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"She Thinks She's All That": Intra-Group Colorism, Stereotypes and the Experiences of Light-Skinned Women Who Identify as Black

Krysten L. Long

Abstract

Colorism in the Black community is pervasive, and it has far-reaching consequences. However, much of the colorism research that exists examines colorism unidirectionally and omits the lived experiences of light-skinned Black women from the larger conversation on colorism. This article aims to understand how Black women with lighter complexions experience intra-group colorism beyond the commonly enumerated privileges and introduces their experiences into the colorism narrative. This study phenomenologically captured the experiences of sixteen self-identified light-skinned Black women with in-group colorism. The women's ages ranged from 18 to 64 and despite differing generations being represented the experiences of the participants closely mirrored each other. Having conducted interviews and follow-up interviews over thirty hours of data were collected examining intra-group colorist experiences. Findings suggest that light- skinned Black women that navigated predominantly Black spaces at times encountered a light- skin penalty that punished proximity to Whiteness. For the participants that experienced intra- group colorism, it manifested in the form of microaggressions and macroaggressions, such as interpersonal violence. The women in this study believed their

experiences with in-group colorism were inextricably linked to internalized colorist stereotypical beliefs about light-skinned Black women. This study contributes to an emerging body of literature on colorism in the Black community. Moreover, it provides a more balanced assessment of how Black women experience colorism intra-racially and asserts that access to privilege and actualized disadvantage can exist simultaneously in the lives of light-skinned Black women.

Keywords: Colorism, light-skinned, Black women, intra-group colorism

Introduction

> I was always told I was [B]lack… but not quite [B]lack enough… I was told that in my life… I should never ever complain about my skin because real [B]lack girls, go through things every day that I will never be able to relate to . . . (Durant, 2016)

Existing research has noted the disadvantages Black women of darker complexions experience regarding out-group and in-group colorist ideas and the privileges that lighter-skinned Black women receive (Hill, 2002; Hunter, 2007; Keith & Herring, 1991). However, colorism does not solely confer benefits to those of lighter complexions. There is scant research examining the experiences of lighter-complected Black women, particularly as it relates to intra-group colorism. The present study seeks to partly fill that void by exploring the colorist experiences of light-skinned women who identify as Black by asking, *how do light-skinned Black women experience intra-group colorism*?

Alice Walker defined colorism as "prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color" (Walker, 1983). However, the term has gradually become exclusionary in both academic literature and popular culture. Deviating from its original conception, the term colorism tends to be defined and interpreted in a manner that repudiates the experiences of lighter-skinned individuals. It is now commonly defined as a "system that grants advantages and opportunities to those that possess lighter complexions within the African-American community" (Mathews and Johnson, 2015, p. 251). It is "considered a form of oppression in which darker complexions are mistreated and lighter complexions are typically shown favoritism" (Jackson-Lowman, 2013, p. 156), and it is considered "the allocation of privilege and disadvantage according to the lightness or darkness of one's skin" (Burke, 2008, p. 17). Such articulations contribute to the problematization of the issue of colorism by denying its multi-directionality and consequently rendering light-skinned Black persons' oppression negligible. Although lighter-complexioned individuals are sometimes societally favored, they may also find themselves subjected to various forms of victimization that vary in effect and severity (Monk, 2015; Hunter, 2008).

Colorism impacts individuals more when it is perpetrated within their respective communities (Monk, 2021). Specifically, for Black Americans, perceived in-group colorism is associated with diminished physical health outcomes. Moreover, in-group colorist discrimination is a viable form of discrimination that may rival or exceed other forms of discrimination such as major lifetime discrimination, everyday discrimination, and perceived outgroup colorism (Monk,

2021). Still, the impact that in-group colorist confrontations may have on light-skinned Black women is at times minimized. If lighter-skinned Black women are mentioned, their experiences are subsequently diminished when compared to their darker counterparts (Landor & Smith, 2019). Scholars note that despite the extreme ways that resentment (Wilder, 2010) and rejection (Hunter, 2005) may be exacted against this group by dark-skinned Black women, "the disadvantages of dark skin still far outweigh the disadvantages of light skin" (Landor & Smith, 2019, p. 798). Such assertions may be factual in specific contexts but are not universally applicable.

The aforementioned views within academia ignore the penalties associated with being Black and having lighter skin (Uzogara & Jackson, 2016) and contribute to a portrayal of colorism and the trauma it causes as relatively unidirectional or minimally damaging to those with lighter complexions. Within academia there has been an acknowledgement of the pervasive nature of colorist stereotypes (Abrams et al., 2020) and how this may affect intra-group interactions (Uzogara & Jackson, 2016). However, the nature of these interactions and their subsequent impact should be explored. We live in a world that prioritizes Whiteness and proximity to Whiteness (Aslakson, 2012; Keith & Monroe, 2016). Therefore, light skin privilege may therefore be more apparent or accessible in spaces where White persons systematically wield influence (Gullickson, 2005; Jones, 2000). But, Black spaces and predominantly Black spaces exist, and within some of these spaces, there may be shifts in power dynamics that negatively impact light-skinned Black women (Carter, 2003; Harvey et al., 2005). In spaces where Blackness dominates, lightness may be more likely to be punished, as my research reveals below.

Literature Review

The Historical Roots of Colorism Among Black Americans

Colorism, also referred to as skin tone stratification, is a global phenomenon (Dixon & Telles, 2017; Telles, 2004). However, in the context of the United States, it is a consequence of racism and a product of a history of forced servitude and racial subjugation (Russell-Cole et al., 2013). Those who adhered to the ideology in which slavery was rooted firmly believed in the superiority of White people, and this produced an adhesion to a line of thinking rooted in White supremacy (Hill, 2002). The structuralized racialism that was created established the primacy of Whiteness, and it "cultivated a system of language, classification, and domination, privileging [W]hiteness over [B]lackness" (Wilder, 2010, p. 186). Throughout the world, European colonialism was entrenched in race-based ideology that structured a social and racial hierarchy that placed Whites above Blacks and that ultimately favored those with lighter skin (Jackson-Lowman, 2013) and Euro-typical phenotypic features, features that are traditionally associated with Whiteness (Leath et al., 2023).

