Where Is The Beauty In Hatin' On Ya Sistah?

Penetrating the Color Complex within the African-American Community

Communication Honors Undergraduate Research

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**Abstract**

This study analyzes the color complex which is defined as psychological fixation about color and features that lead African-Americans to discriminate against each other. There is a lack of dialogue around how history has turned African-American women to focus towards hurting each other through skin color biases, which is also known as colorism. I ask how issues of colorism within the African-American community lead to concerns of self-acceptance and perception of beauty among young African-American women. I found evidence of the effects of the color complex on young Black women and the factors that lead themselves in ways that influence their perception of beauty. I found evidence of the effects of the color complex and determine how young Black women perceive beauty in order to frame their identity. The findings fill a gap in existing research by challenging the work of earlier researchers, who have looked at the existence of colorism among African-American women today and look farther into how this issue has been and is affecting their perception of beauty in relation to the acceptance of themselves.

**Introduction**

In discussions of beauty among African-American women, a controversial issue has been whether internalized racism affects the way we interact with each other. As a member of the African-American community, I consider myself a part of the phenomenon and therefore will present this research with a self-reflexive approach. On one hand, some argue that we have grown to believe that skin tone and hair determines acceptance due to the effect of colonialism and white supremacy. Older scholarship like that of psychologist J.A. Baldwin (1979) speculated that Black people tended to associate racism and racist practices directly with White people. On the other hand, however, more contemporary researchers argue the ongoing issue goes beyond history and whiteness. In the words of sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2000), "sometimes the pain most deeply felt is the pain that Black women inflict on one another" (p. 91). According to this view, the intra-community infliction of racism has a deeper impact than when judgment comes from non-Blacks.

Due to a long history of dehumanization and devaluation through images and stigma during and after slavery, the construction of beauty is reflected in the media and social interactions, causing individuals to believe that they are imperfect and unacceptable the way they are. People of color have striven to have the epitome of the Western beauty standard of long hair, lighter skin, and a slim build. Although there has been research on how history has shaped how we are perceived and perceive ourselves, there is a lack of dialogue around the impact of how the past has turned our focus towards hurting each other through colorism, the process by which African-Americans "respond to shades of Black skin" (Neal & Wilson, 1989). Drawing on the research of psychologist Robert Hall, I demonstrate that the effect of our social construction of beauty has taken the African-American community farther apart as opposed to uniting us, impacting the development of young African-American women today. In this research, I dig deeper into the group interactions which lead the African-American woman to believe that she is not beautiful in the eyes of her community. In particular, I ask how issues of colorism within the African-American community lead to concerns of self-acceptance and perception of beauty among young African-American women.

## Factors of 'The Color Complex'

The underlying factors of the 'the color complex,' are the influence of the family, media and peers, which are all significant to understand the impact this phenomenon has and continues to have on African-American women. The distinctions created by Whites to distinguish between Blacks have come to be used within the African-American community, causing conflict between authentic Blackness and community membership. Black families have a direct effect on shaping the self-image of their children and

preparing them with the necessary tools to combat racism and discrimination as they grow older. Scholarship has determined that African-American girls are bombarded early with negative messages about their worth, intelligence and beauty (J.F. Brown, 1993). Black women today still struggle with self-esteem due to the perpetuation of lighter skin and long hair continuously used as the representation of the collective Black women of our community. This is reflected among popular Black women such as Nicki Minaj, Tyra Banks and even Beyoncé who have lightened their skin tone and lightened and straightened their hair to fit a more favorable perception of Black women, which young Black girls idealize. In addition to family and media messages, peers is a likely influence on young children that may reflect negative messages through behavior that may have implications of certain standards of beauty (Smolak & Levine, 2001). Peers have crucial and high impact roles in trauma experienced by young Black children due to internalized racism and discrimination. My research take these findings a step farther and analyze the phenomenon of the "color complex" today and look into how these conversations happen, how these ideals of physical beauty are being perpetuated and how this reoccurring issue leads to concerns of self-acceptance among young African-American women.

## Research Question

While there has been research on the negative societal messages received by adolescent African-American girls and research that correlates skin color bias with physical beauty among young African-American women, there is a lack of scholarship on the intra-group experiences and interactions among young African-American women that have led them to conform to social norms of beauty and/or question their self-perception.

