stigma can be conceived as a group identity stigma. The study’s participants realize that lighter complexions are less stigmatized and attempt to make adjustments in their life choices and of their social identities to distance themselves from blackness. One of the participants, Mackwell, is originally from South Africa and his childhood memories of understanding whiteness and social acceptance came from his mother. At her urging, Mackwell has spent his adult life searching for the best representative model of a “white-light,” black partner to marry so not to dishonor his mother’s wishes, but also to avoid any further “blackening” of his family.
I remember like it was yesterday, my mom called me in from the back and pointed to the television...’see son, that’s the type of woman you need to have as a wife and mother to your children.’ There was a pageant on and all the women were white, none were black. So I asked her, “Mama, you want me to marry outside black?” She said back, “I want your children to be white, so they don’t have to live like we have to.” (Mackwell, age 32, from South Africa)

The lack of or decreased self-efficacy these men endure is seen in their narratives as negative experiences as they try to avoid or alter by looking toward secondary socialization sources in popular culture – attempts to imitate or attain what they see others (like themselves) have in terms of light skinned women (Gecas, 1995). Several of the participants referred to gaining social acceptance and establishing their identities in a perceived improvement over their current social position by virtue of association with lighter complexioned women. For instance, Ahmad’s experiences illustrate an idealization of establishing a reference point for relationships, economic success and integration acceptance:

Whenever you turn on the TV, listen to the radio or even go to the malls or out to eat, you see black men with light skinned females. And those who got them, got money and respect...from all sides of the coin, they get respect from the brothers and from the white folks. The attention these men get says ‘these ni****, ain’t as bad as we thought, they got money, class and a woman on their arm that’s nearly white.’ If you gonna get ahead in this world, you need a strategy that gets you an entry for the race, that’s when you gotta choose your chick wisely...if she’s not passable for the white folks, you ain’t either. (Ahmad, age 42, from Florida)

Ali’s narrative also conceives blackness to represent an impairment or blemish to one’ identity as a black man in American society. His youth was comparatively less racialized than that of Ahmad’s due to Ali’s light complexion. Ali admits his experiences growing up lighter than his peers afforded him a different reality and that by choosing to be with a woman who is even lighter will solidify his place in the world.

I’m all about moving up and ahead in life. I truly am that “man-apart” from the rest of these ni****. As a kid, I got all the attention; as a teen, I got all the girls and as a man I got to maintain what I have and grow into something even more
untouchable. My ideal wife or baby’s mama can’t be darker than me. She will have to be beige white, like those really light khaki pants (points to one of the barber’s outfit) otherwise, our kids will come out looking black. Plus, the move to make right now is to go international...you know blending black with other black orientations of races. Like on all the reality shows right now & even in the videos, the new move is to get with the black Dominicans, the black Latinas, the mixed chicks ‘cause that sh** is exotic! Ain’t nobody comin’ up today with plain Jane, brown skin average chicks that look all alike. Ain’t nobody tryin’ to look like night and day with some midnight black chick. Hell, even the pro ballers got wise to what’s opening doors for them, light, mixed and white girls. Being black in America just drags a black man down so if I can lift that weight off of me and use what I know works (light skin) then my quality of life is enhanced and my future is bright (verbal emphasis on word and points to his skin). (Ali, age 23, from Texas)

Since the dominant group or white culture has underlying racist meanings, these men attempt to work through this stigma by making choices that subvert racial solidarity. One of the very few men who scored high on the self-esteem test felt quite strongly about assimilation practices and not identifying with the black community. He situated his perspective in white ideology and decidedly chose to negate black cultural traditions and values as having value in relation to the reality of society. Baron argued that there was no “true place” for black people in the United States, therefore blending-in is the best alternative to living in segregation. His views on racial solidarity suggested that black people collectively could never achieve this because:

Black folks may have the same traditions and cultural likes but they ain’t on the same page with one another – ain’t never gonna be. Black folks are always sabotaging one another, so we will never transcend our social positions in being black. Racial solidarity for us is a joke, we only unite long enough to get something then we are right back at individualizing our needs. Our common cause efforts are really just fronts to get something we don’t have access to...when we do get what we need, we take it run like we stole something, we don’t invest our opportunities to survive together as a black race. We like crabs in barrel, someone will catch another crawling out, alert the masses and drag a ni*** back down. We don’t help each other to be successful, we just wait for our chance and when it comes, we take it and don’t look back. Hell, we don’t even keep the almighty green dollar in the black business world, we give it away to white capitalism. So, basically I am just saying what others won’t say and admitting that I do the same thing everyone else is doing, looking out for my best interest and that of my legacy. Our best bet is to get ‘white’ in our thinking and if we can, give our kids a better
chance in the world and make use of genetics...lighten up the best way you can, get yourself a girl with good genes, good features and she might be able to give you babies that look almost white. (Baron, age 46, from Michigan)

While racial consciousness among the group proves discrimination is a shared reality, racial solidarity is perceived to be a necessary casualty to survival and quality of life for them. Racial solidarity is contextualized by a variety of determinants: readiness for social and racial activism, consciousness of racial inequities, pride and identity and the transmission of generational values. The social processes by which these men have developed in their sense of connection to the larger black community has been interrupted by colorism, classism and racism.

4.4 Embedded Idealizations

In a study on childhood socialization by Viktor Gecas (1981), it was determined that a child’s sense of self was most heavily molded by his or her family. The impact that these socialization messages have on a child’s frame of mind suggests how they may govern behavior and make decisions within themselves and around others. Ahmad illustrated how navigating through school as a darker skinned boy taught him how and when to respond:

I believe I was about 6 in the 1st grade and the bus I rode how white and black kids on it, it took 2 loads of kids to 2 different schools. I could never sit up front behind the driver because she’d always tell me that my school mates were at the back, and when I looked back there, she might’ve been right but they were all the black kids. Every day that 1st week, I tried to get a seat up front (so I could be the 1st off the bus) and everyday she’d tell me to go on to the back. I finally stopped trying because I realized that my place was not where I wanted it to be and if I wanted to keep riding the bus; I had to sit where I was told. And once we got to school, my desk was always in the back on the side where the door was, didn’t matter what grade level either. If I raised my hand to answer a question, the teachers never acknowledged it, so I just came and went as quiet as I could. When I complained to my momma that 1st week, she told me that I need to get tougher skin because as black as I was, I’d spend a lifetime being upset. (Ahmad, age 42, from Florida)

Determinants of black identity via socialization are enmeshed with social status, interplay among other ethnicities and life courses. Similarly, as Rosenberg (1975) illustrated in his article
on adolescent self-concept, incongruous racial group identification impacted members of the out-group (blacks) by the values and attitudes of members of the in-group (whites) negatively.

