DE-OBJECTIFYING BODIES: HOW AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN VIEW THEIR OWN
SKIN COLOR

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ABSTRACT

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This paper explores how the social forces that impact African American perceptions of beauty.

Rather than focusing on psychical features this paper explores the various social-structural forces

that impact a sense of attractiveness. I found that age and a sense of community, not skin color,

were the significant predictors of Black women's feelings of attractive. This finding contradicts

much conventional knowledge that women's assessment of their own beauty is determined by

the existence of particular physical features. The limitations of this study are the exclusion of

other physical features, such as weight, body shape or hair texture that may also impact how

attractive black women view that skin shade. Regardless, this paper points to a wide range of

variables that shape how women assess their own beauty.

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INTRODUCTION

It is widely accepted that beauty is both personal and political. The importance of beauty in the U.S. is clear; women who feel unattractive are more likely to have low self-esteem and even eating disorders (Taylor et al 2007; Shaw et al 2004). Yet it remains unclear how women negotiate their aesthetic worth and how they determine their level of attractiveness and sense of beauty. This is especially true for racial minorities, who at times appear resilient in face of the onslaught of mainstream beauty standards and at other times seem to succumb to these mainstream norms. At first glance, African American women appear to successfully mitigate the pressures of popular culture and resist demands to be thin (Striegel-Moore 2003; Chin Evans & McConnell 2003; Durham 1999). However, African American women routinely spend billions of dollars annually to chemically straighten their hair and to lighten their skin in an effort to achieve mainstream beauty standards (Thompson 2009; Milkie 1999). These two very different trajectories are simultaneously characteristic of African American women's experiences. Theoretically this remains difficult to reconcile why Black women succumb to social pressures for chemically straightened hair and light skin yet resist social imperatives to be thin. Clearly African American's perception of their bodies is quite complex. It is my hope that by examining skin shade I can begin to uncover the complexity of hidden complexity of African American beauty self-perceptions.

As women gaze at themselves in the mirror to take stock of their appearance, they pay attention to a multitude of features. Even when honing in on one aspect of their physical appearance, like skin, their understanding and assessment is embedded in a complex schema of beauty that is constituted by the convergence of a number of social

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factors. As a result, I explored under utilized theories in skin tone literature to understand the range of social forces that impact African American women's assessment of skin shade. As a consequence, the present study constitutes a divergence from previous scholarship that examines perceptions of hair, body and skin as fragmented, disjointed and theoretically isolated entities. Even studies that attempt to grapple with the complex meanings of Black women's beauty perceptions tend to examine women as dismembered parts conceptually de-contextualized, and at times objectified (Poran 2006; Gervis et all 2012). I hope begin the process of *repairing* and *de-objectifying* our understanding of Black women and their bodies by synthesizing the various theoretical perspectives that have been used in the studies of hair, skin, weight, and body-image to uncover all of the social forces that impact Black women's sense attractiveness due to skin tone.

Due to the limitations of the data-set, I was not able to examine the ways in which other physical qualities, such as hair and weight may construct black women's perception of their skin but I was able to examine how our understandings of these features can strengthen our understanding of Black skin tone. As a consequence, I synthesized seemingly irrelevant concepts and theoretical frameworks born out of investigations of hair rand body-image with colorisim literature to better understand social determinants of African American beauty perceptions due to skin shade. In this paper I hope to accomplish three tasks (1) problemetize the ways theorized African American beauty (2) begin the difficult work of re-orientating our current theories and conceptualizations African Americans' women's bodies (3) Demonstrate through empirical analysis how complex Black women's understand of their skin-tone truly is.

WHY STUDY BEAUTY?

Beauty is more than a just a combination of physical qualities, it is a socially constructed aesthetic valuation system shaped by societal structures, and it is accomplished through embodied practices (Entwistle 2000). The prism of beauty refracts the social significance of appearance, unequal gender relationships, and the continuing salience of race in personal and public spaces. In a study of beauty pageants in the U.S., Kinloch (2004) argues beauty is a feminine imperative and the primary agent of acceptance for women in the U.S; it is a measure for ideal gender and race performances. As such, beauty highlights the variegated and complex pressures women feel.

Furthermore societal success and privilege is highly correlated with the ideal of beauty. Women feel pressure to measure up to the dominant constructions of beauty in order to achieve a modicum of success, approval and acceptance. The behaviors and activities associated with beauty are highly contingent upon the social and historical location (Entwistle 2000). Although the dominant construction of gender may come with particular correlates of beauty, sub-cultural and marginal groups often contest and modify dominant constructions of beauty. Though body-work women exhibit agency to manipulate their display of beauty (Woodward 2009). Black women's perceptions of beauty exemplify this navigation between and within various paradigms of beauty.

In the U.S. beauty represents one of the central measures by which race and gender categories are constructed and evaluated. The epitome of feminine beauty is racially and ethnically exclusive because it privileges whiteness, long hair, and white skin

(Anderson et al 2010; Anderson et al 2008; Jeffreys 2005; Adkins & Skeggs 2004; Kinloch 2004; Bordo 1993). Despite the pressure to conform to this ideal of beauty, Black women construct a *third space* whereby they negotiate own ideas of beauty by navigating through dominant constructions of gender, beauty and race and other paradigms of gender and race (Tate 2007).