I argue that socialization within the Black community has a strong impact on young African-American women, and more measures need to be taken to provide us with the tools to have these conversations and improve our self-image. In summary, through this research I aimed to understand how the phenomenon of colorism is reflected in the experiences of young Black women. In my research on how issues of colorism within the Black community lead to concerns of self-acceptance and perception of beauty among young African-American women, I found that young Black women perceive their beauty through the influence of family, peers, media, and division within the Black community. I also discovered the influence of young men on the perception of our beauty and the emphasis of lighter skin being favorable. I have concluded that among all these factors, the Black family has the largest impact on young African American women due to situational observances. Therefore, raised awareness around the intra-group conflict and its affect on younger generations should be brought to attention. These findings may fill a gap in existing research by challenging the work of earlier researchers, who have looked at the existence of colorism African-American women today and look farther into how this issue has been and is affecting their perception of beauty as well as acceptance of themselves.

<h3 style="text-align:center">Applications for Self-Development</h3>

Through this research, I hypothesized to find that young Black woman who have experienced the effects of the color complex in our community have difficulty talking about the issue with their peers and family members. I anticipated that the lack of tools to cope with discrimination from our own people leads to self-image issues, questions regarding racial identity, and a skewed perception of beauty due to the interactions they

engage in, overhear, and the information they observe in our community. These conclusions would have significant applications for the self-development of young Black women while also provide insight to parents, mentors and psychologists to help understand the importance of empowering young women of color to love their skin and our fellow sisters. This research may contribute to existing literature by specifically looking at how the color complex is experienced among young African-American women within their community and affects their self-image from adolescence to womanhood.

## Qualitative Research

I employed the lens of social construction; the societal construction of experiences through cognitive processes, in my research to analyze how young African-American women's communities are led to believe what beauty should look like (Young & Collin 2004). I used a qualitative approach to explore human experience, analyze beliefs, opinions, emotions and relationships among individuals within a select group to further examine how conflict around beauty has continued within the Black community. I used the method of phenomenology; a phenomenon-focused qualitative research for better understanding of the effects of the color complex through the experiences among young African-American women. I chose to do focus groups due to their ability to allow participants to draw comparisons, opinions and insight around complex behaviors. Using focus groups prior to individual interviews primes a participant for the topic of discussion and provides a starting point. Individual interviews allow the researcher to put behavior in context and provide access to understanding the participants' behavior (Seidman 1991). Focus groups and 1:1 interviews allow participants to have a conversation with

others that have shared similar experiences and to get more personal through their

rationale for actions in past situations.


**Participants**

   Prospective participants for the focus group were recruited from a Black student

group called Sisterhood that specially caters to young African-American women at the

University of Washington. I recruited another group through flyering and a Facebook

group event. Each group consisted of 8 to 10 women ranging from 18 to 25 years of age.

Kruger (1994) suggests the group be small enough to have opportunity to share insights

and yet large enough to provide diversity of perceptions (p. 17). Three students took part

in an in-depth 1:1 interview. I chose only three participants for the in-depth interview to

augment the information I gathered from the focus groups.

   In the focus groups, I showed clips from Duke and Berry's (2011) "Dark Girls"

documentary movie, which highlights experiences of the color complex among African-

American women, to provoke conversation around the phenomenon. The clips used to

prime the group to channel the discussion and reactions from the text. In constructing the

agendas and question protocols for the focus group and in-depth interviews, I crafted

original questions to be particular to the overarching aim of this study.

**Instrumentation**

   Data was generated by the use of video recording with the consent of participants. I

reviewed the video recordings and transcribed the speech verbatim to generate the

transcripts. I worked alone in generating the information with the use of one video

camera.

**Data Analysis**

The data from the focus groups and in-depth interviews has been analyzed through reading over transcripts to categorize the information which entailed dividing the data into themes. These statements are compartmentalized into clusters of themes and used to make a general description of the experience explained. The cluster themes include: family influence, beauty definitions, external acceptance, self-acceptance, peer influence, media, and skin color division. I took that the information farther and drew correlations to better understand how certain factors affected one another such as how external acceptance correlating with self-acceptance. With this analysis, I found that young Black women perceive their beauty through the influence of family, peers, media, and division within the Black community. I also discovered the influence of young men on the perception of our beauty and the emphasis of lighter skin being favorable. The names used during analysis are made up for the purpose of privacy.

<div align="center"><b>Research Findings</b></div>

After conducting my focus groups, various themes surfaced in the conversation around the color complex and the influences of their perception of beauty through past experiences among the participants. The in-depth interviews did not produce as helpful information due to possibly the questions asked and not priming those participants with a video or any context other than the purpose of the research to guide the conversation. With that being said, most of my analysis stems from the content produced from the focus groups. Themes that were brought to my attention included: family influence,

beauty definitions, external acceptance, self-acceptance, peer influence, media representation, and skin color division. These themes are pinpointed through context and key terms.