Internalization of societal rules and structures provide for a foundation of behavior and identity. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) provided a model of the domains of societal power that may be useful in connecting the macro-level to the micro-level of embedded idealizations. She stated:

By manipulating ideology and culture, the hegemonic domain acts as a link between social institutions (structural domain), their organizational practices (disciplinary domain), and the level of everyday social interaction (interpersonal domain) (Collins, 2000, p.284).

If we analyze the positions of these participants’ within a white racist structure, their preferences and assertions are seen as reflections of the ideas, philosophies and racial messages operating against them. In a conversation about social cues benefitting behavior in society, Mike exclaimed:

Mixed mutts, redbones, yellow broads are with it – you know, they know their place in society and use their skin as an advantage, they’re smart like that. They realize that corporate America wants presentable women, who look like the white women, who look like they’re clean and well-kept so they play into that. They’ll go get a good job, sometimes even take the place of a white woman, look the part, dress right, not be ratchet in how they speak or look, and get that money, get that promotion, drive that nice car, have nice things. If those other black women wanna wear they’re hair natural or in all that lumped-up box braids, put on skin tight dresses with stripper shoes, that’s their choice – but its not a wise one ’cause they can’t play the white, power game. If you wanna win it, and I mean that for anything in society, you gotta act right, act white. For example, look at the university you attend, if a black woman is looking Africanized or worse, lookin’ street, she is not gonna get the job as a professor, the HR department is gonna file her app in the trash because she looks like trash – and this goes for light and dark skinned. But if the woman IS light, she already has one-up on the brown skinned or dark skinned applicant. (Mike, age 26, from Georgia)

The reinforcement of white racist perceptions, values, symbols and beliefs via internalization reproduces colorism. As a cumulative consequence of years of socialization, these men have con-
textualized ideologically racial understandings and attitudes on skin tone, class, cultural value and gender. William was born around 1940 in Mississippi. His narrative tells of change and continuity with respect to race relations and skin tone values in the United States.

There are important meanings attributed to the simplest differences of skin color and tone. Always been that way and I don’t foresee it to change. If you were a dark shade, you had a long hill to climb. The whites would already look at you like you were up to no good. They knew you didn’t have no money, that you probably didn’t go all the way through schooling and lived across town in the ‘shacks’ [his term for “poorly” constructed homes]. My family got a better piece of the pie because of my great, great grandfather taking [raping] my great, great grandmother when she came to his property. She was already the product of another white and black union so her skin was fair. Coming down the line, that’s what gave my generation this high yellow tone. We always had a little bit more than the rest of the black folks in our town and the white folks treated us a bit kinder. They’d tell us we were “well-mannered” and didn’t seem bothered by us being around them…would even complement our children on how pretty they were…owe that to my wife’s and my own skin shades, she was high yellow too. In the 50s, as a young boy watching the struggles of the Civil Rights workers coming through town, I was able to discern how relevant looking white was and looking black could be. Schooling was a terrible struggle, never past the seventh grade because of the problems of Civil Rights. In the 60s, black folks attitudes got the best of them and while they had a good run of it, whites were back in control [referring to the Black Power Movement]. The 70s brought black people back down with all the drugs and they stayed constant through Reagan. If you were dark, you were a criminal. Jails were full of black men, those being darker stayed the longest. In the 80s and up through today, black women wanted to get into white corporate America and out of the houses and roles of being mothers. Yet, those who have remained successful are just like the black men who made it, they’re mostly all fair toned. (William, age 73, from Mississippi)

The duality of skin tone and race forces individuals to have daily encounters of discrimination in which they are hindered socially, economically or politically.

4.4.1 Application of Values or Adherence to Societal Norms Established Within a White Racist Structure

In an effort to frame the concepts and internalized ideas guiding how the participants understand the world, it is necessary to evaluate their agency under a white hegemonic societal structure. The men are conscious of white racial privilege, systemic racism, social stratification
and operate within the ‘structure’ without much contemplation. It appears that their socialization over the years has been internalized and these ideas guide their preferences and choices. Some of the participants spoke on their deliberate selections for procreation and how they intentionally gauged the genetic outcomes of their children’s skin tones. Will, one of the older participants, explained that when considering having children, he focused more on how their lives would be if they had dark complexions:

As I recall my whole life, my skin tone, my family’s skin colors were always a visual reminder of where a negro’s place was at, behind the white man. I never wanted my kids to have to answer to that so the best remedy is to have a wife that can make ‘white’ black kids…got no desire to be with a white person (no offense) ‘cause its hard to like a people who have never liked your people but I knew the only chance I got to give my kid was to give them the lightest complexion possible so they could get by. My daughter survived that way, she got into the better schools and her features were vague, never knew quite what she was…made me proud when people would ask, “is that your daughter?” The way she looks, the way she talks all make people wonder if she is really black. She don’t even get bothered by the police, never has a problem at the bank and no one thinks she’s out here having babies and working the system for welfare. (Will, age 66, from North Carolina)

As demonstrated, skin tone has the power to influence identity and effects of behavior. Will’s insert describes the social valuation of skin tone, its societal acceptance and prejudicial treatment by others. Additionally, his life experiences before the birth of his daughter were representative of generations of racist struggles and his development of interpersonal relationship preferences grew out of this discriminatory turmoil. His desire to highlight his daughter’s racial ambiguity, as well as her educational and employment opportunities revealed that his strategy to veil her African heritage was to her credit in possessing an ultra-light complexion. It also serves to reproduce racist notions that darker skinned people have less education, tend to earn lower wages and have less access to upward social mobility. It has been proven to be such, but the facts remain that skin tone does not represent the truth about darker complexioned individuals. Will al-
so, inadvertently, reflects the devaluation of black women by skin tone in acknowledgment of his preconceived ideas on which pigmentation would be better to bear children.

4.4.2 Return to Valorization of Whiteness

In the processes of racial socialization, messages regarding pertinent behaviors, values and beliefs are given to children by their significant others with the intentions of providing a foundation for racial identity and self-concept. Depending on the assimilation or acculturation of the significant others, the messages a child receives may influence their racial identity and extension of values that shape their self-concept. Sociologist, Peter Burke stated in an article that identities are “meanings a person attributes to the self as an object in a social situation or social role” (1980, p.18). Given the research outcome, it is fair to say that the participants’ primary socialization and other social factor influences have affected their perspectives and racialized identities. Will’s statement on the value of whiteness speaks to painful representations of skin tone stereotypes:

I love my black people, my black women but only those who look like me – light and bright, close to white, all the rest ain’t worth nothin’. (Will, age 66, from North Carolina)

Baron also entered an economic perspective of valorizing whiteness and attributing life choices to skin tone stratification:

Black people ain’t all in the same pot together: we got those who can pass for white, some who can pass for being exotic or Hispanic of some sort, some who are just average and some who are dark. The point I am trying to get you to see is that with all them different shades, only the ones who are light to white and exotic can make it and while we’re all black by definition, we all ain’t gonna make it, so each level has its own experiences and stays within their color lines. (Baron, age 46, from Michigan)
While all participants confirm they are black men from strong (culturally) black families, their narratives indicate valorization of whiteness and incorporation of white stereotypes that stem from intergenerational messages.

