Senior Honors Projects, 2020-current                        Honors College

5-14-2022

# Loving the skin you're in: The mediating role of internalized racism between skin color satisfaction and self-esteem

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Loving the Skin You're In: The Mediating Role of Internalized Racism Between Skin Color
Satisfaction and Self-Esteem

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An Honors College Project Presented to

the Faculty of the Undergraduate

College of Health and Behavioral Studies

James Madison University
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March 2022

Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Psychology, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

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PUBLIC PRESENTATION

This work is accepted for presentation, in part or in full, at the Virginia Association of Psychological Sciences

(VAPS) Spring Conference on April 1, 2022.

# Contents

**Acknowledgments**

## Abstract

Colorism is discrimination against individuals with darker skin, with preference afforded to those with lighter skin (Hunter, 2007). To study colorism, researchers have looked at concepts that colorism influences, such as skin color satisfaction, internalized racism, and self-esteem (Coard et al., 2001; Maxwell et al., 2015). The current study determined if internalized racism acts as a mediator between skin color satisfaction and self-esteem in Black participants since internalized racism influences both (David et al., 2019; Maxwell et al., 2015). I also determined if skin color acts as a moderator, explaining differences in the effect of skin color satisfaction on internalized racism, based on the darkness of Black participants' skin tones. Three hundred and twenty-six participants were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) to complete an online survey through Qualtrics. Data were collected through four variables: Internalized Racial Oppression Scale, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, Scale of Skin Color Darkness, and Skin Color Satisfaction Scale. A demographic questionnaire was also given. Moderated mediation analysis was performed, using regression-based techniques with Hayes' PROCESS Macro for IBM's SPSS software (model 8; Hayes, 2017). Black participants with higher skin color satisfaction were associated with higher general self-esteem, which was explained by participants' lowered internalized racism. Additionally, there was evidence that participants with darker skin colors were more affected by internalized racism as a mediator between skin color satisfaction and self-esteem.

*Keywords: Internalized Racism, Self-Esteem, Skin Color Satisfaction, Skin Color*

**Loving the Skin You're In: The Mediating Role of Internalized Racism Between Skin Color Satisfaction and Self-Esteem**

In 2012, a casting agency for an *Acura* automobile commercial put out a casting call for a Black man who was "nice-looking, friendly, not too dark" (Crawley, 2012). Some of the most popular Black musicians in today's society have light skin, including Beyoncé, Rihanna, and Drake. In hit Netflix shows, such as *Bridgerton*, *BlackAF*, and *Ginny and Georgia*, all of the Black lead actors have lighter skin. If actors with darker skin appear, they are typically extras or do not have lead roles. These are all examples of colorism. Colorism refers to the discrimination and prejudice that gives individuals with lighter skin privileges over those with darker skin (Hunter, 2007). It was first coined in 1982 by novelist Alice Walker, author of *The Color Purple*. While Latinos, Asians, Native Americans, and other people of color can experience colorism, much of the literature has focused on Black individuals (Walker, 1983). In this study, I hope to explore other psychological mechanisms related to colorism, and how they affect individuals in the Black community.

**Colorism and the Black Community**

Colorism is deeply rooted in racism, but they are not the same (Hunter, 2007). For example, all Black people experience discrimination because they are Black, but the amount and intensity of said discrimination will differ based on skin color, as well as other factors (Hunter, 2007). The first incident of simultaneous racism and colorism against Black individuals in the United States was slavery (Dhillon-Jamerson, 2018; Hunter, 2007). Enslaved people were placed in a hierarchical system based on skin color. Those with lighter skin worked in the house and received more opportunities to learn how to read and write because of the proximity to their

white owners (Davis, 1991). Those who worked in the house also had a higher chance of receiving their freedom. During slavery, an elite class of freedmen was created. Most of the individuals in this social strata had lighter skin and were given job opportunities as teachers and business leaders (Gatewood, 1990). By contrast, those with darker skin worked in the fields. They worked long hours and were not usually given a chance to learn how to read or write (Davis, 1991). Because of slavery and racism, colorism became a big problem for the Black community.

White supremacy is the ideology that white individuals are superior to Black individuals, and white individuals should have control over Black individuals (Dhillon-Jamerson, 2018). White supremacists maintain colorism by holding the ideology that darker skin represents "savagery, irrationality, ugliness, and inferiority" and white skin represents "civility, rationality, beauty, and superiority" (Hunter, 2007). This belief system is the foundation of colorism and the rationale for the U.S. slave hierarchical system. Although colorism started as an interracial issue from U.S. slavery and white supremacy, Black individuals saw the advantages that lighter skin individuals received. Because of the advantages, colorism extended into an intraracial issue, meaning in addition to being a Black versus White issue, it became an issue within the Black community (Dhillon-Jamerson, 2018).

Around the same time freedman organizations were created, discrimination based on skin color began to occur in the Black community. The Brown Paper Bag test was created to set up an internal hierarchy with those with lighter skin being superior to those with darker skin. To police this hierarchy, a brown paper bag was placed upon one's arm to determine skin color; if one's skin was darker than the bag, they were put into the least privileged category. Those that were

the same color as the bag were categorized in the middle. If one's skin color was lighter, one would be placed into the most privileged category (Kerr, 2005). Being in this privileged category gave those with lighter skin better resources than their dark-skinned counterparts, including a higher paying job, a better neighborhood, and a higher-status spouse (Hunter, 2007). The Brown Paper Bag test was used to police inclusion and acceptance within the most privileged parts of the Black community, with it being used to get acceptance into the most high-status Black churches, Black clubs, and Black social circles (Kerr, 2005). Even though the test seems like it would have only been used long ago, even into the mid-1980s, it was used at events, such as a Howard Law School graduation party (Kerr, 2005). A group of girls, who had lighter skin, organized an on-campus, invite-only-graduation party named "Paper Bag Party". This tactic was used so that only students with lighter skin could attend (Kerr, 2005). Just as with racism, colorism is a social problem that was introduced by white people; however, it is partially maintained by the Black community.

