

Student

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#IsMyBlackBeautiful?: Colorism and Mental Health Concerning Black Women & Girls

First I am Black, secondly I am a Black woman. I started off this piece establishing two sectors of my identity in hopes to prepare you, as a reader where and what my standpoint is evaluating society and my place within that space. By doing so maybe you will have a better understanding of my rationale. I have found that separating my identities as Black and female are useless. From experience I have come to realize that being a woman/girl who is black means something different from just being a woman/girl. Coming from a sociological point of view, it is the assumption that a woman/girl is white because whiteness has been set as the “default” for many things. I have always known from a young age that white skin comes with unearned perks or benefits, like being able to turn away from the issues that affect communities of color. This is possible because racism exists. And because of racism, colorism was born. Colorism is the intracultural prejudice and discrimination based on the lightness or darkness of ones’ skin tone. The effects of colorism have been detrimental to people of color, in particular damaging to the mental health of young black women and girls. I think it is imperative to study mental health within the black community specifically because it is often overlooked and not talked about in black households. I am very interested in this topic because I have personally dealt/deal with mental health issues like anxiety and depression. I want to know more about this topic, how to help other black women/girls like myself, and to shed more light on this issue.

Commented [LS1]: Nice. I like the way these two simple phrases help you stake a claim and establish your ethos to your audience.

Commented [LS2]: And these two words (woman v girl) have a bunch of deeper meaning wrapped up in them; as do words we use to define skin tone like Coates writes about (black v brown v white v “those who believe they are white”)

Commented [LS3]: I appreciate that you’re tracing the progression of this term and defining it for your audience who might be unfamiliar. It’s also important since the way you’re using the word might be different than how others are using the word.

Commented [LS4]: I like the way this introduction establishes your voice and identity as a writer as well as addresses your purpose for writing

When discussing colorism, it's very important to remember that aspects of colorism involve race and ethnicity, however it is about skin tone and what that shade of skin symbolizes. 'Colorism' written by Mohamed Adhikari, a chapter in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, 2nd Edition*, the historical context of colorism was explored. Adhikari wrote about the simple meanings of the terms "white/light" and "black/dark." White symbolizing purity, Godliness, fresh, and right whereas black symbolizes filth, ominous, bad, wrong. This also applies in terms of how skin is perceived. Blackness is punished, it's equated to being wrong or bad because it is not White. Blackness strays the farthest from whiteness, therefore it is more vulnerable and subject to hate. Whiteness becomes something superior, something to aspire to or to be grateful of. White privilege. I had to be taught this by my parents since this topic was conveniently left out of my social studies books from K - 12th grade. A survival guide to "Being Black in America," a lesson passed down from generation to generation that every Black family has in their repertoire. Social injustice, a subject I know all too well, a conversation that I still have over and over, and will one day teach my children.

In addition to the threat of skin discrimination I was also taught to be aware of gender discrimination as well. The good ole matrix of domination that haunted my childhood, and even now as a 20-year old college student. Since I can remember, I have always struggled with my insecurities that stem from pieces of my identity. As an adolescent I struggled heavily with my confidence like most 12-year old girls, but in addition to dealing with my issues in a female body going through puberty, I also faced issues with my racial/ethnic identities often placing myself into a double bind. Rona Carter, author of *Ethnicity, Perceived Pubertal Timing, Externalizing Behaviors, and Depressive Symptoms Among Black Adolescent Girls*, conducted a study to evaluate the link between depression and adolescent girls. Though some of her research was

Commented [LS5]: I really love the way you're blending the source material and your voice here. It seems very natural to talk through these definitions and then relate them back to your experience (and potential future experiences). This does a great deal to further your ethos as a writer and build your project

