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Understandings and experiences of colourism: global perspectives

Edited by
Aisha Phoenix, Nadia S. Craddock and Margaret Hunter

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Understandings and experiences of colourism: global perspectives

Topic editors

Aisha Phoenix — King's College London, United Kingdom

Nadia S. Craddock — University of the West of England, United Kingdom

Margaret Hunter — Santa Clara University, United States

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Table of contents

04 Editorial: Understandings and experiences of colourism: global perspectives
Aisha Phoenix, Nadia Craddock and Margaret Hunter

07 Colorism and immigrant earnings in the United States, 2015–2024
Joni Hersch

18 Skin shade and relationships: how colourism pits Black and mixed Black-White women against each other
Aisha Phoenix and Nadia Craddock

32 Color me khmao: the effects of social factors on colorism among Khmer women
Vanessa Lakana Veak

51 Colourism and law in the UK: a story of colonial indifference?
Zainab Batul Naqvi

63 Examining colorism, body image, and self-esteem in UK Black and South Asian adolescents
Nadia Craddock, Aisha Phoenix and Paul White

76 Reimagining "racial" stratification and inequality: inter- and intraracial colorism in Trinidad and Tobago
Monique D. A. Kelly

90 The effects of skin tone and prototypicality on the dynamic racial categorization and stereotyping of Latine Americans
Gabriel Camacho, Mora A. Reinka and Cassidy J. Burt

102 The perception paradox: experiencing and witnessing skin color discrimination and self-rated health in Latin America
Angela R. Dixon

114 From filters to fairness: understanding colourism through TikTok aesthetics and trends
Monica Ronniza Majumdar

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EDITED AND REVIEWED BY
Sin Yi Cheung,
Cardiff University, United Kingdom

*CORRESPONDENCE
Aisha Phoenix
aisha.phoenix@kcl.ac.uk

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Editorial: Understandings and experiences of colourism: global perspectives

Aisha Phoenix[1]*, Nadia Craddock[2] and Margaret Hunter[3]

[1]Centre for Public Policy Research, School of Education, Communication and Society, Faculty of Social Science and Public Policy, King's College London, London, United Kingdom, [2]Centre for Appearance Research, School of Social Sciences, University of the West of England, Bristol, United Kingdom, [3]Department of Sociology, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, CA, United States

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Editorial on the Research Topic
Understandings and experiences of colourism: global perspectives

Prejudice and discrimination in which people are penalized for having darker skin and features not associated with whiteness is known as colorism (Hunter, 2005; Phoenix and Craddock, 2025). Rooted in histories of colonialism, slavery, caste and racialized hierarchies, colorism operates both within and between racialized groups, shaping opportunities and lived experiences across diverse cultural contexts. Colorism has far-reaching consequences for health and wellbeing, education and employment opportunities, interpersonal relationships, and within legal justice systems (Monk, 2019, 2021; Strmic-Pawl et al., 2021), shaping, for instance, who is hired, who is considered desirable as a romantic partner, and who is believed in court. Technological innovations, including the algorithms driving social media platforms and AI-enhanced beauty standards, have only added to the power of global messaging that prioritizes light skin and devalues dark skin. Despite increasing scholarly attention, research has remained disproportionately concentrated on the United States and the experiences of Black Americans, leaving important geographical contexts, populations, and disciplinary perspectives comparatively underexplored. This Research Topic, "Understandings and Experiences of Colourism: Global Perspectives" brings together international scholars whose work advances understanding of how colorism operates across multiple regions, populations, and social institutions. The nine articles in this volume highlight both the global reach of colorism and the diverse ways in which it is experienced, reproduced, and challenged, offering new theoretical, methodological, and empirical insights into an enduring yet under-researched form of inequity. Many articles take an intersectional approach to their investigations of colorism and include studies of colorism and migration, gender, sexuality, and class. For example, Hersch's article investigates the interaction between immigration and colorism, Veak's article explores the relationship between gender and colorism, and Dixon's article examines how class and skin color influence health outcomes. Moreover, the entire volume demonstrates that colorism operates across multiple levels of social life, from everyday interactions to institutions and systems of

inequality. We have grouped articles accordingly, though acknowledge that some papers straddle more than one theme.

Three articles in the Research Topic examine how colorism shows up in individuals' everyday lives: online, in relationships, and in family/community settings. First, Majumdar's work qualitatively explores how colorism operates on social media, examining how the video platform TikTok perpetuates, normalizes and commodifies colorism through an examination of British South Asian women's engagement with skincare and beauty content on the platform. Second, another interview study written by two of the guest editors, Phoenix and Craddock, explores how colorist beauty ideals that privilege light skin affect Black and mixed Black-White women's experiences of the heterosexual relationship market. Findings suggest that women with light skin are often desired while those with darker skin are overlooked. In turn, colorist injustices stoke competition between women of different skin shades, with those with light skin holding an advantage in the relationship market. Third, also employing qualitative methods, Veak advances understandings of colorism among Cambodians by examining how family and community shape Khmer women's perceptions of colorism. Veak explores the colorism experiences of Khmer women living in the USA and Cambodia and reports that self-esteem and colorism experiences were shaped by the way in which support from family and cultural connections to Khmer identity interacted with relative skin shade within families and communities. Together, these three studies show colorism operating through ordinary, everyday practices, from engaging with social media to family and peer relationships.

The next three articles in this Research Topic examine associations between colorism and psychological wellbeing, health, and identity. First, Craddock et al. examine associations between experiences of colorism and body image and self-esteem among Black and South Asian adolescents in the UK based on online survey data. One of their major findings is that colorism from people of the same racialized group was a stronger predictor of low self-esteem than colorism from other racialized groups. Second, Dixon's article contributes to the literature on colorism and health by exploring Latin American adults personal and vicarious experiences of skin shade discrimination. She found that witnessing colorism directed at others (i.e., vicarious colorism) was associated with worse self-rated health, while personally experiencing colorism was not. Third, Camacho et al.'s article uses computer mouse tracking to examine how skin shade and prototypicality of Latin Americans, i.e., the extent to which their phenotypical appearance aligns with features associated with Latin Americans, relates to the ways in which they are racialized and stereotyped. These findings complement the qualitative findings of Phoenix and Craddock, by demonstrating that skin shade can shape the processes through which people are racialized and stereotyped. Collectively, these three studies indicate that colorism, like other forms of discrimination, is detrimental to wellbeing and can shape self-perceptions and social belonging.

The final three articles focus on colorism as a system of inequality. Naqvi focuses on the invisibility of colorism in the UK legal system. She argues that colorism is absent from the UK legal framework despite colorism-related incidents being brought to court and suggests that the law is poorly equipped to address racism let alone colorism. Naqvi demonstrates that colorism is neither specifically recognized in the UK hate crime framework, nor the 2010 Equality Act, making legal claims exceptionally difficult. Kelly considers one aspect of colorism in the Caribbean with her article on colorism occurring both between and within racialized groups in Trinidad and Tobago. Drawing on Americas Barometer surveys, she finds that there is a significant association between darker skin and reduced odds of attaining higher levels of education as well as reduced access to household amenities. Hersch's research focuses on an association between skin shade and earnings in the United States. In her analysis of Current Population Survey 2015–2024 data matched to New Immigrant Survey skin color data, she reported that immigrants from countries where people have darker skin experience a significant earnings penalty, even when controlling for age, education, ethnicity, and immigration status. Together, these three articles suggest that colorism operates as a structural force with material consequences across law, education, and the labor market.

Collectively, these nine articles highlight the pervasiveness of colorism and its relevance in different parts of the world. Moreover, they show that colorism operates at different levels within society, enacted through everyday practices and conversations as well as through institutions, and that experiencing colorism is associated with worse wellbeing outcomes. Addressing colorism, many of the authors suggest, requires action at each of these levels. These include: increasing understanding of how it operates; facilitating conversations about colorism; challenging and addressing colorism through educational programs and anti-discrimination policies; improving media representation of people with darker skin and features not associated with whiteness and challenging colorist beauty ideals. The Research Topic also points to important priorities for future scholarship, including longitudinal studies, intervention development and comparative international research. Despite our efforts to include articles from around the world, the Research Topic has no contributions on colorism in sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa, the Middle East or East Asia. It is important that future collections foreground research in these regions to further understandings of how colorism operates.

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EDITED BY
Aisha Phoenix,
King's College London, United Kingdom

REVIEWED BY
Margaret Hunter,
Santa Clara University, United States
Jeannette Wicks-Lim,
University of Massachusetts Amherst,
United States

*CORRESPONDENCE
Joni Hersch
✉ joni.hersch@vanderbilt.edu

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Colorism and immigrant earnings in the United States, 2015–2024

Joni Hersch[1,2]*

[1]Vanderbilt Law School, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, United States, [2]IZA Institute of Labor Economics, Bonn, Germany

Using data from the Current Populations Survey 2015–2024 matched to skin color data in the New Immigrant Survey, this article shows that immigrants from countries with darker skin color face a substantial earnings penalty. The penalty is similar to that found using 2003 data on individual immigrants. Controls for extensive labor market characteristics and race and ethnicity does not eliminate the negative effect of darker skin tone on wages. Color discrimination lawsuits in light of the addition of a Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) reporting category for US government surveys may become more viable.

KEYWORDS

colorism, race, skin tone discrimination, immigrant, earnings, Current Population Survey, New Immigrant Survey, MENA

1 Introduction

Using unique data from the 2003 New Immigrant Survey (NIS), I found that new documented immigrants to the US with darker skin color suffered a substantial earnings penalty relative to immigrants who were otherwise comparable on a wide range of individual and labor market characteristics (Hersch, 2008). On average, immigrants with the lightest skin tone earned 17 percent more than otherwise comparable immigrants with the darkest skin tone. After ruling out an array of alternative explanations, discrimination against immigrants with darker skin color appears to be the most likely explanation for the pay penalty.

Although the US is a country founded by and populated by immigrants and their offspring, immigration has always been controversial, and the legal history shows a wide range of laws encouraging or prohibiting immigration from specific countries. Donald Trump made opposition to immigrants—at least those from certain countries—a defining policy of his 2016 presidential campaign and subsequent presidency.[1]

Aside from the political rhetoric, however, whether the penalty to darker skin color has diminished, increased, or remain unchanged over time is an open question. There is abundant data on the labor market outcomes of immigrants, as immigrants are included in and identified in government surveys and in other nationally representative data sets. The main barrier to gaining more recent evidence on the relationship of skin color to immigrants' economic outcomes is the absence of data on skin color. Since the NIS was fielded in 2003, there has been no new data that reports information on immigrants and skin color.

1 In January 2018, then-president Donald Trump questioned why the US would accept more immigrants from Haiti and "shithole countries" in Africa rather than places like Norway. See, for example, Julie Hirschfeld Davis, Sheryl Gay Stolberg, and Thomas Kaplan, "Trump alarms lawmakers with disparaging words for Haiti and Africa," *New York Times*, January 11, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/11/us/politics/trump-shithole-countries.html.

To overcome this obstacle and provide recent information on the skin color–earnings relationship, I estimate wage equations using the standard methodology widely used in the hedonic wage literature. For information on earnings, individual characteristics, and labor market status, I use data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) for 2015–2024. For information on skin color, I match to individuals in the CPS the average skin color by country of birth and gender calculated from the NIS and reported in Hersch (2008). I include in the wage equations this measure of skin color in addition to extensive individual and work-related characteristics available in the CPS. I note that this approach is feasible only because of the between-country variation in skin color.

Despite the differences in the data sources and time period, I find a pay penalty to immigrants from countries with darker skin tone of a magnitude very close to that in Hersch (2008). The pay penalty is robust to alternative specifications. These findings indicate that overall, time has brought little change in the penalty to darker skin color among immigrants. However, the penalty is more than 20 percent higher during the Trump administration than in the subsequent Biden administration.

2 Motivation and empirical specification

2.1 Background

It is widely recognized that lighter skin color confers preferential treatment and advantaged outcomes among many dimensions and in almost every culture or region.[2] There is a large empirical literature documenting advantaged educational, occupational, and earnings outcomes of African Americans with lighter skin tone (e.g., Hughes and Hertel, 1990; Keith and Herring, 1991; Goldsmith et al., 2006, 2007; Hersch, 2006; Monk, 2014; Kreisman and Rangel, 2015). Studies examining other population groups in the US similarly find those with light skin color are advantaged. For example, Mason (2004) and Espino and Franz (2002) document preferential treatment of Hispanics/Latinos in the United States with lighter skin color. Kiang and Takeuchi (2009) find that Filipino Americans residing in San Francisco or Honolulu with darker skin color have lower income.

Studies that examine the relationship between skin color and economic outcomes among immigrants to the US use data from the 2003 New Immigrant Survey (NIS). Hersch (2008, 2011, 2018) documents a substantial pay penalty to immigrants with darker skin color. Frank et al. (2010) shows an earnings penalty to darker skin tone among Latino immigrants. Han (2020) shows that those with darker skin color experienced greater downward occupational mobility upon immigrating to the US and subsequently slower upward mobility. Rosenblum et al. (2016) stratify the NIS sample by region of birth and by self-reported race, finding that the most consequential penalty arises among those darker skinned Latinx immigrants who report their race as White.

2.2 Empirical specification

To investigate the relationship between skin color and earnings among immigrants, I estimate a standard log wage equation of the following general form:

$$\ln wage = X\beta + Z\delta + \gamma S + \varepsilon, \quad (1)$$

where *wage* is the hourly wage rate and X is a vector of individual characteristics that may be related to earnings such as education, age, and time since migration. Z is a vector of characteristics related to current employment status such as occupation and union status. These variables are available in the CPS and are defined below. To account for the stratified sampling frame, all estimates are weighted by the earning weight.

The key variable in Equation 1 is skin color S, implemented as the average value for the individual's country and gender. The NIS provides interviewer-assigned measures of skin color for immigrants in the sample. Average skin color varies by race, as expected, but also varies on average by country of origin even among those with the same identified race. To examine the skin color–earnings relationship, I use the methodology common in the hedonic wage literature to estimate wage–job risk tradeoffs. In this literature, the wage equation includes as a regressor the average job risk measure calculated from a source that reports data on job risk (e.g., fatalities, injuries) matched to those with the same characteristics in the data set that reports earnings and other labor market and individual characteristics. Similarly, I assign to individuals in the CPS sample the average skin color calculated from the NIS for the individual's country of origin and gender. Because skin color is assigned by country, it is not possible to also control for country of origin as would be possible if skin color was individual-specific. I describe the NIS survey and the measures of skin color in the next section.

3 Data

3.1 Current Population Survey

The data on earnings and individual characteristics is drawn from the CPS for the years 2015 through May 2024.[3] The CPS is a monthly survey of a representative sample of about 60,000 households. It is the primary government source of data on the unemployment rate, earnings, labor force participation, and other labor market information. Households are surveyed for four consecutive months and then again for four months a year later. In every round, employment status is reported for household members ages 16 and over. Respondents in their fourth and eighth interview are in the "outgoing rotation group" and are asked to report additional information on their employment status including earnings, hours worked, and union status. I restrict the sample to those in the earnings eligible sample. Earnings for those who are self-employed are not available in the monthly CPS (it is available only in the March Annual

2 Seminal work in this area includes Russell et al. (1992), Hall (1995), Hunter (2005), and Jablonski (2006). Dixon and Telles (2017) provide an excellent survey of the literature related to colorism.

3 I use CPS data available from IPUMS (Flood et al., 2023). IPUMS CPS harmonizes microdata from the monthly CPS over time, and some variables are recoded from the original CPS.

Social and Economic Supplement). To remain focused on possible employer discrimination and to ensure a large sample size, I use the monthly CPS. Self-employed are not included in the analyses.

3.2 Variable definitions

The key outcome variable is the log of the real hourly wage rate. In the CPS, hourly wage is either reported directly for those paid hourly or is calculated as weekly earnings divided by usual hours worked per week.[4] I standardized the wage rate to January 2024 dollars using the Consumer Price Index for Urban consumers.

The explanatory variables include demographic, employment, and location information. Demographic information includes age, education, race, ethnicity, citizenship status, and years since immigration. Employment information includes occupation, class of worker, union status, and whether paid hourly. Location information includes region of the US and metropolitan location. The specific variables are defined as follows.

Age is reported in years. Education is reported in categories. I assign years of education using the midpoints of the categories. Race and ethnicity are recorded in separate questions. Respondents are asked whether they are of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin (hereafter, Hispanic for brevity). I group race into mutually exclusive categories of single race White, Black, or Asian, and a category for other races, or more than one race reported.[5] There are few observations in the latter category and few immigrants.

All respondents report their country of birth and their citizenship status. Those who were born in the US, in US outlying areas, or born abroad of US citizen parents are defined as native-born. The remaining respondents are grouped as naturalized citizens or not a citizen. Respondents report the year they immigrated, which is grouped into ranges in the CPS (the ranges are usually two years). I define years since immigration as the difference between the survey year and the top value of the range. This will somewhat underestimate the years since immigration for those who immigrated earlier than the end of the range.

Class of worker is reported as self-employed, private employee, or government employee. Self-employed workers are not considered in the analyses. I create indicator variables for private and government employees. Union is an indicator equal to one for those who are a union member or are covered by a union contract or employee association. I define an indicator for full-time employment for those who usually work full-time (whether or not they did so in the survey week). Occupation is grouped into five categories using the top-level 2010 Census occupation groups (management, professional, and related; service; sales and office; natural resources, construction, and maintenance; production, transportation, and material moving).

To take into account regional and city-size differences in cost of living and population characteristics such as concentration of immigrants, I include indicators for location. Location is identified by indicators for the four broad Census regions (Northeast, Midwest, South, West) and with an indicator for location in a metropolitan area. I also include indicator variables for survey year to account for trends in economic conditions.

The sample is restricted to immigrants who are employed, not self-employed, ages between 18 and 70, with real wages between $4 and $150 per hour in $2024. Appendix A indicates the number of observations eliminated by each restriction. Descriptive statistics overall and by gender for the variables included in the wage equations are reported in Table 1. Column 1 reports statistics for the full sample of immigrants and columns 2 and 3 report these values by gender. The sample size of immigrants is 206,961, with 93,233 women and 113,728 men. For comparison, column 4 reports the corresponding values for native-born US citizens.

As a brief overview of some of the sample characteristics, first compare the overall averages for the immigrant sample reported in column 1 to the corresponding native-born sample in column 4.[6] Although hourly wages are somewhat higher for the native-born sample, the difference is only about 4 percent and confirms that immigrants' faster earnings growth leads to rapid convergence (Hersch and Shinall, 2018).

Following the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, post-1965 immigrants primarily arrive from Asia and Latin America. This immigration pattern is reflected in the sample characteristics. The Hispanic share of the immigrant sample is 48 percent, in contrast to the 12 percent share in the native-born sample. The share of the immigrant sample reporting their race as Asian is 26 percent, compared to less than 3 percent among the native-born sample. Fifty-nine percent of the full immigrant sample report their race as White. In contrast, 81 percent of the native-born sample report their race as White. A higher share of the native-born sample is employed in management, professional, and related occupations; and in government jobs (which often require US citizenship). Immigrants are more likely to reside in the West and less like to reside in the Midwest relative to the native-born.

Comparing women and men immigrants in columns 2 and 3, the statistics show the usual pattern of lower earnings for women, with women immigrants on average earning about 16 percent less than men. Women are 10 percentage points more likely to be naturalized US citizens. For both men and women, the average duration since immigrating to the US is about 19 years.

3.3 New Immigrant Survey skin color measure

The 2003 NIS provides data on a nationally representative sample of immigrants admitted to lawful permanent residence status in 2003

4 For those observations who are not paid an hourly rate and who report that their usual hours vary, I calculate their hourly wage based on the hours they reported working in the previous week. For the few respondents who did not report hours for either question, I use information on whether they usually work a full-time or part-time schedule. The modal value of hours worked is 40 for full-time workers and is 20 for part-time workers, so I calculate hourly wage for those respondents not reporting specific hours by dividing by the modal value for their work hours status.

5 The other single race categories are American Indian/Aleut/Eskimo, Asian or Pacific Islander, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander only, and other single race (not specified). There are too few immigrants in these groups to analyze separately, so I group these observations together into the 'other' category.

6 Because of the large number of observations in all samples, even small differences are usually statistically significant.

drawn from a sampling frame of US government records (Jasso et al., 2005). Most important for the present purpose is the measure of skin color that was recorded by interviewer observation for 4,652 adult respondents (out of the full sample of 8,573 observations). Skin color is recorded as one of 11 values ranging from zero (albinism) to 10 (darkest possible shade) using a scale designed by Massey and Martin (2003).[7] Analysis in Hersch (2008) confirms the reliability of the measure. In addition, Hersch (2008) confirms that the skin color scale can be used as a cardinal scale instead of as only an ordinal scale (as might be the case for skin color measures found in surveys with three to five categories such as light, medium, dark; or very light, light, medium, dark, very dark). Because the scale allows a cardinal interpretation, use of the average skin color value is statistically appropriate. Hersch (2008; Table 2) reports average skin color by gender and country or region. For women, average skin color ranges from 1.07 (for countries in the Oceania region) to 7.33 (Nigeria). For men, the range is from 1.96 (Poland) to 8.32 (Nigeria).[8]

Country of birth is recorded from US government records for all sample members in the NIS, with 22 countries separately identified in the public use data and the remaining countries grouped into broad regions such as Middle East and North Africa. I assign skin color to individuals in the CPS data by matching to the average skin color corresponding to the individual's country of birth and gender reported in Hersch (2008; Table 2).[9] Seventy percent of the NIS sample are from the 22 separately identified countries. As indicated in Table 1, 72 percent of the CPS sample are from these same countries. I assign the average for the corresponding region to observations in which the skin color measure is based on the regions. I report earnings equations both including and excluding observations in which the country is not specifically identified in the average skin color measures.

There are two methodological features worth noting. First, because skin color is matched at the country level, it is not possible to also control for country of birth in the regressions. Second, this approach would not be feasible to study, for example, the role of skin color for Black Americans in the US because the average would be the same for all Black Americans.[10]

It is worth pausing here to consider the sources and consequences of possible measurement error in the skin color measure. There are three sources of measurement error: interviewer ratings, assignment of the gender and country average to individuals, and assignment of regional averages when the skin color measure for an individual country is not available. But it is important to keep in mind that as long as any measurement error is random, the estimated effect of skin color on earnings would be biased toward zero. In that case, the true effect of skin color on earnings would be underestimated.

By considering each of the three possible sources of measurement error, it is evident that any measurement error is random. First, although skin color is assigned by interviewer observation in the NIS, systemic measurement error appears to be unlikely (Hersch, 2008), indicating that the average skin color measure is an unbiased estimate of skin color by gender and country. Second, because the average skin color measure is an unbiased estimate of skin color, assigning this average measure to individuals does not introduce bias. The third possible source of measurement error arises from assigning regional averages for observations in which the country is not identified in the NIS. There is likely to be greater random measurement error in average skin color associated with these observations. In this case, we would expect the downward bias associated with random measurement error to be exacerbated.

It is also worth recognizing that in addition to any attenuation bias associated with random measurement error, because skin color for each individual is assigned as the country and gender average, and there are only 22 identified countries, there is less variation in the skin color measure assigned to individuals than there would be if the measure of skin color was individual-specific. The more-limited variation automatically leads to larger standard errors and a lower probability of finding statistically significant effects than if there was greater variation.

Given these known data limitations, we can summarize how to interpret the estimates. Finding nonsignificant effects of skin color does not mean that there is not a relationship. But finding significant effects is strong evidence in support of a skin color effect, and one that is likely a lower bound on the magnitude.

4 Results

The wage equation estimation proceeds in stages, starting with a baseline specification that includes only pre-market characteristics and consecutively including additional variables that may be in part related to any possible skin tone discrimination. To the extent that skin color is correlated with the variables in the wage equation, the magnitude of the coefficient on skin color will be reduced. And to the extent that these characteristics are themselves associated with discrimination, the coefficient on skin color will not capture the full effect of any discrimination and will instead be an underestimate of the magnitude.

In the following regressions, the dependent variable is the log of real hourly wage. The specifications reported in Table 2 pool men and women and include an indicator variable for gender. Estimates reported in Tables 3 and 4 examine possible gender differences in the relation between skin color and wages as well as alternative specifications and sample periods.

7 The Massey and Martin skin color scale shows a series of hands increasing in darkness numbered from one to 10, but the value zero was used by some interviewers to indicate the lightest possible color (or albinism), making the scale an 11-point scale.

8 Using the sample of US native-born spouses of the immigrants in the NIS sample, Hersch (2011) calculates an average skin color value of 2.71.

9 As noted earlier, this approach of matching an average characteristic calculated in one data set to individual observations in a second data set that includes labor market information is standard in the hedonic wage literature.

10 Stratification by region of birth or race as in Rosenblum et al. (2016) is also not desirable in this analysis because there is little variation in average skin color on each of these dimensions. In addition, there are two conceptual arguments against stratifying by region or race in an analysis of skin color and earnings. First, stratification implies that the labor market is comprised of segmented jobs and that workers of different national origins or races are not competing in the same labor market. For example, stratification by race implies that there are "Black jobs," "White jobs," and so forth. Second, among the dominant theories explaining disadvantage to those with darker skin tone is the concept of a skin color hierarchy rather than one based on racial categories (e.g., Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich, 2009).

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics for variables in wage regressions: Mean (standard deviation) or percent.

	Immigrant sample			Native-born US sample
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	All	Women	Men	All
Real hourly wage (2024$)	28.91 (19.40)	26.50 (18.06)	30.76 (20.18)	29.99 (18.35)
Log of real hourly wage (2024$)	3.18 (0.59)	3.10 (0.58)	3.24 (0.59)	3.24 (0.56)
Skin color	4.32 (1.16)	4.13 (1.13)	4.46 (1.16)	–
Exact country match	72.23	71.09	73.11	–
Age	42.77 (12.07)	43.23 (12.08)	42.42 (12.05)	40.83 (13.71)
Female	43.45	100.00	0.00	49.00
Years of education	13.39 (3.90)	13.74 (3.66)	13.13 (4.06)	14.44 (2.34)
Years since immigration	19.08 (12.34)	19.51 (12.30)	18.75 (12.35)	–
Naturalized US citizen	48.09	53.87	43.64	–
Non-citizen	51.91	46.13	56.36	–
Hispanic/Latino (any race)	47.95	43.13	51.65	11.76
Single race White	58.54	54.65	61.53	80.85
Single race Black/African American	11.90	13.43	10.72	13.12
Single race Asian	26.08	28.57	24.16	2.43
Other race or more than one race	3.48	3.35	3.58	3.60
Private employer	91.10	88.38	93.18	83.31
Government employer	8.90	11.62	6.82	16.69
Union or employee association	9.58	10.26	9.07	12.43
Usually full-time	85.64	78.64	91.02	84.11
Paid hourly rate	58.41	61.82	55.80	56.51
Management, professional, and related	34.06	37.31	31.56	42.59
Service	22.31	30.28	16.18	14.89
Sales and office	14.84	19.93	10.94	23.01
Natural resources, construction, and maintenance	13.43	1.98	22.23	7.88
Production, transportation, and material moving	15.36	10.50	19.09	11.64
Metropolitan location	96.14	96.54	95.84	86.23
Northeast	20.92	22.19	19.94	16.95
Midwest	11.91	11.67	12.10	23.67
South	35.14	34.38	35.72	37.75
West	32.03	31.76	32.24	21.63
N	206,961	93,233	113,728	1,218,381

Author's calculations from the earnings sample of the Current Population Survey 2015–May 2024. Except for skin color, all values are reported in the CPS. Skin color is matched by gender and place of birth from the average skin color for that gender and place of birth calculated using the New Immigrant Survey 2003 and reported in Hersch (2008). The samples are restricted to those ages 18–70, with real hourly wage $4.00–$150.00 (in real January 2024 dollars). All values are weighted by the earnings weight.

In Table 2, column 1 controls only for skin color, age and its square, years of education, an indicator variable for gender, and indicator variables for survey year. This is a standard human capital specification of the wage equation and allows comparison to estimates in the literature. Column 2 adds variables relevant to immigrant status, specifically years since immigration, an indicator variable for whether the individual is a naturalized US citizen (versus non-citizen), and location characteristics (metropolitan location and region of country). It is possible that these characteristics are influenced to some extent by skin tone discrimination. For instance, whether an individual enters the US with an employment visa may be related to skin color if there is bias originating from sponsoring employers. And the time it takes to receive legal entry status or to become a naturalized citizen may be related to the skin color associated with the originating country. In addition, location may be related to skin color because immigrants may select their location upon entering the US based on various factors including labor market conditions that may be more or less favorable to immigrants of different skin color.

Column 3 includes additional variables associated with current employment. Specifically, this equation adds indicator variables for

TABLE 2 Wage equation estimates for immigrant sample: Dependent variable = ln (real hourly wage).

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Skin color	−0.0336** (0.0011)	−0.0294** (0.0011)	−0.0167** (0.0010)
Age	0.0490** (0.0006)	0.0469** (0.0006)	0.0311** (0.0006)
Age squared/100	−0.0499** (0.0007)	−0.0500** (0.0007)	−0.0318** (0.0006)
Years of education	0.0764** (0.0003)	0.0746** (0.0003)	0.0360** (0.0003)
Female	−0.2096** (0.0024)	−0.2150** (0.0023)	−0.1485** (0.0023)
Years since immigration		0.0028** (0.0001)	0.0018** (0.0001)
Naturalized US citizen		0.0587** (0.0027)	0.0387** (0.0024)
Metropolitan location		0.0934** (0.0050)	0.0809** (0.0045)
Northeast		0.0627** (0.0033)	0.0645** (0.0030)
Midwest		0.0206** (0.0038)	0.0360** (0.0034)
West		0.0894** (0.0028)	0.1013** (0.0025)
Private employer			0.0529** (0.0040)
Union or employee association			0.0878** (0.0038)
Usually full-time			0.1489** (0.0032)
Paid hourly rate			−0.1941** (0.0027)
Management, professional, and related			0.4273** (0.0039)
Service			−0.0937** (0.0031)
Sales and office			0.0447** (0.0037)
Natural resources, construction, and maintenance			0.0967** (0.0037)
Constant	1.2300** (0.0147)	1.1147** (0.0154)	1.6867** (0.0153)
Adjusted R^2	0.32	0.33	0.48
N	206,961	206,961	206,961

Author's calculations from the earnings sample of the Current Population Survey 2015–May 2024 matched to skin color measures calculated from the New Immigrant Survey 2003. The samples are restricted to those ages 18–70, with real hourly wage $4.00–$150.00 (in real January 2024 dollars). Indicators for survey year are included in all regressions but these coefficients are not reported. Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses. All values are weighted by the earnings weight. ** $p < 0.01$.

private employer (versus government), union status, full-time employment, whether paid hourly, and broad occupational category (with production and transportation the reference category). Characteristics that are associated with current employment may themselves be influenced by discrimination. If so, the coefficient on skin color will be smaller in column 3, but it does not necessarily imply an absence of color discrimination but may instead indicate that any colorism is manifested through sorting in the labor market.

Before discussing the skin color estimates, it is useful to consider the other variables in the wage equations. The regressions reported in Table 2 show the conventional relationships between age, education, and gender. Wages rise with age at a decreasing rate, wages are higher for those with more education, and women earn substantially less than men. The estimates reported in columns 1 and 2 are very similar and show that wages peak when individuals are around 47 years of age, each additional year of education is associated with about 7.5 percent higher wages, and women have earnings lower than men by about 21 log points. The results in column 2 show that each additional year since immigration is associated with 0.3 percent higher wages, and wages are about 6 percent higher for naturalized US citizens relative to noncitizens. Wages vary by location and are higher in metropolitan areas and lower in the south than in the other three regions, a pattern consistently seen in earnings regressions.

Inclusion of current employment characteristics in column 3 reduces the magnitudes of the coefficients on age, education, and gender, meaning that current employment characteristics are correlated with these characteristics. For instance, part of any wage advantage to more education will be captured by employment in a higher-paying occupation, and management, professional, and related occupations show a high premium of 43 log points relative to those in production and transportation occupations. Similarly, a comparison of columns 2 and 3 shows that inclusion of current employment characteristics reduces the magnitudes of some of the coefficients, but the patterns and statistical significance are unchanged. The current employment variables included only in the column 3 estimates show the typical pattern and magnitude, with wages higher for those with union status, full-time employment, and paid a salary rather than an hourly rate.

Most important is the relation between skin color and wage. Column 1 shows a statistically significant penalty to darker skin color. The magnitude in column 1 shows that an additional unit of skin color darkness on the 11-point scale lowers wages by 3.4 percent. This magnitude is very similar to the coefficient on skin color of 3.1 percent reported in Hersch (2008; Table 3, column 1) that is calculated using individual-level data from the NIS. The estimates in column 2 show a slightly smaller but similar skin color penalty of 3 percent. These estimates indicate that a one-standard deviation increase in a country's average skin color scale lowers wages on average by 3.4 to 3.9 percent.

Inclusion of current employment characteristics in column 3 cuts the magnitude of the skin color penalty in half, but the coefficient remains statistically significant and substantial at 1.7 percent. The reduction in the magnitude means that part of the skin color penalty arises from a correlation of skin color with current employment characteristics. Because current employment characteristics may be subject to skin color discrimination, it is notable that darker skin color continues to show a negative effect on wage.

Tables 3 and 4 report estimates from additional specifications and samples. All of these estimates are based on the Table 2, column 2 specification as a middle-ground between the most restricted estimates that control only for age, education, and gender, and the most expansive set of estimates that include current employment characteristics. Specifically, these equations control for age and its square, education, gender, years since immigration, citizenship status, metropolitan location, region, and survey year.

To consider whether there are gender differences in the skin color penalty, Table 3, columns 1 and 2 report the estimates stratified by gender. There is reason to examine whether the penalty to darker skin tone differs by gender. There is substantial evidence suggesting that a darker skin tone is more disadvantageous for women than for men (Hunter, 1998, 2005). By contrast, Hersch (2008) found no gender difference in the relation of skin color to wages among immigrants. The estimates in Table 3 show a lower penalty for women than for men, with an additional unit of skin color darkness on the 11-point scale lowering wages by 2.0 percent for women and 3.6 percent for men. The larger penalty for men is puzzling. Perhaps recent societal trends have eroded the disadvantages faced by women with darker skin color relative to men, but further investigation is warranted.

Table 3, column 3 presents estimates controlling for ethnicity and race in addition to skin color. Because of the high correlation between skin color and race, a key concern in any analysis of whether skin color influences earnings is whether we are actually estimating only a race effect instead of a combination effect of race and color, or an effect of color only. Earnings disparities on the basis of ethnicity and race are widely established. In the labor market as a whole, relative to comparable White workers, estimates typically show lower earnings for Black and Hispanic workers and similar or higher earnings for Asian workers.

The estimates in Table 3 show the typical earnings pattern with respect to ethnicity and race observed in the US labor market as a whole. Relative to comparable immigrant White workers, Black and Hispanic workers have lower hourly wages by 13 to 15 log points, and Asian workers have wages higher by about 5 log points. Most notable is that even controlling for ethnicity and race, the estimates continue to show a negative and statistically significant penalty to darker skin color. The magnitude of the coefficient is smaller but shows that an extra unit on the 11-point skin color scale lowers wages by 0.6 percent on average.

These estimates document that there is an additional penalty for immigrants from countries with darker skin color beyond any penalties associated with ethnicity or race. This finding is consistent with that found in Hersch (2008) using individual data from the NIS, which shows that the penalty to darker skin color persists even with controls for ethnicity, race, and country of birth.

TABLE 3 Wage equation estimates by gender and including race and ethnicity: Dependent variable = ln (real hourly wage).

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Women	Men	Including race and ethnicity
Skin color	−0.0201** (0.0016)	−0.0357** (0.0015)	−0.0057** (0.0015)
Age	0.0392** (0.0009)	0.0528** (0.0008)	0.0469** (0.0006)
Age squared/100	−0.0431** (0.0010)	−0.0550** (0.0010)	−0.0507** (0.0007)
Years of education	0.0797** (0.0005)	0.0711** (0.0004)	0.0658** (0.0004)
Years since immigration	0.0037** (0.0002)	0.0019** (0.0002)	0.0039** (0.0001)
Naturalized US citizen	0.0660** (0.0038)	0.0529** (0.0037)	0.0398** (0.0027)
Metropolitan location	0.0883** (0.0074)	0.0972** (0.0066)	0.0796** (0.0049)
Northeast	0.0791** (0.0048)	0.0501** (0.0047)	0.0450** (0.0033)
Midwest	0.0408** (0.0057)	0.0062 (0.0051)	−0.0036 (0.0038)
West	0.1102** (0.0042)	0.0749** (0.0038)	0.0673** (0.0028)
Female			−0.2111** (0.0024)
Hispanic/Latino (any race)			−0.1467** (0.0037)
Single race Black/African American			−0.1293** (0.0060)
Single race Asian			0.0490** (0.0039)
Other race or more than one race			−0.0203** (0.0066)
Constant	0.9616** (0.0226)	1.0557** (0.0208)	1.2315** (0.0160)
Adjusted R^2	0.32	0.32	0.34
N	93,233	113,728	206,961

Author's calculations from the earnings sample of the Current Population Survey 2015–May 2024 matched to skin color measures calculated from the New Immigrant Survey 2003. The samples are restricted to those ages 18–70, with real hourly wage $4.00–$150.00 (in real January 2024 dollars). Indicators for survey year are included in all regressions but these coefficients are not reported. Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses. All values are weighted by the earnings weight. ** $p < 0.01$.

5 Alternative specifications

Estimates from alternative specifications and samples are summarized in Table 4. All estimates reported in this table are based on the specification reported in Table 2, column 2. Row 1 repeats the coefficient on skin color reported in Table 2 for reference. Row 2 restricts the sample to those in which the specific country is identified and excludes those observations in which skin color is assigned by the region. Because all individuals within a country of origin and gender group are assigned the same skin color value, row 3 reports standard errors clustered by country of origin and gender to account for the correlation of the error term for observations within the same country and gender.

To examine any possible effects related to the COVID pandemic, rows 4–6 divide the sample into three periods. Employment status, remote work, and survey responses rates were affected by the pandemic. The before-COVID period includes the years 2015–2019. I define the COVID period as the years 2020 and 2021. Although the federal public health emergency did not officially end until May 2023, I consider the period beginning in 2022 through the end of the analysis sample in May 2024 as the post-COVID period.

To investigate whether time in the US since migration diminishes any skin color effect, I report in rows 7–9 estimates dividing the sample into three periods: those that migrated within 10 years, those that migrated between 10 and 20 years ago, and those who migrated more than 20 years ago. This extends the analyses in Hersch (2011, 2018) which examine whether more time in the US reduced the skin color disparity. By construction of the NIS survey, all immigrants in the survey achieved legal status in 2003. This means that the time in the US before achieving legal status was usually fairly limited for most of the sample members. The CPS data allows examining more variation in time in the US.

Rows 10 and 11 provide estimates divided into the years 2017–2020 corresponding to the Trump administration and the years beginning in 2021 corresponding to the Biden administration.

In Table 4, only the coefficient on skin color is reported for each alternative sample or specification. Notably, the coefficient on skin color remains negative and statistically significant in each specification, and most of the coefficients are similar across all specifications. The magnitude is somewhat smaller in the sample in which skin color is assigned with an exact country match instead of either an exact match or a regional match reported in row 2. As typically found when clustering, the standard error in the row 3 estimate is much larger than in estimates without clustering, but the coefficient remains statistically significant (p-value = 0.016). Division into COVID periods had little effect on the magnitude.

Even though longer residence in the US could be expected to mitigate any skin tone effect, the results show that on average, the penalty to darker skin color did not decline with longer duration in the US. This is consistent with the results from both the NIS reinterview survey conducted four years after the initial survey (Hersch, 2018) and from the sample of immigrant spouses who may have had longer legal status in the US than the sampled respondent to the NIS (Hersch, 2011).

Also of interest is the comparison of the coefficients in rows 10 and 11, which are based on dividing the years into the Trump administration and the Biden administration. The coefficient on skin color is −0.0321 during the Trump years and is −0.0259 during the Biden years. The coefficients are significantly different at the 1 percent level and show a penalty that is 24 percent higher during the Trump years than the Biden years.

6 Discussion

It is widely recognized that across most cultures, regions, and over time, lighter skin tone confers social and economic advantages. This paper estimates wage equations using data from the CPS for the years 2015 through 2024 matched to measures of skin color calculated from the NIS. The wage regressions show that on average, immigrants to the US from countries with darker skin color continue to suffer a substantial pay penalty, with a magnitude

TABLE 4 Alternative samples and specifications: Dependent variable = ln (real hourly wage).

Row number	Sample or specification	Skin color coefficient (standard error)	*N*
1	Baseline Table 2, column 2	−0.0294 (0.0011)	206,961
2	Exact country match	−0.2577 (0.0015)	147,976
3	Clustered and robust standard errors	−0.0294 (0.0121)	206,961
4	Survey years 2015–2019 (Pre-COVID)	−0.0316 (0.0014)	119,692
5	Survey years 2020 and 2021 (COVID)	−0.0281 (0.0025)	39,031
6	Survey years 2022–May 2024 (Post-COVID)	−0.0260 (0.0022)	48,238
7	Less than 10 years since immigration	−0.0289 (0.0020)	52,044
8	10–20 years since immigration	−0.0288 (0.0019)	67,569
9	More than 20 years since immigration	−0.0303 (0.0018)	87,348
10	Trump administration 2017–2020	−0.0321 (0.0017)	90,324
11	Biden administration 2021–2024	−0.0259 (0.0019)	68,243

Author's calculations from the earnings sample of the Current Population Survey 2015–May 2024 matched to skin color measures calculated from the New Immigrant Survey 2003. The samples are restricted to those ages 18–70, with real hourly wage $4.00–$150.00 (in real January 2024 dollars). All equations include age and its square, education, gender, years since immigration, citizenship status, metropolitan location, region, and survey year. Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses. All values are weighted by the earnings weight. All coefficients are statistically significant with $p < 0.01$.

similar to that found in studies based on the 2003 and 2007 NIS. A one-standard deviation increase in a country's average skin color darkness lowers wages on average by 3.4 to 3.9 percent. Inclusion of characteristics associated with current employment that may themselves be subject to skin color discrimination reduces the wage penalty, but the penalty remains statistically significant and indicates that wages are lower by 1.94 percent with a one-standard deviation increase in the skin color scale. The penalty to darker skin color is not merely picking up any penalties associated with race or ethnicity, as the penalty to darker skin color remains statistically significant with inclusion of race and ethnicity indicators in the regressions.

Although longer time in the US might mitigate any penalty to darker skin color, for example, through assimilation and mobility in the US labor market and by improvement in English language proficiency, the penalty is not mitigated by duration of residence in the US. However, political winds seem to have an impact on the penalty to darker skin color, as the penalty was 24 percent larger during the Trump presidential administration than in the Biden administration.

One possible explanation for lower wages for those from countries with darker average skin color could be that darker skin tone is associated with undocumented status. Even if wrong, inferences about possible undocumented status could lead to worse job offers and lower pay. But it is unlikely that inferences about documented status is the full explanation. An experimental study shows that even if an immigrant is known to be undocumented, White observers have a more favorable view of those who are depicted to have lighter skin and stereotypically Eurocentric features (Ostfeld, 2017).

Evidence of differential economic outcomes on the basis of skin tone potentially has bearing on employment discrimination lawsuits. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits employment discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, and national origin. Although there is a substantial body of research documenting discrimination on the basis of skin tone, relatively few legal claims allege color discrimination alone but instead cite more than one basis such as color and race, or color and national origin (Hersch, 2012). Furthermore, courts often dismiss the color claim, subsuming the color claim into a race or national origin claim given the facts of the case.[11] Although Title VII does not prohibit claims of discrimination between parties of the same identifiable race, there are few claims of this type compared to the number of cases involving parties of different races, and courts are typically skeptical of intra-racial claims.

But legal charges of color discrimination are likely to become more frequent in the future. Demographic trends indicate greater skin tone diversity among the US population as the immigrant share of the population and the share of children born to parents of different races or ethnicities increases. Color discrimination charges have substantially increased over time in number and as a share of discrimination charges filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. In FY 1997, there were 762 charges of color discrimination, representing 0.9 percent of all claims. In FY 2023, there were 5,819 claims, representing 7.2 percent of all claims. For comparison, the share of claims of national origin discrimination was 8.3 percent in FY 1997 and 8.6 percent in FY 2023.[12]

How race and ethnicity is categorized by the government may have bearing on the viability of color discrimination claims. The US Office of Management and Budget (OMB) sets the standards for racial and ethnicity classifications used in government statistical surveys. In the 1997 OMB standard which is currently used, race and Hispanic ethnicity are treated as separate concepts and asked in two questions, with the race question allowing for the first time reporting of more than one race. In the new 2024 OMB standard, race and ethnicity is asked in a single question and a new, separate category for Middle Eastern and North African (typically referred to as "MENA") has been added to the five racial categories in the 1997 standard. Research from the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that those who will now indicate MENA would likely have indicated White previously (Loewenstein et al., 2024). While it has been difficult to bring discrimination claims against individuals of the same identified race, under the new classifications, claims of color discrimination among those in the MENA category may be more viable.