Today there is still a clear discrepancy of privilege between those with darker and lighter skin. For example, Black individuals with darker skin experience more police brutality, attain lower education levels, receive lower wages, and have inferior jobs than those with lighter skin (Crutchfield et al., 2017; Dhillon-Jamerson, 2018; Ryabov, 2019). In a study with adolescent girls aged 12-16, the girls believed that lighter skin was synonymous with beauty and higher class, while darker skin was synonymous with unattractiveness and lower class (Abrams et al., 2020). The entertainment industry and beauty industries have further peddled this ideology. For example, Mitchell (2020) looked at which skin colors are most represented in marketing campaigns. She examined four magazines: two targeting Black women and two targeting White women. Each of the magazines included advertisements for beauty, retail, and

media/entertainment. It was found that only 10% of women in the magazines had darker skin, while 36% of the women had lighter skin (Mitchell, 2020). The rest of the women had medium-colored skin. If young children are shown that only women with light and medium skin are recognized as beautiful and have the means to go shopping, they will be more likely to believe the ideology that individuals with darker skin are unattractive and lower class. As colorism persists in everyday life, there has been a growing body of research on the topic and related psychological concepts.

**Skin Color Satisfaction and Self-Esteem**

Skin color satisfaction is defined as how much an individual is satisfied with the color of their skin (Maxwell et al., 2015). It is often assumed that individuals with lighter skin must be more satisfied with their skin color than those with darker skin. This is because it is presumed that individuals with lighter skin experience less discrimination, and those with darker skin tend to desire to be lighter (Thompson & Keith, 2001). However, the research that has examined skin color satisfaction showned results have sometimes been inconsistent with this assumption. On the one hand, Mucherah and Frazier (2013) compared skin color satisfaction, self-esteem, and body dissatisfaction among African, African American, African Caribbean, and biracial women and found that biracial women with lighter skin were the most satisfied with their skin color. On the other hand, Coard, Breland, and Raskin (2001) examined skin color satisfaction between participants with lighter, medium, and darker skin. They found that participants with darker skin had higher skin color satisfaction than participants with lighter skin. Bond and Cash (1992) examined participants with lighter, medium, and darker skin and found no difference between them, in terms of their skin color satisfaction. Another study found similar results; skin color

satisfaction was not affected by skin color (Maxwell et al., 2015). Although the number of studies examining these effects has been increasing, the research findings continue to be inconclusive.

Another concept related to one's satisfaction with aspects of themselves is self-esteem. Self-esteem is an individual's overall positive or negative evaluation of themselves (Cast & Burke, 2002). This construct represents how much a person values themselves, as well as their perceived level of importance in the larger society (Dar & Wani, 2017). Many studies have found that there is a relationship between skin color satisfaction and self-esteem. However, these results were often the opposite of the researchers' expectations. For example, Coard, Breland, and Raskin (2001) found that male participants with darker skin, who were more satisfied with their skin color, reported lower levels of self-esteem. Mucherah and Frazier (2013) found similar results, showing that women who had the highest levels of skin color satisfaction also had the lowest self-esteem. Coard, Breland, and Raskin (2001) provided a few possible explanations as to why this inverse relationship between skin color satisfaction and self-esteem might exist. First, they stated that participants may have equated acceptance with satisfaction. It is possible to accept something but not like it. The participants may have accepted their skin color but might not have necessarily liked it or been satisfied with it. Second, they stated that participants could have been satisfied with their skin color, but the negative perceptions and beliefs of others could have affected their global self-esteem (Coard et al., 2001). As of now, no studies have examined the mechanisms underlying this previously documented inverse relationship between skin color satisfaction and self-esteem. There is a need for research in this area.

**Internalized Racism**

Internalized racism refers to marginalized racial groups (e.g., African Americans) accepting negative stereotypes and stigmatizing societal beliefs as applying to themselves and other members of their racial group (Speight, 2007). This type of within-group racism can be covert (i.e., unconscious) and plays an important role in how Black individuals operate throughout life, including avoiding those of the same race (David et al., 2019; Speight, 2007).

Internalized racism clearly plays a significant role in one's overall self-evaluation, but leaves open the question of how it relates to skin color satisfaction. One study found that Black participants' internalized racism was associated with less skin color satisfaction (Maxwell et al., 2015). Although this study was an important contribution, there have not been many other studies that look at the relationship between internalized racism and skin color satisfaction. Furthermore, even fewer studies have examined whether this association changes, based on the skin color of the participants.

Researchers have also studied the relationship between internalized racism and self-esteem. One study, conducted by Thomas, Witherspoon, and Speight (2004), examined how acceptance of negative stereotypical views of Black women was related to self-esteem. They found that accepting the "Mammy" stereotype, or the depiction of Black women as working for a white family and nursing their children, was related to lower self-esteem. Additionally, acceptance of the "Sapphire" stereotype (Black women are loud, argumentative, and angry; i.g., the Angry Black Woman stereotype) were related to lower self-esteem. Other studies have found that internalized racism is related to lower levels of self-esteem in Black individuals (David et al., 2019; Szymanski & Gupta, 2009; Brown et al., 2002). However, few studies have expanded to examine how this relationship could be associated with skin color and skin color satisfaction.

In addition to decreasing self-esteem, internalized racism can also be detrimental to one's overall mental health. For example, studies have shown that internalized racism is related to lower levels of psychological well-being and life satisfaction in Black individuals (Bailey, 2009). Internalized racism is also related to higher levels of helplessness (Cort et al., 2009) and stress (Bailey, 2009) in Black individuals. It is also related to specific psychological disorders such as depression (Mouzon & McLean, 2017), anxiety (Graham et al., 2016), and body dissatisfaction (Cort et al., 2013). Lastly, internalized racism can harm physical health including higher levels of obesity (Cort et al., 2013), a higher chance of cardiovascular disease (Chae et al., 2010), and shorter telomere length, indicating a, potentially, sooner death and overall poor health (Chae et al., 2014). Internalizing racist attitudes prevent Black individuals from being healthy, which can impact one's overall well-being and livelihood. Therefore, it is important that researchers continue to understand what is associated with internalized racism, in order to possibly help alleviate these negative effects. In this study, I examined skin color and skin color satisfaction as a predictor of internalized racism. This in turn should be associated with important outcomes, like self-esteem, in ways previously examined.