Consider, as an example, the global sales market of skin lightening, whitening and bleaching products. The advertisements in magazines, on television, in stores and on billboards provide a symbolic reality in which the terminology or wording endorses racial notions about color and self-worth. The vocabulary correlated to variants of skin tone is unfailingly linked to racialized stereotypes and identity traits. Power of simple wording carries such significant symbolism in that conveyed meanings are internalized and as a result are externalized in practice. The consumption of a white culture and standard of beauty is not only aimed at women of color, there is also a tacit market share of men of color who sub-promote these products by giving their stamp of approval of the intended results. When discussing the participants’ perceptions about the practices of skin bleaching or lightening, Samuel discussed his thoughts on the matter:

Black women who are light can wear different color clothes, have fewer problems finding cosmetics and their skin is without blemish, oil or flaws, compared to darker women who have skin problems and look silly in makeup…back home (in Nigeria) it’s a common practice for our women to bleach, many will go without a husband if they don’t…you cannot drive or walk anywhere without seeing the advertisements for the creams, it’s a big business at home…if my wife would have been darker, I would have supported her using the creams because she would only become more beautiful and desired by all men…it is a sign of perfection and higher achievement. (Samuel, age 36, from Nigeria)

Black women, globally, have always been forced to adjust and adapt themselves, to reinvent themselves for survival, for men and for acceptance. Samuel’s beliefs (similar to the other participants) on the beauty of black women and the valorization of whiteness do not stem from innate meanness, he is reflecting the systemic racist values of white society and then imposing them upon black women who are darker complexioned. The participants are in a ‘space’ that
does not provide them a means to self-define, examine who they are as men, identify themselves as being part of the black community and realize how pervasive racist notions on beauty and about women can be.

4.5 Conclusion

The dating preferences of the participants in this study can be a measure in and of themselves to view racial orders in our society. The lack of studies on intraracial discrimination calls for more investigation in the interests for racial solidarity and societal stratification. The blurred lines between these participants’ preferences and prejudices are negative implications of colorism embedded within their psyche from generations of racist stereotypes and white hegemony. More empirical data is needed to delineate differences between preferences and prejudices. The conveyance of racialized messages prepared these men over their life courses for skin tone bias.
In conclusion, this research study grew out of the lack of evidence and understanding of some black men’s choices as it relates to skin tones in relationships. There exists a blurring of lines between preference and prejudice when it comes to their justification of choice. Establishing preferences relative to physicality or personality is a normal review process of a potential partner’s attributes in terms of the pending relationship. The issue of prejudice arises and is applied when the issue of agency is challenged or when the power of one’s preference is applied as a dominating ideology over the group who is not preferred. Damani asserts that his preference is felt globally and is visible in his home town of St. Ann’s Bay, Jamaica just as much as it is here in the States:

You see the browning [fair or light skinned] gals back home either were fortunate enough to be born that way or they use the cake soap [skin bleaching product] to
get that way. The fair complexions here in the States also show a lead in financial success, better education and higher status in marriages. When you see success, you see light and white. When you see poverty, you see black. If I’m to get ahead in life, it will never be with a dark skin gal on my arm or in my bed, they just weight ya down. A browning gal opens doors to places that don’t get ya criminalized, stereotyped. A browning gal, a natural one though, gets ya babies ahead of the rest of the black pack. A black gal will have to wait on the next generation to try again and escape her legacy of skin tone. (Damani, age 29, from Jamaica)

The overwhelming increase in black women’s participation in skin bleaching, plastic surgery, modifications of hair textures and wearing lighter toned makeup speaks to an imbalance in identity just as much as exclusionary beliefs on the worth of skin color and tone. This preliminary study was to scratch the surface of the issue to determine if a phenomenon was occurring and its findings indicate a rationale for further investigation.

4.6 Summary

Findings from this study lay claim to the beliefs that skin tones manipulate preferences of physical attractiveness, marriageability, desirability within interpersonal relationships. Racialized social values cue encrypted ideas about attractiveness, beauty and desirability. The dichotomous methods employed to aver this group of men’s preferences also suggests how they perceive themselves. All things being equal according to the men in this study, the lightness or whiteness achieved via partner selection, alteration of one’s physical features and value assessment on the skin tone of a partner enhances their social mobility and self-worth. The findings are suggesting that these men make inferences about others’ perceptions of themselves while in turn, they form impressions of black women premised on social, racist notions. The body politics and visual objectification of black women are influenced by values of whiteness and denigrated by blackness celebrate a European white standard of beauty. The participants’ aesthetic preferences are subconsciously, entrenched racial attitudes about the moral ideals of blackness.
5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Conclusion

The results of this qualitative, exploratory study provided evidence that identity development of this particular group of participants did not occur without entanglement between social constructions of gender, race and attractiveness to establish and cultivate idealized sexual identities of black women. Additionally, controlling images of on the perceived desirability and partner selection for these participants furnishes a backdrop for discerning the influences of Eurocentric values on black women’s physicality and worth. The maintenance of a positive self-identity and racial identity could be conceived as a means to circumvent the negative stereotypes about these participants’ own racial group (Wheeler, Jarvis & Petty, 2001). This study’s data shows that the participants frequently fall victim to social comparison processes and inform not only their interpersonal relationship choices, but also shape the security of the racial identities as well as their belief systems on social hierarchies (Herring, Keith & Horton, 2003).

Based on the interviews, the twenty participants detailed their lifetime encounters of colorism through years of advice, internalized messages and discriminatory practices. The broader picture of their micro-practices and behavior display an ingrained and reflected manifestation of colorism and by extension racism. For instance, Mike attributes colorism’s manifestation to be promoted by popular culture, hip hop artists and black athletes. While he did state that his extended family members ‘joke’ about dark skin girls being “from across the water,” he does not identify any generational carry-over of colorism. The antecedent variable of “privilege” can lead to a perception of “status” thereby affecting the “self-esteem and/or self-respect” of the participant. Will has lived long enough to see shifts in the black community and still maintains that dark skinned women are problematic and are not of the same worth as their counterparts. Bar-
on’s input on socialization established causality to lie in “living in a white supremacy that affords no black man or woman any breaks unless they look like them (white).”

