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# He's Dark, Dark; Colorism Among African American Men

Edlin Veras

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# HE'S DARK, DARK: COLORISM AMONG AFRICAN-AMERICAN MEN

by

EDLIN VERAS

Under the Direction of Jonathan Gayles, PhD

## ABSTRACT

This study expands literature on colorism and the monolithic emphasis on the experiences of women by investigating black men's experience with skin tone discrimination. The investigator seeks to interrogate how black males experience colorism by exploring how familial, peer associations, and media shape black males' understanding of their skin-tone; by asking; what messages, if any, enforcing colorism ideals they receive; as well as the frequency of and adherence to such messages. The investigator utilized focus groups to gather data. Sample was limited to 10 self-identifying African-American black men age 18 and older. Focus group data is analyzed through an intersectional perspective, and thematic coding is utilized for analysis. Findings suggest light skinned and dark skinned men experience colorism differently. Light skinned men noted blatant colorism and often felt they had to authenticate their blackness. Darker skinned men reported more indirect colorism and negative stereotypes as prominent challenges with colorism.

INDEX WORDS: Colorism, Race, Black masculinity, Skin tone, African-American males, Identity, Discrimination, Intra-racial, Qualitative, Colorism Studies, Blackness

HE'S DARK, DARK: COLORISM AMONG AFRICAN-AMERICAN MEN

by

EDLIN VERAS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Masters of Arts  
in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2016

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2016

HE'S DARK, DARK: COLORISM AMONG AFRICAN-AMERICAN MEN

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## **DEDICATION**

I hope this work can start a much needed conversation in communities of color and especially among black men. Together we can begin to eradicate the vestiges of colonization. Although I focus on men in the United States, there is need for work throughout the African diaspora--I hope this can start some conversations.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

...he said with tears, 'I'm dark. It won't wash off. How do I get light again? I don't like being dark.'... My child continued to monitor his skin as the seasons changed...and as his skin began to lighten, his smile began to get bigger. (*Colorism Has No Gender*, Quoted from Wilder, 2015, p. 136).

Jacob, an African American teenager, shares his pain of a darker *than normal* skin complexion after a long summer in the Florida sun. His mother, deemed by family members as fair skinned or *light bright*, does her best to console Jacob despite persistent ridicule by family and peers teasing him about his newfound skin color. Jacob's experience illuminates some of the more blatant and harmful ideals colorism maintains; the self-deprecation of *dark* skin and the simultaneous coveting of lighter skin rooted in larger paradigms of race and colonialism. Further, his experience suggests that colorism operates similarly across gender boundaries. That is, colorism is similarly upheld through familial and peer ties among black males as it is among black women (see Wilder, 2010, 2012, 2015; Hordge-Freeman, 2013).

The codification of de jure racial categories and racialized slavery during the early 17<sup>th</sup> century was pivotal in reasserting the already palpable color lines of the time. For many years indigenous Natives and enslaved Africans were regarded "similarly as alien people with an odd and unfamiliar culture and, most fundamentally, as heathens" (Ablavksy, 2011, p. 1473). Legislation followed, creating a virtual *master* class pitting whites (even poor working class whites) against Natives and those of African descent. The white-master non-white-slave model slowly eroded following the groundbreaking 1772 Robin v. Hardaway case suggesting the illegality of Native enslavement thus allowing "Indian racial identity itself, like white[ness] and unlike blackness...a possible route to freedom" (Ablavsky, 2011, p. 1487). The aftermath of slavery has instilled in black (and white) Americans (African

American, Black Americans, and Blacks will be used interchangeably) notions that “dark skin represents savagery, irrationality, ugliness, and inferiority” (Hunter, 2013, p. 2). This legacy of oppression and subsequent disaccumulation of economic and social standing among African Americans has created blatant and implicit inter/intraracial differences in the United States (Brown, Curnoy Currie, Duster, Oppenheimer, Shultz, & Wellman 2003; Frazier, 1997; Katzneslon, 2004; Vigilione, Hannon, & DeFina, 2010; Alexander, 2008). Among the many consequences of America’s racist legacy is colorism (Wilder, 2015); the value of lighter skin and European features coupled with the simultaneous prejudice and discrimination of those with darker or more *African* features (Wilder, 2015; Hall, 2010). What follows, is an examination into the history, maintenance, and contemporary social climate on colorism. Specifically, a systematic case is presented detailing the dearth of, and subsequent need of an investigation into the black male colorism experience.

Echoing 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century color hierarchies, contemporary colorism research suggests notable relationships between skin tone and both actual and perceived life chances (Uzogara, Lee, Abdou, & Jackson, 2014; Landor, Simmons, Simmons, Brody, Bryant, Git, Granberg, & Melby, 2013; Wilder, 2010; 2015; Levinson, 2010; Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Rockquemore, 2002; Klonoff, 2000). These relationships are a complex combination of geography, class, race, and education, affected directly and indirectly by skin tone. An offspring of racism, Colorism can be described as “the allocation of privilege and disadvantage according to the lightness or darkness of one’s skin” (Burke, 2008, p. 17); Wilder expands positing colorism is “the unequal treatment and discrimination of individuals *belonging to the same racial or ethnic minority group* (e.g. African Americans) based upon differences in physical features—most notably skin complexion (color), but also

facial features and hair texture” (Wilder, 2015, p. 6). It is important to note, although the general discourse on colorism has traditionally focused on light skin over dark skin, colorism is not static and highly dependent on social context and can work against light-skinned individuals as well (Hordge-Freeman, 2013; Uzogara et al, 2014; Winkler, 2010).

### **1.1 Background**

Research on colorism has existed for decades but has been sparse, with a resurgence only in the past few decades. JeffriAnne Wilder (2015) posits that research has occurred in three waves: pre-civil rights era, height of the black power movement, and post-civil rights era, and the overwhelming majority of its interrogation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The direction seems to have shifted away from blacks as a whole, and has since become a relatively gendered topic, reflected in the disproportionate emphasis research on women compared to men (Wilder, 2015). Women have become the focal point of skin tone research as the notion that they are more affected by colorism has predominated the field; as such much of the literature available addresses women’s feelings and experiences with: beauty, self-esteem/acceptance, desire to attract a mate, among other interests. (Wilder, 2015; Monk, 2014, Wilder & Cain, 2011; Mchurrah & Frazier, 2013; Viglione, Hannon, & DeFina, 2009; Hill, 2002).

The bulk of research exploring colorism among men has largely been *in* the family context and quantitative in nature. Further, because of the lack of contemporary representative samples, contemporary research too often relies on antiquated data sets (Hill, 2000; Uzogara et al, 2014; Monk, 2014). While informative, quantitative studies may fail to capture the everyday microaggressions African-American men may face. Many of which, while helpful can be problematic especially when addressing a topic that is as innately intersectional and

interdisciplinary as skin tone. As such, this research addresses methodological concerns by utilizing an intersectional perspective.

## 1.2 Race and Colorism

As a social construct, race has recently been conceptualized as a fluid and malleable phenomenon; susceptible to frequent changes, interpretations, and applications (Rockquemore & Arend, 2002; Omi & Winant, 1994; Giliberti, 2013; Bailey, Saperstein, & Penner, 2014). Feagin and Elias posit a systemic component, one in which mostly white actors shift socio political climates through institutions and ultimately hoard legislative and economic resources upholding racial inequalities (2013). Advancing racial discourse Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2002), Joni Hersh (2010), and Ronald Hall (2005, 2012) propose the rise of a skin-gradient-based racial system in U.S society. Hall even suggesting the growing irrelevance of race, suggesting its impediment in scholarly research (2005). While scholars such as Ajani ya Azibo (2011) and Hall (2012) hold more radical views than both Hersh and Bonilla-Silva, the general concept is premised on an ever-changing demographic in the United States including continuing immigration, higher interracial marriages, and a continual *darkening* of the general population; in many ways mirroring the complex racial systems of Latin-America and the Caribbean (Telles, Flores, & Fernando, 2015; Bonilla-Silva, 2002).

Bonilla-Silva (2001) proposes a three tier “racial” system: Whites, honorary whites, and collective blacks, each category comprised of varying populations differing from traditional—black, white, Asian and Hispanic—racial categories. Collective blacks for example, transcended traditional markers of African descent and includes Filipinos, Vietnamese, dark-skinned Latinos, and reservation-bound Indigenous groups among others (p. 4). In a skin-tone based system, collective blacks experience relatively similar conditions as African-Americans. Conversely,

“Whites”, Bonilla-Silva argues includes traditional whites as well as newly immigrated and accepted whites, and will share similar life chances and are most prone to opportunity and prosperity. In essence Bonilla-Silva suggests is the erosion of a binary racial model and alludes to an emerging colorism-based model based on color gradients though not specifically influenced by race. Thus Bonilla-Silva implies

### **1.3 Working Explanations for Colorism**

While Bonilla-Silva’s framework is not perfect, some contemporary literature supports many of his claims (see Monk, 2015; Bailey, Saperstein, & Penner, 2014; as well as *Shades of Difference*, Glenn, 2009 and *Melanin Millennium*, Hall, 2010 anthologies). Across and within racial groups, there exists varying degrees of colorism and subsequent discrimination practices. Burton, Bonilla-Silva, Ray, Buckelew, & Hordge-Freeman (2010) suggest a similar need for colorism research especially in regards to race conceptualizations: “...we argue that in a multicultural society that is shifting in numbers and potentially in the distribution of power, researchers must be mindful of the roles that racialized systems and differentiations based on skin color play in families’ lives.” (p. 454). The application of Bonilla-Silva’s model by Herring (2002) found it was partly supported and suggests “tripartite model of race makes some apparent improvements on the binary model” and ultimately may be “more predictive of stratification outcomes as the 21<sup>st</sup> Century unfolds” (p. 27). Similarly, in their examination of racial identity, Rockquemore and Arend claim that traditional black and white racial models “fail to allow space for the newly emerging patterns of negotiation, fluidity, and choice” (p. 61). These studies suggest an increasing need for the acknowledgement of skin tone in increasingly changing and multi-racial population.

## 1.4 Relevance

Despite its scientific and social reality colorism has remained largely understudied and undermined. Monk (2014) suggests, that the "...overwhelming interest in black life telescoped through the lens of social problems, particularly in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had the consequence of creating a blind-spot in our scholarship—the continuing significance of skin color" (p.1314). Similarly, Ronald Hall (2012) and Burton et al. (2010) argue that academia's Eurocentric undertones have undermined colorism's legitimacy and subsequently limited its investigation. In addition, Hannon, DeFinna, and Burch suggest focusing solely on race masks the importance of skin color and white privilege and white supremacy (2010).

Further alienating discourse is the United States' relentless claim to post-racialism and swift allusion to Commander in Chief, President Barack Obama, as irrefutable evidence that race and color are no longer relevant (Springer, 2014; Alexander, 2010; Brown et al, 2003). Notwithstanding colorism has gained notoriety outside of the academic realm in popular culture through multiple avenues including music, film, advertisement, and various social media outlets (Wilder, 2015). Hunter (2002) supports these claims, positing that "Skin color stratification has moved from "dirty laundry" to "dinner table conversation" (p. 22).

In 2015, award-winning Hip-Hop artist Kendrick Lamar alongside Rapsody released a track entitled "Complexion" blatantly challenging conventional notions of skin color among African Americans; consider a snippet of Rapsody's verse "12 years of age, thinkin' my shade too dark I love myself, I no longer need Cupid, Enforcin' my dark side like a young George Lucas, light don't mean you smart, bein' dark don't make you stupid, and frame of mind for them bustas, ain't talkin' "Woohah!"; and Lamar's historical reference "...may the Willie Lynch theory reverse a thousand times..." (Lamar & Raleigh, 2015, 12). Both artists, among the

most blatant, only make-up a small number of black celebrities speaking out in the last three decades. Lamar's reference to Willie Lynch is one of many. Hip-hop artists Xzibit (2012), Nas (2010), and Common (2011) reference Lynch alluding to the divisive schema purportedly offered by Lynch. Lynch is often credited with presenting a systematic, intersectional, set of practices that would ensure slave obedience and prevent rebellions before white constituents. According to Lynch, skin color was one of the many tools at slave owner's disposal to divide enslaved Africans. Presently, in popular culture including social media and other outlets Lynch's name is synonymous with intraracial tensions among African-Americans.

Music artists are not alone in their contemporary discourse on colorism. D. Channsin and Bill Duke released documentaries entitled *Dark Girls* and *Light Girls* in 2012 and 2015 respectively, conspicuously exploring colorism experiences among both darker and lighter skinned women. In sum, *Dark Girls* and *Light Girls* focused on the life experiences of black women and the various intraracial societal, and interpersonal barriers they regularly encounter. The films are presented as a series of interviews predominantly with women of color varying in age and profession. Professional actors, marketers, psychologists, and historians provide brief historical context –consistent with existing literature, situating intraracial black divides in slavery. Their contextual backdrop alluded to differential treatment of lighter skinned slaves over dark skinned slaves, and the subsequent internalization of a white beauty standard that persists contemporarily.