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inconclusive she did find that black girls are more likely than their white counterparts to struggle with depression and anxiety while going through puberty. Carter's study did find that black girls in particular are also dealing with social and cultural factors that may also lead to their depression and anxiety. Carter's study brings more questions to the table, like what are those factors? Could race, colorism, as well as other aspects of their identity like class come into play as well? For me, as a fellow researcher and learner, I'd have to say that yes these factors play a huge role in the development of young black girls. As an adolescent, I often found myself feeling depressed and fighting thoughts of suicide while at the same time making myself anxious for feeling weak. I was disappointed in myself for not being able to be strong like my mother, even though I was just a girl. As a girl I definitely felt the pressures of what it meant to be a black girl in society today, mixed in with everything else I endured was absolute torture mentally. I was so small, yet so full of pain anger and hatred for myself.

I internalized everything that made me feel that way, I could not outwardly express what I was going through. And it's obvious that cannot be good for one's mental health, especially for a young mind that is still growing and developing. According to *Adolescent Girls' Experiences of Discrimination*, a journal article written by Melanie Ayres, approximately 30% of adolescent girls think that it's best to seek help when they are dealing things like discrimination, but only about half of those girls who think this is the best option will actually speak up and defend themselves. Ayres conducted a study where the participants were asked to reflect on their adolescence as well as their current experiences on being female and dealing with discrimination in all sectors. Their answers were honestly pretty discouraging, only 6% of this group said they cope with their pain by using self-affirmations. Only 6-percent felt that telling themselves "You are intelligent," or "You are beautiful," or "You are enough," was the best way to cope. What

Commented [LS6]: YES. I love that you're identifying this way. Because you are!

Commented [LS7]: It breaks my heart to read this, but I know how important it is for you to include moments like this in your project. I think it is especially important to establish a connection you, unfortunately, probably share with a potential audience of other young Black women in this respect.

Commented [LS8]: Remember that articles get placed in quotation marks rather than italicized.

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does this mean? That not even close to a quarter of adolescent girls in America have the courage to believe in their own power.

I first experienced feelings of depression when I was in elementary school. I was bullied horribly every day. From the moment I stepped onto the morning bus, until the last bell rang I was bullied. I was teased by kids in my class and by the kids who were much older than me in the middle school. I would be cornered in the locker room after gym class, pushed into walls in the hallways, and sometimes even hit on the school bus. On the bus, some older girls would pull my hair and the boys would call me a nappy-headed-whatever they could think of for the day. We were a predominately black school however they'd make fun of my skin, hair, how I'd speak, what I'd wear. Everything. I thought that if I just tried to ignore them it would help, but it made things worse. Yet, I still remained silent, I never tried to tell my teachers or anyone with some authority to do something about it. I felt powerless and small. I was afraid to speak out, I didn't want to be a snitch and get them all in trouble. My biggest concern was not having any friends but I couldn't even realize that I was already there, alone.

How I spoke, got me into the worst of it. I would get called an Oreo for being black on the outside, "white on the inside." They associated my ability to speak proper English with whiteness. They equated my intelligence to whiteness. I could not understand why I was teased for using proper grammar, but I was not in a space where I could be Black and intelligent. Black excellence was not encouraged, even from the teachers. We were taught by predominately white teachers (only 2 black teachers in the school), who did not believe that we could achieve greatness. Our white teachers did not attempt to break that cycle my peers were perpetuating, now of course the teachers were burnt out and underpaid which is terrible. However, my learning environment was toxic and my growth was hindered. My peers, they thought I was trying to be

Commented [LS9]: There's a whole lot of internalized stuff going on there with your bullies that I think your research speaks to. I wonder if you might make mention of a connection to that here and how you can reflect on these experiences.

Commented [LS10]: I appreciate that you're reflecting on not just events here but also emotions. I think this piece of your narrative is especially important and really gets at the heart of this project.

better than they were by speaking the way I did. So I would try to talk like them, hoping I would finally be able to fit in. I look back now and realize how damaging this experience was for me...it seemed so foolish, yet I felt it was necessary for me to be “more black,” I thought maybe if I could achieve this said level of “blackness,” the kids would treat me better, maybe I could have friends. I thought maybe all of the emotional and physical harassment would stop if I could just be like them. I was split, completely torn on both the idea of wanting to fit in and what being Black actually was.

