



# The Lived Experiences of College Students Overcoming Colorism: Perspectives from the Midwest

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## Abstract

Colorism is a global phenomenon that has disenfranchised people of color, even from the most privileged backgrounds, for over a century. Skin complexion discrimination is an important factor to consider when examining the experiences of Blacks in America. The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of college students and the impact that colorism has had on them. The study was conducted at a midsized university in the Midwest. A total of five focus groups were conducted, and a brief survey was given to undergraduate participants (N = 14), ages 18 - 25, in order to gather information about participants' experiences throughout their lifetime regarding skin complexion (Colorism not racism). The survey assessed self-perception of skin complexion, satisfaction level with skin complexion, and life satisfaction. The findings revealed five major themes: Gender matters, mate selection bias, family dynamics, media, and resilience. Limitations and future research will be discussed.

**Keywords:** Colorism; Skin Tone Bias; Critical Race Theory; African American College Students

## Introduction

Colorism is a global phenomenon and is "defined as the unequal treatment and discrimination of individuals on the basis of the lightness or darkness of their skin tone, is an often-overlooked form of discrimination that privileges individuals with lighter skin over those with darker skin..." (Landor & Smith, pg. 797). The term colorism was coined in 1983 by Alice Walker and is also known as skin tone bias [1-3].

The literature indicates that African Americans with light skin have higher income, occupations with more prestige, housing in more upper-scale areas, higher levels of education, lower rates of criminal sentencing, less suspensions from school, spouses in a higher socio-economic class, and are more likely to get elected for public office than

African Americans with dark skin [4-11]. Black adults with dark skin experience 11 times more racial discrimination and reported poorer overall health than Black individuals with light skin [12-14]. This finding is a concern as perceived skin tone discrimination is related to poorer psychological well-being outcomes in adulthood [15].

Understanding psychological well-being is important. While research on colorism has generally found dark skin as less desirable and often associated with poor outcomes, the few studies that have specifically concentrated on emerging adults have examined different well-being outcomes than what has been explored in adulthood [16]. Emerging adulthood is a transitional time period developed by Arnett, et al. [17] and typically encompasses ages 18-30 when young people are still transitioning from adolescence to becoming independent from their parents. Researchers have found

this to be a critical development period as young adults are discovering who they are and establishing behavioral patterns [17].

Researchers have shown a link between skin tone and satisfaction with skin color, negative attitudes toward being African American, mental, and physical health [1,18]. However, African American emerging adults with light skin are more hopeful about entering romantic relationships, and men of this demographic tend to have less risky sexual behavior and experience arrests and police stops less than those with dark skin [19,20]. There is evidence that social and psychological well-being factors may be influenced by environment as Black college students in predominately Black universities with dark skin were found to have higher self-esteem and greater perceived peer acceptance than Black students with dark skin attending predominantly White universities [21].

### Theoretical Background-Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory suggests that racism is a pervasive component of social systems, power, and privilege. It also encourages researchers to examine phenomenon by understanding that racism survives and is perpetuated through often invisible systems and those within that system thus affecting the everyday life of individuals. Laurence, et al. [22] called for a greater use of critical race theory in qualitative research. Critical race theory is an appropriate framework to interpret how colorism functions in the lives of African American college students. Laurence, et al. [22] also call for a greater use of critical race theory in qualitative research. Critical race theory first suggests that racism is a pervasive component of social systems, power, and privilege. Critical race theory encourages researchers to examine phenomenon by understanding that racism survives and is perpetuated through often invisible systems and those within that system do affect the everyday life of individuals. Because skin tone is a component of the social construct of race, colorism can be examined through the same lens that critical race theory uses to examine race. Historically, skin tone has played a role in legal affairs for Blacks in the United States; however, by using critical race theory to examine modern day colorism, there can be a better understanding of colorism's function in social and cultural affairs of the modern day African American experience [23].

Landor, et al. [24] outlined a theoretical framework to examine how historical (slavery, antebellum, and Black Power Movement) and contemporary (Colorblind era) have influenced skin tone trauma among African Americans. They argue that practitioners and researchers pay attention to racial trauma in addition to skin tone trauma among African Americans. They describe a stratification system

where lighter skinned Blacks are afforded more privileges than darker skinned Blacks. This creates in-groups and out-groups. The in-group has advantages and the out-group is discriminated against. The authors suggest more work is needed among researchers and practitioners to address and understand the skin tone trauma that African Americans may have experienced by taking historical and contemporary factors into consideration.