a) Beauty definition is classified as any instance where the participants would pinpoint certain physical features that were favorable and/or desired leading to what they considered beautiful. Key words and phrases that surfaced around beauty were 'lighter,' 'smaller nose' "if your hair is not straight…" "you're pretty for a black girl," that emphasized a Western beauty ideal. Eurocentric qualities of light skin and straight hair was emphasized as the message of what beauty is in our society through comments the participants make in regards to how they are compared to others. One the of participants presents what makes her sister beautiful by mentioning, "[my sister's] thicker and has light skin…she got more prettier and prettier…I felt like, if she's gonna be the beautiful one than fine, I'm gonna be the ugly smart one…I feel like I had to dress very nice to make it look like I was pretty." This specific excerpt brings to attention certain associations young women make with beauty that leads to particular behaviors of resistance.

b) Family influences are depicted through experiences around family members' comments and treatment. The young women tend to begin their responses to the video with interactions in their families and treatment from family members. Interactions are usually with other women in the family, particularly mothers, and address the concern of skin color through comments like, "pretty, light-skinned baby," and "oh you know, it's because you become darker than you were before," as an explanation to why her mother won't stop using skin bleaching products. Comparisons between

siblings are common among families such as comments and behaviors that pinpoint skin color and body image. The young women that exuded more positive perception of self-image usually mentioned comments from family as an influence. An example of this is one participant mentioning that her father said, "no matter what, if the KKK comes through this town, it does not matter if you are light skin, dark skin. If you're not white, you're getting hung. And so to me, that's always been my thing like I don't care if you're light or dark." Another young women looked up to her grandmother who would promote darker skin and resulted in the participant to "like [her] brown skin." The comments from family members either reinforced or retracted from the idea of black beauty.

c) Peer influences are defined by comments and behaviors by peers within the group that was observed and/or internalized by the participants. If participants do not necessarily experience effects of the color complex through family influence, friends and classmates is an evident factor. Many participants trace back to childhood experiences in middle school and high school that shaped the perception of their appearance. Young women are teased, ostracized, or favored for their appearance or how they act. One individual points out that her family never raised her to pay attention to the color of her skin and it is not until high school skin color is an issue. An interesting factor within peer influences that come into play throughout the focus groups is the influence young African American men have on how young African American women perceive their beauty. Many girls expressed comments and interactions between men that lead to a reassessment of their appearance. A participant mentions, "it wasn't until a light-skinned guy took interest in me and

complimented me on my chocolate skin that I felt worth anything." Another instance includes a conversation between one of the research participants and her sister, a freshman in high school, where the young girl says, "yeah this kid Andrew, I really like him. He probably doesn't like me back though because I'm black you know?" which reflects how male peers have an effect on our body perceptions.

d) Media influences are assessed by the observation of the media platforms that perpetuate the issue of the color complex among the Black community. Social media platforms with hashtags of #teamlightskin and #teamdarkskin bring to attention how young women divide themselves within their peer group. The representation of Black women in media has been called out as scarce by some of the participants with comments like, "and in the media, within the last year or something like that, I've seen [memes of] how light skinned girls respond to text…so there's kind of like a stigma that light skin girls think that they're better than everyone and I mean it's kind of harsh." Positive media representations of Black women reflect heightened appreciation for Black women that is recently shown in mainstream media such as Lupita N'yongo. During an in-depth interview, an interviewee states, "I really appreciate her because she shows not just darker skinned women, but Black women in general. She challenges Western ideal. She counters the master narrative there is about women of color; the perception of beauty in the media," displaying her observations of positive Black bodies in media.

With the factors of family, peers, and media at play, the effects of external acceptance, self-acceptance, and skin color division result from these influences.

## Outward Appearance with Personal Implications

The purpose of this study was to better understand how issues of the color complex within the African-American community lead to concerns of self-acceptance and perception of beauty among young African-American women. I attempted to examine family, peer, and media influences as factors that lead to concerns of self-acceptance and perception of beauty and included beauty definitions a moderating factor.

Study findings show that family influence was the strongest component to how young African American women perceive themselves considering most conversations stemming from family experiences. Experiences within the home and conversations with family members directed the lens of how these young women viewed their physical appearance as well as their sisters. Interestingly, media had a lower influence on the participants but was mentioned as a tool for conversations around the color complex to occur. Media is a main indicator of the division of skin color within the Black community through representation and trending topics such as #teamlightskin and #teamdarkskin.

Interestingly, men played a prominent role in the way younger African-American women assessed their beauty in comparison to male preferences. Many of the participants can recall an experience regarding African-American men that confirmed their beauty or led them to question their beauty. Social science data suggest that African American men have long found fair-skinned women the most sexually desirable; African American men adopted Eurocentric notions linking femininity to whiteness (Clark and Clark 1980; Drake and Cayton 1945; Freeman et al. 1966; Urdy et al. 1971; Hill 2002). Young African American women are affected by this phenomenon, which is evident in my

research through Black men preferring lighter skinned Black women or these women expecting be considered attractive based on the interest Black men reflect in their choice of the ideal woman.