Eurocentric beauty standards and social acceptability have historically stratified the Black community, but this did not insulate light-skinned Black persons from suffering (Russell-Cole et al., 2013). Advantage and grotesque abuses existed concurrently. Because of their complexions, lighter-skinned Black people were assigned domestic roles while also being targeted for degrading purposes. Eurocentric beliefs governed what was deemed aesthetically appealing, and

consequently, the internalized ideals directly impacted the status, placement, and treatment of Blacks during slavery (Maddox & Gray, 2002). The variations in skin color led to demonstrable benefits being conferred (Keith, 2009; Keith & Herring, 1991). Nevertheless, enslaved persons with lighter complexions were given more duties that placed them in direct contact with the enslavers and their families, and this was not inherently beneficial (Crutchfield et al., 2020; Dixon & Telles, 2017; Reece, 2019). The enslaved with light skin were deemed desirable commodities, and as such, they were often prostituted (Jablonski, 2012). Their light skin increased their allure (Keith & Herring, 1991). As a result, they were subjected to constant abuse (Heuman & Walvin, 2003) and sexual exploitation, such as being sold as sex slaves in the fancy trade (Gordon, 2015). Despite the harsh realities of enslaved Africans, the method of dividing by complexion led to a schism within the Black community. Interracial skin color stratification reinforced the perceived validity of intra-racial skin tone bias and fueled dissension among the enslaved (Wilder, 2010). Colorism's legacy continues to cause strife, and although slavery ended, the concept of colorism was implicitly systematized and internalized in American society among both Black and White populations (Mathews & Johnson, 2015).

Colorism, Gender, and Societal Barriers

Black Americans live in a society that has instituted systematic oppression, fears dark faces, is threatened by Blackness, and perceives those who are Black as menacing, criminal, and dangerous (Hochschild & Weaver, 2007; Maddox & Gray, 2002). Skin color bias is a phenomenon that manifests interracially and intra-racially and for Black Americans, it is related to opportunities for socioeconomic achievement and socially desirable outcomes; employment opportunities and promotions in the work field; incarceration and sentencing; interpersonal relationships; and perceptions of intelligence and attractiveness (Brown, 2004; Snider & Rosenberg, 2006; Viglione, Hannon, & DeFina, 2011).

Colorism impacts men and women, but it is a particularly gendered issue. Black women are disproportionately impacted by aspects of colorism that directly relate to their physicality and Eurocentric beauty standards (Abrams et al., 2020; Neal & Wilson, 1989). Scholars have found that colorism is psychologically and emotionally damaging for Black girls and women (Alexander & Carter, 2022; Hall, 2017; Wilder, 2010) and that experiences with colorism may lead to diminished outcomes in areas such as self-perception and self-esteem (Abrams et al., 2020; Stephens & Few, 2007; Williams & Davidson, 2009). Lighter skin is associated with having increased social capital (Aslakson, 2012; Keith & Monroe, 2016), "a form of prestige related to things such as social status, reputation, and social networks" (Hunter, 2002, p. 177). Consequently, Black women of darker hues are believed to wield less power and suffer from diminished social capital because of negative stereotypes and unfounded antiquated attitudes associated with their skin. Due to lighter skin being seen as closer in proximity to Whiteness, it is societally deemed more feminine and more attractive. Given the social importance of physical attractiveness for women, those of lighter complexions are believed to be at an advantage and benefit from increased social capital thereby placing darker-skinned Black women at a disadvantage (Jones, 2000). For some Black women colorism is damaging in ways that extend beyond socially desirable outcomes. It may also impact their mental state throughout their maturation, beginning during pre-pubescence (Hill, 2002). Colorism influences how Black

women feel about themselves and how they interact with others (Thompson & Keith, 2001), and it is a source of psychological distress for the women that experience it (Hall, 2017).

Historically and contemporarily, it has been asserted that those with lighter complexions encounter(d) fewer societal barriers than those with darker complexions (Gullickson, 2005). Light skin privilege for Black persons in the United States exists, in some contexts, and research on the subject matter is not a new occurrence (Hunter, 1998). Existing literature shows that despite the gains that Black people have experienced in more recent U.S. history, colorism remains a significant issue (Hunter, 2007). However, the presupposition of light-skin privilege without consideration of the potential impact of intra-group colorism on light-skinned Black women negates the relevance of an understudied group's experiences.

When exploring relative disadvantages, research regularly focuses on those who are darker-complected and disregard the possible adverse or traumatic experiences that lighter-complexioned Black women may experience. Monk (2015) and Mathews and Johnson (2015) found that medium-complexioned Black persons note the least perceived colorism from other Black people, while lighter-skinned Black individuals perceive more within-group bias, and darker-skinned Black persons perceive the most in-group discrimination. Meaning it's the outliers, the very dark and the very light, that experience the most in-group colorism, respectively. Despite such findings, the intra-racial discriminatory interactions experienced by lighter-skinned Black individuals continue to be omitted from the larger colorism narrative.