Data availability statement

Data necessary to replicate the results of this article are publicly available from IPUMS. See Flood et al. (2023).

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for this study in accordance with institutional requirements.

Author contributions

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

11 See Banks (2000), Jones (2000), and Nance (2005) for a description and analysis of the legal environment of color discrimination claims under Title VII.

12 EEOC Table E1a. Charge receipts by basis or statutes (all statutes) FY 1997–FY 2023. Available at https://www.eeoc.gov/data/enforcement-and-litigation-statistics-0.

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Appendix

TABLE A1 Construction of samples used in wage regressions: Monthly CPS 2015–2024.

	Net number affected	Number remaining
Initial earnings eligible sample		1,550,241
Not an immigrant	1,324,405	225,836
Under age 18	856	224,980
Over age 70	3,683	221,297
Missing hourly wage	12,118	209,179
Real hourly wage < $4.00 (2024$)	1,037	208,142
Real hourly wage > $150 (2024$)	600	207,542
Skin color measure not available	581	206,961
Skin color measure not exact country match	58,985	147,976

Source: earnings sample of the monthly Current Population Survey 2015–May 2024. See Flood et al. (2023).

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EDITED BY
Christine Barwick-Gross,
University of Flensburg, Germany

REVIEWED BY
Kevin Toffel,
HES-SO University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland, Switzerland
Eunike Piwoni,
University of Passau, Germany

*CORRESPONDENCE
Aisha Phoenix
✉ aisha.phoenix@kcl.ac.uk

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Skin shade and relationships: how colourism pits Black and mixed Black-White women against each other

Aisha Phoenix[1]* and Nadia Craddock[2]

[1]Centre for Public Policy Research, School of Education, Communication & Society, Faculty of Social Science & Public Policy, King's College London, London, United Kingdom, [2]Centre for Appearance Research, School of Social Sciences, University of the West of England, Bristol, United Kingdom

Introduction: Colourism, prejudice where people are penalised the darker their skin and the further their features are from those associated with whiteness, occurs within and between racialised groups and can affect relationships. In this paper we examine the complex processes through which colourism positions Black and mixed Black-White women in contrasting positions in beauty and desirability hierarchies based on their skin shade.

Method: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 27 Black (n = 18) or mixed Black-White (n = 9) adults (18 women, 9 men) living in Britain. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Results: Analysis generated four main themes. First, colourist and gendered appearance ideals promoted by mainstream media serve to devalue and thus harm Black people, particularly Black women with dark skin. Second, these ideals can affect Black and mixed Black-White women's experiences of the heterosexual relationship market where women with light skin are desired and those with darker skin often overlooked. Third, colourist appearance ideals and colourist-induced inequities in the heterosexual relationship market affect relationships between Black and mixed Black-White women of different skin shades. Fourth, fostering Black self-acceptance, celebrating natural Black beauty, and creating spaces for dialogue between women of different skin shades are seen as ways to address some aspects of colourism and/or their affects.

Discussion: Findings highlight how colourism shapes desirability in gendered ways and how this affects the lives of Black and mixed Black-White women, influencing within-group social dynamics and relationships.

KEYWORDS

colourism, appearance ideals, heterosexual relationship market, dark-skin penalty, gendered differences, intersectionality, light-skin privilege, media influence

1 Introduction

Colourism refers to prejudice in which people are penalised the darker their skin is and the further their features are from those associated with whiteness. Intrinsically related to, and yet distinct from racism (i.e., prejudice and discrimination based on racialised), colourism occurs both within and across racialised groups (Dixon and Telles, 2017). When colourism is experienced from a different racialised group, it can intensify experiences of racism, such that

those with darker skin are more likely to experience racialised discrimination (Brown et al., 2023; Hunter, 2007). In this way, colourism and racism operate together (Hunter, 2007). However, within a racialised group, the prejudice operates in the absence of racism as a skin shade (and features) hierarchy in favour of those with lighter skin and phenotypical features that are associated with whiteness.

Colourism has a widespread impact on the lives of People of Colour[1] globally and can affect many different aspects of an individual's life. While people with light skin often benefit from light-skin privilege, those with dark skin experience penalties in numerous institutional settings, including in education, health and the criminal justice system (Crutchfield et al., 2022; Keyes et al., 2020; Monk, 2015; Monk, 2021). Colourism also can affect experiences in the relationship market, particularly for women (Hill, 2002; Hunter, 2021). As a racialised and gendered phenomenon, colourism can affect people differently according to their ethnicity and gender (Hunter, 2007; Dixon and Telles, 2017). Consequently, it is valuable to take an intersectional approach that is attentive to how colourism is perpetuated, reproduced and experienced at the individual, interpersonal, and systemic level in relation to the interplay of different personal characteristics, such as skin shade, ethnicity and gender. In this article, we focus on the experiences of Black and mixed Black-White women in recognition of the ways in which colourism compounds experiences of anti-Black racism.[2]

Colourism is pervasive and it is sustained and reproduced in multiple ways through powerful sociocultural influences including family, peers, and the media (Phoenix and Craddock, 2024a; Wilder and Cain, 2011; Phoenix and Craddock, 2022). In this article, we focus on how the media can serve to popularise, normalise, and perpetuate colourist ideas through the ways in which it both depicts (Harper and Choma, 2019) and excludes minoritised ethnic people, and particularly women with dark skin (Mitchell, 2020). The media, including film, TV, advertising and print media (e.g., newspapers and magazines), plays a potent role in contributing to wider colourist attitudes that can be internalised by individuals and reinforced by family and peers.

Operating alongside racism, colourism informs dominant media-sustained appearance ideals for women, which serve to privilege whiteness and light skin as attractive and desirable (Silvestrini, 2020; Hunter, 2021). For example, Keigan et al. (2024, p. 2) argue that "Eurocentric physical characteristics," such as thinness, whiteness and long, straight hair are portrayed as the epitome of beauty" in the media. By positioning women with White or light skin as beautiful and desirable, women with dark skin are implicitly positioned as lacking in both beauty and desirability by the media and society more broadly (Collins, 2000; Hunter, 2021). For example, Collins (2000, p. 69) argues that "controlling images," which are designed to make forms of social injustice, such as racism, sexism, and colourism, "appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life," construct Black women as "ugly and unfeminine" (p. 27).

Due to "patriarchal patterns of desire" (hooks, 2003), women and men's experiences of colourism can differ, as women are typically judged on their looks more than men are, subjected to more societal appearance pressure, and held to different appearance ideals where light skin is consistently privileged (Hill, 2002; Phoenix, 2014). Additionally, as dark skin is often associated with masculinity and virility, Black men, unlike Black women, can benefit from having darker skin in the context of societal appearance ideals and romantic relationships (Hill, 2002; Phoenix and Craddock, 2022).

Colourism can inform heterosexual men of colour's choice of romantic partners, and their descriptions of the physical attributes that make women attractive (hooks, 2003; Phoenix and Craddock, 2022). For example, Hunter (2002, p. 189) found that when it came to the marriage market, Black women in the USA who had light skin "had a clear advantage" over those with darker skin and were more likely to marry men of high-status. Experimental research from the US showed that Black men rated the same set of advertising images featuring Black women as significantly more attractive when their skin was digitally lightened compared with when their skin was digitally darkened (Watson et al., 2010). Black men in Phoenix and Craddock's (2022) UK study explained that one reason why some Black men prefer women with lighter skin is due to the elevated social status they can gain from having a partner with light-skin privilege.

1.1 Colourism in the UK

Colourism is under-researched in the UK. However, a few studies have been published in the past few years that give some insights into how the prejudice operates in the UK. For example, in a cross-sectional, mixed ethnicity study on colourism, Craddock et al. (2023) found that compared with people from other minoritised ethnic groups, Black people reported greater experiences of colourism. Further, those with darker skin shades reported greater experiences of colourism. In turn, colourism was associated with negative wellbeing outcomes even when racism was included in the model, thus highlighting the unique role of colourism. Notably, qualitative work conducted in the UK that has explored the effects of colourism and racism has shown that in predominantly White areas, people of mixed ethnic backgrounds and Black people with light skin may be subjected to anti-black racism and may not experience the privileges they may otherwise experience in more diverse contexts (Phoenix and Craddock, 2024b; Spratt, 2024).

1.2 The present work

In this paper, we analyse narratives from Black and mixed Black-White women and men in an exploration of how skin shade affects Black and mixed Black-White women's social positioning in the context of romantic relationships. Specifically, we take an intersectional approach focusing on ethnicity, gender and skin shade to explore the complex processes through which colourism positions Black or mixed Black-White women who have dark or light skin in hierarchies of

1 We acknowledge that the term 'People of Colour' is imperfect. It implies that White people have no colour and thereby renders whiteness invisible. Where possible we have specified particular ethnic/racialised groups, but occasionally for simplicity and brevity, a collective term is useful. Mostly, we use "minoritised ethnic people," but where a broader term is required, we use 'People of Colour'.

2 Anti-black racism is defined as a "system of beliefs and practices that attack, erode, and limit the humanity of Black people" (Carruthers, 2018, p. 26).

beauty and desirability (see also Phoenix and Craddock, 2022; Hunter, 2021). We consider the implications of this in terms of both how women are positioned in the heterosexual relationship market, and how it affects relationships between women with dark and light skin.

Our work is situated in Britain (which includes England, Scotland, and Wales). Britain is majority White ranging from 81.7% White in England and Wales, to 87.1% White "Scottish" in Scotland (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2022; National Statistics, 2024). The Black population (categorised as Black, Black British, Caribbean or African) is 4.0% in England and Wales and 1.0% in Scotland, and the mixed Black-White population is 1.1% in England and Wales.[3] Britain has a long history of racism, including in its institutions (Afzal, 2022; Casey, 2023; Macpherson, 1999). Accordingly, our work examines colourism against a backdrop of racism in Britain.

2 Method

2.1 Participants

Participants were 27 adults (18 women, 9 men) racialised as Black (n = 18) or mixed Black-White (n = 9) living in Britain.[4] The mean age was 35.8 years, ranging from 19 to 60 years old. Six participants (five women and one man) were full-time students (undergraduate or postgraduate), and one woman was a stay-at-home parent at the time of interview. The remaining participants worked in a variety of occupations in sectors including government, healthcare, media, and transport. All participants identified as heterosexual, except for one woman who identified as pansexual. Demographic data pertaining to social class or social economic status was not collected. Participant demographics, self-reported skin shade, and allocated pseudonyms are detailed in Table 1.

2.2 Materials

2.2.1 Skin shade chart

We created a purpose-built skin shade chart using 30 colours from Pantone® SkinTone™ Guide to use as an ice-breaker, and to capture participants' skin shade as they saw it. The Pantone® SkinTone™ Guide is designed to be representative of the full spectrum of human skin types and in 2019 contained 110 SkinTone™ Guide shades. We selected 30 shades that we felt adequately represented minoritised ethnic people from different racialised groups and that were sufficiently distinct when printed on a home printer. We felt that 30 shades gave enough range without being overwhelming to look at in a brief exchange at the start of the interview.

2.2.2 Interview guide

We followed a semi-structured interview schedule that we designed for the scoping research project. The semi-structured interview format provided flexibility, allowing the conversation between the interviewer and participant to delve into areas that felt most relevant to the participants, in such a way that data were co-constructed. Interview questions were intentionally broad to gain initial insights into the topic of colourism in Britain. For example, questions included: *How do you think others view your skin shade? Do you feel pressure to change the shade of your skin? Have you ever received preferential treatment because of the shade of your skin? Have you ever been discriminated against or treated badly because of the shade of your skin?*

2.3 Procedure

Ethical approval for a broad, scoping qualitative research project on colourism and skin shade in the UK was granted by the Research Ethics Committee at SOAS, University of London. Study advertisements were shared on social media inviting minoritised ethnic people (aged 18 and over) living in the UK to take part in a 60-min interview on their experiences related to their skin shade. Snowball sampling was also used. Interested individuals were sent a study information sheet and consent form. There were no incentives for participation.

Semi-structured interviews took place in person or via video conferencing software. The first author conducted 18 interviews, and the second author conducted nine. Demographic information was collected before formally starting the interview, with participants either completing a short questionnaire or answering demographic questions verbally. Then, we asked participants to indicate the colour that was the closest match to their skin shade on the chart before we proceeded with the interview, using our schedule.

Interviews were audio recorded with participants' consent and were then transcribed by either a professional transcription service, freelance transcribers, or one of the study authors. To protect participants' privacy, pseudonyms were used and identifying information was removed from participant accounts. Audio recordings were deleted once transcripts were checked by one of the study authors.

2.4 Data analysis

The first author led the data analysis using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013, 2021). This approach was selected as it is a theoretically flexible approach, suitable for under-researched topics.

Analysis was informed by both social constructivism and intersectionality. Socio-constructivism posits that reality is socially constructed through interactions and shared understandings among individuals (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). There is no single, objective reality independent of human perception and social context. Reality is seen as constructed through language, culture, and social practices. Socio-constructivism emphasises the role of human agency in creating and interpreting the world (Burr, 2003).

Adding an intersectionality framework allowed us to understand the nuanced and multifaceted experiences of participants in relation

3 Mixed Black-White ethnicity data is not available for Scotland, though the total Mixed Ethnic Group category for Scotland is 1.1%.

4 While the study was open to people living in the UK, only people living in England and Scotland responded, thus Britain better represents the study sample compared with the UK.

TABLE 1 Participant demographics.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age (years)	Generation cohort[a]	Ethnicity	Skin shade[b]
Ella	Woman	18–25	Generation Z	Mixed: Black-White	
Sofia	Woman	18–25	Generation Z	Black British	
Alice	Woman	18–25	Millennial	Mixed: Black-White	
Catherine	Woman	26–35	Millennial	Black British	
Chloe	Woman	26–35	Millennial	Mixed: Black-White	
Destiny	Woman	26–35	Millennial	Black British	
Erika	Woman	26–35	Millennial	Black British	
Jamila	Woman	26–35	Millennial	Black British	
Jennifer	Woman	18–25	Millennial	Mixed: Black-White	
Kelly	Woman	26–35	Millennial	Black British	
Sienna	Woman	18–25	Millennial	Mixed: Black-White	
Yemi	Woman	26–35	Millennial	Black British	
Clare	Woman	46–55	Generation X	Black British	
Grace	Woman	36–45	Generation X	Mixed: Black-White	
Portia	Woman	46–55	Generation X	Black British	
Viv	Woman	46–55	Generation X	Mixed: Black-White	
Dawn	Woman	56–65	Boomer	Black British	
Josephine	Woman	46–55	Boomer	Mixed: Black-White	
Terrence	Man	18–25	Generation Z	Black British	
Bilal	Man	26–35	Millennial	Black British	
Ekow	Man	26–35	Millennial	Black British	
Henry	Man	26–35	Millennial	Mixed: Black-White	
Isaiah	Man	26–35	Millennial	Black British	
Malakai	Man	26–35	Millennial	Black British	
Andrew	Man	36–45	Generation X	Black British	
Michael	Man	36–45	Generation X	Black British	
Gregory	Man	56–65	Boomer	Black British	

[a]Generational cohorts were based on participants' ages at the time of their interview (2019) in line with Pew Research Center's (2019) classification.
[b]The colour swatch participants selected from a purpose-built skin shade chart that best matched their skin shade.

to their personal characteristics, with a particular focus on gender, minoritised ethnic group and skin shade. Intersectionality, a concept coined by Crenshaw (1989), emphasises the interconnectedness of social identities such as "race," gender, age, class, and sexuality, and how these intersections create unique modes of discrimination and privilege. By acknowledging that individuals' experiences cannot be fully understood through single-axis analyses, this approach allows for a more comprehensive exploration of how various forms of inequality and identity overlap and interact (Collins and Bilge, 2016). Further, intersectionality provides a lens through which to examine the complexity of participants' lived experiences and the structural contexts that shape them (Cho et al., 2013). By drawing on this framework, the study aims to capture the diverse and intersecting factors that influence participants' understandings and experiences of colourism in the context of desire and relationships. However, it should be noted that our intersectional analyses are most attentive to gender, ethnicity and skin shade based on a predominantly heterosexual sample. Interpretation based on age and social class were beyond the scope of the present work as our sample was not large enough to draw meaningful comparisons and interpretation.

The six-stage guidance for reflexive thematic analysis detailed by Braun and Clarke (2013) was followed: (i) data familiarization, (ii) generating initial codes, (iii) generating themes, (iv) reviewing potential themes, (v) defining and naming themes, and (vi) writing up the results. Codes were generated in a two-step process. First, interviews were coded openly, guided by participants' meanings. Then, a second round of deductive analysis was conducted, drawing on existing knowledge and understandings of colourism. The authors had several discussions about the data and candidate themes. The second author also provided feedback and revisions on the defining and naming of themes and the write up.

2.5 Positionality and reflexivity

Both authors are minoritised ethnic women. The first author is an African Caribbean sociologist. The second author has an educational

background in psychology and is of mixed ethnicity, with one Indian and one White parent. We both have experience of using qualitative methods and interviewing individuals on sensitive and personal topics.

We did not seek to match participants' broad racialised group when we assigned an interviewer as we were interested in exploring participants' experiences as both "insiders" and "outsiders." As an African Caribbean woman with dark or medium-dark skin, the first author had an insider status when interviewing Black women, some of whom remarked on how easy it was to talk to her. However, it may have been more awkward for mixed Black-White women to discuss the tensions they felt with Black women in conversation with a Black woman researcher. In contrast, the second author occupied insider status with participants of mixed ethnicity who all similarly had one White parent, which fostered some shared understanding in racialised dynamics and feelings of belonging. The second author's outsider status in terms of racialised group may have been useful as it may have prompted more explanation and description, however, it may have limited the extent to which participants' felt comfortable sharing.

As two women, we could not match interviewer-participant by gender for the men in our study. Prior to data collection, we wondered if men may be reticent about openly expressing their feelings on a sensitive topic that includes gendered dynamics. In fact, we found that men were forthcoming in their narratives. However, we do not know how they would have responded had they been speaking with a man, and particularly with one from the same racialised group as themselves.

3 Results

Our results are presented in four sections that consider the implications of different aspects of colourism for Black women with dark skin and Black and mixed Black-White women with light skin. The first explores the effect of colourist appearance ideals and colourism in the media. The second examines the impact of internalised colourism informing heterosexual relationship choices. The third analyses how sexual colourism causes competition and tensions between women. The fourth section considers Black participants' small acts of resistance when confronted with colourist, societal appearance ideals.

3.1 "The media portrays an image that tells Black people … you are not beautiful": mainstream media promoting colourist appearance ideals

In this first section, we begin by exploring women's perceptions of how racist and colourist "European standards of beauty" promoted by the media contribute to constructions of Black women as inferior and unattractive. We then examine narratives that argue that women with very dark skin and natural hair are underrepresented or negatively represented in the media, which can have adverse psychological effects and contribute to Black women feeling undesirable. Next, we analyse narratives from Black men who argue that the media promotes the interests of White people, portraying Black women in negative ways, which can lead them to feel unattractive.

Many participants pointed to the media to explain why Black women with dark skin and Afro hair are positioned at the bottom of what Hunter (2023) refers to as the 'beauty queue.' The term describes how women are ranked by beauty (defined in large part by racialisation and skin shade) in marriage and dating markets, where "beauty" operates as a form of racialised social or symbolic capital. For instance, Kelly, a Millennial who described her skin shade as "Galaxy milk chocolate," said:

> *[P]eople tend to be like, 'Oh, Black women are ugly' or 'Black women cannot grow their hair' or 'our hair is dry and picky' or if you do not have a particular texture hair or whatever, you are not seen as beautiful as someone else…What else? Or, yeah, like we are just less than, because I mean look at everything in terms of the media around us, just like, you know, everything's very European standards of beauty and all that kind of stuff."*

Kelly suggested that dominant perceptions of Black women are that they are inferior ("less than") and unattractive with unpleasant hair. Consistent with scholars such as Keigan et al. (2024), Kelly linked this to racist and colourist "European standards of beauty" in the media that privilege White or light skin and straight European hair.

In keeping with findings from a content analysis in the US, which found that Black women with dark skin were often excluded in media advertising (Mitchell, 2020), Alice, another Millennial, who had lighter skin, highlighted the lack of representation of Black and Asian women with "really dark" skin in the media.

> *We're continuously seeing the same type of Black woman or Asian woman [in the media]. It makes you think that's the only way that [a] person should look, whereas we see a lot more different types of White women or– so you immediately think there's one specifically attractive Black woman and if you do not fit that mould– or Asian woman or whatever then, I think it does, it does feed into your head. […] You see a lot fewer really dark women, I think, in magazine and films, and I also think you see a lot less natural hair.*

Her comment that "if you do not fit that mould … it does feed into your head," suggests that there are psychological consequences of being excluded from the limited racialised constructions of beauty in the media. In addition to a lack of women with very dark skin and natural hair in the media, Alice said there is a "very narrow idea of what's normal and what's good," indicating how morality is implicitly tied into media appearance ideals; that dark skin and Afro hair is neither "normal" nor "good." This is linked to what Hunter (2021, p. 88) described as "a colour-based halo effect": that light skin is not only associated with beauty but also virtue and other positive qualities.

It was not just Millennial women who spoke about the negative impact of racialised and colourist appearance ideals for women. Portia, who belonged to Generation X and described her skin as "beautiful dusky brown," said she used to feel "too dark, not nice" and highlighted the media as one of the sources of that negative self-perception. She said:

> *[W]e're all brainwashed with all this stuff… daily from the media, from work, from society, you know everywhere you turn really, the news, everywhere. There're so many messages that tell you that,*

> *you know, you are the other. And you are not, you know, the preferred option.*

Her narrative suggests that while the media plays a role in indoctrinating people with colourist ideas, colourist messaging is ubiquitous ("everywhere"). Portia also highlighted a gender disparity in the representation of Black people in the media in relation to skin shade. She said that "[d]arker-skin Black men […] they are viewed as attractive, whereas, I think for the most part, dark-skinned Black women probably still are not, if you look at the television and/or that kind of industry."

Black men in our study also discussed the negative impact of racist and colourist gendered appearance ideals on Black people, and Black women in particular. For example, Ekow, a Millennial, said that the media can also have a damaging effect on Black people's self-esteem through the images it conveys about beauty. He stated:

> *[T]he media portrays an image that tells Black people, especially Black women, that you are not beautiful. So, unless you have a strong sense of self, or you are growing up around a community of people, that reinforce your own sense of identity, and your own sense of beauty, you can fall into the view that you are not beautiful, and you are not worthy.*

What he described is what Collins (2000, p. 69) terms "controlling images." Collins (2000, p. 27) argues that some Black women internalise controlling images that construct them as "ugly and unfeminine" and "come to believe that they are the stereotypes." To buffer this negative influence from the media, Ekow suggested that young Black people, and particularly women, require resilience and a supportive community to bolster their identity in order to feel beautiful and maintain high self-esteem. His comments echo those of an earlier text from Collins, published almost 30 years ago (1986, p. S19), who argued that "[e]nduring the frequent assaults of controlling images requires considerable inner strength."

Further, several men in our study also emphasised the role the media, or more specifically White people who are in positions of power in the media, plays in placing this beauty burden on Black women. For example, Malakai, a Millennial with dark skin, said:

> *[Y]ou are bombarded with these lighter-skin women who are [positioned] as attractive. […] It's people like Beyoncé, you know, who they believe is beautiful. The Eurocentric blonde hair or the long straight hair, rather than our own hair [which is] considered bad hair. You do not like your kinks in your hair, you think it's wrong. What's wrong with it? It's what grows out of your head. This that you put on is a fake, it's been placed in your head that that's what's attractive. It's not you who says that's attractive. It's what the media, or it's what the White man, or 400 years of slavery told you that's attractive: The blue eyes, the lighter skin, the hair.*

Relatedly, Bilal, a Millennial, who had a similar skin shade to Kelly, said:

> *If you are looking at the mainstream media that is generally run by White people, now who they consider to be beautiful amongst Black people, and Black people are looking at that, which is generally like light skin or Mixed Race women, that's why it affects not only Black men, but Black women, and their perception of beauty.*

In their narratives, Malakai and Bilal argued that the media shapes societal perceptions of Black beauty because those in positions of power are White and favour light skin and straight, smooth hair. Finally, Ekow, also a Millennial, argued that even when the media includes Black women, it prioritises those with features that can be associated with whiteness. Using the example of the Black supermodel, Naomi Campbell, he said:

> *[E]ven with Naomi, you will not see Naomi with natural hair. So, if you are a young Black girl, and you are looking at that image, or if you are a young Black man and you are looking at that image of Naomi, you are still going to associate how she looks and her features with that of a White woman, or a Eurocentric idea of yes, she's Black, but she looks closer to being our ideal of what we would like to be Black.*

The implication of Ekow's argument is that colourism in the media is apparent even when women with darker skin shades are depicted because beyond their skin shade, it is those who fit White appearance ideals in other ways (e.g., thin, straight hair, a slim nose) who are included. This is consistent with Laybourn (2018, p. 2086), who argued that White appearance ideals are maintained by "placing white beauty ideals onto black bodies." Moreover, his comments resonate with historical perspectives in the media, such as the 1976 description of the supermodel Iman as "a White woman dipped in chocolate" from then editor-in-chief of Essence, Marcia Gillespie (Oliver, 2015).

3.2 "The only dark-skin people we like are the dark-skin men": colourism shaping women's experiences of romantic relationships

We begin this section with an exploration of how, due to gendered colourism, Black men with dark skin are sought after in the relationship market, while women with dark skin are not. We suggest that Black men's desirability means that those who have internalised colourism are well-positioned to perpetuate it in their relationship choices. We then complicate this by discussing how men can feel constrained in terms of their dating options due to concerns about other people's colourist judgements. We conclude the section with an exploration of the issues that sexual colourism raises, including: the pain it can cause Black women with dark skin and the discomfort it can cause those with light skin.

Participants frequently discussed in-group colourism, giving examples of Black people's prejudicial attitudes and opinions about other Black people based on skin shade. This most commonly arose when speaking about heterosexual relationships where Black and mixed Black-White women with light skin were positioned as the most desirable by Black men, while Black women with dark skin were often overlooked. In contrast, Black men with dark skin were viewed as desirable. This phenomenon can be conceptualised as sexual colourism, drawing on the concept of "sexual racism" (for example, Callander et al., 2015), in which people discriminate between possible romantic or sexual partners based on skin shade.

Sofia and Bilal were among the participants who highlighted gendered in-group colourism, arguing that Black women with dark skin are viewed negatively, while Black men with dark skin are desired. Sofia, who belonged to Generation Z and described her skin as "light golden," explained:

> *A lot of our self-hatred in the Black community comes from Black people. It's kind of like a mini racism within the Black community. They love the light-skin people, but did not like the dark-skin people. The only dark-skin people we like are the dark-skin men. The dark-skin females, they are seen as aggressive, they are seen as this and that and they are ratchet, whereas the dark-skin men, they are seen as, oh they are the things to have, you know, yeah. And they get cocky over it sometimes, you get a lot of dark-skin men that will trash a dark-skinned woman that's got the same exact skin tone as him. […] And their mum is the exact skin [as] him, but he's trashing every Black woman.*

In contrast to the association between femininity and light skin (Hunter, 2002), Sofia suggested that women with dark skin are seen as "aggressive" by other Black people, which is a long-established trope. Assertive Black women are labelled "aggressive" and seen as "threatening" as they "challenge White patriarchal definitions of femininity" (Collins, 1986, p. S17). While Black men with dark skin can be seen as aggressive and threatening too, they are also desired (Phoenix and Craddock, 2022) and Sofia said, they are perceived to be "the things to have." In commenting that many Black men will disparage ("trash") women of the same skin shade as themselves and their mothers, she highlights how deeply entrenched gendered colourism can be.

Like Sofia, Bilal described how Black men's experiences are distinct from women's because they are sought after in the relationship market. He said:

> *Even in a racist society, a Black man is still seen as desirable amongst other races of women, so it does not affect him in terms of the dating pool. […In contrast,] Black women, unfortunately, they suffer from racism, sexism and colourism. They see all these different types of oppression.*

As Robinson (2008) argues, in terms of heterosexual relationships, Black men benefit from more options for relationships with people of other ethnicities than Black women do. For Black women with dark skin, colourism compounds the 'gendered racism' or 'racialised sexism' to which they are subjected (see Essed, 2013; Kuo, 2017).

The desirability of Black men with dark skin means that those who internalise colourist, gendered appearance ideals are likely to be well positioned to be able to perpetuate it in the relationship market. Using the example of his Black heterosexual male friends' colourist dating preferences, Ekow said:

> *Because their preference is always to go out with White women, and to me that's on a subconscious level, you have been programmed to think that there's something wrong with Black women. You've all got Black mothers, you all know Black women, you all know beautiful Black women. But you would never want to go out with a Black woman. Or if they do go out with Black women, it will be a very light-skinned Black woman, or a Mixed Race Black woman.*

Through stating that "on a subconscious level" Black men have been "programmed" to view Black women, and particularly Black women with darker skin, negatively, Ekow's comment emphasises how colourist, gendered appearance ideals can be internalised. The fact that both Sofia and Ekow argue that some Black men shun women with similar skin shades to their mothers, emphasises both the complexity and perniciousness of internalised colourism (Phoenix and Craddock, 2022).

Several Black men in our study provided further nuance to how colourism shapes Black men's dating preferences by highlighting the impact of concerns that other people might be colourist. For example, Isaiah, a Millennial who described his skin shade as light brown, said he was single and that he would "subconsciously be drawn towards females that are of a similar shade to myself." When discussing appearance ideals for women, he said, "the ideal has a lot of external factors involved in it." While his ideal woman would have very dark skin, societal racism and colourism mean that having a partner with dark skin would make him "uncomfortable" and self-conscious when out in public. He gave a hypothetical example:

> *So […] we are at a restaurant and the person [waiter] is making only eye contact with myself, not engaging at all with my partner, who's darker skinned than me, straightaway that would start to make me feel a bit uncomfortable in the sense that I would automatically start thinking it's because she's darker as well, but also, other factors, such as she's a female, and I also subscribe to we live in a patriarchal society. So, it's almost a double whammy, she's darker, and she's a female. And that would make me feel uncomfortable, because I would feel that is unjust.*

His concern that a partner experiencing colourism would make him "uncomfortable" due to the injustice of it, meant that Isaiah said he would choose women with light skin instead. This suggests that societal colourism impacts men in complex ways, affecting not only who they desire, but who they are comfortable to be seen with. Relatedly, Ekow said that his first girlfriend was from South Sudan, and had dark skin, which used to be his preference, and "I knew some people that would make fun of that, like that, because she was dark skinned." He said that now, "if I see someone that I like, I will ask myself, do I like this person just because they are light skinned? Or am I giving them more preference because they are light skinned? Because I'm aware that that happens." This raises the question of whether his change in preference was related to the mocking he experienced while in his first relationship. These narratives suggest that concerns about the implications, and potential stigma, of being seen with women with dark skin can inform Black men's dating preferences.

Some participants also described how such in-group sexual colourism created tensions between Black people and was particularly harmful to Black women with darker skin shades. For example, Erika, a Millennial who said her skin was dark brown, described feeling pain and marginalisation due to experiencing colourism from men with dark skin. She said:

> *[T]he ones who held the strongest kind of opinions about light skin being the right skin, were dark-skin men. So, at the time that was a little painful because it was men who look more like you, than anybody else. So, I do not really know. I did not feel pressure, but I kind of felt like marginalised, or at least like they were my type,*

> *so, it felt like you were not your type's type. So, where do you kind of go from there? Because they were very myopic in that view, it wasn't like it could change and it wasn't that they would not find darker-skin girls attractive, it was just that they would not consider it. It would just be, she needs to be light skin, she needs to have green eyes.*

Her comment that "it felt like you were not your type's type. So, where do you kind of go from there?" conveys a concern that Black women with darker skin frequently express (for example, see McClinton, 2019), namely the idea that if Black men with dark skin shun Black women of the same skin shade when it comes to dating and relationships, Black women with darker skin are overlooked in the relationship market. Erika points out that it is women with light skin, "the right kind of hair" and green or light eyes that are desired, rather than women who look like her.

In contrast, Jennifer, a Millennial who described her skin as "tanned," said she was desired by Black young men, but their preference for women with light skin made her feel "uncomfortable."

> *[Y]ou hear people say, 'Ooh, I like –,' which it just makes me so uncomfortable but – 'Oh, I like light-skinned girls.' That is like a huge thing for like young people, or like young Black men. And it does not sit well with me because then it's almost like I'm privileged in some way, even though I do not particularly feel like I am. Or people say, 'Oh like – you are like the best of both' […] like 'the perfect mix of White and Black' […and] people think you should take that as a compliment, but I do not think that […] is really a compliment, you are actually, again, just being like very ignorant. But I definitely think that people think that I'm more desirable, especially to Black boys because I'm Mixed Race and that's what they like prefer.*

Rather than enjoying being privileged because of her light skin, she said she did not feel particularly privileged and found the way her skin shade and mixedness were lauded by others as special to be "ignorant." Jennifer was not alone in considering that light skin is not always a privilege. Some of the mixed Black-White participants said they were fetizishized and excluded from belonging to an imagined community of Black people, which we discuss in detail elsewhere (Phoenix and Craddock, 2024b).

3.3 "Competitiveness between skin shades": the pernicious impact of colourism on relationships between women

In this section, we explore how the inequalities that colourism engendered led to tensions between Black women with dark skin and Black and mixed Black-White women with lighter skin shades. We begin by examining perceptions that women with light skin consider themselves superior to their counterparts with darker skin. We then analyse narratives that argue that sexual colourism leads to competition between women with dark skin and those with light skin, who are privileged in the relationship market. We conclude by suggesting that tensions between women might be exacerbated due to the perception that mixed Black-White women downplay colourism.

Some participants described how Black and mixed Black-White women with light skin were stereotyped as being superior and argued that this harmed relations between women of different skin, a finding that resonates with Spratt's (2024) study. She found that Black women with dark skin argued that women with light skin felt that they were "special" and might avoid engaging with Black women with dark skin, preferring the company of White women and those with light skin, whom they considered their equals. Similarly, in our study, Erika suggested that women who were Mixed and/or had light skin felt superior, which led to tensions:

> *There was a superiority complex that came from it, knowing that you were kind of the most desired and sometimes it got tense […]. I did not feel girls [were] being like "I'm the best," it was more like "I know they see me as the best."*

In parallel to this, women in the study with lighter skin described how they perceived they were viewed by Black women with darker skin. For example, Jennifer shared her experience as a woman with light skin who faced "resentment" from Black women with darker skin who assumed she was conceited because her skin shade made her desirable.

> *I'm like, light skinned, which is what the boys say that they like, they like light-skinned girls and I think– I think people automatically assume that you have that confidence, that that would make me super confident and that I'm aware that boys like me, so they automatically kind of think that you are a bit up yourself, even though I'm like very far from being up myself. I think people think that I must know that people think I'm like attractive.*

Jennifer argued that in contrast to misconceptions about her that relate to stereotypes about women with light skin ("people automatically assume that you have that confidence"), she is "very far from being up myself," (i.e., being conceited or arrogant). Similarly, Sofia, who also had light skin, suggested that women with skin shades similar to hers are resented due to the light-skin privilege that some benefit from and perceptions that they are "stuck up" and conceited, and "not all that" (i.e., not as special as they think they are).

> *You also get this myth that dark-skin girls are jealous of light-skin girls too, so that also plays a part in it because then you get automatically stereotyped as being like bougie. Light-skin girls always get that stereotype that we are stuck up, we are bougie, we think we are pretty […]. And dark-skin girls like, they just think we are not all that. […] stereotypes hinder stuff a lot.*

Notably, participants in our study described how these stereotypes were not benign. For example, for Sofia, stereotypes about Black women with light skin impeded her ability to have relationships with Black women with dark skin. She said:

> *I am more friends with light-skin people than dark skin, and not on purpose. Like, I would like to become friends with more dark-skinned people, it's just like, well, they would not be friends with me.*

Sofia's comments highlight the barriers that colourism, and the resultant mistrust between women with dark and light skin, can create. Her narratives suggest that from her perspective, her skin

shade is used to stereotype her, and she is seen as a type, rather than an individual in her own right.

Furthermore, several of the mixed Black-White women participants from different generational cohorts said that they faced hostility from Black women with darker skin due to competition in the relationship market and resentment about their light-skin privilege. For example, Ella, who was Generation Z and described her skin shade as a "yellowy colour," said that on social media women with light skin were constructed as denigrating Black women and "stealing" Black men:

> *There's a lot of posts on Instagram about lighter skin women being, like either stealing Black men or being, putting Black women down. Things like thinking that they are better because their skin is lighter, and I do feel like sometimes that Black women treat me differently for those reasons. Because maybe they have a perception of me, like I'm going to be stuck up or think that I'm better than them.*

Ella suggested that Black women treat her "differently" because they think she feels superior due to her light skin. The narratives in the previous section about Black men, including those with dark skin, shunning Black women and desiring Mixed women and those with light skin, help to contextualise what Ella describes as online posts about women with light skin "stealing" Black men.

Similarly, Grace, who was Generation X and described her skin as 'dark for someone who was Mixed', was more explicit about the way in which she feels Black women treat her. She said:

> *I definitely felt like I got microaggressions and passive aggressiveness from Black women. Especially if I was seen out with a Black man, I was given the impression sometimes that, you know, it's not my business to be dating a Black man. Also, when you are out at clubs and stuff, and I would predominantly only go to Black spaces, I would feel most comfortable there. […] But I would usually get vibes from the women, not from the men, that I should not be there. And I think that's cause of the competitiveness between skin shades and I've always felt that and even now […] there's still [a] feeling of you should not be here.*

Grace argued that Black women subjected her to "microaggressions" and "passive aggressiveness" and made her feel that she should not date Black men or frequent what she described as "Black spaces" due to "the competitiveness between skin shades." In doing so, she seemed to be describing hostility driven by colourism-fuelled competition, and particularly competition for Black men, between Black and Mixed women, or those with dark skin and those with lighter skin shades.

Jennifer, a Millennial, made similar points, arguing that she feels drawn into competition with Black young women who feel she is encroaching on their space, when she does not wish to compete. Her comments resonate with Campion's (2019, p. 200) argument that Black and mixed Black-White women "can, unwillingly, find themselves pitted against other women in competition for male approval." Jennifer said:

> *I've definitely, definitely been in situations before, where there's been a group of Black girls and they have kind of been giving me the side eye, like, 'Who do you think you are?' Kind of thing, which again it's like, I've been thrown into a competition that I never wanted to be in. They think that we are like there to compete with each other, whereas I'm literally not interested at all, but I definitely think there's like a competition thing and I think because I'm not Black, I'm Mixed Race, it's – I almost feel like…they think that I'm like stepping on their territory and I do not deserve – like I do not deserve to be like in that because I'm not Black.*

Her description of Black young women giving her "the side eye" suggests that she faces microaggressions in a similar way to Grace. Despite stating that she does not want to be in competition with Black women, the fact that she has tanned skin and is Mixed ethnicity, means that she has an advantage in the relationship market over Black women who may consider her their competitor.

Further complicating relationships between Black women with dark skin and Black and mixed Black-White women with light skin, some participants with darker skin shades argued that those with lighter skin often downplay colourism, and their perspectives tend to be prioritised over those of Black women who experience the negative effects of the prejudice. For example, Bilal said:

> *[T]here is a reluctance, even when the issue of colourism comes up, there's a lot of pushback from a lot of Mixed Race and light-skinned Black women because they all jump on it, "We're all the same, it does not matter," which we are, but there is clearly a hierarchy, unfortunately, which exists among a lot of men, in terms of when they are viewing Black women. When you have got a group of Black women speaking about it and then the Black men are denying it and you have got Mixed Race and light-skin women who say, "No it's not true, it's exaggerated," that's the reason why a number of Black men would not even listen to Black women, because you have got other women who are saying, "It does not exist, it's just in their heads," so to speak.*

Bilal suggests that Black men choose to listen to women of Mixed ethnicity and those with light skin who argue that colourism claims are "exaggerated" and only in Black women's heads, rather than listening to the perspectives of Black women with darker skin, who are lower down the hierarchy. While he does not discuss the impact of this on relations between women of different shades, from the preceding narratives it seems likely that such scenarios would cause frustration and potentially resentment.

In a similar way, Erika said "a lot of the time it's denied," with people declaring that they just have a particular preference. As Silvestrini (2020, p. 308) argues, sexual colourism "reproduces hierarches of race and power under the illusion of personal preferences towards racial 'types'." Erika described the work she does to try and get people to understand that if everyone has the same narrow preference then something more is going on. However, she suggested that people can perceive her to be "bitter" or an "angry Black woman" for bringing up the topic.

> *It's like you are being the angry Black woman who's annoyed that people do not find you attractive […] Dark-skin women cannot accept that light-skin women are more desirable. And it's like, that is not the issue. Honestly, I do not care. If that is your type, great. But at least come from a place of being informed. Because a lot of the time you have not even, you are myopic, you cannot see beyond,*

> *a lot of the time, what you have been told to like. Because you have not even thought about why you like this, what the odds are, what the chances. It's very much a cookie cutter. Everybody likes this, so you should too.*

Erika suggested that women with dark skin are seen as jealous ("Dark-skin women cannot accept that light-skin women are more desirable"). In doing so, she both highlighted tensions between women of different shades, as discussed above, and underlined how difficult it is to challenge colourism among Black people when the views of those critiquing the prejudice are trivialised.

3.4 Small acts of resistance: rejecting colourist ideology and embracing Black beauty

This final section focuses on participants' narratives about countering colourism in the context of gendered appearance ideals and self-worth. Accordingly, we examine how participants discussed the need to resist colourist appearance ideals through different strategies including critiquing and rejecting societal appearance ideals, education, and taking pride in their skin shade and appearance.

Some participants emphasised the importance of rejecting racist and colourist ideologies that tell Black people with dark skin that they are inferior and ugly. Malakai, for example, emphasised the need critically to appraise appearance ideals and to recognise the contradictions inherent in the fact that physical features that are associated with, but not privileged in, Black bodies, are increasingly celebrated in White bodies. Implicitly, Malakai called for Black people to reject the dominant racist and colourist messages. He said:

> *[Y]ou look at the Kardashians now, filling their lips to get bigger lips, fuller lips, what you already have, bigger bums, what you already have, this curvier body, what you already have, but they told you that wasn't attractive, but now they are taking it for themselves. They love the culture, they do not like you, and they make you feel worthless while they are stealing what you have. Look at it differently. Think about it.*

Malakai suggests that mainstream appearance ideals are racist and colourist with White women desiring (and having surgery to achieve) features that are denigrated when associated with Black women. Although he does not use the term, what he is describing is a phenomenon known as "blackfishing," which includes "altering physical appearances through physical and digital means" to appropriate black aesthetics (Stevens, 2021, p. 1). When he says, "[T]hey make you feel worthless while they are stealing what you have. Look at it differently. Think about it," he invites an imagined audience of Black women to reflect on the injustice and contradictions inherent in appearance ideals. "Look at it differently" may be a call for Black women to reevaluate both their perceptions of beauty and their self-perceptions.

Just as Malakai called for Black women to reflect and change their perspectives, Portia, who was in an older generational cohort, described her 'journey' of "re-educat[ing]" and "de-brainwash[ing]" herself.

> *[Y]oung people use kind of language around people being 'blick' and you know, I hear things all the time that kind of make you think, wow. I do not know, are we really moving beyond this state that we were in, or are we standing still? I'm not sure. For me personally, I've moved a long way along that journey, I'm definitely in a better place now. But that's through educating myself, re-educating myself, de-brainwashing myself, going into spaces where they are all Black people in that space, and no one seems particularly– well on the surface they do not seem bothered with what shade you are.*

Portia argued that colourism is still prevalent, and it is not clear that progress is being made at a collective level, though she has educated herself and worked on addressing her internalised colourism in a way that arguably enable her to "[l]ook at it differently." As Glenn (2008, p. 298) argued, attempts to address colourism are often individualised and framed around "re-education" that focuses on broadening conceptions of beauty and desirability to include dark skin so that whiteness and light skin are no longer viewed as the "dominant standard."