With these conclusions, I discovered that the factors I examined result in the correlation of external and self-acceptance, and the ultimate outcome of skin color division, which I further discuss as follows.

*Looking Different from the Outside Thus Feeling Different in the Inside*

Key words and comments that reflect treatment from others, the desire for acceptance from others or observations of behaviors for approval are defined as external acceptance. External acceptance is usually an effect of the way family members, peers, and the media impact how young women react in terms of what others seek as approval. Our environment constructs the perception of bodies and we react accordingly in situations where for instance, skin color is pointed out and brought to attention. Self-acceptance is determined by internalized behaviors and feelings that result in either body alterations and/or personal statements about self. External self-acceptance correlate with the result of what is pinpointed on the physical body. This correlation leads to internalization that aligns with racial identification, defined by how an individual feels a sense of 'belongingness' to a particular racial group and the degree to which the perceived group values are internalized within the person's own self-concept, (Harvey, LaBeach, Pridgen, & Gocial 240). That very feeling of belongingness is made clear through treatment and comments whether they are positive or negative which I found evident when a participant, Sarah, mentioned her mother using skin whitening products but still telling the participant that her black skin was beautiful. Ironically, her mother did not believe her

own skin tone was valuable which leads her daughter to begin to question her value as a Black woman. Unfortunately, color holds such high stakes in society. Whether or not an individual is accepted externally can have psychological effects since skin-tone stigma is self-esteem, a person's feeling of self-worth, (Rosenburg, 1979). The young women in my research that were judged more attractive demonstrated higher self-esteem through their expression of embracing their skin, their blackness, and themselves. Sarah also mentions her relationship with her "beautiful" sister who she teases and scolds for being of lighter skin and curvier shape, which is favored in her family. I correspond Sarah's actions in result of her family influences with self-acceptance due to the ways she constantly rejects herself in order to emulate the examples set in front of her. Self-acceptance underlines comfort, happiness and wholeness with oneself, which this young woman found difficulty in reflecting. Sarah goes even farther to explain, "natural hair thing was hard for me," and, "people would tell me I'm pretty and I'm like yeah, yeah, whatever," exposing how peers did not affect her as much as family. Her form of self-acceptance was at the expense of herself and fueled the message coming towards her bringing the color complex to its relevance. Based on the evidence of my research, the color complex being the psychological fixation about color and features that lead African-Americans to discriminate against each other, results in the affect of external-acceptance that directly correlates with self-acceptance.

<div align="center">*Separation in Sameness*</div>

To take a step further, skin color division surfaces from the evidence of my research being possibly the sole way young Black women perceive beauty. I evaluated this concept by pinpointing key words and phrases that separate the appearance of the Black

community through shades of color variations. The connotations with black skin are usually classified as negative and unfavorable leading some of the participants to want to disassociate with the term and rather be called brown; what they believe their skin color really is. Shanice, a focus group participant, states a powerful realization explaining, "I mean it's sad cause for so long white people or the Caucasian race was against people darker skinned. And I think people in our own community are against each other because of like dark skin…" putting the intra-group conflict of the color complex, specifically skin color politics, into context.

Recent research has studied skin color and its relationship to body (dis) satisfaction and self-esteem in correlation to body image and the sociocultural experience of women of the African diaspora (Mucherah and Frazier, 2013). Their research suggested further addressing to what degree skin color satisfaction impacts an individual's well-being that could be found with a qualitative approach. My research has demonstrated the analysis of the factors that affect African American women within the broader context of the color complex and goes even farther to address how their perception of beauty is affected due to various factors at play.

Future research could address how Black women who migrated to the United States from other countries and how their perception of beauty has altered, whether through stronger racial identity, ambiguity or changed perceptions of beauty. Some answers for these questions would be interesting to access with quantitative research methods. My next step to further progress my current study would be to examine the color complex among older African American women.

One limitation of the present study is that these participants did not represent the diverse population of African-American women at the University of Washington and Black college women more generally. Due to time restraints, I was not be able to recruit women from outside of the UW, such as young Black women living in different areas outside of the University District who are not currently pursuing higher education. Another limitation was that by looking specifically at young Black college women from the ages of 18-25, this excluded the voices of older Black women. However, the aim of this research is to analyze the experiences of young women in between their adolescence and full womanhood, to understand how they are shaping their identity in a negative or positive way at this present point in their lives. Future studies may examine experiences of older Black women and whether their perception of beauty reflects the idea of colorism prior to the 21$^{st}$ century.

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