

Colorism in the Dating Pool: How Skin Tone Affects Black High Schooler's Preferences

Kristen Reed

Math Senior Seminar

Mr. Jason Scott

May 2021

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate how skin tone affects black high schoolers' dating preferences. Previous research shows that colorism in relationships happened frequently in the 20th century and may continue today. We hypothesized that light-skinned people will be the preferred skin tone to date, light-skinned people will rate themselves the most attractive, and there may be a difference in preference between sexual orientations. Information about preferred skin tone and partner characteristics was collected from teens that attend The Neighborhood Academy through an online survey. We found that most teens had no skin tone preference, that light-skinned students saw themselves less attractive, and that there was no difference between sexual orientations. However, females preferred traits typically associated with people of lighter skin. Our data suggest that the students may have found out what the study was about and did not want to appear colorist, so they tailored their answers, which is why findings may be inconsistent with our hypotheses.

Introduction

Colorism is still a controversial affair in all age groups amongst black communities, but this project will investigate colorism in high school daters. Research has found that when dating, people find lighter-skinned people to be more attractive (1). Preference for lighter skin has been around for hundreds of years. Colorism has its beginnings during the slave era; slave masters would put darker skin people in the field while placing lighter skin people in the house (2). This is because lighter-skinned people resemble white people, due to a history of sexual violence. The origins of colorism are important to know so people understand why they need to take this discrimination seriously. To create change, there must be awareness.

Colorism is defined as “the process of discrimination that privileges people with a lighter skin tone over their darker skin counterparts” (2). Over the years, colorism’s influence on objective things in life such as jobs and education has declined significantly. Colorism was a strong factor in the 1940s for jobs and education, but much lower for people born after 1963 (3). In a 1990 study, from an education standpoint, the difference in light to dark skin tones was as big as the white to black gap overall for those born in the 1940s. However, it is almost gone for today’s generation (2). As far as subjective ideas such as marriage, lighter skin people are still favored. A study on marriage found that there is “no change in the importance of skin tone in the marriage market,” from the 1940s to today. (3) Light-skinned people are as likely to be married but tend to marry higher status spouses (3), due to preference/desire for lightness. These findings are important because colorism is often hidden as a desire for people with more money or status(4). Because marriage starts in dating, it is important to look at dating as well. There are many different factors that play a part in colorism in dating such as attractiveness, gender differences, and sexual orientation.

Researchers have found that attractiveness has an impact on colorism (1). Researchers surveyed 40 HBCU students about their self-reported attractiveness and the attractiveness of other people in photographs. The survey found that all skin tones found themselves equally attractive. While rating each other, they found that dark skin people were more gracious with their ratings. This can be because dark skin people may have lower standards, due to being less desired and less likely to be the first choice compared to lighter-toned peers. It is also possible that the number of black people in an environment affects colorism (5). When there are many black people in a space, research suggests that black people may be more colorist, but less so in a

white space. This is important because it suggests that a lot is unknown about colorism in dating in young people.

Gender differences can have an effect on colorism (4). In one study of 388 never married, single black students, researchers asked about their potential perfect partner. The survey found that men were very openly colorist. They preferred lighter women to date at a higher rate than women did men (33.3% vs. 16%). The survey also found that women preferred men with more wealth at a higher rate than men did (60.2% vs. 44%) (4). The women seemed to be more concerned with wealth and future success, which is subconsciously associated with lighter skin in America. In today's society, men are more likely to say they want a lighter skin complexion to date, while women might express colorist preferences by talking about characteristics or other features that are associated with light skin.

Colorism is extensive in every aspect of dating, including the LGBTQ+ community. Researchers looked at people on dating websites who sent and received messages to or from white people to see how orientation affects race (6). They found that race preference is based on gender within orientation, meaning gender stereotypes are more important. They also found black women are seen as exotic, so straight whites men and gay white women are more open to dating them. However, black men were seen as threatening, so both white straight women and gay men were less likely to talk to them. Although we are looking at skin tone and not race, this suggests that gender might be more important than orientation for race, so it might be true for skin tone as well.

Overall, research says that black men are openly colorist whereas women tend to conceal their feelings. Also, gender stereotypes tend to be more important than sexual orientation when it comes to skin color. However, there has been little to no research on teens and dating. Our study will address this by surveying the students of The Neighborhood Academy on their preference when looking for someone to date. The survey will include questions with obvious colorist questions and questions with hidden colorist associations like wealth or education.

Our first hypothesis is that light-skinned prospective daters should be preferred over darker-skinned, due to research suggesting light-skinned people are seen as more desirable (2, 3). The second hypothesis will look at if men have strong overt colorist preferences (4). Our third hypothesis will address if women have a colorist preference, but we expect it to be shown through other signs besides questions about skin tone (4). Our fourth hypothesis will look at

sexual orientation and we are looking for whether or not there will be a difference in color preference between orientations (6). Lastly, we think there will be differences in how attractive people see themselves versus how much they prefer a given skin tone (1).