Other women focused on taking pride in the darkness of their skin and the way that they looked in a moment when there is a renewed move to celebrate natural Black beauty. For Kelly, ensuring she was "presentable" was an important way to challenge negative colourist narratives about Black women with dark skin, demonstrating that "we are beautiful as well." Her comments evoke the "Black is Beautiful" slogan from the 1960s and 1970s Black Consciousness and Black Power movements, which protested against institutional racism and sought to celebrate Black features, including dark skin, Afro hair and Black cultures (Baird, 2021). Kelly said:

> *I like to, for most of the time, be presentable and…this might sound really funny but represent in a way, because I think there's so much sort of negative viewpoint when it comes to darker skin and Black women, that I think it's important to show, do you know what, this is us and actually we are beautiful as well. So, I tend to really take pride in my appearance in certain environments.*

Kelly struck a defiant tone as she argued that she took pride in her appearance to emphasise the beauty in women with dark skin that mainstream colourist narratives seek to deny. Collins (1986, p. S24) asserts that when Black women draw on whatever is at their disposal "to be self-defined and self-valuating [*sic*] and to encourage others to reject objectification, then Black women's everyday behaviour itself is a form of activism." She suggested that just the act of viewing oneself "as fully human, as subjects," is enough to become an activist even if only in a limited way. In her narrative, Kelly rejects definitions of Black women with dark skin as ugly or unattractive and asserts her own "definition" of Black women with dark skin as beautiful, which could be seen as a form of resistance or "activism."

When asked how she felt about her skin shade, Destiny said, "I love it, I always have." She said, "I was lucky growing up in somewhere like [area in London] where everyone was from a different place […]. [I]n places like [area in London], Blackness is celebrated, so I was really happy." Her appreciation for her skin shade was reflected in her description of how she puts on makeup:

> *[A]nd then I put a bit of bronzer on, and I like the one that's quite brown and full, it just looks better with my face. Rather than if*

> *I wanted to make it lighter, I prefer to go darker, I think it looks better.*

In a similar way to Kelly, Destiny took pride in her appearance and presented herself to the world in a way that emphasised the fact that she saw darker skin as valuable.

Ekow pointed to changes in perceptions around beauty, suggesting that there has been a shift in how Black people both see and accept themselves:

> *There's a lot more men and women embracing their natural hair, and embracing themselves, and are being able to articulate more now, that growing up, they did not feel worthy, they did not feel beautiful, they did not feel handsome. But they now are beginning to feel and accept themselves a lot more.*

He contrasts Black people's comments about feeling inferior and unattractive as they were coming of age, with what he perceives to be them "beginning to feel and accept themselves" much more. His comments should be contextualised against a backdrop of digital and hybrid movements that centre on celebrating black beauty and natural hair. Such movements include the 'natural hair' movement and the "#BlackGirlMagic" hashtag, which "insists on the visibility of black women and girls as beauty subjects and aspirational figures in the wider culture" in an effort to challenge discourses that construct Black women as dysfunctional, unattractive and "social failures" (Hobson, 2021, p. 4).

4 Discussion

In this paper, we examined the complex processes through which colourism situates Black and mixed Black-White women in contrasting positions in beauty and desirability hierarchies based on their skin shade. We took an intersectional approach to our analysis to allow us to be particularly attentive to participants' positionality in terms of gender, skin shade, and where possible, their generational cohort. Our findings contribute to international work on colourism by presenting a British perspective, and providing an in-depth account of colourism's role in the heterosexual relationship market, and the effect of sexual colourism on platonic relationships between Black and mixed Black-White women.

Women and men in our study argued that gendered colourism in the media, and society more broadly, could be internalised by Black people, leading both to negative self-perceptions among women with dark skin, and negative perceptions of women with darker skin shades. This supports US qualitative research with Black women and adolescent Black girls that emphasises the negative impact of gendered colourism on participants (Hall, 2017; Abrams et al., 2020). Triangulating our findings with those in the US with different age groups underscores the similarity of experiences of Black girls and women across the Atlantic.

Notably, alongside a lack of representation of women with dark skin, participants in our study often highlighted the lack of representation of Afro hair in media portrayals of female beauty. This is consistent with work by Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly (2018), who argue that Black hair practices need to be contextualised within a racialised social structure that privileges White appearance ideals and stigmatises physical features associated with Black people, such as skin colour and hair. Together, this highlights the need to consider hair texture, alongside skin shade, in analyses of how gendered colourism affects Black women.

Women and men in our study also described how gendered colourism, perpetuated by appearance ideals in the media, is internalised and enacted by Black men, informing their (heterosexual) relationship choices. Specifically, Black men rejected Black women with dark skin in the heterosexual relationship market, preferring Black women with light skin or White women. Participants described how this led to competition between Black women with dark skin and Black and mixed Black-White women with light skin. This is consistent with Campion (2019), who asserted that Black and mixed Black-White women can be drawn into competition for male attention. Campion argued that "the systematic racism, sexism and colourism experienced by darker skinned Black women can create frustrations which, in some cases, can result in 'interpersonal conflict' with Black mixed race women."

Some of our participants described small acts of resistance whereby Black people, including those with dark skin, rejected colourist ideology and embraced notions of Black beauty. While this was presented as a sign of hope in the face of colourist controlling images, individualised rejection of colourism is insufficient to combat the prejudice. What is required is the dismantling of the structures that sustain racism and colourism. As Glenn (2008, p. 298) argues, "focusing only on individual consciousness and motives distracts attention from the very powerful economic forces that help to create the yearning for lightness and that offer to fulfil the yearning at a steep price." Multinational corporations profit from the lucrative global skin lightening industry and are therefore invested in perpetuating colourism in order to create and sustain demand for products that depend on inequities and insecurities created by colourism (Glenn, 2008). Addressing colourism will require educating and regulating both the corporations that profit from it and the institutions that help to sustain it (cf. Hill, 2002; cf. Phoenix, 2014).

4.1 Limitations

There are three key limitations of the study worth consideration. First, we employed convenience sampling, and our resulting sample included almost twice as many Black or mixed Black-White women with light skin as Black women with darker skin shades. This means that we have an imbalance in the sample that may have skewed the data on perceptions of relationships between women with dark and light skin and how they are affected by colourism. Relatedly, fewer men participated than women, meaning that we had fewer male perspectives to draw on. Second, our findings may be affected by a selection bias based on our recruitment strategy in which minoritised ethnic people were invited to take part in an interview study about "skin shade." We may, therefore, have attracted those for whom skin shade is particularly salient and who would be happy to talk about the role of skin shade in their lives.

Third, it would have been valuable to include a specific question on relationships with women of different skin shades to capture more

perspectives on how colourism affects interpersonal dynamics between Black and mixed Black-White women with different skin shades. However, the fact that many participants commented on this despite not being asked directly, could be viewed as a strength of this inductive analytical work. Finally, though we collected age data, the spread of participants' ages in conjunction with our relatively small sample size meant that we were often unable to make meaningful comparisons or interpretations by age.

4.2 Future directions

Colourism research is still relatively nascent in the UK. Therefore, there are several directions of research that could build upon the current work focused on colourism and romantic relationships in the UK. First, it would be valuable to conduct a larger in-depth UK study with Black and mixed Black-White women, capturing the perspectives of more women with dark skin and specifically asking women of all shades how they perceive and relate to Black and Mixed women of different shades, as well as asking them about their desire and experiences in the relationship market. Second, it would be beneficial to conduct similar research on colourism and relationships with minoritised ethnic people of other ethnicities in the UK. Third, understandings of colourism in the context of relationships would benefit from more research with minoritised ethnic people who occupy marginalised identities related to sexual orientation and gender to expand intersectional analyses. Fourth, more nuanced intersectional understandings of colourism and relationships could be gained by considering personal characteristics such as social class and generation status.

4.3 Conclusion

This study highlights how colourist and gendered appearance ideals can affect Black and mixed Black-White women's experiences in the heterosexual relationship market. We argued that Black women with dark skin and Afro hair were seen as unattractive due to sexual colourism, in contrast to the perceived beauty of mixed Black-White women, who were desired and sometimes objectified. Participants argued that dominant media constructions of white and light skin as beautiful and desirable, and dark skin as the opposite, could lead Black women with dark skin to internalise the idea that they are ugly, while Black men shunned them in favour of women with lighter skin in the romantic relationship market.

We found that sexual colourism damaged platonic relationships between women of different shades, some of whom felt they were thrust into competition with each other, creating resentment and mistrust. In this way, the study reveals some of the subtle, less tangible effects of colourist, gendered appearance ideals, which shape Black and mixed Black-White women's realities. Our intersectional approach to analysing how sexual colourism affects Black and mixed Black-White people, and particularly women, was valuable as it enabled us to be attentive to the complex ways in which intersecting factors such as gender, racialisation and skin shade affected both our participants' experiences and the possibility of heterosexual and platonic relationships. In particular, it allowed us to highlight the detrimental impact of sexual colourism on Black women with dark skin.

Data availability statement

The datasets for this article are not publicly available as participants have not consented to the archiving of their data. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Research Ethics Committee, SOAS, University of London. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent, or for online participants, their recorded verbal consent, to participate in this study.

Author contributions

AP: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. NC: Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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EDITED BY
Margaret Hunter,
Santa Clara University, United States

REVIEWED BY
Nadia S. Craddock,
University of the West of England, United Kingdom
Neha Goel,
University of California, San Diego, United States

*CORRESPONDENCE
Vanessa Lakana Veak
✉ vveak@stanford.edu

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Color me khmao: the effects of social factors on colorism among Khmer women

Vanessa Lakana Veak*

Department of Sociology, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, United States

Introduction: Given the lack of academic literature on colorism within the Cambodian community and the lack of focus on how colorism influences experiences in this context, this study seeks to analyze how Khmer women's perceptions of colorism are shaped by their family and community environments.

Methods: The data and methods consist of 40 in-depth qualitative interviews with Khmer women, primarily those living in the United States and Cambodia, with their experiences of colorism analyzed through thematic analysis.

Results: Findings reveal that factors such as family support and cultural connections to Khmer identity interact with relative skin tone within families and broader communities to shape self-esteem and experiences with colorism. Women with darker skin did not necessarily have the lowest self-esteem, especially when they had supportive families and lived in communities where darker skin tones were more prevalent. Conversely, women with lighter skin did not necessarily have the highest self-esteem, especially when their families reinforced color hierarchies and they lived in communities dominated by White or East Asian Americans.

Discussion: By further examining this structural issue, colorism, the study highlights how communities of color can work toward racial and ethnic justice while developing strategies for future generations to challenge and move beyond colorism.

KEYWORDS

colorism, Cambodia, Khmer women, family, self-esteem and belonging, wellbeing, community, skin tone discrimination

1 Introduction

> [Growing up,] my brother-in-law called me the N-word. He'll just call me, "'Ey little N-word! Hey little N-word!" and I was the one that was dubbed me khmao/ម៊ីខ្មៅ (black, derogatory nickname) … I mean I've known a lot of me khmaos growing up. There was always one in the family. I do not know if it's derogatory or not, but there were times when if I was mean, they were like, "ម៉ោពីវាខ្មៅអញ្ចឹងបានវាកាចដូចអញ្ចឹង ឬកខ្មៅសាច់ខ្មៅអាក្រក់ដល់ហើយ" (it's because she's black, that's why she's angry like that. Black attitude and skin black, so ugly).

Regardless of Khmer language fluency, the word khmao/ខ្មៅ, meaning black, holds familiarity to the vast majority of the Cambodian community, though not as a literal color but primarily in regards to skin complexion. Soriya, a 37-year-old 1.5-generation Khmer American in Minnesota, shares her experience in the quote above growing up with the nickname me khmao, a commonly shared nickname across Cambodians and colorism. Colorism is defined as the structural occurrence of white or light-skin supremacy associated with status, privilege,

and other positive stereotypes, while darker skin is perceived with disdain and other negative stereotypes (Dixon and Telles, 2017). For my study, I use skin tone and complexion interchangeably, and I specify *White* as the racial group or of European descent to distinguish it from *white* as pertaining to skin color, similar to *Black* and *black*. In addition, I extend this definition to involve the discrimination and preference for certain facial features and hair texture, as the majority of interviewees in my study discussed feeling self-conscious about their textured hair and flatter noses in conjunction with their skin color, associating lighter-skinned Asians or the Asian standard of beauty with having slimmer noses and silky and straight hair (Rondilla and Spickard, 2007). While research on colorism has been increasing recently over the decades, the concept of colorism has existed in all regions and racial groups for centuries (Dixon and Telles, 2017). Because of the United States' color line shifting from majority White people to majority people of color given the rise of Asian, Black, and Latinx immigrants and multiracial populations, colorism becomes more prominent as racial distinctions may become increasingly blurred, hence the rise in literature (Burton et al., 2010).

Despite increased attention to colorism overall and especially in the U.S., there is a lack of research on Southeast Asian and Southeast Asian American communities. Thus, my study focuses on the effects of colorism among Khmer women, who are darker-skinned on average relative to Asia's ideal skin tone, and among East Asians and East Asian Americans. I focus on women, particularly due to the greater extent to which they are affected by colorism in the context of marriage, value, femininity, and other social capital (Glenn, 2008). For women, lightness is associated with femininity, beauty, and purity; lightness brings women perceived value in the marriage market and social opportunities (Hunter, 2021; Rondilla and Spickard, 2007). This study aims to demonstrate how Khmer women, who are also marginalized by indigenous erasure, are vulnerable to the harmful and systemic effects of colorism.

Existing literature suggests that colorism feels more overt and culturally emphasized in Asia than in the United States (Khanna, 2020). In addition to this, colorism in Asia existed prior to European contact and thus is not entirely rooted in seeking European Whiteness (Dixon and Telles, 2017). While in the Philippines, Spanish and the United States colonialism majorly contributed to a color hierarchy with lighter skin at the top (Rondilla, 2012); lighter skin was historically a sign of the upper class in East Asian countries like China, Japan, and Korea, with the ideal skin color described as snow (Yeung, 2016; Glenn, 2008); and while British colonialism exacerbated colorism in South Asia, the caste system existing far prior also contributed to stratification based on skin color (Modi, 2016). With a variety of historical contexts in Asia, further research on colorism across Asian communities is imperative.

I focus on Khmer American women additionally, as opposed to solely Cambodian nationals, due to the pressure that arises from being in a White-dominated society and appearing stereotypically Asian through a White American lens (Trieu and Lee, 2018). The observation of colorism in a comparative national context indicates the influence of community dynamics and the intergenerational transmission of colorism within families. Although some colorism scholarship addresses the relationship between family and colorism (Tharps, 2017) and interpersonal outcomes such as job and social opportunities (Monk, 2014), there is a lack of literature on the impact of the overall complexion of community on perceptions of colorism and its factor into self-esteem and how one views their skin color. This study seeks to fill this missing gap, bringing the question of how Khmer women's perceptions of colorism are shaped by their family and community contexts.

My findings suggest that Cambodians of all generations acknowledge the belief that lighter skin will equate to better social and economic opportunities, a large number desiring to possess lighter skin, straighter hair, and a more slender nose themselves at some point in their lives, identical to several colorism research findings with other communities (Mathews and Johnson, 2015; Norwood, 2015; Rondilla, 2012). Although all respondents described experiences with colorism, the extent to which their skin color was associated with self-esteem varied by four key factors: (a) Family Support, (b) Skin Tone in the Family, (c) Community Color; and (d) Connection to Khmer Culture. I posit that possessing at least two of these factors that contribute to lower self-esteem will thus generally lead to lower self-esteem and a negative view of one's skin color. Similarly, possessing at least two of these factors contributes to a higher self-esteem, which will thus generally lead to a higher self-esteem and positive view of one's skin color. As a result, these family and community contexts operate collectively rather than one theme dominating over another, illustrating the intricate dynamics between family, community, and self-esteem. Additionally, due to observing colorism as a structural issue in the Cambodian community, predominantly in the United States and Cambodia, participants begin considering strategies for future generations to navigate and combat colorism.

1.1 The Khmer ethnic identity

Cambodia is a multiethnic country, with the ethnic Khmer group making up about 90% of the country's total population, and ethnic Chinese, Vietnamese, Cham, and mountain-dwelling ethnic groups accounting for the remainder 5 to 13% (National Institute of Statistics, 2020; Hein, 2006). As intermarriage and mixing across different groups in Cambodia increase, the blurred ethnic lines and skin tone variation increase, in turn, parallel to the United States. Although a small minority, Chinese Cambodians have currently been the most dominant group economically, significantly controlling Cambodia's commerce and businesses, leading to higher-paying and higher-position occupations, creating conflict among other Cambodians (Hein, 2006; Willmott, 1981), and exemplifying wealthy, lighter-skinned Asians in Cambodia. The indigenous Khmer ethnic group, apart from being the majority of Cambodia's population, is, on average, darker in skin tone in comparison to the Chinese ethnic group and East Asians in general. Prasso (1995) asserts that there is a preference for lighter complexions in Cambodians. In addition, due to Cambodia's unique history with the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge regime, many Cambodians experience some desire to distance themselves from the Cambodian identity (Chan, 2004; Kinzie, 1985). Given all of these factors, Khmer people are more susceptible to colorism, especially with a social hierarchy that places the darker-skinned Khmer people at the bottom and lighter-skinned Asians at the top in not only East and Southeast Asia but within Cambodia as well.

As of 2020, with a population of approximately 339,000 in the United States (Budiman, 2021), Cambodian Americans have 38% limited English proficiency compared to 9% of the total population, are the Southeast Asian American group least likely to have completed high school, 23% low-income, and 20% in poverty, and

suffer from a higher incidence of severe mental health problems than any other group and the general population overall (Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, 2020a; Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, 2020b). After 1985, many Cambodians joined gangs due to the treatment they received from Americans, such as getting jumped or alienated for being Asian, and to cope and compensate for their lack of attention and treatment from teachers, peers, and parents, as well as a form of affirming their Khmerness or Cambodianness by having pride for their gang of Cambodians (Needham and Quintiliani, 2007). This may also have contributed to the association of Cambodians with gang life, as well as the media painting a negative light on Cambodian youth when gang warfare became the most violent between the 1980s and 1990s despite the majority of Cambodian youth doing well in school (Chan, 2004).

As a result of the systemic and social conditions that Cambodian Americans possess–more often darker-skinned Khmer Americans–society perceives them with negative stereotypes such as unintelligent, gang-affiliated, poor, and uncivilized (Chhuon, 2014), similar to darker-skinned Black Americans (Hannon et al., 2013; Welch, 2007). In contrast, for both Khmer and Black Americans, pale, pearly-white skin became the symbol of the intelligent, wealthy, pure, and civilized (Tharps, 2017). In one interview with a Cham person–that is, an Indigenous and ethnic group along coastal Cambodia and central Vietnam from the original kingdom of Champa–Khmer was used as a derogatory term for dark Cham people, revealing dark skin tone associated with Khmer people and the negative implications behind having dark skin (Khanna, 2020). This stereotype contributes to dark-skinned Khmer Americans facing lower-paying jobs, lower socioeconomic status, and poor living conditions compared to the average Asian American population (Banh, 2023) and lighter-skinned Cambodian Americans (Jones, 2013), perpetuating a cycle of disadvantage and reinforcing the stereotype.

Existing literature suggests that ethnic identity impacts some aspects of the self, such as the ego or psychosocial functioning, entailing self-esteem, as belonging to an ethnic minority group is also associated with having resolved one's commitments in occupational, educational, political, and religious domains (St. Louis and Liem, 2005; Phelps et al., 2001). Previous research has revealed a positive relationship between ethnic identity formation and psychosocial functioning for ethnic minority youth (Phinney, 1992). Ego identity formation is particularly critical in young adulthood, specifically during college, as identity determines the success or failure of adult development to an extent (Erikson, 1968). In turn, college students of color with well-developed ethnic identities have higher self-esteem and psychological well-being (St. Louis and Liem, 2005; Phelps et al., 2001). Ethnoracial identity has, therefore, been shown to be critical in influencing the educational experiences of students of color, which leads to the focus on my participants' connection to Khmer culture as a key mediating factor. However, due to the negative stereotypes Cambodians face, many Cambodian students have made efforts to distance themselves from their ethnic group to perform better in school (Chhuon and Hudley, 2010), contrasting the literature deeming a positive relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem and psychosocial functioning. Chhuon further discusses how, for Cambodian American girls, however, the norm was that they were studious and quiet in class, mirroring the model minority. This may be because women have a higher societal and cultural expectation to be obedient and do well in school than men. However, many Cambodian women living in the United States still view their community in a negative light, and my study thus seeks to observe whether or not ethnic identity influencing self-esteem would outweigh the negative stereotypes of Cambodians.

1.2 The influence of family

Family significantly influences self-esteem, especially in adolescence and early childhood. Family influence and support in students' work are crucial for better academic satisfaction, career decision-making, and overall happiness in adolescence. Family guides them as major support even when peer groups and communities change (Fatma et al., 2023; Tahir et al., 2015). Family, especially the older female generations such as mothers and grandmothers, in particular, primarily aid in the process of racial socialization, where individuals view themselves as their racial group as well as gain behaviors, perceptions, values, and attitudes on that group (Kulish et al., 2019; Wilder and Cain, 2011). Consequently, ingrained feelings of colorism frequently appear from families giving messages to their children to protect them from the realities of racism, but in doing so, some families may also perpetuate colorism–a double-edged sword (Walker, 2014).

The role of family in colorism is deeply intertwined (Tharps, 2017), as it consists of the expectation of unconditional love, yet various treatments may be observed, especially if one has siblings of different skin complexions. Additionally, the family typically influences one's development growth as they spend much of their time together growing up outside of school (Li and Guo, 2023). Landor et al. (2013) reported a higher quality of parenting, most likely due to the beauty standard favoring lighter skin. Women especially see themselves as a direct reflection of their mother, grandmother, or other female family member, as the maternal family members serve as the source of identity construction (Wilder and Cain, 2011). These studies demonstrate how ingrained colorism is for women and when another female figure is involved; thus, the significance of potential internalization of family support from female relatives.

Wilder and Cain's (2011) study found that some women credited the wide diversity of hues in their families for their oppositional foundations of colorism, whereas others described the color homogeneity within their families as causation for less color-conscious family experiences; thus, the focus on skin tone in the family as a theme in my study. Wilder and Cain (2011) also provided an example where, despite her parents' adamant challenges to colorism, a participant's subsequent exposure to extended family members, schools, and relationships overrode what her parents initially fought so hard to instill. This signals that social factors are interconnected; hence, my study posits the importance of analyzing the social factors, family and community, in tandem and its effect on self-esteem and views on one's skin tone.

1.3 The influence of community

External and social factors, i.e., community, clearly demonstrate influencing self-esteem; for example, having an ethnic community or

an online community consumed through social media may lead to the effect of self-racialization, identifying the dominant norms in appearance, and acceptance or rejection of the community membership influencing self-esteem (Steinsbekk et al., 2021; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2002; Phinney, 1991).

Harris (2013) article discusses how to feel accepted and validated within the Black community. The participants in a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) felt they needed to validate their community by taking classes, engaging in Black student groups on campus, and attending more campus-related events. Bhatt's study with South Asian American emerging adults found general positive perceptions and experiences, and an increased sense of belonging with others of their ethnicity were the most common influences of skin tone on ethnic identity (Bhatt, 2023). These findings reveal a clear relationship between a sense of belonging and an ethnic community.

However, there is a lack of literature on the effects of specifically the complexion of the overall community beyond the ethnicity or race of the community on particularly self-esteem, much less focusing on colorism. Self-perception of one's skin color is affected by the range of skin tones surrounding their social networks (Norwood, 2015). Mathews and Johnson's, 2015 study discusses the difficulties of belonging for darker-skinned women due to their skin tone, even within the same ethnic community. With participants from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), darker-skinned women felt less valued in their friendships compared to lighter-skinned women. Notably, notable findings show that women who self-identified their skin tone as light provided the most egalitarian responses (Mathews and Johnson, 2015). Nambiar's study on the experiences of colorism for South Asian women found that friendships and peers were a source of support for participants, largely when the times they felt great about their skin color were being with Black or Brown people who could also empathize with participants and not solely with other South Asians (Nambiar, 2023).

I attempt to address this gap in the effect of the complexion of the overall community on self-esteem among Khmer women in this study by accounting for how my participants compare their skin tone to those around them and not just other Cambodians.

2 Data and methods

This study consisted of qualitative interviews conducted from June to September 2020 involving a sample of 40 Khmer women. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, travel was not possible. Accordingly, we conducted interviews over Zoom and Facebook Messenger to adjust to these new circumstances for the safety of all parties. Out of the convenience of video conferencing, we conducted interviews from a larger range of locations. While we expected participants to feel less connected or to face Zoom fatigue within the online setting, the majority of participants expressed eagerness to speak about their experiences, leading to interviews lasting longer than the initially suggested duration of 1 h.

Given the nuanced subject of colorism involving unique and complicated personal experiences, in-depth interviews allowed the required contextual information to further understand colorism's factors and effects among Khmer women (Hays and Singh, 2012). Furthermore, both interviewers were Khmer American women, 20 years old at the time, and with medium skin tones. We both grew up low-income, but my co-interviewer grew up in Lynn, Massachusetts, with some Cambodian community, whereas I grew up primarily in the suburbs of Fairfield, Ohio, with a very small Cambodian community aside from my family. I have the darkest skin tone in my family, especially with sisters with pale skin from my mother's part-Chinese ancestry, so my experiences of colorism were as early as my toddler years. I have grown up hearing and receiving comments about my dark skin from family, friends, Cambodians, and strangers alike. Colorism directly affected my self-esteem growing up, as well as my dating views. Visiting Cambodia multiple times and living there for 4 months, I have witnessed acts of colorism and the privileges that I also hold, being medium-toned and American. Despite the difference in higher education and immigrant generation from a handful of our participants, our positionality and ability to resonate with the participants' stories made our participants feel more comfortable and open to freely sharing their thoughts and experiences.

2.1 Participants

We sampled and interviewed 40 Khmer women, where the only qualifications to participate in the study were to identify as ethnically Khmer or have Khmer ancestry to an extent, identify as a woman, and be at least 18 years old to consent. Of the 40 participants, 30 are Khmer American, in which they were either born in the United States or grew up primarily in the United States; nine are Cambodian, in which they were either (1) born in Cambodia and/or currently live there, or (2) grew up primarily, including adolescence years, in Cambodia, as opposed to 1.5-generation Cambodians, who were born in Cambodia or Thailand refugee camps and immigrated at a young age, identifying more as American; and one participant is Khmer French, having been adopted from Cambodia but raised in France with French citizenship. Participants' demographics presented a wide range of variations in age, location, birthplace, relative complexion, and Cambodian community proximity, which can be referred to in Table 1. All names of participants are pseudonyms for their privacy.

Participants were initially recruited through snowball sampling and then recruited primarily through voluntary sampling as we promoted the study on our Khmer instructor's Facebook page, which was then shared widely in a Cambodian-centered Facebook group. Only one participant in the sample was recruited in person with no personal connection at a Cambodian restaurant. The study's budget, funded by the 2020 Chappell Lougee Scholarship, allowed all 40 participants to be compensated 30 USD for their time.

2.2 Procedure

Participants electronically signed an e-form sent via Zoom or Facebook Messenger chat to provide their consent to be interviewed and recorded. Additionally, we asked for verbal consent to be interviewed once the recording started, informed to avoid sharing anything unwanted, and with any identifying information redacted afterward. Interviews were initially conducted for storytelling purposes on the general premise of archiving Khmer women's experiences with colorism. The interview duration averaged 1 h and a half and ranged between 45 min and 2 h, during which participants responded to 26 scripted questions, in addition to any follow-up or probing questions.

TABLE 1 Participant demographic information.

Name (Anonymized)	Age	Current Location	Birthplace	Community Color[1]	Cambodian Proximity[2]
Angela	25–29	Ohio	New York	Darker	Not Many
Bailey	18–24	California	California	Lighter	Many
Bopha	25–29	Cambodia	Cambodia	Lighter	Many
Candy	18–24	Massachusetts	Massachusetts	Darker	Many
Caroline	18–24	Maryland	Cambodia	Lighter	Not Many
Chantha	25–29	California	California	Lighter	Many
Chea	45–49	Hawai'i	Cambodia	Lighter	Many
Chhaya	30–34	Cambodia	France	Lighter	Not Many
Dahlia	18–24	Massachusetts	Massachusetts	Darker	Many
Dara	35–39	Washington	Cambodia	Lighter	Not Many
Elise	18–24	France	Cambodia	Lighter	Not Many
Jamie	25–29	California	California	Lighter	Not Many
JJK	25–29	New Jersey	California	Darker	Many
Kalianne	30–34	California	Iowa	Darker	Many
Laura	18–24	Massachusetts	Massachusetts	Darker	Many
Lesly	25–29	Ohio	Ohio	Darker	Not Many
Lucy	25–29	California	California	Darker	Many
May	18–24	Texas	Texas	Lighter	Not Many
Michelle	25–29	California	California	Lighter	Many
Neary	45–49	Washington	Cambodia	Unclear	Many
Pam	30–34	California	California	Lighter	Many
Pich	45–49	Ohio	Cambodia	Darker	Many
Pisey	25–29	Cambodia	Cambodia	Lighter	Many
Rathana	45–49	Massachusetts	Cambodia	Lighter	Many
Reaksmey	25–29	California	California	Lighter	Not Many
Samnang	18–24	California	California	Darker	Not Many
Serena	18–24	California	California	Darker	Not Many
Socheat	25–29	Cambodia	Cambodia	Lighter	Many
Sokha	18–24	Washington	Washington	Lighter	Not Many
Sopheap	30–34	Wisconsin	Illinois	Unclear	Many
Soriya	35–39	Minnesota	Thailand	Lighter	Many
Sreyla	35–39	Pennsylvania	Ohio	Darker	Many
Sreyleak	18–24	Minnesota	Minnesota	Lighter	Not Many
Sreymom	50–54	Texas	Cambodia	Darker	Many
Tari	35–39	Massachusetts	Thailand	Darker	Not Many
Tevy	18–24	Cambodia	Cambodia	Lighter	Many
Theavy	18–24	Washington	Washington	Lighter	Not Many
Tida	50–54	Ohio	Cambodia	Darker	Many
Vanna	30–34	Cambodia	Cambodia	Lighter	Many
Wendy	25–29	California	California	Darker	Many
Total 40					

[1]Categorized as either Lighter, where the community primarily growing up was either predominantly White and/or East Asian, or darker, where the community was either more diverse with predominantly Black and/or Brown.

[2]Categorized as Many if they grew up with an extensive Cambodian community in their area, such as Long Beach, California; Lowell, Massachusetts; or simply surrounded themselves with many Cambodians aside from their family, or Not Many if vice versa.

Questions were reviewed by grant advisors and consisted of both closed questions to establish the participant's positionality and primarily open questions to understand feelings or attitudes towards their skin color and facial features, colorist incidents or stories, skin tone concerning romantic relationships and children, occupations, and media representation—topics and concepts that have all surfaced or been researched in existing colorism literature as mentioned in this article's previous section. With colorism as a social construct, participants self-reported their own skin tone description. I asked each participant how they describe their skin color relative to their family members. Because my study focuses on the effects of family and community on Khmer women predominantly living in the United States and Cambodia's perception of colorism, my analysis refers to their skin tone relative to their family members unless specified otherwise. Interviews were primarily conducted in English, but all questions were translated into Khmer, and a Cambodian translator was present if needed, or the entire interview was conducted in Khmer, which consisted of six interviews. My co-interviewer and I can speak conversational Khmer. Often, English-speaking participants would say or be encouraged to say Khmer words or phrases to feel more comfortable and prevent phrases from getting lost in direct translation.

2.3 Ensuring quality

To maintain credibility and confirmability, I used triangulation through multiple analysts (Patton, 1999). While the study contained me as a coder and primary researcher, my advisor reviewed the codes at the beginning and end of phase one and the final codebook, alongside reviewing my reflection memos and reasonings behind each theme. In the first coding phase, both interviewers could identify patterns and numerous codes. To further reduce interpretive bias, after each interview, both interviewers would write reflection memos on interview summaries and highlights, patterns, and themes compared to prior interviews, as well as questions related to the study and implications to observe in future interviews. These all helped compare observations, identify the codes, and confirm and expand on existing colorism literature and personal experiences.

To maintain dependability and ethical validation, as another form of triangulation through multiple analysts, participants were aware of what topics and themes were going to be asked or discussed prior to the interview and were followed up with an email regarding the study completion, gratitude, and key findings (Patton, 1999). During this preparation, participants were informed that one of the study's objectives was to observe the impact of colorism on their lives, wellbeing, and self-esteem, and interviewers elaborated on what this entails. Some participants followed up to chat more about the study personally, stating their connection and agreement to have more open dialogue and research on colorism in the Cambodian community. To use triangulation through multiple data sources (Patton, 1999), I sent participants their interview transcripts once we completed interviews or 10 months later as a courtesy for their reference or opportunity for reflection. Some participants would ask to redact certain information, usually personal or not applicable anymore, but none that affected study findings, and instead, they would reaffirm their stories.

To provide a further contextual understanding of the study, I analyzed the negative cases of my initial findings (Patton, 1999). Negative cases constituted participants undermining colorism, participants of lighter complexions not appreciating their lightness, and participants of darker complexions not minding their skin color when thought to be most susceptible. I examined negative cases by comparing interviews that deviated from the initial findings to consider why they did not fit into the pattern, and then I asked follow-up questions in future interviews about the negative cases. This led me to question the social contexts that may impact participants' perceptions of colorism.

Therefore, I used critical race theory (CRT) as a framework and constructivist approach to interpret participants' experiences through subjective interpretations that participants constructed through their experiences and not independently of the researcher (James and Busher, 2009). The CRT lens to colorism recognizes that with racism and other structural constants, colorism is socially constructed with hierarchies placed on skin tones within racial groups (Reece, 2019), further demonstrating skin tone as capital and a form of power and privilege (Hunter, 2002). Given my study explores the impact of social factors such as family and community as environmental forces, I use this approach informed by intersectionality (Collins, 2019) to account for contextual experiences where these social factors and structural systems in play coexist with and influence the participant's individual experience they share.

2.4 Data analysis

All interviews were securely audio-recorded either on my cell phone's microphone as a recorder or on Zoom, if applicable, with files stored in a USB hard drive. After completing all 40 interviews, I identified recurring patterns in which participants deeply reflected on the significant influence of family and community on their perceptions of colorism and self-esteem during their upbringing. Consequently, I developed a codebook to retroactively analyze the data and formulated research questions based on the existing interview transcripts. The data analysis using NVivo occurred once all interviews were conducted and not during the collection process due to time constraints prioritizing completing interviews.

The coding process consisted of two coding phases, with myself as a coder and my advisor reviewing the codes at the beginning and end of phase one and the final codebook. In the first phase of coding, both interviewers were able to identify patterns, and I thus created numerous codes from reviewing the interview transcripts three times. New codes were created by comparing other transcripts with a narrative from the transcripts as an example representing the code. Aiming for a deductive thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012), I found that the most significant general themes consisted of (a) Family Support, (b) Skin Tone in the Family, (c) Community Color, and (d) Connection to Khmer Culture. I relied on existing literature on colorism outcomes to identify common themes such as self-esteem, skin tone preference in marriage, and skin tone preference in children to compare, as well as the explicit responses participants would give to specific questions. Using the codes from the first phase, the second phase of coding narrows in on specific yet common trends under each broader theme to identify any correlations or intersections, leading to a focus on four major social factors and their effect on Khmer women's self-esteem. Then, the transcripts underwent a final round of review using the codes in the final codebook. I describe how I assess the four

major themes in the following passages. My experiences with colorism in the Cambodian community also helped me identify trends and understand the data. The frequency of the sample size by theme, including self-esteem level, can be summarized in Table 2.

2.4.1 Self-esteem

Self-esteem is measured in three categories: Higher or Secure, Low Young but Secure Grown, and Low or Insecure. Because self-esteem is dynamic and the level or feeling can change depending on the context, I determined which category based on the participant's overall attitude when speaking about their experience during the interview. For example, if the participant would generally have much more negative feelings or associations, such as disliking their skin color or lacking a sense of belonging in general when talking about their skin tone or experiences, lack of worthiness or quality, or changes in mental health, I would code for Low or Insecure, and vice versa for Higher or Secure. If participants specifically discuss a shift in attitude, such as using phrases like "when I was younger…but now I feel…" then I would code for Low Young but Secure Grown.

2.4.2 Family support

Family Support is measured in three categories: Supportive, Not Supportive, and Neither. Supportive would indicate the participant's family, which includes both immediate and extended family, would provide them assurance, defense, or lessons on self-love for their skin color. Unsupportive would indicate the participant's family would comment about their skin color, implying lighter is better, or dictate not going in the sun or offer lightening products. Neither would indicate the participant's family was neither supportive nor unsupportive.

2.4.3 Skin tone in the family

Skin tone in the family is measured in three categories: lightest or lighter, middle or same, or darkest or darker. Relative to the participant's family, either immediate or whoever the participant considers family, the participant is coded into whichever category they deem themselves. Darkest in Family, meaning if they were either the darkest or among the darkest in their family; Lightest or Light in Family, meaning if they were either the lightest or among the lightest in their family; Middle or Same in Family, meaning if they were in the middle or had similar shades among their family and had been combined into one category given the greater similarity in experiences and results among participants.

2.4.4 Community color

Community includes the overall complexion of the community members that the participants coded under Community Color, as well as if they grew up with an extensive Cambodian community in their area, such as Long Beach, California; Lowell, Massachusetts; or simply surrounded themselves with many Cambodians aside from their family coded under Cambodian Proximity. Community Color is categorized as either Lighter, where the community is predominantly White and/or East Asian, or Darker, where the community is more diverse with predominantly Black and/or Brown. Since some participants moved to different areas over time, their communities were coded based on where they primarily grew up, who they mostly spent time with or talked about, or where they considered their home and community. Two participants' Community Colors were unclear, so they were removed from the analysis.

2.4.5 Connection to Khmer culture

Participants were asked how connected they felt to Khmer culture to gauge their ethnic pride and were either categorized under Feel Connected or Not Connected. The question and response were very open-ended, and culture was defined; however, the participant personally defined it.

3 Findings

Every par ticipant in the study has criticized or simply acknowledged how, generally, lighter skin, straighter hair, and a slimmer nose are heavily desired in the community, suggesting colorism within the Cambodian community, predominantly in the United Sta tes and Cambodia, persists as an issue. All but five participan ts received comments from other Cambodians and Cambodian Americans regarding their skin tone, either pointing out darker skin complexions or implying lighter skin is better. These acti ons are so common that when "…they call you 'អើយអាខ្មៅ អើយអានេះអាក្រក់អា ខ្មៅ (hey blackie/darkie, hey this one's so ugly, black)!'… it almost becomes a norm for Cambodian children or Cambodian kids, and we start to accept that," as one of the Cambodian na tional participants, Neary, mentions, suggesting colorism as one of the few shared aspects of Khmer culture.

TABLE 2 Sample size by theme.

Number of participants				
Self-Esteem Level	Higher or Secure 14	Low Young but Secure Grown 13	Low or Insecure 13	Total 40
Family Support	Supportive 15	Unsupportive 13	Neither 12	Total 40
Skin Tone in Family	Lightest or Lighter 3	Middle or Same 16	Darkest or Darker 21	Total 40
Community Color	Lighter 22	Darker 26		Total 38
Connection to Khmer Culture	Feel Connected 25	Not Connected 13	Contextual/Complicated 2	Total 40

3.1 The impact of ethnic pride

> I have heard [about when other Cambodians felt they were not good enough] from whitewashed Cambodians who were not [SIC] in touch with their culture. So I feel like they do not really know what they are talking about, especially about the culture that we share. Since they are not connected to it as much as I am, they view being Asian negatively. Since in America, you just want to be White, and you just want to be seen as an equal to them.

In her quote above, Laura, a Khmer American, suggests that one's connection to Khmer culture affects one's self-esteem and whether one views oneself negatively or positively. Similarly, Caroline, a Khmer American, shares, "that because I'm a darker skin tone, I kinda have engraved that like, 'Oh, maybe I am more ethnically Khmer,'" implying that for some, darker skin is equated with being Khmer. Despite Laura's suggestion that being surrounded by Cambodians or connected to Khmer culture would most contribute to self-esteem, there is no strong correlation between Khmer ethnic pride and self-esteem in this study, as displayed in Table 3.

3.1.1 Complexity of Khmer culture

As culture does not have one concrete definition and because culture constantly changes, participants may have different ideas of what is included in Khmer culture, especially among different generations of Khmer people. For example, 10 participants discussed how these types of colorist comments are just a part of Khmer culture; it's a norm. Sreymom, a Cambodian national, shares:

> I was growing up when old people called me, "Oh aing khmao/ឯងខ្មៅ (you are black)," I did not feel it was racist, or I did not feel that I was offended by them calling me that. I just feel that "okay, old people, they just make fun of me; I let them make fun of me. They old I cannot do anything." So, if you ask me how I feel ab out that, I can only tell you that. I can only tell you that's how I felt when I was a kid. I never feel like, "Oh, that old lady is racist! Oh my god." I never feel like that because it's almost an acceptance because our culture does like that all the time to other people.

Of these 10 participants, the majority ($n = 7$) thus felt more disconnected and disliked their skin color as they engaged more with Khmer culture. Notably, two of the other participants love their skin tone but do not feel as connected to Khmer culture. Descriptors and nicknames such as khmao/ខ្មៅ (black), sraem/ស្រអែម (tan but in a beautiful manner), and sreymao/ស្រីម៉ៅ (black girl) were frequently used and received, oftentimes derogatorily, to where Elise, Khmer French, mentions that "There's this whole culture of making fun." Not only from blatant comments manifesting colorism throughout the interviews but also through actions and available opportunities, such as wearing long sleeves or having an umbrella on a sunny day, family members warning participants not to swim for too long in fear of tanning, the majority of participants ($n = 33$) not feeling represented in media and especially Cambodian media, participants ($n = 16$) trying whitening creams typically offered by mothers or Cambodian nationals, and feeling the need to work harder overall.

However, others talk about community, classical dance, holiday celebrations, and language as positive aspects of culture that allow them to feel closer to their Khmer identity, like Laura:

> I really feel like I am a part of my culture because [my high school] has its own Khmer community, Khmer clubs, Khmer parties, and Khmer New Year's. And then going to [university], there's a Khmer culture there because of the clubs, and there are other Asian clubs I get to meet. We have a lot of Khmer things that go around, and you just see things, and you are just like, "Yes, this is where I belong."

3.1.2 Cambodian stigma

Several other participants discuss how a lack of a large Cambodian community contributes to a disconnect between them and their Khmer culture. Furthermore, over half of the participants ($n = 21$) discuss the stereotypes that come with being Cambodian, where Cambodians are the "ghetto Asians," "the Black people of Asia," "gang-infested," "not being as achieving or as smart as other Asians," "lazy or not hard-working," "Cambodians are mean or Cambodians smell," "lov[e] gambling and drinking," "end up in jail post-high school," and "low-income," and this extends to Cambodian nationals and Khmer Sot/ខ្មែរសុទ្ធ (pure Khmer) as well, where "ថាខ្មែរអត់ឆ្លាតដូចពួកចិនទេ (Khmer people aren't smart like Chinese people)." Three participants specifically mentioned how these stereotypes dissuaded them from connecting to the community and therefore disconnected them from the culture, like Bailey, a Khmer American, and her experience:

> This is why I kind of separated myself from the Cambodian community. Because it was basically the stereotype that Cambodians were the ghetto Asians. We were the not-so-smart Asians. There were not a lot of Cambodians, particularly in my classes, AP classes, and accelerated classes. […] Definitely, now I realize what I did was stupid, but I definitely sort of tried to separate myself from my Cambodian peers because of that sort of stereotype that we are the ghetto, dumb Asians.

TABLE 3 Khmer culture results.

Self-Esteem Level				
Culture connection	Higher or secure	Low young but secure grown	Low or insecure	Total
Feel Connected	10 (40.00%)	8 (32.00%)	7 (28.00%)	25
Not Connected	4 (30.77%)	4 (30.77%)	5 (38.46%)	13
Contextual/Complicated	0 (0.00%)	1 (50.00%)	1 (50.00%)	2
Total	14	13	13	40

Kalianne, a Khmer American, and her quote below exemplifies how colorism is more than a beauty issue and the sentiment shared among the majority of participants about how life would be overall advantageous if they had lighter skin:

> "Well, if you were white, if you were light-skinned, or if you were a lighter Khmer person, would you have that same confidence? You know, or would you navigate the world differently?" I would navigate it with much more confidence, I think. Because it would be easy for me to just get what I want, and I feel like I would not have to try as hard as I have to try now to fit in or, you know, get a job. <Laughs and sighs> Yeah, I just would feel more privileged.

In the next section, I analyze which combination of social factors contributes the most to lower self-esteem and higher or secure self-esteem, derived from the findings of each social factor theme. I find that family ($n = 16$) and community ($n = 18$) were the greatest contributors to how the participants viewed their skin tone, with media ($n = 6$) following behind, indeed signifying an influence on self-esteem and perceptions of colorism from the social factor themes. Thus, the following sections aim to understand how social factors, when together, can play a role in an individual's experience with colorism and differ from another individual with a different combination of social factors.