**The Present Research**

Internalized racism should influence the relationship between skin color satisfaction and self-esteem for many reasons. First, internalized racism is related to skin color satisfaction and self-esteem. Additionally, self-esteem is contingent, meaning it can change based on the approval of others and important events that occur as one is being socialized (Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003). Colorist experiences that children have at school can contribute to internalized racism which, in turn, could be associated with lower self-esteem. For example, in a longitudinal

study on African American girls, girls with darker skin had the lowest baseline levels of self-esteem, which then decreased as the girls entered middle school (Adams et al., 2020). This experience of entering middle school was an event that seemed to change the girls' self-esteem. This change in self-esteem could be because dark-skinned children are more disciplined and receive less attention from their teachers, leading them to internalize the messages of inferiority and stigmatized status that they receive from their teachers (Hunter, 2016).

More studies are needed to examine the relationship between skin color satisfaction, internalized racism, and self-esteem. The present study did this by examining the following research question: Does internalized racism mediate the relationship between skin color satisfaction and self-esteem? I hypothesized that internalized racism will mediate the relationship between skin color satisfaction and self-esteem. I also examined the following exploratory research question: Does skin color moderate (i.e., influence the strength and/or direction) the relationship between skin color satisfaction and internalized racism? On the one hand, there may be a stronger association for those with darker skin since colorism and racism are very connected. On the other hand, there may be a stronger association for those with lighter skin as many might be of mixed race. This could complicate the feelings of their Black identity and skin color which could lead to an increase in internalized racism. It is important to bridge this gap in knowledge because internalizing these negative messages about one's skin color can have serious implications for one's mental and physical health, leading to lower overall well-being.

**Method**

**Participants**

This study was administered using Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) to recruit adult (at least 18 years of age) participants who identified as Black/African American and resided in the United States. MTurk is a useful recruitment tool because it allows one to reach a population that is not widely seen in rural or predominantly White areas, such as the Shenandoah Valley and James Madison University, where this research took place. Three hundred and fifty-three participants began the survey; however, if participants did not finish the survey, completely, did not provide consent, or did not pass attention checks, they were excluded from the analyses. The final analyses included a sample size of 326 participants between the ages of 18 and 76 years old and a mean age of 37.5.

Two hundred and fifteen participants (66%) identified as female, 108 (33.1%) as male, and three (0.9%) as nonbinary. Two hundred and two (62%) participants had a college degree, 97 (29.8%) participants attended college but received no degree, 26 (8%) participants obtained their high school diploma or GED, and one participant (.3%) had less than a high school degree. Of the 326 Black participants, nine also (2.8%) identified as Hispanic, four (1.2%) identified as Latino, and two (0.6%) identified as Spanish. Three-hundred and twenty-three participants identified explicitly as Black/African American in my survey (99.1%) (those who did not identify as Black [$n = 3$] were retained, for reasons explained later). Thirteen participants also identified as other races including Native American/Alaska Native (2.1%), Asian (0.6%), Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (0.3%), white (2.1%), and "other" (0.3%). Participants had the option to choose more than one race, which was indicative of their mixed-race status. A complete list of demographics can be found in Table 1.

Although I used Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) to screen for Black/African

American participants, three participants did not explicitly identify as such. However, these

participants were retained for analyses, since they would have identified as Black/African

American at some point in their lives. It was required for them to identify as such to pass through

the MTurk screening procedure. Additionally, after comparing analyses that only included Black

participants to analyses that included all participants, the results were very similar and the levels

of significance did not change. Participants took approximately 15 minutes to complete the

survey and were compensated $1.81 for their participation.

**Table 1**

*Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

|                                      | *n*  | *%*    |
|--------------------------------------|------|--------|
| Gender                               |      |        |
| Female                               | 215  | 66.00  |
| Male                                 | 108  | 33.10  |
| Nonbinary                            | 3    | 0.90   |
| Race                                 |      |        |
| American Indian/Alaska Native        | 7    | 2.10   |
| Asian                                | 2    | 0.60   |
| Black/African American               | 323  | 99.10  |
| Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander     | 1    | 0.30   |
| Other                                | 1    | 0.30   |
| White                                | 7    | 2.10   |
| Ethnicity                            |      |        |
| Hispanic                             | 2    | 2.80   |
| Latino                               | 4    | 1.20   |
| Spanish                              | 2    | 0.60   |
| Sexual Orientation                   |      |        |
| Asexual                              | 6    | 1.80   |
| Bisexual                             | 23   | 7.10   |
| Heterosexual (straight)              | 282  | 86.50  |
| Homosexual (lesbian/gay)             | 10   | 3.10   |
| Pansexual                            | 2    | 0.60   |
| Questioning                          | 1    | 0.30   |
| Prefer not to say                    | 2    | 0.90   |

Highest Education Level

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Less than high school degree | 1 | 0.30 |
| High school graduate | 26 | 8.00 |
| Some college but no degree | 97 | 29.80 |
| Associate degree (2-year) | 45 | 13.80 |
| Bachelor's degree (4-year) | 109 | 33.40 |
| Master's degree | 43 | 13.20 |
| Professional degree (JD, MD, PhD) | 5 | 1.50 |

Class

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Lower to Working Class | 83 | 25.50 |
| Middle to Upper Middle Class | 196 | 60.10 |
| Upper Class | 45 | 13.80 |

Political Party

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Democrat | 216 | 66.30 |
| Democratic Socialist | 1 | 0.30 |
| Green | 1 | 0.30 |
| Independent | 72 | 22.10 |
| Libertarian | 3 | 0.90 |
| Neutral/None/No Affiliation | 10 | 3.60 |
| Progressive | 1 | 0.30 |
| Republican | 22 | 6.70 |

*Note*. $N = 326$.