Colorist encounters affect Black women's mental health (Jackson-Lowman, 2013) and Black women's experiences with colorist microaggressions impact social, relational, and emotional aspects of their lives and their well-being (Hall & Crutchfield, 2018). Additionally, the "colorist microaggressions that Black women [encounter] in their community, family, and in society, [are] pervasive" (Hall & Crutchfield, 2018, p. 491). These findings are significant, however, as is routinely done in academic studies on skin tone there is a failure to thoroughly interrogate the impact of intra-group colorism on the life experiences of light-skinned Black women. And so, this group of women, who have previously reported maltreatment, who have noted significant amounts of perceived in-group colorism, and who are also impacted by intra-racial microaggressions, are overlooked and their experiences continue to be neglected.

Microaggressions & Macroaggressions

Racism has evolved and while explicit forms of racism are still exhibited, implicit and surreptitious microaggressions and their manifestation as microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations are the new faces of racism (Sue et. al., 2007). The term microaggression was coined by Chester M. Pierce and referred to forms of aggression that were not physical but directed toward minorities within disenfranchised communities (Pierce, 1970). It has also been defined as "brief and commonplace daily, verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271). More specifically, microaggressions are verbal and behavioral exchanges, sometimes subtle and covert, that send denigrating messages to the recipients. They are usually regularly received, affirm stereotypes, demean, and transmit harmful and disparaging messages to members of a stigmatized group

(Sue, 2010). While often attributed to interracial interactions, microaggressions are not limited to interracial encounters. They can be perpetrated and experienced intra-racially as well.

Experiencing microaggressions can be stressful for its recipients, impacting their physical and psychological well-being. Sue et al. (2007) assert that the cumulative effect of microaggressions may lead to diminished self-confidence and a poor self-image. It may also affect the victimized individual's mental health resulting in depression, anxiety, and trauma. Moreover, those on the receiving end of microaggressions may experience anger, frustration, or exhaustion (Sue, 2008). Microaggressions may seem minor or be regarded as trivial because they are often deemed unintentional, because the offending parties may be unaware of having committed the act (Sue & Spanierman, 2020). Yet, microaggressions can be gravely damaging to the individuals who fall victim to them and have the propensity to be more damaging than traditional explicit forms of prejudice because they are usually minimized and ignored (Sue, 2008). For those that experience microaggressions, "[they] have the lifelong insidious effect of silencing, invalidating, and humiliating the identity and/or voices of those who are oppressed. Although their lethality is less obvious, they nevertheless grind down and wear out the victims" (Sue, 2010, p. 66). Occurrences of interracial microaggressions have long garnered attention (Pierce, 1970), but the insidious nature of intra-racial microaggressive incidents have also been explored. Hall and Crutchfield (2018) found that Black women's experiences with colorist microaggressions impacted the social, relational, and emotional aspects of their lives and their well-being. It was also found that the "colorist microaggressions" that Black women encountered in their community, family, and in society, were pervasive" (Hall and Crutchfield, 2018, p. 491). Due to correlations between individual well-being and microaggressions, it is essential that the impact of microaggressions be further explored.

Macroaggressions within the Black community are often recounted as being racist and are associated with racist imagery and bigotry, such as the historical lynching of Black Americans (Russell, 1998). However, macroaggressions are not exclusively interracial and can occur intra-racially. According to Russell (1998), macroaggressions refer to overt forms of discrimination. Unlike microaggressions where the intent may not be purposefully harmful, macroaggressions serve no purpose besides being discriminatory and prejudicial (Donovan et al., 2012). Their impact is immediate thus showcasing "the aggressive and deleterious effect of macroaggressive" behaviors and they garner "an immediate and powerful reaction…" (Osanloo et al., 2016, p. 7).

For this paper a distinction was made between microaggressions and macroaggressions as it related to how individuals experienced them. While macroaggressions may be associated with larger structural level occurrences (Osanloo et al., 2016), the overt and at times violent nature of the actions experienced by this study's respondents, while occurring interpersonally, denoted a need for classification that extended beyond the microaggressive label that some might be inclined to classify them with. And so, for this study usage of the term macroaggressions refers to non-structural macroaggressions that are blatant forms of aggression that disseminate hostile messages from the perpetrator to the victim or recipient and does not necessitate occurrence at a systemic level.

Critical Race Theory

Race is not a biological reality; it is a social construct that is a consequence of global White supremacy (Omi & Winant, 2014). People do not have a race; they are given one (Trautmann, 2004). Race is pervasive in its societal implications (Curry, 2018; Ray, 2022), and it has had a precarious impact on Black Americans regarding their view of themselves and those within their ascribed racial group. Critical Race Theory, created by legal scholars in the 1970s, asserts that racism is a social construct that facilitates advancing and maintaining White societal interests (Delgado & Stefancic, 2011). Racial categorizations have historically and contemporarily served the purposes of those in power, as does the construction of colorism.

Proximity to Whiteness influences nearly all facets of life for minority populations that were previously colonized and historically marginalized (Goldsmith et al., 2006). Colorism is a notion rooted in the construct of race, and like racial construction, the hierarchal differences that manifest interracially may become readily visible intra-racially in the form of privileges for those of lighter complexions. Therefore, colorism, being integrally entwined with racism and a "primary offshoot of racial domination" (Reece, 2019, p. 3), should be questioned through a lens that critically considers colorism as an extension of racism that is reproduced by not only the hierarchically dominant racial group but also by subordinate racial groups (Reece, 2019). And this should be done while considering that internalized racism has significant intra-racial ramifications for individuals of color. Colorism in the United States has specific origins stemming from racist rhetoric (Wilder, 2010) it is appropriate to examine colorism through a theoretical lens that considers the phenomenon's origins.

Data and Method

This study endeavored to phenomenologically explore how light-skinned Black women experience in-group colorism. Phenomenology examines a particular occurrence within a group and lends credence to an often minimized and negated lived experience (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenological research's strengths lie in exploring participant perspectives and its ability to capture a shared lived experience and condense it into a description that grasps the nature of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The gaps in colorism research, particularly the omission of the discrimination experienced by lighter-skinned Black women, denoted a need for the phenomenon to be examined via a phenomenological approach.