Based on the narratives, the data suggests that there is a strong linkage between the historicity of colonial mentality that challenges some black men’s self-esteem, identity construction and self-respect as well as the socialization among family, peers and media that influence behavioral norms and societal values. These findings have suggested that family plays a large part in the influence of socialization. The upside though, with foresight, is a familial influence could also be part of the solution and healing. In all of the participants’ interviews, the family role was a negative antecedent variable due to their perceptions of skin tone values and perpetuation of the hurtful stereotypes aimed at dark skin. The interactions of family members with either light or dark skinned members revealed unspoken biases and preferential treatment. The age range of participants also revealed how trends of intraracial discriminations have shifted from the home life into the public life.

The findings intersect with the existing literature in many ways, but beg scholars to take the next steps in examining the roles that black men maintain in the investment of colorism. There is continued evidence of the objectification of black women’s bodies and values are still placed upon whiteness and Eurocentric standards of beauty. In consideration that eighteen out of twenty participants would change their looks if they could and thirteen out of twenty would change their race or ethnicity if they could, it is fair to say that these findings challenge prior research assertions in that visual cues of skin tones are just as salient for men when deliberating interpersonal relationship preferences (Hill, 2002; Hunter, 2002). We see this in the continuation of skin bleaching, plastic surgeries, hair straightening and wig wearing and restrictive color spectrums of foundational cosmetics. Color consciousness is still prevalent in influencing desirabil-
ity and partner preferences. Intraracial stratification was found to still affect women’s self-worth and esteem. Light skin tones persist in operating as ideas of social capital and privilege. The takeaway from this study is that colorism lingers with cogency and has gendered effects, even in 2014.

The majority of the participants alluded to colorism being an issue for black women but not black men; it is an issue of gender in which these men are constructing the values of skin tone. There was a consensus among the participants that the value of lighter skin forms an internal hierarchy among black women overall. Gerald’s comment on intraracial stratification reveals skin tone bias in the form of self-worth:

Black women know full well that they have strife amongst themselves. Can I help it if a light skinned female advances herself and a dark skinned one just sits around bitching or being angry? We live in a white world, light skinned chicks blend in, mixed girls blend in but black girls are always coming with the attitude and entitlement issues. If there was less negativity coming out of darker skinned women, then they would be at the top of the food chain with the light females. (Gerald, age 63, from Connecticut)

Seventeen out of twenty participants believed that these lighter complexioned women maintained more power and privilege, in terms of academic and work achievement. Studies have shown that black men tend to desire light skinned black women on more accounts of attractiveness and as exchanges of wealth status (Bond & Cash, 1992; Breland, Coard & Steward, 2002; Stephens & Phillips, 2003). The textual analysis for roles of family, peers and society undergird the participants’ rationales. The content began to affirm that a participant’s preferences in light skinned women were the results of external interventions that would not be altered regardless of how attractive participants may think a darker skinned woman might be. Alvin explains his personal preferences in terms of skin tone and purpose within the personal situation:

I’ll surely get up with a dark skinned female if its just to hook up and that’s it. No man should pass that up if she’s good enough to look at in the bed. Before I was
married, I would never think to be out in public with a dark skinned girl, it just isn’t complementary looking. I’m brown and if she’s brown or darker, there’s just no uplift, no contrast, no looking like I’m moving up in the world. Sure, I find some of those girls attractive but they are not suited for a permanent position in my family. (Alvin, age 56, from New York)

The second and third level of coding provided this textual data with salient support for the themes discussed in the narratives.

One of the participants consistently degraded darker women within his ethnicity in a manner that displays an ingrained stereotype and pathology; his partner selection preferences are the embodiment of interlocking oppressions he unknowingly has internalized. Baron’s interview revealed his investment in racism, classism, sexism and he denied colorism existed.

Black women are troublesome, they’re difficult to control, they’re disagreeable for the most part and they’re just out to get a ni***. Now, if you separate them out, you can find that most light skinned women are easier to mold and they can be good wives. Dark skinned women on the other hand are just obstinent as hell, always ridin’ a ni*** back and wants a handout or a handup. I can’t do nothing with that. I don’t think its an issue of colorism, I think its an issue of laziness and low self-esteem on their part. Light skinned girls just know they got it made, they can make it in the world and so they don’t look like they need a man whereas the others need a man for every damn thing. (Baron, age 46, from Michigan)

The research data revealed another participant whose responses were worthy of divergent examination to better understand the internalization of colorism; he was so far removed from the historical context that his choices derive from an imposed notion of privilege to which he appears to be unaware.

Everything I have is due to the color of my skin. I would never call myself ‘black’ because I have a better title of being ‘colored.’ Whether I am in America or in South Africa, my status in being light toned is recognized and sets me apart from the rest of them. I have had to make hard choices in my life for my family and myself to keep us from being affected by racism. I will not be placed in a category with those [emphasis added, referring to black] people. I may have business transactions with them, get services from them – you know like here, getting my hair cut – but I am different and should lawfully be seen as such. When it comes to the black women, they are just not as clean, refined or well-mannered as the light or mixed women. Their values are different than those of
light women and in a job setting, they are last in the line of applicants. Sure, you can see that some get college degrees and earn a living, but it is not recognized on the same caliber of light and mixed women. Black women simply have too many negative things stacked against them in their potential as beauty and success are concerned. It pains me to be so honest but that is how life is, we must all accept our places in it and make the best of it. I have accepted what is not best for me and I am okay with that. The quality of my life should not have to suffer under the scrutiny of white people and I have made sure not to give them any reason to degrade me or my family. (Baruti, age 52, from South Africa)

As we can recall from earlier evidence, the participants were also all in agreement that light skinned women possessed better phenotypic features such as hair textures and this amounted to an additional level of attractiveness for them. Santana offered his commentary on hair textures of black women:

You know I’m an OG from the island, been ‘round many years, had many wives so I know what’s important with a woman’s looks. Her hair is the second thing a man will notice over the color of her skin and if its knotty, nappy and unkempt, she is dirty. A nice perm hair is best, weaved is good but wigs are lazy. There is a special, feminine beauty that comes with having long hair flow around a woman’s shoulders. This is not natural for dark skin gals, but most light ones and mixed have that privilege. It’s a genetic benefit. Whereas a dark skin gal may have nice body, if her hair is not perm or weaved, it detracts from her beauty because that nest atop her head takes away from the appeal. (Santana, age 61, from Jamaica)

There were brief mentions about the desire for more European phenotypic features: nose, cheekbones and eye color. Fabian emphatically shared his thoughts on the extension of physical qualities accompanying light skin:

