

February 2023

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Recommended Citation

Spann, Marrakesh Shiloh and Nyutu, Pius (2023) "The Effects of Colorism on the Self-esteem and Relationships Among College Students," *Journal of Research Initiatives*: Vol. 7: Iss. 2, Article 1. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.uncfsu.edu/jri/vol7/iss2/1>

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The Effects of Colorism on the Self-esteem and Relationships Among College Students

About the Author(s)

Marrakesh Spann is a native of New Jersey and has been in North Carolina for two years. She is graduating with a BSW in May 2023. Marrakesh intends to relocate back North and obtain a PsyD in psychology. Publishing a book(s) is a dream of Marrakesh's she one day hopes to fulfil.

Keywords

colorism, college students

Cover Page Footnote

Mentor: Dr Pius Nyutu, Dr. Kaycee L. Bills, McNair Scholar's Program.



The Effects of Colorism on the Self-esteem and Relationships Among College Students

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Abstract

This study was designed to examine the relationship between colorism and self-esteem and relationship satisfaction among college students. Additionally, the impact of other social-economic factors such as gender, race/ethnicity, and income level were evaluated. Data were collected via a questionnaire developed in google forms from 202 participants. The instruments included the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), A Generic Measure of Relationship Satisfaction (Hendrick, 1988), The Colorism Scale (Harvey, Banks, & Tennial, 2014), and a general demographics questionnaire. The results indicated a very low correlation between colorism and self-esteem ($r = .084$) and between colorism and relationship satisfaction ($r = -.118$). The Univariate Analysis of Variance results showed no significant effect of gender, race, and income, nor an interaction effect on colorism. However, a One-Way ANOVA, with recorded race (African American/Black compared other races together) as the independent variable and colorism as the dependent variable, indicated a significant effect: $F(1, 200) = 5.816$, $p = .017$, with African Americans having a higher mean than other races together. The findings indicate that African American college students continue to be more affected by colorism than others.

Keywords: colorism, college students

Introduction

Colorism remains an issue that has affected African Americans since the times of slavery (Lynch, 2020), but it also affects other racial minorities and people of color (Quiros & Dawson, 2013). Some researchers have studied colorism and its impact from different perspectives, such as discrimination based on skin tone (Gardner, 2020; Monk, 2021), its effect on women (Brown, Williams, & Williams, 2021; Rosario, 2021), and education (Crutchfield, Keyes, Williams, & Eugene, 2022; Hunter, 2016). However, there are minimal studies focused on colorism and

college students, and few have mainly focused on African American students (e.g., Cosbert, 2019; Gasman & Abiola, 2016). It has been noted that despite gains in racial awareness over the years, the issue of colorism and its impact on education still needs to be addressed (Keith & Monroe, 2016). These studies have heightened the need for an increased understanding of the impact of colorism on college students. Gardner (2020), after studying low-income Black undergraduate students, concluded that skin tone impacted some critical aspects of a student's life, such as friendships, social relationships, and social events. We, therefore, aimed to examine further the relationship between colorism and psychological welfare, namely self-esteem and relationship satisfaction, among college students. Additionally, we evaluated the impact of other social-economic factors such as race/ethnicity, gender, and income level in this population.

Colorism

Monk (2021) defines colorism as "a discriminatory practice" where the lighter skin tone is preferred over darker skin, straight hair over kinky hair, and by which lighter skin tones, straight hair, and Eurocentric facial features are favored over Afrocentric features. Others, such as Lincoln and Waldmon (2021), have described colorism as involving differential treatment of people based on skin tone, favoritism towards light-skin people, and mistreatment of those of darker skin tone. Research also indicates that the darker a person's complexion is, the more negative one is likely to be perceived. This extends to various aspects, such as beauty and intelligence (Monk, 2021).

Other research has concluded that colorism is a subsystem of structural racism and permeates institutions to a point where it exists even without requiring the racist propagator to be present (Hunter, 2016). This primarily occurs when people internalize negative messages based on colorism. For instance, racialized beauty norms can enhance the importance of physical appearance for girls, making light skin color even more important to their social status (Hunter, 2016). Since dark-skinned girls are more likely to be treated negatively than boys (Wilder, 2010), their self-esteem is more likely to be adversely impacted by colorism. Through internalization, colorism causes a cognitive bias component, making prevention more complicated and challenging. Ransom, Williams, and Hall (2022) suggest a multi-level approach to colorism education that includes community awareness, parental intervention, provider

education, and policy changes. They also recommend using self-reflective practices such as mindfulness to restructure cognitive processes.