**Procedure**

After receiving approval from the Honors Thesis committee and the Internal Review

Board (IRB), the survey was launched on Amazon Mechanical Turk (hosted on Qualtrics). Pilot

testing was conducted to determine the actual expected amount of time and to ensure fair

compensation of MTurk workers. As a cover story, participants were told that they were

completing the survey to help me compare new psychological measures to old psychological

measures. To do this, I added additional measures, that were not included in the analysis, in the

survey so that participants could compare them. Before completing the survey, participants

signed a consent form, stating they knew they had the right to withdraw from the study at any

time and there are no more risks involved than they would experience in their daily lives.

Participants completed the inventories in the following order: demographic questionnaire, Scale

of Skin Color Darkness, Internalized Racial Oppression Scale (IROS), Rosenberg Self-Esteem

Scale (RSES), and, lastly, Skin Color Satisfaction Scale (SCSS).

After submitting the survey, participants were debriefed on the true purpose of the study.

A debriefing page appeared telling participants the hypotheses and specific purpose of the study,

as well as a list of mental health resources. Participants received a unique completion code, after

reaching the debriefing page, which they entered into MTurk to receive compensation.

**Measures**

*Demographic Questionnaire*

A demographic questionnaire, including gender, sexual orientation, class/income, age,

racial identity, ethnic identity, political affiliation, and highest level of education, was given to

participants to document the make-up of the sample. See Appendix A for the entire

questionnaire.

*Skin Color*

**Scale of Skin Color Darkness.** Skin color was measured using the Scale of Skin Color

Darkness. This scale was used in the American National Election Studies (ANES) 2012 Time

Series Study (American National Election Studies, n.d.) This ten-point scale, ranging from 1 (the

lightest possible skin color) to 10 (the darkest possible skin color), includes images of the same

hand, differing in skin color. Participants were instructed to select which number best

corresponded to their own skin color. See Appendix B for the measure.

**Pantone Color System.** Participants' skin color was also measured using the Pantone

Color System. The Pantone Color System is a standardized color system that describes colors

using an allocated number. PMS 726 to PMS 732 were skin tone color stripes used to represent

the lightest skin tone (PMS 726) to the darkest skin tone (PMS 732). This seven-point scale was

suggested by one of my Honors Thesis committee members and previous research showed it had

high reliability ($k = .82$). However, because there were no differences in the effects or

significance of the results between the Scale of Skin Color Darkness and Pantone Color System,

I decided to only include the Scale of Skin Color Darkness in the analysis, given there were more

skin color choices in this measure. See Appendix C for the measure.

### Internalized Racial Oppression Scale (IROS)

Internalized racism was measured using the Internalized Racial Oppression Scale (IROS;

Bailey et al., 2011). This scale includes five dimensions including internalization of negative

stereotypes (INS; $\alpha = .86$), hair change (HC; $\alpha = .67$), devaluation of the African worldview and

motifs (DAW; $\alpha = .75$), belief in the biased representation of history (BRH; $\alpha = .74$), and

alteration of physical appearance (APA; $\alpha = .61$; Bailey et al., 2011). This scale uses a 7-point

Likert scale with scores ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) with higher

scores indicating a greater degree of internalized racism. Four questions under the APA

subsection include feelings about skin color, which were assessed on a separate scale. To avoid

testing this information twice, these questions were removed from the analyses. Instead, I used a

more robust measure of skin color satisfaction to measure that variable. The removed items

included: "I wish my skin was lighter than it is now," "I would like a partner with lighter skin, to

insure that my children will have lighter skin,", "It is fine to use skin care products to lighten

skin color,", and "Lighter skin is more attractive". Two example questions from the rest of the

scale include: "Most Black people are on welfare" and "I hesitate to do business with Black-

owned companies because of their mismanagement" (Bailey et al., 2011). The total scale's alpha

coefficient for this study was .89. The original researchers used exploratory factor analysis to

ensure construct validity and reliability of the scale (Bailey et al., 2011).  To see the complete

measure, see Appendix D.

### Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)

Self-esteem was assessed using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg,

1965). The RSES is a 10-question measure of global self-esteem. Participants answered the

RSES using a seven-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly

agree)*. The five negatively worded questions were reverse scored (1 = *strongly agree*, 7 =

*strongly disagree*). Two example questions include "I feel that I have a number of good

qualities" and "I certainly feel useless at times". Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .92,

ensuring strong reliability. The original researchers indicated that this scale demonstrates

construct, and specifically convergent validity, by comparing the scale to other scales assessing

self-esteem. See Appendix E for the full measure.

### Skin Color Satisfaction Scale

In this study, skin color satisfaction was assessed using the Skin Color Satisfaction Scale

(SCSS; Falconer & Neville, 2000), which included the Skin Color Questionnaire (SCQ; Bond &

Cash, 1992). This scale encompassed six questions. One question came from the original SCQ

which examined skin color satisfaction: "How satisfied are you with the shade (lightness or

darkness) of your own skin color?" This item was rated using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*extremely dissatisfied)* to 7 (*extremely satisfied).*

The next four questions of the SCSS included "Compared to the complexion (skin color) of members of my family, I am satisfied with my skin color"; "I wish the shade of my skin was darker" (reverse scored); "I wish my skin was lighter" (reverse scored); and "Compared to the complexion (skin color) of other African Americans, I am satisfied with my skin color" (Falconer & Neville, 2000). The SCSS had strong reliability in previous research, with an alpha coefficient of .71 (Falconer & Neville, 2000); Cronbach's alpha was .81 in this study. The two reverse-scored items, which indicate whether individuals desire to have either lighter or darker skin, were reversed since wishing for a different skin color would indicate skin color dissatisfaction. For the full scale, please see Appendix F.

**Data Analysis Strategy**

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 28. Before performing any planned statistical analyses, data were cleaned and checked for outliers. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated for skin color, skin color satisfaction, internalized racism, and self-esteem. Pearson correlation coefficients (Pearson's *r*) were examined to determine the strength and direction of the relationships between the variables.