Even ideal types of beauty are reified though experiences, images, discourses and structures (Hammidi and Kraiser 1999). In a critique of studies of beauty, Hammidi and Kraiser (1999) theorized that by *doing beauty* women negotiate culturally contradictory spaces and personal ambivalences to arrive at personal sense of beauty. This posture recognizes the agency of social actors, who actively participate in accomplishments of beauty despite the dominant construction of beauty (Hammidi & Kraiser 1999). Though Hammidi and Kraiser's (1999) study focused on lesbian women in California, the theoretical model is a useful tool for understanding how African American women construct and evaluate their own beauty (as all groups regardless of race, class or gender are active agents of their social world) (Berger & Luckman 1966). Furthermore, Tate (2007) and Thompson (2009) argue that Black beauty is a matter of doing, rather than an inherent attribute or a fixed physical trait. As such, rather than seeing Black women as hegemonically scripted by dominant raced and gendered ideologies, I focus on the concurrent divergent influences that Black women must negotiate to arrive at a sense of their own beauty, thereby participating in the construction of their own beauty perceptions.

Leeds Craig (2006, 2003, 2002, 2006) has studied how African American's beauty is collectively negotiated at in beauty pageants in the 1960s and 1970s. She

provides evidence for historical shifts in beauty constructions among African Americans as a direct result of social movements (Leeds Craig 2006). Her unique and groundbreaking ethnographic research provides important conceptual grounding for the present study. Specifically, her use of an intersectional analysis highlights the multiple convergent influences of U.S. Black women's dynamic perceptions of beauty. Correspondingly, I will examine variables that have been found to be significant in shaping Black women's feelings about hair, body size and shin color to determine whether these factors shape Black women's feelings of attractiveness thereby re-tooling the dominant method of assessing how people understand their bodies.

CHAPTER 2

2.1 SKIN SHADE

The *colorism* model dominates our understanding of skin tone, shade and color. Within this paradigm, African Americans have been indoctrinated, coerced, and socialized into societal imperatives of beauty. As a result internalized racism is the significant determinant of perceptions of beauty within the Black population. In accordance, African Americans self-perceptions of beauty are defined by dominant social ideology, largely characterized by racism (Hunter 2005, 1998). The history and current reality of racial oppression, beginning with slavery, are the drivers of African American's self-assessment of beauty of beauty (Hunter 2005, 1998).

Colorism is skin-color bias and privileging of lighter-skinned African Americans (Harris 2008; Hunter 2007, 2005, 2002, 1998; Leeds Craig 2006, 2003; Keith 2003; Maddox and Gray Chase 2004; Hall 2006; Ransford 1970). Under the colorism paradigm, African Americans who have lighter skin, that more closely approximates Whiteness, are viewed as smarter, cleaner and more attractive than their darker-skinned counterparts (Harris 2008; Hunter 2007, 2005; Keith 2003; Hill 2002). *Colorism* emerges as an important facet of the U.S. racial formation whereby a series of historically situated campaigns called *racial projects* construct race and create meaning. These projects reify White supremacy as the central dimension of the construction of race (Hunter 2007, 2005, 2002; Keith 2003; Omi & Winant 1994). Specifically the trans-Atlantic slave trade, subsequent enslavement of African Americans, and the continuing history of racial oppression of Blacks in the U.S. concretized Whiteness and white skin as the epitome of civility, virtuosity, righteousness, and beauty. At the same time, standing in direct

opposition to Whiteness, Blackness became defined as being ugly, unintelligent, and ignorant (Hunter 2007, 2002, 1998; Hill Collins 2005; Keith 2003; Hill 2002; Russell, Wilson and Hall 1992; Drake & Cayton 1945; Myrdal 1944). The designation of particular phenotypes cemented these negative controlling images and stereotypes (Hill Collins 2002). In these racialized contexts, "phenotype came to be the preeminent indicator of social standing and moral character: physical traits such as skin color, eye color, hair texture, nose shape, and lip prominence became powerfully loaded symbols of beauty, merit, and prestige," (Hall 2002). Particular pheonotypical markers emerged though the reverberation of numerous racial projects in the U.S. as the manifestation of African American inferiority and White supremacy (Omi & Winant 1994; Hunter 2002, 1998; Keith 2003).

By the mid-1940s, scholars began to posit that African Americans, in response to racial oppression, had internalized racism, and colorism had become a significant trend with Black communities (Hill 2002, Hunter 2002). Frazier (1957) regaled tales of the *blue vein societies* where affluent African Americans with light complexions gathered to socialize. In these exclusive social clubs Blacks were required to be lighter than a brown paper bag to participate (Thompson and Keith 2004, 2001; Frazier 1957). For scholars studying African Americans, these discriminatory practices that value light skin highlight the colorism embedded in Black communities. Additionally they argued that prejudicial views accompanied the discriminatory practices within the African American population; merit, attractiveness, and prestige were determined by skin shade, which lead to a bias against dark-skinned African Americans (Johnson 1941; Marks 1943; Myrdal 1944; Drake & Cayton 1945; Seeman 1946; Clark & Clark 1947). They drew a direct link

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between the persistent pressures of racism and African Americans, believing in their own inferiority, mobilizing colorist regimes of beauty and worth within their own communities (Johnson 1941; Marks 1943; Myrdal 1944; Drake & Cayton 1945; Seeman 1946; Clark & Clark 1947).