Method

The participants in this study were 10th through 12th graders that attend The Neighborhood Academy, a private college-prep high school. There were a total of 43 students that took the survey with 14% being male and 76% being female. Thirty-two percent of students were in 10th grade, 27% were in 11th grade and 39% were in 12th grade. Seventy-two percent listed themselves as heterosexual, 20% listed themselves as homosexual, and 8% listed themselves as other. All participants identified as Black or African American. The material used in this experiment was a survey with questions drafted by the study author.

The survey was emailed out to students and then the primary researcher followed up in classes to encourage participants to take the survey. All class visits were done remotely over Zoom. The survey had questions about the students' ideal partners. Most questions were just them describing their ideal partner (height, hair, skin color) while other questions were questions that hinted at colorism. These questions included the kind of school their partner attends or if they have to have access to a car. The final part of the survey was questions that pertained to them such as their gender, age, grade, skin tone and perceived attractiveness.

Results

The purpose of this study is to investigate colorism in black high school daters. By sending out surveys to teenagers in grades 10-12 that attend The Neighborhood Academy, we assessed our hypotheses concerning the role of skin tone, gender, sexual orientation and self-attractiveness on one's ideal partner. Our first hypothesis is that light-skinned prospective daters should be preferred over darker-skinned. Our survey had a total of 43 students and out of those 43 students more than half of them claim to not have a preference. Out of the students who did have a preference, six of them preferred light skin tones while four of them preferred dark skin tones (Table 1). Unfortunately this is not enough evidence to confirm or deny my hypothesis.

Light - Skin	Brown - Skin	Dark - Skin	No Preference
6/43 = 14%	10/43 = 23%	4/43 = 9%	23/43 = 53%

Table 1. Dating Preference by Skin Tone. *This table shows the proportion of people who preferred a given skin tone of their potential dates. Over half of people stated they had no preference. There were no significant differences between the groups.*

Our second hypothesis is that men will be more open about their colorist preferences. Out of the 43 total students only nine were male and out of those nine males, six of them did not have a preference so once again we can not conclude anything from this data.

The third hypothesis states that women will demonstrate secret colorist tendencies. We asked our participants a series of questions that are typically associated with those of a lighter skin tone such as the importance of wealth, employment, education, and access to a car. Our findings suggest that women do indeed show colorist tendencies. In all four questions (Table 2), females rated these traits higher than males.

Question	Female	Male	Difference?
(F) How important is your ideal partner having money or wealth?	2.7	1.9	t(43) = 2.12 p = 0.02 yes
(G) How Important is your ideal partner having a job?	3.9	2.8	t(43) = 2.67 p = 0.005 yes
(H) How important is your partner going to a good school?	3.5	2.4	t(43) = 2.42 p = 0.01 yes
(I) How important is your prospective date having access to a car to you?	3.0	1.9	t(43) = 2.22 p = 0.02 yes

Table 2. Differences between Male and Female Partner's Ideal Characteristics. *This table shows the questions we asked the participants and the differences between male and female students. Overall, females preferred these traits more than males.*