To test for the hypothesis, a moderated-mediation analysis was performed using regression-based techniques with Hayes' PROCESS Macro for IBM's SPSS software (Model 8). Skin color satisfaction was entered as the main predictor variable (*X*). Skin color was the moderator (*W*). The mediator (*M*) was internalized racism. Lastly, self-esteem was the criterion

variable ($Y$). The mediation model has three paths: ($a$) the direct effect of skin color satisfaction

on internalized racism, ($b$) the direct effect of internalized racism on self-esteem, and ($c$) the

direct effect of skin color satisfaction on self-esteem (Hayes, 2017). Skin color was moderated

between skin color satisfaction ($X$) and internalized racism ($Y$; $a$ path) as well as between skin

color satisfaction ($X$) and self-esteem ($Y$; $c$ path) to find the indirect effects ($c'$) across categories

of skin color. The separate indirect effects for each level of skin color are used to determine

whether those with lighter, medium, or darker skin colors have a stronger, more significant

relationship between skin color satisfaction and self-esteem, explained by internalized racism.

The index of moderated mediation was used to test the significance of the moderated mediation,

or whether the indirect effects were significantly different between the levels of skin color. Both

skin color satisfaction and skin color were mean-centered prior to analysis, since the analyses

included tests of interaction terms.

## Results

### Descriptives & Correlations

Participants reported both high average levels of skin color satisfaction ($M = 5.85$) and

self-esteem ($M = 5.45$), while internalized racism was low ($M = 2.44$). Participants had a

relatively wide range of skin colors with 102 (31.3%) participants reporting a lighter skin color,

175 (53.7%) participants reported having a medium skin color, and 49 (15%) of participants

reporting a darker skin color.

Table 2 shows the correlations between study variables. There were no significant

relationships between participants' skin color satisfaction and skin color, their level of

internalized racism and skin color, or their self-esteem and skin color. Based on Lovakov and

Agadullina's (2021) social psychological guidelines for correlation coefficient interpretation, the

correlations listed represent weak correlations ($\leq$ .12). There was a significant, negative

relationship between participants' internalization of racism and skin color satisfaction, as well as

between their level of internalized racism and level of general self-esteem. Participants who had

more satisfaction with their skin color also had more self-esteem.

**Table 2**

*Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables*

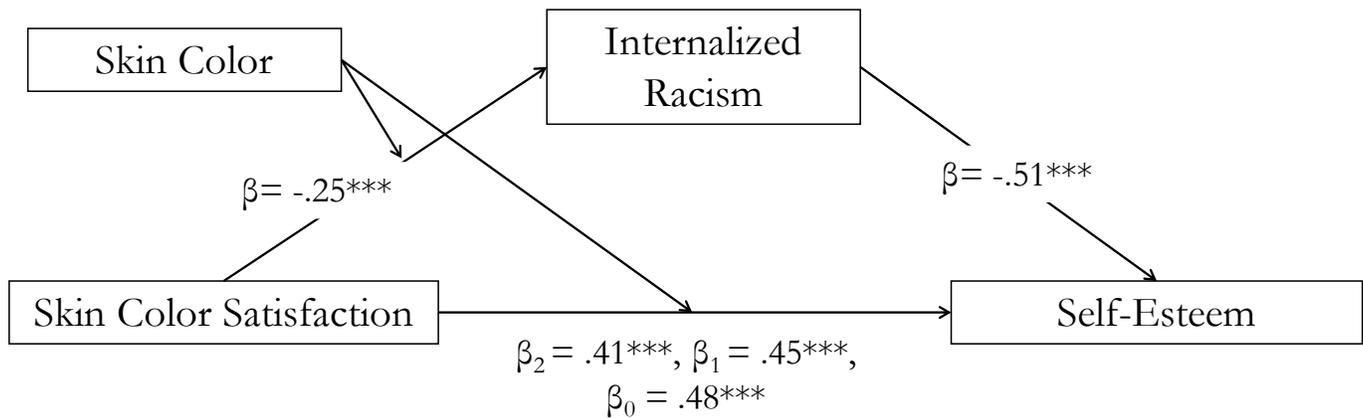| Variables | *n* | *M* | *SD* | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Skin Color Satisfaction | 326 | 5.85 | 1.02 | — | | | |
| 2. Skin Color | 326 | 5.17 | 1.40 | -0.05 | — | | |
| 3. Internalized Racism | 326 | 2.44 | 0.74 | -0.35** | -0.01 | — | |
| 4. Self-Esteem | 326 | 5.45 | 1.32 | 0.44** | -0.07 | -.39** | — |

**p < .01.

**Moderated Mediation**

The centered mean for skin color was -.17, indicating that participants' skin color was

skewed toward lighter skin colors. As shown in Figure 2, results indicated that a significant

inverse relationship existed between participants' skin color satisfaction and their levels of

internalized racism (path *a*; $\beta$ = -.25, *95% CI*: [-.32, -.18]). Participants also experienced a

significant negative relationship between their internalized racism and their levels of self-esteem

(path *b*; $\beta$ = -.51, *95% CI*: [-.69, -.33]).

It was hypothesized that internalized racism would mediate the relationship between skin

color satisfaction and self-esteem. Additionally, skin color was expected to moderate the

relationship between skin color satisfaction and internalized racism. There was no specific

prediction as to which skin color category (i.e., individuals with lighter, medium, or darker skin) would experience more or less internalized racism, as a result of skin color satisfaction. There was a significant, positive direct effect of skin color satisfaction on self-esteem, for individuals with lighter skin ($\beta$ = .48, *95% CI*: [.33, .64]), individuals with medium skin ($\beta$ = .45, *95% CI:* [.32, .58]), and individuals with darker skin ($\beta$ = .41, *95% CI:* [.26, .56]). These results differed from the results of previous studies since previous research found that participants who were more satisfied with their skin color experienced lower self-esteem (Coard et al., 2001; Mucherah & Frazier, 2013).

There was also a smaller, significant, and positive indirect effect on skin color satisfaction and self-esteem, as a result of internalized racism, for those with lighter, medium, and darker skin colors. This meant that internalized racism significantly mediated the relationship between skin color satisfaction and self-esteem for all skin color categories, such that individuals who were more satisfied with their skin color were associated with higher general self-esteem, and this was explained by participants experiencing lower levels of internalized racism. Additionally, since the index of moderated mediation was significant, the model also showed that those with darker skin colors had a stronger indirect effect than those with lighter and medium skin, meaning they may be more affected by internalized racism as a mediator between skin color satisfaction and self-esteem.