To index and analyze the data that was collected two cycles of coding were employed. Due to the understudied nature of this topic and because this study focused on personal experiences as they relate to intra-racial colorism and ideas about cultural values within the Black community regarding skin color, value coding was used in the first round of coding. Value coding categorizes data according to participant's values, attitudes, and beliefs and is appropriate for nearly all qualitative research that explores inter- and intra-personal experiences (Saldana, 2016). The second coding cycle used pattern codes to categorize, thematically conceptualize, reorganize, and reanalyze the data in such a way that reduces the number of codes, minimizes cognitive shifts, and makes study findings more reliable (Saldana, 2016). Pattern codes are exploratory and inferential, drawing from the previous coding cycle and developing meta-codes

to create more significant units of analysis by re-grouping themes and codes into meaningful sub-categories (Saldana, 2011).

The population for this study consisted of sixteen self-identified light-skinned Black women between the ages of 18 and 64 that lived in the southern United States. The participatory age requirement was set at 18 years to combat inconsistencies around maturation. The sample was recruited via convenience sampling. Participants for this study were recruited from various locations that varied in demographic composition, including universities, public locations such as shopping malls, social media platforms, and professional institutions to create a sample that would vary and reduce demographic homogeneity. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Interviews were divided into two sessions, an initial interview and a follow-up interview. The average total interviewing time per participant was approximately two hours and resulted in over thirty hours of data examining intra-group colorist experiences.

Through self-reported demographic information, the participants were required to identify as biological, cis-gender women, eighteen years of age or older, and identify racially as Black. Mixed-race and biracial participants participated in the study if they identified as Black or acknowledged Black as a dominant or primary racial identity. Respondents who, through vetting, exclusively identified as "mixed-race" or "biracial" are not included in the final tally of participants because racially identifying as Black, in some capacity, is integral to the lived Black experience. Due to various ages, as well as socioeconomic statuses, and educational levels, there are a variety of experiences and perspectives represented.

The women rated their complexion on a five-point Likert scale that ranged from very light, light, medium, dark, to very dark. All the women identified as either very light or light. They also used a 24-image graphic that encompassed variations in skin tone and skin undertone to self-rate their complexion, and their complexion ratings were confirmed via inter-rater agreement.

Participant demographics were captured via an online survey completed before being interviewed. The demographic survey collected the participants' pseudonyms, age, racial composition, racial classification, educational level, and marital status. The majority of participants were 34 years or younger. Approximately 31% of respondents were between the ages of 18-24, roughly 31% were between the ages of 25-34, 25% were aged 35-44, and about 13% were 55-64 years of age. Of the participants, 75% of the women racially identified as Black. The remaining 25% acknowledged their biracial, multiracial, or mixed-race heritage while primarily identifying as Black. The educational levels of the women ranged from some college to having obtained a doctoral degree, and most were unmarried.

In Table 1, information regarding the spaces that the participants navigated is shown. This information includes their place of birth, where they were raised, where they currently reside, and the racial demographics of the spaces they frequently traversed, such as school, work, and church. As seen in Table 1, at the time of the interviews each woman lived in the Southeast. However, it is important to note that variations in where they were born and raised may have impacted their experiences. Additionally, most women navigated predominantly Black environments (see Table 1).

Interviews were conducted in person and via Zoom, a video conferencing platform. The researcher began each interview by asking whether the participants would give express consent for the interviews to be audio and video recorded. For participants of in-person interviews and respondents that did not consent to video recording, an unmodified image was requested for the purpose of inter-rater demographic survey complexion chart choice triangulation.

Table 1
Spaces Traversed by Participants

Name	Born	Raised	Currently Reside	Spaces Traversed
Rhys	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia	Predominantly Black
Tee	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia	Predominantly Black
Selena	New York	Sudan, Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia	Georgia	Multiracial
Wylene	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia	Predominantly Black
Elena	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia	Predominantly Black
Jaydyn	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia	Predominantly Black
Ealey	Florida	Florida Georgia	Georgia	Predominantly White, Predominantly Black
Valencia	Georgia	Georgia New Jersey	Georgia	Predominantly Black, Multiracial
Kyra	West Virginia	Georgia	Georgia	Predominantly White, Multiracial
Laney	Michigan	Michigan	Georgia	Predominantly Black
Darlene	Germany	Germany Florida North	Georgia	Predominantly White, Multiracial

		Carolina Hawaii Georgia		
Kym	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia	Predominantly Black
Aimee	Michigan	Georgia	Georgia	Predominantly Black
Shayla	Virginia	West Virginia	Georgia	Predominantly White
Braelyn	Washington	Michigan, Georgia, Texas	Virginia	Predominantly Black
Liliana	Germany	Germany, Florida, Louisiana, Hawaii Georgia	Georgia	Multiracial

The interview guide used to conduct the interviews was divided into two sections. Section one explored experiences with colorism, portrayals, and stereotypes of light-skinned Black women, the racial composition of the spaces the women frequently traversed, and racial connectivity. Section two examined the respondents' thoughts on the privileges they believed their skin may or may not have conferred and explored academically enumerated privileges not limited to education, family, relationships, and dating.

Prior to beginning the interviews, the participants were told that they could end the interview at any time and refrain from answering any questions as they saw fit. Additionally, the women were provided with a list of mental health resources(Hall, 2017; Hill, 2002; Sue et al., 2007; Thompson & Keith, 2001). The resource list included services addressing mental illnesses and disorders like anxiety, PTSD, and depression, locally and via hotlines. Throughout the interviews, there were moments when the women became notably emotional and visibly upset. During these moments, they were reassured that our interview was a safe space and that their experiences were undeniably valid.