J. Cole, a self-identifying light skinned Black male and prominent Hip-Hop artist. In a recent interview laments, that he is not only is he so acutely aware of colorism that he makes a concerted effort to include darker skinned women in his music videos. He also believes it may have aided him in his rise to stardom:

“That brainwashing that tells us that light skin is better, it’s subconsciously in us, whether we know it or not... still pursuing light skin women. There are some women out there that are like, “I don’t even like light skin men” and that’s fine. But Barack Obama would not be President if he were dark skin. You know what I mean? That’s just the truth. I might not be as successful as I am now if I was dark skin.” (J. Cole quoted in Cain, 2013).

Cole’s statement suggests is an understanding that light skin is valued over darker skin. And more subtly, implies a relationship between prestige and upward mobility for those with lighter skin. A paradigm brought to life in hypothetical satires on YouTube.

*YouTube*, a popular video sharing site, and among the most visited websites in the world has several videos emphasizing the (perceived) differences between light skinned men and dark skinned men. Although intended to be comical, what these videos exemplify are long standing beliefs of civility and barbarism among lighter and darker men respectively. More specifically though, what these videos showcase are rigid class and gender attributes associated with lighter skinned and darker skinned black men. The entertainment group known as All Def Digital have a series of episodes entitled *Light Skin Guys vs Dark Skin Guys*, all of which were uploaded in 2015. The description to each video openly states “Light Skin vs. Dark Skin will take on the common racial stereotypes associated with light skin and dark skin guys.” sic (All Def Digital, 2015). In the skits, the two most prominent actors, the “Light Skin guy” and the “Dark Skin guy” (played by two men of noticeably different shades) are juxtaposed in various social contexts.

While each episode’s situation is vastly different, the attributes of the actors remain static; the *dark skinned* actor consistently displays inclinations to: violence, fearlessness, insatiable sexual conquest of women, abnormal athleticism, use of non-standard English, and

less regard for hygiene. In stark contrast, the *light skinned* actor steadily displays: emotion—including willingness to cry openly, respect for women, immense concern for appearance, mastery of *standard* English, un-athleticism, and decision to use words as a non-violent means to deescalate confrontations. The videos portray stereotypical differences between light and dark skinned men, but also associate dark skin with hyper-masculinity, and light skin with femininity.

These examples in popular culture speak to colorism's prevalence and pervasiveness. They also depart from academia in that they suggest that colorism effects both men and women despite the lack of attention men have received in by the academy or as Wilder asserts, *colorism studies* (2015). Thus, colorism's relevance is two-fold, not only is there empirical evidence of colorism discrimination (Wilder & Cain, 2010; MCarthy-Brown, 2011; Levinson & Young, 2010; Monk, 2013; 2014; 2015; Wilder, 2015), but the day to day interactions and popular culture suggest serious tangible and perceived effects. No time has the study of colorism been as important as it is today.

## **1.5 Problem Statement**

It is clear that African-American women and other women of color are affected by colorism at the micro-level, it is possible that the reasons and/extent women and men are affected will vary, however the omission of the black male experience is problematic considering they too, are effected socially and materially. In effect, the gendering colorism studies has ignored the experience of a sizable population experiencing similar societal prejudices. This study seeks to address the gendered inquiry of colorism and enrich the literature by adding to the growing body of research and its methodology. Studies suggesting that colorism effects African-American men including income, education attainment, criminal sentencing, for example also suggest, that colorism effects more than issues of beauty—a topic that has been the focal concern for many

colorism scholars. It is curious then, that the individual-level processes among men have been understudied (for literature see DuBois, 1903; Frazier, 1957; Monk, 2014).

In response to the dearth in the literature and in response to scholar's suggestions such as Maxwell, Brevard, Abrams, and Belgrave (2015), who contend "...future investigations could focus on the group-level mechanisms by which individuals becomes dissatisfied with their complexion, by examining sociocultural factors that reinforce colorist ideologies" (p. 456) and Wilder's assertion that "black men and boys contend with color bias and discrimination as well" (2015, p. 135), focusing on men in contemporary research has the potential to enrich our understanding of colorism.

## **1.6 Purpose & Significance**

This research fills a glaring gap in contemporary literature regarding men and their experiences with colorism. To date, little research has explored colorism among African-American men. This study focuses on African American men and their life experiences as it relates to colorism, and the transmission of such messages from familial, colleague, peer associations, and societal influences. The study was conducted in Atlanta, Georgia. The target population is adult African American men over the age of 18.

Notable income, educational, criminal sentencing, and perceptions of intelligence disparities exist among African American males differing in skin complexion (Burch, 2015; Monk, 2014; Ryabov, 2012; Vigilione et al, 2010; Eberhardt, 2004). It is curious then, that such little research has examined the extent to which it affects African American men socially on the individual level, as well as the interpersonal origins of divisive messages. A clearer understanding of interpersonal African-American colorism among adult men adds to the literature and aids in future inquiry by providing the foundation for creation of theories. That is,

focusing specifically on the experience black men solutions can be borne from the voices of black men, and not the symptoms of colorism i.e. income and educational disparities. Further, as suggested by many scholars, (see Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Herring, 2002; Hall, 2010) the continual *darkening* of the U.S. population suggests that the traditional study of race relations, that is in a relatively polar fashion—with only recent focus on other populations including Asians—with relatively rigid categorizations, may be increasingly ineffective as racial lines blur and give way to color.

### **1.7 Nature of Study**

The non-experimental research design differed from many previous studies on colorism in that it specifically focuses on men. The study was phenomenological, and sought to understand the colorism among black men. While not nationally generalizable, the qualitative approach sample (N=10) adds depth and breadth to the literature investigating colorism.

Given that the aim is to explore how black men experience colorism focus groups and surveys provide appropriate means to do so. Focus groups allowed the investigator access to information that survey information may not capture. Focus group interviews often offer invaluable insights and have the ability to create pseudo communities in which those with shared lived experiences can exchange ideas in the comfort of knowing a shared experience, especially amongst a relatively homogenous sample. Given the potentially sensitive nature of the subject at hand, and to address the possibility of interviewer influence, focus group is better suited than individual interviews.

## 1.8 Research Questions

This study sought to explore 1) how African-American men experience colorism; 2) How African-American men learn about colorism? And 3) what messages, if any, they receive from family, peers, and media enforcing colorism ideals.

## 1.9 Theoretical Frameworks

Phenomena do not occur in a vacuum. In any given situation there are multiple forces directly and indirectly influencing interactions. Intersectionality assumes the possibility of multiple interlocking oppressions acting simultaneously to create unique experiences (Brah & Phenix, 2004). Although its origins date back to the 17th century, the term gained notoriety in recent decades, only coined Kimberle Crenshaw in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Jordan-Zachary, 2007). Intersectionality posits that examining phenomenon as a monolith, investigating discrimination based solely on one's race for instance, is less effective and less genuine than the now-common intersection of race *and* gender (Hill-Collins, 2015). To that end, Hill-Collins suggests that intersectionality has many interpretations and applications but can be defined as "the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities" (2015, p. 2).

Extending Collins' conceptualization, this study presumes that one's state of being male and navigating one's race and respective skin tone is significant and inherently different than solely examining one's skin color or gender in respect to colorism. Incorporating this perspective to investigate colorism experiences is essential to capturing an authentic experiential phenomenon. Wilder concurs, positing that "skin tone is inexorably linked to, and intersects

with, race, class, and gender” (2015, p. 12). Thus the focal points of this study, are race, gender, and skin tone.

### **1.10 Assumptions**

I contend that African-American men, like African-American women, are affected by colorism on a personal level. That is, just as women suggest skin tone to be a major factor in their lives (Wilder, 2015) men will as well. Given the gender differences in learned behavior and performances however, the source of and gravity of particular experiences may differ (Hill, 2011). Because issues of beauty are often attributed to women, womanhood, and subsequently feminine, men’s voices, under the pressure of maintaining their masculine identity on such an aesthetic issue may be relegated to silence, and thus overlooked in social science inquiry and society at large.

### **1.11 Chapter Summary**

Chapter one introduces colorism, provides an historical foundation, presents contemporary colorism discourse in and outside of academia, as well as describes the nature of study and theoretical frameworks used. In short, colorism is discrimination against those deemed to have darker skin, usually irrespective of race (Wilder, 2012; Bachyavara, 2014; Hunter, 2005). Colorism often functions intra-racially, that is within one’s own racial group, though not exclusively (Winkler, 2012; Hunter, 2005). As noted, despite colorism’s persistence effecting the lives of African Americans including income (Monk, 2012) education (Ryabov, 2013) and law enforcement interaction (Eberhardt, 2006), relatively little research has examined the impact it has had on men specifically, or at the individual level in particular. This study addresses the glaring omission in the literature through an intersectional perspective utilizing an adapted Racial Microaggressions framework. The study, conducted in Atlanta, Georgia explores the lived

experiences of black men at least 18 years of age. Exploring how black men's experiences colorism and the source of colorist ideals, I predict that black men do experience colorism in many ways similar to women but navigate their experiences differently. The following chapter covers germinal and seminal literature regarding the colorism on a global scale, and more explicitly details the colorism experiences of African-Americans in a U.S. context.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The study of colorism has taken various forms. Studies have explored colorism through a historical gaze, familial tensions, income, education, cosmetic/appearance, and perception discrepancies among others. Essentially, colorism literature addresses traditional markers of social standing to assess discrimination. What follows is a comprehensive examination of the various topics in colorism research. The chapter begins with an overview of race and color ideologies in the Americas. Specifically, an exploration into the racial and color evolutions of Brazil and the Dominican Republic. Situating colorism in the African diaspora contextualizes white supremacy and its global influence on race and skin color ideologies. Reflected in each country's dark, often violent histories, are clear indicators of racial and colorism hierarchies, relics of imperialist and colonial powers. The section proceeds exploring various social implications and potential challenges of African Americans with darker skin tones. The section concludes with a review of methodological underpinnings and subsequent omission of micro-level narratives of black men.

### **2.2 Conceptualizations of Color in the United States**

Being black was a marker of social status for the overwhelming majority of the United States' existence. Being black unlike being white, meant that one could be enslaved, bought, and sold as property through a sophisticated international enterprise. Majority white merchants purchased, kidnapped, and bartered for continental Africans in what would prove to be among the most egregious acts against humanity, the transatlantic slave trade. This color-caste labor model would ultimately set the tone for African Americans' position in society and continues to affect them presently (O'Connell, 2012). Present-day marginalization of African-Americans has

evolved for a number of reasons: Most notably, the 1865 emancipation of enslaved peoples; which legally destabilized the racial caste system. It is important to note, that despite the legislative attempts de facto racism and discrimination remained common. The Black Codes for example, re-solidified inter and intra racial divides as whites remained socially superior through strategic state's rights laws and ordinances (Foner, 2015). Simultaneously, newly freed lighter skinned blacks, with relative freedom and autonomy compared to their darker skinned counterparts, began disassociating with darker blacks (Kerr, 2005; Frazier, 1997).

Add to this, growing social circles and markets literally promoting *whiteness* over *blackness*; straight hair, light skin, narrow noses became markers of status and was virtually a prerequisite among elite black social groups (Charles, 2011; Hope, 2011; Lindsey, 2011; Frazier, 1997). Whiteness was so coveted that slave owners would often buy lighter-skinned blacks, not only for their perceived higher intelligence compared to their darker skinned peers, but also as a status symbol in and of themselves. Lighter skinned slaves were often worth more for their *European* features while darker slaves sold for less and were relegated to more intense physical labor, though not exclusively. Today, despite centuries of resistance and notable gains, race and color remain a significant determinant of life chances (Alexander, 2010; Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Thomas, 2005; Katznelson, 2005; Brown et al, 2003). The plight of intraracial discrimination among African Americans immediately before and after civil rights lingers and “has been perpetuated and created anew within the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” into the 21<sup>st</sup> (Keith and Herring, 1991, p. 775; see also Hall, 2005).

### **2.3 Blackness, Colonialism, and Skin Bleaching**

Colonial societies, or those that maintained slave societies, had and continue to have pronounced racial and colorist ideologies. Markets took notice and skin bleaching products

remain a steady and increasingly lucrative multibillion dollar business flourishing globally (Hall, 2012; Charles, 2011; Street, Gaska, Lewis & Wilson, 2014). Charles succinctly posits “cosmetic companies have embarked on aggressive a global marketing of skin bleaching products...tapping into the racial and colorized norms and values” (Charles, 2011, p. 123). These markets conceptually rely on a global preference for lighter skin. In practice, skin bleaching is the physical act of buying products and applying—often unhealthy chemicals, for the larger goal of achieving a lighter more *ideal* skin color (Street et al, 2014; Hall, 2012; Lindsey 2011, Hamed, Tayyem, Nimer & AlKhaitb, 2011; Charles, 2011).

Beyond obvious economic incentives of skin bleaching markets and international companies, are the underlying implications of what it *means* to have lighter skin and its connection to social capital. Consider the following product names for contemporary skin lighteners: “*White Perfect*, *Bi-White*, and *Blanc Expert*” (quoted from Charles, 2011, p.123). Interestingly, not only are there more products sold to countries with people of color, but there are higher rates of potentially dangerous bleaching ointments sold to those regions as well (Iwegbue, Bassey, Tesi, Onyeloni, Obi, & Martincigh, 2015; Street et al, 2014).