I remember the boys holding up brown paper bags to the girls faces at recess trying to see who was the prettiest. You were considered pretty if your skin was lighter than the bag, and I was right at the cut-off mark so I did not get a **pass**. The boys would say I was too dark and therefore unattractive. I failed the test created by little boys who had skin just like my own, and was mocked for my being ugly according to that test. If it was not my skin, it was my pudgy waistline and lack of bosom. The boys would poke my stomach, and pop the straps of my training bra then yell, “Carillon’s got mosquito bites!,” announcing my shortcomings on my journey into womanhood to the entire **class**. I find this *somewhat* comical now, but then it was absolutely humiliating. Typical school-aged boy behavior, but regardless of how common it is, it should not be tolerated. Embarrassed because of what would happen I would cry, then be teased by everyone for being a crybaby. I hated my sensitivity. I hated my inability to have thick skin like the other girls in my class. I hated everything about my body, and my ‘dark’ skin, and in a sorry attempt to become more appealing I’d purge my food after lunchtime and killed myself at volleyball practice. I ran harder, squatted faster, and did sit-ups until my core shook so I could be skinny. I would question to myself, have I subjected myself to this treatment? Do I deserve this? But as a little girl, this should be the farthest thing from my mind...I grew tired, and sad.

Commented [LS11]: Almost immediately after we talked about this in our conference, I watched an episode of *Black-ish* where they made mention of this. I was totally ignorant of this practice when you talked about it that day and I did a bit of a double take to hear it in the show. White folks are likely to be completely oblivious to a lot of the experiences you’re describing here which I think does two things:

1. It makes your narrative and discussion all the more important for the young girls who *do* identify with these experiences because they likely aren’t getting that narrative in shows, movies, books, etc. that are mainstream.
2. It opens the eyes of a secondary audience of white folks or light-skinned folks who don’t know about these experiences because they haven’t experienced them themselves.

Commented [LS12]: Then there are moments like this that I think do the same thing for women. There’s a really important thing happening in your discussion that – as you mention in your introduction – makes it clear that both your identity as a woman and identity as a Black woman are significant and have to be experienced/understood together.

How I looked was a huge priority of mine. I greatly valued a good appearance. And I was destroying my mental/emotional state in the process of looking good vs. being good emotionally. I was and still to this day very critical and harsh on myself, constantly critiquing and overthinking every single decision I made. I'd look to Tiger Beat, Seventeen, J-14, and Teen Vogue magazines to tell me what to do to become more attractive, but rarely saw girls who looked like me on the covers. I'd flip through the pages and see 100 Miley Cyrus's just to get to one Keke Palmer (maybe). There would always be those little segments with male celebrities describing their dream girl, but I was never surprised when those descriptions could would never fit me. All things beautiful had straight hair, a tight waist, small lips, a slim nose, and light eyes. I was in awe at the beauty of these white women, and hated myself even more for not being able to measure up to their perfect proportions. I could not find a black female role model for myself in those magazines. My beauty was not represented, so I did not feel that I could be beautiful.

'My beauty was not represented, so I did not feel that I could be beautiful'.... this line right here is what gives colorism power. My beauty (My skin) was not represented, so I (as a Brown/Black woman/man) did not feel that I could be beautiful (powerful, successful, appreciated, taken seriously, etc.) And the list could just go on and on. If one does not feel that their hair, clothes, or skin is not beautiful or even trendy there's an urge to go out and fix that. Many people when it comes to their skin, dislike it so much they feel it is important to physically change their skin using lightening products. It is well known that skin bleaching or lightening has been a huge trend in many European countries. It is for them to whiten their skin, cleanse the skin of any impurities that may have made the skin darker. It's imperative for them to stay white, bright, and to uphold that standard of beauty whether that's unconscious or not I'm unsure. However, these skin lightening trends are also very popular throughout the Caribbean Islands,

and throughout several African countries. These beauty trends are conveyed through the media, in magazines, television, and movies that have a dominate focus on white women and light skinned women of color.