**Figure 1**

*Moderated-Mediation Model*



```
┌─────────────────┐              ┌──────────────┐
│   Skin Color    │              │ Internalized │
└─────────────────┘              │    Racism    │
                                 └──────────────┘
         β= -.25***                          β= -.51***

┌───────────────────────┐              ┌──────────────┐
│ Skin Color Satisfaction│─────────────▶│  Self-Esteem │
└───────────────────────┘              └──────────────┘
        β₂ = .41***, β₁ = .45***,
             β₀ = .48***
```

$\beta = -.25^{***}$

$\beta = -.51^{***}$

$\beta_2 = .41^{***}, \beta_1 = .45^{***}, \beta_0 = .48^{***}$

*Note.* Moderated Mediation for the effect of skin color satisfaction on self-esteem, by internalized racism and moderated by skin color. Indirect Effect $_2$ = .16, 95% Confidence Interval (1,000 bootstrapped samples): [.09, .25]. Indirect Effect $_1$ = .12, 95% Confidence Interval (1,000 bootstrapped samples): [.07, .19]. Indirect Effect $_0$ = .09, 95% Confidence Interval (1,000 bootstrapped samples): [.03, .16]. Index of Moderated Mediation = .04, 95% Confidence Interval (1,000 bootstrapped samples): [.0004, .0719]. $R^2$ = .27, $F$ (4, 321) = 29, $p$ < .001. W variable coding: 0 = Lighter skin color, 1 = Medium skin color, 2 = Darker skin color. $^t$ $p$ < .1, * $p$ < .05, ** $p$ < .01, *** $p$ < .001.

## Discussion

Because previous research found that lower skin color satisfaction was associated with higher self-esteem, the goal of this study was to examine the relationship between skin color satisfaction and self-esteem among Black participants while examining internalized racism as a

mediator. I was also interested in how skin color moderated the relationship between skin color satisfaction and internalized racism. I hypothesized that internalized racism would mediate the relationship between skin color satisfaction and self-esteem, and skin color would moderate the relationship between skin color satisfaction and internalized racism. My findings supported these hypotheses. In Black participants, individuals more satisfied with their skin color had higher levels of self-esteem which were explained by lowered internalization of negative attitudes about Black individuals. Additionally, findings showed that participants with darker skin colors may be more strongly affected by the mediating influence of internalized racism than those with lighter or medium skin. Participants with darker skin colors experienced a stronger relationship between skin color satisfaction, as a result of internalized racism, compared to those with lighter skin. This means that skin color affected darker-skinned participants' self-esteem more than lighter-skinned participants' as a result of internalized racism being more strongly associated with lower skin color satisfaction among participants with darker skin colors.

There may be a couple of reasons why those with darker skin are more affected by internalized racism, compared to participants with lighter skin. One may be due to the stigma Black individuals with darker skin face their entire lives. Although colorism and racism are two distinct systems of discrimination, they work in concert (Hunter, 2007). This means that my participants with darker skin are more likely to face racism and colorism as opposed to participants with lighter skin who are more likely to experience only racism. One example of this occurring was discussed by Dhillon-Jamerson (2018) as he deliberated on the economic influences of colorism. As skin becomes lighter, education attainment increases. Young Black children, especially those with darker skin, are presented with an unfair opportunity from when they first begin school due to a phenomenon titled the halo effect (Hunter, 2016). The halo effect

suggests that individuals allow physical attractiveness to influence other traits, including

intelligence and kindness. Because darker skin is associated with unattractiveness, teachers may

subconsciously favor Black individuals with lighter skin because these students are associated

with competence and likeability. In other words, teachers believe that Black students with lighter

skin are smart and Black students with darker skin are not. This could affect Black students with

darker skin's relationship with the school and the type of educational goals that are set (e.g.,

good grades, going to college, etc.) which could explain why those with darker skin obtain lower

levels of education.

Children also face stigma from their families. Umaña-Taylor et al. (2014) found that

families play a large part in ethnic and racial identity formation, from early childhood until

young adulthood. For example, Coard et al. (2001) found that individuals' skin color perception

was associated with family members' ideal skin color. If family members felt positive towards

lighter skin but negative towards darker skin, participants were more likely to choose a lighter

skin color than their own. As families subscribe to colorist beliefs, children with darker skin will

feel underappreciated or unworthy. Peer influences also play a big role in the stigma faced. One

study showed that adolescence and young adults are more likely to be influenced by peers than

adults (Steinberg & Monahan, 2007). Peer interactions for Black adolescent students, such as

getting asked on a date or elected as homecoming queen, are based upon colorist ideologies,

stating that darker skin is inferior to lighter skin (Hunter, 2016). These interactions manifest in

thought as adolescent girls are more likely to believe colorist messaging in the beauty industry

and class status (Abrams et al., 2020). Teacher, family, and peer colorist ideologies can greatly

affect how adolescents and young adults with darker skin view themselves and their rate of

internalizing these messages.

Another contribution toward the participants with darker skin is more affected by internalized racism is because the average age of participants was 37.5 years old. As adolescents and young adults grow into adulthood, they may carry stigmatizing messages they learned from childhood throughout their lives. As individuals age, their personalities change. This can include becoming more rigid or being less likely to accept change. For example, Roberts and Mroczek (2008) found that openness to experience stabilizes over time whilst agreeableness increases. As individuals with darker skin grow into adulthood, they may be more likely to believe they are inferior to their counterparts. As children, they were taught colorist ideologies which were reinforced at school and home as Black children have favorable or unfavorable expectations and responsibilities in each of these settings, based on skin color (Hunter, 2016; Coard et. al., 2001). If Black individuals with darker skin begin to internalize colorist themes seen throughout society at a young age, as they grow, they may be more likely to believe they are inferior to their counterparts and agree with the ideology. This could cause them to push onto their children these same colorist beliefs.