Since the initial outpouring of scholarship on colorism, chronicling and documenting internalized racism among African Americans remain central within contemporary academic research. This model largely the use of skin tone as a measure for self-perception of physical attractiveness among African Americans (Tate 2007). In 1991, Porter found that Black children have a preference for light skin; additionally Robinson & Ward (1995) found that Black adolescents have the same inclination; even African American adults (Hall & Cash 1192; Hall 1992) were found to prefer light skin. Brown (1998) found that among Black Americans light skin came to represent intelligence and cleanliness, whereas dark skin was devalued as being indicative of ignorance, stupidity, and filth (Hall 2006; Hill 2002; Robinson & Ward 1995; Bond & Cash 1992; Porter 1991; Anderson & Cromwell 1977; Goering 1972). Hunter (2005) contends that despite the Civil Rights movement and Black power movements of the 1960s and 1970s, African American women still harbor feelings of shame about their skin color.

Colorism is an important dimension of racist organizations and structures of power (Hochschild & Weaver 2007; Hunter 2005). Historically and contemporarily societal rewards and opportunities are bestowed upon African Americans whose appearance more closely approximates Eurocentric standards (Hall 2006; Hill Collins 2005; Keith 2003; Hill 2002). As a consequence, lighter-skinned African Americans are

more likely to have higher-status occupations, higher levels of income, and more years of schooling. (Hunter 2007, 2005, 1998; Keith 2003; Hall 2006; Hill 2002; Ransford 1970; Hughes & Hertel 1990; Keith & Herring 1991; Seltzer & Smith 1991; Bond & Cash 1992; Brown 1998). Additionally women with light skin are more likely to marry men of higher social educational attainment and with higher income levels (Hunter 2007; Hall 2006; Keith & Herring 1991; Hughes & Hertel 1990).

Scholars documenting the history of colorism see the societal advantage linked to light skin as an incentive for African American women to conform to colorist standards of beauty (Hochschild & Weaver 2007; Thompson & Keith 2004, 2001; Bond & Cash 1992). Thompson and Keith (2004) argue that if one's bodily attributes are judged positively by society, one will feel attractive and beautiful. Furthermore, positive assessments of skin color within society are important predictors of self-efficacy and self-esteem (Thompson & Keith 2004). African Americans are more likely to find light skin among Black women more beautiful (Hunter 2007, 2005, 2002, 1998; Bond & Cash 1992). Because of the widespread pressure to adhere to this ideal of beauty, many Black women in the U.S. desire to have light skin (Hunter 2007, 2005, 2002, 1998; Keith 2003). Women's use bleaching creams and other cosmetic procedures and techniques are evidence of this trend toward pressure and preference for light skin (Hunter 2007, 2005, 2002, Hall 2006, 1995, 1997; Keith 2003). The colorist ideology and practices among African Americans are bolstered by systemic and institutional benefits awarded to lighter skin (Hunter 2007, 1998; Hochschild & Weaver 2007; Drake & Cayton 1945).

Thematically this body of colorism literature posits women are more susceptible than men to the colorsim and as a consequence it is particularly significant for women's

self-assessments. The evidence toward this trend is domineering presence of light-skinned African American women in the media presents added evidence of social preference for Black women with light skin (Hill Collins 2005; Thompson & Keith 2004, 2001). Additionally, Hunter (2005) cites the African American males' preference for Black women with light skin as central to Black women's sense of attractiveness due to their skin shade. Undergirding the colorist scholarship is that societal assessment of skin tone is gendered and is particularly important for Black women's self-appraisals (Thompson & Keith 2004). This contention reifies a heteronormative paradigm that women feel social pressure to embody particular aesthetic norms in order to attain marriage partners. By deducing Black's women's own perception of attractiveness from the societal pressure from male preference of marriage partners we obfuscate the ways in which social pressure for attractiveness is varied, widespread and impacts people regardless of sexuality and gender in the U.S. Though the discriminatory practices among Black men and women may impact Black women's perception of attractiveness it is my contention that there are other social determinants of African American women's perceptions.

Also embedded within the discourse on colorism is Foucault's notion of power and subjectivity, whereby the body emerges as a subject and object of power and discourse (Tyner & Ogle 2007; Blood 2005; Foucault 1980). As a consequence, dominant discourse on race and gender construct Black women's bodies without resistance or contestation from Black women (Tyner & Ogle 2007; Blood 2005; Foucault 1980). Women are passive victims or cultural-ideological dupes rather than active agents in the raced and gendered construction of their own bodies (Tyner & Ogle 2007; Bordo 1993). As such

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their own beauty self-judgments based on skin tone are derived from social pressures rather than the accomplishment of negotiation race and gender (Tyner & Ogle 2007; Bordo 1993). The racialized gendered construction of Black women's bodies is only one factor in determining the perception of their own attractiveness.

Although the colorism literature underscores the social significance of having light skin, the literature on colorism does not provide substantial empirical evidence to explicate how African American women feel about their attractiveness or beauty based upon their skin tone. It remains unclear whether the societal preference for light skin and corresponding social advantages or attached to having light skin lead African American women to use social pressure and discrimination as the critical variable in their aesthetic self-appraisal.