Importance of Characteristics of Ideal Partner by Gender

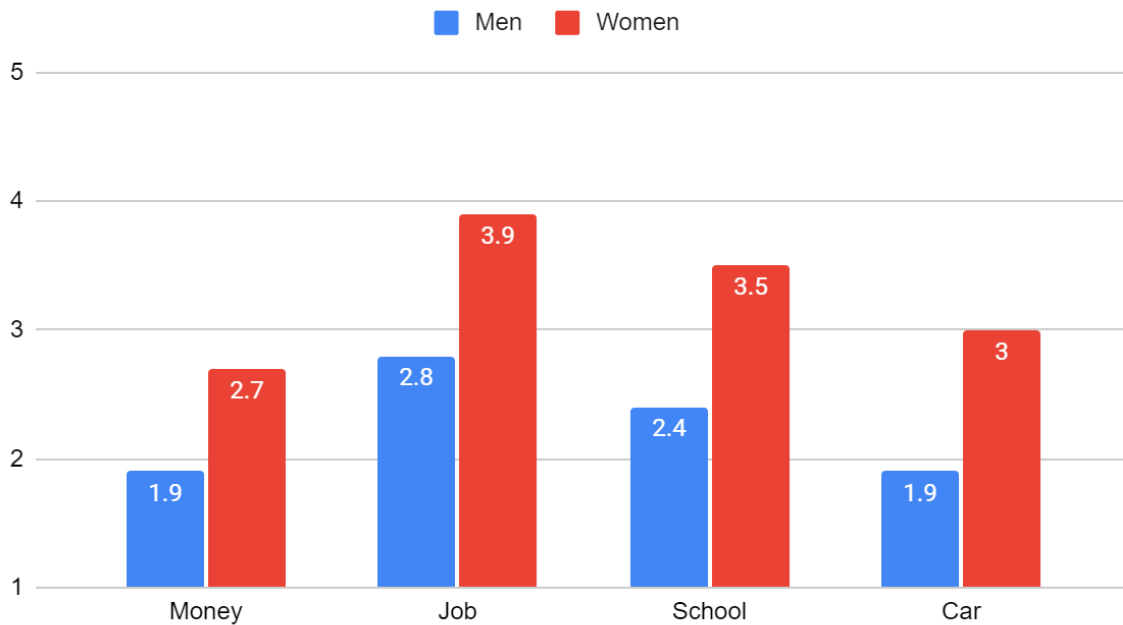


Figure 1. Importance of Characteristics of Ideal Partner by Gender. *This chart shows the difference between females and males in their answer to the questions of their ideal partners characteristics.*

Our fourth hypothesis examined the role of sexual orientation and color preference.. Table 3 states that there is no real difference between orientations. Out of the 40 students who did state their sexual preference, 28 of them are heterosexuals of whom 50 percent had no skin tone preference. The other 12 participants were part of the LGBTQ+ community; 58 percent also have no preference. Our hypothesis is inconclusive due to the high number of “no preference” answers.

	Light	Brown	Dark	No Preference
Heterosexual n=28	5 (18%)	6 (21%)	3 (11%)	14 (50%)
LGBTQ n=12	1 (8%)	3 (25%)	1 (8%)	7 (58%)

Table 3. Skin Tone Preference by Sexual Orientation. *This table shows the different skin tones and the percentage of them chosen as the answer to an ideal skintone to date question for different sexual orientations.*

Our final hypothesis was people of different skin tones will rate their own attractiveness differently. By using a ANOVA test we compared skin tone to attractiveness and found that light skin people actually found themselves less attractive than brown skin and dark skin participants ($F(2, 40) = 7.53, p = 0.001$). Light skin participants ($M=5.6, SD= 1.76$) saw themselves as less attractive than brown ($M=7.5, SD=1.6$) or dark skin ($M=8.2, SD=1.5$) participants. Dark skinned people saw themselves as most attractive, but there were only six of them in the study, limiting our ability to find a difference.

We also expected people who prefer a lighter skin tone will see themselves as more attractive, which would show a bias towards lighter skin. A one way ANOVA test found that there was no difference between self-attractiveness by partner preference ($F(2, 17) = 73.31, p = 0.06$.) There was basically no difference: those who preferred brown ($M=8.1, SD=1.2$), dark ($M=6.25, SD=0.5$), and light ($M=7.5, SD=1.3$) prospective partners were desired by similarly attractive people.