Skin bleaching products are found in communities and countries that are relatively racially homogenous, yet *color* heterogeneous. A series of investigations on skin color bleaching practices and attractiveness in Jamaica (Charles, 2011), Jordan (Hamed et al, 2010), and Ghana (Fokuo, 2000) respectively, found that skin bleaching is a common practice among women, and often used for perceived social benefits including beauty and mate selection. In the United States one can see similar trends, specifically in regard to desiring lighter skin. Scholars (Lindsey, 2011; Gooden, 2011; Dorman, 2011; Frazier, 1997), posit that many blacks, women in particular,

were increasingly pushed to use skin lightening products from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century well through the 1960s.

Many of these products were frequently promoted by the *Black press*, a loosely connected network of a growing literate, expressive, and relatively affluent African American class. Through black-owned companies and black-run media sources Gooden contends (2011) in peaks, skin lightening advertisements for such products would reach as high as 40% of all advertisements in a given magazine issue (2011). Contemporary markets uphold eerily similar undertones, though are often less explicit through the use of post-racialism narratives. Compare the following skin lightening/whitening/bleaching product excerpts from 1948 and 2009 respectively.

“Made for kisses—the lighter, smoother skin men adore. So let this wonderful bleaching cream give you amazing beauty help! In just 3 days you begin to see the amazing change in your complexion after you use Snow White Bleaching Cream.” (1948 *Ebony* magazine; quoted from Gooden, 2011, p. 88).

“...will give you that light beautiful, clear skin you have always desired.”

“This soap lightens your skin, leaving it smooth and radiant”

“Lightens the complexion of all pigmentation” (quoted from Charles, 2011, p. 124).

In these examples, over a half of a century apart, one can see clear maintenance of colorist ideologies. Further alluding to colorism’s persistence in spite of racial progress, and post-racialism claims.

## 2.4 Colorism Inequality in the United States

### 2.4.1 *Income*

In the United States, income disparities among racial lines have been consistent and persistent (del Rio, 2015; Mather and Jars, 2014; Hoover and Yaya, 2010). There also exists various disparities within racial groups and several studies have shed light on the income disparities among African Americans (Monk, 2014; Ryabov, 2012; Monk, 2000). Interestingly, in the last two decades there has been a sharp increase in the number colorism claims in the work environment (Marira and Mitra, 2013; Equal Employment Opportunity Committee, 2008). The Equal Employment Opportunity Committee responded with special program designed to combat these issues; The Eradicating Racism and Colorism from Employment initiative (E-RACE). The six year program (2008-2013) implemented educational, awareness, and data collecting procedures to “address race and color discrimination in the workplace” (EEOC, 2015). Related to this, employment prestige and likelihood of employment is in favor lighter skinned men. Lighter skinned men are more likely be hired than their darker skinned peers. The disparity is so pronounced in some studies that even when the lighter skinned men have less education and job experience than a competing darker skinned candidate, they are still more likely to be hired (Harrison & Thomas, 2009). One can infer how the likelihood to be hired and wage discrepancies work together to significantly disadvantage African Americans with the darkest skin complexion.

Women with lighter skin are also at an advantage. Light skinned women are more likely to earn higher wages than their light darker skinned counterparts (Hunter, 2002). Keith and Herring echo similar results, light skinned individuals outpace their darker skin peers in employment, employment prestige (women only), individual income, and family income. They

maintain that “skin tone and other contemporaneous factors were more strongly related to stratification outcomes than were such background characteristics as parental socioeconomic status” (1991, p. 777). Monk’s study (2014) supports Keith and Herring while being employed was not necessarily supported in his study, occupational employment prestige was. Individuals with “‘very dark skin’ have 73 percent higher odds of having a less prestigious occupation than all other respondents” (Monk, 2014, p. 1324). When comparing the darkest skin men in his sample to the lightest skin men, Monk finds that the former has a 97% higher chance of holding a less prestigious job after controlling for age, education, and SES background (2014). What these separate but related studies suggest, is a series of barriers in the employment sector that darker skinned men and women face at mild to moderately disproportionate rates. This can have tremendous implications for life chances as income is highly correlated with upward mobility, social capital, and general quality of life.

#### ***2.4.2 Education***

As seen with income discrepancies, recent studies suggests indirect links between skin tone and education mediated by family SES. According to Carla Monroe (2013), colorism has largely gone ignored in educational settings and is wanting for the scholarly investigation of potential interpersonal preferential treatment based on skin tone. Studies that have examined educational discrepancies have generally been large in scope. For example, Igor Ryabov’s quantitative analysis explored the likelihood and quickness (after high school) to attend college, found those with the lightest complexion “differed from the rest with respect to school-to-work/college transition” and were more likely to attend college (2013, p. 25). Other nationally representative, studies suggest that the lightest skinned blacks have over one full year more of education compared to their darkest skinned counterparts (Monk, 2014).

Furthering alienating darker skinned blacks, educational institutions dole out disproportionate punishments to darker skin students. Using a national sample, Hannon et al. found that darker skin men and women were more likely to receive school suspensions even when controlling for academic performance. Of those students, young women with the darkest skin were three times more likely to be suspended than their lightest skin counterparts (2013). As with income, there are plausible among these studies. That is, a relationship between likelihood to attend college and likelihood to be suspended is not only feasible but logical. One who is at a greater risk to be suspended may take longer to graduate, may not graduate or may simply lose interest in pursuing further education.

#### ***2.4.3 Law Enforcement Discrepancies***

Similar trends, with respect to associating dark skin with negativity, and danger, can be seen in the criminal justice system. Women perceived as having lighter skin tend to receive more lenient prison/jail sentences. According to Viglione and DeFine, lighter skin women will receive less harsh punishments than their dark skin counterparts (2010). Granted, skin color was not the most salient factor, however it was a significant predictor nonetheless. Similarly Levinson & Young's (2010) research suggests more readily imposed guilt on dark skinned individuals as opposed to their light skin individuals, even after considering the same evidence. When presented with identical scenarios with intentionally ambiguous evidence, those that involved darker skinned men were more likely to be deemed as criminal.

Burch's (2015) study mirrors these results. Examining length of sentencing for first time male offenders in Georgia, Burch suggests that, when controlling for pertinent factors and separating blacks by skin color, there is a clear discrepancy in sentencing outcomes. With dark skinned men receiving over a year (400 days) more than their lighter skinned peers. In line with

harsher sentencing, Karletta White's investigation of the likelihood to be stopped and or arrested is consistent with Burch's. White suggests that that skin tone is a significant, though not a direct, variable in the likelihood of being stopped by the police with darker skinned black men being stopped at higher rates than both medium and lighter skinned black men (2014).

#### ***2.4.4 Perception Discrepancies***

Simply having dark skin increases the tensions and perceived negativity and discrimination among black Americans. These tensions can be seen in both children and adults. Black children are more likely to attribute negative traits to darker skin counterparts and positive traits to their light skinned peers (Averhart & Bigler, 1997). Maintain biases into adulthood, Klonoff & Landrine's research suggests that darker skin black Americans reported 11 times more discrimination than their lighter-skinned counterparts, and propose a loose relationship between hypertension among darker-skinned black Americans and stress due to their over-exposure to discrimination (2002). Other indirect skin tone discrepancies can be seen with women and suicidality. Perry and Stevens-Watkins found among low SES African American women, those who reported medium or dark skin tone were not only more likely to be victims of gendered racism but also at a "substantially increased risk for suicidality, while there was no significant effect among those reporting lighter skin" (p.10)

Beyond external discrimination from out-groups such as whites and other racial or ethnic groups, colorism studies have shown evidence for intraracial conflict among black Americans, particularly as it pertains to authenticating one's blackness. Coard et al. found that individuals on either side of the *color spectrum* (very light skin or very dark skin) prefer to have more balanced or medium skin tone despite their skin color and had the varying levels of self-esteem associated with each (2001). This suggests an aversion to being too dark or too light. Similarly, Erin

Winkler's (2012) study found that children on either side of the color spectrum may be more likely to be aware of their skin tone and feel like outsiders, even among predominately black populations (p. 149). Winkler credits this tension to intraracial teasing and interrogations, consider an excerpt from one of her interviews; "Who do you think you are? You just want to be white. You just want to look like a little white girl, a little fake girl....Are you black and how black are you?" (p. 148). Winkler posits these types of interrogative and confrontational interactions are common among African-American children as those with perceived lighter skin often have to *prove* their blackness. Similarly, Scot (2003) contends that among young black children, skin tone teasing is common citing that light skinned children would be called white and darker skinned children would be called black. .

Blatant verbal attacks from peers and various aspects of the English language in general perpetuate aversions to blackness. Williams (1996), Smedley (2011) and Smith et al (2011) allude to various ways through which language perpetuates and consistently devalues blackness; as it black in most contexts is correlated with negative phenomena: black-balled, black Tuesday, black-listed etc. Similarly Wilder (2008; 2010; 2015) found that the many of the words used to describe varying shades of color have survived over several decades despite the negative connotations attributed to them. Participants described the latent animosity among women of different shades and countless snap judgments made of both lighter skin women and dark skinned women. Generally, words associated with dark skin were more negative than they were for medium or light skinned women (2015).

While there are many studies suggesting the various ways colorism effects the lives of African-Americans negatively, there are some studies countering such claims. For example, Maxwell et al (2015) study suggests little no significant difference in the skin satisfaction of

Dark-Skinned African Americans versus light-skinned African Americans; and actually found positive feelings and or pride in race/ethnic group. Further countering general colorism research trends, they suggest that there is no significant difference between men and women's level of skin tone satisfaction. Both of these claims depart from a host of studies suggesting prevalence colorism among women (Wilder, 2010) as well as more negative stereotypes associated and subsequent lower self-images among darker skinned African-Americans.

Maxwell et al, general findings contest larger colorism claims, and indirectly support the fluidity—advantages and disadvantages of light skin—of colorism. That is, although the colorism phenomenon generally favors those with *European* or *White* features, research has found that its application is not static and highly situational (Hordge-Freeman, 2015). Winkler's (2012) exploration into Detroit families found that while lighter skinned is held with higher regard, light skinned children were also the victims of verbal abuse. Hunter's (2002) research supports non-static depictions of colorism, suggesting there are certainly tangible and material advantages associated with having lighter skin, however she asserts:

“Women and men with dark skin are more likely to be seen and accepted as legitimate members of their ethnic groups, are less likely to have their group loyalty questioned, are more likely to be perceived as *racially-conscious* and are less likely to be accused of trying to assimilate” (emphasis by author, p.35).

Hunter's claim speaks to the fluidity of race, skin color and importance of contextualizing experiences.

#### **2.4.5 Cosmetics, Beauty/Attraction/Mate Selection**

Beyond structural or institutional colorism disparities, research has suggested notable informal sanctions perpetuating disparities among African Americans. Wilder and Cain (2010)

posit that continual familial comparisons coupled with dichotomously-charged language is a frequent theme among black families. Phrases like “light side” (of family) and “dark side”, “cousins with curly hair” help ingrain beliefs and attitudes about skin color and phenotype. Ultimately the researchers deduced that the most prominent factors include a) maternal figures as points of origin for normative ideologies of colorism; b) the family as the site for reaffirming and transforming color consciousness; and c) the family as the point of origin for oppositional ideologies. Throughout Wilder and Cain’s research were subtle and blatant forms of colorism; from mothers warning children to be weary of sun exposure to more forward suggestion advocating the use of skin bleaching lotions. Many women carry these messages into adulthood. Falconer and Neville (2000) found among College African American women, skin color was “significantly related to internalized acceptance of societal notions of beauty and satisfaction with specific body areas” (p. 241). This suggests that the skin color socialization young African-American children receive has the potential to effects them throughout their lives and into adulthood.

Consistent with Wilder and Cain, Hunter (2002) postulates that not only are their perceived beauty differences among black females but the implications of future life chances are mediated by skin color and beauty as well (2002). That is, not only are light skin women likely to earn higher wages individually, they are also more likely to be married than their dark skinned counterparts. Hunter posits that this is among the most detrimental forms of colorism that exists in the black community because of its various implications including social stigma and household income. As alluded to above it is clear to that colorism is in direct conflict with lives of black Americans.