Abrams, et al. [1] conducted a qualitative study on colorism with adolescent young girls ages 12-16 in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The authors chose to focus on this group because of the issues facing young women and colorism issues. The findings show that the following three primary themes emerged: skin tone and attractiveness (light as beautiful, dark as unattractive); skin tone and social standing and education level (i.e., dark skin as lower class, light skin as higher class); and skin tone and personality/behavior traits. Since this study was conducted on adolescents, more studies are needed that further emphasize the effect of colorism on the psychological well-being of young adults.

Since we know that colorism may have harmful effects on individuals, it is important to explore how this type of discrimination plays a role on well-being of young adults. Past literature on colorism has been primarily theoretical, quantitative, primarily focused on adolescents, health related and adult driven, and has not provided a clear picture of how it impacts the well-being of young (emerging) adults [4,10,11]. While previous research has taken steps towards uncovering various facets of colorism, this study aims to gain a rich qualitative perspective of life experiences with colorism and how they impact well-being in college students.

The current study purpose is three-fold:

1. Gather the voices of young African Americans attending college and document their lived experiences with Colorism and Skin tone bias:
2. Determine the psychological impact Colorism and Skin tone bias had on African Americans attending college; and
3. Determine whether there were gender differences in how Colorism and Skin tone bias impacted the lives of males and females.

## Method

### Participants

#### African American/Black College Students

This study consists of 14 participants who were young adults between the ages of 18 to 25 (Mean = 20.67) who

identified as Black/African American during recruitment. All participants were undergraduate college students at a midsized university of approximately 15,000 students in a Midwest urban city. Seven percent of undergraduate students at this university identify as Black/African American [25]. Six participants self-rated their skin tone as “dark,” seven participants self-rated their skin tone as “medium,” and one participant self-rated their skin tone as “light.” There were nine female and five male participants. Table 2 represents the demographics of each participant in the study. All individuals were notified beforehand that they would be compensated for their participation with a \$10 gift card to the University bookstore.

### Procedure

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board. Recruitment was conducted on a university campus by contacting university organizations and offices that serve the target population, such as the university’s Black Student Union, office of diversity, and the Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program, as well as through email, word of mouth, and the snowball method. The research team of this study includes two African American female researchers: one graduate student with an interest in minority mental health and one university faculty member with an interest in adolescent health and health disparities. Both researchers identify as having dark skin and complexions and have had negative life experiences due to race as well as colorism discrimination. Bracketing and interrater reliability strategies were used to ensure rigor in this research. Participants were compensated for their time with a \$10 gift card to the university bookstore. Participants were notified beforehand that they would be compensated for their contributions with this gift.

### Positionality Statements

There are two authors for the current study. The first author is a full professor in the department of Psychology, first generation college student, identifies as a community psychologist, practitioner, and prevention scientist and is an African American woman with dark skin. The second author, who led the data collection and analysis, is “a queer dark skinned Black woman who was a community psychology Ph.D. student at the time of this research.” Both authors could relate to the study participants but may have had different interpretations of the data given the different experiences and dynamics within the family. It is important to recognize the different biases each author brings in interpreting the data. To address the biases the authors may have experienced, a debriefing session was held after

each focus group.