In my analysis of Black women, the first potential predictive variable I included was the personal experiences Black women had with skin shade discrimination, or colorism. In particular, I will examine whether experiencing negative treatment due to skin tone impacts the Black women's self-assessment of beauty due to skin tone. I did not measure the Black women's skin shade, instead I focused on the treatment they received in regard to their skin tone. This amalgamation of experiences due to skin shade are in many ways emblematic of the social pressure Black women face to conform to dominant racialized and gendered ideology. While I believe that these variables to be significant, I explored other elements that may also influence Black women's perception of attractiveness due to skin shade. I scoured the literature on other facets of appearance such as weight and hair; within these bodies of literature I found that a sense of proximity and age were significantly related to feelings of attractiveness. Though, I did not examine

African American body image or hair for the present study, I utilized concepts and theoretical models, such as proximity and age, which have been found to be significantly related to how Black women perceive their hair and weight. As a consequence, I propose that feeling close to the African American communities and Black women's age would also be significantly related to a sense of attractiveness due to skin tone.

2.2 BODY-IMAGE

In the 1960s, Black scholars introduced an alternative paradigm of African American culture (Patton 2006). Largely influenced by the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement, this cadre of scholars articulated that African Americans possessed racial pride despite oppression and dominant racial ideologies (Tate 2000, 2007). Counter to the discourse on colorism, this framework resisted sweeping generalizations that African Americans internalized racism. The focus on body-image highlighted African American's refusal to accept stereotypes, controlling images, and racial oppression (Duke 2002). They documented the ways in which a Black identity and sense of community belonging served to buffer internalized racism or self-hatred (Leeds Craig 2003; Duke 2002; Poran 2006, 2002; Bell-Scott & McKenry 1986). Rather than merely reflecting dominant ideologies of African American inferiority, the Black community served as a refuge and the source of an alternative referential paradigm.

Black women's close proximity to other African Americans can bolster positive self-evaluations beautiful (Chin Evans & McConnell 2003; Rucker & Cash 1992). Numerous studies have explicated the pressure for women to achieve specific physical traits, particularly being thin (Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Bordo 1993; Wolff 1991). Despite widespread social mandates for women to be skinny, studies centering on Black

women's body-image highlight the definitions of beauty among African American women that run counter to dominant social definitions of beauty (Nishina *et al* 2006; Duke 2002; Wolff 1991). They argue that African American group membership allowed girls to resist negative beauty assessments and retain high-self esteem and self-worth (Grogan 2008; Chin Evans & McConnell 2003; Duke 2002; McKenry Markus & Wurf 1987; Fish 1980). Regardless of social imperatives to be for women to be skinny, Black women retain positive self-appraisals and report seeing themselves as good-looking despite weighing more than normative constructions of beauty (Grogan 2008; Chin Evans & McConnell 2003; Duke 2002). This literature supposes Black women reject dominant imperatives for feminine beauty because their interpretive and reference community asserts a disparate beauty paradigm (Gorgan 2008; Duke 2002; Milkie 1999; Lakoff and Scherr 1984; Fish 1980). Tate (2007) has concluded that Black women mobilize an anti-racist framework on their bodies because of their participation and membership within Black communities.

Borrowing from the body-image research, I examine the role proximity to Black communities has in shaping how women gauge their own beauty. Through the incorporation of concepts gleaned from body-image and hair literature, I position self-appraisals of beauty due to skin shade within the entire context of the body. Accordingly, I will investigate whether a sense of closeness to Black communities facilitates a positive assessment of attractiveness based on skin tone.

2.3 HAIR

Dominant social mandates for hair highlight how beauty is both racialized and gendered in the U.S. Typically the hairstyles and textures that approximate whiteness and

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beauty are peferable. As a consequence, long, straight, silky hair is considered most attractive (Candelario 2007, 2000). Despite this dominant trend, an investigation into Black hair demonstrates that Black women both conform and resist to these mandates for beauty. Studies on Black hair have highlight the centrality of specific socio-historical dynamics in shaping how women understand beauty (Candelario 2007, 2000; Leeds Craig 2002). Some scholars argue that Black communities affirm various Black hairstyles and textures thereby providing a foundation for black women to feel attractive regardless of hair style or texture (Milkie 1999). As a consequence, Black hair is a space to transcend paradigms of exclusion that privilege whiteness. Other scholarship regards Black hair as a site of oppression because of the subjugation of particular hair-styling patterns wherein Black women feel less attractive if they do not conform (Tate 2007; Patton 2006; Byrd & Tharps 2001). Thompson (2009) found that the social location of black women aids in the construction of meaning of hair. From the literature on Black women's hair, I honed in on the importance of the social-historical and political setting for the construction of Black women's beauty (Leeds Craig 2002, 2006). The politics of the moment aid in the production of beauty scheme used to measure attractiveness (Leeds Craig 2002, 2006). As a consequence I examined the relationship between age, as an indicator of the temporal space Black women occupy, and Black women's self-appraisal of beauty due to skin shade.