#### 2.4.6 *Colorism and Men*

The experiences of men and colorism have a long and storied history. Men of African descent in the United States livelihood, civic rights, identity, and legal status was susceptible to change based on his respective racial classification and phenotype. As noted earlier the black racialization of slavery made for rigid caste systems. Beyond the black white binary, Saperstein and Gullickson (2015) contest that identity, social mobility, and occupational prestige among blacks were often influenced by one's identification as *mulatto* or black. Once prominent in everyday discourse as well as official census use, the term Mulatto rarely used in contemporary race relations in the United States (Saperstein and Gullickson, 2015). Mulatto almost exclusively denoted *mixed* ancestry (often white and black) but remained very fluid until 1890 when it was classified as an individual with "three-eighths to five-eighths black blood" (U.S. Census Bureau, quoted from Saperstein & Gullickson, 2015, p. 1923). It is important to note that although an attempt was made to *essentialize* mulatto-ness, in practice it remained a very subjective—even arbitrary phenomenon. This ambiguity provided black men an agency and ability classify oneself as mulatto and subsequently a tentative buffer through which to navigate white spaces. Census data in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century suggests that men of African descent were more likely to identify as mulatto if their wife was mulatto, and were also more likely to be: financially stable, be a skilled worker, be literate (Saperstein & Gullickson, 2015; Hill, 2000). This introduces the concept of how one is treated by others but also how one self-identifies. Men would whom could phenotypically, socially, or financially approximate whiteness were afforded advantages.

Mulatto's racial ambiguity did not go unchecked however. Hordes (1997) notes several instances in which white judges would have to "determine degrees of African ancestry" in

order to delineate rights to property as well as various other legal matters. Hordes continues “where a person’s appearance prompted too many different opinions, courts seeking to classify a person by race had to investigate the person’s entire way of living” (1997, p. 98-99). These parameters imply the very day-to-day movements, manners, and idiosyncrasies, and speech of those who were not *clearly* black were policed. This meant for men longing to maintain their relative privilege over *prima facie* blacks they had to behave and interact in acceptable ways. To gauge the acceptability of their behaviors officials would call on neighbors and community member for first-hand accounts of acceptable behaviors. Consider a testimony suggesting a racially ambiguous man’s whiteness “many persons tried to catch his step, and nearly all admired its style...there was no clumsiness about him” (quoted from Hordes, 1997, p. 101); referencing his dancing style and prowess one neighbor alleges that this is further evidence of whiteness. Black men (and women) were constantly at odds with the legal system that placed grave legitimacy on witnesses to determine *true racial identity*, thus were under conscious and subconscious pressures to behave in pro-white conforming ways. In colorist terms, men of African descent that phenotypically approximated whites had to adapt a corresponding way of behaving. Thus beyond economic, educational, and marital implications of colorism, this concern for interpersonal interactions suggests micro-level influences of colorism among black men. Contemporary examples continue suggesting African American men with darker skin complexions are more likely to experience discrimination than their lighter skinned counterparts (Uzogara et al 2014; Eberhardt et al, 2006; Klonoff & Landrine, 2000).

## **2.5 Race and Colorism Methodologies**

Researchers have utilized various methods to capture and conceptualize colorism. As alluded to before, Monk suggests that “nationally representative data on skin tone in the

United States have been limited, [thus] the majority of the studies of the significance of skin tone among black Americans have necessarily relied on heavily on the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA), 1979-1980". (p. 1314). According to Monk, the National Survey of American Life (NSAL 2001-2003), based on many of the same premises as the NSBA, provides a more accurate depiction of skin tone stratification. Of the studies referenced above, the overwhelming majority utilized *either* quantitative methods or relied solely on interviews. Further, men and colorism were seldom the focus, generally referenced as an auxiliary to families of color and not on their experiences alone, this study aims to fill that gap.

## **2.6 Chapter Summary**

This chapter provides a review of relevant colorism literature regarding the systemic and interpersonal experiences of African-Americans. Colorism is a global phenomenon and manifests itself in the United States through various institutions and interpersonally through interactions inside and outside of the black community. The literature suggests noticeable financial, educational, perceptual, and familial discrepancies of the treatment of African-Americans of varying skin tones. The literature also seeks to illuminate the dearth of literature regarding the experiences of black men. The next chapter covers the methodological details of the research study. Specifically the chapter covers the theoretical underpinnings, procedures, and sample in the study.

### 3 Methods

The following sections detail the methodological underpinnings of the research study.

Specifically, the following sections outline the design, participants, and procedures as it relates to exploring colorism among African-American Men.

#### 3.1 Research Design

This study investigated the experience of black men, and is subsequently non experimental. That is, the study did not seek to test for or analyze newly introduced variables to juxtapose against a control variable, as might be done in an experimental study. Social science inquiry generally falls under two categories; quantitative or qualitative. This study is qualitative and seeks to gather, experiential, interpersonal data on black men.

Stated simply, the qualitative study sought to contextualize and deconstruct the ways in which individuals experience their phenomenon. Focus group interviews seek to unearth specific life experiences with colorism. Data were derived from participant response through semi-structured prompts and focus group discussion and prominent themes throughout their narratives. Focus group are useful tools to gather data. Focus groups can foster friendly environments in which participants can openly express and share collective experiences (Then, K. L., Rankin, J. A., & Ali, E. (2014). Participants in these environments can be very dynamic and promote honest responses. Stated simply focus group interviews often offer invaluable insights and have the ability to create pseudo communities in which those with shared lived experiences can exchange ideas in the comfort of knowing a shared experience, especially among a relatively homogenous sample.

### **3.2 Participants**

The population of concern includes men that are U.S. born African-American in and around the Atlanta area attending Georgia State University. Participants are at minimum 18 years of age at the time of the study and born in the United States. Exclusion criteria is as follows: those whom are not male, individuals who do not self-identify as African American, individuals that are below the age of 18.

### **3.3 Sample Solicitation**

The focus group solicitation went as follows: In a classroom announcement students who express interest in participating in the focus group shared contact information with the student primary investigator. The student PI contacted each participant and determine whether the participant self-identifies as a light skinned or dark skinned man. Focus groups were divided into relatively homogenous groups. That is, men that identified as light skinned or very light skinned were placed in one focus group of five; and men that identified as dark skinned or very dark skinned were in another focus group of five. The researcher held two focus groups, five participants each, for a total of 10 participants. All whom agreed to participate in the focus group received five (5) dollars compensation for their time. Inclusion and exclusion criteria included men who were born outside of the United States, men who did not identify as black or African-American and individuals that were under the age of 18.

### **3.4 Instrumentation**

Appendix A.2 details the focus group protocol. The semi-structured interview guide is used to solicit open ended responses from the participants. Utilizing Wilder's 2008 study on colorism among women, this study adopts many of the same prompts regarding friends and relationships. The questions seek to gain participant's general ideas on colorism and its role in

their lives. The questions continue exploring how, what, and where colorism ideals (if any) stem from including, peer relationships, media, and family interactions. These questions serve as the foundation for the qualitative analysis.

### **3.5 Research Procedures and Pilot Testing**

Professors in the Department of African-American Studies department were contacted to gauge their willingness to allow for an announcement in their class. The announcement included a brief overview of the study as well as inclusion criteria. Students that showed interest in the study provided the student PI with appropriate contact information. The participants were sent emailed discussing in detail the nature of the study. Up to 10 Participants that met the aforementioned criteria were invited to participate in one of two focus groups.

Individuals were contacted and scheduled to attend focus group at their collective convenience. The focus groups were separated into two groups; one group of individuals that identified as light skinned or very light skinned, and another group that identified as dark skinned or very dark skinned. The identification of their respective skin color is self-reported. There are many benefits from homogenous focus groups, some of which include, culturally and experientially centered practices as well as research responsibility (see Rodriguez, Schwartz, Lahman, and Geist, 2011 & Breen, R, 2006 for further discussion).

### **3.6 Data Collection**

Focus groups were recorded in their entirety and transcribed. Transcripts were imported into NVIVO qualitative coding software for analysis. Transcripts were coded thematically accounting for race, gender, and skin tone and how those factors interact with peer, family, and media. Recording device were kept under lock and only student PI and PI had access. Upon transcription of audio recordings, focus group interviews were destroyed. Transcriptions were

kept on a password protected personal computer. Only PI and student PI had access to transcripts. Each focus group is scheduled to last 2 hours. For a total of four hours of total focus group interviews.

### **3.7 Pilot Study**

Pilot studies consisted of three semi structured interviews. These studies were used to gauge the effectiveness of the interview questions as well pre-screen any potential difficulties at investigating colorism among black men. The pilot studies were promising, suggesting that all three participants were eager and willing to share their various experiences navigating their respective skin color. Further participants, both light skinned and dark skinned, spoke to the challenges they faced as children. Participant 1 (P1), an 18 year old college freshman, who identified as “dark brown” said he wished he was a lighter shade when he was younger. P1 went on to explain that his skin color is “not typical brown, but a darker shade of brown” and that “he noticed growing up that everyone was lighter than him” Participant 2 (P2) had related but different experiences. P2, a 26 year old college senior who identified as “Carmel” felt that he often felt like he needed to dress and act black and go to black venues. P2 continues recalling instances when he was ridiculed for his skin color: “umm maybe growing up in a black neighborhood, you know what I mean, I would get called white for being so light skinned”. Participant 3 (P3) a 28 year old college senior who identified as “black” and did not see the need or the purpose for specifying what shade differed in his responses. P3 goes on to suggest that regardless of skin color America, white America in particular just sees black.

All three participants’ responses were consistent existing literature in regards to identity and blackness (see Winkler, 2012; Scott, 2003). Further the pilot study also suggests that exploration on larger scale may illicit rich data and expound on *colorism studies* (Wilder, 2015).

Focus group interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded for themes through an intersectional lens. The codes were entered in NVIVO qualitative research assessment tool and analyzed for major themes and patterns. First cycle coding was limited to the intersectionality of colorism. These were derived from the participant's responses to the focus group interview protocol. First cycle coding placed major elements of the research question under the following three paradigms: Race, Skin color/tone, and Gender. Second cycle coding incorporated specific passages and or life experiences that met the criteria addressing the question of: how familial, close peer associations, and media shape black males' understanding of their respective skin-tone; by asking; what messages, if any, enforcing colorism ideals they receive; as well as adherence to such messages.

### **3.8 Validity**

Imperative to sound social science inquiry is the need for internal and external validity. Complete objectivity is impossible thus clear and transparent subjectivity works to ground the research and researcher in realistic and meaningful ways. Internal validity was maintained through my conscious positioning and repositioning in the study. That is, acknowledging, accepting, and even disclosing to potential experiences and or biases to research participants. In addition, I utilized a culturally relevant and sound interview protocol. This positionality sought to treat participants as subjects in the study as opposed to objects to be explored (Creswell, 2013). This meant interpreting information from their valuable point of view rather than solely on what makes good research.

External validity was provided a number of ways. First, the pilot study which sought to test the measures as well as serve as a screening for any potentially insensitive or harmful questions. Second, after focus group interview data was collected and transcribed any

questionable or unclear phrases were addressed by contacting the respective participants. The participants addressed any misinterpretations. This method of comparison and clarification increases accuracy of the thematic coding and can serve to reduce researcher bias. Glaring discrepancies were discussed to reduce the likelihood of skewed data and or results.

### **3.9 Positionality Statement**

Transparency, and acknowledging that objectivity does not exist eliminates the false precepts and traditional views on social science research. For the purpose of this study it is important at this time to acknowledge my position in the research. As a black, lighter skinned man, it should be noted that I am vested in the community in which I study, have experienced many of the things I sought to explore, and may have indirectly influenced some of the participant' responses. Further, it is possible, because of my vested interest in the community I may have perceived and interpreted participant's experiences in ways others that may not be as vested might not have. This held true for both the lighter skinned and darker skinned focus groups.

### **3.10 Chapter Summary**

This section detailed the methodological underpinnings of my research study. The non-experimental research sought to explore the colorism experiences of African-American U.S. born men age 18 or older attending GSU in Atlanta, Georgia. The qualitative approach utilized thematic coding and intersectional lens through which to analyze data. I take several measures to address potential validity concerns including participant follow-up where necessary, sound interview protocol and pilot studies. These measures not only increased empirical validity, but help prevent potentially harming the communities involved.

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings of the research study. Specifically the chapter details the results of the two focus groups. The chapter proceeds with a brief review of intersectionality, its role, purpose, and relevance of examining race, gender, and skin tone in the study of colorism. Again this study sought to explore African-American men's experiences with colorism and the messages, from family, peers, and media and how those messages influence their lives. The findings are presented first as descriptive statistics, then as data related to the research questions and their respective themes as it relates to intersectionality. In some sections the lighter skinned focus group (FG1) is presented first, followed by the darker skinned focus group (FG2). Section 4.4 titled *Conceptualizations of Colorism* presents information on both focus groups collectively connecting prominent patterns throughout their respective focus group discussions. Some major themes differed slightly for respective focus groups hence the separate presentation of the data. Light skinned African-American men and dark skinned African-American men experience colorism differently. FG1's prominent themes included *authentication, approachability, blatant colorism, childhood colorism, mate attraction, media portrayal, and color names*. Major themes in FG2 included *media portrayal, mate attraction, masculinity, negative stereotypes, approachability, and childhood colorism*.

### 4.2 Descriptive Statistics & Themes

The light skinned focus group FG1 consisted of five self-identifying black men. All of the men in FG1 are college educated. Their age ranged from 20 to 25. All men self-identified as either light-skinned or very light skinned. All five men showed familiarity with the term colorism suggesting some preliminary exposure to the topic. See table 1 for more complete

demographics. The dark skinned focus group (FG2) consisted of five self-identifying black men. All the men are college educated. Their age ranged from 18 to 25. All the men in the second focus group identified as dark (3) or very dark (2). Like the first focus group all men suggest some familiarity with colorism both in theory and in practice.