### Measures

Participants were asked to complete a brief survey with open-ended demographic questions regarding age, gender, and racial/ethnic identity. In an effort to gather information about self-identified skin complexion, the survey asked, “In terms of complexion, you have...?” to which participants could select “I have a very light skin complexion,” “I have a light skin complexion,” “I have a medium skin complexion,” “I have a dark skin complexion,” “I have a very dark skin complexion.” To assess participants’ satisfaction with skin tone, the survey stated “I am satisfied with my skin complexion” to which participants could respond “Yes,” “Usually,” “I feel indifferent,” “Not often,” or “No.” In order to assess well-being, researchers used the Satisfaction with Life Scale by Diener, et al. [26], which asked participants to what extent they agree with the following statements: “In most ways my life is close to my ideal,” “The conditions of my life are excellent,” “I am satisfied with my life;” “So far, I have gotten the important things I want in life;” or “If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.” The Satisfaction with Life Scale questions could be answered with “7 - Strongly agree,” “6 - Agree,” “5 - Slightly agree,” “4 - Neither agree nor disagree,” “3 - Slightly disagree,” “2 - Disagree,” or “1 - Strongly disagree” [26]. Responses to the Satisfaction with Life Scale are as follows: “7-Strongly agree,” “6-Agree,” “5-Slightly agree,” “4-Neither agree nor disagree,” “3-Slightly disagree,” “2-Disagree, and “1-Strongly disagree” [26].

### Protocol: Focus Groups

This study was designed to explore participants’ experiences with skin tone from when they first noticed skin tone in childhood up until the point of their participation in the focus group as young adults. The data collected was originally gathered by the researchers of this study. Semi-structured focus groups of two to five people were conducted in closed rooms at a university student center. One interview was conducted unintentionally due to recruited participants not showing up. Researchers isolated males and females into gender-specific groups. At the beginning of the focus groups, researchers read the consent form to the participants, which included this study’s operational definition of skin complexion. Colorism was defined to participants as “discrimination based on an individual’s skin complexion.” Participants were then asked to complete the demographic survey. Table 1 represents the open-ended questions that researchers asked participants in the focus groups.

When did you first notice skin complexion?
Tell us about your own experiences in relation to skin complexion
Growing up, did you feel that skin complexion affected your personal experiences positively or negatively? How do you believe that those experiences affect your experiences with skin complexion now?
In the past, has your skin complexion affected the way you view yourself? In what ways? Do you believe that these past experiences affect how you view yourself now?
Growing up, did you feel that others perceived you in a certain way or assumed things about you based on your skin complexion? How? If so, do you believe that it still impacts you today?
Do you believe that skin complexion has played a significant role in your overall well-being? Psychological well-being?
Growing up, did you believe that your skin complexion fit into society's standard of what is attractive? Do you currently believe that your skin complexion fits into those standards?
Do you believe that skin complexion has played a significant role in the opportunities and advancements that you have in your adult life? If so, in what ways?
Do you feel you have ever been discriminated against in your adult life based on your skin complexion? If so, explain.
Do you believe that discrimination based on skin complexion is an issue in society today?
Do you believe that other individuals are treated differently based on their skin complexion?
Do you believe that the media promotes a particular skin complexion as better/more attractive than other skin complexions with the Black community?
Do you believe changes should be made regarding how people are treated based on skin complexion? If so, what changes should be made to make things better?

**Table 1:** Focus Group Questions.

## Data Analysis

### Thematic Analysis

All focus group responses were audio recorded and transcribed using Express Scribe. Thematic analysis was

used to analyze this data. The purpose of thematic analysis is to find common themes. Step one of thematic analysis emphasizes becoming familiar with the data and recording patterns of common themes that are gleaned from the data [27].

Participant	Age	Gender	Racial/Ethnic Identity	Self-Rated Skin Complexion
Participant 1	21	Female	Black	Dark
Participant 2	22	Female	African American	Dark
Participant 3	20	Female	Black	Medium
Participant 4	19	Female	Haitian Canadian	Medium
Participant 5	18	Female	African American	Dark
Participant 6	19	Female	Black/African American	Dark
Participant 7	21	Female	African American	Light
Participant 8	18	Female	Black	Medium
Participant 9	19	Female	Black	Medium
Participant 10	21	Male	African/Hispanic/Latino/Caucasian	Medium
Participant 11	18	Male	Black	Medium
Participant 12	23	Male	African American	Medium
Participant 13	22	Male	Black	Dark
Participant 14	24	Male	African American	Dark

**Table 2:** Demographic of Participants.

When a common theme was observed by both researchers a tally was made for that theme. Step two of the analysis is to generate initial codes. The tallies noted in step one indicate each instance a theme was discussed by participants. For example, if a participant mentioned the same instance of mate selection bias twice, it was noted two separate times as “mate selection bias.” In step three, researchers search for themes in an effort to capture which experiences were brought up more often and, therefore, are presumably more impactful. Relevant themes are recorded in step four. Once the transcription was fully reviewed, researchers conducted thematic analysis and found that five themes emerged from discussion in the focus groups. Consistent themes were identified in each group between both of the authors. All

themes were reviewed, modified for clarity, or developed based upon the number of mentions until consensus was reached. Pseudonyms were used to help protect participants’ identities. A total of 30 codes emerged from the focus groups of emerging adults and their lived experiences but were collapsed into five compelling themes.