In *Skin Bleaching and the Prestige Complexion of Sexual Attraction*, a journal article written by Christopher Charles, on how colorism can lead to skin bleaching practices. Charles's study focused specifically on the skin lightening trends in Jamaica. Jamaica was colonized by England, and many of England's beauty standards and practices became popular on the island. Some of the British colonizers would bleach their skin to maintain ultimate whiteness. This symbolized beauty, purity, and most of all superiority. The colonizers whitened their skin to create a clear divide between themselves. This practice is driven by colorism—"we must stay clean white and pretty...we cannot subject ourselves to anything less, meaning the black people especially those with 'dark' skin. The darker the skin, the 'less attractive' one is. In Charles's study he evaluated skin bleachers vs. non-skin bleachers as well. While interviewing those who chose to bleach their skin regularly, they did so to feel more beautiful, to be sexier, but most importantly to find partners. When asked these women said they did not want to become White, they just felt that their skin was better. Unconscious, deeply rooted self-hate for their skin based in colorism.

Studies like, *Skin Complexion In The Twenty-First Century: The Impact of Colorism on African-American Women*, by Tayler J. Matthews and Glenn S. Johnson the complexities of colorism are broken down even further and evaluated. This particular study focused on how colorism effects the self-esteem of young Black women. These researchers conducted studies with black female HBCU undergraduate students. The participants felt that black women who had high self-esteem felt as though they had higher social capital, however they still felt as

Commented [LS13]: I love the way your narrative is sort of ebbing and flowing throughout this project. You're doing some cool stuff stylistically by using narrative and then letting that sort of flow out and the source material ebb in. I see you transitioning through in a way that makes clear that your experiences are directly related to this research and representative of many other young Black girls' experiences.

though darker skinned women faced more discrimination within the black community. And this is true, speaking from experience and just from belonging to the community. When a black female has dark skin it's seen as something unfortunate. Dark skin today with social media trends embracing the melanin and the #BlackGirlMagic, I think that more people are becoming more accepting of it, but in reality it's still a daily struggle. In accordance with the Matthews study, Maya Poran author of *The Politics of Protection: Body Image, Social Pressures, and the Misrepresentation of Young Black Women*, found that black women do indeed face intense pressures about their image from within the black community. The focus somewhat shifts on Poran's study, she conducted focus groups of black women with guided discussion where the women talked about feeling as if they were in competition with other black women. The women came to a consensus agreeing that when you have darker skin it is harder to find black male partners who appreciate your skin tone. Participants also reported feeling as though their mental health had been damaged severely over their lifetime.

As a group of people I think we all struggle with our identities, our insecurities, and weaknesses. We look to the media and societal norms to see what's 'right' or 'wrong' in order to find our place. I think that even though for some people what is considered to be challenging varies. My purpose in this essay was not to create some kind of contest about who's more oppressed, but to shine a light on the black women and girls who are far too many times left out of the conversation. I know that what I have created does not really give solutions or tips on how to solve issues like colorism or mental health within the black community, I'm just not that powerful. But I do feel like I did some good by bringing this huge problem to the surface. If you can take anything away from this piece it would simply be knowledge. To know, to be aware and

Commented [LS14]: Even within those hashtags and movements – I'm thinking here of the backlash and abuse that women posting often receive as a result of their confidence and daring to speak out.

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well informed of the issues, in hopes that someday this knowledge can help you help out
someone **else**.

Commented [LS15]: YES. Wonderful takeaway for your audiences.

Work Cited

Commented [LS16]: Works Cited

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