Table 1 shows the complete demographics for both focus groups. Participant's age ranged from 18-25 with an average age of 22.1. The men's skin tone was self-identified as light, very light, dark, or very dark. All the participants' parents completed at least some high school with 8 out of ten participants having at least one parent that earned a bachelor's degree and two participants who came from a household with at least parent earning a professional or graduate degree. Most of the participants (60%) had a household in which their parents made over \$50,000 per year. Five made over \$75,000 and only one participant household earned over \$100,000 per year.

**Table 1: Focus Group Demographics**

Participant	Age	Skin tone	Parent's Education	Parent HH Income
Vince	22	Very Light	M: B F: HS	25,000- 50,000
Jack	23	Very Light	M: G/P F: B	75,001- 100,000
Mike	20	Very Light	M: HS F: HS	25,501- 50,000
Leo	25	Light	M: HS F: B	>100,000

Nick	24	Light	M: B F: B	75,001- 100,000
Ray	23	Very Dark	M: B F: G/P	75,001- 100,000
Mitch	18	Dark	M: HS F: B	75,001- 100,000
Kyle	25	Dark	M: HS F: B	25,501- 50,000
Adrian	20	Dark	M: B F: B	25,501- 50,000
Joseph	21	Very Dark	M: HS F: HS	75,001- 100,000

Legend table 1: M=Mother, F=Father, U=Unknown. L=Less than high school. H=High school, B=Bachelors, G/P=Graduate or professional degree, P=PhD.

\*Highlighted Themes indicate shared experience in both groups.

**Table 2: Major Themes**

Research Questions	Themes: Focus Group 1 Light/Very Light	Themes: Focus Group 2 Dark/Very Dark
Conceptualization of Colorism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approachability</li> <li>• Stereotypes/ positive &amp; negative</li> <li>• Skin tone preference</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approachability</li> <li>• Stereotypes/ positive &amp; negative</li> <li>• Skin tone preference</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Masculinity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Masculinity</li> </ul>
Cont...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stereotypes/ positive &amp; negative</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stereotypes/ positive &amp; negative</li> </ul>
Peers and the politics of Skin Tone/Family and Socialization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Childhood Colorism</li> <li>• Color Names</li> <li>• Authentication</li> <li>• Resistance</li> <li>• Blatant Colorism</li> <li>• Approachability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Childhood Colorism</li> <li>• Resistance</li> <li>• Implicit Colorism</li> <li>• Approachability</li> </ul>
Colorism in the Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negative/Inadequate Media Portrayal</li> <li>• Stereotypes/ positive &amp; negative</li> <li>• Masculinity</li> <li>• Mate attraction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negative/Inadequate Media Portrayal</li> <li>• Stereotypes/ positive &amp; negative</li> <li>• Masculinity</li> <li>• Mate attraction</li> </ul>

### 4.3 Research Questions

How do African-American men experience colorism? What colorism messages, if any, do they receive from; family, peers, and media. Do they adhere to colorism messages?

### 4.4 Conceptualizations of Colorism

#### 4.4.1 *Origin Story*

The original source of colorism differed slightly from one participant to the next. For some, early contact with family was their first experience with colorism. For others it was not

until elementary, primary, high school or even as late as college when they recalled exposure to colorism. Nearly all participants however (9 of 10), openly expressed an understanding of the history of colorism through slavery. This indicates some formal or informal exposure to colorism in a historical context, even if it's indirect. Participant's reference and familiarity to phrases such as "house nigga", typically portrayed as a lighter skinned enslaved man or woman, and "field nigga" typically portrayed as darker skinned enslaved man or woman, and the differential treatment of each suggests an understanding of white supremacy in a larger context. Ray, 24, FG2, expresses the benefits of having lighter skin during slavery:

"If you go back into history like slavery they were the ones in the fields they were like brutes and stuff. Light skin were close to the house they were more accepted by whites."

The implication is, that being accepted by whites then has allowed light skinned men to be more accepted by whites presently. Similarly, Leo from FG1, also suggested an informal awareness to colorism and slavery and its influences on contemporary stereotypes:

"Well to me this dates back to slavery, where you had "house nigga" which would be us the light skin guys (group laughs). And the dark skin guys on the field. So I think even now people don't really, some people use it as a joke, to say 'oh you would be a house nigga' but at the same time I think that's where the distinction comes in. because one, we're seen as the soft type. And it don't necessarily mean that we're all like that because we could have characteristics just you know, [of] a normal black man. At the same time we're all still black. But you know there is always going to be some type of distinction just because that light skin being in the house."

The two participants from the different focus groups conceptualize slavery and colorism in very similar ways.

#### ***4.4.2 The Privileges and Barriers of Skin Tone***

In general, participants indicated that privileges and barriers associated with having light skin and having dark skin originating during slavery and continuing presently. The majority of advantages identified by both groups were social and not material in nature. In fact, there were only a few direct references to more *tangible* benefits of having a particular skin tone. Jack for instance spoke to what he would want his children to look like because of the perceived advantage:

“Someone said previously you can see it. Not just in terms of business aspect, but in terms of how other races see us as black, but they kind of give a little bit of wiggle room for light skin men. And that’s just the way it is. I can’t change it. So I would just want my children to be born into the best advantage as possible.”

Most men referred to the perceived benefits attracting potential partners or being able to easily interact with other non-black racial groups. Social advantages included positive and negative stereotypes associated with particular skin tones, and subsequent approachability.

Approachability was a major theme and there were frequent references to actual encounters with members of the black community as well as perceived reasons why they may or may not have been approached by members of the black community. The few references to material advantages included job attainment, business opportunities and media exposure.

##### ***4.4.2.1 Stereotypes***

Stereotypes about both groups remained relatively consistent. That is, FG1 and FG2 identified nearly identical stereotypes about their own skin tone (lighter skinned for FG1 and darker skinned for FG2) as their peer group. In other words, all men regardless of skin tone, shared a collective understanding about stereotypes associated with particular skin tones. The

overwhelming majority of stereotypes were blatantly *negative* or perceived as negative for both groups with only a few *positive* or even *desirable* stereotypes. Stereotypes associated with darker skin tones were more numerous and inherently negative compared to their lighter skinned counterparts.

For lighter skinned men, the most prominent *negative* stereotype was the association with sensitivity. Participants in both focus groups utilized words like *soft* and *punk* to describe the connotations associated with lighter skinned men, and the perceived loss of respect they may feel from the black community—from men and women alike. Lighter skinned men’s aversion to sensitivity, a trait largely associated with women in western society, may rest in their perceived hindrance to expressing their masculinity appropriately. By heteronormative standards, men, and especially black men, are expected to behave in a very rigid and predictable fashion. Mike, agreeing with his peer, explains his experience being stereotyped as a *soft* or *sensitive* light skinned man:

“...like [Leo] said light skin is looked at being so sensitive. I don’t know, like they always make the light skin guy really look like a punk. I don’t like that. In elementary school and middle school being light skinned that’s when people started to think I was just some punk and they thought I was someone they could always just mess with. I don’t know now if that’s why I act so aggressive, if somebody kind of try me like I’m a punk.”

Mike’s echoes FG1’s sentiments and implies that the stereotype may have altered his behavior. Here Mike’s skin color—light skin—intersects with his gender and race. Thus perhaps in an effort to compensate for his perceived *softness* or *sensitivity* associated with his skin color, Mike suggests he acts “so aggressive” if somebody were to try him or if his toughness is tested.

For darker skinned men, the most prominent *negative* stereotypes were dangerousness, toughness, and general antisocial behaviors. Both groups identified these traits as negative and undesirable. Joseph, 21, from FG2, explains stereotypes or *titles* he actively avoids:

“I think that with my skin tone I have to make sure that I’m not following the titles, the negative titles, of the skin tone. [I have to] make sure that I have my life together [that] I don’t have five kids running around, baby mama drama, umm child support all that type of stuff.”

Josephs seems to imply that because of his skin color he is expected to have anti-social behavior. His allusion to “have my life together” suggests a clash with societal standards and normative expectations. Another *negative* stereotype included darker skin associated with scariness. Adrian, 20, from FG2, detailed the way darker skinned men are sometimes perceived:

“I think dark skin is just, I think people portray dark skin men as being more, like scary, or like if you get a body guard he may be big tall and dark skin. Or maybe closer to dark skin. People may fear a dark skin man over a light skinned man.”(Sic).

Both Joseph’s and Adrian’s excerpts speak to the convergence of race, gender, and skin color. The two statements however, relate to the intersectionality of colorism in different ways. For Joseph, his skin tone may leave him more susceptible to negative perceptions, but by actively avoiding non-normative—not having five kids and baby mama drama—behavior he can protect his masculine identity. That is, in not having “five kids running around, baby mama drama,” and “child support” he can more readily portray a *provider* role, a traditional marker of masculinity in western society. Conversely, Adrian’s excerpt is not an allusion to save or adhere to notions of masculinity, but a conflict against notions of *hypermasculinity* often associated with black men, and perhaps more so with darker skinned men. To this end, Adrian’s comment might suggest that

for darker skinned men their perceived hypermasculine predisposition is a source of internal conflict. In respect to his example, a darker skinned man may be perceived as more imposing than a lighter skinned man, thus his toughness, a positively associated marker of black masculinity, is not challenged but instead assumed.

Focus groups also identified positive stereotypes. The most prominent positive stereotype for lighter skinned men identified by members of both groups included the perceived ease of attracting women. Men in both groups suggested that lighter skinned men were more likely to attract women. Mitch, FG2, suggested very simply “light [skinned men] get more girls”.

Similarly Nick, in FG1, relayed:

“...other stereotypes are like good because they also help in a way. Like with girls, it has pros and cons being light skin. They think like we’re clean, we got good hair, our babies going to look good (groups laughs)...”

The assumption then, is that lighter skinned men are more inclined to attract women. By heteronormative standards, would be a positive association with masculinity. In addition the virtual unanimity of light skinned men attracting women supports broader colorism ideals—the general preference for lighter skin over darker skin.

Beyond social advantages echoed by the majority of all participants, fewer participants suggested potential material advantages. Jack however, in FG1, suggested stark advantages of having lighter skin in relation to potential job attainment:

“Um, I want to talk about it less from a social standpoint you know from a business perspective. I feel like, I know a lot of hiring managers are going be Caucasian, usually when they look at us they[‘re] going to categorize us like you know, light skin dark skin, and how (inaudible) the people that work for them. And I think because of that I have

better advantage because I can be approached easier by the people you know that you generally associate with certain businesses. As opposed to a dark skin guy. I mean of course they going to look at your resume but at the same time image is so big, I just feel like I have that advantage over a dark skin man. You know I have no problem against dark skin people it's just like damn I feel sorry, automatically you know that puts me at an advantage if I'm going up against you and you dark skin and I'm light skin. And that's just unfortunate from a business standpoint."

Jack's very explicitly states his perceived overwhelming advantage over darker skinned men.

This implies more access to certain "businesses" and perhaps income. Vince immediately echoed Jack's statement:

"I mean I might just be speaking for myself, but I'm pretty sure we all feel, all that [are] in the room, feel like [we] have an advantage in certain fields, just because we might feel we get more acceptance from other groups, you know I mean? They may view a dark skin male a little more threatening than a light skin male. "

Jack and Vince's proclamation of material advantage was among the most direct and explicit mentions of privilege. They were the only two in FG1 that claimed such obvious advantages. Only Ray in FG2, was as explicit when he stated that "were more accepted by whites. Like in society if you're lighter you have high roles in corporations or in businesses." And

Coincidentally *positive* stereotypes associated with darker skinned men revolved around the same colorism ideals that generally ostracized them. In particular, because darker skin was more closely associated with masculinity, compared to lighter skin, some men suggested that women may want a darker skinned man because he was more masculine or believed to be well-endowed. Leo shares his opinion:

“Ya I work somewhat in the film industry, and I think they cast roles to fit the stereotypes. They cast Idris Elba, he’s dark and women see him like a sex figure. Because he’s like this dark skin, dangerous looking guy that also really, I don’t know, charming.”

Leo detailed how certain skin tones are bestowed film personas and are given a mystique of masculinity and subsequently sexualized. These examples tie into larger social dynamics of image and image maintenance.

#### **4.4.2.2 Approachability**

In respect to image, men in both groups expressed difficulties in approaching and being approached certain types of racial or ethnic groups. In general, men in FG1 collectively suggested that they felt other racial groups, whites in particular, were more likely to and found it easier to approach them compared to African-Americans. Among African-Americans, they felt that their darker skinned African-Americans counterparts were less likely to approach them compared to African-Americans of a different color. Conversely, all the men in FG2 suggested other racial groups such as whites were reluctant to approach them because of their physical features. Leo from FG1, 25, made an interesting observation on perceived experiences with white people:

“...being light skin it does puts us at an advantage. It makes us approachable. Or [to] white people if that makes sense. We’re able to make friends easier than a guy of dark skin complexion. We’re able to make friends, this is just an opinion, they’re (white people) able to speak, they feel like they’re able to be comfortable. As opposed to a dark skin guy, they feel like that’s an *actual* black guy, he might be dangerous. Whereas light skin they’re somewhat close to our skin complexion, they feel like they can trust us. We

have an advantage to talk to Caucasians more than dark skin guys.”(Emphasis by speaker).