3.2 Contributors to self-esteem

I specifically use semicolons to separate the conditions that more likely lead to having a low or insecure self-esteem. It should mean something like this: by possessing all of the following (1) Unsupportive family; (2) Darkest or Darker, or Lightest or Lighter skin tone in family; (3) and Lighter community and Many Cambodians. Thus, I pull the participants who possess all of the following themes to determine whether or not their self-esteem is low or insecure. I do not consider the theme when cross-tabbing the data because of the low or unclear significance of the Khmer culture connection shown above in Table 3.

Results of participants possessing all of the factors can be summarized in Table 4, which affirms the argument that having all three themes is more likely to lead to low or insecure self-esteem but demonstrates that these social factors have a greater influence on participants when they are young. Notably, no participant who had an unsupportive family was the lightest or lighter skinned in the family, possibly due to subconscious better treatment or having different expectations due to their lighter skin, as well as not having family point out their skin tone nearly as much compared to those darkest or darker.

In contrast, I observed that the following social factor theme conditions were more likely to lead to high or secure self-esteem: supportive family, middle or same skin tone in the family, darker community, *and* many Cambodians. Thus, I pull the participants who possess the following themes to determine whether or not their self-esteem is high or secure. All of their self-esteem levels were higher or secure, affirming the argument that having all three themes is more likely to lead to high or secure self-esteem.

3.2.1 Social factor themes in tandem

Given the vast individual differences among the participants and their experiences with family, community, and overall values, the results of this study do not confidently determine whether and in what context one social factor theme consistently outweighs another theme. Therefore, I further examine how each theme contributes to self-esteem in tandem with one another rather than outweighing it, as each factor, aside from the connection to Khmer culture, has a substantial impact. However, they do not exist separately. Upon observing which combination of social factors contributes the most to lower self-esteem and higher or secure self-esteem, as seen in Table 4, I find that when combining at least two of any of the social factors theme conditions that most lead to lower self-esteem, the outcome of the individual's self-esteem and perception of their skin tone will generally be lower. Similarly, when combining at least two of any of the social factor theme conditions that most lead to a higher or secure self-esteem, the outcome of the individual's self-esteem and perception of their skin tone will generally be higher, as modeled in Figure 1. The following section elaborates further on how social factors in the context of family and community interact, affecting one's self-esteem and experience with colorism.

3.3 The impact of family

> [I]t's kind of hard because it can be from your own parents, your own siblings, and that's where I think it hurts more because it's supposed to be people who are supposed to kind of uplift your confidence and boost your self-esteem, and not make you feel less than. Yeah, it's definitely within the family.

Reaksmey, a Khmer American, and her quote above demonstrate how, because family is generally one of the closest relationships in their life, the support and treatment they receive

TABLE 4 Contributors to self-esteem.

Self-Esteem Level				
Social factor combinations	Higher or secure	Low young but secure grown	Low or insecure	Total
Unsupportive Family, Darkest or Lightest Skin Tone in the Family, Lighter Community Color, and Many Cambodians	0 (0.00%)	3 (50.00%)	3 (50.00%)	6
Supportive Family, Middle or Same Skin Tone in Family, Darker Community Color, and Many Cambodians	4 (100.00%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	4
Total	4	3	3	10

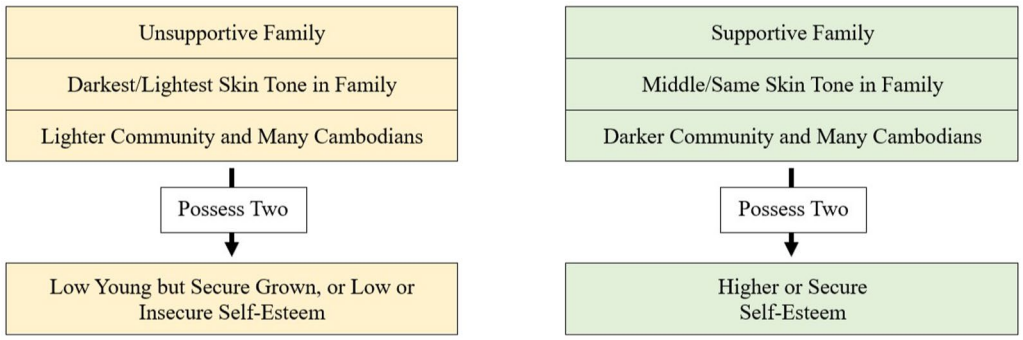

FIGURE 1
General trend for contributors to self-esteem.

will have a lasting impact on their self-esteem. Family dynamics are oftentimes internalized and compounded with visible differences between family members, such as skin tone, whether pointed out or not, frequently leading to a lack of belonging, which does not go unnoticed as Bailey reflects how "sometimes I feel [my sister] gets treated differently because of that, or I get treated differently because I'm just a few shades darker," further elaborating:

> I remember this comment that she made from that day. She said, "No matter what you do, you still look dirty." And that's something that really stuck with me throughout elementary school. […] I do not know [if] she would remember that, but that's something that I will always remember. […] I think that was the first sort of instance where I just doubted why the color of my skin was the way it was. And, especially since my mom is kind of lighter-skinned.

Of the participants with a supportive family, the majority were secure overall or became secure at some point growing up, whereas those with an unsupportive family were insecure overall for a large part of their lives. The participants who were the lightest or lighter in their family, or darkest or darker, were overall insecure for a large part of their lives, whereas those who were in the middle or the same were overall secure or became secure at some point growing up. Findings can be summarized in Tables 5–7.

3.3.1 Family support observed

Family support displays itself in multiple ways throughout the interviews, including defending or speaking back against colorist comments or actions towards the participant, being against whitening creams, participants feeling overall love from their family and therefore loving their features because their family gave them those features, and looking up to female figures in the family. The most critical determinants of family support were the type of comments about the participants' skin tone and the amount of comparisons between and from family members. When participants are in the middle or have the same skin tone in the family, skin tone and comparisons between family members are less apparent and tend to be more understanding. May, a Khmer American, discusses how when she talks about colorism, her father "…understands what it's like to be Brown because he is brown, but he's not indigenous Khmer type brown, but he still understands, and he understands what they go through, and same with me."

Negative or general comments from the family or self-awareness of appearing different in the family may increase feelings of insecurity. Soriya, a 1.5-generation Khmer American, shares:

> I think with the teasing from the family, and how they put you down, it goes down all the way to the self-esteem because they'll tell you, "Well, you have to go to college–Oh well, you are dark, you are so dark; you are not going to succeed in college, so why even waste your time to go to school. You're not going to amount to anything anyway." So then, we do not go to school, our self-esteem is so low, we do not believe in ourselves, so we just give up at the end, and then they wonder why there are no dark-skinned people in school or graduating high school.

3.3.2 Comparing skin tones in the family

Oftentimes, comments by family members or self-comparisons between other family members played more of a role in how participants saw themselves, especially if compared to other female figures, either sisters or mothers. For example, Wendy, a Khmer American, says that she and her sister are the lightest, but she always thought her mom was beautiful, and her mom would always make comments and comparisons to her sister:

> My sister, for example–we are half, so we look nothing alike–she takes after my mom; she has that smaller nose, she's very light-skinned, she's tall. She's that ideal of beauty, and I'm seven years older than her, but people still think she's the older sister. One confidence for sure, growing up as a young girl and you are still forming your ideas of what it means to be beautiful, it's the little things…My mom likes to post on Facebook a lot, and she always says, "My beautiful daughter, blah, blah, blah."

In Wendy's case, it was clear that family was her biggest influence on how she perceived colorism, even despite being on the lighter side among her family. If participants were lighter, they were not the lightest among their family members, and typically, the lightest person was usually their mother or sister, never a male figure. Seventeen participants spoke about having a lighter parent, of which all but one were the mothers.

3.3.3 Family support and skin tone in the family

Despite an obvious difference in complexion, some participants were able to still appreciate their skin color, differing from the overall

TABLE 5 Family support results.

Self-Esteem Level				
Family support	Higher or secure	Low young but secure grown	Low or insecure	Total
Supportive	9 (60.00%)	3 (20.00%)	3 (20.00%)	15
Unsupportive	1 (7.69%)	5 (38.46%)	7 (53.85%)	13
Neither	4 (33.33%)	5 (41.67%)	3 (25.00%)	12
Total	14	13	13	40

TABLE 6 Skin tone in family results.

Self-Esteem Level				
Skin tone in family	Higher or secure	Low young but secure grown	Low or insecure	Total
Lightest or Lighter	0 (0.00%)	1 (33.33%)	2 (66.67%)	3
Middle or Same	11 (68.75%)	3 (18.75%)	2 (12.50%)	16
Darkest or Darker	3 (14.29%)	9 (42.86%)	9 (42.86%)	21
Total	14	13	13	40

TABLE 7 Family support and skin tone in family results.

Self-Esteem Level				
Family support and skin tone in family	Higher or secure	Low young but secure grown	Low or insecure	Total
Supportive and Lightest or Lighter	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	0
Supportive and Middle or Same	7 (87.50%)	1 (12.50%)	0 (0.00%)	8
Supportive and Darkest or Darker	2 (28.57%)	2 (28.57%)	3 (42.86%)	7
Unsupportive and Lightest or Lighter	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	2 (100.00%)	2
Unsupportive and Middle or Same	1 (33.33%)	1 (33.33%)	1 (33.33%)	3
Unsupportive and Darkest or Darker	0 (0.00%)	4 (50.00%)	4 (50.00%)	8
Neither Lightest nor Lighter	0 (0.00%)	1 (100.00%)	0 (0.00%)	1
Neither and Middle or Same	3 (60.00%)	1 (20.00%)	1 (20.00%)	5
Neither Darkest nor Darker	1 (16.67%)	3 (50.00%)	2 (33.33%)	6
Total	14	13	13	40

trend of being darkest and lightest in the family, leading to lower self-esteem due to positive reinforcement from that parent, demonstrating the importance of family support as Lucy, Khmer American, points out:

> With my parents, I am a little bit tanner than my mom is, but she does not really discriminate against me because of that. If anything, she tells me that my skin color is beautiful and that others should be envious because while others are going to try to get tan and stuff, I have a natural tan.

JJK, a Khmer American who has a lighter parent and lives in a lighter-skinned community, further affirms the notion that a supportive family is essential as she feels "…very lucky that [she] had a pretty nurturing environment, so [she] never hated [her] skin or ever wanted it to be a different color." However, when there was a lack of support from family, many participants instead would look towards their community, including non-family members, as a form of support.

3.4 The impact of community

> My support system was not my family. My support system was actually other Black people. That's the only way that I survived in school. It was not other Cambodian people or my family. I had to look outside of my race, and I had to look outside my skin color and everything to get that support. I did not graduate from high school due to mental illness. Mental illness that's like generational trauma during the Pol Pot regime and everything like that. So, I had to deal with that, plus I had to deal with colorism, and so I had to deal with the family trauma of all that. So, layering all that put together, going through therapy, and having a family that has no type of understanding of any of that.

Similar to Soriya, a Khmer American, in her quote above, many participants spoke of the impact of family as very internal, especially with the intergenerational trauma that accompanies second-generation Cambodian immigrants, while community is external and oftentimes a substitute or alternative for family support.

TABLE 8 Community color results.

Self-Esteem Level				
Community color	Higher or secure	Low young but secure grown	Low or insecure	Total
Lighter	3 (13.64%)	9 (40.91%)	10 (45.45%)	22
Darker	10 (62.50%)	4 (25.00%)	2 (12.50%)	16
Total	13	13	12	38

TABLE 9 Cambodian proximity results.

Self-Esteem Level				
Cambodian proximity	Higher or secure	Low young but secure grown	Low or insecure	Total
Not Many Cambodians	6 (40.00%)	4 (26.67%)	5 (33.33%)	15
Many Cambodians	8 (32.00%)	9 (36.00%)	8 (32.00%)	25
Total	14	13	13	40

However, successful substitutes and higher self-esteem tend to occur when the community consists of people of darker skin tones. Lighter-skinned communities, on the other hand, have rather more complex outcomes.

The majority of those with a lighter-skinned community were overall insecure for a large part of their lives, whereas the majority of those with a darker-skinned community were overall secure or became secure growing up, as seen in Table 8. Given that Khmer people are typically darker in skin tone compared to White and East Asians, many participants did not feel like they fit in with lighter-skinned communities, hence why participants like Soriya were able to find support in their darker-skinned communities. Jamie, a Khmer American, was one of the only Cambodians in her high school, but not the only Asian. She recalls feeling excluded among the Hmong students at her school:

> Outside of that, too, growing up because the other Asians at my school were Hmong, and when Americans think of Asians, they think of small, pale-skinned Asians, slanted eyes, really silky thin hair, and straight hair, and I did not look like that. That's how the Hmong kids looked like at my school, and I already wasn't accepted by them because I was not Hmong, and then I was also just a different-looking Asian. I did not feel like I fit in with other Asians, and then, within mainstream media, I did not look like the stereotypical Asian. It's kind of a mind fog like [I ask myself], "Are you Asian at this point?" I do not hang out with them, all my friends aren't Asian, and I do not really look like what people expect me to look like as an Asian person, so it messes with you.

There is no direct connection between having a Cambodian community and the participant's self-esteem. This may be due to the fact that while one can feel a sense of belonging while surrounded by Cambodians, it can act as a double-edged sword as many Cambodians reinforce the notion that lighter is beautiful as Tari, a 1.5-generation Khmer American, says:

> When you are hanging out with friends, they are like, "Oh, she's ខ្មៅជាងគេ (the darkest/blackest)," or like, "Oh, she's the darkest one." I mean, I catch myself saying that when somebody is darker than me, I'm like, "Oh yeah, she's darker than me," or you know, you use skin color to describe someone. But I was always taught that lighter is just more beautiful.

3.4.1 Being the darkest in the room with or without Cambodians

Participants also discussed how their skin tone felt more salient when surrounded by lighter-skinned people, regardless of whether they were Cambodian or not. May notes that "Cambodian people always comment on how [she's] dark" but "never had a person darker than [her] point out [her] skin color." Therefore, I also analyze the effects on self-esteem when combining Community Color and Cambodian Proximity into four categories: Lighter and Not Many Cambodians, Lighter and Many Cambodians, Darker and Not Many Cambodians, and Darker and Many Cambodians. The majority of those with Lighter and Not Many Cambodians were overall insecure for a large part of their lives. In contrast, the majority of those with Darker and Many were overall secure for a large part of their lives (Table 9). Findings can be summarized in Table 10.

Having many Cambodians in the community but having them lighter than the participants in skin tone made several participants insecure. They see that this should be their community, and so they should feel like they belong, but because they do not look alike or experience the same issues of colorism because of their different skin color, participants are even more aware of their skin color and feel insecure in comparison to participants who have a large Cambodian community who are also just as dark but are overall more Higher or Secure. Dara, 1.5 generation Khmer American, for example, shares:

> I was insecure about my skin color, both when I was growing up, just because I was surrounded by White people, and then having the Khmer people telling me that my skin is dark.

They mainly felt self-conscious about their skin color or no sense of belonging whenever they noticed they were the only brown person in the room or when they were in Asian spaces but noticed that a vast majority are ethnically East Asian, Cambodian or not, and thus a lighter Asian. Rather than what is said that hurts the interviewees, it's what is not said that hurts more. Pam, a Khmer American, recounted moments in her Cambodian student organization at her university:

TABLE 10 Community color and Cambodian proximity results.

Self-Esteem Level				
Community color and Cambodian	Higher or secure	Low young but secure grown	Low or insecure	Total
Lighter and Not Many Cambodians	3 (30.00%)	2 (20.00%)	5 (50.00%)	10
Lighter and Many Cambodians	0 (0.00%)	7 (58.33%)	5 (41.67%)	12
Darker and Not Many Cambodians	3 (60.00%)	2 (40.00%)	0 (0.00%)	5
Darker and Many Cambodians	7 (63.64%)	2 (18.18%)	2 (18.18%)	11
Total	13	13	12	38

> I'm like the darkest, so I really stand out, and I have noticed that any pictures someone posts or something you do like differently, they'll be noticed for it like, "Oh yeah, they are really beautiful," and I do not think I've ever been told I was beautiful. So, most of the time, I do not like my skin color. I think I actually thought about [how] people use those papaya soap and to kind of just lighten up their skin.

Pam's comment demonstrated that even having other Cambodians as friends or around you will still have the interviewees question their value and worth if they constantly notice that the Cambodians around them are lighter and receiving more compliments or opportunities. Candy, a Khmer American, had a secure and high self-esteem and sense of belonging, yet still commented that the only time she felt negative feelings surrounding colorism and her skin tone was when she was with other Cambodians because they had lighter skin:

> [It was] just whenever I was in an environment that did not have any dark Cambodians. Before my church, I felt like they were all Cambodians, but they were all super light. Whenever they would talk about skin color, they pointed out me, my brothers, and my dad. […] I did not feel alone on it, so it did not take a toll on how I felt about it much, but that would really be it.

The sense of belonging difference asks what an ethnic community looks like or feels like with people of different skin tones and experiences. Especially when in lighter-skinned communities, comparisons that were between family members also opened up to peers where participants discussed an example of peers holding up their arms to compare skin tones, in contrast to a participant with a supportive family and able to see representation within their darker-skinned community, like Lesly, Khmer American:

> I love that my family has so many different colors, so it's not just everybody was the same color. Even living in the community that I was growing up in has always been somewhat diverse. I did not have to worry about it. I know I have my friends out there in the community, and then I would have my family, too. I can always have their support.

Observing participants who grew up in a lighter-skinned community, despite having a supportive family or being the middle or same skin tone in the family, and still having lower self-esteem additionally illustrates the impact of having at least two Social Factor Theme conditions to better understand the outcome of the self-esteem, referring back to Figure 1.

3.4.2 National context

Notably, diversity may look different depending on the national context in which a diverse set of racial groups in a community may be more prevalent in the United States, for example, than in Cambodia, where diversity is more seen in skin complexion and ethnic groups rather than race.

> I saw it more in Cambodia than in the US because…well, for my mom, it would be to stay out of the sun and wear more clothes so that your skin does not get dark. And then maybe she had a couple of lotions, but she never tried any, never pushed any skin-whitening products on me…But then, when I was in Cambodia, I remembered my cousin. One of them showed me a bottle, and she was like, what bottle is this? The person who sold it to me—so the text is all in English—the person who sold it to me said that this was it will make your skin lighter. I read it, and I think it was just regular sunblock. […] That same cousin wanted to […] lighten my skin through a milk bath. And I was like, "No, that's okay." But then, being in Cambodia or watching Asian shows, you would see commercials for skin-lightening products.

Similar to Dara's experience above, 27 participants discussed comparisons between experiences in the United States versus in Cambodia, as several participants have visited Cambodia in the past, and eight participants currently live or grew up in Cambodia. Due to the differences in race and identity politics between the United States and Cambodia, given the idea that the United States is more heterogeneous in terms of race while Cambodia is more homogenous, the influence of community can look and mean very different. However, the interviews reveal that Cambodia, while homogenous in terms of race compared to an American context, consists of varying ethnicities and, therefore, skin tones, affecting how participants viewed their own skin tone accompanied by the more tangible notion that lighter skin is superior given the more extensive application and push to use whitening creams, and blatant and direct comments on skin tone in Cambodia, as over half of the participants remark. In Cambodia, Socheat, a Cambodian national, said the way they talk about people, they "only have two standards: saw/ស (white) and khmao/ខ្មៅ (black)." Comments and being compared by people anywhere in Cambodia were the largest reasons behind frustration and insecurity. The social pressure to appear white even outweighs

family support in Cambodia as Tevy, a Cambodian national, said that despite her family loving her:

> My mom would try to get me to use it and buy me that stuff, but by the time I was 12, I moved to live with my sister, and my sister would not ever allow me to use any of those, so I did not really use it up until I was in university. And then, I was living with many girls and felt pressured, so I'd just use some moisturizer, but I only used moisturizer.

The findings demonstrate how a national context affects a group, primarily focusing on the Community social factor. American participants also confirm Cambodia's values of lightness where Sopheap, a Khmer American, talks about how in Cambodia, with her cousins, she was not expected to cover up as much because of her American nationality:

> Even though it's 104 degrees, they are still wearing long sleeves. I was wearing a tank top, and then our cousin tried to wear a sleeveless one, and her husband and everybody else started yelling at her. "What do you think you are doing?" She's like, "It's hot," and they are like, "Go put on clothes, you are naked." I'm like, "Oh, am I naked?" but they are like, "Oh, you are fine," I guess 'cause I'm American, I'm not really Cambodian then, so she had to run back and put on.

Elise, who grew up in France but moved and traveled frequently around Asia and America, stated, "In Asia, you feel the color of your skin 10 times more than in the US or, for example, France." Despite Cambodia's population being often seen as "homogeneous" in comparison to the United States, racism and colorism are still widespread issues, especially for women. Socheat even brought up a testimony where she was almost not hired for her job:

> [T]here were two interviewers. One of them, who's my current boss, told me they chose me because they liked me but the interviewer did not want me because I was too dark and they told my boss "You can choose her if you want, but I do not want her." My boss works under the other interview. We (the other candidate and I) were evaluated based on our experience and our appearance. They wanted someone who was good-looking.

In the United States, for some participants, the racial heterogeneity of vast shades could help love one's skin tone but could alternatively lead to feeling fetishized by White people for their darker skin tones.

The capital city of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, has a significant proportion of the Chinese and Chinese-mixed Cambodian population, and therefore lighter-skinned Cambodians. Cambodian participants would frequently mention how they were often the darkest ones in the room once moving to Phnom Penh. This factor is crucial, as nearly all talked about repeatedly receiving comments comparing and pointing out their dark skin or that it's ugly to other Cambodians, furthering the strong influence of having a lighter-skinned community and many Cambodians. In the case of Socheat and Tevy, whose self-esteem grew over time, they talked about how this change happened after being exposed to more diverse people and international ideas of beauty. Socheat, for example:

> I used to have a Black professor. As far as I'm concerned, they were from America, and they taught at a university here. They once asked me, "Why do Cambodians like to cover themselves so much? They wear socks and gloves out under the blazing sun. In America, people do not like that (fair skin). They like dark skin. They like tanned skin. Why do Cambodians like to hide (their skin) so bad?" That's what they said. It made me think, why do we like to torture ourselves like this? Whether you bleach your skin or use whitening lotion, you will end up destroying your skin. Why do not we love our own skin (color)? When [the professor] said that, I started to think, why do we let others' words influence us? Why do not we use [SIC] natural ways, like sunscreen, to protect our skin? This should be enough. Why do we have to torture ourselves to the point where we cannot sleep?

I infer that this could be due to the idea that these five women do not feel like they have a community. When you are in Cambodia, there are going to be many Cambodians, but instead of having a close community where people are supposed to look like you, relate, and support each other, they see people who are much lighter, who do not look like them and instead start comparing one another as well as making rude or blatant comments about their dark skin. This false sense of community and just feeling othered in your own community can feel isolating, and people lack a sense of belonging. Bailey talked about how, because of the norm of Cambodian Americans being ethnically mixed, being darker made her stand out and "feel ostracized," hence the importance of representation–seeing people who look like you but also who have high self-esteem and love their skin tone. Socheat also talked about the difference in media from Cambodia to American media:

> Another thing is the media in Cambodia. Sometimes, I watch foreigners on Google. I do not know what ethnicity they are, but I think they look really pretty with their dark skin. I look beautiful in their clothes and makeup. I'm just wondering why Cambodian media does not like dark skin. Like Rihanna, Alicia Keys, and Beyoncé, they have dark skin, do not they? But they are popular. They're really pretty, right?

Sreyleak, a Khmer American, also informs how constantly seeing lighter-skinned Asians and people informs her view on her skin color in her anecdote:

> But when I was in middle school, back when I really liked K-pop—I think the big theme here is how K-pop and Korean media, or the absence of Asian American representation in American media, pushed me into finding media elsewhere, and that media was Korean media—I used to put so much effort into trying to get my skin to be lighter.

While colorism is seen as more overt in Cambodia than in America on a surface level, especially with the frequency of people suggesting to darker-skinned women that lightening creams should be used and blatant comments disliking darker skin, colorism in America is also complex and appears in similar ways, but in addition to navigating the Cambodian American cultural identity and community.

3.5 Breaking the cycle

> I make it a point to this day to never say anything to my daughters about anything with their looks or self-esteem, nothing about their skin color, because it should not matter. Because I know how it affected me as a child.

As family support is malleable, 16 participants in the study, like Soriya in her quote above, shared, unprompted, their efforts to prevent similar feelings of disliking their skin tone and experiencing colorism to the future generations such as their children or other Cambodian or Cambodian diaspora youth. Efforts include not making statements or comments on skin tone, including microaggressions, and instead having positive reinforcement regarding skin tone; raising or emphasizing Cambodian pride and being proud of their skin color; surrounding themselves with people who love their skin tone; teaching their children to be actively anti-racist and anti-colorist or to treat others well regardless of skin tone; and providing education and awareness on the systemic issues and history behind colorism and racism, as well as Cambodian history that shaped this beauty ideal rooted in classism in Asia, and exacerbated by colonialism and influenced by Eurocentric beauty ideals. Participants suggest that efforts to break the cycle of colorist norms for the future generation require more action and less complacency, as Dahlia, a Khmer American, urges:

> What I would want to change is just going forward, how we interact with each other, how we treat each other, and how we destroy the notions in our minds that we have grown so comfortable with. Just do better going forward instead of trying to change what's previously been implemented in the past. I feel like that's the duty of every Khmer person, whether you are affected by colorism or not. You need to do your part to make sure that we do not repeat past mistakes. It's people's lives that are on the line at some point, like Khmer Angkor; they are just not as present as they used to be due to the treatment that they have received, and it's just like they are dying out. That's happened because we were so neglectful as a country–not as a country, as a whole, as a community as a whole. But yeah, it's just actively being anti-racist, anti-colorisist, and not just standing by and hoping that somebody else will do the work because I feel like that's a big problem.

Overall, the majority of participants strongly encouraged more dialogue surrounding colorism, especially to bring awareness. Once Michelle, a Khmer American, learned the word colorism, she realized "That there was a word for it and that there were other people who went through the same thing and that we could talk about it." Chantha, also Khmer American, only felt able to "confess" her experiences of colorism, anti-Blackness, and using whitening products once she "realize[d] others have experienced it too."

As some participants seek to make efforts for future generations to encourage a more positive view of their skin tone, some participants in the past actively sought to distance themselves from their Khmer identity to avoid negative attributes of the culture and identity that have, or they feel will hinder their growth and success. However, many Cambodians within and outside the study have expressed a desire to rekindle or preserve Khmer culture. A large portion of participants expressed regret at not learning the language growing up or having never gone to Cambodia, with the thought that because the Cambodian population is already so small in diasporic countries, there is a feeling "to keep the culture alive and keep it going," as Jamie puts it. Additionally, because so many second-generation Cambodians initially assimilated into the dominant culture, losing their cultural identity, participants like Caroline shared their concerns:

> I wish I were more connected. I'm kind of like on my part where I want to be more connected and celebrate culture more, but I do not know how to, and I do not want to be disrespectful to the culture and celebrate in the wrong way. But, like, I tried to celebrate the Khmer New Year, and I tried to do all that, but there's definitely a disconnect because I did not grow up with culture, and I just do not know anything about it. And I'm trying to learn, but it's also really hard to learn, like all these traditions, without witnessing it first.

Furthermore, culture continuously changes, even reflecting on the current differences between Cambodian and Cambodian American cultures. This raises the question of how and what to preserve in the culture, especially taking colorism into account as a part of Khmer culture by some Cambodians and other negative aspects.

4 Discussion

4.1 Colorism within the Cambodian community

This study reveals that colorism perseveres in various ways in the Cambodian community, predominantly in the United States and Cambodia. Through examining the pervasive presence of colorism within this community, the complex interplay between social factors becomes apparent and collectively affects participants' self-esteem and perception of their skin tone, highlighting the intricate nature of the interactions between family, community, and cultural influences.

Due to various definitions of culture and the stigma of being Cambodian, connection is also subjective, emphasizing the need to examine multiple social factors. This continues the exploration of how an individual's sense of ethnic identity varies greatly when the community possesses diverse skin tones and experiences. The complexities of a cultural connection thus further reveal the importance of considering family support, skin tone within the family, and the complexion of community alongside cultural connection.

Findings suggest family support holds significance, especially during the younger or critical developing portion of participants' lives, as having a supportive family during this time will lead to secure self-esteem in the long term; having an unsupportive family will lead to low or insecure self-esteem more long term; and having neither demonstrates some kind of malleability in self-esteem and growth later on in their lives, possibly due to independence developed from not having family play a large role in colorism. The majority (8 out of 12) of participants with neither a supportive nor unsupportive family fell into the low or insecure and low young but secure grown categories, thus demonstrating the importance of putting in an effort to be supportive. There is a difference between being supportive and being not disrespectful or non-supportive, as the lack of family

support generally leads to lower overall self-esteem. Of those who receive little to no family support or have a strained relationship with their family due to numerous negative comments on darker skin tones or comparisons among family skin tones, many have low self-esteem.

In addition to the evidenced structural effect of colorism in the Cambodian community, this study reveals the impact of social factors as reference groups that contribute to and/or exacerbate Khmer women's perceptions of colorism. Given that life experiences and emotions are a result of a combination of various factors, including internal and external, it is critical to acknowledge that while a social factor can significantly contribute to how an individual feels about their skin color, it is highly unlikely one single social factor completely attributes to that feeling, especially as self-esteem is contextual. Therefore, to determine which factors contribute to self-esteem and to what extent, I analyzed the data on how each of the four social factors interact with one another: (a) Family Support, (b) Skin Tone in the Family, (c) Community Color, and (d) Connection to Khmer Culture, and their impact on self-esteem.

Through analyzing four Social Factors Themes–Family Support, Skin Tone in the Family, Community Color, and Connection to Khmer Culture–together and their impact on self-esteem, the combination of two or more themes that lead to a Lower Self-Esteem (Unsupportive Family, Darker/Darkest or Lighter/Lightest Skin Tone in the Family, and Lighter Community Color and Many Cambodians altogether) generally resulted in lower self-esteem and a more negative perception of one's skin tone. Similarly, the combination of two or more themes that lead to a Higher Self-Esteem (Supportive Family, Middle or Same Skin Tone in the Family, and Darker Community Color and Many Cambodians altogether) generally resulted in higher self-esteem and a more positive perception of one's skin tone. As seen through the Connection to Khmer Culture theme, the individualized and contextual interpretation of culture and one's connection to it demonstrates how context within the family and community can either shape a negative or positive experience for both one's ethnic identity and skin tone. As such, the combination of two or more themes contributing to self-esteem suggests that these social factors work in tandem rather than one theme consistently outweighing another and consequently demonstrates the complexity of interactions between family and community.

This study further reveals the structural hierarchy of lighter skin at the top and darker skin at the bottom, hence why Chinese immigrants and Chinese Cambodians are typically viewed as and hold a higher social standing than Khmer people. When speaking of the most marginalized populations in Cambodia, participants, both Cambodian nationals and not, would generally refer to Cambodians working in the countryside, typically as farmers or poor, referring to Khmer Sot/ខ្មែរសុទ្ធ (pure Khmer) or the darkest Cambodians on the spectrum.

Moreover, almost half of the participants ($n = 19$), all living outside of Cambodia, reported being frequently misracialized or misethnicized by others, often as Black, Hispanic, Filipino, or of mixed race. This highlights not only the inability of societies, particularly outside Cambodia, to identify Khmer individuals or recognize their physical attributes accurately but also underscores the existence of a racial and social hierarchy. This hierarchy, well-documented in the literature (Yip et al., 2019; Willmott, 1981), places Southeast Asians at the bottom and East Asians at the top within the Asian racial group, aligning with American society's stereotypical image of an Asian person, which often resembles East Asian phenotypes.

4.2 Comparisons across previous literature

Despite the notion that colorism is more blatant and overt in Cambodia than in America or other diaspora countries (Khanna, 2020), findings suggest experiences of colorism remain quite similar and almost universal within the Cambodian community. While colorism may feel more overt in Cambodia due to the larger presence and pressure of using whitening creams and direct comments on skin color, participants in the diaspora countries also speak of their experiences with whitening creams and, to the same extent, with direct comments on their skin color from family members or the greater Cambodian community. The persistence of colorism in these countries may manifest in various ways, though still stemming from the mainland of Cambodia, and thus frequently appear in similar actions, such as the acknowledgment of or desire for lighter skin, straighter hair, and a slimmer nose for better social and economic opportunities; receiving comments or derogatory nicknames based on their skin tone; demands from others, such as wearing long sleeves or not being out in the sun for too long; not feeling represented in Cambodian media aside from low roles such as comedies, as farmers, or as servants; and receiving offers and using whitening creams.

Colorism in Cambodia may also feel more overt due to the larger presence of diverse racial groups in diaspora countries like the United States acting as a buffer and seemingly more tolerant or accepting of various skin complexions, though more so by individuals outside of the Cambodian community. Notably, this does not dismiss the fact that colorism within the Cambodian diaspora community persists in similar ways. The conversation regarding comparisons of a national context implies the significance of communities in play, as well as the ongoing colorism throughout all generations, implying how colorism is passed down in the family. This study highlights the persistence of colorism within the Cambodian community, specifically at the expense of indigenous or ethnically Khmer women. It emphasizes the importance of family and community dynamics in shaping the self-esteem and experiences with colorism of individuals not only within the Cambodian community but also in communities of color as a whole.

In America, tanning shifted from a symbol of labor and work into leisure and wealth in the 20th century (Martin et al., 2009), yet the study's findings of consistent colorism within the Cambodian community demonstrate the nuances of colorism as well as implications of who benefits from tanning or darker skin. As the Pan-Asian beauty ideal in Asia and racial ambiguity in the United States become increasingly popular (Strmic-Pawl et al., 2021; Yip et al., 2019), studying Khmer American communities and other Southeast Asian American communities becomes relatively important as they live in in-between states. While colorism in East Asia is more deeply rooted in classism (Rondilla and Spickard, 2007), Southeast Asians like Cambodians—as seen in the findings—are more negatively racialized, even sharing a similarity in skin color hierarchy in the Philippines (Rondilla, 2012). The average Khmer person's skin is typically a shade in between White people and Black people (Willmott, 1981), bringing the question of where their privileges and discrimination lie and how they navigate their identity in countries

outside of Cambodia. The parallels between the Black community with stereotypes as being troublemakers, gang-associated, unintelligent, aggressive, or violent (Monk, 2014; Maddox and Gray, 2002) and the Cambodian community, primarily given due to their darker skin, broader facial features, and hair texture, signify how understanding colorism in one particular community may also contribute to understanding colorism as a whole and in efforts towards solidarity despite differences in history, including colonial and imperial patterns.

4.3 Implications for future generations

The conditions of the social factors that lead to either a lower or higher self-esteem exhibit the magnitude of supportive social networks and cultural pride, which are tied to a sense of belonging. Whenever the reference group is lighter in skin tone, regardless of the skin tone relative to society, self-esteem and sense of belonging decrease; this is especially true when faced with a larger Cambodian community, as participants' expectation to feel a sense of belonging is higher, thus causing deeper infliction when faced with differences. Possessing a supportive family or community, however, would mitigate these feelings to a certain extent, though not entirely, especially when in environments with typically stable factors such as being the darkest in the family, having a lighter community, or simply being a darker-skinned individual in a society that values lighter skin. By finding support within the family and community, individuals may be able to resist and navigate the negative effects of these structural hierarchies, especially with the compounding impact of globalization and the legacies of colonialism and white supremacy, fostering a more positive self-image of their skin tone and themselves as a person.

Understanding the social factors prevents history from repeating in the community and continues the conversation about colorism and how to move forward. The literature discusses how common African American families introduce and reinforce messages that depict racialization yet can lead to a greater understanding of racial pride (Walker, 2014), in contrast to participants' experiences where family members generally provide negative comments on their skin tone; thus, the desire or will to provide positive reinforcement for the future generation highlights the actions against colorism moving forward.

Moreover, the study confirms that colorism is a complex and nuanced structure that needs to be further researched to be understood. Not only should Cambodian communities take note of the study's results in addressing colorism within the community, but other communities that face colorism should do so as well, given the similarities between other studies, to move toward racial justice. Despite documented colorism, which has existed for at least thousands of years (Dixon and Telles, 2017), the issue has only been widely discussed relatively recently. Even some participants had never heard of the term colorism before the study or simply possessed no words to describe their experiences. After gaining knowledge of the word colorism and others' similar experiences, participants were inspired to engage in conversations with one another, highlighting the importance of awareness and dialogue in racial and ethnic justice efforts.

Furthermore, participants felt more inclined to share their experiences of colorism, anti-Blackness, and using whitening products, signifying the internal shame that accompanies colorism and latches onto darker-skinned individuals in attempts to position themselves higher in this pre-existing hierarchy. The negative comparisons between dark-skinned participants and Black people and actions and mindsets to withdraw from Blackness in this study demonstrate the inherent anti-Blackness driving colorism within the Khmer community. Providing a better understanding of the dynamics and consequences of colorism aids in initiating conversations and implementing anti-discrimination measures and educational programs necessary to challenge and address this issue. It is imperative to promote positive body image, media representation, and self-acceptance and foster supportive environments that value diversity and reject discriminatory gender and beauty standards for the sake of mental health, self-esteem, and racial justice.

4.4 Limitations

Interviews were initially conducted for storytelling purposes on the general premise of archiving Khmer women's experiences with colorism, with current research questions formed and analysis conducted retroactively; thus, this study contains limitations where findings could have been formed more precisely. Conducting follow-up interviews in future research would aid in ensuring quality. As interviews were conducted during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns, the environment affected mental health and well-being through isolation, loneliness, and other material losses (Hwang et al., 2020), potentially heightening participants' emotions and attitudes towards their experiences with colorism and self-esteem. Although this qualitative study required each participant's individualized experience to benefit and further contextualize the study's objectives, the subjective nature of self-esteem made it difficult to compare data among participants' varying levels and thus potentially alter findings.

I acknowledge that skin tone is a nominal category that varies based on context and that complexion changes over time, representing another limitation of the study. When participants share their experiences, their descriptions of skin tone and complexion are contextual and ultimately self-reported, which may influence how they perceive their skin tone in relation to other Cambodians. This underscores the social construct of colorism while acknowledging a shared understanding of what is considered a dark complexion or "too dark," given the racialization of Khmer people and the perception of dark-skinned Khmer individuals from rural areas as occupying the lowest position in Cambodia's social hierarchy.

Additionally, due to the sensitivity of colorism and the historical trauma of censorship within the Cambodian community—rooted in the legacy of the Khmer Rouge—responses may have been curated or biased, whether to save face or mitigate potential retaliation. Even if this were the case, the responses still demonstrate what is considered politically correct or "normative" in the Cambodian context, revealing the pervasive impact of colorism and its intricate relationship with social context and reference groups.

The use of snowball sampling in this study introduced a high susceptibility to bias, as participants were recruited based on their interests, leading to less control over the sample composition. For example, we received many participants living in California and not as many participants over the age of 60 years. Additionally, there may have been a bias toward American interviews, as these tended to last longer compared to those with non-American participants. One French national participant was also considered an outlier. Given the sample size, the perspectives of Cambodian nationals and

non-Americans, while consistent and substantial within the findings are limited. Further investigation focusing on a non-American Khmer sample and targeting intentional age groups with a larger sample size would strengthen and further the narrative and literature, especially on the impact of community and national background. Given the complexity of Khmer culture found in this study and the close associations between ethnic pride and self-esteem, a focused investigation of ingrained colorism within Khmer culture could provide valuable insights into the relationship between colorism and ethnic pride in the community, distinct from self-esteem, which was the main focus of this research. This study explores the multifaceted nature of colorism among Khmer women, primarily those living in the United States and Cambodia, and represents one of the first to focus on Khmer women in colorism literature. By doing so, it strengthens the understanding of colorism across the globe and opens numerous avenues for future studies on this population.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Institutional Review Board of Stanford University. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

VV: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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EDITED BY
Aisha Phoenix,
King's College London, United Kingdom

REVIEWED BY
Bharat Malkani,
Cardiff University, United Kingdom
Folúkẹ́ Adébísí,
University of Bristol, United Kingdom

*CORRESPONDENCE
Zainab Batul Naqvi
✉ z.naqvi@mmu.ac.uk

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Colourism and law in the UK: a story of colonial indifference?

Zainab Batul Naqvi*

Manchester Law School, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, United Kingdom

In this paper I explore legal and judicial responses toward skin tone and colourism in the UK. I argue that despite incidents involving colourism coming before the courts, there is no mention of this oppression in the legal framework. Colourism is invisible to the law and courts. "Colour" is included under the protected characteristic of "race" in the equalities and hate crime frameworks, but this is inadequate. This approach, I argue, reinforces the wider issue that the law is incapable of effectively addressing racism so measures to tackle colourism are even further beyond its scope. The law's weaknesses here are emblematic of its indifference toward racially minoritised communities and their experiences. This colonial-inspired strategy of indifference is dismissive, dehumanising, and disdainful toward the vulnerable people and groups who are most affected by colourism.

KEYWORDS

colourism, coloniality, antidiscrimination law, hate crimes law, equality act 2010, skin tone

Introduction

In recent years, several TV personalities have faced public backlash around presenting documentaries about Black women's experiences. The announcement that Leigh-Anne Pinnock of Little Mix would be fronting a 2021 BBC documentary on colourism and race in the music industry prompted severe criticism.[1] Similarly, actress and singer Rochelle Humes received death threats after false rumours spread that she had replaced the presenter Candice Brathwaite in a Channel 4 programme about Black women and childbirth (O'Connor, 2021). The reason for this? Leigh-Anne and Rochelle have light skin and the privilege this affords them led to anger that they were perhaps chosen to present these programmes over Black women with darker skin because of their skin tone.[2] Both incidents raised concerns about colourism, a prejudice in which racially-minoritised people with darker skin tones and phenotypical features associated more with people of colour face mistreatment and disadvantages both outside and within their communities (Phoenix and Craddock, 2022a, 2022b, 2024a). In this paper I argue that UK legal responses to colourism are non-existent and incapable of addressing this form of oppression. This oversight stems from the colonial indifference which surrounds the law perpetuating the dehumanisation that underpins general attitudes toward racially minoritised communities and racism in the UK.[3] The law is incapable of dealing with racism in the first place, so it is little wonder that despite references to colour, colourism is invisible. This is a colonial hangover echoing imperial behaviour toward colonised people that limits the possibility of legal repair.

1 Colourism featured in the working title of the documentary, but this was dropped because of the negative reaction (see Rosseinsky, 2023).

2 Skin tone is defined as the "colour of the surface of someone's skin" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025).

3 The terms "racialised" and "racially minoritised" refer to the marginalisation, exclusion, or different treatment of people because they are not white and/or perceived to be white (El-Enany, 2020).

Colourism is well-documented all around the world, but outside of the Americas the scholarship remains underdeveloped (Dixon and Telles, 2017). The reactions to Leigh-Anne and Rochelle demonstrate that colourism is a social concern in the UK. Over 8 million people of colour live in the UK and yet, there has been very little attention to colourism. We have research undertaken by Phoenix and Craddock looking at the experiences of Black men (2022a); colourism in minoritised ethnic families (2024a); the complex interactions of skin shade with desirability (2024b) and an ongoing project on colourism among young people (2022b). They have further collaborated with others to develop a colourism scale (Craddock et al., 2022) and investigate the effects of colourism on body image and wellbeing (Craddock et al., 2023). In other work, Spratt (2024) has investigated light-skin privilege and poor health outcomes among Black British women. Whilst there is research on colourism and law in other jurisdictions like the US (see for example Jones, 2000), there is no legal or policy literature that explicitly looks at colourism in the UK. This includes mainstream law textbooks (e.g., Fredman, 2023), government commissioned reports focussing on racialised communities (Lammy Review, 2017) and independent reports around antidiscrimination law (Bi, 2022).

I start this paper with three novel conceptual arguments. First, colourism has been overlooked in law, so understandings remain underdeveloped in the UK. Second, this manifests the wider colonial indifference around the law's failure to cope with oppressions against racially minoritised communities, including racism. Third, colonial indifference flattens out the experiences of racialised communities in the UK. I then provide an overview of where we try but fail to find spaces in law to address colourism. I follow this with a discussion of my methodology for my original and rigorous review of British judicial responses to colourism which involved examining over 200 cases.[4] Finally, I share three thematic analytic arguments from my findings. First, skin tone appears throughout criminal justice processes to disadvantage racially-minoritised people. Second, there are loaded interactions around skin tone subsumed under race discrimination which fail to recognise the nuances of colourism and racism. Third, skin tone is used in particularly racialising areas of law like immigration as evidence for people's identity. In all three situations, skin tone is weaponised by legal authorities to orientalise racially-minoritised people. We need an in-depth understanding of how legal institutions can use skin tone to oppress communities of colour. I am not calling for an immediate reform of the law. We need legal change, but this alone is insufficient. Instead, I expose what current legal responses tell us about the operation of legal power in relation to colourism and racism. The lack of acknowledgement of colourism is a black box: a box which if opened, will tell us about the complex inner workings of legal discourses and how they are maintained (Latour, 1987).