Colorism discrimination can occur in one's family, educational setting, occupation, dating life, and many other aspects of a person's life. However, the term colorism was coined by social activist Alice Walker in 1982, and colorism dates to the era of slavery. On December 25, 1712, an enslaver, Willie Lynch, introduced his letter "The making of a Slave" in Virginia. In the letter, Lynch noted how variations in people, such as age, sex, and height, were used by enslavers in plantations to create divisions among the enslaved people. Among these variations were skin color and hair texture, which continue to affect people of African ancestry (Lynch, 2020). In addition, crossbreeding and sexual assault by enslavers produced biracial offspring who received preferential treatment if their skin tones were lighter. This could have contributed to the reason enslaved persons experienced an identity crisis even after slavery had been abolished (Onwumah & Imhonopi, 2019).

The negative ramifications after enslaved people were emancipated were kept vibrant by Jim Crow Laws that were aimed at separating Black and White races in the American South (Iowa Department of Human Rights: IDHR, 2022, para. 1). The Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968 finally ended the legal sanctions of Jim Crow Laws (IDHR, 2022) but despite these advances, colorism that had already permeated society, continued to have a significant impact not only on how African Americans are viewed and treated by others but also how they view selves and others within the group. Stemming from the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, white supremacy has influenced Black culture, and the harsh reality is that influential people of color may still inadvertently participate in this behavior. It is not unusual to see messages and images propagating colorism displayed in the media, pronounced by politicians, or reflected by celebrities in music and film. Such messages are likely internalized by individuals who have encountered colorism, resulting in a negative self-concept, low self-esteem, and problems developing relationships.

A study with adolescent girls' perception of colorism indicated that "74 % of Black girls were acutely aware but largely rejecting the idea of upholding whiteness as the desired outcome or positionality" (Rosario, 2021, p. 3). In a study with Black college women, Brown, Williams, & Williams (2021) found that while subjects had received messages about colorism from family

and media, there were differences in attention to colorism and how individuals responded. Other cultures also have demonstrated problems with colorism. For example, in practice, primarily in Panay Binukot, Philippines, a bright-complexioned female born in Binukot is kept out of the sun altogether to avoid darkening her skin tone (Muyco, 2016). This is believed in the culture to make her highly valuable for a wealthy suitor due to her light skin tone. According to Muyco, light-skin females are accorded prestige, which also has economic implications. In some cultures, the woman, no matter her complexion, is blamed and ostracized as having a "dirty womb" if the baby has dark skin and kinky hair (Webb, 2015). Women in these circumstances have increased anxiety about their children's appearance. Sometimes a color-struck parent may display favoritism or even abuse a particular child because of that child's skin color (Webb, 2015).

Personal Relationships

A healthy personal relationship is built on the grounds of trust and respect. Unfortunately, early life socialization occurs within the family setting for many people. Although it is intended to aid in positive personal development, it can also propagate negative messages about self and expectations. Landor et al. (2013) noted that while families may transmit racial socialization messages to help their children understand the impact of racism, these messages may also transmit colorism. For instance, a parent who has internalized colorism through the prevalence of lighter skin over darker skin may favor a lighter skin-tone child, thus leading to the child developing a superior attitude and a false sense of reality (Landor et al., 2013). This reality can negatively impact how such individuals interact in their social realm, believing they do not have to follow basic norms because they are placed on a pedestal.

Personal relationships are supposed to be a subdivision of a support system. Scholars have found that skin color is associated with the perception of self-worth and attractiveness. People with lighter skin tones are more likely to marry sooner, and people commonly prefer partners with lighter skin tones (Berumen & Martinez, 2021). This highly affects personal relationships because of societal pressures, and it can force a darker-complexioned person into low standards for dating due to fear of loneliness. Such individuals may also feel compelled to choose partners based on complexion rather than other healthy relationship characteristics. Interracial dating has increased, especially among Blacks and Whites (Ross & Woodley, 2020). It would be

detrimental to relationship satisfaction if a person entered such a relationship-based embedded attitude that a lighter skin partner is preferable.

Cultural mistrust is also important when examining how colorism impacts personal relationships. Studies have found that African American women have higher levels of cultural mistrust which could indicate one reason Black women have much lower marriage rates than women from other ethnicities (Luke & Oser, 2015). Determining the factors influencing the choice of partner may be imperative when someone of color is dating, as this may impact relationship satisfaction.

Self-esteem

The negative effect of colorism on self-esteem has been well noted in research and media (Cosbert, 2019; DeGree, Wilson, & Solomon, 2021; Webb, 2015). DeGree, Wilson, & Solomon (2021) applied Cooley's Looking Glass Self-theory (LGS) as a theoretical framework to explain this connection. LGS states that individuals will inevitably learn to see themselves based on how society views them. A statement such as "you are pretty for a dark-skinned girl" uttered to a woman may have a negative effect as it may be perceived as implying that one is the exception when dark skin is not appreciated. As more emphasis continues to be placed on revising the standards of beauty that were based on Eurocentric norms, and with increasing appreciation of differences in skin color, it still needs to be clarified how much personal aspects such as self-esteem have become detached from colorism.