Leo’s remark of what others racial groups might perceive as an *actual* black person supports FG2 collective sentiment in terms of their perception of other’s perception of themselves. Adrian’s reference, 20, supported Leo’s remarks:

“I just feel like some people may perceive me as, probably the stereotype that black people have. Probably up to no good. Probably because of my hair.”

Men in both groups also addressed approachability from within their own racial group. For FG1, participants suggested that both light skinned and dark skinned men and women found it difficult to approach them. Often citing experience in which other light skinned men and women remarked on how surprisingly amiable they were. When asked how he is approached Mike explains:

“A lot of people don’t, they afraid to approach me because they think I’m stuck up, conceited, cocky, serious, I’m just mean. Just because of my skin tone. If my face is chillin’, people like ‘why you looking so mean?’ People just don’t want to approach me.”

Mike believes his skin tone is responsible for his perceived lack of approachability. Vince, also in FG1, concurs:

“...they like to classify light skin as pretty much, highly sensitive and unapproachable. And when I say that I mean girls, maybe, like mike said, oh because he’s light skin he might be too arrogant for me. Even dark skin dudes approach me and said, ‘hey man, you nothing like how I thought you was’ and when I asked him what do you mean by that? And he said ‘for a light skin guy you have dark skin tendencies’.”

Vince not only share similar feelings as Mike but suggests that the experience is not limited to women, as his peer went on to imply that his behavior showed *dark skinned tendencies* despite his outward appearance.

These parallels can be seen in FG2, as many participants suggested similar instances.

Kyle, 25, shared:

“I have a lot of cousins who are biracial. And the older relatives would treat them like they could do no wrong. So oftentimes there would, there became a personality association and that’s I think huge in black communities. Oftentimes personality association that goes along with color. So whatever shade you are associated with some way of doing things, whether you’re aggressive or not, whether you’ll say sorry if you do something wrong or not. You know. Whether you have capacity to express your emotions in a certain type of way. Or whether, ignore that one because he’s not capable.”

These essentialist views within the black community mirror larger more rigid *inter-racial* expectations. That is, sweeping notions that behaviors are tied to biology, especially for minority groups.

#### ***4.4.3 Comfortable in my Skin***

All participants, with the exception of one (9 of 10), expressed the desire to have a different skin tone. Those in the self-identifying light skinned focus group suggested that at one point in their lives they wished to have a darker, browner, or more medium toned skin complexion. Those in the self-identifying dark skinned focus group (4 of 5) indicated their desire to have lighter skin, but not *light skin* per se. They, like FG1 wanted to have brown, or medium skin complexion. All those that desired to change their skin color indicated that they no longer felt that need that they mostly felt that way as young children.

Focus Group 1's reason for wanting to alter their skin revolved around several reasons. Some, like Mike and Vince wanted darker skin as a means to avoid bullying. Consider Mike's experience:

"I'll say when I was younger I would have probably would have wanted to be more medium skin tone. Like Leo, around that shade. But now I love it and I embrace my skin tone. When I was younger, bullied, and picked on you know? You know as kid you don't really accept who you are but as you get older you get more comfortable with who you are. Now I'm good."

Mike seemed to attribute his desire to change his skin to bullying and not accepting oneself as child. Their narratives leave unresolved the possibility not experiencing a desire to change their skin color had their skin tone not teased as children. Leo's experience differed, he did not make mention of any previous bullying experiences as children, he did however mention respect.

Consider Leo's response to wish to alter his skin:

"I like my skin complexion, but of course there's a been a time where I've wanted to be a little bit darker, like in the middle of my skin complexion and lie completely black, I feel like it that would have gotten respect from all; females, dark skin guys, you have that much more respect, but at the end of the day it's like a friendly competition thing. And that why I realize I'm content being the skin color that I am."

Focus Group 2's reasons differed slightly from FG1. Members of FG2 indicated that they did not like the way they were perceived or treated Kyle explains:

"When I was younger I wanted to be lighter. Because I wanted girls to like me. Just being honest. And I don't feel that way now. That's like a *long* time ago. Like when I was little. I thought people might be less mean to me, or think you know "let me not hurt his feelings"

or whatever. I mean now, I feel like I'm the way I should be and supposed to be you know? This is me. You know? I feel really good about myself. I think it comes from learning about myself and my history.” (Emphasis by speaker)

Like participants in FG1, Kyle relayed that his desire to change his skin color had long subsided. While similar to others in terms of preferential treatment, his desire was slightly different in other respects. Kyle indicated his wish to attract girls with lighter skin going on to say that in elementary school the light skinned liked each other. Others such as Mitch, would have liked to change their skin tone to not be perceived as harshly:

“I think when I was younger when I first started getting adjusted to the whole wall between the ethnicities. I think I would have liked to be lighter. But now, being where I'm at now I'm in college and everything I love my skin I love my color.”

When prompted what events in particular led him to desire that change Mitch responded:

“Probably the look that people always give. It's always a different look. A different look for light skin colors. It's more relaxed for lighter skin tones. And it's more forceful for darker skin tones.”

Unlike blatant mentions about his skin color, like what participants in FG1 reported, Mitch perceived undesirable external gazes that subsequently led him to desire a different skin tone. Continuing a pattern of implicit colorism for darker skinned men.

## **4.5 Peers and the Politics of Skin Tone**

### ***4.5.1 Focus Group 1***

Focus group 1, consisted of five self-identifying light skinned or very light skinned men, suggested that peer groups were significant in exposing them to colorism. They went on to suggest that schools, and educational institutions were very important mediums through which

colorism was learned and maintained. Colorism displays in these arenas ranged from avoidant behavior, playful teasing, and even physical altercations. A major theme in among was the notion of *authenticating* one's blackness. A process in which participants, especially identifying light skinned or very light skinned, would attempt to prove to other members of the black community that they too, were African-American.

Vince, 22, suggested elementary school was an especially difficult time for him as he felt rejected by his darker skinned African-American peers.

“Um actually [the] distinction was made at a very young age in Elementary [school], just from being able, just like from going to the lunch table and sitting with who I thought was similar to me as far as where they came from. And I always had to prove myself as a child even with the fights I would have with dark skin guys, you know, to prove that nothing but my skin color doesn't make me different from you. We all come from the same struggle, but that was something I had to face as a kid growing up.”

Vince, a light skinned man, shares his experience with colorism as a boy in elementary school. He seems suggests that because he perceived his peers to be like him, both black and from a similar background, they would get along. In Vince's experience, it was not enough to be African-American, because his skin was lighter than his peers' and thus susceptible to scrutiny. His alienation led Vince to believe that he had to prove his blackness, prove that he was *black enough* to sit with his peers. Suggesting he had to fight other darker skinned peers and even show proof of his lineage:

“It was just a situation with me I just had to show them who my dad was, (laughs) my dad, one day just happened to pick me up [from school] and I was like, ‘see that's my dad, dark skin and he looks like me’. And as a kid you know that's what I had to do.”

Mike, 21, followed Vince's sentiments, suggesting that stereotypes about light skinned men were widely accepted by his peers in school; a belief that he perceived was among the causes of his bullying:

“It was just that fact that I was light skin so if you like see me turn red, or you see the veins on my face, and then I stuttered a lot I stuttered real bad in elementary school. Me being light skin, me being short, really because I was light skin people thought I was funny when I turned red.”

Sensitivity and light skinned men was an overwhelmingly popular stereotype identified in both focus groups (FG1 FG2). FG1 was collectively and vehemently averse to being associated with softness and sensitivity. To this stereotype men in FG1 felt similarly, but responded in different ways. Some like Mike suggesting that he changed his physical behavior to the *opposite* what a light skinned man is expected to be; actively resisting the stereotype. In responding to the degree to which he felt stereotypes about light skinned men influenced him he responded:

“Honestly the stereotype made me—it didn't mold me to act like the stereotype it made me try to become the opposite of the stereotype. Even before the stereotype of light skin being sensitive, back when I was in elementary school it wasn't really much that much of a stereotype back because of the area I was living in you know, I was kind of in the hood. So the dark skin kids used to hit me, because they seen that I would turn red, so then it got to point that I was like nah, I'm done letting y'all hit me, so when I started fighting back that's when no one messed with me no more. This whole stereotype of light skin dudes being soft, light skin dudes being this, I'm like nah that's not me, I'm not no soft nigga, I'm not someone you just going to mess with. Even with girls [they] take advantage of dudes because

they're soft. People see light skin dudes and think they can just try them. I'm not going to let anyone think I'm part of that stereotype"

In Mike's account, the intersection of race, gender, and skin tone is very clear. His proclamation "I'm not no soft nigga, I'm not someone you just going to mess with" is quite telling. Because his skin tone is traditionally associated with sensitivity and softness—direct attacks to normative masculinity—he seems to adapt hypermasculine behaviors to combat stereotypes he perceived his peers have associated with him.

In addition to the blatant resistance strategies of Mike and Vince, others such as Nick, 25, have employed much more personal and discrete resistance and authentication techniques:

"There's this one time in middle school I actually tried to get dark in the summer time. Like when the summer time came I just tried just sit in the sun (group laughs and nods head in agreement) because I really didn't want to be light skin, because so many people were getting on me for being light. So I thought by tanning I could get dark, but it didn't work."

Here Nick, describes how he literally tried to darken his skin to avoid being teased. This behavior is part of larger theme of authentication. The idea that light skinned men, because of their lighter skin and status in the black community, had to *prove* their blackness, either by behavior or more implicit methods as seen with Nick's narrative. This implies, that having darker skin would mitigate the negative effects of having lighter skin in the black community. Jack, 23, shares his struggle being accepted in the black community. He struggled with being too light skinned, *acting*, and *speaking too white* for his peers in the black community. He suggested his color and idiosyncrasies left him too white for the black community and too black for the white community.

“My experience was a little different my first time in Illinois, into a place more urban, the way I talked wasn’t the same, and of course you know I’m already light skin so people just used to always call me ‘white boy’, or, you know, ‘you act white’; act, you know I hate that word act, or you know ‘you not one of us’. They put me in a different category. And it was tough you know [because] you have white people that you know already don’t want to claim black people of course, you know certain ones. Now you have the black people don’t want me to be a part of them. So I always kind of felt like I was on my own with that. Um, and of course when you play into color. People see my color and some point they didn’t even want me to be black. Because the way I talked [and] my color.”

Jack’s struggle for authentication came to fruition through joining traditionally black membership groups. He, like the others, felt disconnected from the black community because of his skin tone and how he spoke. The intersections of race and skin tone are evident, he was called “white boy” by members of his community because he was light skinned *and* spoke in a way that was not traditionally associated with African-Americans, thus racializing his colorism experience.

“I was kind of disconnect[ed]. Until I got to Georgia and started proving myself. I didn’t necessarily prove myself I just had to be there for my community and show people that I support the cause, I joined the Student African American Brotherhood and the NAACP. That’s what I did to make myself be accepted. No one wants to say that they forced themselves to be accepted, at the same time, it’s like that sometimes.”

Being supportive of *the cause* is reference to a larger racial context. This is in line with Vince’s statement suggesting *we all come from the same struggle*. In these ideas we see how lighter

skinned men navigate the strife their skin color within their racial group, while also combating racial injustices they face as a collective racial group.

#### ***4.5.1.1 Peers and Color Names***

Unlike FG2, participants in FG1 suggested that they were very deliberately and readily reminded of their lighter skin tone. This included being addressed, named, categorized and blatantly treated differentially based on their skin tone. Participants indicated that oftentimes it would be close friends but not exclusively. Jack and Mike shared some of their experiences respectively:

“There’s a girl that’s never called me my name since freshman year, and I’m a senior. She just calls me ‘light skin’. That’s it. I’m just a color. You know. I’m ‘light skin’.”-  
Jack

“...residents in the hall. I have that role as an R.A. to interact with them. I kind of have to talk to them. So they’re like what up ‘light skin’. Or they’ll be like ...if I do something they’ll say, ‘You’re such a light skin’. It’s funny it’s always the younger generation. It’s always the ones just now getting to college. That make such a big deal about light skin.”-  
Mike

Both Jack and Mike’s examples suggest very blatant forms of colorism. Acquaintances addressing them by their skin tone as opposed to their names, when in the case of Jack, the perpetrator knew Jack’s actual name. When asked to list some of the names they’ve been called personally FG1 listed the following: Light Bright, Light Skin, Banana, Peanut Butter Boy, Sun, Unburnt Toast, Poo Bear, Honey Mustard, Corn Bread, Cream Corn, Vanilla Wafer, and Cauliflower. While they were also able to list names associated with darker skinned African-Americans, there were fewer and less frequent.