There’s a special kinda high when you luck out and find a woman with gray or green eyes, high cheekbones and a slim nose. Its like your very own lucky charm and no one else was lucky enough to find her. It’s a guarantee your seeds [children] gonna be beautiful. My baby’s mama had that exact creole quality so you know I wasn’t gonna try and pass that up, got her pregnant instantly and my daughter is a princess. She ain’t got her mama’s eyes though but she’s still got that creole in her, even has a few freckles across her nose. (Fabian, age 28, from Lousiana)
Gerald lamented his missed opportunity with a woman whose features were “international” or “exotic:”

Been married 37 years to a fine woman, she’s light and all but I remember when I was about 25 and met up with this lady who looked damn near white, had bluish eyes pink heart-shaped lips and a dainty narrow nose. I wanted to marry that girl right then and there, have some kids and live like white folks. Turned out she was waitin’ for her husband to get back from his tour of duty though. A year later, I met my wife and she was suitable and we had similar goals in life, can’t complain though we had a honey colored baby boy and lived a good life. (Gerald, 63, from Connecticut)

As for their perceptions of identity construction related to black women, they thought less of dark skinned women than of light and stripped away the collective self-worth of Africana women. Baron made an admission as to why he rejects women who are darker than he; he feels any woman of brown or dark skin tone suffers from insecurities and lack confidence, yet did not feel their feelings of inferiority were a result of black men placing value on lighter skin.

Many indications were made to socioeconomic statuses between light and dark complexioned women that served as a background criterion for the participants. Elements of class were derived from their narratives, but even those examples could be considered wrongly justified. Baruti is married, originally from South Africa and has been in the United States since 1989. His views on skin tone and socioeconomic opportunities are understood as results of apartheid, yet are applicable to the American binary nature of black and white racial attitudes and assumptions.

Being colored was no walk in the park, there [South Africa] or here. At home, we occupy a somewhat invisible status: not black and not white, but still not accepted or valued. For South African women, it was far better to be colored than black. As a young man in the 1970s and early 1980s, we looked for women who were “pass whites” because she could give you children that would evade discrimination and categorization of black. Those women were also somewhat economically independent or at least educated. It was to our benefit to be light because we were employable whereas black South Africans were not. They [black South Africans] were very envious of us [coloreds], we have separate zones as living spaces and the Afrikaners even made into law that we could not bear children with people outside of our racial designation. Most of us colored men would have de-
clined to be in a relationship with a darker woman; it just made no sense to do and the cost associated with it was too great. But there were a great many, black South African women who would try to influence us [colored men]. It’s fair to say that the only time we [coloreds] would agree to unite with them [black South Africans] would be in support of collective discrimination cases. Truly though it is to maintain our economic social hierarchy over them [black South Africans]. Here in America, it is not much different in sentiment but there is no laws separating us. I still have family at home [Cape Town] and I was determined to keep my lineage as light as possible, so when we visit there no problems would arise for my children. As for them growing up here, they have benefited educationally and economically from being very light in color. Being white or close as you can get to it is a worldwide reality, life in any other color brings about hardship. (Baruti, age 52, from South Africa)

Stereotypes were prevalent and characteristic of confirmation in their preferences. It is plausible to say that how the participants viewed themselves was relational to how others see them as well as their perceptions of whiteness and blackness, inferiority and superiority. Therefore, if they are seen to choose a partner who is dark, then they perceive their social identity to become a reflection of degradation and disparagement. As told by Fritz, having a love interest that did not meet the class and social expectations of his family and peers was traumatizing:

Marie was so much fun. As kids, we grew up on the same street and played everyday. She was my best friend. When we got to be teenagers, it was a natural instinct to have her become my girlfriend, but when we were caught holding hands and walking home one evening all that ended. My mother and aunt rushed outside screaming at us like we had done something awful. Marie’s mother came out and made her go inside. When I sat down at our kitchen table, my aunt and mother told me Marie was not the kind of girl I needed to be sexual with because she was from the same place we were and looked just like I did. I just sat there, confused. My family was friends with hers. How could this be bad? My grandmother came into the kitchen and placed her hand on my shoulder and told me there was no future to be had with a dark skinned girl. I needed to remain only friends with Marie. We could not plan to have 3 kids and have a wedding back home in Haiti. We could not dream of a future because 2 dark skinned black people did not equal success. My mother tried to comfort me by telling me how beautiful my children will be with a light girl, how much better their lives would be than mine or that of my brother. She said that “only light girls could open the doors to happiness and prosperity” and that light girls’ beauty was in their skin, eyes and hair. Then she asked if I really wanted to run my fingers through Marie’s hair…never really thought about it…she then had some unfavorable things
to say about Marie’s hair and skin quality…it broke my heart. (*Fritz, age 23, from Haiti*)

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) conjectured that beauty standards afford privilege to whiteness and shame blackness…”white beauty is based on the racist assumption of black ugliness.” Structural racism is at work to normalize these notions of blackness and whiteness and to continue designating value and social position. Many of the men passively allow black female identity and beauty to be defined and framed by racist standards; this becomes a problem as these black men then subscribe to a domination of the physical characteristics and values placed upon the women they deem undesirable. What remains after their assertions are black and brown girls and women who have no positive reflection within the community and whom are without the right to self-define as beautiful and possess self-worth.

While this study’s findings give explanations to why this group of participants’ preferences are aimed at lighter skin, a harsh reality also emerges from their perspectives. Up until this research, black men who preferred light skinned women remained voiceless. The content of their narratives may be hard for some people to accept or understand, but their reasons are rooted in a place they did not create – white supremacy, European standards of beauty and racial stratification intertwine to create a place of discrimination. The participants’ honesty needs acceptance in order to allow for healing and transformation. Even with the small amount of time spent together talking openly, these men gained a new consciousness about colorism and its implications. Many of the men were taken aback with realizations of racial divide and the collective devaluation of black women. So when digesting these findings, please consider the power of dialogue for social change and individual perspective. Beginnings only come at the ends of something else – let this work be the beginning of the end of colorism.
5.2 Implications

The perpetuation of color-defined social hierarchy within a global context as well as within the black communities continues to place disadvantages of racial solidarity by opposing darker and lighter complexions against one another. In spite of the soul-baring, narratives on the manifestations of colorism of the twenty men who participated in this study, the findings are not generalizable to an absolute group of peers. However, the data is beneficial in evaluating if colorism continues to persist within the black community.