CHAPTER 3

3.1 RESEARCH QUESTION AND HYPOTHESIS

In this investigation I seek to uncover the social correlates to African Americans' conceptions of beauty due to skin tone. It is my contention that a number of simultaneous divergent factors converge to contour African American beauty self-perceptions based on skin shade, not just social pressure for feminine beauty as purported by the colorism literature. Central to this investigation are the feeling of proximity African American women have toward Black communities and the experiences with of rejection or discrimination. As a result, I hypothesize that closeness to the Black community, a sense of shared fate with Black people and experiences with discrimination are significant predictors of whether African American women feel attractive based on their skin shade. Additionally, I posit that the social-historical context of the women's lives, as exemplified by their age, significantly shapes their perception of beauty.

3.2 DATA AND SAMPLE SELECTION

The data I will utilize was collected through the National Survey of American Life (NSAL). This questionnaire was administered to African Americans nationwide from 2001 to 2003. This data is a contemporary and nationally representative sample collected by renowned social science researches; the principal investigator is head of Institute of the Social Research James Jackson. I chose this sample because it is reputable, national and contemporary. I performed a secondary data analysis on the NSAL data-set to ascertain the significant factors that shape how self-identified African American women ages 18 to 94 evaluate their beauty perceptions due to skin shade. Because missing data was random rather than systematic, I deleted the missing data. The

final sample included 1913 self-identified African American women from the north, south, east and west regions of the U.S.

3.3 MEASURES SECTION

The dependent variable for this analysis is, "How often are you considered attractive due to skin shade?" This question establishes whether the respondent thinks she is considered beautiful as a consequence of her skin shade. It symbolizes the ways in which women understand signs and communications of their own beauty. I hypothesized that processing being considerations of attractiveness would be shaped by host of interactions, experiences and contextual realties that construe beauty as a schema. The perception of being attractive is derived from a general comprehension of the symbols and embodied accomplishment that construct beauty. Rather than being contingent upon physical characteristics, beauty is constructed by women negotiating and coming to terms with their reality—as a corollary their experiences with affirmations or rejections are processed through a construction of beauty. Undergirding this posture, is the assumption that beauty is a complex combination of performances and embodied accomplishments reified in social situations.

For the analysis, I began by narrowing down the respondents to only include Black women. Although gender exists on a continuum rather than an essentialized binary for the purposes of practicality I will be relying on the respondents who identified as women for the present study. I controlled for social demographic information such as education level, which I recoded into meaningful categories. Additionally, I controlled respondents' skin shade, as determined by the interviewer. I planned to control for income but found it was insignificant and substantially reduced the sample population, as

a consequence I did not include it in the analysis. To examine the generational differences between African American women, I categorized age into blocks of 10 years and included it as the primary independent variable so to uncover possible generational differences. Furthermore, I am interested in how embedded the women are within the African American community; in order to unearth this dimension I will incorporate the independent variables: "closeness to Blacks" and "what happens to Blacks affect your life." Finally, I am interested in the role of colorist and discriminatory practices; as a consequence, I included "how badly Blacks treat you due to skin shade" and "how badly Whites treat you due to skin shade" as major explanatory variables. By examining the variables, I hope to unearth the simultaneous effect of various and contradictory social realities on the perception of attractiveness for African American women.

3.4 DEPENDENT VARIABLE

How often are you considered attractive due to your skin shade: The variable "g10c" is ordinal and describes the respondent's perception of attractiveness due to skin shade. The responses ranged from very often to never. I recoded the responses into meaningful categories. 29.22% of the Black women felt they were often considered attractive due to their skin shade (5). 37.06% of the Black women felt they were fairly often considered attractive due to their skin shade (4). 15.63% of the Black women felt they were not often considered attractive due to their skin shade (3). 8.21% of the Black women felt they were hardly ever considered attractive due to their skin shade (2). 9.88% of the Black women felt they were never considered attractive due to their skin shade (1). These responses did not vary as a result of the respondents skin shade.

TABLE 3.1 How often are you considered attractive due to your skin shade?

How often are you considered attractive due to skin shade? (g10c)	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative
very often (5)	559	29.22	29.22
fairly often (4)	559	37.06	66.28
not too often (3)	299	15.63	81.91
hardly ever (2)	157	8.21	90.12
Never (1)	189	9.88	100.00
Total	1,913	100.00	

Variable	Observations	Mean	Standard deviation	min	max
g10c	1913	2.32	1.25	1	5

3.5 INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

Education Status: The variable "educ" is continuous and describes the amount of

schooling the respondent has received. The Black women had between 1 and 17 years of

schooling. I recoded this variable (educ recoded) into meaningful categories: Black

women have not had any high school education (1), women who have had some

education (2), women who completed high school, (3) and women who have some

college education (4). 1.57% of the Black women had between 1 and 5 years of

schooling. 24.83% of Black women had between 6 and 11 of years of schooling. 37.64%

of Black women had 12 years of schooling. 4% of Black women had between 13 and 17

years of schooling.

TABLE 3.2 How many years of schooling have you had?