Nick, Mike, and Vince, offered a theory as to why lighter skinned men were more susceptible to blatant colorism. The trio collectively suggested that in general the black community was more sensitive toward darker skinned blacks and were hesitant to give darker skinned men nicknames out of fear of sounding racist or being offensive. They went on to explain that the black community shows a lot more empathy for the darker skinned men. Nick succinctly relayed the group's sentiments:

“I just want to kind of go off what he saying, it's kind of like what we was saying earlier they don't really see light skin as full blacks. You know real black men. So you know there's some injustice. But you know most the times if its real crime there'll be support. But um, you know when a light skinned man is portrayed bad, I think there's some sort of trigger in their head that's like 'You know he's not really black' or 'I don't know if he's black or not might be mixed, or something, mulatto.' But you know I'm not sure of how that is. But I can imagine from everything I've experienced.”

Nick's statement ties into larger implications of blackness and authenticity. Darker skinned men, the groups suggests, do not need to express or prove their *blackness* their dark skin invariably does it for them. Conversely, lighter skinned men are at odds with their skin complexion as it relates to themselves and the black community at large.

#### **4.5.2 Focus Group 2**

Focus group 2 consisted of five self-identifying dark or very dark skinned African-American men. Like FG1, FG2 identified schools as spaces in which colorism was prominent. However, as a stark distinction from FG1, FG2, made very few remarks regarding blatant colorism. That is, unlike FG1, there were very little mention of actual colorism dialogue directed at participants. Notwithstanding, active resistance to perceived peer's stereotypes was evident in

FG2. Ray, 24, for example, is working to overcome the stereotypes society has placed on him. When asked what images, expectations, and stereotypes he wishes to redefine he responded:

“That we’re not all aggressive. All dark skin men are not aggressive we’re actually nice people. Like don’t look at my skin color and determine what my personality is or how I am going to become or what my work ethic is or what I can do. Like, you look at my skin tone and think oh he’s aggressive or he’s violent, he’s going to yell, he’s mean. I’m actually not mean I’m a nice person.”

Ray like other men in the study, is cognizant and determined to shift the way his peers may view him, despite not indicating whether or not someone explicitly stated if they thought he was aggressive or not.

While many participants in FG1 suggested authenticating or *proving their blackness*, participants in FG2 suggested an embrace of their blackness and made no mention whatsoever of proving their blackness, but did allude to being *more black* than someone lighter.

“I’ve also seen for dark skin men, the darker their skin, they feel like they should be the one speaking for black people or they should be the loudest ones on the podium ‘Brothers and Sisters, oh and I’m black, dark as that’ and ‘I’m from Nubia’ and whatever. So I’ve seen it go both ways. You have that Farrakhan situation and the brother Nubian—I’m the real deal, I’m black like liquorish.”

In stark contrast yet strongly correlated to authenticating blackness Kyle, from FG2, suggested that that darker skinned men may feel inclined to speak for the black community as his dark skinned experience may be more valid more *real deal*.

## 4.6 Family and Color Socialization

### 4.6.1 Focus Group 1

Participants made little reference to family in regards to colorism ideals. The few instances included mothers directly telling the participants about their personal experiences. And there were also very few mentions of explicit colorism socialization. One respondent's mother however did attempt to sway her son's colorism adherence. Leo reported:

“I want to say that my family really didn't try to make us different. but I remember one time I said to my mom, and I told her, I only wanted to be with light skin girls, because you know like back in the day 06-08 that's when rappers was making a big deal about having a redbone or yellowbone and seeing that, you know what I mean? So I told my mom “like I want a light skin girl” she got so upset when I said that because she was like don't ever just cancel out other black girls and because their skin tone. Your little sister is dark skin. So do you think she's not worth having because she's dark skin? My mom is light skin and she was saying this. My family was never really into making categories of skin tone.”

Leo's behavior seemed to be reprimanded by his mother, however Leo or any other participant did not mention any significant colorism experience regarding their own skin color. That is, v

### 4.6.2 Focus Group 2

In FG2, as with FG1, family made little mention of explicit colorism ideals. Although, Adrian recalled being exposed to colorism through his mother's narrative, he noted that it was not necessarily directed at his darker skin complexion. She, also a dark skinned African-American woman, expressed her difficulty as a child and her struggles with her skin tone. She

suggested she did not like what she saw in the mirror, which led Adrian, like other participants, to associate colorism with women:

“Um, I seen well first, my mom, my mom is dark skin told me how she didn’t liked the way she looked when she was younger because she was dark skinned. She would look in the mirror and say ‘Why am I so dark?’ and things like that. That kind of opened my mind that there a black girls that have that problem.”

This may have influenced how Adrian came to conceptualize colorism, as primarily a woman’s phenomenon.

For others it was not necessarily what family members said or did to the participants that conveyed colorism messages, it what was what they did not do or did not say. Kyle, a 25 year old dark skinned man talks about the differential treatment he experienced as a child from close family members.

“I felt like I had older relatives who would always comment on whether someone was fair or not. Like it always something to mention in terms of dealing with children. And clearly I don’t fit like that. So that was never ascribed to me. But it was something that was a term of endearment to my cousins or other family members. “Oh you’re so fair” you know? That wasn’t attributed to me, so that automatically created a split. “Well I don’t fit that”. And then going along with skin tone thing, hair texture, like “oh this person has good hair” or whatever. Oftentimes people would comment on, I’m trying remember grandparents. Specifically among women, it was never really something that I heard men say. It was always something that women said. Somebody’s auntie, or my aunt, or great aunt or something. And with the good hair thing, we had dark skinned members of our family that had like really curly hair, not what they would call, like

nappy. So oftentimes it would be comments about their hair. “Oh let me put my hand in your hair”. Nobody was trying to put their hand through my hair.”

Kyle’s experience exemplifies more subtle forms of colorism. In his example he was not explicitly told colorism messages. Instead colorism was conveyed to him through ulterior means. He was excluded from interactions that indicated preference for lighter skin tones. This also suggests that colorism may operate on a subconscious level among those who perpetuate the phenomenon. That is, relatives may not realize that their exclusion of Kyle of example, in terms and behaviors of endearment, work two; explicitly perpetuating colorism among the *fair skinned* family members and implicitly among the darker skinned members of the family.

#### **4.7 Colorism in the Media**

Men in FG1 and FG2 suggested they have received several colorism messages from media. From childhood well into adulthood participants noted significant experiences that contributed to their understanding and their adherence to colorism ideals. The messages originated from various platforms spanning movies, sitcoms, social media, music and music videos. In general, both groups, with few exceptions, identified eerily similar messages from media with; a consistent preference for lighter skin, for men and women.

In their youth participants noted the relevance of media in their desire for potential mates often citing specific shows or rappers that influenced them. Kyle, from FG2, for example suggested that some of his earliest experiences with colorism was through media:

“I think had TV had a lot to do with that. Because there was a lot of black sitcoms on TV.

And the girl to get was a light skin girl. Like on a different world Jasmine Guy she was super light skinned, on The Cosby Show it was Denise Huxtable she was super light skin, on Family Matters there was this one girl and everyone was like “oh that’s the girl”...it

was never like the dark skin girl. And for the girls it was like *Sister Sister* was on, so it was whoever looked like their younger brother was like the *it!* And you know Kriss Kross, the light skin[ned] one in Kriss Kross, not the other one. Um and then I remember that kind of happening in waves when I was in school. Because in middle school Bow Wow was kind of in the middle so it was kind of like ‘oh ok I’m kind of close to, you know [that color]’, but you know when B2K came that just blew it away (laughs).”(Emphasis by speaker).

Kyle’s narrative shows how he learned colorism ideals through music, and what he termed *black sitcoms*. His narrative is quite telling as it shows his awareness to colorism preferences for both men and women. He also suggests that the *girl to get* was almost always a lighter skinned woman and that popular boy groups were lighter skinned. Interestingly he may have implied he felt better when in middle school Bow Wow was popular because he was closer to his complexion, implying that more representative media may be beneficial for some African-Americans identifying as darker skinned.

Mike, in FG1, shares similar experiences, recalling the overrepresentation of light skinned women in the media and its potential influences:

“...girls in the music videos you just see light skin girls. When [the movie] ‘ATL’ came out, [the actress playing] NuNu was light skin and they just used to put light skin out there. I was like damn I want me a light skin girl. So you can definitely be influenced to feel like a certain skin tone is better and now it’s almost like ok, you have to have a foreign girl now. A big name can definitely influence a younger generation.”

As with Kyle, Mike, exposed predominantly to lighter skinned women, was under the impression that lighter skin was more desirable. Subsequently both men adopted colorism ideals adhering to traditional notions skin tone preference.

In a counter narrative shift from the predominant colorism ideal Vince, from FG1, referenced the lack of lighter skinned actors in lead roles. Suggesting that darker skinned men were only casted to play *ideal* black men. Vince stated:

“When we really sit down and think about it as far as the images we see on screen, like movies let’s just say, given that our age, movies in the 90s, how many powerful light skin males [have] you seen in roles? But they (dark skinned men) have Wesley Snipes, you know what I mean? He embodied what a black man, know what I mean? They didn’t have much diversity back then, there was so much they had to go through just to be in Hollywood. And I feel like that kind of molded not just movies, TV, magazines, social media, all that stuff kind of molded that, ‘that’s a real black man. That’s more of black man. That’s more of a man as opposed to a light skin male.’”

Here we see how the intersections of race, gender, and masculinity very closely relate to colorism. Vince, a lighter skinned black man, is combating colorism stereotypes of sensitivity associated with his skin tone. He feels he is not adequately represented in mainstream films. First, from a racial perspective, he admits that black actors in general were limited in film, *they had so much to go through just to be in Hollywood*. He then goes on to suggest that from a gender and skin color perspective his masculinity is interrogated, since it is a *dark* skinned man in Wesley Snipes that is embodying what a *real* black man is and should be. Vince is not alone in his yearning for authentication in the black community, a recurring theme for lighter skinned men throughout the study.

Ray, FG2, also suggested that there is lack of representation, but for darker skinned men in media:

“Like models or guys are light skin. I mean you do have a few dark skin guys. Tyson Beckford, and Idris Elba. Those are some dark skin men. But you have more light skin men. But it’s like models that are models that dark skin they are African models. Not African American. So I guess media has shaped it to say. But I always had my own saying that ‘light skin is only in for certain seasons’ (laughs).”

The distinction between Vince and Ray’s accounts of representation differ slightly yet remain interconnected. That is while notions of beauty standards generally favor lighter skin, masculinity is more closely associated with dark skin. Thus while being either lighter skinned or darker skinned has its *advantages* and masculinity standards, both at odds with lighter skinned men and darker skinned men. According to Vince, there are not enough light skinned men portrayed in masculine ways, while Ray suggested that there are not darker skinned men portrayed as models or as subjects of beauty. This example illustrates how two individuals can perceive and experience colorism differently based on their respective skin tones, despite referring to the same medium.

Other examples from both groups convey the importance of social media in everyday colorism. Participants suggested that social media maintained rigid scripts and stereotypes for respective skin tones, often influencing how they felt or thought about skin color. Adrian, from FG2, reported that social media often depicted messages of toughness:

“I hear light skinned men are sensitive, and um you don’t want to get beat up by a light skinned [man] and...(laughs). I just hear people say that. People always say dumb stuff.”

For Adrian, the association of light skin with sensitivity mirrors what participants in FG1 have conceptualized and led him to resist the idea of being overpowered or assaulted by a light skinned man *because* he is light skinned and sensitive. These examples indicate that African-American receive messages from social media about men and women; regarding skin tone, beauty, masculinity, and expected behaviors.

#### **4.8 Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented the findings of the research study. Specifically the chapter presented the data from the two focus groups exploring colorism among African-American men. Data was presented in relation to the research questions; by asking how black males experience colorism by exploring how familial, peer associations, and media shape black males' understanding of their skin-tone; by asking; what messages, if any, enforcing colorism ideals they receive; as well as the frequency of and adherence to such messages. Where colorism experiences differed significantly focus groups were presented separately. Where colorism experiences were similar data was presented collectively. Overall the data suggests that men are effected by colorism from a young age into adulthood. Light skinned men and dark skinned men experienced colorism differently in a number of ways including but not limited to: family socialization, peer associations, as well as from outside and within the black community. In general the lighter skinned men reported more instances blatant colorism. Lighter skinned men indicated the need to authenticate their blackness to the black community, but also realized their advantage with other non-black communities. In opposition to lighter skinned men's blatant colorism experiences darker skinned men suggested more indirect colorism experiences with only a few mentions of direct or explicit colorism. Lastly both FG1 and FG2 indicated varying degrees of adherence to colorism ideals, despite their better judgment.

## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter summarizes the results of the research study. Following a brief summary of the study the chapter proceeds to discuss the limitations of the study, what could be improved and why certain decisions were made regarding the procedures of the study. The section continues with a future implications on what and where future research questions could explore. Finally the chapter concludes with data-driven solutions to prevent colorism in the black community.