First, a note about my position in this project. I am a woman of colour with light skin who grew up in a South Asian community in the UK. I have witnessed incidents where those closest to me were subjected to colourist remarks. By the same token, I have received praise for my light skin which is just as problematic. My situation is mired in privilege – something that I have not spoken against enough. This is not a confession to absolve me of my guilt but to encourage my resolve to tackle this. My aim with engaging in this work is to express support, solidarity and care toward my people who move through the world with the pain of colourism and the devastating lack of attention to that pain. I am also conscious of recent interventions into the drive for these declarations of privilege in research. Gani and Khan (2024) persuasively argue that positionality statements in research are rooted in enlightenment philosophy. They were introduced for the white researcher to relieve themselves of guilt toward their non-white research subjects. They have also become a marker of authority leading to a narcissistic performance of radicalism (Hamati-Ataya, 2018). Through my small contribution, I hope that I can practise humility and learn how to recognise and end my complicity in colourism and its pernicious effects.

Conceptual framing: colourism and indifference

I now turn to colourism as a concept to make sense of the law. I argue that part of the reason colourism has been overlooked is due to a lack of knowledge and understanding. What exactly are we missing? Several analytical categories that feature in my discussion throughout this paper need explaining first. Skin colour is one device for assigning us to a race. Race or categorising people for example as Black, Brown or white can be understood as a "floating signifier" which takes on different meanings at different times (Hall, 2021). It is a social rather than biological construct (Malkani, 2024). Race is not supported by objective physical characteristics and is not genetically inherent or a biological fact (Mirza and Warwick, 2022; Andrews, 2018). Ethnicity is often used interchangeably with race, but it was historically a way to describe shared identity based on "culture, descent and territory" (Mirza and Warwick, 2022, p. 8). Considering it synonymous with race is problematic because it equates the immutability of skin colour with the changing cultural norms that ethnic identity is based upon (Adébísí, 2019). Under colonial rule, this is exactly what happened as colonisers used skin tone to differentiate between ethnic groups to create divisions within communities. Finally, whilst I do not engage in discussions of nationality, in the UK this includes the citizenship of an individual (Equality Act Explanatory Notes, 2010, para 50).

Colourism involves the mistreatment and oppression of racialised people with darker skin tones and phenotypical features associated more with people of colour compared with lighter-skinned members of their communities. The "colour" in colourism is shorthand for a complex entanglement of "perceived physiognomy, behaviour, and culturally-transmitted expectations and assumptions" (Harris, 2008, p. 60). While skin colour is one device for assigning us to a racial category, for colourism the social meaning afforded to skin tone itself leads to the disadvantageous treatment (Jones, 2000). Further, colourism occurs within racialised communities where members with darker skin are mistreated by members of the same community. And it can be inflicted by those from different racialised communities too. The terminology around skin is complex in this context so I adopt the clumsy distinction of

4 I refer to the UK throughout this piece when making general comments about the law and wider social context. British legal responses cover England, Wales and Scotland. When I talk about law in England and Wales, this is because in those situations Scotland and Northern Ireland have their own frameworks (Hand et al., 2015).

using skin tone when referring to colourism-related discourses and skin colour when looking more broadly at race.

Some scholarship discusses colourism as motivated by a desire for proximity to whiteness (Bhattacharya, 2012). Through this, we can trace the development of colourism back to European colonialism and the idealised physical appearance of the coloniser (McClintock, 2004). Taking this approach, it is much easier to draw the connection between colourism and racism. "Colourism" stems from the physical manifestations of our "race" which leads to colourism essentially being a form of racism. However, this fails fully to account for the colourism that happens within communities of colour, and it sidelines the skin tone hierarchisations predating European imperialism (Cleland et al., 2007; Shevde, 2008; Tate, 2015). So, whilst we can argue that European colonisers might have exploited this skin tone hierarchy and encouraged it as a desire for whiteness (Anjari, 2023), we need to avoid reducing colourism to only wanting to be white and a sub-category of racism.

This oversimplification has been noted in other jurisdictions like the US. Jones (2000) tells us that despite colourism's longstanding presence in the US, it is overshadowed by racism. The courts are unaware of it or minimise its importance. For example, in *Ali v. National Bank of Pakistan*, 508 F. Supp. 611 (S.D.N.Y. 1981), where a Pakistani bank employee brought a claim for discrimination against another Pakistani colleague based on skin tone, it was decided that imported biases brought over to the US from other cultures could not establish a new "protected class" (Nance, 2005). Colourism is not something the US legal imaginary ignores or fails to understand – it has outright rejected it as "imported." The same imperious attitudes are not out of place in the UK. Like racism, there is little recognition of colourism as part of structures which are maintained by supposedly neutral laws and policies that disadvantage its victims. This means that colourism (when it is acknowledged) is only viewed as a result of individual behaviour that is prejudiced and discriminatory (Reece, 2019). Legal responses to colourism are more than just a benign ignorance – there are active processes framing it as imported or migrated into the US. These responses are not harmless. There could be a strategy behind this to designate colourism a foreign oppression which the courts and law need not concern themselves with. It is an example of orientalist "blackboxing," where the courts state "facts" and authorise views about colourism and those that suffer with it as "other" (Said, 1978). These people and their oppressions are not ours; they are other and from elsewhere. A black box is used to encase a contested process or practice that has become part of common knowledge to maintain the fiction that it is a fact and cannot be challenged (Riles, 2005).

Such distancing denotes the legal strategy of "indifference" which arises in colonial administrations but can be seen in other contexts. My starting point is that indifference is found in the *absences* rather than the *presences* in law. It makes sense of the invisible, the silent, the missing. It is hidden in the black boxes throughout the law (Valverde, 2009). The law has often been depicted as technical, neutral, objective and devoid of any of the messy biases that humans have. This attitude has underpinned the use of law in colonial rule for centuries. The courts' focus is supposedly on the technical application of those rules rather than the ideological issues that obscure law's role in building empire and constructions of race into the present day (Muir Watt, 2017; Garland et al., 2022). The law has always been used as a powerful tool to enforce colonial order and impose norms onto colonised communities. Law has shaped the ways that racialised people are treated today but black boxes work to diminish our awareness of this.

How does indifference fit in here? Indifference suggests a lack of knowledge and concern; a sense of emptiness or nothingness (Tester, 2002). This might be innocuous. If we are indifferent, it is because we simply do not know enough to have an opinion. We might be indifferent to colourism because we have never encountered it. And yet, as I have argued elsewhere, indifference has dangerous effects (Naqvi, 2023). Indifference is not just being unaware but also being uninvested and unbothered. This attitude of not caring enough is what leads to minoritised groups becoming invisible (Passini, 2019). To not care can sometimes take as much effort as it does to care. It is not as empty as we think; underneath the surface it is brimming with feelings drowned out by the monochromatism of being indifferent (Tester, 2002). Indifference subjugates those sensations and requires an active investment by the person practising it – it is intentional, political and harmful (Granzow, 2020).

Indifference derives from sites of power like law and expresses a cultural and emotional distance resulting in impassive, fake concern from those in power. It shows up in everyday mundane administrative and governance processes. We do not notice indifference because it is lurking underneath every surface. At its core, indifference facilitates the dehumanising of those deemed unimportant. The most marginalised and minoritised of us. The quickest way to cast something as unworthy of concern in law is for it not to exist in the first place. The law is indifferent to colourism because it is not important to the people who matter; therefore, it does not exist. This legal strategy of indifference, of stripping away the common humanity of its victims flattens out the experiences of racialised people and communities in the UK and the same attitude is prevalent in legal responses to racism. The black box surrounding colourism acts as a form of jurisdictional control which reveals how the coloniality of law operates to see or unsee; to react or remain unmoved by communities associated with the colonised. As we saw with the case of *Ali* earlier: colourism is something that affects the "other," the foreigner who is outside of the mainstream legal gaze. If you suffer with colourism, it is not important to the law, which means you are not important to the law. And if you are not important to the law, then what is the law saying about you? That your suffering is non-existent? That you are non-existent?

Spaces in the law?

There is no legal attention toward colourism in the UK. This discussion of the law could easily end here but what about skin colour? Could laws covering skin colour provide space for mistreatment based on skin tone? We have to resort to looking at race and its association with skin colour so there are two possible legal areas for this: hate crimes and hate speech or antidiscrimination law. Starting with hate crimes and hate speech, in England and Wales these criminal offences are set out across four different statutes: the Public Order Act 1986; the Crime and Disorder Act 1998; the Football (Offences) Act 1991 and the Sentencing Code.[5] Hate crimes are treated more seriously than offences which do not involve hostility toward a protected

5 For a detailed explanation and commentary of hate crimes law, see Law Commission (2021). The Scottish legal framework is similar to that of England and Wales. See Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Act 2021.

characteristic (race, religion, sexual orientation, disability, transgender identity). First, by prosecuting them under the discrete category of aggravated offences which have a higher maximum penalty (Crime and Disorder Act 1998, ss28-32) and second, by prosecuting them under existing criminal offences but subjecting them to enhanced sentencing to increase the maximum sentence (Sentencing Code, s66). The aggravated offences only apply to racial and religious hostility, but enhanced sentencing applies to all of the protected characteristics.

For hate speech, there are also specific offences of "stirring up" hatred in relation to race, religion and sexual orientation (Public Order Act 1986, Pts 3 and 3A). The "stirring up" offences only criminalise conduct (use of words, material or behaviour) targeting entire groups rather than specific individuals. For the purposes of hate crime laws, a racial group is "a group of persons defined by references to race, colour, nationality (including citizenship) or ethnic or national origins" (Public Order Act 1986, s17; Crime and Disorder Act 1998, s28(4); Sentencing Code, s66(6)(a)). "Colour" could cover colourism-based offences, but it is not defined. Combining this with my brief examination of over 200 racially-aggravated hate crime case reports where I was unable to see any instances of skin tone being addressed, the inclusion of colour in the hate crimes framework must be limited to describing a person's socially-constructed race (e.g., Black, Brown etc).

This is supported by British equality or antidiscrimination laws. The Equality Act (2010) requires public bodies to have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and promote equality of opportunity for people that experience inequalities and discrimination on the basis of their age; disability; gender reassignment; marriage and civil partnership; race; religion or belief; sex and sexual orientation (Fredman, 2023). Again, there is no reference to colourism but the explanatory notes for the Act tell us that the protected characteristic of race under Equality Act (2010), s9 includes "colour, nationality and ethnic or national origins" (Equality Act Explanatory Notes 2010, para 47). Similarly, people who have or share characteristics of colour, nationality or ethnic or national origins can be seen as belonging to a particular racial group (Equality Act Explanatory Notes 2010, para 48). And most illuminating of all, we are told: "Colour includes being black or white" (Equality Act Explanatory Notes 2010, para 50).[6] So, equality law even includes discrimination for being white which speaks volumes about the race power relations at work (Song, 2014).[7] This binarisation reinforces the essentialism of race in the law: if you are not white, you are only Black so all racially-minoritised people are collapsed into the category of Black (Lugones, 2010). Arguably, if colour "includes" Black or white, there is room for a more expansive definition of colour but there has been no application of Equality Act (2010), s9 to a claim of discrimination, victimisation or harassment based on having a darker skin tone compared to a person with light skin. The claims focus on skin colour as the physical manifestation of race, for example, being Black rather than being a Black person with a darker skin tone who is being discriminated against compared to a Black person with light skin. This is where we see the indifference at play: by limiting understandings of skin colour, there is a lack of interest in truly grasping the experiences of those subjected to racism and colourism. Legal actors do not care and never have because it does not touch them.

More generally, there are limits to including new categories within the existing protected characteristics of the Equality Act (2010). For example, when claims have been brought for menopause-related discrimination or harassment as a form of sex discrimination, the Act has not helped (James, 2024). There is no indication that colourism was on the minds of the drafters either which means it would be difficult to fit it within the characteristic of race. In another more relevant example, Equality Act (2010), s9(5)(a) provided for "caste" to be added as "an aspect of" race in the future. This later became a duty in Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Act 2013, s97. Not long after, in *Tirkey v Chandhok & Anor Appeal No. UKEAT/0190/14/KN*, it was decided that even though "caste" as an autonomous concept did not come within Equality Act (2010), s9 under the protected characteristic of race, many of the facts considering caste might be capable of doing so since "ethnic origins" under the Act had a wide and flexible ambit. This provided the first instance of an existing protected characteristic being potentially expanded. Further, it provided for the possibility of an intra-racial claim. The claimant and her employer respondents had the same racial background, but the claim of mistreatment was rooted in caste-related oppression. This is important when thinking about the possibility of a colourism-based claim against members of the same racial group. However, casteism and colourism are not analogous. Further, Waughray and Dhanda (2016) argue that the decision in *Tirkey* was created by the wider climate brought about by the 2013 duty. There is no such legislative backing for colourism, so expanding the "colour" element of the race characteristic is less feasible.

And then there is the bigger issue of our expectations. Are race-related hate offences and discrimination the same thing as racism? We can find race-based mistreatment being explicitly denounced in official legal practice publications such as the Guide to Judicial Conduct (2023); Equal Treatment Bench Book (2024) and the Judicial Diversity and Inclusion Strategy (see Monteith et al., 2022). These guides set standards for judges to challenge racial bias and prejudices in the courtroom and beyond. And yet, this is all framed around racial bias and prejudice rather than racism. These discursive moves to never name racism are threaded throughout the law. Race discrimination and hate offences are not synonymous with racism, especially structural racism (Atrey, 2021). Structural racism refers to how racism is integral to social, cultural, political and economic processes and institutions (Bonilla-Silva, 1997, 2021). Racism is not only found in isolated incidents, it is foundational to law and society. There is no substantive test or link between legal understandings of race discrimination or race-based hate crimes and structural racism (Atrey, 2021). Race-based discrimination, or the less favourable treatment and particular disadvantaging of people because of their race, is prohibited by the Equality Act (2010).[8] However, we are told multiple times in *R v JFS* (2009) UKSC 15 that being guilty of race discrimination should not be interpreted as being "racist" as that

6 Before this, in *Abbey National PLC v Chagger* (2009) I.C.R. 624, it was held that the EU's Council Directive 2000/43/EC on race equality was intended to cover discrimination on the ground of colour because "such discrimination is in practice necessarily an aspect or manifestation of discrimination based on racial and ethnic origins" (para 35). So, colour has long been a marker of race rather than attracting distinct forms of mistreatment.

7 Here, I am referring to the socially-constructed concept of white, rather than the physical colour. It is difficult to argue that including white as a colour was originally or solely intended to protect minoritised people with albinism.

8 See Equality Act (2010), s13 and s19.

word is generally understood (para 9). So, there is no indication that race discrimination in legal terms can be interpreted as racism (Atrey, 2021). There seems to be an explicit desire to decouple race equality law from antiracism. If the law does not even want to fully tackle racism in its structural forms and has set limits on its ability to do so (Malkani, 2024), there is little hope it would deal with colourism in a meaningful manner. The Equality Act (2010) is a misdirection. It gives us the impression that implementing it will achieve equality (Ahmed, 2012). But shying away from acknowledging the racist underpinnings for race discrimination means it is a half-hearted measure.

The same can be said of the hate offences law framework. Does prohibiting racially-aggravated offences and hate speech actually target racism? Again, terms like "racial" or "race" form the backbone of the legislation rather than "racism" (Goodall, 2013). And whilst the term "racialist chanting" in the Football (Offences) Act 1991 is interpreted by the Crown Prosecution Service (2022) as "racism," the discursive distancing in the text of the law remains. The law enacts its indifference against racism, especially the structural forms by using adjacent terminology like race, racial hostility, prejudice and bias to obscure its real condition of being constituted by racism itself (Fitzpatrick, 1987). This indifferent approach is tokenistic: the law might end up treating some of the symptoms of racism through antidiscrimination and hate offence frameworks but is never able to escape its complicity in the structural racism that runs deeper. Like people who suffer because of racism, those oppressed by colourism would be failed if we solely relied on existing legal responses and frameworks to counter it.

Note about methodology

Before sharing my analytic arguments, I explain my methodological approach. I looked at legal judgments from around the UK. I initially searched for these judgments on the legal database Westlaw using the search term "colourism." However, this yielded nothing. So, I used the more expansive "skin colour" since there is no mention of "tone" in the legislation. I focussed on court judgments because as active agents who produce and reproduce discourses that reflect the values of the society they live in, judges tell us a lot more about what the law is intended to achieve and how it is used (Naqvi, 2023). I undertook a thematic analysis of the reports to look for repeated patterns of meaning about the ways that skin tone is viewed in the courts (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It was very difficult to find any reference to colourism in the case law. Instead, I point to the gaps or absences which suggest the artificial emptiness of indifference guiding the courts around colourism. The select examples of the themes from my analysis show where colourism and skin-tone related oppression are present but are not recognised. The examples are also tangled up with racism so there are no standalone incidents of colourism. There is no way for colourism to come up as an autonomous issue, so we are unlikely to see examples of it that do not overlap with racism. This paper and my analysis are therefore limited by the equation of colourism with racism. Despite examining cases up until 2022, many of the key findings are from cases in the earlier 2000s so this does not tell us everything we should know about legal and judicial responses to colourism in the UK. There is a need for more legal research which centres those affected by colourism. My aim is to raise awareness of just how desperately we need collectively to unpick this lack of legal engagement.

Colourism in the courts?

Skin tone and criminal law and justice

My first theme concerns criminal law and justice processes. There is no mention of colourism but there are repeated references to skin tone made by criminal justice system actors. Skin tone is a means of identifying people whether suspects or victims. As a result, the criminal justice system creates the ideal conditions for colourism-based oppression revealing the operation of legal power against racially-minoritised people:

> 'For example, the deceased himself was variously described as an Asian man, a man of light skin colour who may have been Turkish in origin, white skinned with short, light coloured hair, and indeed white.' (*Regina v Gifford George Mullings, Andre Anthony Morgan* [2004] EWCA Crim 2824, 2004 WL 2935850, para 13)

> 'The point taken was that the appellant has a distinctive skin colour, namely that of a mixed race black but light-skinned man, whereas all the police officers, including DC Curzon, were adamant that the man they saw on 8th August was a black-skinned West African/ Caribbean and not a mixed race light-skinned man.' (*Regina v Tunde Abiodun* [2005] EWCA Crim 09, 2005 WL 62280, para 24)

These two excerpts illustrate how skin tone is produced during criminal investigation and prosecution processes. The first concerns the victim of a murder whilst the second refers to an appellant who is appealing their conviction. In both cases as well as many others, the "skin colour" of the parties involved or affected, features heavily in the evidence. It is taken for granted that these descriptions are helpful, but in both cases, skin tone is contested which means the identity of the "subject" is unclear. How helpful are these descriptions? And how much do they work against the person being described? This might provoke the question of how we should expect people to be described in an investigation. If I cannot include a description of someone's skin tone in my eye-witness account, then surely my account is incomplete? I am not expecting that this will change, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to propose an alternative. However, I want to cast light on the potential implications of these uses of skin tone.

In the first instance, whilst colourism is neglected in law, skin tone is not invisible in the UK legal gaze (White, 2015). There are clearly situations it is considered useful to distinguish between people. That being said, if skin tone does appear in law as a descriptor, who benefits from this and who suffers? I argue that mentions of skin tone in this context result in greater disadvantage to racially-minoritised people. I look to other jurisdictions where this has been researched to demonstrate further. For example, in their study of the association between skin tone; Afrocentric facial features; and criminal punishment in two Minnesota counties, King and Johnson (2016) found that the darker skin tone and Afrocentric facial features of offenders were associated with harsher sanctions. There are further US and Canada based studies reaching similar conclusions: members of racialised communities with darker skin are worse off than their lighter-skinned counterparts in encounters with the police and law (White, 2015; Lam and Bryan, 2021). This displays the colourism at

play in and around the criminal justice system in other countries but what about the UK? Unsurprisingly, there is not much to go on.

Looking at the starkest encounters around stop and search powers, Bowling and Phillips (2007) observe that there is evidence police officers use skin colour when deciding whether to stop and search, rooted in stereotypes about the involvement of Black people in crime. However, this is based on the use of skin colour to identify the socially-constructed race of "suspects" rather than skin tone. Others argue that the police are "policing race" which indicates racialised communities are targeted for policing based on race rather than the tone of their skin (e.g., Barrett et al., 2014). Within the system, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) has reviewed racial biases and established a "racist incidents" monitoring service (HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate, 2002; John, 2003). The Lammy Review (2017) which shares the findings from a purportedly independent review investigating the treatment and outcomes for racially-minoritised individuals in the criminal justice system commended the CPS for its diverse workforce and openness to scrutiny. But these enquiries have still found evidence of racial discrimination and biases. We see again the prominence of "discrimination" and "bias" which raises the question of whether they captured the experiences of racism happening at a structural level. There remains no reference to colourism by the government or official bodies like the police and CPS.

Using skin tone to identify people disproportionately affects racially-minoritised people. Even when there are no specific tones used, it is still harmful. In the *Abiodun* case above, the defence argued that the appellant had a distinctive "skin colour" which was lighter than the description of the police officers. Despite this being mentioned in the facts of the appeal, it is not dealt with in the judge's examination. This was important enough to feature in the case facts yet is then left hanging like a loose thread. The weaponisation of skin tone and the ways in which it is unreliable for identifying people is completely ignored. But it is vital. It changes lives, it can harm lives. This lack of concern for the role of skin tone is the epitome of indifference. During these criminal justice processes, skin tone is taken as material fact for the police and courts – it forms part of the persuasive evidence. This acceptance of skin tone descriptions exposes the indifference to colourism hidden under the surface of the law. When we open the black box around colourism and skin tone, we see how the law maintains the racialising system designed to harm the most minoritised communities in the UK. It becomes even more apparent in this further example from a Scottish case:

> 'The undisputed facts found by the sheriff were that the appellant was brought to Partick Police Office in custody to be placed in an identification parade. The police had secured the attendance of nine men of various ages and descriptions as stand-ins. The appellant's solicitor expressed a dissatisfaction with the stand-ins on the ground that they were white and pale skinned, while the appellant was of mixed race and dark skinned.' (*Paul Murray Wright v Her Majesty's Advocate* 2006 S.C.C.R. 455, para 4)

Here, Paul Murray Wright who had been charged with robbery and assault challenged the admissibility of evidence from his identification parade. The appellant's solicitor raised objections at the time of the identification parade regarding the differences in appearance between the suspect and the nine stand-in participants. Amongst those objections was that the stand-ins were all white whilst the appellant was a mixed-race man with darker skin. He challenged the admissibility of his identification parade evidence, but it was pushed on to be considered at his full trial because the sheriff did not think that they had sufficient information to do justice to the issue. He appealed this arguing that the parade had been unfairly conducted and should not be put before a jury at full trial. Ultimately, the appeal was rejected because the sheriff was right to think that they could not do it justice. I was unable to find the full trial judgment but there is an online news article about a Paul Murray Wright convicted of assault and robbery at Dumbarton Sheriff Court in May 2007 (Currie, 2008). The appellant made it into the news for breaking free from prison for around 4 minutes. This article tells us that he was convicted and so his appeal against the evidence probably had minimal effect on the outcome.

The first identification parade in England and Wales reportedly took place in 1860. Davies and Griffiths (2008) argue that despite improvements, identification parades still lead to errors in identifying suspects. As far back as 1976, the Devlin Report recommended that these parades be investigative rather than evidential (Devlin, 1976). They are already mired in weaknesses and injustices. One of the biggest issues stems from the differences in appearance that can occur between a suspect and the stand-ins in the parade. Code D of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 states that "The identification parade shall consist of at least eight people (in addition to the suspect) who, so far as possible, resemble the suspect in age, height, general appearance and position in life" (Code D, 2023, Annex B(c)(9)). At least legally, the other people in the parade should be similar in appearance which presumably includes skin tone but how well this is ensured in practice is not clear.[9] Imagine the effects of being in a parade with nine other men who have a different race and skin tone to yours. It would be difficult to find a clearer expression of both racism and colourism in the criminal justice system – neither of which are being admitted or prevented. Here, the disparities between the appellant and stand-ins were a marker of difference in race but there were separate implications and social meaning to the difference in skin tones. It was not just that the appellant was mixed race but that his skin tone was darker. We cannot overlook this added layer of difference.

But when he challenged the admissibility of this evidence, the courts repeatedly said that there was not enough information available to deal with it before trial. Here, we see the Sheriff and courts plead ignorance – we do not know enough; therefore, we must be indifferent – we accept the law as it is and are not willing to open the black box. This emptiness in the attitudes of the criminal justice system actors reveals so much. It shows us the same orientalist lack of concern reserved for colourism in the US. It is not our problem, it comes from outside of our community, it does not make a difference to the case against this defendant, and it does not exist to us. The repeated dismissal of the appellant's challenge encompasses an implicit denial of the racist and colourist processes underpinning the identification parade. This emphasises the dehumanisation of people

9 In Scotland, the Lord Advocate's guidelines on identification parades state that "the suspect should be placed beside persons of similar age, height, dress and general appearance" (Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, 2019).

on the receiving end of the oppressions embedded into the criminal justice system. Their oppression does not exist and neither do they fully exist as whole humans along with their skin tone. Because if your skin tone is not visible to the courts and legal actors, then you cannot be visible to them either.

Skin tone and antidiscrimination

Earlier, I discussed how skin colour is presented in the British equality law framework. I now look at how this operates in practice by exploring the way skin colour can come up in antidiscrimination cases in subtle yet loaded ways. In *Diem v Crystal Services plc* [2006] All ER (D) 84 (Feb), the claimant, Anita Ho, complained about the behaviour of the employment Tribunal Chairman during her original race discrimination claim hearing:

> 'At the Employment Tribunal hearing, whilst I was giving my evidence, the Tribunal Chairman, Mr S M Duncan, questioned me at some length as to why I was claiming to be non-white. In this context, he said that my skin colour was 'as white as the English'. Whilst he made this statement, he looked at me and used his finger to point at the skin of his other hand to stress the point. In fact, my complaint was not based on any claim that I was 'non-white', but on the fact that I am Vietnamese.
>
> The chairman's comment and behaviour took me by surprise. When I did not answer, the chairman said to me: 'Your skin looks whiter than mine.' I felt pressurised to admit that my skin was white.
>
> I felt that the chairman was mocking my appearance and perhaps my make-up was too white so that I looked like a clown or a geisha girl…' (*Diem v Crystal Services plc* [2006] All ER (D) 84 (Feb), paras 4-6)

The claim was based on her identity as a Vietnamese woman, but the Chairman's comments bear deeper examination. Starting with questioning her at length about why she was "claiming to be non-white." This is an attempt to dismiss the race discrimination that she had endured during her employment. She is "claiming" to be non-white which means her honesty about both the mistreatment and her identity are being doubted. The Chairman is discrediting her and the discrimination. It gets worse with the Chairman then using the reductive and offensive arguments that her skin is "as white as the English" and whiter than his. The Chairman deliberately rejects the social construction of race and skin colour to humiliate the claimant. He is shaming her into admitting that her skin is white to imply that her claim is frivolous.

The comment about her skin colour being as white as English people, ensures the ideal of being white English is pitted against the claimant to make her feel inferior. Her skin colour is weaponised by the Chairman to highlight that her skin might be white and therefore her claim is unimportant but this acts at the same time to reinforce just how different and "other" she is. The claimant is forced to admit that her skin is white and that she has therefore not suffered any discrimination. I argue that the Chairman's statements and gestures are a form of racial gaslighting. Abu Laban and Bakan (2022) posit three dimensions of racial gaslighting. First, that it involves the denial of lived experience and reality for racially-minoritised groups and individuals. Second, that it operates to maintain the status quo and is directed at those with less power. And third, that it involves a form of blaming the victim, typically by pathologising or treating as abnormal those who resist their oppression. In this case, the Chairman denies the claimant's lived experiences and reality of discrimination; she is at the receiving end of this denial; and she is the one that is interrogated and pressured into admitting her skin is white. She is held responsible for making an unserious claim of race discrimination and therefore treated as unreasonable. This is what indifference looks like in law. The legal actor does not care and makes her feel at fault.

The final statement of this passage is also revealing. The claimant felt that her appearance was mocked which made her feel conscious of her makeup being too white so that she looked like a clown or geisha girl. Both of these descriptors: clown and geisha girl are associated with negative stereotypes, one of which concerns the appearance of the white makeup that they apply. Both clowns and geisha are performance artists. They apply makeup as part of their performance. Performance and entertainment are significant in the context of this case. When the claimant is made to feel that she has worn white makeup that has affected perceptions of her and the claim she is making, she is made to feel like a performer. Someone playing the role of a race discrimination victim. The Chairman has pushed her into feeling like a performer and not a victim through the emphasis on her skin colour compared with his. This imposes a narrative on her. She loses control of her story and experiences in the face of his prolonged questioning on her skin colour which should have no bearing on the claim.

The claimant's concern about being seen as a geisha girl expresses an implicit fear of being associated with the orientalist stereotype of a geisha. Geisha are educated women and artists. They have been well-respected for their skills and performances for centuries in Japanese culture (Skotadi, 2013). They have gained attention through the years as the embodiment of beauty ideals in Japan and their white skin contributes to this (Yoshikawa, 2021). However, due to encounters with the white world including the runaway success of Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha* which was a fictional account of a geisha's experiences, they have been exoticised in ways that misinterpret their profession as a form of prostitution.[10] This has left a lasting impression with geisha being forced to clarify to white customers from the West that they are not prostitutes (Yoshikawa, 2021). For this analogy to present here, we can see a fear of the consequences of the Chairman's words. He has made the claimant fear that she seems like a performer associated with a group that is at risk of being ostracised because of misconceptions about its craft. A craft which reflects the ideals of a particular skin tone.

The Chairman of the Tribunal claimed that it never crossed his mind that the claimant looked like a clown or geisha girl. He also argued:

10 My use of the term "prostitution" is deliberate to convey the orientalist portrayals of geisha, not because I am conflating the work of geisha with prostitution (or sex work for that matter). Nor am I commenting on prostitution and sex work but the mainstream negative connotations around them.

> '…the Claimant did not give the impression of a person who was humiliated, embarrassed or mocked and further that in no way were any of his questions or comments intended to be offensive, nor did he believe that the Claimant was in fact offended' (*Diem v Crystal Services plc* [2006] All ER (D) 84 (Feb), para 12)

In his view, the claimant did not seem humiliated or offended by his questions. This weak response focusses only on his perceptions of the situation. It is a continuation of his attitude from the start: that his questions and comments are legitimate. Since the claimant did not seem offended, he is absolved of responsibility. This is another demonstration of indifference – he does not believe she was offended which means he is ignorant of it and therefore indifferent to it. The claimant's feelings do not exist, because his gaze as a white man in a position of authority does not capture them.

The appeal was upheld but part of the decision states the following:

> 'We find that the fair-minded observer would conclude that the remarks made were likely to cause the Claimant to feel unsettled, humiliated and embarrassed…We accept…that the position is not improved by the chairman's comment that he did not believe that the Claimant was in fact offended; although equally we accept that it was not the chairman's intention to cause offence' (*Diem v Crystal Services plc* [2006] All ER (D) 84 (Feb), para 26)

Even whilst accepting that the chairman's comments were likely to cause the claimant to feel humiliated, the appeal tribunal still stated that the chairman did not intend to cause offence. This is a back handed victory. On the one hand, the claimant's feelings are recognised, but the chairman was not intentionally offensive. In this way, the chairman's behaviour and the blame are diminished. There is no real challenge to his actions, he did not intend to cause harm and so there are no real consequences beyond upholding the appeal. It is treated as an isolated incident, an exception that does not happen every day which denies the structural conditions that have led to this situation. The weaponisation of skin colour against a racially-minoritised person does not happen in isolation – but it appears this way because it is obscured by the black box that contains this process (Valverde, 2009). The indifference to the ways that racially-minoritised people are treated permeates the courts and legal responses to skin colour. This may not be a clear example of colourism in the courts, but it does showcase the lack of sensitivity, nuance and awareness of the ways that skin colour and tone present in the courts. It further illustrates how poorly the law and legal actors deal with race discrimination. And if this is happening in race discrimination legal processes, we can imagine how structural racism would be approached. Overall, it represents the legal strategy of indifference being deployed against racism and colourism. It is deliberate and invested: a form of colonial control.

Skin tone and evidence of ethnicity

The final presentation of skin tone in the courts I share is visible in asylum case law where it forms part of the expert evidence assessing whether a claimant belongs to a vulnerable minority and would be at risk if deported to their home country. This is authoritatively articulated:

> 'Firstly, most Ashraf could be picked out by their appearance, being relatively light-skinned.' (*HH & others (Mogadishu: armed conflict: risk) Somalia CG v The Secretary of State for the Home Department* [2008] UKAIT 00022, 2007 WL 7239189, para 214)

> 'Individuals of non-Arab Darfuri or Nuba ethnic origin are both identifiable because of their darker skin colour and have historically been looked down upon by lighter-skinned Sudanese from tribes in central Sudan…' (*KAM (Anonymity Direction Made) v The Secretary of State for the Home Department* [2020] UKUT 269 (IAC), 2020 WL 05548776, para A47)

Both of these cases involved claims that deporting the appellants would put them at risk of persecution because of their ethnicity. In both instances, expert evidence helped to make the decision on whether the claims were persuasive. Expert evidence plays a contested role in the adversarial court system because it involves a party paying for a written report or oral testimony from an expert of their choice. All of the parties to a case can take advantage of this (Mnookin, 2008). The expert's evidence is an "opinion" rather than fact. However, the context behind these experts' statements tells us several things. Looking at the first case of *HH*; here, evidence was provided by two experts. Their involvement was commissioned by the appellants to support their claims. Interestingly, in an earlier asylum case which also involved Somali appellants, one of the experts who testified in *HH* confirmed the following about himself:

> '…despite not having visited the country since 1992 he was able to keep abreast of Somali affairs through reading academic and non-academic reports, relevant websites, his discussions with FCO staff and a number of personal contacts inside and outside Somalia.' (*NM and Others (Lone women – Ashraf) Somalia CG* [2005] UKIAT 00076, para 75)

Both experts in *HH* were white anthropologists from the UK who had undertaken ethnographic fieldwork in Somalia. They have been recognised for their contributions to asylum claims (The Editors, 2013). Similarly in *KAM* which was heard nearly 15 years after *HH*, the three experts speaking on behalf of the appellants were from the UK or America and had diplomatic and research connections to Sudan. I am not evaluating these experts' motives. However, it is pertinent to think about their positionality and identity in these courts. Evidence in the courts and tribunals is powerful because it is part of the legitimate narrative and facts of a party's case (Gonzales Rose, 2017). But the power of evidence and how it comes before the courts where minoritised people and issues are concerned has not been given much notice. Gonzales Rose argues that the lived realities of racialised minorities are often excluded in the courts and when they are admitted into evidence, it is "through expert witnesses' white or "insider" voices" (Gonzales Rose, 2017, p. 2244). The authority of white experts on the claims of racialised minorities is taken for granted, even when they have not been to the place they are testifying about in over a decade. There is a power relationship being expressed here where a white expert who has studied Somalia or Sudan can make authoritative claims about the place and its people. The added weight of their white voice is needed to make the case of these vulnerable asylum-seeking appellants persuasive. They are therefore, feeding into the orientalist approach that ensures

appellants lack credibility until a white person speaks on their behalf. They authorise views of Somalia and Sudan, they speak for these countries and their people who are not allowed to speak for themselves.

This flows into the greater narrative arc surrounding legal and judicial responses to asylum and immigration. The hostile environment which is designed to make these racially-minoritised people especially vulnerable requires the authoritative white and/or insider expert to support their claims. Asylum policy in the UK is guided by deterrence rather than human rights protection (Fekete, 2001). Intrinsic in this is the absorbing of asylum seekers and refugees into the broad category of migrants. Refugees and asylum seekers fleeing persecution and suffering are now viewed as immigrants (read economic migrants) (Goodman et al., 2017). Their claims are viewed with suspicion by default. When these cases came before the immigration tribunals, the Home Office had already decided that these appellants' claims lacked merit. When you are already being treated with hostility by the government, how do you overcome their authoritative narrative and decision? By having an "insider" speak on your behalf. When you tell your story, they do not believe you. But when someone who looks and speaks like them tells your story, it makes a difference. The problem is that the authoritative insider is still exactly that: an insider who forces you to stay in the outsider position. You remain the chancer who is trying to stay without permission whilst they tell your story through their lens for a fee. Their lens which cannot be separated out from their institutionalised whiteness, or their position as defenders of white authority. Their price goes beyond monetary value; it perpetuates the norms of the hostile environment. It never allows the racialised othered asylum seeker to take control of their narrative and be taken seriously in their own voice.

Thinking more directly about the comments on skin tone, in *HH* it is claimed by the first expert that members of the Ashraf minority in Somalia can be identified by their appearance because they are relatively light-skinned. The statement is qualified by the idea that "most" rather than all Ashraf can be picked out by their lighter skin. However, this is later limited by the second expert in the case stating that:

> 'skin colour is not itself determinative and…there are exceptions both ways' (*HH* (2007), para 289)

This is later followed by the tribunal's conclusion for one of the appellants that:

> 'actual skin colour is plainly not a factor that can advance her case' (*HH* (2007), para 360)

So, in the end, "skin colour" was not that important in making the decision on whether the appellants were from the Ashraf minority in Somalia and therefore at risk of persecution if deported. Arguably, the comments on skin tone form one small detail in the larger context of the opinions on identifying members of this vulnerable community. In any event, "skin colour" is not determinative in the tribunal's ruling so we can forget about it there. In *KAM*, members of the Darfuri or Nuba communities are supposedly identified by their darker skin. These remarks are hidden within over 100 pages of expert evidence appended to the judgment. You would not even notice them unless you were looking for them. Does that mean they are insignificant? I argue that we should not be dismissing their presence in these official judicial records.

Their presence tells us that it is acceptable to use skin tone when determining a person's ethnic identity and therefore their difference from members of another group. We have seen the horrifying consequences of this before. In Rwanda, European pseudo-scientific racism was used to distinguish between communities based on their physical features including their skin tone to create a hierarchy. This hierarchy positioned Tutsi and their supposed lighter skin as superior to Hutu thereby framing them as distinct groups which divided communities. Around 1 million people, mostly Tutsi were killed during the genocide in Rwanda (Baisley, 2014). Classifying people and groups based on skin tone is dangerous and reductive. The ease with which these discourses rooted in that imperialist racist science are being reproduced in the courts and tribunals today is concerning. The indifference toward this weaponisation of skin tone in asylum and immigration cases evinces a deliberate lack of care masquerading as a lack of awareness. It does not matter that these comments are irrelevant to the outcome of an appeal, what matters is that they are making it into these spaces at all. What matters is who is making these comments and their position. The white insider expert who is not a member of the affected appellant's community is making these authorised claims of the other. There may not be a lot of weight placed on this evidence or expert opinion, but this highlights how structural and normalised the reduction of racialised people's identities are in immigration law within the hostile environment. It is a piece of the bigger picture which is going unnoticed – an example of blackboxing which conceals the injustices around the use of legal power to oppress the minoritised. The law is blind to structural forms of oppression whether racism or colourism and there is no desire to recognise or remedy this.

Another issue concerns the social meaning attached to skin tone. Earlier I discussed how colourism is a standalone oppression because it describes how the social meaning attached to skin tone itself leads to disadvantageous treatment. In both *HH* and *KAM* we are told by the experts that skin tone as an indicator of ethnic group belonging could lead to minoritisation and persecution for the appellants. The Ashraf in Somalia are usually picked out by their relatively lighter skin; the Darfuri or Nuba in Sudan by their darker skin which leads to them being looked down upon. The evidence tells us that people experience colourism as part of their wider oppression. But we are told this in passing. The colourism is an afterthought and part of the status quo. We do not explicitly identify people through their skin tone in this jurisdiction, so it is unimportant. I am not saying that skin tone should be used as evidence in asylum applications but the normalisation of its inclusion in expert opinions is troubling. It denotes an orientalist perception of colourism as an established fact in those countries and communities. The courts are accepting that these people experience mistreatment because of their ethnic group which is marked on their bodies through their skin tone. They unquestioningly accept that it is a form of prejudice which happens in those foreign countries to divide and categorise people according to their skin tone. This lack of engagement with skin tone and by extension colourism echoes the attitudes displayed in the earlier US case of *Ali*. Colourism is not an issue for the courts in England or Britain or the UK because it does not happen here. And if it does not happen here, then there is no need to waste resources on trying to understand it. And even if it was happening in the UK, it happens in those racially minoritised

communities only. In which case, it is so complex and "other," legal actors cannot understand it, so they do not see a need to address it.

Concluding thoughts

This was not exactly a paper about legal and judicial responses to colourism in the UK. For that to be possible, there would need to actually be some engagement with colourism in the law and courts around the UK. But colourism is not accounted for or recognised in the law here. This is mirrored in wider legal, policy and social approaches to racism. There is very little that brings attention to this form of oppression in the UK and we have only recently started to see a more robust exploration of it. As a result, I had to think more laterally and interrogate the gap between law and colourism. As I stated earlier, gaps and silences are equally informative when considering the experiences of racially-minoritised people in the UK. They tell us how and where the state and its institutions deploy their preferred legal strategy of indifference. A strategy that was honed and used to great effect by colonial administrations to dismiss, dehumanise and detach from the colonised people they were oppressing. These same attitudes are seen here as we are forced to look at how the law and courts treat skin colour more broadly.

I looked at potential spaces within existing antidiscrimination and hate offences law where victims of colourism might find a remedy. However, there was little to be found and the limitations of the statutory framework not just for colourism but more fundamentally racism were apparent from the beginning. Could something be achieved in the courts instead? Going through dozens of case reports which had no mention of colourism, I was forced to expand my analysis out to think about the ways that judicial fora consider skin colour or tone. I found repeatedly that there is an orientalist weaponisation of skin tone across different areas of law. Skin colour and tone are used and abused in the courts and legal processes to dismiss and reduce racially-minoritised people to the surface of their skin. Their skin tone or colour are used to make it easier for them to be identified as criminal offenders; to humiliate them in proceedings which are meant to give them a voice; to determine whether they deserve to be seen as a victim of persecution and can therefore seek asylum. By allowing the unchallenged use of skin tone and colour to continue like this in legal and judicial processes, racially-minoritised people are being forced to suffer even further.

In this way, indifference is a form of jurisdictional control whereby legal power does not just control what is recognised in law but *how* it is recognised: whether this involves failing to understand the specifics of colourism and the implications of identifying people through their skin tone; reducing people's claims of suffering race discrimination to an irrelevant discussion about how light their skin is compared with a white person's; or even by farming out the identification of a persecuted group to "experts." This leads to my final conclusion. That the differential treatment of people based on their skin tone and colourism exist in the UK, but the problem goes beyond this. The black box of unrecognised colourism in the law has the potential to reveal much more about how colonial discourses are constructed and maintained in law for racism as well. It tells us that the operation of legal power is wielded in specific ways to dehumanise those of us who are already suffering from multiple and combined forms of marginalisation. Without opening that black box which hides colourism from the legal gaze, we can neither challenge its operation, nor can we start to explore how the law could otherwise be constructed. Thus, there is no immediate legal reform to propose: instead, I want us to seek out and open the black boxes which hide us and our pain from the law. Taking that first step will open up more possibilities for repair in the law and beyond.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

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The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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The author declares that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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EDITED BY
Christine Barwick-Gross,
University of Flensburg, Germany

REVIEWED BY
Ilze Van Der Merwe,
North-West University, South Africa
Zikun Li,
Mount St. Mary's University, United States

*CORRESPONDENCE
Nadia Craddock
✉ Nadia.craddock@uwe.ac.uk

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Examining colorism, body image, and self-esteem in UK Black and South Asian adolescents

Nadia Craddock[1]*, Aisha Phoenix[2] and Paul White[3]

[1]Centre for Appearance Research, School of Social Sciences, University of the West of England, Bristol, United Kingdom, [2]Centre for Public Policy Research, School of Education, Communication and Society, Faculty of Social Science and Public Policy, King's College London, London, United Kingdom, [3]Department of Mathematics and Statistics, University of the West of England, Bristol, United Kingdom

Introduction: Colorism, a form of appearance-based prejudice in which people are penalized or privileged according to skin shade, hair and facial features, is a pervasive yet underexplored form of bias that affects minoritized ethnic populations. This study examined associations between experiences of colorism and body image and self-esteem among 552 Black and South Asian adolescents (M_{age} = 16.1 years) in the United Kingdom.
Methods: Participants completed an online survey that included measures of ingroup and outgroup colorism, internalized colorism, self-reported skin shade, skin shade satisfaction, body image (body esteem), and self-esteem.
Results: On average, Black and South Asian adolescents were not regularly subjected to colorism in their everyday lives. However, both ingroup and outgroup colorism were significantly associated with higher internalized colorism and lower skin shade satisfaction, lower body esteem, and lower self-esteem (all $p < 0.001$). Linear models showed that colorism predicted lower body esteem and lower self-esteem, even after controlling for demographics (e.g., gender, age), self-reported skin shade, and internalized colorism. Ingroup colorism was a stronger predictor of low self-esteem than outgroup colorism though there were no differences between ingroup and outgroup colorism and the relationship with body image. Additionally, analyses showed that internalized colorism mediated the relationship between ingroup colorism and both body image and self-esteem. This mediation pathway was neither observed between outgroup colorism and body image nor self-esteem.
Discussion: Experiencing colourism was associated with worse wellbeing. The relationship between colorism and wellbeing may be explained by different mechanisms based on whether colorism is experienced by one's own racialized group or not. There is a need for carefully designed culturally responsive interventions.