How many years of schooling have you had?	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative
1 (between 1 and 5 years of schooling)	30	1.57	1.57
2 (between 6 and 11 years of schooling)	475	24.83	26.40
3 (12 years of schooling)	720	37.64	64.04
4 (between 13 and 17 years of schooling)	688	4	100.00
Total	1,913	100.00	

Variable	Observation	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
educ_recoded	1,913	3.08	.82	1	4

Age: Age is a continuous variable ranging from 18 to 94 years that I recoded into

meaningful categories. I recoded the variable (educ recoded) by sectioning off age-

cohorts into blocks of approximately 10 years: between ages 18 and 29 years (1),

between ages 30 and 39 years 2), between ages 40 and 49 years (3), between ages 50 and

59 years (4), between ages 60 and 69 years (5), between ages 70 and 79 years (6), and

between ages 80 and 94 (7). 24.41% of the Black women were between 18 and 29 years.

25.77% of the Black women were between 30 and 39 years. 22.16% of the Black women

were between 40 and 49 years. 12.02% of the Black women were between 50 and 59

years. 8.94% of the Black women were between 60 and 69 years. 4.70% of the Black

women were between 70 and 70 years. 1.99% of the Black women were between 80 and

94 years.

TABLE 3.3 How old are you?

How old are you?	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative
1 (18/29=1)	467	24.41	23.10
2 (30/39=2)	493	25.77	50.18
3 (40/49=3)	424	22.16	72.35
4 (50/59=4)	230	12.02	84.37
5 (60/69=5)	171	8.94	93.31
6 (70/79=6)	90	4.70	98.01
7 (80/94=7)	38	1.99	100.00
Total	1913	100.00	

Variable	Observation	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
Age_recoded	1913	2.77	1.55	1	7

Closeness to Blacks: The variable "g3a" is ordinal and describes the sense of closeness

Black women have to other Blacks. The responses ranged from very close to not close at

all which I recoded into meaningful categories. 52.69% of the Black women felt very

close to African American (4). 38.42% of the Black women felt fairly close to African

Americans (3). 7.21% of the Black women felt not too close to African Americans (2).

1.67% of the Black women did not feel close at all to African Americans (1).

TABLE 3.4 Do you feel close to blacks?

Do you feel close to blacks?	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative
very close (4)	1,008	52.69	52.69
fairly close (3)	735	38.42	91.11
not too close (2)	138	7.21	98.33
not close at all (1)	32	1.67	100.00
Total	1,913	100.00	

Variable	Observation	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
g3a	1,913	1.58	.70	1	4

What happens to Blacks affects you: The variable "g11" is ordinal and describes the

sense of community Black women share with African Americans. 59.96% of Black

women commented that what happens to African Americans had an effect on them.

40.04% of Black women commented that what happens to African Americans did not

have an effect on them.

TABLE 3.5 Does what happens to blacks affect you?

Does what happens to blacks affect you?	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative

TABLE 3.5 (cont'd)

1 (yes)	1,147	59.96	59.96
0 (no)	766	40.04	100.00
Total	1,913	100.00	

Variable	Obs	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
g11	1913	2.60	1.96	0	1

How often Blacks treat you badly due to skin shade: The variable "g10b" is ordinal and describes the number of times Black women were the victims of colorism by African Americans. The responses ranged from very often to never. 3.97% of Black women felt they were often treated badly due to their skin shade. 10.77% of Black women felt they were fairly often treated badly due to their skin shade. 27.23% of Black women felt they were not too often treated badly due to their skin shade. 20.96% of Black women felt they were hardly ever treated badly due to their skin shade. 37.06% of Black women felt they were never treated badly due to their skin shade.

TABLE 3.6 How often do Blacks treat you badly due to skin shade?

How often do Blacks treat you badly due to skin shade?	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative
very often (1)	76	3.97	3.97
fairly often (2)	206	10.77	14.74

TABLE 3.6 (cont'd)

not too often (3)	521	27.23	41.98
hardly ever (4)	401	20.96	62.94
hardly ever (4)	401	20.96	62.94
never (5)	709	37.06	100.00
Total	1,913	100.00	

Variable	Observation	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
g10b	1,913	3.76	1.17	1	5

How often Whites treat you badly due to skin shade: The variable "g10a" is ordinal and describes the number of times Black women were the victims of prejudice and discrimination by Whites. The responses ranged from very often to never. 7.16% of Black women felt they were often treated badly due to their skin shade. 15.42% of Black women felt they were fairly often treated badly due to their skin shade. 30.74% of Black women felt they were not too often treated badly due to their skin shade. 23.58% of Black women felt they were hardly ever treated badly due to their skin shade. 23.11% of Black women felt they were never treated badly due to their skin shade.

TABLE 3.7 How often do Whites treat you badly due to skin shade?

How often do Whites treat you badly due to skin shade?	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative

TABLE 3.7 (cont'd)

very often (1)	137	7.16	7.16
very often (1)	137	7.16	7.16
fairly often (2)	295	15.42	22.58
not too often (3)	588	30.74	53.32
hardly ever (4)	451	23.58	76.89
never (5)	442	23.11	100.00

Variable	Observations	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
g10a	2262	3.418656	1.200128	1	5

Skin shade: The variable "k21" is ordinal and signifies the skin shade of the respondent as determined by the interviewer. The observations ranged form very dark to very light. 2.35% of the Black women were identified as having very dark skin. 14.75% of the Black women were identified as having dark skin. 17.93% of the Black women were identified as having somewhat dark skin. 42.34% of the Black women were identified as having medium skin. 13.17% of the Black women were identified as having somewhat light skin. 7.63% of the Black women were identified as having light skin. 2.82% of the Black women were identified as having very light skin.