While results supported my hypothesis, some differences were found between my results and the results of previous researchers. In previous findings, researchers found that the relationship between skin color satisfaction and self-esteem could be explained by an inverse relationship (Coard et al., 2001; Mucherah & Frazier, 2013). This could have been due to the age differences of participants and reluctance to change ideals. As in previous studies, most participants were in their early to middle twenties (Coard et al., 2001; Mucherah & Frazier, 2013). Due to the inverse relationship and examining previous studies, I believed that internalized racism could have been used to explain why the inverse relationship occurred.

Although not all results were expected, they will contribute to the growing body of literature on this topic and similar topics.

**Skin Color Satisfaction and Internalized Racism**

My findings suggested that as Black participants are more satisfied with their skin color, they were less likely to internalize damaging messages about their race. This supports Maxwell et al.'s (2015) finding on the relationship between skin color satisfaction and internalized racism. These results are important, as they lend support to the damages that internalized racism can have on one's mental and physical well-being. The results can also help researchers understand skin color dissatisfaction and one way in which it is likely to manifest, through internalized racism. Once the mechanisms of this system are known, it will be easier to deconstruct Black individuals' dissatisfaction with their skin color.

**Self-Esteem and Internalized Racism**

Results suggested that Black individuals' self-esteem levels were lowered as participants' level of internalized racism was raised. These results support the findings of previous studies (Brown et al., 2002; David et al., 2019; Szymanski & Gupta, 2009; Thomas et al., 2004). My findings add more support to the argument. Black individuals internalizing racist messages and stereotypes about their race can lead to negative mental health implications. In addition, negative mental health can largely impact physical health, including obesity (Cort et al., 2013) and cardiovascular issues (Chae et al., 2010). For example, one study suggested that Black individuals were more likely to be obese compared to white individuals (Lincoln et al., 2014). These findings could be used to help medical doctors and physicians understand how mental

health and physical health interact and how these societal biases, such as colorism, can affect one's physical health.

**Limitations**

One limitation in my study was the use of Amazon Mechanical Turk for recruiting participants. I used MTurk to obtain participants because it is a great way to reach those who are not typically easy to recruit. Because MTurk reaches participants who are hard to find, using internet-based methods, the sample may not represent the overall Black population across the United States. The results may, therefore, not be representative of the ways the general Black population feels about themselves. For example, as I mentioned earlier, some participants no longer identified as Black/African American, although they did in the past and were able to pass screening, to be included in my study. Additionally, research has suggested that MTurk workers may have had previous exposure to similar surveys, due to comparable studies being conducted in the past (Levay et al., 2016). This could leave workers with an idea of what the study is about, therefore leading participants to select dishonest answers, as well as a result of things like social desirability.

Additionally, there were more participants with lighter and medium skin colors than participants with darker skin colors. Participants were asked to subjectively choose their own skin color. I had no way to objectively select participants' skin color and verify that their skin color was correct. Because there was an uneven distribution of skin colors, the results could be skewed. Also, because this study could not test causal relationships (i.e., there is no random assignment to experimental conditions), I was not able to determine whether other confounding variables were influencing the results. Finally, even though I have diligently compared these

measures to other measures of the same constructs and selected those that I felt were the strongest, there was still a chance that the measures did not accurately or validly measure these constructs.

**Future Directions**

This research on how skin color satisfaction, internalized racism, and self-esteem are associated is very important and timely in our current society. Although this study only focused on the Black American population, this topic is still relevant to other groups of color. I would like to see this research expanded to include Latino/a, Asian, and Native/Pacific Islander populations, in order to see how results might differ. I would also like to see the results of this study being compared to other Black populations around the world, including the Caribbean and Africa, given different histories and attitudes about skin color in these majority-Black countries. Both of these suggestions would allow researchers to better understand how different cultures and environments play a role in how individuals of color view themselves and their skin color. I am still curious about why previous studies found an inverse relationship between skin color satisfaction. I believe that more studies should examine the relationship between the two variables so that confounded results will no longer occur and shift the weight of evidence from one side to another.

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**Appendix A**

Demographic Questionnaire

Directions: Please answer to the best of your ability.

1. Age: How old are you?

    a.  Choose an item.

2. Ethnicity: Are you Spanish, Hispanic, Latino, or none of these?

    a.  Yes

    b.  None of these

3. Ethnicity: Are you Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino

    a.  Hispanic

    b.  Latino

    c.  Spanish

4. Choose one or more races that you consider yourself to be:

    a.  American Indian or Alaska Native

    b.  Asian

    c.  Black or African American

    d.  Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

    e.  Other _____

    f.  White

5. What is your gender? If your gender is not represented on this list, please click other and explain your gender identity?

    a.  Female

    b. Male

    c. Nonbinary

    d. Other_____

    e. Transgender

6. Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation? If your sexual orientation

   is not represented on this list, please click other and explain your sexual orientation.

    a. Asexual

    b. Bisexual

    c. Heterosexual (straight)

    d. Homosexual (lesbian/gay)

    e. Prefer not to say

    f. Other _____

7. What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have

   received?

    a. Less than high school degree

    b. High school graduate (high school diploma or equivalent including GED)

    c. Some college but no degree

    d. Associate degree in college (2-year)

    e. Bachelor's degree in college (4-year)

    f. Master's degree

    g. Doctoral degree

    h. Professional Degree (JD, MD)

8. Below you will find a picture of a ladder. Imagine that this ladder represents the way our society is set up. The people on the top rung (10) are the best off and have the most money, the most education, and jobs that most people want or respect. The people on the bottom rung (1) are the worst off and have the least money, little to no education, and jobs that few people want or respect.

a.

b. Using the 10 point scale, please indicate where you would place each of these, to the best of your ability:

    i. Yourself (now)

        1. (The lowest rung)

        2.

        3.

        4.

       5.

       6.

       7.

       8.

       9.

       10. (The highest rung)

ii. Your family (growing)

       1. (The lowest rung)

       2.

       3.

       4.

       5.

       6.

       7.

       8.

       9.

       10. (The highest rung)

9. What political party do you most closely identify?

   a. Democrat

   b. Republican

   c. Independent

   d. Libertarian

   e. Tea party

f. Green

g. Other _____

**Appendix B**

Scale of Skin Color Darkness

Before you answer this next question, please adjust the brightness of your screen to 100%; the brightest it can be. If you have light sensitivity, please adjust your screen as brightest it can be without negatively affecting your eyes.