### 5.2 Conclusion

Recall that the overarching research question was to explore how African-American men experience colorism. Specifically this study sought to explore how African-American men experience colorism by exploring how familial, peer associations, and media shape black males' understanding of their skin-tone. To do this participants were asked what messages, if any, enforcing colorism ideals they receive; as well as the frequency of and adherence to such messages. The major findings of the study are consistent with previous literature. Men experience colorism in similar fashion as women; that is a general preference of lighter skin over darker skin (Wilder, 2015; Hill, 2010, 2002). There were some notable differences in terms of socialization. Whereas for women, family was a primary agent of socializing colorism ideals (Wilder, 2015; 2012; 2010; Landor et al, 2013), this study indicated that for men, peers were more influential in relaying colorism ideals. In terms of media representation this study was consistent with previous literature suggesting that negative images of African-American men were often associated with darker skin and especially darker skinned men (Dixon & Maddox, 2005; Eberhardt, Goff, & Davis, 2004; Gyimah-Brempong & Price, 2006). Further, participants

in both groups consistent reference to the prevalence of colorism during childhood supports previous research (Averhart & Bigler, 1997; Winkler, 2012).

In addition, the question of authenticity, particularly among lighter skinned African-Americans was supported by previous literature on African-American women (Wilder, 2015). This suggests that a significant portion of the black population, those whom identify as lighter skin, often feel disconnect from their community. Consistent with previous studies Participants in FG1, mentioned their frustration and disenchantment having their blackness questioned called “mixed” or “biracial”.

The findings also support theories of colorism; Including *Everyday Colorism*; the notion that colorism’s multidimensionality at the micro and macro level is mitigated through language, internal scripts, and external practices and ultimately influences how one experiences colorism (Wilder, 2015). Participants in the study for example, frequently commented on how their personal interactions stemmed from larger systems such as media portrayal and subsequent expectations of their behaviors, one participant’s peer stated “for a light skinned dude, you have a lot of dark skinned tendencies”.

Despite numerous references citing violence, teasing, and alienation, all participants in both groups suggested that colorism was not a pressing issue in the black community. Some suggesting that is solely a distraction from larger racial issues the community is facing. The dismissal of colorism as trivial could in part be explained by their rationale that as children, skin color was more prevalent because one has yet to accept oneself. While that may be true, I argue, as one other participant did, that colorism dismissal may be tied to maintaining masculine expectations. That is, because colorism is so closely related to image and subsequently appearance, men may find it difficult to identify as a pressing issue. Especially if colorism is

continually conceptualized as a phenomenon primarily effecting women (Wilder, 2015; Hill, 2000) then a man concerning himself with the issue could be problematic.

### **5.3 Limitations**

While adding to the general body of literature surrounding colorism among African Americans, the study is not without its limitations. The convenience, relatively small size, age, and location of the sample prohibit the generalizability of results. Recruiting participants only from Georgia State University, limits both the number and variability required to generate mass assumptions and generalizations. Further, it is possible that college educated men may conceptualize colorism, race, gender, and masculinity differently. That is, their lived experiences and relative hierarchy compared to those that have never attended college may be different than other populations. Another major limitation to note involves coding and theme identification. Having been the sole researcher coding the data, that does leave the possibility for significant room for error given my positionality, experience, and investment in the community. Notwithstanding, the aim of the study is not to generalize, but instead to shed light on a burgeoning topic and an overlooked population. The study provides invaluable insight to the ways in which black men experience and receive colorism messages.

Another limitation in this study involves inclusion criteria of the sample. The sample is limited to self-identifying black or African American men born in the United States. The reason to limit the study in this fashion is to maintain the homogeneity of the sample as well as attempt to limit other country's colorism schemas to influence that data. As noted, colorism is indeed a global phenomenon however, its application and practice are not universal. Colorism in Central and South America for instance, may have drastically different implementations and implications on how one self-identifies and thus susceptible to different perceptions of discrimination.

However limiting the sample to US born men may better capture colorism specific to the immediate population and subsequent sample.

Beyond inclusion limitations there are clear limitations allowing participants to self-identify their skin color. This has been a long standing concern in colorism research as it is completely subjective and thus not an absolute marker of *actual* skin tone. More common in the medical field, some studies have utilize spectrometers to measure the light reflected from one's skin to objectively and empirically capture the color of skin. That too however, is not without its faults. Skin color is relative, thus in varying social settings one may be considered fair, compared to their immediate peers. Conversely that same individual may be considered darker in different social setting regardless of their *actual* skin color.

Finally, my participation in the study as a racially ambiguous man of color, of a very light or fair complexion may affect the way individuals answer questions. This is a very common concern among qualitative researchers commonly referred to as the *insider outsider* dichotomy. Ethnographer Elizabeth Hordge-Freeman suggests there can be strengths and weaknesses in navigating this complex insider/outsider identity. Referencing her experience as a black woman in Brazil, she details her relative nation-based privilege as an (outsider) American in stark contrast to her phenotype as a dark black (insider) woman (2012). Simultaneously navigating two realms Hordge-Freeman recalls the seemingly complexity of her situation "Blacks are ugly! But your blacks are better-looking than our blacks." Hordge-Freeman (2012, p. 22). Hordge-Freeman was able to easily access the population because of her nationality and appearance, but was simultaneously subject to racial tensions in everyday interactions because of her skin tone.

Still, I did my best to situate myself as a black man who has had experiences with colorism, and attempted to remain transparent as well as develop rapport with participants. This

is not always enough, and does not always work. There is a possibility that my presence may have affected the participant's interaction with me, with each other, particularly in Focus Group 2 (FG2). FG2, comprised of self-identifying dark and very dark skinned men, were visibly darker than me and even made reference to my skin color in relation to their narratives. While I may perhaps never know for sure how or to what degree I may have affected their answers, it is important to recognize the possibility. Questions regarding privilege were sometimes tense for me, having a skin tone that has traditionally been associated with privilege, I often wondered if they felt more or less inclined to share their feelings on lighter skin and privilege due to my presence.

Beyond the insider outsider phenomenon, having all male focus groups may have affected the ways in which the participants answer questions. Traditionally male groups tend to develop a collective masculine identity which may have influenced the way they choose to or choose not to address questions. Any given participant, for example, may not want to share a potentially embarrassing or hurtful experience out of fear or disapproval of group affirmation (Wade & Coughlin, 2012).

#### **5.4 Implications and Future Research**

Many of the participants alluded to their childhood as the origin of colorism messages and a decline in colorism's importance with age. Future research could explore colorism among young school-age males to juxtapose the origins of colorism ideals then with young adult men. In addition, the study focused primarily on light skinned men and dark skinned men and did not include the experience of self-identifying medium skin tones. Future research could explore colorism among more variations intermediate skin tones, to span the color spectrum. Lastly, although participants suggested that colorism was not a pressing issue for men in the black

community, they did suggest formal and informal education-based solutions for preventing the continuance of colorism. Most turned to family socialization and education as an effective means to educate members of the black community and possibly lessen the effects of colorism. Others suggested more formal approaches, such as forums and or rites processes to help combat insecurities colorism can create. With a greater understanding of colorism through future research, the aim of future research could seek to investigate prevention strategies and programs.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A-Instruments

#### *Appendix A.1 Demographic Survey*

##### Demographics

1. What is your age?
  - a. \_\_\_\_\_
2. What would you estimate your parent(s)/guardian household income is?
  - a. Below 25,000
  - b. 25501-50000
  - c. 50,001-75,000
  - d. 75,001-100,000
  - e. Over 100,000
3. What is the highest level of education your mother (or corresponding guardian) has obtained?
  - a. Less than high school
  - b. Some or all of High school
  - c. Some college
  - d. Bachelor's
  - e. Master's
  - f. PhD
4. What is the highest level of education your father (or corresponding guardian) has obtained?
  - a. Less than high school
  - b. Some or all High school
  - c. Some college
  - d. Bachelor's
  - e. Master's
  - f. PhD
5. What is your mother's skin complexion?
  - a. Very light
  - b. Light
  - c. Brown
  - d. Dark
  - e. Very Dark
6. What is your father's skin complexion?
  - a. Very light
  - b. Light
  - c. Brown

- d. Dark
- e. Very Dark

7. How would you rate your skin complexion?

- a. Very light
- b. Light
- c. Brown
- d. Dark
- e. Very dark

8. Please indicate country where your father born?

\_\_\_\_\_

9. Please indicate country where your mother was born?

### ***Appendix A.2 Interview Focus Group Protocol***

1. How would you define colorism? What prompted you to decide to participate in this discussion?

2. How is (has) your life shaped because of your skin color? (i.e. What does it mean for you to be a “X” skinned Black man?)

3. What stereotypes do you think are associated with light-skinned men? Dark-skinned men? Men of medium skin tones? Why do you think that? How do you know these things?

4. If you could choose, would you be light, medium, or dark? Why did you choose that skin color? What might have influenced your decision?

#### **• Learning About Colorism/Origin of Messages (family/peer associations)**

5. At what age did you become conscious of your skin color and the meaning/value of different skin tones? Can you tell me about any memorable experiences you had growing up when you first became aware of the differences associated with skin color?

6. Did your family play a role in emphasizing skin tone difference? How so?

7. Does your ethnicity play a role in how you learn or understand the issue of skin tone?

8. Can you recall any sayings or advice that you may have received from friends, family, or your community regarding skin color?

- **Media/social media**

9. In what ways has media shaped your view of skin color?

10. What do you think the media portrays about men with light skin or men with dark skin?

- **Friendships/Relationship** (peer associations)

11. In reflecting on your everyday experiences, how are you made aware of colorism in your day-to-day interactions?

12. How significant is the issue of skin color among your peers?

13. In what ways does skin color affect your interactions and relationships with other black women? Black men?

14. What are the skin tones of the black women in your current friendship groups? In what ways (if any) have your views/beliefs about skin tone impacted who you have developed friendships?

15. If you could choose the skin the skin tone of your spouse, what color would that be? Why?

16. If you could choose the skin tone of your baby/children, what color would that be? Why?

- **Other Issues**

17. How do you think your generation views this issue, compared to other generations? (i.e. How are you a product of your generation in light of this issue?)

18. Participants from previous focus groups indicated they felt that the issue of colorism was more prevalent in the South compared to the North or other regions of the country. What are your thoughts on the differences between the North and the South?

19. Why do you think men do not talk about colorism as much as women?

- Closing

20. What things do you personally think can be done to prevent colorism and to educate others about its consequences?

## Appendix B Informed Consent

Georgia State University  
Department of African-American Studies  
Informed Consent

Title: He's Dark, Dark: Colorism Among African-American Men

Principal Investigator: Jonathan Gayles

Student Principal Investigator: Edlin Veras

### I. Purpose:

A total of ten participants will be asked to participate in two different focus groups. You are invited to be in a research study. The purpose of the study is to explore African-American men's experiences with colorism. You are invited to be in this focus group with four other African-American men. If you choose to participate it will involve a focus group lasting two hours.

### II. Procedures:

Focus groups will be at Georgia State University library. Focus group will be a discussion of colorism and experiences. Focus group will be led by Edlin Veras. Focus groups will be audio recorded.

### III. Risks:

There is the chance that being in this study may cause you harm if your experiences were/are painful. This study has no greater physical harm than you would have in a regular day of life.

#### IV. Benefits:

Being in this study may benefit you. It can spread awareness to communities of color. The focus group gives you a chance to reflect on your experiences. Also it may provide a safe space for yourself and peers.

#### V. Compensation:

If you participate in the focus group, you will be paid \$5 dollars (U.S.).

#### VI. Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal:

Being in this research is optional. You do not have to be in this study. You have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop at any time. You will not lose any benefits or compensation. You will still be compensated if you should withdraw early.

#### VII. Confidentiality:

We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. We ask that all participants not discuss the content of the focus group with others. However we cannot assure their compliance which may limit your confidentiality. Jonathan Gayles and Edlin Veras will have access to the information you provide. Data may also be shared with those who make sure the study is done correctly (GSU Institutional Review Board, the Office for Human Research

Protection (OHRP). You will be assigned names rather than your name on study records. The recorded audio will be secured in a locked cabinet. The voice recordings will be destroyed once transcribed. Jonathan Gayles and Edlin Veras will have access to the recording device. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results. The findings will reported in group form. You will not be identified personally.

VIII. Contact Persons:

Contact Jonathan Gayles at [JGayles@gsu.edu](mailto:JGayles@gsu.edu) or 404-413-5142 or Edlin Veras at [Everas1@student.gsu.edu](mailto:Everas1@student.gsu.edu) or 404-477-9121 if you have questions, concerns, or complaints about this study. You can also call if you think you have been harmed by the study. Call Susan Vogtner in the Georgia State University Office of Research Integrity at 404-413-3513 or [svogtner1@gsu.edu](mailto:svogtner1@gsu.edu) if you want to talk to someone who is not part of the study team. You can talk about questions, concerns, offer input, obtain information, or suggestions about the study. You can also call Susan Vogtner if you have questions or concerns about your rights in this study.

IX. Copy of Consent Form to Participant:

We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep.

If you are willing to volunteer for this research and be audio recorded, please sign below.

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Participant

Date

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Principal Investigator or Researcher Obtaining Consent

Date