Synopsis

This study is therefore designed to investigate the relationship between colorism, self-esteem, and relationship satisfaction. The target population is college students as they represent the population that mainly consists of young people who, on the one hand, are developing more individualized self-concepts and, on the other hand, learning to determine and detach from negativistic standards of beauty and skin tone that have been propagated over the years. The study will also examine the effects of important aspects such as gender, race/ethnicity, and income on colorism in this group. This study seeks to answer the following questions: Is there a relationship between colorism and self-esteem in college students? Is there a relationship between colorism and relationship satisfaction? Does gender, race/ethnicity, and income level impact colorism in college students?

The hypotheses are: There is no relationship between colorism, self-esteem, and relationship satisfaction among college students; there is no statistically significant effect of gender, race/ethnicity, and income on colorism in college students.

Methods

Participants

Participants for the study were 202 students enrolled in summer classes at a university in southeastern North Carolina, ranging in age from 18 to 66. The participants included 166 females, 35 males, and one who identified as other. The ethnicities were as follows: African American/Black 121 (59.9%), European American/White 35 (17.3%), Hispanic/Latino 16 (7.9%), Multiracial 19 (9.4%), Native Alaskan/Native Hawaiian/American Indian 7 (3.5%), and Other 4 (2.0%). The participants reported their income levels as less than 20,000 (27.2%), 20,000-34,999 (25.7 %), 35000-49,999 (16.8%), and 50,000 or more (28.7 %). Education ranged from 27.7% high school or GED, 48.5% associate degree, 17.8% bachelor's degree, and 5.4% with a graduate degree. In addition, 74.8% of the participants stated they were employed, while 25.2% were unemployed; For relationship status, 39.1% were married, and 60.9% were unmarried.

Procedures

After IRB approval was acquired from the Human Rights in Research Committee, data were collected via google forms through a secure google suite account. A recruitment email containing the link to the survey was sent to target participants enrolled in summer 2022 classes through the instructors and posted on each class's Canvas site. By clicking the link, those who volunteered to participate were presented with the informed consent form; at the end, a question asked if they agreed or declined to participate in the study. Those who agreed were directed to the survey questionnaires. Participants were free to discontinue the study at any stage without any penalties. After completing the survey and submitting it, participants saw a debriefing statement thanking them for their participation. Data were stored on a secure OneDrive folder, downloaded from Google Forms into an Excel file, and then transferred to SPSS software to be analyzed.

Instruments

Demographic questionnaire: a general demographics questionnaire containing age, gender, ethnicity, education, employment status, income, if they have children, and type of residency location.

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) contains ten items and uses a scoring system that reverses some items' scoring. For example, the Likert scale was "Strongly Disagree" = 1 point, "Disagree" = 2 points, "Agree" = 3 points, and "Strongly Agree" = 4 points. Higher scores indicate higher self-esteem. Examples of questions on this survey are: "I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others," and "I take a positive attitude toward myself."

A Generic Measure of Relationship Satisfaction (Hendrick, 1988) contains seven items, and reverse scoring is conducted on items 4 and 7. The higher the score, the more satisfied the respondent is with his/her relationship on a Likert scale of 1 (low satisfaction) to 5 (high satisfaction). Sample questions on this scale were: How well does your partner meet your needs? Furthermore, how satisfied are you with your relationship?

The In-Group Colorism Scale (Harvey, Banks, & Tenniel, 2014) contains twenty items. Items are answered on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Sample questions on this scale are "Skin tone affects how much money you can make" and "If you want to get ahead, you must be the right skin tone."

Data Analysis Technique

Data collected were transferred from excel sheets to SPSS, where the variables of colorism, self-esteem, and relationship scales were recoded from string to numeric. Reverse scoring was applied based on the questionnaires that required it. Data were then screened for normality of distribution by ensuring all basic demographics were answered. If they needed to include pertinent information, the students' results were invalid and deleted. For example, three students did not provide their ages, and four gave no consent. Also, some responses to the demographics fell into an already provided category, but verbiage put them in another category, so answers were screened and placed in the proper categories. Data were then screened for normality of distribution by running descriptive statistics and frequencies. After determining that missing data were minimal, the missing data were excluded pairwise within the analysis. Pearson correlation

analysis examined the relationship between colorism, self-esteem, and relationship satisfaction variables. Univariate Analysis of Variance was conducted to examine the effects of gender, race/ethnicity, and income level on colorism and the interaction effect of those variables.