It is believed that researcher positionality influenced rapport development with respondents, helped facilitate the construction of a safe space, and the researcher’s ability to use said positionality as a resource proved to be an asset (Holmes, 2020; Harding, 1992). The researcher, having had experiences of her own with intra-racial colorism and being transparent with participants when asked about herself, believed this helped foster a sense of community over a unified experience. Several participants voiced that "for once they felt [they] could speak without judgment," that they “finally felt seen,” and that the interviews were "cathartic" and "necessary," the women felt comfortable enough to cry and vent and express a range of emotions.

Due to the understudied nature of this topic, the researcher was meticulous in ensuring the study's trustworthiness. Researcher subjectivity can highly influence the interpretation of the data and consequently cause critical aspects of the quality of research to be called into question. Therefore, to establish trustworthiness, three processes were conducted. Firstly, the researcher compiled and kept an audit trail; secondly, respondent validation was employed; and lastly, inter-rater reliability was used. An audit trail is a way to monitor and keep a record of the interviews and helps reduce threats to researcher bias (Rodgers & Cowles, 1993). The audit trail consisted of the raw data collected, the audio recordings, the researcher notes, the coding dictionary, and the coding book. Respondent validation, also known as member checking, tests whether the initial results of the interviews ring true to the participants (Carlson, 2010). To help ensure the accuracy of the results, participants were asked if researcher interpretations of their comments were correct throughout the interviews and the phases that followed. Regular contact with the participants was maintained, as interpretations were verified and clarifying questions were asked as needed as it related to what was meant by certain interview excerpts and statements (Carlson, 2010). This maintained the integrity of the findings and controlled assumptions regarding feelings expressed about events related to in-group colorism and the potential impact the events may or may not have had on the women. Inter-rater reliability is a measure of reliability in which multiple raters are used to assess the degree that raters agree with their assessments. It is a score of homogeneity and helps to reduce bias and increase objectivity when interpreting the data (Armstrong et al., 1997). Two inter-raters partook in the process. The inter-raters were supplied with the demographic survey skin tone chart, the interview guide with textual definitions and copies of each interview void of identifying information. The interview transcripts were then read, and evidence regarding coding was triangulated.

Findings

Respondents were given the definition of colorism for the study. Colorism was defined as differential treatment based on skin color. Table 2 provides the major results of the coding analysis examining how light-skinned Black women experienced intra-group colorism. The table shows superordinate themes and the associated concepts that emerged from analyzing the women's memories of their experiences with in-group colorism. In response to the question "*How do light-skinned Black women experience intra-group colorism?*" for section one of the interview, specific themes emerged (1) macroaggressions, (2) microaggressions, and (3) stereotypes. The associated concepts that came to the fore for the theme of macroaggressions were physical altercations, physical bullying, verbal assault, verbal bullying, name calling referencing skin color, and deliberate discriminatory actions.

Table 2

Major Categories of Experiences with Intra-Group Colorism

Major Categories	Associated Concepts
Macroaggressions	1. physical altercations/violence, 2. physical bullying, 3. microassaults via (a) verbal bullying, (b) verbal assault, and (c) name-

	calling referencing skin color, and 4. deliberate exclusion/discriminatory actions
Microaggressions	1. microassaults in the form of (a) nonverbal avoidant behavior and/or (b) disingenuous compliments; 2. microinsult via (a) questioning Blackness and (b) subtle snubs; and 3. microinvalidation in the form of (a) minimizing struggle knowledge and (b) negating racial experiences/feelings
Stereotypes	1. Cocky/arrogant, 2. stuck-up/bougie, 3. doesn't work as hard/ has it easier, and 4. unapproachable

Scholars have noted that microassaults, despite being initially classified as a microaggression, may be classified as macroaggressions (Donovan et al., 2012). They may or may not be malicious in intent and are like forms of racism that are no longer widely acceptable, e.g., using racial slurs and racial epithets (Sue et al., 2007). For this study, the researcher considered the validity of both perspectives and distinguished between the types of microassaults experienced. Microassaults in the form of nonverbal avoidant behavior or disingenuous compliments, despite being perceived as passive-aggressive, were classified as microaggressions. Microassaults that manifested as deliberate exclusion, discriminatory actions, or name-calling that references an individual's skin complexion that is perceived in a derogatory or aggressive manner were coded as macroaggressions.

The subtheme microassaults via *name-calling referencing skin color* accompanied each subtheme for the superordinate theme macroaggressions. Thus, where physical altercations/violence, physical bullying, verbal bullying, verbal assault, and deliberate exclusion/discriminatory actions were experienced there was also name-calling referencing skin color. The related concepts for the theme of microaggressions were microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Microaggressive microassaults were experienced as nonverbal avoidant behavior or disingenuous compliments. Microinsults were exhibited as demeaning one's racial identity by questioning one's Blackness and subtle snubs. Microinvalidations manifested explicitly as minimizing struggle knowledge and negating racial experiences and feelings. The associated subthemes for the superordinate theme stereotypes were cocky/arrogant, stuck-up/bougie, doesn't have to work hard/has it easier, and unapproachable. While Table 2 provides a broad overview of the overarching themes, the following sections provide more details about them and their associated concepts.

Intra-Racial Macroaggressions

Fifteen out of sixteen participants recalled experiences with intra-group colorism. One participant, Aimee, expressed she had not experienced in-group colorism,

> "I was the lightest in the group, but like I changed. I became more like them, like you know, like personality-wise, and I ain't act funny. I laid low and went with the flow…I

was unproblematic, so like, I ain't have issues. So, nah, colorism wasn't a thing I experienced."