The theoretical suggestions made in this thesis were to devote attention to the holistic nature of the black, male-female relationship whilst looking toward positive change, which much of the current literature has not addressed. The prior research has mostly focused on colorism’s influences impacting black women and excluded the voices of black men. These analyses have divorced black men from black women in terms of contextualizing and evaluating the issues surrounding desirability, self-worth and attraction. Engendering colorism can bring forth an understanding of lived experiences and causative agents for preferences on both sides.

Within our “color-blind” or “post-racial” society, this research invites future scholars to continue to make connections between institutional racism and colorism. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has laid the groundwork for critical race scholars to examine “new racism” and I find it to be a benefit to extend these ideas with colorism and racial attitudes as foci. It is my wish that in addressing colorism in this manner, the knowledge of intraracial discrimination will be addressed outside of academic scholarship and permeate society for hopes of social change and perspective transformation.
5.3 Recommendations for Future Research

It may be useful for future research at the college level to investigate how students place significance on skin tone in comparison to the environment in which they were raised. Different results may yield insight into where a young adult was socialized (meaning the racial/ethnic environment) and what skin tone preferences and racial values are carried over to either a predominantly white university or an HBCU. Researchers studying black families could extract socialization solely from this study and refine and test the effects of colorism within family practices. Such a study could suggest solutions at the primary socialization level that may cease intergenerational messages. Looking at the flip side of the coin, whiteness studies experts could investigate racial socialization of white people and how their understandings of and responses to racism contribute to colorism. There may be benefits to extending the research conducted by Feagin and van Ausdale (2004) in that social advantages are learned and executed at early adolescent ages and the racial understandings that children have create socialization roles. Their study can be a platform to examine and apply intervention as it relates to shades of skin tone, social hierarchy and gendered manifestations of colorism.

To expand the empirical data on the nature of this colorism study, perhaps more diversity in the groups of participants would render different findings. It is possible to reconsider the sexuality of the participants as well and open up a new path that includes members of the LGBTQ community skin tone preferences. This idea can lend itself well to either male or female interpersonal relationship preferences. Skin tones of the participants could have been sectioned off or even expanded to look at manifestations of colorism in the experiences of the men; at either an equal number of each skin tone categorization or in comparison to the mediating variables. Another direction of the research could have been a comparative analysis on global regions and
prevalence of colorism. Lastly, I conceive that reducing the age range for comparisons would be helpful to look at the effects of history and intergenerational influences. To compound that type of data, an added layer of socioeconomic status could reveal interesting findings.

5.4 Summary

There is hope for creating consciousness about colorism; issues are addressed at a personal level and at a larger fundamental level of the larger society. Attempts could be made that counteract skin tone bias and diversifying beauty standards outside of academia. Collective efforts or movements to return black standards of beauty, parenting curricula, educational instruction at the elementary levels and media messages could all serve as solutions to obliterating the perpetuating cycle of discrimination. In terms of bolstering identity construction and self-esteem, focused campaigns targeting black male-female relationships could foster acceptance and diminish self-hatred and the lack of collective self-respect. Looking toward a global impact, it is feasible to assume that a promotion of consciousness and reflection of the diversity of blackness could diminish the ingrained white standards of beauty ideals.

EPILOGUE

My family’s experiences and social realities became the root for my research interest in colorism. If I was to rewind time, even before I met my husband, I can say colorism was at play in the branches of my family tree. Coming from an Italian background, a Sicilian heritage, my skin tone should be more olive toned, my eyes should be brown and my hair texture thicker – as found in my siblings or cousins – my eyes are hazel, my curls are loose, my hair texture is fine and my skin is fair. However, my ambiguous features gave me opportunities for ‘non-identity’ and ethnic ‘invisibility.’ My experiences with my grandparents, my godparents and extended
family were quite different, I was shown favoritism. Could it have been due to my fair complexion? I found myself in many situations where I was praised for not carrying the stereotypical, social stigma of being a ‘peasant’ Sicilian or perjoratively-named Italian. To the contrary view though, I have always been very proud of my ethnicity, my heritage and its cultural traditions. There has never been shame for me as an Italian-American and when society criticized my ethnicity, it made me more determined to self-define and assert my place within.

I have continued to ask myself why my own preferences for men are a set criteria. I have pondered where my preferences originated from. Where am I within society’s social hierarchy and if or how does my white, racial privilege account for any of my choices? Does my societal privilege translate into qualities that reproduce biased notions of preference for my sons? In my own relationships, how did I form the bond and trust with my husband of more than twenty years? In reflection of my younger years, I attempted to find the point where I defined who I am and what I want. I reviewed my past boyfriends, crushes and dates, yet I return to an unanswered inquiry. I have made connections with socialization agents; living in a predominantly black and Hispanic neighborhood during childhood, occupying several economic statuses throughout my life course, and having an upbringing that celebrated diversity. But to say why my partner’s skin tone is relevant to me as a preference is not quite figured out yet.

My relationship to my participants in this research could be perceived (on the surface) as disjointed. We are ‘scientifically’ defined and divided by gender and race, but we found a way to have meaningful connections through our honesty and willingness to respect different perspectives. My outsider status was always visible. Somehow though, through our combined reflections we removed the barriers of objective research and racial assumptions. In the beginning, it was an awkward balance but that changed when my outsider status made me an inquiry of re-
search for the participants as well. In just telling my story to them, a process and eagerness to share theirs emerged. I “shifted” my roles as researcher and participant (to them) to balance the interactions and establish authenticity of self and as scholar (Deutsch, 2004). Self-reflexivity and passion for the research issue were crucial to producing this knowledge.

The relationship to my personal history and this research study is relevant in how I parent my sons. The life choices they make are a reflection of the values and morals I instill within. If I was not cognizant of how colorism reproduces racism, my boys may become further oppressed and in turn, oppress others in their daily social practices. If I allowed my sons to place value upon the shade and color of another’s skin, I would be complicit in the perpetuation of racism. I want the best for them, but never at the expense of demeaning the worth of a human being. Since society continues to position men as agents of (wielding) power, it is imperative that young boys and men understand how to treat women, how not to construct the ideals of beauty and how to offer love of self and love of women. The knowledge begins at home and is then carried into society by the messages we transmit. My position amidst this research is entwined from the center of the issue to the fringes of hopeful, social change.
REFERENCES


Cokley, K. (2002). To be or not to be Black: Problematics of racial identity. In R. Birt
(Ed.), *The quest for community and identity: Critical essays in Africana social philosophy* (pp. 29–44). Lanham, MD; Rowman & Littlefield.


Hochschild, J. L., & Weaver, V. (2007). The Skin Color Paradox and the American


doi:10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2011.10.003


Books.