Please, select the number that best corresponds with **your skin color**.
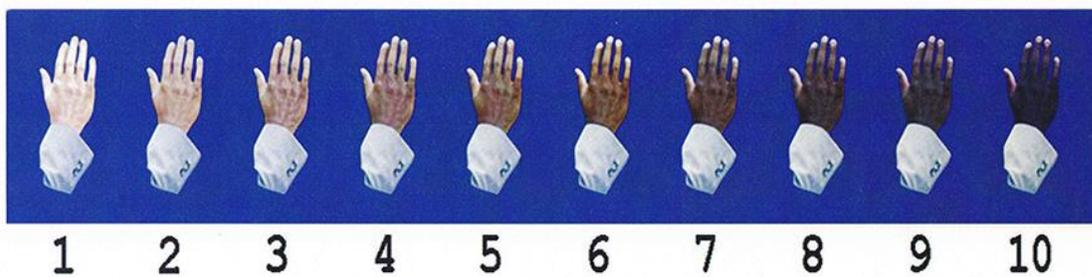
**Appendix C**

Pantone Color System

Before you answer this next question, please adjust the brightness of your screen to 100%; the

brightest it can be. If you have light sensitivity, please adjust your screen to as brightest it can be

without negatively affecting your eyes.

Use the color shades below to determine your approximate **skin complexion**. Make a fist and

place your fist on the screen to determine your skin tone.

What number is closest to **your skin-tone complexion**?
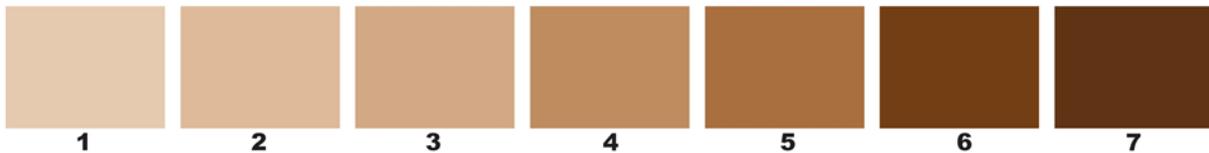
**Appendix D**

Internalized Racial Oppression Scale (IROS)

Please rate the extent that you agree with the following statements. There is no right or wrong

answer. Please answer openly and honestly.

| 1 = *Strongly Disagree* | 2 = *Disagree* | 3 = *Slightly Disagree* | 4 = *Neutral* | 5 = *Slightly Agree* | 6 = *Agree* | 7 = *Strongly Agree* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

\_\_\_\_\_ There were no institutions of higher learning in Africa.

\_\_\_\_\_ Earlier Egyptians were either White or Arabic.

\_\_\_\_\_ The earliest civilizations were in Africa.

\_\_\_\_\_ The first mathematicians and scientists were European.

\_\_\_\_\_ There were universities and other learning centers in Africa more than 2,000 years ago.

\_\_\_\_\_ There were Africans in the Americas prior to Europeans.

\_\_\_\_\_ Cannibalism was widely practiced in Africa.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not tend to associate myself with an African heritage.

\_\_\_\_\_ I identify with African values and beliefs.

\_\_\_\_\_ I value respecting elders in my community.

\_\_\_\_\_ Being a part of family celebrations is not important.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would never date someone with a natural or an Afro hairstyle.

_____ I hesitate to do business with Black-owned companies because of their mismanagement.

_____ I don't attend any cultural programs with African-centered values.

_____ Harmony and balance are important values in my life.

_____ I wish my nose will be narrower.

_____ Having full lips is not attractive to me.

_____ African people have no written history.

_____ It is okay for Black people to change their appearance through surgery.

_____ I wish I looked more White.

_____ Black women are controlling.

_____ Black women are confrontational.

_____ Money management is something that Black people cannot do.

_____ Black men are irresponsible.

_____ Most criminals are Black men.

_____ Black people are lazy.

_____ Most Black people are on welfare.

_____ It is okay to straighten or relax my hair.

_____ I prefer my hair to be natural.

_____ I like it when my partner wears their hair natural.

_____ I texturize my hair.

_____ Straight hair is better than my natural hair texture.

**Appendix E**

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)

Please rate the extent that you agree with the following statements. There is no right or wrong answer. Please answer openly and honestly.

| 1 = *Strongly Disagree* | 2 = *Slightly Disagree* | 3 = *Disagree* | 4 = *Neutral* | 5 = *Agree* | 6 = *Slightly Agree* | 7 = *Strongly Agree* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others.

I feel that I have a number of good qualities.

All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.*

I am able to do things as well as most other people.

I feel I do not have much to be proud of.*

I take a positive attitude toward myself.

On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.

I wish I could have more respect for myself.*

I certainly feel useless at times.*

At times I think I am no good at all.*

**Appendix F**

Skin Color Satisfaction Scale

Please rate the extent that you agree with the following statements. There is no right or wrong

answer. Please answer openly and honestly.

| 1 = *Extremely Dissatisfied* | 2 = *Dissatisfied* | 3 = *Slightly Dissatisfied* | 4 = *Neither Satisfied Or Dissatisfied* | 5 = *Slightly Satisfied* | 6 = *Satisfied* | 7 = *Extremely Satisfied* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

_____ How satisfied are you with the shade (lightness or darkness) of your own skin color?

Please rate the extent that you agree with the following statements. There is no right or wrong

answer. Please answer openly and honestly.

| 1 = *Strongly Disagree* | 2 = *Disagree* | 3 = *Slightly Disagree* | 4 = *Neutral* | 5 = *Slightly Agree* | 6 = *Agree* | 7 = *Strongly Agree* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

_____ Compared to the complexion (skin color) of members of my family, I am satisfied with

my skin color.

_____ Compared to the complexion (skin color) of other African Americans, I am satisfied with

my skin color.

_____ Compared to the complexions (skin color) of my friends, I am satisfied with my skin

color.

_____ I wish the shade of my skin was darker.

_____ I wish my skin was lighter.