KEYWORDS

colorism, body image, self-esteem, Black adolescents, South Asian adolescents

1 Introduction

Colorism refers to the differential treatment people receive the darker their skin is and the further their hair and facial features are from those associated with whiteness (Phoenix and Craddock, 2024a). Rooted in histories of colonialism, slavery, caste stratification, and global white supremacy, colorism intersects with, but is distinct from, racism (Dixon and Telles, 2017). While racism is typically perpetrated by dominant groups against minoritized ethnic populations, colorism occurs both within and between racialized groups (Dixon and Telles,

2017). Extensive research has shown the detrimental impact of racism on adolescent wellbeing (e.g., Priest et al., 2021). However, there has been much less quantitative work exploring the impact of colorism on adolescents (Craddock et al., 2018). This study begins to address this gap by cross-sectionally exploring how experiences of colorism are associated with body image and self-esteem in Black and South Asian adolescents in the United Kingdom (UK). We examine how experiences of colorism may vary according to participants' gender and racialized group. Additionally, we explore whether the racialization of perpetrators affects how young people respond to colorism by comparing whether findings differ based on experiences of colorism from people from the same racialized minority group (ingroup) or those racialized as White (outgroup).

1.1 Colorism and body image

Body image broadly refers to how individuals think and feel about the way their body looks (Cash, 2011). Adolescence is a high-risk development period for experiencing body image concerns. In turn, poor body image during adolescence is associated with worse wellbeing with longitudinal studies showing predictive relationships with later depression, disordered eating, and risky health behaviors (Blundell et al., 2024; Bornioli et al., 2019; Foster et al., 2024). Though body image scholarship has historically focused on weight and shape, increasingly researchers view the term as encompassing other aspects of appearance such as skin shade and complexion (Landor et al., 2024). Importantly, while body image is a psychological construct encompassing individuals' cognitions, emotions and behaviors about and towards their appearance, it is largely informed by social factors. Sociocultural theories such as the Tripartite Model (Thompson et al., 1999) detail how societal appearance ideals are socially communicated and reinforced by media, family, and peers, which can lead to body dissatisfaction via internalization of these ideals and upwards social comparisons.

The portrayal of light skin as a societal appearance ideal, particularly for women, has been well documented (Landor et al., 2024). In line with the Tripartite Model (Thompson et al., 1999), studies have shown how the media (including social media and advertising), family, and peers promote and reinforce a light-skin ideal. For instance, content analyses have demonstrated how media and advertising perpetuate colorism by prioritizing women with white or light skin to the exclusion of those with dark skin (Hall, 2018; Mitchell, 2020). Scholarship has also shown how social media platforms promote a light-skin ideal via algorithms that exhibit colorist biases, as well as through "beauty" filters that lighten skin (Riccio et al., 2024). Qualitative research has found that family members (parents, siblings, extended family) play a central role in reinforcing colorist appearance ideals, often through casual comments, comparisons, or advice (e.g., *to lighten skin* or *avoid getting darker*) (Mishra et al., 2023; Phoenix and Craddock, 2024a). Peers also perpetuate colorism by bolstering a skin shade hierarchy through appearance-focused comments, teasing, jokes, and romantic preferences (Mathews and Johnson, 2015; Phoenix and Craddock, 2024b). Consistent with the Tripartite Model, these social appearance pressures can harm how individuals think and feel about how they look. This is particularly the case when young people internalize narrow appearance ideals that are unattainable or misaligned with their racialized features and when they make comparisons with those who have lighter skin.

Research focused on experiences of colorism and body image is limited. Qualitative research in the USA and UK has documented how societal appearance ideals that devalue dark skin and natural Black hair textures, shape how Black adolescent girls and young women perceive themselves (Abrams et al., 2020; Gadson and Lewis, 2022; Mathews and Johnson, 2015; Phoenix and Craddock, 2024b). Qualitative work in the UK has also described how South Asian women and adolescent girls experience colorist pressures, particularly from media and family members, and how these influences negatively impact how they think and feel about the way they look (Lewis et al., 2025; Mishra et al., 2023). Turning to quantitative studies, there seems to be even less research that has examined the topic of colorism and body image, particularly among adolescents. In one cross-sectional study with a sample of minoritized ethnic adults in the UK, Craddock et al. (2023a) found that experiences of colorism were indirectly associated with worse body image. Therefore, an aim of this study was to examine whether experiences of colorism are associated with worse body image in minoritized ethnic adolescents living in the UK.

1.2 Colorism and self-esteem

Self-esteem can be defined as one's overall sense of worth and personal value, encompassing perceptions of competence, social acceptance, resilience, and emotional wellbeing (Rosenberg, 1965). A meta-analysis on longitudinal studies showed that self-esteem increases in early and middle childhood, remains constant (but does not decline) in adolescence, and increases strongly in young adulthood. This trend was observed regardless of gender, ethnicity, and country (Orth et al., 2018). Additional meta-analyses have shown that self-esteem predicts depression (Sowislo and Orth, 2013) and social relationships (Harris and Orth, 2020) across the life span, including during adolescence.

Colorist stereotypes may harm the self-esteem of minoritized ethnic adolescents with dark skin. In a longitudinal study following 124 Black adolescent girls, Adams et al. (2020) found that in early adolescence, Black girls with light skin reported higher self-esteem than those with dark skin. Interestingly, this gap narrowed as the girls progressed through high school, as girls with medium and dark skin reported increases in self-esteem over time. However, this study did not measure colorism, so it is hard to draw clear conclusions on the role of colorism and self-esteem for these young women. Several cross-sectional studies with adults have shown a relationship between experiences of colorism and self-esteem. For instance, in a study with women in Pakistan aged 18–40, those who reported more experiences of colorism were also more likely to report lower self-esteem (Sharif and Siddique, 2020). Similarly, in a UK sample of minoritized ethnic adults, more frequent experiences of colorism from people belonging to the same racialized group were associated with lower self-esteem (Craddock et al., 2023b). Finally, in a study with Latinx adolescents living in the USA, those who reported experiencing more colorism were more likely to report lower self-esteem and greater depressive symptoms (Centeno et al., 2023).

1.3 Ingroup and outgroup colorism

An important feature of colorism is that it can operate within and between racialized groups, such that individuals can experience

colorism from the same racialized group (ingroup) and from other racialized groups (outgroup). Studies in the USA and UK have started to explore how ingroup and outgroup colorism affect wellbeing, focusing on the dominant racialized group (White people) as the outgroup in both contexts. These studies indicate that ingroup colorism is often more strongly associated with worse wellbeing outcomes than outgroup colorism (Craddock et al., 2023b; Monk, 2021; Oh et al., 2021). For instance, Monk (2021) showed that among Black American adults, experiences of colorism from other Black people were significantly associated with worse physical and mental health outcomes, over and above other forms of discrimination. Similarly, Oh et al. (2021) found that ingroup colorism was more strongly linked to elevated risk for anxiety and other psychiatric disorders in Black adults in the USA than outgroup colorism. Finally, in a sample of minoritized ethnic people in the UK, Craddock et al. (2023b) found that ingroup colorism was associated with lower self-esteem and perceived social support, while outgroup colorism was associated with greater anxiety.

As adolescence is marked by heightened sensitivity to peer and social evaluation, it is possible that ingroup colorism may be particularly harmful due to its occurrence within presumed safe or affirming spaces such as families, schools, and religious communities (James et al., 2018). Indeed, qualitative studies with minoritized ethnic adults in the UK document narratives of individuals experiencing colorism from family members during childhood which had long-term effects on their skin shade satisfaction, body image, and self-worth (Mishra et al., 2023; Phoenix and Craddock, 2024a). Additionally, qualitative research has also shown how being overlooked as romantic partners by men racialized in the same way can lead to feelings of rejection by, and tensions between, minoritized ethnic women, which can impact how these women see themselves (Phoenix and Craddock, 2024b). This may be even more potent as adolescents start navigating romantic relationships. In contrast, outgroup colorism, though still harmful, may be interpreted through existing frameworks of racism or intergroup conflict and so individuals may be able to distance themselves from the prejudice they encounter.

1.4 Skin shade satisfaction, body image, and self esteem

Existing research with Black adolescents has shown that skin shade satisfaction is associated with more general body satisfaction or body esteem. In a sample of 252 Black adolescents in the USA, skin shade satisfaction was significantly associated with higher appearance esteem, even when controlling for weight and muscle tone satisfaction (Ladd et al., 2022). Notably, these associations were similar for adolescent girls and boys (Ladd et al., 2022). In a prospective study following 1,213 Black adolescent girls, Parker et al. (2022) found that skin shade satisfaction predicted later body satisfaction. In fact, Parker et al. (2022) observed that when participants were dissatisfied with their skin shade, they were at greater risk of disordered eating – a relationship mediated by body (dis)satisfaction. In a second longitudinal study following Black women from adolescence to the age of 40, Parker et al. (2024) reported that greater skin shade satisfaction at ages 12 and 15 was indirectly associated with greater body satisfaction in adulthood, with body satisfaction at age 19 serving as a mediator. Parker et al. (2024) also reported that skin shade satisfaction at age 12 directly predicts greater self-esteem in adulthood.

1.5 The present study

This study aimed to explore whether experiences of colorism were cross-sectionally associated with body image and self-esteem in two minoritized ethnic groups of adolescents living in the UK: Black and South Asian 13–19-year-olds. According to the 2021 Census, (Office for National Statistics, 2022) 9.3% of the population of England and Wales identified as Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh (including Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and other Asian) and 4.0% as Black, Black British, Caribbean or African groups. In Scotland's 2022 Census, (National Statistics, 2024) those identifying as Asian, Asian Scottish or Asian British accounted for 3.9% of the total population and those identifying as Black, Black Scottish, or Black British made up 1.2% of the population in Scotland. By focusing on Black and South Asian adolescents in the UK, relatively under-studied populations in colorism research, we aim to contribute to the growing body of scholarship examining how intersecting identities and social contexts shape youth wellbeing.

> Research Question (RQ) 1: *Are experiences of colorism associated with worse body image when controlling for self-reported skin shade, internalized colorism, and skin shade satisfaction?*

We hypothesized that experiences of colorism would be negatively associated with body image, even when controlling for self-reported skin shade, satisfaction with one's skin shade, and internalized colorist beliefs.

> RQ2: *Are experiences of colorism associated with lower self-esteem when controlling for self-reported skin shade, skin shade satisfaction, and internalized colorism?*

We hypothesized that experiences of colorism would be negatively associated with self-esteem, even when controlling for self-reported skin shade, satisfaction with one's skin shade, and internalized colorist beliefs.

> RQ3: *Are there differences in the strength of association for ingroup versus outgroup colorism?*

Consistent with studies focused on adults, we anticipated that ingroup colorism would have a stronger relationship with negative body image and self-esteem than outgroup colorism.

> RQ4: *Does internalized colorism mediate the relationship between both ingroup and outgroup colorism with the two psychological outcome variables: body image and self-esteem?*

We expected that the degree to which individuals internalized colorist ideas would help explain the following four relationships: (i) ingroup colorism and body image, (ii) ingroup colorism and self-esteem, (iii) outgroup colorism and body image, and (iv) outgroup colorism and self-esteem.

Finally, further to the above hypotheses, we also explored some additional questions looking at the differences in experience by gender and racialized group.

2 Method

2.1 Participants

Participants were 552 young people living in the UK aged between 13 and 19 (M_{age} = 16.1 years) who identified as Black or South Asian. Most participants (86.4%) were in full-time education. Among the remainder, 7.1% had completed formal education, 3.8% were in part-time education, 2.0% were taking a break from education, and 0.7% preferred not to share. Most participants (84.4%) had two parents/guardians and almost three-quarters of participants (72.7%) had at least one parent who had been to university. For further participant characteristics, see Table 1.

TABLE 1 Participant characteristics (*N* = 552).

Characteristic	*N*	%
Gender		
Girl/Woman	294	53.3%
Boy/Man	254	46.0%
Non-Binary	3	0.5%
Prefer not to say	1	0.2%
Racialized Group		
Black	301	54.5%
South Asian	251	45.5%
Born in the UK		
Yes	505	91.5%
No	47	8.5%
Prefer not to say	0	0
Skin Shade (compared with ingroup)		
Very Dark	8	1.4
Dark	143	25.9
Medium	266	48.2
Light	114	20.7
Very Light	16	2.9
Prefer not to say	5	0.9
Sexual orientation		
Heterosexual	488	88.4
Gay/Lesbian	8	1.4
Bisexual/Pansexual	24	4.3
Asexual	20	3.6
Questioning/Other	2	0.4
Prefer not to say	10	1.8
Religious beliefs		
Christian	270	48.9
Hindu	54	9.8
Muslim	168	30.4
Other (e.g., Sikh)	14	2.5
No religion	41	7.4
Prefer not to say	5	0.9
UK region		
London	232	42.0
North (North West, North East)	65	11.8
South (South West, South East)	45	8.2
Midlands or East of England	136	24.6
Yorkshire	49	8.9
Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales	25	4.5

2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Skin shade

Participants were asked to complete two self-reported skin shade measures. First, participants were asked to indicate whether, compared with their racialized group peers, they had 'very dark', 'dark', 'medium', 'light', or 'very light' skin. Second, participants were asked to select the color that best resembled their skin shade on Monk's 2021 Skin Tone Chart. Participants were shown both the 10 orbs and swatches (Figure 1). The darkest skin shade was 1 and the lightest was 10.

2.2.2 Internalized colorism

Internalization of colorism was assessed using the Ingroup Colorism Scale (ICS; Harvey et al., 2017). This scale comprises 20 items and five subscales: self-concept, affiliation, attraction, impression formation, and upward mobility. Small modifications were made to make items more appropriate for an ethnically diverse UK sample (e.g., "Black Americans" was replaced with "People of Color") and for consistency of terms across the survey to avoid confusion (e.g., "skin tone" was replaced with "skin shade"). Sample items include "Skin shade affects how much money you can make" and "Most of my friends tend to be the same skin shade." Participants provided responses on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 7 = *Strongly Agree*). A global score was calculated by summing and averaging all 20 items with higher scores indicating higher internalized colorism. The overall Cronbach's alpha was 0.88 (0.86 for girls, 0.90 for boys; 0.88 for Black adolescents, 0.89 for South Asian adolescents).

2.2.3 Everyday colorism

Experiences of colorism were captured by the recently validated Everyday Colorism Scale for Adolescents (ECS-A; Craddock et al., in press), adapted from the adult version of the scale (Craddock et al., 2023b). The ECS-A scale has 16 items and participants are asked to indicate the extent to which they have experienced a particular colorism scenario on a 5-item Likert-type scale (1 = *Never*, 5 = *Always*). Participants were asked to respond twice, based on experiences of colorism from their ingroup (i.e., other Black or South Asian people depending on the participant's racialization) and the majority outgroup (White people). Participants were given the following guidance before answering: "*You may wish to think of people who are family members, friends or peers, teachers/school staff, members of the public, shopkeepers, police/security guards etc. when responding to these statements. This means you may think of other young people as well as adults.*" Overall Ingroup Cronbach's alpha was 0.94 (0.94 for girls, 0.95 for boys; 0.94 for Black adolescents, 0.95 for South Asian adolescents). Overall Outgroup Cronbach's alpha was 0.96 (0.96 for

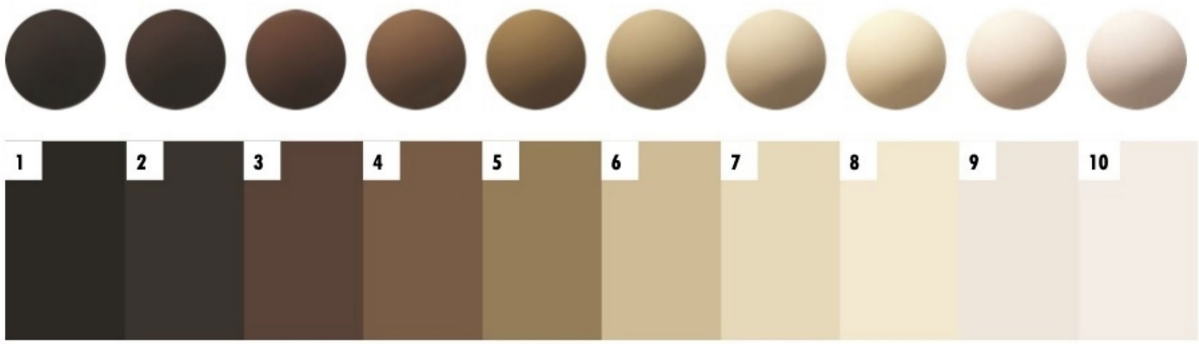

FIGURE 1
Monk's (2021) skin tone chart.

girls, 0.97 for boys; 0.96 for Black adolescents, 0.97 for South Asian adolescents).

2.2.4 Skin shade satisfaction

Skin shade satisfaction was measured with a single item: how satisfied are you with your skin shade (how dark or light your skin color is)? Responses were provided on a 5-item Likert-type scale (1 = *Very Dissatisfied*, 5 = *Very Satisfied*).

2.2.5 Body image

The 10-item Appearance Evaluation subscale from the Body Esteem Scale for Adults and Adolescents (BESAA; Mendelson et al., 2001) was used to measure participants' body image. Specifically, this subscale assesses overall self-appraisals of one's own appearance ("*I like what I see when I look in the mirror*"). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "*Never*" to 5 = "*Always*"). A mean total score was calculated, with lower scores indicating worse body image. The BESAA has demonstrated high internal consistency and reliability and has been validated for use with adolescents as well as adults (Mendelson et al., 2001). It has also been used previously in studies of Black adolescents in the U.S. (Ladd et al., 2022). Cronbach's alpha for the full sample was 0.93 (0.94 for girls, 0.89 for boys; 0.93 for Black adolescents, 0.92 for South Asian adolescents).

2.2.6 Self-esteem

Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965) was used to measure self-esteem. The scale contains 10 items, with the response options ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 4 (*Strongly Agree*). A sample item is "on the whole, I am satisfied with myself." Five items were reverse scored so that higher global mean scores indicate higher self-esteem. Overall Cronbach's alpha was 0.84 (0.87 for girls, 0.79 for boys; 0.82 for Black adolescents, 0.84 for South Asian adolescents).

2.3 Procedure

Ethical approval was granted by King's College London's Social Science, Humanities and Law Research Ethics Sub-Committee (RESCM-23/24–34003) and data were collected from July to September 2024. The research agency Childwise recruited participants, advertising the study on partner research panels. Participants had to meet the following eligibility criteria: (i) be aged 13–19 years, (ii) be Black or South Asian (and not of mixed racialized backgrounds), (iii) live in the UK, and (iv) be born in the UK or have moved to the UK before starting primary school. Anyone not meeting these criteria was excluded from the study.

For participants aged 13–16, parental consent was obtained before the child provided their consent to participate in the study. For participants aged 17–19, parental consent was not required (in line with KCL ethics committee guidelines), so after reading the information sheet, individuals were invited to provide their informed consent prior to completing the survey. The survey was regularly monitored by the research agency for any safeguarding disclosures in the open-ended response boxes. Anonymized data was sent to the study authors for analysis. Participants were allocated points via the research panel to which they or their parent was subscribed. The points could be converted to shopping vouchers.

2.4 Data analysis

All analyses were conducted on SPSS v 29. The data is amenable to analysis using established statistical techniques (Pearson-Bravais correlation coefficient, independent samples t-test, multivariable linear models, and mediation analysis). To reduce Type 1 error with multiple comparisons, significance was set at $p < 0.01$.

Correlation analyses and between group comparisons are presented as exploratory analyses to better understand the gender differences within the two racialized groups and to explore nuanced correlational effects.

Multivariable linear models were used to test study hypotheses. The variables included in the models (in-group and out-group experiences of colorism, self-reported skin shade, internalized colorism, skin shade satisfaction, age, racialized group, and gender) were pre-specified without reliance on algorithmic variable selection. Model assumptions were examined with no marked deviation from expectation.

Building on the linear models, four mediation models were tested using PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2022) to examine whether internalized colorism mediates the relationship between both ingroup and outgroup colorism and the two psychological outcomes (body esteem and self-esteem). The same covariates used in the linear models were controlled for. Statistical significance was judged using the bootstrap (5,000 bootstrap samples).

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3 Results

3.1 Descriptive statistics

Table 2 provides the correlations and descriptive information for key study variables. Mean values for ingroup and outgroup colorism were low, equivalent to only 'rarely' experiencing colorism in their everyday lives. Almost one in five young people (17.8%) reported never experiencing ingroup colorism, while 10.3% reported never experiencing colorism from White people. However, almost a third of participants (30.8%) provided a mean score of 2 or higher for ingroup colorism and more than half of participants (55.3%) gave a mean score of 2 or higher for outgroup colorism, indicating the relevance of the prejudice for a sizeable proportion of the study population.

The two skin shade measures were highly correlated ($r = -0.701$) such that participants who indicated they had comparatively darker skin were more likely to select a darker skin shade. Black participants were most likely to rate their skin shade as 'dark' (41%), closely followed by 'medium' skin (38%) relative to other Black people. South Asian participants were most likely to report having 'medium' (60%) skin when thinking about other South Asian people. The median skin shade was 4 for Black participants and 6 for South Asian participants (two shades lighter than Black participants). Notably, most adolescents (85.0%) indicated that they were satisfied or very satisfied with their skin shade, giving an average score of 4.27 where 4 = satisfied and 5 = very satisfied. A total of 9.4% of adolescents reported they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, 5.1% reported they were dissatisfied and 0.5% selected very dissatisfied.

Experiences of both ingroup and outgroup colorism were significantly associated with higher internalized colorism, lower skin shade satisfaction, lower body esteem, and lower self-esteem ($p < .001$). There was also a significant correlation between both ingroup and outgroup colorism with age, such that older adolescents reported more frequent experiences of colorism from both their racialized minority peers and White people.

Table 3 shows some differences in means by gender within racialized groups. Of note, among Black participants, girls have significantly lower mean internalized colorism ($p = .002$), lower self-esteem ($p = .003$), lower body esteem ($p < .001$) and lower skin shade satisfaction ($p < .001$) scores than boys. There were no significant differences in study variables between South Asian girls and boys at the threshold of $p < .01$, aside from age, where girls were significantly older than boys in this sample.

Table 4 shows some differences in means by racialized group within gender. Compared with South Asian girls, Black girls reported significantly more frequent experiences of colorism from White people, yet indicated higher self-esteem, higher body esteem, and higher skin shade satisfaction. Black girls also reported having darker skin compared with other Black people more frequently than South Asian girls reported having darker skin compared with other South Asians. Black girls also selected a darker skin shade on the skin shade chart than South Asian girls. The same pattern of results was observed comparing Black and South Asian boys. The only exception was that the difference in scores for colorism from White people did not meet the criterion of $p < .01$.

Looking at correlations by racialized group (Table 5), ingroup colorism was positively associated with outgroup colorism and internalized colorism and negatively associated with self-esteem, body esteem and skin shade satisfaction for both Black and South Asian adolescents (all $p < 0.001$). Similarly, outgroup colorism was positively associated with internalized colorism and negatively associated with self-esteem, body esteem and skin shade satisfaction for both Black and South Asian adolescents (all $p < .001$).

Looking at correlations by gender (Table 6) for both adolescent girls and boys, ingroup colorism was significantly associated with higher outgroup colorism and internalized colorism scores and lower self-esteem, body esteem, and skin shade satisfaction scores. There were no other significant associations for ingroup colorism at the threshold of $p < .01$. Regarding outgroup colorism, for both adolescent girls and boys, colorism from White people was significantly

TABLE 2 Correlation matrix ($N = 552$).

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. ECS-A In	–								
2. ECS-A W	0.578**	–							
3. ICS	0.259**	0.239**	–						
4. RSES	−0.379**	−0.280**	−0.203**	–					
5. BESAA-AE	−0.332**	−0.275**	−0.178**	0.741**	–				
6. Skin Shade Sat	−0.252**	−0.171**	−0.110	0.381**	0.439**	–			
7. Shade Comparison	−0.080	−0.110	−0.021	−0.058	−0.036	0.072	–		
8. Shade Chart	−0.104	−0.205**	−0.035	0.030	0.058	0.024	−0.701**	–	
9. Age	0.155**	0.115*	0.001	−0.326**	−0.303**	−0.112*	−0.027	−0.010	–
Descriptive statistics									
N	538	533	520	498	536	552	547	549	552
Mean	1.76	2.28	3.38	3.11	3.70	4.27	3.02	5.08	16.1
SD	0.75	0.97	1.02	0.56	0.96	0.87	0.80	1.63	2.08
Possible Range	1–5	1–5	1–7	1–4	1–5	1–5	1–5	1–10	13–19

*$p < .01$, **$p < .001$. ECS-A In – ingroup colorism; ECS-A W – colorism from white people, ICS – internalized colorism, RSES – self-esteem, BESAA-AE – body esteem, appearance evaluation, Skin Shade Sat – skin shade satisfaction.

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TABLE 3 Means, independent sample *t*-tests and effect size (Cohen's *d*) comparing the scores of adolescent girls with boys within each racialized group.

Black participants						
Variable	Girls (*n* = 163)	Boys (*n* = 136)	*t*	*df*	*p*	*d*
ECS-A In	1.86	1.67	2.154	289	.016	0.254
ECS-A W	2.50	2.36	1.257	288	.105	0.148
ICS	3.28	3.62	−2.934	287	.002	0.347
RSES	3.16	3.33	−2.770	265	.003	0.340
BESAA-AE	3.71	4.19	−4.610	291	<.001	0.541
Skin Shade Sat	4.30	4.65	−3.880	298	<.001	0.450
Skin Shade Com	2.70	2.80	−1.024	298	.153	0.120
Skin Shade Chart	4.23	4.73	−2.764	297	.003	0.321
Age	16.24	15.66	2.414	298	.008	0.280

South Asian participants						
Variable	Girls (*n* = 131)	Boys (*n* = 117)	*t*	*df*	*P*	*d*
ECS-A In	1.83	1.62	2.205	241	.028	0.283
ECS-A W	2.09	2.05	0.286	238	.775	0.037
ICS	3.20	3.48	−2.051	226	.041	0.272
RSES	2.90	3.06	−2.128	225	.034	0.283
BESAA-AE	3.34	3.55	−1.688	237	.093	0.219
Skin Shade Sat	3.97	4.14	−1.452	246	.148	0.185
Skin Shade Com	3.27	3.21	0.813	245	.417	0.104
Skin Shade Chart	5.98	5.65	1.974	244	.049	0.252
Age	16.84	15.69	4.608	246	<.001	0.586

Two-sided, equal variance assumed.

TABLE 4 Means, independent sample *t*-tests and effect size (Cohen's *d*) comparing the scores of Black and South Asian adolescents within girls and boys.

Girls						
Variable	Black (*n* = 163)	South Asian (*n* = 131)	*t*	*df*	*p*	*d*
ECS-A In	1.86	1.83	0.359	286	.720	0.043
ECS-A W	2.50	2.09	3.686	279	<.001	0.442
ICS	3.28	3.20	0.715	277	.238	0.086
RSES	3.16	2.90	3.598	259	<.001	0.448
BESAA-AE	3.71	3.34	3.065	286	<.001	0.363
Skin Shade Sat	4.30	3.97	3.138	292	<.001	0.368
Skin Shade Com	2.70	3.27	−6.704	291	<.001	0.788
Skin Shade Chart	4.23	5.98	−11.092	292	<.001	1.302
Age	16.24	16.84	−2.549	292	.006	0.293

Boys						
Variable	Black (*n* = 137)	South Asian (*n* = 117)	*t*	*df*	*P*	*d*
ECS-A In	1.67	1.62	0.567	244	.565	0.074
ECS-A W	2.36	2.05	2.483	247	.014	0.316
ICS	3.62	3.48	0.999	236	.319	0.130
RSES	3.33	3.06	4.126	231	<.001	0.542
BESAA-AE	4.19	3.55	6.257	242	<.001	0.805
Skin Shade Sat	4.65	4.14	5.371	252	<.001	0.676
Skin Shade Com	2.80	3.21	−4.027	248	<.001	0.511
Skin Shade Chart	4.73	5.65	−4.642	249	<.001	0.588
Age	15.66	15.69	−0.140	252	<.444	0.018

Two-sided, equal variance assumed.

associated with higher internalized colorism and lower self-esteem. For adolescent girls, but not adolescent boys, colorism from White people was also associated with lower body esteem and lower skin shade satisfaction.

Table 7 summarizes correlations between skin shade satisfaction and measures by gender and racialized group. Skin shade satisfaction is consistently associated with both self-esteem ($p < .001$) and body esteem ($p < .001$) for all gender and racialized groups. Skin shade satisfaction is negatively correlated with ingroup colorism ($p < .01$), except this correlation does not achieve the more stringent levels of statistical significance of $p < .01$ for Black Girls. Similarly, skin shade satisfaction is negatively correlated with colorism from White people ($p < .01$), except this correlation does not achieve the more stringent levels of statistical significance of $p < .01$ for South Asian Boys. Skin shade satisfaction is negatively correlated with internalized colorism ($p < .01$) only for Black Girls, and skin shade satisfaction is significantly correlated with self-reported skin shade ($p < .01$) and self-reported within group skin shade comparison ($p < .01$) only for Black Boys. That is, for Black girls and for South Asian boys and girls, there was no significant relationship between the two measures of self-reported skin shade and skin shade satisfaction. Interestingly, for Black boys, those who reported having darker skin reported greater satisfaction with their skin shade. These analyses outline the importance of skin shade satisfaction but with context varying levels of importance.

3.2 Hypothesis testing

As hypothesized (H1), experiences of colorism were significantly associated with worse body image, even when self-reported skin

TABLE 5 Correlation matrix split by racialized group (Black adolescents – top triangle, South Asian adolescents – bottom triangle).

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. ECS-A In	–	0.567**	0.244**	−0.403**	−0.350**	−0.231**
2. ECS-A W	0.606**	–	0.257**	−0.322**	−0.309**	−0.226**
3. ICS	0.275**	0.206*	–	−0.264**	−0.262**	−0.151
4. RSES	−0.404**	−0.380**	−0.176	–	0.718**	0.393**
5. BESAA-AE	−0.352**	−0.377**	−0.113	0.729**	–	0.413**
6. Skin Shade Sat	−0.306**	−0.224**	−0.102	0.298**	0.389**	–

*$p < .01$, **$p < .001$.

TABLE 6 Correlation matrix split by gender (girls top triangle, boys bottom triangle).

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. ECS-A In	–	0.563**	0.211**	−0.412**	−0.318**	−0.228**
2. ECS-A W	0.594**	–	0.226**	−0.343**	−0.365**	−0.203**
3. ICS	0.379**	0.280**	–	−0.221**	−0.147	−0.136
4. RSES	−0.307**	−0.183*	−0.256**	–	0.767**	0.367**
5. BESAA-AE	−0.316**	−0.136	−0.312**	0.678**	–	0.394**
6. Skin Shade Sat	−0.241**	−0.110	−0.147	0.363**	0.469**	–

*$p < .01$, **$p < .001$.

shade, internalized colorism, skin shade satisfaction, and key demographics (age, racialized group, gender) were included in the model, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.381$, $F(9, 480) = 33.831$, $p < .001$ (see Table 8). Similarly, as hypothesized, experiences of colorism were significantly associated with lower self-esteem, even when self-reported skin shade, internalized colorism, skin shade satisfaction, and key demographics (age, racialized group, gender) were included in the model, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.347$, $F(9, 449) = 27.544$, $p < .001$ (Table 9).

We found partial support for our third hypothesis (H3) that ingroup colorism would have a stronger association with both lower body esteem and self-esteem. Contrary to our expectations, we found that ingroup and outgroup colorism contributed similar variance in the model for body esteem. However, in the model for self-esteem, in line with our hypothesis, ingroup colorism contributed more strongly than outgroup colorism, though both remained significant predictors.

We also found partial support for our fourth hypothesis (H4). Internalized colorism significantly mediated the relationship between ingroup colorism with both body esteem and self-esteem, with statistically significant indirect effects ($p < .001$ and $p < .001$ respectively) and with statistically significant remaining direct effects ($p = .006$ and $p < .001$) indicating partial mediation. See Figure 2.

In contrast, outgroup colorism showed no significant mediation via internalized colorism for either body esteem or self-esteem. Although outgroup colorism significantly predicted internalized colorism ($p = .045$ and $p = .026$, respectively), the indirect effects were not statistically significant ($p = .083$ and $p = .052$ respectively) and the direct effects, although significant for body esteem ($p = .009$) were not for self-esteem ($p = .070$). These findings suggest that internalized colorism is a key mechanism linking ingroup colorism to body esteem and self-esteem.

Notably, age and racialized group were significant in both models, and gender was significant for body esteem. Specifically, age was inversely associated such that older participants reported lower body esteem and self-esteem. Identifying as Black was associated with higher body esteem and self-esteem. Identifying as a girl was associated with lower body esteem.

TABLE 7 Correlations between study variables and skin shade satisfaction.

	Black		South Asian	
Variable	Girls (*n = 163*)	Boys (*n = 134*)	Girls (*n = 131*)	Boys (*n = 116*)
ECS In	−0.195	−0.237*	−0.284*	−0.301*
ECS White	−0.207*	−0.231*	−0.309**	−0.121
ICS	−0.218*	−0.176	−0.070	−0.181
RSES	0.377**	0.353**	0.301**	0.274*
BESAA-AE	0.350**	0.440**	0.399**	0.362**
Skin shade chart	0.121	0.234*	0.165	0.165
Skin shade comparison	0.029	0.242*	0.169	0.139

*$p < .01$; **$p < .001$.

4 Discussion

The present study examined the associations between experiences of colorism and two key indicators of adolescent psychological wellbeing – body esteem (a dimension of body image) and self-esteem – among Black and South Asian adolescents in the UK. Findings extend research focused on racism and adolescent wellbeing (see Priest et al., 2021) by showing how adolescents' experiences with colorism are associated with lower body esteem and self-esteem scores. Results revealed nuances based on the source of colorism, highlighting differences depending on whether colorism

TABLE 8 All participants, multivariate linear model predicting body esteem, adjusted R^2 = 0.381.

Variable	Standardized coefficients *b*	*t*	*p*	95% CI
Skin shade				
Comparative	0.173	3.364	<.001	0.074, 0.280
Skin tone chart	0.245	4.508	<.001	0.140, 0.358
Skin shade attitudes				
Skin shade satisfaction	0.278	6.997	<.001	0.200, 0.357
Internalised colorism	−0.110	−3.050	.002	−0.191, −0.039
Experiences of colorism				
Ingroup	−0.160	−2.737	.006	−0.218, −0.037
Outgroup – White	−0.124	−2.763	.006	−0.210, −0.031
Demographics				
Girl	−0.105	−2.753	.006	−0.181, −0.030
Black	0.244	5.781	<.001	0.162, 0.331
Age	−0.197	−5.258	<.001	−0.271, −0.124

All variables standardized.

TABLE 9 All participants, multivariate linear model predicting self-esteem, adjusted R^2 = 0.347.

Variable	Standardized coefficients *b*	*t*	*p*	95% CI
Skin shade				
Comparative	0.176	3.201	<.001	0.070, 0.289
Skin tone chart	0.200	3.462	<.001	0.088, 0.316
Skin shade attitudes				
Skin Shade Satisfaction	0.212	5.040	<.001	0.130, 0.300
Internalized colorism	−0.116	−2.842	.005	−0.189, −0.031
Experiences of colorism				
Ingroup	−0.220	−4.603	<.001	−0.315, −0.127
Outgroup (White)	−0.094	−1.975	.049	−0.180, 0.000
Demographics				
Girl	−0.075	−1.885	.060	−0.153, 0.005
Black	0.210	4.665	<.001	0.123, 0.301
Age	−0.206	−5.213	<.001	−0.283, −0.127

All variables standardized.

was experienced by people belonging to the same racialized group as participants (ingroup) or by White people (outgroup). For example, results showed that the relationships between ingroup colorism and both body esteem and self-esteem can be partially explained by the extent to which young people internalize colorist ideas. This was not observed when looking at outgroup colorism. Together, these findings contribute to the growing literature on the psychological associations of colorism (e.g., Adams et al., 2020; Craddock et al., 2023a; Craddock et al., 2023b; Sharif and Siddique, 2020).

Descriptive statistics showed that experiences of both ingroup and outgroup colorism occurred relatively infrequently in the everyday lives of Black and South Asian adolescents. However just 18% of participants reported never experiencing any ingroup colorism and 11% reported never experiencing any colorism from White people, suggesting that most young people in the study have some personal experience with the prejudice. Consistent with our first and second hypotheses, adolescents who reported more frequent experiences of colorism, whether from members of their own racialized group or from White people, also reported significantly lower body esteem and lower self-esteem. Consequently, findings suggest that even relatively infrequent experiences of colorist prejudice may be significant in relation to psychological outcomes. It is possible that colorism's potency lies not solely in its frequency but in its meaning and the contexts in which it occurs, with certain incidents carrying disproportionate weight.

With respect to our third hypothesis, we anticipated that ingroup colorism would have a stronger impact than outgroup colorism on both body image and self-esteem. This was partially supported. In line with expectations, ingroup colorism emerged as the stronger predictor of self-esteem, consistent with the view that discrimination from within one's own racialized group may undermine adolescents' sense of belonging and self-acceptance. It is plausible that when colorism is experienced from trusted ingroup sources such as family members or close peers, it carries unique psychological costs due to its violation of expected solidarity (cf. Drake et al., 2024). However, for body esteem, ingroup and outgroup colorism accounted for similar variance, suggesting that experiences of colorism from racialized minority peers and from White people may be equally salient to adolescents' body image. Given that societal appearance ideals are largely shaped by the dominant group (i.e., White people), and that colorism is embedded within these ideals (e.g., Hunter, 2021), adolescents' body image may be particularly sensitive to colorist messages from White people as well as from Black/South Asian people.

Our fourth hypothesis was also partially supported. We found that internalization of colorist beliefs mediated the associations between ingroup colorism and both body image and self-esteem. That is, more frequent exposure to colorism from people belonging to the same racialized background is associated with more negative body image and lower self-esteem in adolescents, and this can be partially explained by the internalization of colorist beliefs. This finding is consistent with qualitative research conducted by Abrams et al. (2020) who found that Black adolescent girls in the USA linked light skin to perceived attractiveness, higher social status, and favorable personality traits, implying a degree of internalization.

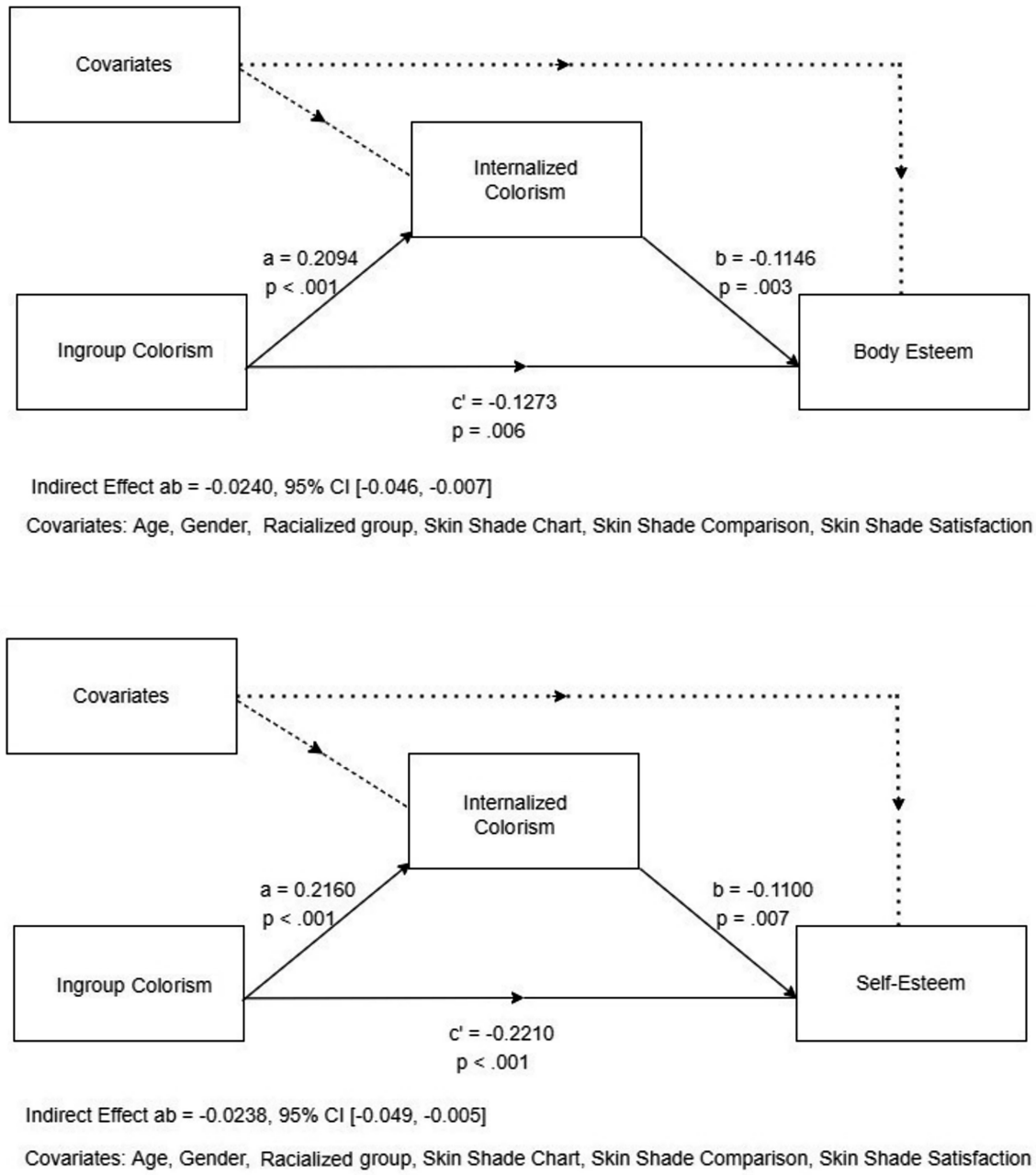

FIGURE 2
Mediation models for body esteem (top) and self-esteem (bottom).

In contrast, we found that experiences of colorism from White people were not mediated by internalized colorism, indicating that young people may respond differently to colorism based on the source of colorist experiences. Colorism from White people may be more readily construed as an external manifestation of racism (i.e., a threat or devaluation imposed from an outgroup) and so is not associated with internalization of the prejudice in the same way as when colorism is experienced from the ingroup. Despite this, our data revealed a direct effect between colorism by White people and worse body image, indicating that such outgroup experiences influence body image even in the absence of explicit internalization of colorist ideology. Thus, while internalization helps to explain how ingroup colorism undermines body image and self-esteem, it does not fully capture how outgroup colorism exerts influence. Based on previous research with adults, it is plausible that skin shade surveillance (i.e., the ongoing monitoring and comparison of one's own skin shade) is a relevant mechanism between colorism from the dominant group (in this case White people) and psychological outcomes. In a UK sample of Black, Asian, and other racialized adults, Craddock et al. (2023a) and Craddock et al. (2023b) found that outgroup colorism was associated with increased skin shade surveillance, which in turn was linked with worse body image.

As colorism is often described as a gendered phenomenon (Hunter, 2021), we examined patterns in the data by gender. Our exploratory

analysis showed that both Black and South Asian girls reported higher ingroup colorism than their male peers, suggesting that girls may be particularly vulnerable to ingroup prejudice and mistreatment based on their skin shade. In contrast, there were no differences by gender when comparing colorism from White people among both Black and South Asian participants indicating that outgroup colorism may be experienced more uniformly across girls and boys. These findings align with research conducted with minoritized ethnic adults which showed women reported higher overt experiences of ingroup colorism than men (Craddock et al., 2023b). Additionally, results from this study found that gender was a significant predictor of adolescent body image but not self-esteem. Specifically, being a girl remained significantly associated with lower body esteem in the model that included experiences of colorism, internalized colorism, skin shade, skin shade satisfaction, racialized group and age. This reflects the broader body image literature that finds that adolescent girls often experience more intense appearance pressure than boys and consequently are typically considered to be at higher risk of experiencing poor body image (Calogero and Thompson, 2010).