## Results

The major findings of the study were five major recorded from participants’ discussions regarding colorism: gender matters, mate selection bias, family dynamics, media, and resilience. These five themes are explained further below in Table 3.

Themes	Descriptions	Quotes
Gender Matters	Participants reported that there were differences in how the genders viewed skin completion. For males, darker skin was associated with being masculine and light was associated with being emotional and sensitive. For females, darker skin was viewed negatively, and light was viewed more positively.	“I think it’s almost more acceptable for a male to be dark-skinned than a female.” <b>Marie</b>
Mate Selection Bias	Participants reported that skin complexion impacted their ability to choose mates. Females believed that Black men, for example, prefer to date Black women with light skin.	“I had a crush on him, and I talked to him, and I had one of my friends, you know sixth grade, ask, you know, ‘do you like her,’ and he had said ‘No, she’s too dark. I don’t date dark skinned girls,’ and I was confused because I was like that—I had never heard that before.” <b>Raquel</b>
Family Dynamics	Participants reported personal stories relating to how they received both negative messages and positive messages from their families related to their skin tone.	“...a lot of my family was lighter complected, and even my mom was lighter complected. So I felt like I wasn’t a part of my family, like I was the odd one out, and my sister felt that way” <b>Laura</b>
Media	Participants reported instances in the media of the lack of dark skin representation in the media but noted how this has changed slightly in recent years.	“...they [celebrities] want to be light skinned. They want to be lighter, and I believe that’s just to fit how the media wants to portray the ideal woman, the ideal girl.” <b>James</b>
Resilience	Participants reported that, although they have negative experiences and perceptions regarding their skin complexion, they showed resiliency as they reached emerging adulthood.	“..I was so ashamed of how dark I was until, like, I said, like probably about sophomore year [of high school], and then it clicked like this, this is how you were born. It’s not gonna change. You’re beautiful regardless of if you’re pitch black or super pale or uhm, it doesn’t matter, and that’s when it hit me kind of like a train, I was like I’m cute.” <b>Raquel</b>

**Table 3:** Themes of the Study.

### Gender Matters

There were five instances discussed that emphasize the role of gender matters in skin tone dynamics. Participants talked about how skin tone creates different associations and perceptions based on an individual’s gender. Both female and male participants commonly expressed that

regarding African American men, society associates dark skin with strength and masculinity while light skin is associated with emotional sensitivity and spending more time on one’s appearance. Many of the women discussed that throughout their lives they had constantly experienced both subtle and overt social reinforcers indicating that light skin is a positive characteristic for African American women

and dark skin a negative characteristic. These perceptions were reinforced mainly by the media and comments from peers. A participant, Laura, discussed a conversation she had with her friends regarding how beautiful Nigerian men are. However, when Laura suggested that Nigerian women were also beautiful, her friends disagreed. Overwhelmingly, female participants expressed how gendered skin tone ideals were internalized in their youth and how they contributed to negative perceptions of self, more than for the male participants. A majority of the male participants did not express that these gendered skin tone ideals played a role in negative perceptions of self in youth or any other time in their lives. Participants' discussion indicate that light skin seemed to play more of a positive social role for African American women than men. One participant, Marie, gets at the core of this when she says, "I think it's almost more acceptable for a male to be dark-skinned than for a female."