Appendix A: Informed Consent

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title: Manifestations of Colorism in Interpersonal Relationship Preferences of Black Men

Georgia State University
African American Studies Department
Informed Consent

Principal Investigator: Dr. Makungu Akinyela
Student Investigator: Julie Corso

I. Purpose: You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to examine the preferences for lighter complexions in heterosexual, relationship preferences within the black community. The effects of this study are intended to lend valuable insight toward the effects of colorism or skin color discrimination. A total of 20 black men will take part in this study. The study will require 90 minutes of your time.

II. Procedures: If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete a short demographic survey, complete a questionnaire that classifies attractiveness and desirable mate samples, identify your skin tone color and answer related questions about skin tone preferences while talking with a researcher in an interview. At the close of your interview, you will be given a $20 gift certificate for use at Exquisite Barber Shop. The interview will take place at Exquisite Barber Shop, in the conference room/break area or at another place we have both agreed upon in your community. The interview will be audio-recorded. An interview guide will help steer our conversation, however
you are encouraged to share as much or as little as you feel comfortable about your
skin tone preferences. You will not be asked for any information that may reveal your
identity or the identity of people you may know.

III. Risks: There are no known risks in this study. In the course of the interview, it is
possible that information may come out that could make you feel uncomfortable. If
such a moment should occur you can be referred to a professor in my department. His
name is Dr. Makungu Akinyela. He is a trained therapist. If any questions asked make
you feel uncomfortable at any time, you do not have to answer them.

IV. Benefits: It is possible that the study actually benefits your day to day life by
extension of your knowledge of self and community.

V. Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal: Participation in research is voluntary. You
do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind,
you have the right to drop out at any time. Should you choose to withdraw from the
study, your data will not be used. You may skip questions or stop participating at any
time. Whatever you decide, you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise
entitled.

VI. Confidentiality: We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. The
study’s primary researcher (Julie Corso) will have access to the information you pro-
vide. Additionally, information may be shared with those who make sure the study is
done correctly like the GSU Institutional Review Board and the Office for Human
Research Protection (OHRP), as well as Dr. Makungu Akinyela who is supervising
this study. The information you provide will be stored on a in a locked file drawer in
the office of Dr. Akinyela on Georgia State’s campus. Your name and other facts that
might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results.

VII. Contact Persons: Contact persons are Makungu Akinyela at 404-413-5141 or through
his email at: makinyela@gsu.edu; and Julie Corso at 404-697-2803 or through her
email at: jcorso2@student.gsu.edu. Please contact researchers if you have questions
about this study. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant
in this research study, you may contact Susan Vogtner in the Office of Research In-
tegrity at 404-413-3513 or svogtner1@gsu.edu.

VIII. Copy of Consent Form to Subject:
I will give you a copy of this consent form to keep. If you are willing to participate in this research and agree to be audio-taped, please sign below.

____________________________________________  ________________
Participant                     Date

____________________________________________  ________________
Principal Investigator Researcher Obtaining Consent  Date

Appendix B: Recruitment/Roundtable “Conversation on Colorism” Ad

Black Men Wanted to Discuss Issues of Colorism in the Community

A research study is being conducted that will explore black men’s beliefs, assumptions and attitudes surrounding skin tone politics. Issues of colorism will be presented in conversation and in video to understand the values attached to light and dark skin, hair texture, eye color and facial features. The purpose of the “Conversation on Colorism” is to introduce and highlight the facts on colorism while having an open-forum style dialogue. Come join in the conversation and enjoy a tapas-style meal!

Interested? Want to Sign Up?

If you are a black male, living in the Atlanta area, are 21 years or older and are interested in attending this conversation, please call the student researcher for details. Contact: Julie Corso at jcorso2@student.gsu.edu.
Appendix C: Survey Questions and Interview Guide

Survey Information and Details

Scales & Measures: Demographics

The personal data form will be the first survey of the study. Participants will be asked a range of questions that are demographic in nature and will include the following entries:

- Age/DOB
- Where were you born/raised?
- What area of Georgia do you reside?

- Level of Education Completed
  - Some college, degree not yet obtained
  - Associates Degree
  - Bachelors Degree
  - Masters Degree
  - Doctoral Degree

- Annual Income Level
  - $0-$10,000
  - $10,000-$20,000
  - $20,000-$30,000
  - $30,000-$40,000
  - $40,000-$50,000
  - $50,000-$75,000
  - $75,000-$100,000
  - $100,000 or more

- What is your current marital status?
  - Single, never married
  - Member of an unmarried couple
  - Married
  - Separated
  - Divorced
  - Widowed

- What is your religious or spiritual affiliation?
  - Christian, protestant
  - Christian, evangelical
  - Catholic
  - Muslim
  - Jewish
  - Hindu
  - Buddhist
- What is the highest level of education completed by your parents?
  - Mother
    - Less than high school
    - High school/GED
    - Some college
    - Associates Degree
    - Bachelor’s Degree
    - Master’s Degree
    - Doctoral Degree
  - Father
    - Less than high school
    - High school/GED
    - Some college
    - Associates Degree
    - Bachelor’s Degree
    - Master’s Degree
    - Doctoral Degree

What is your employment status?
- employed for wages
- self-employed
- out of work
- student
- retired
- unable to work, physical or psychological reason

Do you have children?
- yes
- no

Please choose what best reflects your family’s income status (based on the 2011 Poverty Threshold Guidelines, Dept. of Health and Human Services)?
- Family of 2 = $14,710
- Family of 3 = $18,530
- Family of 4 = $22,350
- Family of 5 = $26,170
- Family of 6 = $29,990
- Family of 7 = $33,810
- Family of 8 = $37,630

**Scales & Measures: Skin Color Survey (SKS)**

The Skin Color Survey questions and means of analysis are borrowed and somewhat adapted from the study previously conducted by Bond & Cash in 1992. *Since the Pantone swatch is not*
readily available for your use, please utilize the image below & select a number that is closest to your answer.

Question #1 = Indicate the color swatch that most resembles your actual skin tone color.

Question #2 = Indicate the color swatch that you would like to be if you could change the color of skin tone.

Question #3 = Select a color swatch that represents the ideal mate’s skin tone color.

Question #4 = Choose a color swatch for skin tone that you believe your peers find the most attractive.

Question #5 = Identify a color swatch for skin tone that you believe your family most admires.

The second part of the Skin Color Survey is 3 questions that are answered by ratings:

Question #1 = How satisfied are you with the shade (lightness or darkness) of your own skin color?
   (1) extremely dissatisfied, (2) somewhat dissatisfied – wish I was a little darker, (3) somewhat dissatisfied – wish I was a little lighter, (4) extremely satisfied
Question #2 = Compared to most Black/African American/African-American people, I believe my skin color is… (1) very light, (2) very dark, (3) dark brown, (4) medium brown, (5) caramel toned, (6) light, yellow, red

Question #3 = If I could change my skin color, I would make it…(1) much lighter, (2) much darker, (3) more brown spectrum, (4) I would not change it at all

_Scales & Measures: Self-Esteem_

The next survey will measure participants’ self-esteem levels and are answered by selecting the most appropriate response.