Self Attractiveness by Participant Skin Color

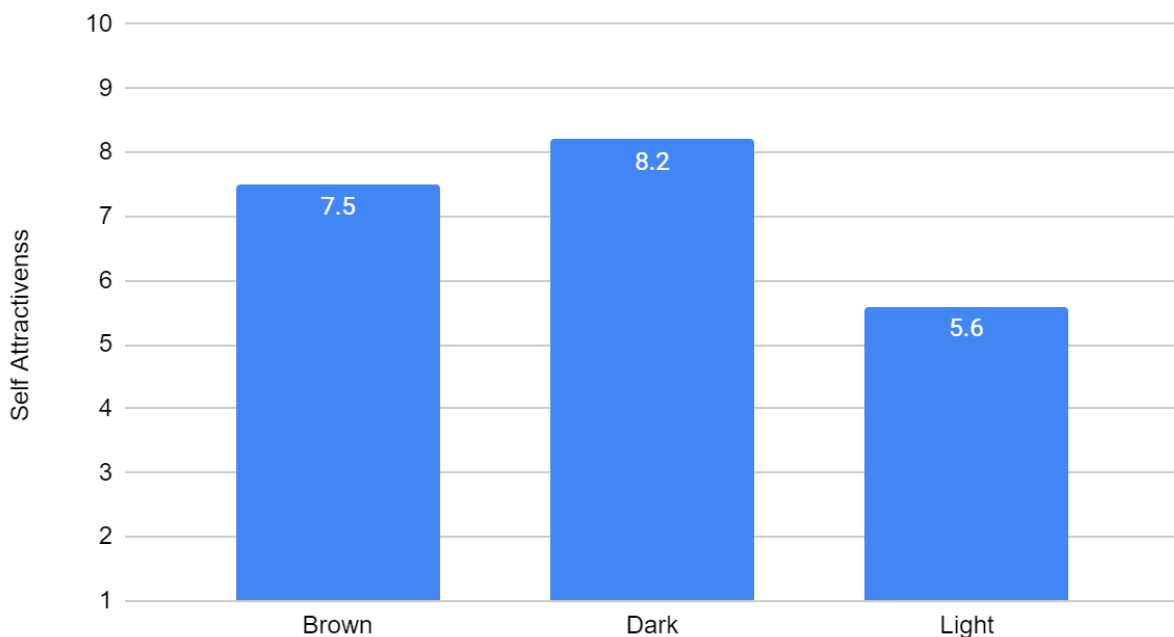


Figure 2. Self Attractiveness by Participant Skin Tone. This chart shows the average that each skin tone finds themselves attractive. Light skin tone participants viewed themselves as less attractive than other participants.

Discussion

Our first hypothesis is that light-skinned prospective daters should be preferred over darker-skinned; there was no evidence to support this hypothesis (Table 1). The second hypothesis considered if men have strong colorist preferences and most of our men said they had no preference leaving our hypothesis unsupported. Our third hypothesis addressed if women have a colorist preference, we found that women agree with all our questions we asked about hidden colorism more than males, so our hypothesis was supported (Table 2, Figure 1). Our fourth hypothesis looked at sexual orientation and we found no significant difference (Table 3). Lastly, we expected there will be differences in how attractive people see themselves versus how much they prefer a given skin tone. We found that light skin toned people rated themselves as the least attractive, but there were no differences in the self-attractiveness for people's preferred ideal partners. Our last hypothesis was also unsupported (Figure 2).

We think the students were reluctant to express their colorist views. We can conclude this because more than half said they had no preference, but females showed a possible colorist preference by their answers to the questions that are related to lighter-colored people. Most African Americans are aware that being a colorist is a terrible thing to be called. In popular culture, even famous people like celebrities also fear being called colorists because it's seen as such a dreadful name to be called within the black community (7). Many have an incorrect view of what a dating preference means. A difficult conversation between African Americans is preference vs. prejudice. Many excuse their colorism by claiming that they just prefer a partner with a certain skin tone. When a preference goes beyond a choice a person makes or something about themselves they can control, then it's a prejudice. It's very likely that people made a choice on the survey to prevent negative connotations about themselves.

Our findings are consistent with previous research on gender. Other researchers found that women preferred men with materialistic attributes such as wealth and future success, which are typically associated with lighter skin people (4). We also found that women prefer men with money, a job, who attend a good school, and have access to a car. Therefore it might be plausible that females in our survey are colorist, but they hide it. Fifty percent of our women said they had no preference, but that may not be true. Or females at The Neighborhood Academy have higher standards but given that we agree with previous research (4), and common stereotypes of

successful black people, it might be reasonable that TNA teenagers are colorist, but don't want to admit it.

In contrast, our findings were inconsistent with research on attractiveness (1). We found that light-skinned students downplayed their attractiveness. This can mean the students anticipated what the study was about and downplayed themselves to not appear colorist. Or it can be a form of aversive racism, which is professing equality publicly, but acting racist privately (8). Possibly, our study is an example of aversive colorism because the students are downplaying how they feel about themselves publicly but may act differently privately when choosing dating partners, as suggested by our results related to gender (Table 2).

Although we tried to be as thorough as possible, we still faced limitations such as a small sample size, participants figuring out the intent of the survey, and possible issues due to self-report of skin tone. Due to The Neighborhood Academy's small student population, it was difficult to get a large sample of students, which renders our findings unreliable for many of our hypotheses. Also, the students may have figured out the intent of the survey, so the students may have altered their answers to appear as non-colorist as possible. Also adding "no preference" as an answer gave the students an easy way out on answering the questions honestly. Due to COVID restrictions, we had to give the survey online making it hard to make a more personal connection to the students which led to fewer responses to the survey. Lastly, allowing the students to self-report their skin tone may have led to falsified answers. Although we have no evidence of this, the students may have reported the color they want to be rather than the color they actually are.

For future research, we would recommend a forced choice for the participants instead of providing a "no preference" option. Also, to do the interviews in person so one could engage with people on a personal level. Finally, we'd also recommend the consideration of a focus group or interview. A photo line-up may be beneficial too, gathering pictures of different skin-toned people and asking the participants to rate their interest in dating them could be interesting.

Overall, we suggest that participants may have been afraid to be called colorist, and altered their answers to avoid judgment. They may have downplayed it or hid with characteristics like money or education or by changing how they see their own attractiveness. This is problematic because ignoring the problem of colorism won't make it go away. Colorism is

racism within a community that experiences outside racism. Hiding it is futile. It's important to be open-minded; people need to talk about the difficult topic of preference vs. prejudice.

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