### Mate Selection Bias

There were 16 mentions of mate selection bias in the discussion. This theme was the first to reach saturation and was the most salient theme throughout the study. Perceptions of skin tone appeared to contribute to perceptions of skin tone in a major way for mate selection for women, as the topic of mate selection was more prominent and vehement in female focus groups. Cheyenne began to discuss how skin tone bias in mate selection impacted her before researchers even posed the question. Female participants shared their beliefs that men, especially Black men, prefer to date Black women with light skin. Women shared experiences of overt discrimination by men in regard to mate selection as romantic interests explained that their rejection was due to their aversion to romantic involvement with a woman with dark skin. This experience was reported by women who both self-identified and did not self-identify as dark-skinned. A few female participants even began to anticipate rejection because of their dark skin tone. Laura, who identified as having dark skin explained that, as an adolescent, she felt the need to engage in physical work outs to keep her body in shape to compensate for her skin tone in order to be attractive. Raquel reveals an experience in her youth with a former crush that brought skin tone-based discrimination in mate selection to her attention:

I had a crush on him, and I talked to him, and I had one of my friends, you know, sixth grade, ask, you know, "Do you like her," and he had said, "No, she's too dark. I don't date dark skinned girls," and I was confused because I was like that - I had never heard that before....

Female participants did not report a pattern of skin tone preference regarding their own romantic interests. Although

Raquel reported currently dating a man with light skin, she expressed her preference to date dark skinned men in order to go against the grain and not be what she referred to as a stereotypical female who "needs to date a light skinned guy." Laura, a self-identifying dark-skinned female participant, began to cry as she reported that, in youth, she did not want a marital partner that was dark-skinned because she did not want children that were dark skinned for fear they too would experience the internalized hatred she felt growing up as a woman with dark skin. Kyrah discussed her perception that White women see light skin as "safe" in bringing home a Black male to meet their parents. Light skin as "safe" was mentioned in four other instances.

Males discussed mate selection in a different light. James said that skin tone did not matter to him when it came to mate selection. All male participants reported similarly that skin tone did not matter to them personally in terms of mate selection. However, a few expressed that they have a general perception that males prefer female romantic partners with light skin or that they have peers who do prefer light skinned females as romantic partners. Michael described his perception that Black men believe that it is adventurous to be intimately involved with Black women with dark skin, but Black women with light skin are perceived as safe to bring home to parents as a romantic partner. James describes his friends' skin tone preferences when he stated, "...they would prefer a light skinned girl. Just being honest with you. That's a preference."

When researchers asked male participants what skin tone they believe that women prefer in a romantic partner, one participant felt that women preferred men with light skin while another participant felt that women preferred men with dark skin. Other male participants either did not make a distinction as to a dominant skin tone they felt women preferred or they expressed that women's skin tone preferences differ based on the individual.

### Family Dynamics

There were seven instances in which family dynamics were mentioned. Family seemed to be an important institution through which skin tone was first realized for most participants. Participants shared their experiences with personal skin tone-based discrimination by family members as well as the diversity in skin tone that exists within their families and how these experiences shaped their perceptions about skin tone. Laura explained that, because her and her sister's dark skin tone differed drastically from her other family members' lighter skin tones, her and her sister felt like "...the odd one out." Feelings of being "odd" compared to family based on skin tone were discussed explicitly by

two additional participants. Another participant, Marie, discussed how her grandmother was upset with the fact that her father, who had dark skin, married her mother, who also had dark skin. Marie said knowing her grandmother's negative feelings about her mother's skin tone made her wonder if her own skin tone negatively impacted how her grandmother felt about her. Marie's sister, Jordyn, identified as having dark skin and discussed how her grandmother would frequently comment that Marie was dark. Stories of family members commenting on skin tone were present in six other participants' stories.

Four participants discussed how, as they were growing up, they noticed family members of different complexions receiving specific treatment. Jordyn talked about how her grandmother would give gifts to her sister and brother who were lighter than her but not give gifts to her. Another participant, Michael, talked about how it seemed that members who had darker skin were more accepted in his family. For many of these participants, negative attitudes towards skin tone were fostered within the family. However, some experienced the family as an institution that taught and reinforced positive messages about skin complexion. For example, one participant, Kyrah, who is adopted, explained how her mother, who is White, favored dark skin and fostered positive ideals about dark skin within their family. Cheyenne discussed that her father would make positive comments about dark skin and how, as a woman who described herself as having medium-brown skin, comments like that from her father fostered positive feelings about herself.