Question #1 = Growing up, what type of community/neighborhood did you reside in? (1) predominantly white, (2) predominantly black, (3) blended cultures and races

Question #2 = When attending elementary through high school levels of school, what was the dominant population? (1) predominantly white, (2) predominantly black, (3) blended cultures and races

Question #3 = How important are your religious/spiritual values to you when making life decisions, (i.e. sex, dating, marriage)? (1) not relevant when making such decisions, (2) extremely important, (3) considered somewhat

Question #4 = How important are the opinions of your family members when it comes to your dating/mate selection choices? (1) extremely important, (2) not relevant when making such decisions, (3) considered somewhat

Question #5 = How important are the opinions of your peers/friends when it comes to your dating/mate selection choices? (1) extremely important, (2) not relevant when making such decisions, (3) considered somewhat

Question #6 = Which is more important to you, personality or physical traits, when it comes to selecting a mate? (1) physical traits, (2) personality traits

Question #7 = Which is more important to you when you look in the mirror prior to an outing, how you look or how you carry yourself/your actions/your disposition? (1) your looks (2) your attitude

Question #8 = Do you get your sense of self-worth from the approval of others? (1) yes, (2) no

Question #9 = Do you feel unattractive unless others praise you or notice you? (1) yes, (2) no

Question #10 = Do you struggle with feelings of inferiority? (1) yes, (2) no
Question #11 = Do you feel other people’s opinions matter more to you than your own? (1) yes, (2) no

Question #12 = Do you hesitate to do things because of what other people might think? (1) yes, (2) no

Question #13 = Do you criticize yourself often? (1) yes, (2) no

Question #14 = Do others criticize you often? (1) yes, (2) no

Question #15 = Do you feel like a person of worth and are on an equal plane with others? (1) yes, (2) no

Question #16 = On the whole, you are satisfied with yourself. (1) yes, (2) no

Question #17 = When you look in the mirror, you see…(1) someone who is ugly and insecure, (2) someone who is confident and attractive, (3) someone who is average and unsure

Question #18 = Does age matter to you when looking for a mate? (1) yes, (2) no

Question #19 = I would change my look if I could. (1) yes, (2) no

Question #20 = If I could change my race/ethnicity, I would. (1) yes, (2) no

Scales & Measures: Skin Color, Social Desirability, Mate Selection

Question #1 = In choosing a mate, what is more important to you: (1) her physical traits, (2) her personality traits

Question #2 = Could you be interested in someone you are not initially attracted to? (1) yes, (2) no

Question #3 = Does media marketing affect the type of female you desire? (1) yes, (2) no

Question #4 = Are you exclusively attracted to light skinned females? (1) yes, (2) no

Question #5 = Does skin tone bear any weight to your mate selection preferences? (1) yes, (2) no

Question #6 = Who would be the most ideal choice for you to date? (1) light complexion female, (2) dark complexion female, (3) medium brown complexion female

Question #7 = Who would be the most ideal choice for you to marry? (1) light complexion female, (2) dark complexion female, (3) medium brown complexion female
Question #8 = Who would be the most ideal choice for you to have only a sexual relationship with? (1) light complexion female, (2) dark complexion female, (3) medium brown complexion female

Question #9 = Would you date a female who made less than you or was unemployed? (1) no, (2) yes

Question #10 = Would you marry a female who made less than you or was unemployed? (1) no, (2) yes

Question #11 = What do you notice first about a female? (1) skin tone, (2) nose, (3) lips, (4) hair, (5) eyes

Question #12 = List in order of importance (1 being the most important, 8 being the least important) – skin color, future goals, wealth/socioeconomic status, education level, personality, common interests, religious beliefs, physical looks

Scales & Measures: Cultural Orientation

Question #1: I would agree that my cultural orientation is best defined by: (1) Eurocentric ideology, (2) Afrocentric ideology, (3) unsure

Question #2: Growing up, my parent(s) did not have a strong sense of racial pride. (1) true, (2) false

Question #3: As a child, I was aware of racial differences between myself and others. (1) yes, (2) no

Question #4: I have been a victim of racial epithets due to the color and/or tone of my skin. (1) true, (2) false

Question #5: In today’s reality, it is not necessary to empower racial solidarity and ethnic culture because the focus is mainstreamed and blended. (1) agree, (2) disagree

Scales & Measures: Skin Tone Photo Survey of Preferred Mate Selection

This section will ask the participant to select the photo that best represents their desired mate’s skin tone.
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Allow me to thank you again for your time and consideration for this research inquiry. In our conversation today, the questions I will ask you are intended to help me learn more about your mate selection preferences and your perspectives on colorism.

Background/Demographics (if the demographic survey is not filled out)

I would like to get a bit of demographic background information for comparative analysis:
- What is your age?
- What is your ethnic background?
- Where are you from (regionally or internationally)?
- Where did you spend your childhood? Who did you live with?
- What is your education level?
- How would you classify yourself in terms of income?

Knowledge of Colorism

Can you tell me what colorism means to you? Do you think African Americans value skin tones differently? What skin tones are considered better? Why? Where does this preference come from in your opinion?

How would you define colorism?

What made you decide to take an interest in the roundtable discussion of Colorism Conversation prior to being selected as a participant?

Self-Identity/Racial Identity

How would you describe your skin tone?

What does it mean for you to a ____-skinned man in today’s society?

How has your life been affected because of your skin color?

At what time/age in your life did you become aware of your skin color and the values appended to different skin tones?

Can you tell about a time in your childhood when you became aware of the differences associated with various skin tones?

Was your family, society or the media an influence in your understanding of skin tone differences? How did this shape your ideas about race, colorism and ethnicity?

Was there any advice you received (throughout your lifetime) from family, friends or society that was aimed at skin color?
Values/Norms – Labels & Controlling Images

Can you list names/descriptors (positive & negative) that you have heard associated with people with light skin? Medium skin? Dark skin?

If you could choose your skin color and tone, what would that be? Why? What factors influence that desire?

Socialization

Do you believe there are stereotypes associated with light skinned women? Dark skinned women? Medium skin tones?

How is colorism existent in your daily life?

What do your friends and family have to say about colorism? Is it an issue for them?

In what manner does skin color impact your relationships with women? Men (not in an intimate sense)?

How do your views about skin tone affect who you socialize with?

If you could choose the skin tone of your ideal mate, what color would that be and why?