TABLE 3.8 Respondent's skin shade

Respondent's skin shade	Frequency	Percent	Cum.
very dark	45	2.35	2.35

TABLE 3.8 (cont'd)

dark	263	13.75	16.10
somewhat dark	343	17.93	34.03
medium	810	42.34	76.37
somewhat light	252	13.17	89.55
light	146	7.63	97.18
very light	54	2.82	100.00
Total	2,089	100.00	

Variable	Observation	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
k21	2089	3.852561	1.266006	1	7

3.6 METHODS SECTION

Ordinal Logistic Regression: Ordinal Logistic Regression is a statistical tool that aids in determining probability of an outcome. This method is utilized when the assumption of Ordinary Least Squares Regression is violated because the dependent variable is ordinal rather than continuous. Additionally, this method allows us to capture information that may be lost by binary logistic regression due to the ordinal nature of the dependent variable. Ordinal Logistic regression re-expresses the categorical variable in terms of a number of binary variables through the use of cut points on an ordinal scale. Thus we are produce parallel equations with divergent cut points for each probable outcome. By employing this method I am able to ascertain important dimensions of how age, closeness to Blacks, the perceived shared fate with other Blacks, negative assessments of skin

shade by Black and White people, and education are related to self-perception of attractiveness due to skin shade.

3.7 RESULTS SECTION

TABLE 3.9 How often are you deemed attractive due to skin shade? Ordered Logistic Regression coefficients

	n=1913
age_recoded	*.2176267** *(.0278601)*
educ_recoded	*.0793461* *(.0529953)*
How often do Whites treat you badly due to skin shade? *g10a*	*.0388722* *(.0420572)*
How often do Blacks treat you badly due to skin shade? *g10b*	*.111056* *(.059927)*
What happens to Blacks affects you *g11_recoded*	*-.7373072** *(.2835819)*
How close are you to Blacks? *g3a_recoded*	*.111056* *(.059927)*
Interviewer determines skin shade *k21*	*.0233243* *(.0335546)*
Interaction between Closeness to Blacks and discrimination by Blacks *CloseBDis*	*1764879** *(.07299)*
Cut 1	*-.0112975* *-.0112975*
Cut 2	*1.605582* *(.3649911)*
Cut 3	*2.473194* *(.3679491)*
Cut 4	*3.19852* *(.07299)*
Pseudo R-squared	*0.0191*
Log Likelihood -2723.3092	
*p<.05, one tailed test	

Age: I found as age increases by 10 years, the predicted odds that African American women perceive themselves as attractive due to skin shade increases by

1.24312292 units, holding all other variables constant. At the 5% significance level, the age of Black women is a significant predictor of Black women's perception of attractiveness due to skin shade (p=0.000).

Education: I found as African American women's educational attainment increases, the predicted odds that African American women perceive themselves as attractive due to skin shade increases by 1.08257894, holding all other variables constant. At the 5% significance level, education is not a significant predictor of Black women's perception of attractiveness due to skin shade (p=.134).

Negative treatment by Whites: I found that the fewer experiences with whites discrimination due to skin shade, the predicted odds that African American women perceive themselves as attractive due to skin shade increases 1.03963761 units, holding all other variables constant. At the 5% significance level, negative treatment by Whites due to skin shade is not a significant predictor of Black women's perception of attractiveness due to skin shade (p=.355).

Negative treatment by Blacks: As experiences with discrimination by blacks decreases, the predicted odds for perceived attractiveness increases by 1.11745748 units for those who are not close to blacks, holding all other variables constant. At the 5% significance level, negative treatment by Blacks due to skin shade is not a significant predictor of Black women's perception of attractiveness due to skin shade (p=.064).

What happens to Blacks affects you: Being affected by the fate of blacks, in comparison to not being affected by the fate of blacks, decreases the predicted odds that African American women perceive themselves as attractive due to skin shade by 0.478400419 units, holding all other variables constant. At the 5% significance level, the

perception of a shared fate with Blacks is a significant predictor of Black women's perception of attractiveness due to skin shade (p=.009).

Closeness to Blacks: I found as closeness to blacks increases, the predicted odds for perceived attractiveness increases by 0.859548524 with no experiences with discrimination, holding all other variables constant. At the 5% significance level, closeness to Blacks is a significant predictor of Black women's perception of attractiveness due to skin shade (p=.014).

Participants' skin color: I found that the more dark the interviewer found an African American women's skin shade, the predicted odds that African American women perceive themselves as attractive due to skin shade increases by 1.02359844 units, holding all other variables constant. At the 5% significance level, participants' skin color is not a significant predictor of Black women's perception of attractiveness due to skin shade (p=.487).

Interaction between Closeness with Blacks and Discrimination by Blacks: If closeness increases by one unit, the predicted odds ratio of discrimination will change by 19.301999%, holding all other variables constant. At the 5% significance level, the interaction between closeness with Blacks and discrimination by blacks and significant predictor of Black women's perception of attractiveness due to skin shade (p=.016).

Cut Point 1: 0.988766077 is the predicted odds of being considered attractive due to skin shade very often, fairly often, not too often, and hardly ever in comparison to never feeling attractive due to skin shade, when the respondent does not feel close to the fate of blacks and all other co-variants are zero.