Aimee's remarks echoed statements made by Wylene. However, Wylene noted that she began "switching it up" to make herself "less of a target" after having had violent colorist encounters. Of the fifteen women with colorist experiences, twelve experienced macroaggressions. Macroaggressions were exhibited as physical and verbal bullying, isolated physical altercations, and isolated verbal assaults. For this study, a distinction was made between the forms of macroaggressions that were experienced. Bullying was considered continuous whereas physical or verbal bullying referred to continuous physical assaults or verbal abuse.

Isolated physical altercations or isolated verbal assaults refer to incidents that happened sporadically as opposed to being incessant. For the women who experienced macroaggressions 25% of the participants (N=3) were continuously physically bullied, and 42% (N=5) recalled isolated physical altercations. Each of the women who were physically bullied noted being verbally bullied as well. Physical bullying and verbal bullying were mutually inclusive. Approximately 83% of the participants (N=10) recalled verbal bullying as a dominant form of macroaggression, and 17% (N=2) recalled isolated verbal assaults. Table 3 exhibits the types of intra-racial macroaggressions that the women experienced. As seen in Table 3, most of the women experienced constant verbal bullying and isolated physical altercations, and some experienced multiple types of macroaggressions.

Table 3

Types of Intra-Racial Macroaggressions Experienced

Pseudonym	Isolated Physical Altercation(s)	Physical Bullying	Isolated Verbal Assault(s)	Verbal Bullying
Rhys	X			X
Tee				X
Selena	X		X	
Wylene				X
Elena	X			X
Jaydyn	X			X
Ealey		X		X
Valencia		X		X
Laney				X
Kym				X
Braelyn		X		X
Liliana	X		X	

To assess the presence or absence of experiences with intra-group colorism, the respondents were asked, "*Have you ever experienced in-group colorism? If so, please explain.*" The participants began to recount stories of being violently accosted and targeted by darker-

skinned Black females. They recollected the occurrences with ease, and interview after interview yielded tales of fights and bullying. Valencia, one of the eldest participants, recalled,

> "Yes, I have. When I was young, girls didn't like my [skin] color or my hair. They would literally come and spit on me, or they would come and hit me from behind. So, I had to start fighting. They'd start ganging up on you, and for your safety, you couldn't move alone."

Braelyn, with intense eyes but a nonchalant tone, said,

> "I'd get pushed. One girl took it too far. She kept pushing every day. I reported her. Nobody did anything. My mom was like, 'Stand up for yourself,' but I was like, 'She's not going to stop.' She didn't, and the next time she pushed my head into a brick wall and scraped my face along it, and I was bleeding a lot. That was the last straw for me. So, I came to school the next day knowing I was going to get suspended. I was like, that's it. I brought a razor, and I mean, when she started that day, it was on, we fought, and I cut her up. I had to physically threaten her life for her to stop…"

According to Elena, the violence was inevitable, and so, "you needed to stay ready so you ain't have to get ready." Rhys, one of the youngest participants, was visibly shaken as she recalled years of bullying and its toll on her. She admittedly suffers from generalized anxiety disorder and attributes it, in part, to the scarring experiences of her formative years. Similar sentiments were expressed by Elena and Braelyn, who have been diagnosed with depression and anxiety, Valencia who was diagnosed with depression, and Kym who battles social anxiety. As Rhys remembered being stripped naked by a group of dark-skinned Black girls she was overcome with emotion. Tearfully she said,

> "In hindsight, I felt like a spectacle, like I was under a microscope. I was different, so I needed to be observed, you know, like how White people did Black people? It puts me in the mind of Sara Baartman. It was a violation…"

She went on to say,

"It ultimately silenced me and took away that spark and that fire that I had…and I really started developing a need for validation because I didn't feel like I belonged, and yeah, colorism has really contributed to my anxiety."

Some of the participants that experienced macroaggressions seemed marred by the occurrences. Most experiences with macroaggressions occurred in the formative years, between elementary school and high school, ages five to seventeen. However, as they aged, displays of colorist macroaggressive behavior changed. When speaking about how colorism has manifested in adulthood, Valencia recalled working in a government entity for a large Southern urban city and having a dark-skinned Black woman as a supervisor. She drew attention to "power dynamics" and how they can "shift with complexion" and stated that, "skin color is a continuum, as is power." It was expressed plainly to her by coworkers, who had heard colorist slurs from the boss regarding Valencia, that her superior gave her such a hard time and critiqued her so harshly

because she did not care for her skin complexion. She was regularly ostracized within her department, and her supervisor went to great lengths to exclude her and make things more difficult for her. According to Valencia, her time there was made difficult "because of [her] skin."

Intra-Racial Microaggressions

Of the sixteen participants in this study, fifteen of the women recalled experiences with in-group colorism, specifically in the form of intra-racial colorist microaggressions. Twelve of fifteen participants recalled experiencing a combination of microaggressions and macroaggressions; three expressed solely experiencing microaggressions. It is important to note that participants interpreted the messages received as microaggressions and that this may not have been the intention of the individuals who are considered the perpetrators. The microaggressions experienced were microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations were primarily experienced as subtle snubs and insincere compliments, as well as nonverbal avoidant behavior, having one's Blackness questioned, having one's knowledge of Black struggles minimized or denied, and having one's racial experiences and feelings negated. Beyond direct discriminatory remarks made explicitly to the participants, several noted experiencing passive aggression via "dirty looks" and overhearing comments they perceived as negative.

Selena has battled with actions and comments made by friends and family that she felt negated positive aspects of her person by attributing "everything" to her skin complexion and physical appearance. She stated,

> "It frustrates me a lot because I know that I'm intelligent, I know that I bring a lot to the table . . . people tend to think that I've gotten where I am on the basis of my sexuality more so and my beauty than my intellectual abilities and it frustrates me because sometimes I feel like my beauty or my light skin is almost a curse to a certain extent because if I didn't have that, then you wouldn't rely so heavily on attributing my success to it. I've had friends do this, attribute everything I've got to my skin. My sister does it too. 'Oh, you got this, or they let you do that, or they gave you this because you're light skin.'"