Results

The correlation analysis showed a very low correlation between colorism and self-esteem ($r = .084$) and between colorism and relationship satisfaction ($r = -.118$). Despite the low correlation, it was notable that higher scores on colorism were correlated to low scores on relationship satisfaction (See table 1). The Univariate Analysis of Variance results indicated no significant effects of gender, race/ethnicity, and income level on colorism, nor an interaction effect. Since Levene's test of equality of error variance was significant ($p = .005$), indicating that the groups were not equal, the variable of race was recoded to two similarly equal groups of African American/Black and other races. A One-Way ANOVA was conducted with race/ethnicity as the independent variable and colorism as the dependent variable. The results indicated that there was a significant effect of race $F(1, 200) = 5.816, p = .017$, with African Americans having a higher mean than other races together (see table 2).

Discussion

This study was designed to examine the impact of colorism on college students. Specifically, the study sought to determine if there was a relationship between colorism, self-esteem, and relationship satisfaction in college students. Additionally, the study sought to examine the effect of the essential variables of gender, race/ethnicity, and income level on colorism in college students. The findings from correlation analyses did not indicate statistically significant results; however, there was a marginal correlation between colorism and the other variables. Unlike the hypothesized situation where colorism would influence other aspects, the findings do not indicate that colorism has a meaningful relationship with self-esteem or relationship satisfaction for this group. The subjects, who were all college students, may have already incorporated positive factors that helped counteract colorism.

The findings from the additional results that sought to examine the impact that colorism may have on other aspects of life did not indicate that there may be differences by gender, income level, or racial groups. The lack of significant effects from this analysis may, however, have been a function of the unequal groups of gender and race/ethnicity where more than half of

the sample were African American/Black and more than three-quarters were female. Follow-up analysis comparing similarly equal groups of African American/Black and other races did indicate that African American/Black students are significantly affected by colorism more than the others.

Considering the implications of the initial findings, it is notable that college students represented by this study's sample possess safety guards against the influence of colorism when it comes to self-esteem and relationships. As Vederhus, Haugland, and Timko (2022) have noted, it is common for youth to be encouraged to seek the support of adults when in need to avoid negative outcomes. The findings of the present study suggest that the students who participated may have developed healthy and strong resilience towards negative factors related to colorism. This could be a testament to positive social and family support, but this remains to be investigated. The resilience the group has developed may have prevented them from being affected by colorism, especially regarding self-esteem and relationship satisfaction. On the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, many students strongly agreed that they have several good qualities, thus indicating that they have a positive self-concept. College personnel and mental health professionals should pay attention to the possible impact of positive self-esteem on building resilience toward colorism.

The findings from the ANOVA analysis, while comparing African American/Black students against students of other races as a group, show that colorism still affects Black students more than other racial groups. As mentioned earlier in the introduction, specific studies on colorism have focused on African Americans (Cosbert, 2019; Gasman & Abiola, 2016). The findings on the negative effect of colorism are, therefore, not a discovery but continue to show the importance of addressing the impact of colorism in this population despite other achievements being made in racism awareness. College personnel and mental health professionals should therefore continue attending to the differential impact of colorism on students even when they seem to have incorporated resilience and positive traits. In addition, attention should continue on African Americans and other Black students regarding coping and prevention of colorism.

There are some limitations to be noted in applying the findings of this study. First, it should be noted that the data were initially collected as part of a student's honor thesis in a summer

semester. The extent of the representation of students in a college setting is different from what would be expected in a regular semester such as fall or spring. Second, the participants were predominantly female (82.2%), and the majority identified as African American/Black (59.9%). The findings could have been different if percentages were reversed for the genders, as research presented earlier has indicated there may be differences in how colorism affects females and males. The fact that a significant number of the participants in this study were African Americans adds to its relevance, as racial minority groups have rarely been adequately represented in studies.

Despite some limitations, our findings add to the needed literature on colorism and call for more studies on other colorism-related factors. For example, further research is needed regarding how students develop protection against the susceptibility to colorism and surveying predominately males. It should be noted that this study was conducted at an HBCU, and it is possible that surveying students of color at a predominantly white institution would yield different results. Future studies could also focus on people born before the 1980s to see if the findings would be significantly different, mainly because they grew closer to Jim Crow laws.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1:

Intercorrelations and Descriptives Among Variables

Variable	Colorism	Self-esteem	Relationship Satisfaction
Colorism	-		
Self-esteem	.084	-	
Relationship Satisfaction	-.118	-.288**	-
N	202	202	180
Mean	2.62	1.90	3.76
SD	.93	.61	1.04

** $p < .01$.

Table 2

Number, Means, and Standard Deviations For Racial Categories

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
African Americans/Black	121	2.75	.87
Other Races/Ethnicity	81	2.43	.99