Cut Point 2: 0.200772671 is the predicted odds of being considered attractive due to skin shade very often, fairly often and not too often, in comparison to hardly ever and never feeling attractive due to skin shade, when the respondent does not feel close to the fate of blacks and all other co-variants are zero.

Cut Point 3: 0.084315126 is the predicted odds of being considered attractive due to skin shade very often and fairly often in comparison to not too often, hardly ever and never feeling attractive due to skin shade, when the respondent does not feel close to the fate of blacks and all other co-variants are zero.

Cut Point 4: 0.0408225767 is the predicted odds of being considered attractive due to skin shade very often in comparison to fairly often, not too often, hardly ever and never feeling attractive due to skin shade, when the respondent does not feel close to the fate of blacks and all other co-variants are zero.

CHAPTER 4

4.1 DISCUSSION

The findings supported my hypothesis that a convergence of social forces contour how Black women construct beauty. Regardless of skin tone, a sense of closeness to other Blacks, a sense of shared fate with Blacks and the negative treatment by Blacks due to skin shade were significant predictors of African American beauty assessment. Yet the nature of the connection between these social factors and self-assessment of beauty did not fit neatly into dominant theoretical models of African American women's beauty. Ultimately, these findings confirm that Black women are influenced by their experiences within Black communities. Discriminatory experiences with Whites, education, and the skin shade of the respondent did not have a significant correlation to self-appraisals of attractiveness. Most importantly, the physical markers did not impact perception of attractiveness.

Regardless of skin shade, experiences with discrimination from Blacks are significantly related to Black women's assessment of their own beauty perceptions. Much of the literature on skin tone points to negative consequences of skin shade discrimination and colorism. My findings supported this trend whereby regardless of skin color, encounters with skin shade discrimination within the Black community corresponds with Black women feeling increasingly less attractive. Yet colorism does not merely impact Black women of darker skin hues but rather it affects self-appraisals of Black women of all complexions. The examination opens the door for new theoretical models that explain how negative interactions due to skin shade relate to how Black women to assess their attractiveness.

As predicted, increased feelings of proximity to the Black community and a sense of shared fate with African Americans were related to of black women's beauty perceptions. This positions Black communities as important interpretive sources for Black women's perceptions of their beauty, as the literature on body-image predicts. Regardless of skin tone Black women who feel close to African American communities and have a sense of shared fate with African Americans are more likely to see their skin tone as beautiful. This confirms dominant paradigms espoused in the body-image research whereby Black communities serve as barriers against negative self-assessments. This may be explained by the declining significance of colorist ideological paradigms within Black communities.

Finally, I found age to be a significant predictor of how Black women assess their attractiveness due to skin tone. As a consequence, the definition of African American women's beauty is contingent upon a multitude of social forces converging in one temporal moment. As a corollary, the temporal space Black women occupy significantly shapes their self-perception of attractiveness. Leeds Craig (2002) articulates the centrality of the historical moment in understanding how women negotiate social spaces that concurrently espouse colorism and resist racial stereotypes and controlling images. Specifically, I found that older African American women are more likely to have positive self-appraisals of attractiveness due to skin color. This points to the significance of the social-historical moment Black women were born in. Yet this finding is counter-intuitive because of the dominant ideology espouses an aesthetic of youth, but in this case younger Black women feel less attractive than older Black women. This trend signifies an

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alternative paradigm of beauty whereby older Black women are more likely feel beautiful.

Taken together these findings point toward African American's adherence to an alternative paradigm of beauty, divergent from the social pressure for whiteness and light skin. My findings indicate that African Americans are not mere cultural dupes of passive receptacles of dominant social ideology. Even the effect of discrimination based on skin tone is mediated by a feeling of closeness toward African Americans. As such, Black communities are significant sources for interpretative frames, symbols and meanings.

For future studies I would like to control for confounders and potential mediators not included in the present study, such as friend networks, dating history, and positive experiences with colorism. Furthermore, this study could be improved by the addition of focus groups to hone in on the specificities and particularities that shape Black women's self-assessments.

4.2 CONCLUSION SECTION

The bulk of research on African American women's self-appraisals of attractiveness has sectioned off a portion of the body for analysis. Parceling out the body has led to divergent theories of hair, skin, facial features, and body image. For example, research on Black women's body image has found that African American women resist social pressure to be thin and are less likely to develop eating disorders. Most of these studies conclude that Black women have a positive body image. Research on Black hair has found that Black women chemically process their hair because of the social pressure to have long and straight hair, leading them to conclude that Black women have negative body perceptions. The conceptual dismemberment has led scholars to vastly divergent

conclusions about Black women's body image, perception of attractiveness, and assessment of beauty. In the present I endeavored to conceptualize Black women's self-appraisals of beauty due to skin tone in the context of the entire body and a schema of beauty that includes hair, skin, and weight. Thus, perception of attractiveness is influenced by a host of seemingly irrelevant social factors that construct beauty for Black women in the U.S. This research has show that being apart of Black symbolic communities are more significant than previously assessed for contouring Black women's sense of attractiveness due to skin tone. Though the racialized and gendered pressure to conform is omnipresent, how people feel and perceive themselves reflects negotiation, accomplishment and an embodied experience.

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