Interestingly, we found racialized group differences for outgroup but not for ingroup colorism. Both Black girls and boys reported more frequent colorism from White people than South Asian girls and boys, respectively. This is partially consistent with earlier adult data which found that Black participants reported more frequent experiences of colorism from White people and from racialized peers when compared with Asian participants (Craddock et al., 2023b). Racialized group was significant in both linear models indicating that being Black was associated with higher body esteem and self-esteem when controlling for all other variables including experiences of colorism, internalized colorism, skin shade and skin shade satisfaction. This suggests a greater degree of resilience among Black participants, although further research is warranted to examine this more closely, as it is equally possible that other factors are at play (e.g., greater social support).

Our exploratory findings also point to important developmental considerations. Older adolescents in the sample reported more frequent experiences of both ingroup and outgroup colorism. This could reflect growing cognitive maturity and critical consciousness, but it might also indicate that social networks expand in ways that expose adolescents to more diverse and potentially discriminatory interactions over time. In addition, older adolescents may also experience the impact of colorism more acutely as dating and romantic relationships become more salient domains for appearance-related evaluation (Phoenix and Craddock, 2024b). Future longitudinal research could help disentangle these possibilities and examine how the timing and accumulation of colorist experiences shape trajectories of body image and self-esteem.

Finally, our finding that adolescents in this sample were generally satisfied with their skin shade with 85% reporting satisfaction or high satisfaction, is noteworthy. While positive self-evaluations of skin shade were common, these attitudes did not necessarily insulate against the negative impact of colorist experiences on body image and self-esteem. Indeed, both ingroup and outgroup colorism were negatively correlated with skin shade satisfaction, and skin shade satisfaction was strongly and consistently linked to body esteem and self-esteem across gender and racialized groups. This pattern reinforces previous findings that skin shade satisfaction is associated with other appearance-related outcomes as well as well-being more broadly (Ladd et al., 2022), but that its protective capacity may be compromised in the face of repeated or salient discriminatory experiences.

4.1 Limitations and future directions

This study is not without limitations. While the cross-sectional design allows for examination of associations, causal inferences cannot be made. Additionally, this study focused on colorist experiences based solely on skin shade. Yet, many definitions of colorism include phenotypical features beyond skin shade, so some nuances may be overlooked. For example, Mitchell Dove (2021) found that Black girls often encounter damaging stereotypes related to hair texture, where straight hair is deemed "beautiful" while curly, coiled or coarse hair is not. Moreover, Mitchell Dove (2021) highlighted how these stereotypes were linked to experiences of discrimination and argued that hair was relevant to Black girls' identity and self-esteem. Further, we only used one measure of body image. It would be valuable to explore the role of colorism on other aspects of body image such as body appreciation and body dissatisfaction. Relatedly, measuring mechanisms linked to worse body image such as self-surveillance and internalization of a light skin ideal would provide deeper understanding that would be valuable in intervention development. Finally, we only tested one plausible mechanism to explain relationships between experiences of colorism and body image and self-esteem – the internalization of colorist beliefs. Future studies should examine multiple mechanisms simultaneously to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the pathways linking colorism to wellbeing. For example, in line with previous research, it could be worth including skin shade surveillance or internalization of a White appearance ideal specifically (Craddock et al., 2023a; Harper and Choma, 2019) with UK minoritized ethnic adolescents.

Despite these limitations, this research adds to the limited quantitative evidence on colorism among adolescents in the UK, demonstrating its significant association with both body esteem and self-esteem across two racialized groups. The findings underscore the importance of considering not only an individual's skin shade, their satisfaction with their skin shade or even the internalization of colorist beliefs, but also the direct, lived experiences of discrimination. Findings also demonstrate the value of disaggregating ingroup and outgroup sources of colorism.

4.2 Implications

This study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how colorism operates in adolescence, with clear implications for research, practice, and policy aimed at promoting equitable and affirming environments for minoritized ethnic young people living in the UK. Findings highlight the need for targeted prevention and education efforts in both school and community settings to address colorism explicitly, rather than subsuming it under broader discussions of racism. Second, given the heightened vulnerability observed among South Asian girls, who were found to have lower self-esteem, body esteem, and skin shade satisfaction than Black girls, interventions should be gender- and culturally responsive, incorporating strategies to promote media literacy, critical reflection on societal appearance ideals, and affirmation of diverse skin shades. Third, the finding that ingroup colorism can be particularly detrimental to self-esteem

suggests that family- and peer-based interventions may be especially important. These could include workshops or facilitated dialogues within minoritized ethnic communities to challenge entrenched biases and promote intra-group solidarity and ethnic pride. Notably, Rosario et al. (2021) found that Black girls who actively rejected colorist beliefs reported higher self-esteem, underscoring the connection between appearance-related concerns and the affirmation of Black identity. The same may also apply for South Asian girls.

5 Conclusion

This study shows that even infrequent everyday experiences of colorism, whether from one's own racialized group or from White individuals, is associated with lower body esteem and self-esteem among Black and South Asian adolescents in the UK. With stronger associations between ingroup colorism and body image and self-esteem than outgroup colorism, results indicate a greater psychological cost of prejudice experienced within racialized groups. Further, variations by gender and racialized group suggest the need for more in-depth research focused on specific demographic profiles to better understand cultural and gendered nuances. Recognizing colorism as a distinct form of discrimination, and addressing it explicitly through education, policy, and community initiatives, will be essential to creating more equitable and affirming environments for minoritized ethnic youth.

Data availability statement

The cleaned data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by King's College London – Research Ethics Committee. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardians/next of kin.

Author contributions

NC: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Data curation, Project administration, Resources, Methodology. AP: Project administration, Funding acquisition, Resources, Writing – review & editing. PW: Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis, Methodology.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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EDITED BY
Aisha Phoenix,
King's College London, United Kingdom

REVIEWED BY
Santiago Gómez Echeverry,
VU Amsterdam, Netherlands
Alexander Adames,
University of Michigan, United States

*CORRESPONDENCE
Monique D. A. Kelly
✉ kellymo5@msu.edu

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Reimagining "racial" stratification and inequality: inter- and intraracial colorism in Trinidad and Tobago

Monique D. A. Kelly*

Department of Sociology, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, United States

Introduction: Research on ethnoracial inequality in Trinidad and Tobago has principally focused on intergroup comparisons using broad census categories to examine differential access to key outcomes. Fewer studies, however, have examined how colorism—the systemic conferral of (dis)advantages based on one's rank on a skin shade gradient—shapes life chances. Using skin shade, an embodied cue used in the ascription of race, may offer more nuanced and comprehensive understandings of inequality. Conceptualizing colorism as a continuum bounded both between and within racialized groups, this study offers a unique lens on how skin shade structures socioeconomic outcomes.
Method: Using nationally representative data from the 2010–2023 AmericasBarometer surveys, I examine the impact of interviewer-rater skin color on two key indicators of socioeconomic wellbeing—educational attainment and relative wealth—both inter- and intraracially. I also assess the relative effects of intraracial colorism by ethnoracial group.
Results: Findings show that darker skin is significantly associated with reduced odds of attaining higher levels of education and reduced access to household amenities. Intraracially, color-based disparities persist across all groups: East Indians are most affected in terms of educational access, while mixed-race individuals show the largest disparities in household amenities.
Discussion: The study highlights the multidimensionality of colorism by integrating intraracial and interracial analyses. By centering the case of Trinidad and Tobago, the findings highlight the enduring power of embodied cues—i.e., skin shade—in structuring social outcomes. Moreover, this study emphasizes the need for increased recognition of colorism as an active and salient racialized stratifier that shapes life chances, apart from more commonly centered "racial" divisions.

KEYWORDS

Anglophone Caribbean, colorism, educational attainment, household amenities, skin shade stratification, Trinidad and Tobago

1 Introduction

Research on racialized inequality has primarily focused on intergroup comparisons, often positioning individuals within constrained socially constructed "ethnoracial" categories (Monk, 2022; Strmic-Pawl et al., 2021). These categories often group individuals based on perceived commonalties of ancestry, language, religion, and/or geographical origin (Dixon and Telles, 2017). However, such nominal categories often obscure heterogeneity within

groups, blur commonalities across them, and flatten gradational differences in racialized social experiences. This framework also cannot account for embodied traits, such as skin shade, that serve as visible cues used to assign ethnoracial typicality (Banton, 2012; Monk, 2022; Wade, 2012). Although ethnoracial determinations based on skin shade gradations are oftentimes coupled with other phenotypic characteristics, like facial features and hair type, skin shade remains a central cue in these appraisals (Feliciano, 2016; Flores and Telles, 2012) and drives cognitive judgments connected to group based stereotypes (Jablonski, 2021; Maddox, 2004; Maddox et al., 2022).

Previous research has consistently shown that skin shade operates as a distinct and salient stratifier, that functions as a form of embodied capital that corresponds to material benefits (Ellis and Destine, 2023; Hunter, 2007, 2021; Monk et al., 2021). The social and economic capital gained from the embodied trait of skin shade is referred to as colorism—the unequal distribution of material (dis)advantages along a color continuum (Hunter, 2007; Monk, 2021a; Tate, 2007). In fact, studies frequently find that lighter skin shade is often associated with systemic advantages across domains such as socioeconomic status, health, partner selection, and judicial treatment, though exceptions exist (Adames, 2023; Hall, 2022; Hall and Mishra, 2024; Monk, 2016, 2021b; Painter et al., 2019).

Centering phenotypic cues in the production of racialized stratification is therefore essential (Monk, 2022). By investigating how social perceptions and context shape the impact of colorism on racialized groups, scholars can more effectively identify the underlying dynamics through which skin shade stratification operates (Dias, 2020; Hordge-Freeman, 2015). The (dis)advantages associated with skin shade unfold within the symbolic boundaries of contextual ethnoracial commonsense. That is, based on a society's specific history and dynamics of racial formation (Omi and Winant, 2018), the effects of colorism may vary based on how skin shade maps onto presumed prototypical features of ethnoracial categories in each society (Cartwright, 2022; Pedulla, 2018). Taken together, this body of work suggests that examining the impacts of skin shade on life outcomes not only reveal forms of inequality that might otherwise remain obscured but also provides a more precise, comprehensive, and theoretically robust lens for examining the reproduction of social inequality than census-based categories alone.

Although extensive, much of the literature on colorism has emphasized either interracial or intraracial dynamics in isolation, with few exceptions (e.g., Barlow et al., 2025; Branigan et al., 2017; Painter and Holmes, 2023). This focus leaves both an empirical and theoretical gap in our understanding of how perceived ethnoracial typicality and skin shade stratification vary among racialized groups across contexts. By comparing how colorism operates both between- and within-groups, this dual approach highlights its multidimensional nature (Dixon and Telles, 2017; Monk, 2022; Strmic-Pawl et al., 2021) and reveals variations in skin shade stratification across social outcomes. To address these gaps, I center the case of Trinidad and Tobago and draw on data from the AmericasBarometer to examine the association between interviewer-rated skin color and two key indicators of socioeconomic wellbeing, both interracially and intraracially. I then assess the relative effects of colorism within each ethnoracial group on these outcomes.

Trinidad and Tobago is both theoretically and empirically significant for several reasons. First, it fills a critical empirical and theoretical gap by providing quantitative analysis of colorism and its structural impacts in the Anglophone Caribbean—an underexplored region where such work remains scarce. Second, the country's substantial ethnoracial diversity (Central International Agency, 2025) offers a unique opportunity to examine stratification outside of a U.S.-centric Black–White binary, particularly among intermediate ethnoracial groups. This illustrates how pigmentocratic hierarchies can persist in a majority non-White society, while also challenging assumptions rooted in the region's tripolar racialized hierarchy of White, mixed-race, and Black.

Third, the study advances understanding of how skin shade structures inequality by situating colorism with Trinidad and Tobago's racialized past. Colonial policy often pitted East Indian indentured servants against emancipated West Africans (Munasinghe, 2018; Reddy, 2011; Williams, 1962) and the consequences of such policies and subsequent ethnoracial tensions are well documented (Brereton, 2010; Gosine, 1987; Rakhal-Fraser, 2022a, 2022b; Rampersad, 2022; Ryan et al., 1979; Stone, 1972). Literature on racial inequality has thus focused on disparities between Black (Afro-) and East Indian (Indo-) Trinbagonians (Coppin and Olsen, 1998; Premdas and Bangura, 2006; Schimanski et al., 2018; Sriskandarajah, 2005). As a result, our understanding of how skin shade influences social outcomes remains limited (e.g., Kelly, 2022; Khadan and Ruprah, 2024; McCree, 2015; Painter et al., 2019), and within group distinctions remain relatively understudied, often focusing narrowly on Afro- and/or Indo-Trinbagonians (e.g., Doubeni, 2017; Elwin, 2022; Khan, 2009; Rampersad, 2012).

Additionally, the country has a large mixed-race population, whom historically have had greater access to wealth, education, and skill attainment, along with greater chances of being manumitted compared to many mono-racial and darker skinned Black people. As lighter skin shade was often used as a marker of racial admixture during enslavement (McCree, 2015; Stewart, 2004; Williams, 1962), color has long played a central role in racialized stratification. Fourth, by situating Trinidad and Tobago within broader sociological debates, the study enriches the field of social stratification by expanding the geographic and contextual scope of research, demonstrating how insights from Trinidad and Tobago can complicate and expand sociological theorization.

1.1 Theoretical framework

Monk (2022) presents an Infracategorical Model of Inequality (ICMI) as a means to move beyond reliance on state categories, which often limit analytic clarity and nuanced comprehension, to broaden our understanding of social inequality. The model therefore shifts attention from nominal group membership to the embodied cues of typicality that shape classification. Thus, emphasizes disaggregating differences by centering the body itself (i.e., bodily capital; see Ellis and Destine, 2023; Hordge-Freeman, 2015; Hunter, 2011; Monk et al., 2021), which signals social status and group belonging. To this end, Monk (2022) argues that examining colorism offers a valuable alternative lens with which to examine racialized inequality as differences in social outcomes observed between nominal ethnoracial groups often vary by skin shade. For example, research on colorism has shown that among African Americans, within-group disparities are sometimes greater than between-group disparities (Keith and Herring, 1991; Monk, 2015). Examining skin shade stratification thus

offers critical insights into enduring questions of racial inequality. In doing so, the ICMI draws attention to the often-overlooked processes of social perception in structuring inequality yet carries little sociopolitical salience.

The extensive evidence provided by Monk (2022) affirms the existence of within-group inequality based on factors that shape ethnoracial prototypicality. This work highlights how skin shade, as a form of bodily capital, influences the racialization of individuals in specific contexts—such as the United States in Monk's case—and how these processes are reinforced through institutions. In many postcolonial societies, lighter skin is especially advantageous because it signifies closeness to Whiteness (or White men) (Livesay, 2018; Sio, 1976). This proximity not only reflects colonial histories but also elevates individuals within racialized hierarchies based on their skin shade. Scholars have similarly conceptualized Whiteness itself as a form of bodily capital that includes lighter skin shade as well as other physical and linguistic features (Adames, 2023; Delgado, 2018). The degree of bodily capital ascribed to a person can then be converted into other forms of capital, such as social and economic resources (Hunter, 2002; Monk et al., 2021).

Due to ethnoracial classifications produced through colonialism, enslavement, indentured labor, and migration, lighter skin shades may signal intermediary status within the Americas' hierarchal racialized field of White supremacy and anti-Blackness.[1] Therefore, the value and conversion of lighter-skin bodily capital, as well as the severity of colorism, depend on the racialized group in question, the context of racialization, and the extent to which skin shade is perceived to affirm or violate local ethnoracial typicality.

In societies within Latin America and the Caribbean, race is not conceptualized as rigidly as in the U.S. (Davenport, 2020; Dixon and Telles, 2017), as such, there is often greater room for interracial differentiation. For example, research on racial fluidity—the socio-contextual malleability of race (Davenport, 2020; Telles and Paschel, 2014)—shows that across the Americas, higher socioeconomic status is often classified as White. In the U.S., studies have found that some individuals are more likely to be classified (by interviewers) and identify as White over time as their social position increases, and as Black following prolonged periods of status loss (Saperstein and Penner, 2012).

Conversely, in Latin America and the Caribbean, research has shown that higher status does not consistently "Whiten" racial identification. In fact, scholars have identified varying trends: "polarization" (higher status individuals identifying more frequently as either Black or White); "darkening" (higher status individuals selecting darker racial categories); and "mestizoization" (a shift toward lighter/mixed-race/mestizo classification) (Kelly, 2025; McNamee, 2020; Roth et al., 2022; Telles and Flores, 2013; Telles and Paschel, 2014).

Moreover, research has shown that skin shade does not neatly map onto racial identification in all contexts (e.g., Telles and Paschel, 2014). Taken together, this body of work demonstrates the greater variability and complexity of racialization processes and understandings across the region.

The context of Trinidad and Tobago therefore proves useful for examining the centrality of embodied cues of typicality, namely skin shade, and how these cues differentially shape the socioeconomic capital associated with skin shade (i.e., colorism). Given the complexity of the country's racial formation, post-independence shifts in the intersection of race, color, and class (Ryan and Stewart, 1995; Tate, 2007), centering stratification based on skin shade in the Trinidadian context may demonstrate how reliance on official classifications, while locally specific, function in similar ways across settings to obscure more nuanced and comprehensive dimensions of inequality.

1.2 Colorism in Trinidad and Tobago

Once a British colony, Trinidad and Tobago was shaped by an extractive plantation economy. Prior to British rule, the islands were controlled at various times by colonial powers including the Spanish, French, Dutch, and Courlanders. British authority was formally established in 1814, and in 1889, the unification of Trinidad and Tobago created a single British crown colony (Khadan and Ruprah, 2024; Williams, 1962). Historically, society was structured around a color-based hierarchy: white people at the top, Browns or "coloreds" (often mixed-race individuals) in the middle, and Black people at the bottom. This hierarchy was closely tied to class: Lighter skin was associated with privilege, wealth, and power, while darker skin correlated with poverty and marginalization (Braithwaite, 1953; McCree, 2015; Nettleford, 1998). The arrival of large numbers of (East) Indian laborers beginning in 1839 (Persaud, 2024), alongside imported workers from China, West Africa, and Madeira (i.e., Portuguese), made the country's ethnoracial composition more complex (Braithwaite, 1953).

British policies exacerbated division between Black and East Indian populations. For example, policies allowed East Indian laborers to acquire land instead of return passage, facilitating a transition to peasant farming, enabling the group to remain in the agricultural sector (Munasinghe, 2018; Reddy, 2011). By 1902, East Indians produced over half the island's sugar cane and had expanded into cocoa and rice farming. Many emancipated Africans, however, were forced to resort to squatting due to the inflated prices of land bordering estates (Williams, 1962; Kelly, 2023). Despite earlier unity between the two ethnoracial groups during the 1930s labor movements, politics soon became ethnically polarized, with low voter turnout and fragmented ethnically divided support in the 1946 elections (Khadan and Ruprah, 2024).

In 1955, Dr. Eric Williams founded the People's National Movement, which, although officially multiethnic, was largely aligned with the interests of the Black Trinbagonians. Another salient expression of this inter-ethnoracial tension is persistent differential ethnoracial support for governmental parties (Bahadoorsingh, 1968; Brereton, 2010; Ryan et al., 1979; Stone, 1972). Contemporarily, it has been observed that this ethnoracial

1 A point to note here is that in regions such as Asia and North Africa, lighter skin has long functioned as a marker of class and privilege independent of Western racial hierarchies. My aim is not to superimpose the centrality of Eurocentric ideals onto all contexts, but rather to highlight how racialization operates within the Americas—the region of the current study—and the racial logics to which immigrants in this region may be subjected.

political divide is rife with race-baiting among political leaders (Rampersad, 2022), spurring public discourse on the seeming inability of political leaders to transcend these ethnopolitical cleavages (Anon, 2022; Rakhal-Fraser, 2022a, 2022b). However, scholars tend to frame these ethnopolitical tensions as superficial, because ethnoracial conflict or violence has not erupted with much frequency or potency within the country (Reddy, 2011; Sriskandarajah, 2005).

Leading up to independence in 1962, Afro-Trinbagonians were largely urban and educated, Indo-Trinbagonians were rural and land-owning, and White people dominated capital—reflecting a broader social hierarchy that also included the Chinese, Syrians/Lebanese, and Portuguese (Kelly, 2023; Rajkumar, 2006; Reddy, 2011). The intersection of race, color, and class began to shift post-independence due to education reform, economic expansion, and the Black Power movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Ryan and Stewart, 1995; Tate, 2007). These changes enabled upward mobility for both Black and East Indian individuals, reshaping the middle class (Ryan, 1991; Schimanski et al., 2018). However, inequality persists, with both groups continuing to trail White people and other smaller ethnoracial groups, particularly in income and education (Kelly, 2023).

Previous studies on colorism across racialized groups have reported consistent findings. For example, in my previous work (Kelly, 2022), I used data from the AmericasBarometer and national censuses, examined ethnoracial inequality in Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago. I situated the Anglophone Caribbean region's tripolar racialized framework within broader comparative discussions of race in the Americas. Employing a multidimensional approach to consider both ethnoracial identification and skin shade, I analyzed their effects on three indicators of socioeconomic status. In Trinidad and Tobago, though both racial identity and skin shade were found to be equally effective in explaining observed patterns of inequality, findings indicated that darker-skinned Trinbagonians faced greater disadvantages in education, income, and household amenities.

Adopting a similar multidimensional measure of race, Painter et al. (2019) also found skin shade and asset ownership to be significantly associated: darker skinned respondents were less likely to own homes or a car. Khadan and Ruprah (2024) also find comparable outcomes for income across ethnoracial groups, although their analysis focuses exclusively on Black, East Indian, and mixed-race Trinbagonians.

In addition to how colorism operates across racialized groups in Trinidad and Tobago, it also manifests within-groups. Though there is a dearth of research on the matter, the few existing studies highlight that lighter-skinned Black individuals are often more likely to attain higher status than their darker-skinned counterparts (Bernard, 2015; Doubeni, 2017; Elwin, 2022; Stewart, 2004). Among East Indians, colorism is similarly shaped by caste-influenced norms, with lighter skin shade being highly valued (Braithwaite, 1953; Khan, 2009; Vijaya, 2019), especially in endogamous marriages (Dhillon-Jamerson, 2019).

Skin color should therefore be understood as a salient marker of social status, one that can operate independently of broader racialized categorizations. It thus requires explicit attention in analyses of racialized inequality.

2 Data and methods

2.1 Data

This study is distinct in offering a quantitative analysis of skin shade stratification by examining the multidimensionality of colorism within a single national population: Trinidad and Tobago. It draws on all available waves of the AmericasBarometer social surveys conducted there: 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2023. The data were collected as part of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), housed at Vanderbilt University, with fieldwork support from the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine. Face-to-face surveys were administered in English to nationally representative samples of voting-age adults. The complex sampling design used stratified, multi-stage cluster sampling based on three factors: (1) municipality size, (2) urban versus rural classification, and (3) regions. This approach produced an estimated sampling error of approximately 2.4–2.5% across waves and yielded sample sizes ranging from 1,505 to 4,207 respondents. The four waves were merged into a combined unweighted sample of 8,878 individuals.

2.2 Measures

Socioeconomic wellbeing was measured by two key indicators: educational attainment and household amenities.

In the 2010, 2012, and 2014 waves, education was measured as a continuous variable ranging from 0 to 18 years of schooling. In 2023, it was measured as a seven-category ordinal variable. For consistency across survey years, educational attainment was recoded into four categories: 0 = no formal education (none), 1 = primary-level education (1–7 years of schooling), 2 = secondary-level education (8–12 years; reference), and 3 = tertiary-level education (13 or more years) (Esnard, 2021). In Trinidad and Tobago, some students may choose to return to high school for an additional 2 years of study, after which they take the Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination (CAPE) and receive an associate degree (Caribbean Examinations Council, 2025). However, because not all students pursue this option—many proceed directly to college—I classify this level of education within the broader tertiary education category.

Household amenities were measured using a standardized factor score based on a relative wealth index developed by LAPOP (Cordova, 2008). The index included eight consistently available items across all waves: refrigerator, cellular phone, washing machine, microwave, indoor plumbing, computer/laptop, flat panel TV, and internet access. Exploratory factor analysis identified two factors with eigenvalues greater than one; however, only one factor was retained after removing items with factor loadings below a 0.3 (i.e., refrigerator and cellphone; Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy = 0.690). The remaining 6-items loaded onto a single factor (eigenvalue = 1.655), which was then standardized, with higher number indicating greater household amenities access (Cronbach's alpha = 0.700) (see Kelly, 2020, 2022, 2024).

Skin color was assessed by interviewers using the Project on Ethnicity and Race in Latin America (PERLA) palette, an ordinal 11-point scale ranging from 1 (lightest) to 11 (darkest). To distinguish between intraracial and interracial colorism, I decompose the measure

into two components using group-mean centering: (1) a between-group component representing the average skin color rating for each ethnoracial group and (2) a within-group component, representing the deviation of each respondent from their respective ethnoracial group's mean skin color. For analyses, I restrict the sample to respondents self-identified as Black, mixed, or (East) Indian. The mixed category includes Douglas (Black–East Indian parentage) and other mixed-race individuals, though the LAPOP data do not disaggregate this group—representing both a limitation and an avenue for further research. This decomposition separates the effects of skin shade stratification that operates within racial groups from those that reflect the broader ethnoracial hierarchy linked to skin shade across groups.

Sociodemographic control variables included sex (1 = female), residential location (reference = urban), age (18–98), marital status (1 = married), employment status (1 = employed), survey year (to control for period effects), and interviewer skin color (measured on a scale from 1 to 11), which was included to control for interviewer effects (see Hill, 2002; Kelly, 2022). Additionally, educational attainment was used as a control variable in models predicting household amenities, given its strong connection with asset ownership. Household income was excluded to retain the largest possible sample. Although colorism may influence covariates, such as marital status and employment, including these variables do not compromise the analyses as the primary aim of the study is to estimate the direct effect of skin shade on socioeconomic outcomes, net of sociodemographic controls.

2.3 Methods

I first present weighted summary statistics for all outcome and independent variables along with bivariate distributions of skin color by ethnoracial status. To examine the relationship between skin color and socioeconomic wellbeing, I employed multilevel mixed effects models. As respondents were nested within primary sampling units (PSUs), this modeling strategy accounted for the stratified and clustered sampling design of the AmericasBaromter, while allowing for the estimation of both within-group (intraracial) and between-group (interracial) racialized skin shade differences. Specifically, I estimated the association between skin color and educational attainment using multilevel ordered logit models and used multilevel linear regression models to assess skin color differences in household amenities.

To confirm the appropriateness of multilevel modeling, I first estimated a null model and calculated the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) and the likelihood ratio test. I then examined intra- and interracial differences through stepwise modeling, employing a total of three models. Model 1 assessed intraracial differences (i.e., within-group skin color [whether respondents are darker or lighter relative to their racial group's mean skin color]). Model 2 added between-group skin color (mean skin color for each racial group) to Model 1. Model 3 incorporated interactions of within-group skin color and racial group to evaluate whether the effects of intraracial colorism varied across the three ethnoracial groups.

All models included random intercepts (without random slopes), Level 1 sociodemographic controls, survey year, and sample weights. Robust standard errors were used to adjust for heteroskedasticity and remaining survey design complexities. To compare model fit across nested specifications, the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) are reported, and likelihood-ratios were computed from re-estimated models without robust standard errors (not shown). In models predicting educational attainment and household amenities, I excluded the category "no formal education" due to the small sample size.

To assess whether the effects of skin shade stratification varied across ethnoracial groups, I first conducted a joint significance test for Model 3. I then estimated predicted marginal effects from this model to quantify the expected change in educational attainment or household amenities associated with one-unit increase in within-group skin color for each group. Additionally, to illustrate the magnitude of colorism effects for both socioeconomic outcomes—and to compare magnitudes across groups—I graphed predicted values at the lighter-than-average (−2), average (0), and darker-than-average (+2) within-group skin color positions for each ethnoracial group.

3 Results

3.1 Descriptive findings

Table 1 presents all variables used in the multilevel analyses, detailing their measurement, level, and definitions.

Table 2 presents weighted summary statistics for the pooled sample. Respondents were equally distributed by gender and had an average age of 39.7 years. Sixty percent were employed, 76.6% resided in urban areas, and approximately one-third were married. Educational attainment was relatively high: 54.2% had completed or had some level of secondary education and 29.6% had some level of tertiary education. The household amenities standardized factor score had a mean of −0.009, indicating that respondents in the sample had average access.

The average skin color rating across the pooled sample was 6.4 (on an 11-point scale), with respondents identifying as Black (42%), mixed-race (26%), and East Indian (32%). The within-group skin color variable—which captures the deviation of each respondent's skin shade from their intraracial group's mean skin color—displayed wide variation, ranging from −5.201 to 5.354. The between-group skin color variable defined as the average skin color rating within each ethnoracial group, consisted of mean skin color ratings of 7.201, 5.646, and 5.755 for Black, mixed, and East Indian respondents, respectively.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of interviewer-rated skin color for Black, mixed, and East Indian self-identified respondents on an 11-point scale. Although all three groups are represented across the full range of the scale, Afro-Trinbagonians are more heavily represented at the darker end, particularly between 7 (23.8%) and 8 (24.2%). Mixed respondents display the lightest overall distribution, clustering between ratings 4 and 7 (77.1%). Indo-Trinbagonian respondents are most concentrated at ratings 5 (24.9%) and 6 (28.4%), with percentages declining sharply thereafter. All three ethnoracial groups show relatively low representation at the extreme ends of the scale (1–2 and 10–11). These patterns highlight the heterogeneity of skin shade both within- and between-groups.

TABLE 1 Variables used in multilevel analysis.

Variables	Level	Measurement/coding	Description
Educational attainment	1	Ordered categorical: 0 = none; 1 = primary; 2 = high school; 3 = tertiary	Respondent's completed educational attainment
Household amenities	1	Continuous standardized factor score derived from factor analysis of 8 household-amenity items, with the final factor extracted from 6 retained items	Standardized household wealth measure reflecting relative material wellbeing; higher scores = greater wealth
Skin color		Continuous 1–11 PERLA palette (from lightest to darkest)	Interviewer rated skin color
Within-group skin color	1	Continuous deviation score: skin color – between race skin color	Individual's skin color relative to their racial group mean; values can be negative or positive
Between-group skin color	1	Group mean of skin color within each ethnoracial category	Average skin color of racial group; constant for all individuals in the same race
Ethnoracial Category	1	Categorical: Black, Mixed, East Indian	Cluster variable defining groups with random intercepts
Female	1	Binary: 1 = female, 0 = male	Respondent's sex
Age (in years)	1	Continuous (18–98)	Respondent's age at survey
Employed	1	Binary: 1 = employed, 0 = not employed	Current employment status
Married	1	Binary: 1 = married, 0 = unmarried	Legal marital status
Urban residency	1	Binary: 1 = urban, 0 = rural	Indicator for living in an urban area
Interviewer skin color	1	Continuous (1–11)	Interviewer's rated skin color based on the PERLA color scale
Survey year	1	Dummy indicators: 2010 (ref), 2012, 2014, 2023	Year of data collection
Primary Sampling Unit (PSU)	2	Categorical cluster identifier	Survey sampling cluster; modeled with a random intercept

3.2 Regression analyses: educational attainment

Table 3 presents weighted coefficients from four multilevel mixed-effects ordered logit models predicting educational attainment. The null model provides the baseline distribution of educational attainment across PSUs. Model 1 introduces the within-group component of skin color (skin_within; deviation from group skin shade average), Model 2 adds the between-group component (skin_mean; average skin shade of racial group), and Model 3 includes interactions between within-group skin color and ethnoracial category. Likelihood ratio test of the null model reveal that multilevel modeling was a better fit for the data than a standard ordered logit model ($\chi^2 = 313.35$, $p < 0.001$).[2] This finding justifies the use of multilevel modeling when examining educational difference among the sample.

Model 1 of Table 3 estimates the association between within-group skin color and educational attainment, controlling for sociodemographic characteristics and survey year. Results reveal that the two measures are significantly associated. Specifically, results show that respondents with darker skin, relative to intra-group members, have significantly lower odds of completing higher levels of education ($\beta = -0.145$, $p < 0.001$).

Model 2 of Table 3 incorporates both within-group skin color and between-group skin color to examine the intraracial and interracial impacts of skin shade. Findings show that both components of skin color are statistically significant. For intraracial differences, darker skin shade continues to be negatively and significantly associated with higher levels of education ($p < 0.001$). This is also the same for interracial skin shade differences; respondents from darker-skinned ethnoracial groups, on average, experience further educational disadvantage. That is, these respondents have a reduced odds of reaching higher education categories, even after accounting for their individual skin shade ($\beta = -0.146$, $p < 0.001$).

According to Model 3, which includes interactions between within-group skin color and ethnoracial group, the effects of skin shade vary significantly across groups. Among Black respondents, within-group skin color decreases but remains negative and statistically significant ($\beta = -0.098$, $p < 0.001$). The interaction of within-group skin color and the mixed ethnoracial category is negative but not statistically significant, whereas results from interactions for within-group skin color and East Indian respondents are both negative and significant ($\beta = -0.119$, $p < 0.01$). This suggests that the negative and significant association between skin shade and educational attainment is stronger for East Indian respondents compared to Black respondents (reference group). A joint Wald test confirms that the within-group skin-color slopes differ significantly across the three ethnoracial groups ($\chi^2(2) = 7.17$, $p < 0.05$), providing strong evidence that the effect of within-group skin color on educational attainment is not uniform across groups.

2 Likelihood ratio test derived from unweight null model, not shown.

TABLE 2 Weighted summary statistics for key variables used in multilevel analyses (N = 8,157).

Variables	Mean	S.E.	Min	Max
Educational attainment	–	–	1	3
Primary	0.162	0.005	–	–
High school	0.542	0.007	–	–
Tertiary schooling	0.296	0.007	–	–
Household amenities	−0.009	0.009	−2.585	0.632
Skin color	6.434	0.024	1	11
Within-group skin color	0.104	0.022	−5.201	5.354
Between-group skin color	6.330	0.010	5.646	7.201
Black (group mean skin color)	7.201	–	–	–
Mixed (group mean skin color)	5.646	–	–	–
East Indian (group mean skin color)	5.755	–	–	–
Ethnoracial category	–	–	1	3
Black	0.418	0.007	–	–
Mixed	0.264	0.006	–	–
East Indian	0.318	0.007	–	–
Female	0.499	0.007	0	1
Age (in years)	39.710	0.224	18	98
Employed	0.602	0.007	0	1
Married	0.329	0.007	0	1
Urban residency	0.766	0.006	0	1
Interviewer skin color	6.077	0.023	1	11
Survey year	–	–	2010	2023
2010	0.172	0.005	–	–
2012	0.172	0.005	–	–
2014	0.477	0.007	–	–
2023	0.179	0.005	–	–
PSU	898.719	24.1001	1	9,705

Means and standard errors (S.E.) are rounded to three decimal places.
Respondents with no formal schooling (n = 49) were excluded due to small cell size.

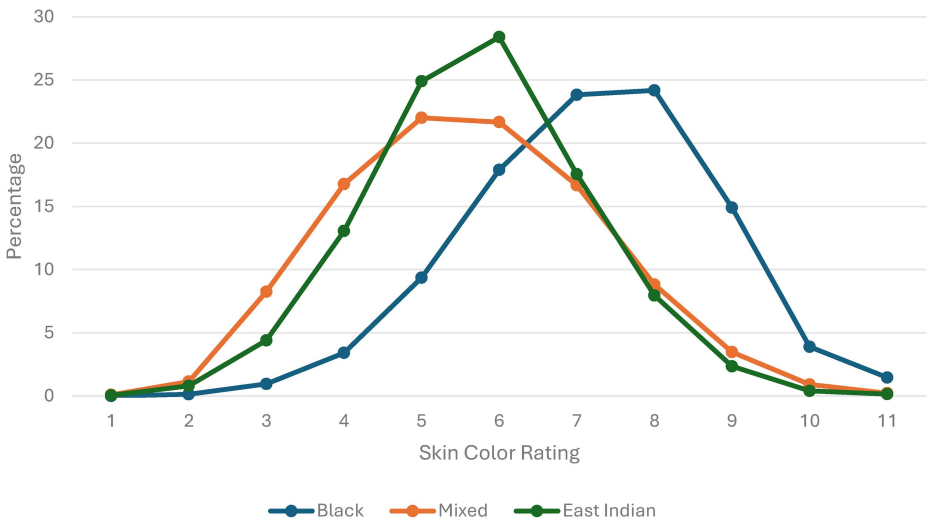

FIGURE 1
Skin color distribution within ethnoracial groups for pooled sample.

TABLE 3 Weighted coefficients from mixed-effects ordered logit regression predicting educational attainment (*N* = 8,159).

Variables	Null model	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Within-group skin color (skin_within)	–	−0.145*** (0.019)	−0.147*** (0.019)	−0.098*** (0.023)
Between-group skin color (skin_mean)	–	–	−0.146*** (0.040)	−0.151*** (0.040)
Interaction: race × skin_within				
Mixed × skin_within	–	–	–	−0.065 (0.041)
East Indian × skin_within	–	–	–	−0.119** (0.047)
Female	–	0.048 (0.065)	0.044 (0.065)	0.040 (0.066)
Age	–	−0.036*** (0.002)	−0.036*** (0.002)	−0.036*** (0.002)
Employed	–	0.462*** (0.064)	0.470*** (0.064)	0.469*** (0.064)
Married	–	0.402*** (0.072)	0.379*** (0.081)	0.375*** (0.073)
Urban	–	0.113 (0.080)	0.091 (0.081)	0.095 (0.081)
Interviewer skin color	–	−0.034 (0.020)	−0.031 (0.020)	−0.031 (0.020)
Survey year (ref = 2010)				
2012	–	0.448*** (0.125)	0.469*** (0.125)	0.462*** (0.126)
2014	–	0.936*** (0.119)	0.960*** (0.121)	0.966** (0.121)
2023	–	0.816*** (0.118)	0.844*** (0.118)	0.843*** (0.118)
Random intercept variance	0.383 (0.055)	0.284 (0.045)	0.279 (0.045)	0.277 (0.044)
ICC	0.104 (0.013)	0.080 (0.012)	0.078 (0.012)	0.078 (0.012)
AIC	15,938.71	15,026.86	15,007.17	**14,999.50**

Source: 2010–23 AmericasBarometer social survey for Trinidad and Tobago.
Coefficients and robust standard errors (in parentheses) are rounded to three decimals and weighted. Standard errors in Models 1–3 are robust and clustered by primary sampling units (PSUs). Skin color is decomposed into within-race and between-race components, with higher values indicating darker skin shades. Respondents are nested within 498 PSUs. ICC values represent the proportion of variance in the latent outcome attributed to PSUs. The analytic sample excludes respondents with no formal schooling (n = 49). Model 0 is the unconditional maximum-likelihood model, and all models are mixed-effects ordered logit models with random intercepts for PSUs. The model with the lowest AIC statistic (highlighted in bold) represents the best overall fit.
*$p < 0.05$. **$p < 0.01$. ***$p < 0.001$.

3.2.1 Marginal effects of within-group skin color on educational attainment

To further explicate differences in the effect of intraracial colorism across ethnoracial groups, Table 4 presents average marginal effects (AMEs) estimating how within-group variation in skin shade affects the predicted probability of attaining tertiary education across ethnoracial groups (based on Model 3). Across all groups, darker skin shade is significantly associated with a lower likelihood of attaining tertiary level education. A one-unit increase in within-group skin color darkness is associated with a 1.7, 2.9, and 3.8% decrease in the probability of gaining tertiary education among Afro-, mixed, and Indo-Trinbagonians, respectively ($p < 0.001$). Despite this general trend in the negative impact of darker skin on educational outcome, pairwise comparison reveal that this disparity is only statistically significant for the comparison between Black and East Indian respondents (difference = −0.021, $p < 0.001$).

Figure 2 plots predicted probabilities of tertiary-level educational attainment for three within-group skin color deviation scores: −2 (lighter-than-average), 0 (average), and +2 (darker-than-average). Lighter-than-average East Indian respondents report the highest probability of attaining tertiary education, followed by mixed and Black respondents, respectively. However, conversely, darker-than-average Indo-Trinbagonian respondents have the lowest probability of reaching tertiary education. In fact, the group's predicted probability decreases by 15% points from lighter-than-average to darker-than-average skin colors.

TABLE 4 Average marginal effects of within-group skin color on the probability of attaining tertiary education, by ethnoracial group (*N* = 8,159).

Average marginal effects (AME) by ethnoracial group		
Ethnoracial group	AME (dy/dx)	S.E.
Black	−0.017***	0.004
Mixed	−0.029***	0.006
East Indian	−0.038***	0.007

Pairwise comparisons of AMEs		
Comparison	Difference in AME	S.E.
Mixed vs. Black	−0.011	0.007
East Indian vs. Black	−0.021***	0.008
East Indian vs. Mixed	−0.009	0.009

AMEs estimated using margins with predictive margins for outcome category 3 (tertiary education). Standard errors are robust and clustered by PSUs. Values are rounded to three decimals. Predicted probabilities are based on Model 3 (mixed-effects ordered logit with interactions between within-group skin color and race).
*$p < 0.05$. **$p < 0.01$. ***$p < 0.001$.

Therefore, the figure illustrates that for tertiary-level education, the strongest effects of intraracial colorism appears among East Indian respondents, followed by mixed-race individuals, and Black respondents.

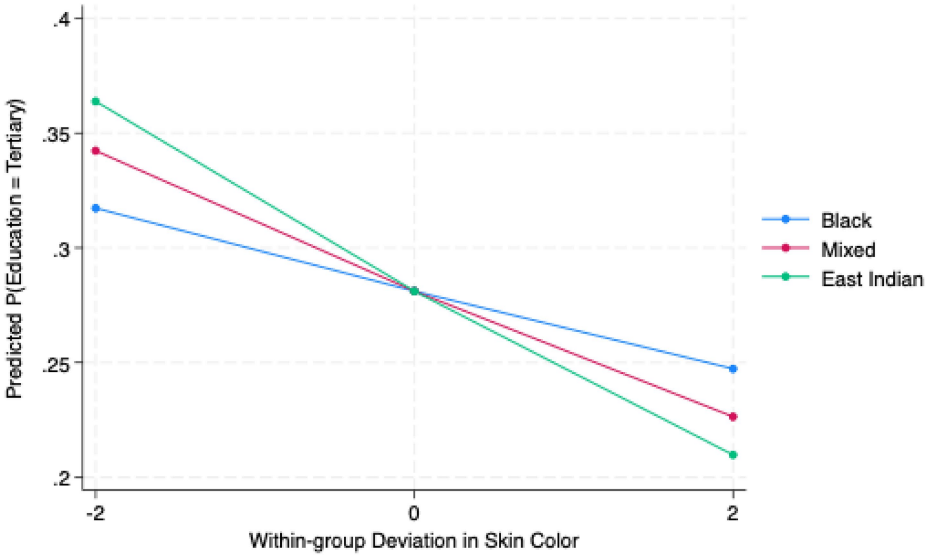

FIGURE 2
Predicted probability of tertiary education by within-group skin color deviation and ethnoracial group. Predicted probabilities are based on Model 3 (mixed-effects ordered logit regression with random intercepts for PSUs). Skin-color deviation represents within-group differences from the ethnoracial group mean (−2 = lighter than group average; 0 = group average; +2 = darker than group average). Confidence intervals are suppressed for clarity. Estimates use sampling weights and robust standard errors clustered by PSUs.

3.3 Household amenities

Table 5 presents weighted coefficients from four multilevel mixed-effects linear regression models predicting household amenities. Likelihood ratio test of the null model reveals that multilevel modeling was a better fit for the data than a standard ordered logistic regression model ($\chi^2 = 279.08$, $p < 0.001$) (see text footnote 2); justifying multilevel modeling.

Consistent with findings on educational attainment, the results show that having darker skin relative to one's group mean is negatively and significantly associated with fewer household amenities ($\beta = -0.046$, $p < 0.001$). After including between-group skin color in Model 2, the coefficient for within-group skin color remains statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Results for between-group skin color also show that respondents of racially darker groups have fewer household amenities ($\beta = -0.021$, $p < 0.05$), independent of within-group skin color. Although statistically significant, the effect size is comparatively small.

Model 3 present the results for household amenities after including interactions between race and within-group skin color to test the intraracial effects of colorism across ethnoracial categories. These interactions show that, compared to Black respondents, the penalty of having darker skin is significantly greater for mixed-race respondents ($\beta = -0.030$, $p < 0.01$). For East Indian respondents, this interaction is negative but not statistically significant. A Wald test confirms that the interaction coefficients jointly differ from the reference group (Afro-Trinbagonians) ($\chi^2(2) = 6.46$, $p < 0.05$).