Tee's experiences were similar to Selena's. She mentioned, "I see the looks I get, the resentment. It's unfortunate because according to my friend, 'whatever happens to me is because I'm light-skinned…'" Like several of the others, Liliana encountered many of the microaggressions she experienced from within her group of friends, who are also doctors, "they'll say I don't get it, that I don't know the struggle, but we are in a White male-dominated field, and when I encounter them, they see a Black woman. I know the struggle." She then went on to express that she "definitely" believes they do this because they question her Blackness. Kym, when talking about the looks she'd receive and the remarks she would overhear, went on to say,

> "It all just made me feel like I didn't belong. Like something was wrong with me. I was the wrong shade and that meant I could be treated like trash. Knowing what I know now I can sympathize and understand the source of the animosity, but it doesn't take the sting

> out of it…like being a minority within a minority. Like, to be made an outcast. It's one thing to be treated like a nigga by White people, we expect that, but it's another thing for it to happen from your own."

Summing up her thoughts on her countless microaggressive encounters, Rhys stated,

> "They look at me with disdain, with animosity… They don't even know me. I don't know them, they don't know me, but they dislike me? They're upset because I exist? I didn't ask for this; I didn't ask to be this color. Why penalize me for what I can't control?"

Stereotypes

During several of the interviews, participants mentioned that when having experiences with in-group colorism, comments about them being "stuck up" or that they thought they were "all that" or "better than everybody" would be made. For instance, Jaydyn remembered how a girl once wanted to fight her because of what she believed Jaydyn thought about herself. Jaydyn considered the event as altogether trivial, and with a slight grin and sarcastic tone, she said,

> "I got into a fight, and it stemmed from me being stuck up. Apparently, I thought I was better than everybody, and she wanted to fight me because of it. They would bully me because of what they thought I thought about myself."

Due to the topic of stereotypes being stated in multiple interviews, several questions related to perceptions of light-skinned Black women within the Black community were created. The participants were asked, "what are stereotypes associated with being light-skinned," "how are light-skinned women viewed in their communities," "how are light-skinned Black women portrayed on television and in cinema?" There was consistency in the enumerated stereotypes about light-skinned women. Elena stated that it is popularly believed that light-skinned Black girls and women are "snobby, bitchy and siditty. That [they] think [they are] better than everybody else." She then added, "[and] it's not true." Aimee echoed her sentiments. She said it is assumed that light-skinned Black women are "stuck up, full of themselves, and think [that] they're all that."

Each of the women that experienced in-group colorism credited the occurrences to stereotypes and misperceptions about light-skinned Black women. Selena said, "The colorism I've experienced has, without a doubt, been because of the ideas believed about light-skinned women. We're stuck up, they're uppity and bougie, and they think they're all that. Things like that" and according to Rhys, "[its] the ideas about what we are, who we are, how we are…" and regardless of whether a light-skinned Black woman believes the stereotypes projected onto her, it was felt that who they truly are doesn't matter "when [others have] already decided…" The women believed that prejudgments about who they were perceived to be preceded them and subsequently impacted their intra-racial interactions.

Discussion

1. …[understand] that any teasing you may have experienced within the Black community for the color of your skin is not equal in severity to the racism that more melanated Black people face…
2. Keep it to yourself… [Your experience] is best dealt with quietly and personally without turning to more melanated people for support… (Bonam, 2019)

Sentiments such as those expressed in the above quote are all too familiar regarding the intra-racial colorist experiences of light-skinned Black women, and they are dismissive of real acts of discrimination and prejudice. The experiences of light-skinned Black women should not be disregarded or deemed illegitimate, and they should not be dealt with quietly and out of the view of other Black people. As this research demonstrates, the colorism experienced by this group impacted them greatly and continues to reverberate in the hearts and minds of the women marred by them.

This study aimed to explore the research question, *how do light-skinned Black women experience intra-group colorism?* To answer this question, sixteen participants partook in semi-structured interviews that explored the phenomenon, and each freely and candidly spoke of their experiences. The demographic composition of the participants presented a mix of ages across multiple generations, as well as varying backgrounds and educational and income levels. Despite demographic and generational differences, many of the women's experiences were similar. The descriptions of the experiences of the women, together with their accounts and reflections on encounters with in-group colorism, suggest an answer to how this group of women experienced intra-racial colorism and the impact it has had on their lives.

Microaggressions and Macroaggressions

This study found that approximately 94% of the participants experienced intra-group colorism. Of that 94%, 80% of the participants experienced intra-racial macroaggressions. Macroaggressions are blatant and overt forms of aggression as opposed to more covert and passive-aggressive actions (Russell, 1998). For participants of this study macroaggressions were experienced as physical altercations, physical and verbal bullying, verbal assault, name-calling referencing skin color, and deliberate exclusion/discriminatory actions. Some of the women were spat at, physically attacked, violently jumped, and verbally abused. It is important to note that there was overlap between experiences with intra-racial colorist macroaggressions and microaggressions. Every participant did not experience macroaggressions. However, each participant who experienced macroaggressions also encountered intra-racial microaggressions.

From the emerging themes and patterns, the responses suggest that experiences with intra-group colorism were significant. While the sample size is not large enough for generalizability, saturation for this group was achieved. Due to the consistent nature of the responses, a key takeaway from this study is that light-skinned Black women are not merely privileged because of their complexions. In particular instances, their skin made them targets of interpersonal violence and verbal assault, as well as physical and verbal bullying and abuse. And the respondents experienced intra-racial marginalization because of their light complexions.