## Media

There were seven instances where the media was mentioned. When the participants were asked about how the media influences perceptions of skin tone, they discussed how a lack of dark skin representation in the media sent the message that dark skin complexions are not valued. Participants with dark skin said there were rarely people on TV that looked like them. The Twitter hashtags #TeamLightSkin and #TeamDarkSkin were discussed as an issue that has influenced a divide in the Black community. These hashtags were discussed in every focus group. The hashtags were explained as creating a rivalry between those who identify with having light skin and those who have dark skin. A few participants found humor in the hashtags or commented on the them, stating they found the hashtag neither negative nor positive. Participants also discussed their perceptions of how skin tone influences what character roles are given to actresses and actors in television and movies. Participants Gabriel and Reina discussed how they felt that actors with lighter skin play more positive character roles with higher statuses while actors with darker skin play

more negative roles as lower-class characters.

Some aspects of the discussion about skin tone and media were gendered. All five focus groups contained discussions about celebrity skin bleaching and skin lightening in the media. Celebrities like Lil Kim, Nicki Minaj, Rhianna, and Beyoncé were mentioned as examples of those who are manually lightened in public images or have been reported as using skin bleaching products. Cheyenne discussed that, if celebrities felt the need to bleach their skin, then the media definitely has promoted a particular skin tone as better or as more attractive. James discussed his perception of the reasons behind skin bleaching when he says, "...they [celebrities] want to be light skinned. They want to be lighter and I believe that's just to fit how the media wants to portray the ideal woman, the ideal girl."

Although no other mentions of gendered skin bleaching were as explicitly stated as in James' quote, most of the celebrities discussed as undergoing skin lightening techniques were female. There was also a recognition of a recent positive change in media regarding skin complexion. There was general consensus that the images in the media were becoming more inclusive of various skin complexions through actresses such as Viola Davis and Lupita Nyong'o. Most participants, especially the women, openly expressed positive attitudes toward this change.

## Resilience

The theme of resilience came up eight times. Although not all participants expressed having negative experiences and perceptions regarding their skin complexion, all participants who did report such experiences in their youth showed resiliency as they reached young adulthood. The following quote from Raquel gives a general idea of most participants' transition to resiliency:

...I was so ashamed of how dark I was until like I said like probably about sophomore year [of high school] and then it clicked like this, this is how you were born. It's not gonna change. You're beautiful regardless of if you're pitch black or super pale or, uhm, it doesn't matter, and that's when it hit me kind of like a train. I was like I'm cute. Participants revealed that their resiliency occurred through education, maturity, and self-realization.

## Discussion

The purpose of this research was to (a) gather detailed descriptions of experiences with colorism through the lifespan, (b) discover if these experiences are still impactful among college students, and (c) suggest meaningful areas

of intervention that promote well-being among African American college students. The results are congruent with much of past literature, supporting that colorism is a complex and pervasive phenomenon taught and reinforced through various social institutions before one reaches young adulthood [28-32]. Additionally, this study also contains findings that are not well documented in previous literature as experiences of colorism showed to be impactful throughout the life, yet resiliency was developed by young adulthood.

The authors of the current study found it is important to address what this research says regarding how experiences with colorism throughout life continue to impact individuals as they enter young adulthood. These findings suggest that, by young adulthood, African Americans may recognize that their introduction to colorism happened before or during grade school years through noticing varying skin tones within the family or personal experiences of skin tone discrimination by family members. This reinforces that family is an important institution where skin tone is first discovered and colorism is initially learned [19,33,34]. Colorism is an important factor to assess as future scholars conduct research on the African American family's impact on young adulthood. Although colorism is initially learned through family, the media seems to reinforce the idea that light skin is better, especially for women. These findings support Russell-Cole, et al. [33] discussion regarding the overrepresented "tragic mulatta." The media messages purporting light skin ideal seem to impact women more negatively throughout their lives than men, and these negative experiences are remembered as a source of sadness in young adulthood. However, when family and media promote diverse skin complexions as beautiful throughout one's life, this seems to have a positive impact on perception of self in young adulthood, particularly for women.

Themes in this research emerged that suggest the need for an intersectional study of colorism. Gender recognizably played an important role in shaping participants' experiences with skin complexion [35,36]. While for men colorism seems to act as a source for friendly joking, for women, it acts as a source of psychosocial harm and personal insecurity. Neither the men nor the women expressed a preference for skin tone in mate selection; however, the women expressed that they felt males preferred women with light skin. This is congruent with previous findings on mate selection and skin color [37,38]. It is possible that this skin tone preference is generally implicit, thus participants are unable to report it. The media may also help explain the discrepancy. Although the media messages of skin tone and beauty seem to be generally targeted towards women, men also see these same images. Media can shape their ideals of what is attractive

through subliminally equating light skin with feminine beauty.

Although some participants experienced a considerable amount of skin tone discrimination throughout their lives, by young adulthood, they showed an extreme amount of resiliency and positive regard toward their skin tone. This is especially striking due to the skin tone-based rejection received from romantic interests throughout their lives and the fact that young adulthood acts as an important developmental stage in romantic relationships [39,40]. This may be a result of cohort effects such as that shown by Goering [41] where a generation-specific increase in societal messages about Blackness as positive and brown skin as beautiful during young adulthood increased positive regard toward dark skin.

### Major Contributions

The major contributions of this study are the sample and the lifespan perspective. The sample in this study was from a predominantly white institution (PWI) in the Midwest; however, our participants came from diverse regional backgrounds. The research questions of this study are unique in that they explore impactful experiences with colorism throughout the lifespan up until young adulthood. Research findings are particularly important for future scholars who plan to conduct research with individuals at PWIs or in the Midwest. Future scholars are encouraged to explore the key contributors to participants' experiences of colorism mentioned in this study as well as implications of resiliency to further explore how to deter discrimination and best promote well-being.

### Limitations

The findings in this study have been affected by several limiting factors. This study only contains participants who have had at least some college education and currently live in the Midwest. Participants were also between the ages of 18 and 25. The specific demographics of the participants limit generalizability. Many participants had previously met one of the focus group facilitators through day-to-day activity on the university campus, making it possible for participants' responses to be self-monitored due to the relationship. Males in this study may have also felt the need to self-monitor when discussing mate selection and gender differences as both moderators were African American women who self-identify as dark skinned.

The most significant limiting factor of this study is that only one participant self-identified as having a light complexion while none identified as having "very light"



or “very dark” skin complexions. This creates a limited perspective as this research does not encompass skin tone diversity in regard to the extreme ends of the spectrum. Research shows a very light or very dark skin tone can shape individuals’ experiences differently than a medium or dark skin tone [42]. The size of the sample and qualitative nature of this study ensure that this research is not meant to be generalized but was conducted to help explain phenomenon in the social dynamics of skin tone discrimination. The authors cannot conclude that these views are representative of the majority of African Americans. However, this research can be used to support previous literature and guide future research.

### Implications for Intervention

Although all participants showed resiliency by young adulthood (emerging), experiences of colorism still acted as a source when recalled while in college. Interventions should be implemented to deter these negative effects. Future interventions should aim to prevent these negative effects by working through the main institutions that engender colorism: the family and the media. Because the institution of family plays a strong role in colorism, families should be encouraged to actively discuss experiences of colorism with their children before young adulthood and use language that promotes diverse skin tones in a positive light throughout their child’s lifetime. Practitioners who work with African American women in young adulthood should consider colorism when assessing discrimination as skin tone acts as an important source of psychological distress and dissatisfaction with self that may not be detected in assessing racial discrimination. The media also has a significant role to play in colorism intervention. This research promotes the importance of diverse skin tone representation in media. Those in media should expand their representation of African Americans in media to include skin tone. There should be active awareness in the skin tone of those chosen for particular roles as diverse skin tones need to be represented in positive roles in order to dispel colorism.

Future colorism researchers must recognize that young adults may already show resiliency through satisfaction for their skin tone in emerging adulthood; however, experiences of colorism act as painful memories in this developmental stage. The In-Group Colorism Scale (ICS) will be an important tool to examine explicit and implicit regard towards skin tone in future studies [43]. Scholars should continue research on how to successfully address and decimate colorism through media and the family as well as discover what factors contribute to resilience in young adulthood. There is a need for further inquiry regarding whether resiliency during this time period is a product of maturation or the product of a

shift in skin tone inclusion within the social environment [44-51].

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