According to the participants, many of the traumatic or negatively memorable events they experienced happened during adolescence. Microaggressive and macroaggressive colorist experiences with intra-group colorism during the formative years of the women's lives helped shape their opinions of themselves and others within their racial group. They noted that negative colorist encounters during their youth irrevocably changed their racial perceptions and impacted feelings of in-group acceptance. Several of the women in this study noted having clinical mental health diagnoses, and some went so far as to directly attribute aspects of their anxiety and symptoms of depression to experiences with in-group colorism. This occurrence lends credence to the work of Hill (2002), that asserts that experiences with colorism and its consequences begin to impact Black women during their pre-pubescent years. These experiences have been found to be a source of psychological distress for women who have experienced colorism (Hill, 2002). This study supports these findings.

Encounters with colorism at times impacted feelings of racial connectedness and produced feelings of otherness. For the women that navigated predominantly Black spaces or multi-racial spaces, where there was self-segregation, several of them alluded to or mentioned feeling marginalized among their own or feeling like a minority within a minority. Additionally, the women noted feeling targeted or singled out because of their skin complexion, and for some, this led to anxiety and a sense that there was a need to look over one's shoulder and to be on guard at all times. Consequently, distrust was cultivated among some of the women regarding their interactions with Black women of darker complexions. This finding supports the work of Sue (2010), where it was found that experiences with microaggressions have ramifications behaviorally for sufferers producing hypervigilance, skepticism, suspicion, rage, and anger.

Stereotypes

In contemplating popular colorist stereotypes, Mathews and Johnson (2015) asked respondents, "People with ____ skin tend to be more lazy, women with ____ skin are attention seekers, and women with ____ skin think highly of themselves" (p. 268). Participants decided between three skin tone options: light, medium, and dark. For these questions, light skin garnered the majority of the selected skin tones at 42%, 56%, and 64%, respectively (Mathews and Johnson, 2015, p. 268). This research supports the notion that pessimistic perceptions of light-skinned Black women are pervasive. As noted in Table 3, the common stereotypes believed to be associated with light-skinned Black women are cocky/arrogant, stuck-up/bougie, they have it easier and don't have to work as hard, and they are unapproachable. Each woman believed these assumptions were at the root of their colorist encounters, culminating in the bourgeois farce and a specific kind of colorism, externalized colorism. The bourgeois farce is defined as the stereotypical belief that a light-skinned Black woman believes that she is better than others, that she is uppity, stuck up, bougie, and/or unapproachable, with no evidence to support the assumptions. Moreover, the bourgeois farce is rooted in antiquated historical notions, false perceptions, inaccurate portrayals, and projected presumptions about said women. The bourgeois farce, manifesting as internalized stereotypical beliefs, then results in externalized colorism. A form of colorism experienced by Black women with lighter complexions. To externalize is to "project a mental image onto a figure outside [of] oneself" (Lexico, 2020). Thus, for this group of women, externalized colorism refers to ideas and feelings about light-skinned Black women that are erroneously projected onto them by others within their ascribed racial group. It is a form

of colorist discrimination specifically experienced by and directed toward light-skinned Black women intra-racially.

Limitations and Future Directions

Inclusion criteria for this study necessitated that participants be born biologically female to partake in this study. Thus, members of the transgender community who may identify as light-skinned Black women were not included. Light-skinned Black transwomen may share similar experiences. However, it would be difficult to measure the impact of time. Other limitations were the regional location of the participants as well as the spaces that they have traversed and that they currently frequent, and the study's sample size. Varying regions may give way to different cultural experiences, and differences in navigated spaces could also impact a woman's lived experience. Due to the study sample size, the results may not be considered generalizable. The aim of this study was to be descriptive. In spite of smaller sample sizes, qualitative research presents an opportunity to delve deeper and give voice to marginalized, disenfranchised, or subjugated populations (Creswell, 2007) and in this regard this research succeeded as it presented findings regarding light-skinned Black women's experiences with in-group colorism.

Given the understudied nature of this topic together with the particularly damaging nature of in-group rejection and the diminished health outcomes associated with intra-racial colorism and microaggressions, future research should endeavor to examine whether violent colorist encounters contribute to diminished mental health outcomes for light-skinned Black women. Additionally, assessing the self-efficacy of lighter-skinned Black women would shed light on the mechanisms the women implement to move past or overcome difficult experiences with in-group colorism. However, if these findings are to be furthered, researchers have a responsibility to report comprehensive narratives with impartiality. Thus, the lived experiences of the individuals that are being studied should be considered in totality, and generalizations regarding light-skin privilege and its existence in the lives of lighter-complexioned Black women should not be haphazardly cast upon the multitude of light-skinned Black Americans living in the United States.

Conclusion

In all, this study's findings add to previous literature on colorism. It has expounded on colorism research by exploring how light-skinned Black women experience intra-racial colorism and helps present a more complete picture of the impact of colorism on the gamut of Black women. As previously stated, Black spaces and predominantly Black spaces exist, and within some of these spaces, there may be shifts in power dynamics that negatively impact light-skinned Black women (Carter, 2003; Harvey et al., 2005). In spaces where Blackness dominates, lightness may be more likely to be punished. Additionally, access to privilege and actualized disadvantage can exist simultaneously in the lives of light-skinned Black women. Therefore, factors such as geographical location, demographic community composition, as well as past and present socioeconomic status should be considered in any examination of light-skin privilege and when contemplating the lived experiences of light-skinned Black women. Lighter skin does not solely confer privileges and while light skin privilege exists in specific realms and within particular areas of life, various aspects of a lighter-skinned Black woman's life must be taken

into account to assess whether she has indeed benefited from the privileges that have been academically enumerated.

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