3.3.1 Marginal effects of within-group skin color on household amenities

AMEs presented in Table 6 show that darker skin relative to the ethnoracial group mean is associated with significantly fewer household amenities across all groups. Each unit increase in the darkness of skin color has an associated 0.033-unit, 0.064-unit, and 0.048-unti decrease in household amenities for Black, mixed, and East Indians Trinbagonians, respectively ($p < 0.001$). The intraracial penalty of darker skin is therefore strongest among mixed respondents, followed by Indo- and Afro-Trinbagonians. Pairwise comparisons confirm findings in Table 5 as only comparison between Black and mixed respondents are statistically significant (difference = −0.030, $p < 0.01$).

Figure 3 presents predicted values for household amenities by within-group skin color deviations across the three ethnoracial groups. Lighter-than-average (−2) mixed-race respondents have the greatest predicted household amenities, followed by East Indian and Black respondents. These patterns reverse for darker-than-average (+2) individuals in each ethnoracial group. Mixed respondents experience a 0.11-unit decrease in predicted household amenities from lighter-than-average to darker-than average skin colors, with Indo- and Afro-Trinbagonians following with smaller declines, respectively. These patterns illustrate that intraracial colorism decreases access to household amenities for all ethnoracial groups, with the strongest effects observed among mixed-race individuals.

3.4 Model fit

To assess model fit, a series of likelihood-ratio tests were conducted to compare each of the three models presented in Tables 3, 5. For educational attainment, likelihood-ratio tests show that colorism functions at multiple levels and varies across the three ethnoracial groups. Including the within-group skin color measure in the null model significantly improved model fit ($\chi^2(10) = 971.95$, $p < 0.001$), demonstrating that intraracial differences in skin shade are associated with different educational outcomes. Likewise, likelihood-ratio tests comparing Model 1 to Model 2 ($\chi^2(1) = 34.62$, $p < 0.001$)

TABLE 5 Weighted coefficients from multilevel mixed-effects linear regression predicting household amenities (N = 8,159).

Variables	Null model	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Within-group skin color (skin_within)	–	−0.046*** (0.005)	−0.047*** (0.005)	−0.033*** (0.008)
Between-group skin color (skin_mean)	–	–	−0.021* (0.010)	−0.022* (0.020)
Interaction: race × skin_within				
Mixed × skin_within	–	–	–	−0.030** (0.012)
East Indian × skin_within	–	–	–	−0.014 (0.012)
Female	–	0.017 (0.016)	0.016 (0.016)	0.017 (0.016)
Age	–	−0.004*** (0.001)	−0.004*** (0.001)	−0.004*** (0.001)
Employed	–	0.067*** (0.019)	0.068*** (0.019)	0.067*** (0.019)
Married	–	0.203*** (0.019)	0.200*** (0.018)	0.200*** (0.018)
Urban	–	0.070** (0.027)	0.067** (0.027)	0.068** (0.027)
Interviewer skin color	–	−0.017*** (0.005)	−0.017*** (0.005)	−0.017*** (0.005)
Survey year (ref = 2010)				
2012	–	0.033 (0.028)	0.035 (0.028)	0.034 (0.028)
2014	–	0.174*** (0.028)	0.177*** (0.028)	0.179*** (0.028)
2023	–	0.350*** (0.026)	0.353*** (0.026)	0.355*** (0.026)
Education (ref = primary)				
High school	–	0.265*** (0.032)	0.265*** (0.032)	0.265*** (0.032)
Tertiary	–	0.551*** (0.031)	0.550*** (0.031)	0.548*** (0.031)
Intercept	−0.045*** (0.013)	−0.384*** (0.059)	−0.255*** (0.090)	0.258 (0.138)
Random effects				
PSU variance	0.036 (0.005)	0.014 (0.002)	0.013 (0.002)	0.013 (0.002)
Residual variance	0.383 (0.013)	0.315 (0.011)	0.314 (0.011)	0.314 (0.011)
ICC	0.086 (0.013)	0.041 (0.007)	0.041 (0.007)	0.041 (0.007)
AIC	16,062.95	14,111.69	14,108.06	**14,101.78**

Source: 2010–23 AmericasBarometer social survey for Trinidad and Tobago.
Household amenities scores are derived from a single standardized factor. Coefficients and robust standard errors (in parentheses) are rounded to three decimals. Models 1–3 use sampling weights and robust standard errors clustered by primary sampling units (PSU). Respondents are nested within 498 PSUs, and all models include PSU-level random intercepts. Skin color is decomposed into within-race and between-race components, coded from lightest to darkest. The analytic sample excludes respondents with no formal schooling (n = 49). Model 0 is the unconditional model. All models are weighted mixed-effects linear regressions. The model with the lowest AIC statistic (highlighted in bold) represents the best overall fit.
*$p < 0.05$. **$p < 0.01$. ***$p < 0.001$.

and Model 2 to Model 3 ($\chi^2(2) = 12.64$, $p < 0.01$) show that adding between-group skin color improves model fit and that within-group skin color effects vary across ethnoracial groups, respectively. Likelihood-ratio tests for household amenities yield a similar pattern, indicating that each stepwise progression significantly improved fit ($p < 0.05$). This pattern is consistent with the AIC statistics, which decrease across models, indicating better overall fit. Model 3 is thus the best overall fit for educational attainment (AIC = 14,999.50) and household amenities (AIC = 14,101.78).

4 Discussion

This study extends the literature on skin-shade stratification by centering Trinidad and Tobago as a case for examining how skin tone structures socioeconomic wellbeing both inter- and intraracially. The results reveal a persistent association between skin shade and socioeconomic outcomes: respondents with darker skin had lower odds of attaining higher levels of education and possessed fewer household amenities. Notably, because education and employment were controlled for in the analysis of household amenities, the significant disadvantages associated with darker skin suggest that additional mechanisms—beyond formal qualifications—may mediate these outcomes. These findings align with prior studies in Trinidad and Tobago (e.g., Kelly, 2022; Painter et al., 2019) and contribute to a broader body of research documenting global pigmentocracies. In doing so, the study enhances our understanding of how skin shade functions as a distinct axis of inequality (e.g., Monk, 2016; Telles, 2014; Telles et al., 2025).

The analysis then assessed intraracial variation by skin shade and evaluated the relative effects of colorism across ethnoracial groups: Black, mixed, and East Indian. Results again showed that differences in skin color stratified access to education and household amenities. Among Afro- and mixed-Trinbagonian respondents, these disparities align with longstanding patterns in which lighter skin is associated with perceived respectability, competence, and social mobility (Braithwaite, 1953; McCree, 2015; Nettleford, 1998; Stewart, 2004; Tate, 2007). Moreover, findings are consistent with previous research that has documented significant disparities by skin shade within various racial groups (e.g., Hall, 2022; Hall and

TABLE 6 Average marginal effects of within-group skin color on household amenities by ethnoracial group (N = 8,159).

Average marginal effects (AME) by ethnoracial group		
Ethnoracial group	AME (dy/dx)	S. E.
Black	−0.033***	0.008
Mixed	−0.064***	0.010
East Indian	−0.048***	0.010

Pairwise comparisons of AMEs		
Comparison	Difference in AME	S.E.
Mixed vs. Black	−0.030**	0.012
East Indian vs. Black	−0.014	0.012
East Indian vs. Mixed	−0.016	0.014

AMEs estimated using margins based on Model 3. Standard errors are robust and clustered by PSUs. Values are rounded to three decimals. The analytic sample excludes respondents with no formal schooling (n = 49).
*p < 0.05. **p < 0.01. ***p < 0.001.

Mishra, 2024; Hunter, 2007; Kelly, 2024; Monk, 2015, 2021b; Monk et al., 2021; Ryabov, 2016).

The most pronounced disparities in educational access were observed among Indo- Trinbagonians, suggesting that colorism is deeply entrenched within the community, where lighter skin is valorized through cultural norms and matrimonial preferences (Braithwaite, 1953; Dhillon-Jamerson, 2019; Khan, 2009; Vijaya, 2019). As Khan (2009, p. 100) notes, although East Indians are ideologically distanced from "Trinidadian nationalism (Afro + Euro = authentic, Creole Trinidadian) [see also Brereton, 2010; Munasinghe, 2019]; … they are not shorn of the meaning of, nor outside the consequences of, color and race." This indicates that, despite Indo-Trinbagonians' marginalization from the dominant national identity, they remain entangled in the country's ethnoracial and pigmentocratic hierarchies. Historical systems of stratification persist, adapt, and continue to shape community dynamics and mobility, even within diasporic contexts with longstanding histories outside the Indian subcontinent.

Additionally, mixed respondents experience the strongest impact of intraracial colorism on access to household amenities. This finding suggests that phenotype, beyond skin shade, serves as a particularly powerful marker of social class (Hordge-Freeman, 2015; Monk, 2022; Wade, 2012) within this group. Because ancestry was not specified for the "mixed" category in the LAPOP data, it is likely that skin shade intersects with other phenotypic traits—such as hair texture, facial features, or body type—to shape social privilege. This complicates the often-assumed advantage of mixed-race identification in Caribbean societies, highlights internal stratification within ostensibly "privileged" intermediary ethnoracial groups, and suggests that structural inequalities are shaped by a wider range of physical cues (Hunter, 2011, 2021; Monk, 2022; Wade, 2012). The category of "mixed" is deeply heterogeneous, reflecting wide variation in appearance, ancestry, and generational legacy (e.g., Dougla vs. other mixed ancestry). This diversity complicates assumptions of racial typicality and underscores the limits of nominal categories in capturing lived social stratification. In this respect, findings from the study extend and affirm Monk's (2022) argument that multiple-race identification disrupts conventional boundaries and calls for reconsideration of "how differences relate to inequality beyond census categories" (p. 20).

While findings on the consistent and significant predictive power of skin shade on outcomes are not surprising, this study is novel in that it uncovers unexpected patterns in the magnitude of intraracial colorism effects across ethnoracial groups. As some U.S.-based research illustrates that within-group skin shade differences among Black Americans can produce inequalities greater than those between racial groups (Keith and Herring, 1991; Monk, 2015, 2022), one might have expected the penalty for darker skin shade to be most severe among Black respondents. However, the results from this study reveal the opposite pattern.

These findings may be explained by ethnoracial prototypicality and the racialization of skin shade. Darker skin is central to how Blackness is constructed and stereotyped (Eberhardt et al., 2006; Maddox and Gray, 2002), therefore, additional darkening may do little to alter how Black respondents are perceived. In contrast, for East Indian and many mixed respondents—groups generally racialized as lighter than Black people—darker skin shade constitutes a clearer deviation from group-based prototypicality, which may lead to stronger penalties. As shown in Figure 1, darker-skinned East Indian and mixed individuals deviate more noticeably from their group's prototypical molds, often imagined as lighter. Because they stand farther from this perceived typicality, they may face greater bias or misclassification (e.g., Maddox et al., 2022).

Moreover, skin shade can be understood as a form of embodied cultural capital, whose value depends on the social and ethnoracial context in which it is interpreted (Ellis and Destine, 2023; Monk, 2016; Telles et al., 2025). Although lighter skin often carries social advantages, the size of the benefit—or penalty—varies across groups. For East Indian and mixed respondents, who are generally associated with lighter skin, darker skin shade may sharply reduce the value of this embodied capital. For Black respondents, however, the relative impact may be smaller because evaluations of Blackness already assume darker skin. As a result, the meaning and consequences of skin shade differ across ethnoracial groups, contributing to the uneven patterns of intraracial colorism observed in this study.

Furthermore, despite longstanding ethnoracial tensions in Trinidad and Tobago between Afro- and Indo-Trinbagonians, Blackness may not be as heavily structurally disadvantaged. Post-emancipation social and economic policies, particularly those pursued by the country's first prime minister Dr. Eric Williams, contributed substantially to the country and Afro-Trinbagonian economic advancement (Reddy, 2011; Sriskandarajah, 2005; Stone, 1972). In my own work (Kelly, 2023), using data from five national censuses (1970–2011), I found that East Indian respondents were consistently and significantly disadvantaged in education and personal income compared to Black respondents. Building on these findings, the present study further disaggregates outcomes to identify who within these groups is most disadvantaged—suggesting that it may be specifically darker-skinned Indo-Trinbagonians who face disproportionate educational barriers.

These findings contradict US-dominant narratives of Asian exceptionalism or the "model minority" myth—which often frame Black disadvantage as singular and Asians as universally privileged (Kim, 1999, 2018). This complicates simplified assumptions about intergroup privilege and instead reveals the layered and context-specific dynamics of colorism in Trinidad and Tobago, aligning with

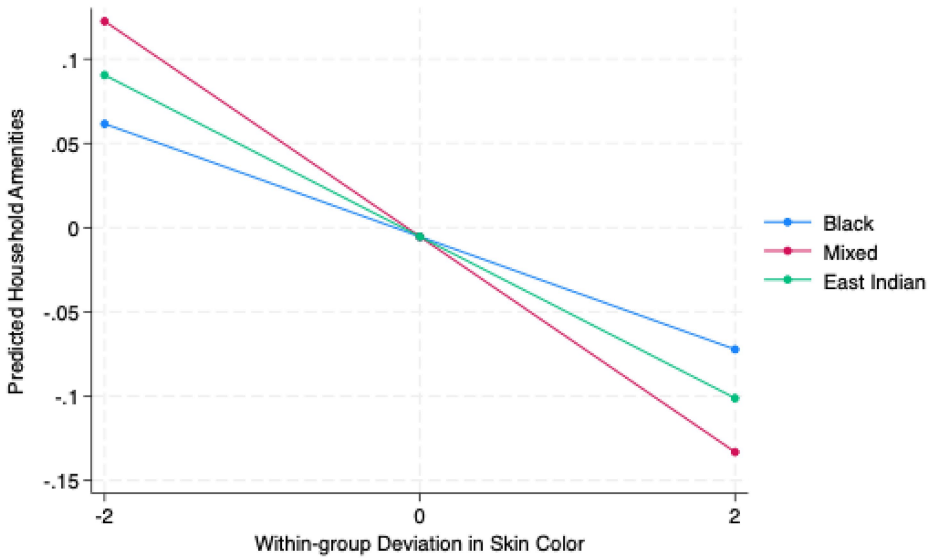

FIGURE 3
Predicted values of household amenities by within-group skin color deviation and ethnoracial group. Predicted probabilities are based on Model 3 (mixed-effects linear regression with random intercepts for PSUs). Skin-color deviation represents within-group differences from the ethnoracial group mean (−2 = lighter than group average; 0 = group average; +2 = darker than group average). Confidence intervals are suppressed for clarity. Estimates use sampling weights and robust standard errors clustered by PSUs.

the findings of Kelly (2022). Moreover, the findings indicate that the social meaning of skin color—and its consequences for education and household amenities—is not uniform across ethnoracial groups but shaped by each group's sociocultural position within the broader national racial order (Khan, 2009; McCree, 2015). Findings thus accentuate the complex and variable nature of pigmentocracies (Telles, 2014) and emphasize the need for more nuanced, comparative analyses of intraracial colorism across heterogeneous populations.

This study contributes to bridging regional and methodological traditions by illustrating how both intraracial and interracial dimensions of colorism shape distinct patterns of inequality. Theoretically, the results of this study further emphasize the need to disaggregate race-based analyses to account for between-group and within-group variation in embodied cues, such as skin shade. Traditional census categories may obscure substantial heterogeneity in how inequality is experienced and perpetuated and hence limit policies set to address disparities based on group differences. For example, anti-discrimination measures such as the Equal Opportunity Act of 2000 have been introduced in Trinidad and Tobago (Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs, 2016). As is common with many such policies, it centers on "race" defined as "a group of persons of common ethnic origin, color or of mixed race" (p. 7). The law thus relies on census categories to recognize and address disparities. The evidence presented here demonstrates that disparities by skin shade, both inter- and intraracially, are equally significant and call for greater attention. Moreover, the conflation of race and color in the above anti-discrimination policy further underscores the importance of centering embodied cues when examining and addressing inequalities more holistically.

By bringing the often-overlooked case of Trinidad and Tobago into wider conversations on skin shade stratification, the findings reinforce that skin shade remains a powerful dividing line in Trinidad and Tobago, not only across racialized groups but within them. This echoes broader global patterns of colorism, yet the Trinidadian context adds a distinctive regional perspective.

Data availability statement

Publicly available datasets were analyzed in this study. This data can be found at: https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/raw-data.php.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the study involving humans in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent to participate in this study was not required from the participants or the participants' legal guardians/next of kin in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

Author contributions

MDAK: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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EDITED BY
Aisha Phoenix,
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David S. March,
Florida State University, United States
René Rejón,
The University of Melbourne, Australia

*CORRESPONDENCE
Gabriel Camacho
gcamacho@jjay.cuny.edu

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The effects of skin tone and prototypicality on the dynamic racial categorization and stereotyping of Latine Americans

Gabriel Camacho[1]*, Mora A. Reinka[2] and Cassidy J. Burt[3]

[1]Department of Psychology, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, New York, NY, United States, [2]Department of Psychology, Ursinus College, Collegeville, PA, United States, [3]Independent Scholar, Queens, NY, United States

Latine people are phenotypically diverse and encompass a wide range of skin tones; however, psychological research on person perception has devoted comparatively little attention to the social-cognitive processes through which skin tone and other phenotypic cues shape the racial categorization and stereotyping of Latine individuals. The present work uses computer mouse tracking to explore how skin tone and Latine prototypicality—the degree to which an individual's physical appearance aligns with stereotypical features associated with Latine identity—affect the dynamic processes of racial categorization and stereotyping of Latine Americans. We examine how Latine individuals who appear typical (medium skin tone with prototypical features), atypical (light skin with non-prototypical features), or ambiguous (light skin with prototypical features) affect categorizations as "White American" or "Latino American" (Study 1; $N = 139$), and as "American" or "Foreign" (Study 2; $N = 206$). Results revealed that both typical and ambiguous Latine targets were more likely to be categorized as Latino and foreign, compared to atypical targets. Skin tone and prototypicality both influenced the mouse trajectories leading to these judgments. Trajectories for typical and atypical targets were fast and direct, suggesting low cognitive conflict, whereas ambiguous targets elicited more complex and indirect movements, indicating greater indecision. These findings demonstrate that both skin tone and overall Latine prototypicality affect the dynamic processes through which the largest racial minority group in the U.S.—Latine Americans—is racially and stereotypically categorized.

KEYWORDS

Hispanic/Latino/a/e, mouse tracking, person perception, skin tone, stereotyping

Introduction

Latine people are phenotypically diverse and possess a wide range of skin tones, which have been shown to influence both their lived experiences and the ways in which they self-identify (Golash-Boza and Darity, 2008; Irizarry et al., 2022; Telles, 2014). Yet psychological research on person perception has given comparatively little attention to the social-cognitive processes through which skin tone and other phenotypic cues shape the ways in which Latine people are racially categorized and stereotyped (Harris et al., 2020). The limited studies that do exist often rely on facial-database methods, in which *Latine prototypicality*—the degree to which an individual's physical appearance aligns with stereotypical features associated with Latine identity—is explicitly rated by samples of online participants (Chen et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2015). Other research examining the cognitive processes underlying stereotyping often uses implicit measures, such as the

Implicit Association Test, which evaluates the strength of automatic associations between different social groups (e.g., Latine targets) and positive or negative attributes (March and Graham, 2015; Uhlmann et al., 2002). While informative, these approaches primarily capture the outcomes of racial categorization and stereotyping, offering limited insight into the dynamic, real-time processes through which such judgments unfold. Understanding these moment-to-moment processes is important because they reveal how phenotypic cues begin to influence racial judgments long before a final categorization is made. In the present work, we address this gap by using computer mouse tracking to examine how individuals continuously and dynamically categorize Latine faces as a function of their skin tone and overall Latine prototypicality.

Mouse tracking is a widely used method for assessing continuous and dynamic cognitive processes by analyzing computer mouse trajectories during binary choice tasks. In a typical task, participants click a "Start" button at the bottom center of the screen, after which an image appears (e.g., a Black man; Freeman et al., 2010). They are then asked to quickly categorize the image by selecting one of two categories displayed at the top left ("White") or top right ("Black") corners of the screen. The temporal movements of the mouse along the x and y axes are analyzed to assess decision-making behavior and cognitive processes, with the mouse's movements theorized to serve as a valid index of participants' decision-making processes (Freeman, 2018). Research has shown that while typical exemplars of a category tend to be categorized directly into the appropriate group (e.g., a prototypical Black target categorized as "Black"), ambiguous exemplars (e.g., a biracial Black–White target) often initially diverge toward the "White" category before ultimately being categorized as "Black." This divergence is significant because it highlights the complexity of decision-making, involving both lower-level sensory information (physical cues) and higher-order social cognition (stereotypical associations) processes (Freeman and Ambady, 2011; Freeman et al., 2020). Although mouse tracking has been extensively used to document racial categorization and stereotyping (e.g., Hehman et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2012; March, 2022; Stolier and Freeman, 2017; Wojnowicz et al., 2009), no study to our knowledge has yet applied this method to explore perceptions of Latine individuals.

One potential reason that the faces of Latine Americans have been underrepresented as stimuli in mouse tracking studies is the difficulty in distinguishing typical from atypical Latine exemplars. Latine Americans are often viewed as racially ambiguous (Chen et al., 2021), with few facial features that reliably set them apart (Ma et al., 2018). However, they are still phenotypically identifiable (Wilkins et al., 2010). Indeed, medium skin tone is the strongest predictor of Latine prototypicality on both implicit and explicit measures (Feliciano, 2016; Norman et al., 2024; Camacho and Reinka, 2026). As a result, in a mouse tracking paradigm, light-skinned Latine faces may be miscategorized as White (atypical target), whereas those with medium skin tones are more likely to be correctly categorized as Latine (typical target). Moreover, because skin tone plays a critical role in racial categorization (Stepanova and Strube, 2012), particularly during early-stage processes like those assessed in computer mouse tracking studies (Freeman and Ambady, 2011), it is likely that these mouse trajectories will show relatively quick reaction times and minimal deviation from an idealized straight line. In other words, medium skin tone represents the prototypical Latine exemplar and will likely function as such in a mouse tracking paradigm in which Latine faces are shown.

The complexity of racial categorization is likely to be reflected in participants' mouse trajectories when they encounter ambiguous targets displaying physical traits associated with both categories. Latine individuals, for example, who have the light skin tone typical of White Americans but also display physical or cultural traits associated with Latine Americans, may be more affected by this because it activates multiple competing racial categories at once. A review of Latine prototypicality scores in widely used face databases reveals that it is not uncommon for light-skinned individuals to be rated as prototypically Latine (Chen et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2015). This is likely due to other features in the images such as lip shape (Feliciano, 2016), eye color (Ma et al., 2018), and hairstyle (MacLin and Malpass, 2001), which contribute to an overall prototypical Latine appearance. While skin tone may be a primary cue in the racial categorization of Latine Americans (Norman et al., 2024), the overall prototypicality of a Latine target is also likely to influence categorization. Distinguishing between light-skinned, prototypical, and non-prototypical Latine targets can be complex. Therefore, we predict that mouse trajectories for ambiguous exemplars (light-skinned, prototypical Latine targets) will exhibit greater deviations in mouse trajectories, reflecting the simultaneous activation of competing racial categories: White American and Latine American.

The skin tone and overall prototypicality of Latine Americans should also influence decision-making processes tied to perceived nationality: American vs. foreign. Specifically, Latine Americans are often perceived as perpetual foreigners (Camacho and Abouras, 2025; Cheryan and Monin, 2005; Devos et al., 2010), facing stereotypes that depict them as undocumented immigrants, poor English speakers, and unassimilated into American society (Zou and Cheryan, 2017). These stereotypes of foreignness are more frequently applied to Latine Americans with darker skin tones compared to those with lighter skin tones (Wilton et al., 2013). However, according to the theory of *racial phenotypicality bias* (Maddox, 2004), individuals who appear more prototypical of a racial group are more likely to be perceived through the lens of group-based stereotypes. This suggests that both ambiguous targets (light-skinned/prototypical Latine Americans) and typical targets (medium-skinned Latine Americans) could be categorized as foreigners, as they both exhibit prototypical Latine traits, albeit in different ways. Nonetheless, while both groups would likely be categorized as foreign rather than American, the cognitive processes leading to this categorization may differ. Specifically, light-skinned/prototypical Latine individuals may generate confusion due to their shared traits with both White and Latine individuals. This could result in greater variability in their categorization—moving between being seen as American or foreign—while medium-skinned Latine individuals would likely be more readily and directly categorized with stereotypical associations of foreignness. We test this possibility in the current research.

Present research

Previous studies have shed light on how skin tone and overall prototypicality influence both explicit and implicit forms of racial categorization and stereotyping of Latine Americans (Chen et al.,

2021; Camacho and Reinka, 2026; Uhlmann et al., 2002). However, there is a lack of research exploring the continuous and dynamic processes involved in these categorizations, particularly as they apply to Latine targets. The present work addresses this gap by examining the temporal mouse trajectories involved in decisions about whether Latine targets are categorized as "White American" or "Latino American" (Study 1) and as "American" or "Foreign" (Study 2).[1]

In each study, Latine targets varied in prototypicality: typical of the Latine category (medium skin tone and prototypical), atypical (light skin and non-prototypical), or ambiguous (light skin but prototypical). We hypothesize that typical Latine targets (medium skin tone and high prototypicality) will be quickly and directly associated with being Latine American rather than White American (Study 1) and with being Foreign rather than American (Study 2). We predict the opposite pattern for atypical targets (light skin tone and low prototypicality). We further hypothesize that ambiguous targets (light skin tone but high prototypicality) will be categorized as "Latino American" (Study 1) and "Foreign" (Study 2) but will elicit the greatest categorization conflict, resulting in greater deviations in mouse trajectories across both studies.

Given the well-documented racial ambiguity of Latine faces and evidence that few specific facial features reliably predict Latine prototypicality (Ma et al., 2018), we selected faces using both objective measures of skin luminance (lighter vs. darker) and previously established Latine prototypicality ratings (Chen et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2015). This approach allows us to examine how these perceptual dimensions shape categorization, with particular attention to light-skinned Latine faces. We test the hypothesis that skin tone plays a primary role in rapid judgments of Latine group membership, while also anticipating that even prototypically appearing light-skinned Latine individuals will still be categorized as Latine and stereotyped as "foreign," though the cognitive pathways to these judgments may be less direct. Mouse tracking enables us to capture both explicit categorization decisions ("White American" vs. "Latino American" and "American" vs. "Foreign") and the implicit cognitive dynamics (mouse trajectories) underlying them. Together, these studies aim to determine whether rapid-response paradigms like mouse tracking can effectively capture the social perception of a racially ambiguous group such as Latine Americans.

Both studies received approval from the college's Institutional Review Board, and all participants provided informed electronic consent. All data and syntax for both studies, as well as preregistration for Study 2, are available here: https://osf.io/jkwue/?view_only=7388465ff6da4f049f313b0a8de0a96d

Study 1

The goal of Study 1 was to examine the real-time processes by which Latine faces are racially categorized using a binary-choice, computer mouse tracking task. Participants were asked to rapidly categorize a randomized set of faces representing typical (medium skin tone and prototypical), atypical (light skin and non-prototypical), and ambiguous (light skin with prototypical Latine traits) appearances of the Latine category. Building on previous research (Camacho and Reinka, 2026), we hypothesized that typical Latine faces would most frequently be categorized correctly as Latine American, while atypical faces would likely be miscategorized as White American. We also predicted these categorizations to be made with relatively quick response times and minimal deviation from an idealized straight line in the mouse trajectory. In contrast, we predicted that faces with ambiguous Latine features—those with light skin but still displaying Latine traits—would be the most challenging to categorize, resulting in longer reaction times and greater deviation in mouse trajectories, reflecting the added complexity of their racial categorization.

Method

Participants

A total of 139 undergraduate students attending either a Hispanic Serving Institution ($n = 105$) or a private liberal arts college ($n = 34$) in the Northeast United States[2] participated in the study for course credit ($M_{age} = 19.71$, $SD_{age} = 4.11$). Most participants self-identified as female ($n = 101$), followed by male ($n = 34$), and non-binary/third gender ($n = 3$), with 1 person preferring not to say. Participants self-identified as Hispanic/Latino ($n = 56$), White/European American ($n = 30$), Black/African American ($n = 23$), Asian/Asian American ($n = 16$), multiracial ($n = 10$), or another racial identity ($n = 4$). The sample size was determined by the number of participants available in the subject pools during the academic semester at both colleges. A sensitivity power analysis using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) for a within subjects, repeated measures ANOVA showed that Study 1 had enough power to detect a small effect, $f = 0.12$.

Materials and procedure

When participants arrived at the laboratory, they were seated at a laptop where an informed consent form was displayed. Each laptop had the trackpad disabled and instead used a corded computer mouse. Before each laboratory session, researchers ensured the mice cords were tangle-free and could be moved unincumbered. The cursor speed was set at the midline of the speed-range on each laptop.

After consenting, participants completed a mouse tracking task presented using MouseTracker (v. 2.83; Freeman and Ambady, 2010) in which they were asked to categorize twenty-five faces as either "White American" or "Latino American". Face stimuli were colored photographs taken from the shoulders up, retrieved from the Chicago Face Database (Ma et al., 2015) and the American Multiracial Faces Database (Chen et al., 2021). Twenty of the 25

1 Throughout the manuscript, we use the term Latine as a non-binary alternative to Latino. However, we retain the term Latino when referencing the study itself, as this is the terminology that participants were presented with.

2 These two institutions were chosen based on convenience (i.e., they are the home institutions of the first two authors).

people in the photos self-identified as Latine: ten of the images showed light skin men and women (i.e., atypical Latine) and ten of the images showed medium skin men and women (i.e., typical Latine), as determined by the researchers and prior ratings of skin luminance scores (Ma et al., 2015). The remaining five images presented faces of light skin multiracial individuals who were deemed to appear phenotypically Latine by previous testing (i.e., ambiguous targets; Chen et al., 2021), but their specific racial backgrounds were not recorded.

MouseTracker records not just the participants' categorization of each image, but the trajectory of their computer mouse as they make their decision (Freeman and Ambady, 2010). Relevant to our investigation, the program records each trial's area under the curve (AUC; computation of the area between the actual mouse trajectory and an idealized straight line between start and end points), maximum deviation (MD; furthest point of mouse travel, measured perpendicularly from the idealized straight line), reaction time (RT; time taken to click the chosen category, in ms), and the number of x-flips (integer measure of how many times the participant's mouse reversed directions along the x-axis).[3]

As previously described, each trial begins when the participant clicks a "Start" button, centered on the bottom of the screen. For all participants, the button labeled "White American" was presented on the top left, and the button labeled "Latino American" was presented on the top right corner of the screen. Participants were instructed to start moving their mouse as soon as a face appeared, even if they had yet to make up their mind; this allows the software to track the decision-making process in real-time. If participants moved their mouse too slowly (> 750 ms; $M_{initiation}$= 242.66 ms), they received an error message. If a participant took too long to decide (> 2000 ms) they received a time-out warning. The timeout warning latency was the default in the MouseTracker example programming (Freeman and Ambady, 2010); the initiation cutoff was set to be slightly faster than the default (1000 ms) to discourage pre-movement processing. Unrelated practice photos were presented before the task began to ensure participants understood the process. All trial images were presented in a randomized order, and participants saw each of the 25 photographs once.

After completing the task, participants answered several demographic questions and ranked their skin tone (1 = *Very Light*, 7 = *Very Dark*; $M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.20$), as well as how their skin tone compares to others of their racial/ethnic group (1 = *Much lighter*, 5 = *Much darker*; $M = 2.53$, $SD = 0.792$). Lastly, participants were presented with the NIS Skin Color Scale (Massey and Martin, 2003), a ten-point scale that shows a range of skin tones, represented by digitally altered hands, ranging from lightest (*1*) to darkest (*10*). They were asked to indicate what they believed to be the skin tone of the "average" Latine American ($M = 3.68$; $SD = 1.02$) and the "average" White American ($M = 1.60$; $SD = 0.64$). These items were included as exploratory measures; however, none significantly moderated the mouse tracking results and are therefore excluded from further analysis.

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations between mouse tracking outcomes, Studies 1 and 2.

Variables	*M* (*SD*)	1	2	3	4
Study 1					
1. AUC	0.746 (1.27)	-			
2. MD	0.388 (0.460)	0.897	-		
3. RT	1540.29 (661.80)	0.351	0.283	-	
4. X-flips	7.41 (3.47)	0.167	0.175	0.107	-
Study 2					
1. AUC	1.01 (13.31)	-			
2. MD	0.941 (2.590)	0.296	-		
3. RT	1311.04 (859.83)	0.086	0.119	-	
4. X-flips	1.89 (2.01)	0.058	0.163	0.442	-

AUC, Area Under the Curve; MD, Maximum Deviation; RT, Reaction Time. All correlations are significant at $p < 0.001$.

Analytic plan

All analyses were conducted in RStudio (v. 2024.12.1.563; Posit team, 2025). The three different facial categories (typical Latine, atypical Latine, and ambiguous) were used as the independent variable in all analyses; ambiguous (light skin, prototypical) faces were used as the reference group. Decision outcomes (e.g., "White American" vs. "Latino American") were analyzed in a logistic regression framework using the Generalized Linear Models ("glm") function in base R (R Core Team, 2016). Mouse tracking trajectory results (AUC, MD, RT, and x-flips) were analyzed using the Linear and Nonlinear Mixed Effects Models ("nlme") package (v. 3.1-168; Pinheiro et al., 2025). AUC, MD, and RT were standardized for easier interpretation in the models but left unstandardized for descriptive statistics and easier visual interpretation in figures. The participant was included as a random intercept to account for the dependency of the data within each person. Any trials with RTs greater than 3 SDs from the mean were removed before analysis (trial $n = 67$ from 36 participants). Descriptive statistics and correlations between all mouse tracking outcomes (AUC, MD, RT, and x-flips) are presented in Table 1.

Results

Decision outcomes by facial category

First, we examined the differences in decision outcome by facial type. The typical Latine faces were more often categorized as "Latino American" (trial $n = 1339$, 97.0%) than "White American" (trial $n = 42$, 3.0%), whereas the atypical Latine faces showed the opposite pattern ("Latino American" trial $n = 274$, 20.4%; "White American" trial $n = 1068$, 79.6%). The ambiguous faces were more

3 MouseTracker also provides y-flips (the number of vertical directional reverses); however, we do not examine this in the current manuscript. Y-flips are more pertinent to choice paradigms with more than two options (e.g., that place options in all four corners of the screen with the starting point in the middle); our setup will create more decisional conflict horizontally between the two presented options (e.g., x-flips), and therefore we see the y-flips as irrelevant.

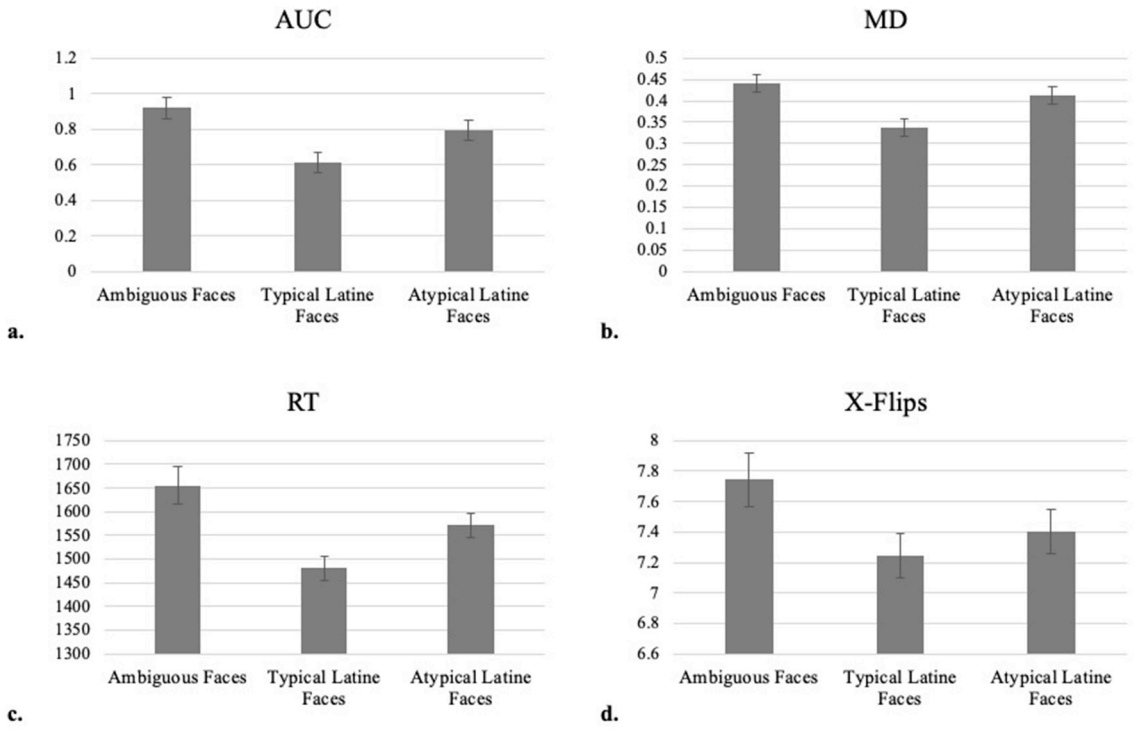

FIGURE 1
Study 1 mouse tracking results measuring **(a)** AUC, **(b)** MD, **(c)** RT, and **(d)** X-flips. Error bars represent standard error.

often categorized as "Latino American" (trial $n = 580$, 84.7%) than "White American" (trial $n = 105$, 15.3%); however, the difference was not as stark as among the typical Latine faces.

To test if these differences were significant, we ran a logistic regression. Compared to the null model, the inclusion of the facial category significantly improved model fit, $^2(2) = 2118.4$, $p < 0.002$. As expected, the atypical Latine faces were much less likely to be categorized as "Latino American" than the ambiguous faces [OR = 0.046, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI (0.036, 0.059)]. In contrast, the typical Latine faces were much more likely to be categorized as "Latino American" compared to the ambiguous faces [OR = 5.772, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI (4.014, 8.443)].

Mouse tracking trajectory analyses

To begin, we examined how facial category (typical, atypical, and ambiguous) affected participants' mouse trajectories, as measured by AUC. There were significant differences between facial categories: participants showed larger AUCs to the ambiguous faces ($M = 0.915$, $SD = 1.453$) compared to both the typical ($M = 0.613$, $SD = 1.126$) and atypical ($M = 0.796$, $SD = 1.294$) Latine faces, indicating that the ambiguous faces elicited the most trajectory divergence (see Figure 1a and Table 2). That is, participants swung their mouse further to one answer before deciding on another when viewing the ambiguous faces. Comparatively, the typical and atypical faces elicited more straightforward decisional processes.

The test of MD also showed a significant difference between the ambiguous ($M = 0.440$, $SD = 0.495$) and typical ($M = 0.338$, $SD = 0.438$) Latine faces, such that participants' mouse movements deviated more from an idealized straight line when categorizing the ambiguous faces, further showing the indecision participants felt to the ambiguous faces. Here, though, there was no significant difference between the ambiguous and the atypical ($M = 0.413$, $SD = 0.460$) Latine faces (see Figure 1b and Table 2). In examining MD, participants swung their mouse equally far to one decision choice before opting for the other when viewing the atypical (e.g., light skin, non-prototypical) and ambiguous (e.g., light skin, prototypical) faces.

In predicting RTs, we see that participants were significantly faster to categorize both the typical ($M = 1474.784$, $SD = 600.875$) and atypical ($M = 1552.120$, $SD = 696.126$) faces compared to the ambiguous faces ($M = 1649.165$, $SD = 694.477$; see Figure 1c and Table 2), suggesting the ambiguous stimuli required more cognitive processing time before ultimately reaching a decision.

Finally, we examined x-flips, the horizontal trajectory reversals. We once again see a difference by facial category, where the ambiguous faces ($M = 7.734$, $SD = 3.556$) elicited the most x-flips compared to either the typical ($M = 7.248$, $SD = 3.426$) or atypical Latine faces ($M = 7.402$, $SD = 3.453$). Similar to the other mouse tracking outcomes (AUC, MD, and RT), it appears as if the ambiguous facial stimuli elicit more decisional complexity in their attempts to categorize these faces as either "White," or "Latino American," as compared to the a/typical Latine faces (see Figure 1d and Table 2).

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TABLE 2 Mouse tracking results, studies 1 and 2.

Fixed effects	AUC				MD				RT				X-Flips			
	b	*SE*	*p*	*d*	*b*	*SE*	*p*	*d*	*b*	*SE*	*p*	*d*	*b*	*SE*	*p*	*d*
Study 1																
Typical Latine faces	−0.241	0.044	<0.001	0.088	−0.224	0.044	<0.001	0.222	−0.265	0.038	<0.001	0.275	−0.500	0.146	<0.001	0.140
Atypical Latine faces	−0.099	0.044	0.026	0.242	−0.062	0.044	0.160	0.056	−0.127	0.038	< 0.001	0.140	−0.343	0.147	0.019	0.095
Random effects	Variance				Variance				Variance				Variance			
Participant	0.317				0.125				0.345				2.281			
Residual	0.945				0.852				0.613				9.732			
Study 2																
Typical Latine faces	0.017	0.040	0.672	0.024	0.045	0.040	0.256	0.041	−0.073	0.030	0.016	0.067	−0.139	0.062	0.024	0.068
Atypical Latine FACES	0.025	0.040	0.528	0.024	0.013	0.040	0.736	0.021	−0.086	0.030	0.004	0.089	−0.203	0.062	0.001	0.100
Random effects	Variance				Variance				Variance				Variance			
Participant	0.011				0.039				0.471				1.658			
Residual	0.987				0.960				0.556				2.334			

Reference group is "Ambiguous" faces in both studies. AUC, Area Under the Curve; MD, Maximum Deviation; RT, Reaction Time.

Discussion

As predicted, participants robustly and correctly categorized the typical Latine faces as "Latino American," and miscategorized the atypical Latine faces as "White American." Participants were also more likely to categorize the ambiguous faces as "Latino American," albeit to a lesser degree than the medium skin (typical) faces. This is consistent with the pre-tested prototypicality of each type of stimuli. Further, the mouse-tracking results show that participants generally struggled to categorize the ambiguous stimuli: faces featuring the skin tone typical of White Americans combined with facial features typical of Latine Americans. We see this via greater mouse trajectory deviation (AUC and MD), in increased cognitive processing time (RT), and increased decisional complexity (x-flips).

According to the theory of racial phenotypicality bias (Maddox, 2004), individuals who appear prototypical of their racial group are more likely to be perceived through the lens of group-based stereotypes. In Study 2, we aim to extend these findings by examining whether prototypically appearing Latine individuals (both typical and ambiguous in appearance) are more likely to be categorized as foreign compared to atypical Latine individuals. Additionally, we explore whether the mouse trajectories associated with these stereotypical categorizations mirror the patterns observed in Study 1, where medium skin tone was the easiest to categorize and ambiguous-looking Latine targets generated the greatest decision complexity.

Study 2

The goal of Study 2 was to examine the real-time processes by which Latine faces are categorized as either American or Foreign. Specifically, participants were asked to rapidly categorize a randomized set of faces—representing typical (medium skin tone, prototypical), atypical (light skin, non-prototypical), and ambiguous (light skin, prototypical) Latine appearances—as either "American" or "Foreign." Consistent with prior research (Camacho and Reinka, 2026), we predicted that typical Latine faces would be categorized as "Foreign," while atypical faces would more likely be categorized as "American." As in Study 1, we predicted that these categorizations would be made with relatively quick response times and minimal deviation from an idealized straight line in the mouse trajectory. However, we anticipated that faces with ambiguous Latine features—those that appear both White and Latine—would be more difficult to categorize, resulting in greater deviation from clear categorization as "Foreign," a category that aligns with the stereotype of Latine individuals as perpetual foreigners (Zou and Cheryan, 2017).

Method

Participants

Participants were U.S. adults recruited via Connect by Cloud Research who were monetarily compensated for completing the study. After exclusions for incomplete data (n = 22), poor data

quality ($n = 11$), or technical issues ($n = 3$), the final sample yielded $N = 206$ individuals ($M_{age} = 38.80$, $SD_{age} = 11.44$). Participants self-identified as male ($n = 109$) and female ($n = 96$), with 1 person preferring not to say. Participants self-identified as Hispanic/Latino ($n = 26$), White/European American ($n = 147$), Black/African American ($n = 13$), Asian/Asian American ($n = 15$), Native American or Alaska Native ($n = 1$), or multiracial ($n = 4$). The sample size for Study 2 was determined by a desire to obtain an effect size of $f = 0.10$. A sensitivity analysis using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) for a within-subjects, repeated measures ANOVA indicated that this study had enough power to detect a small effect, $f = 0.098$.[4]

Materials and procedure

Unlike Study 1, Study 2 was conducted completely online via Qualtrics using a mouse-tracking integration JavaScript code as outlined in Mathur and Reichling (2019). This code produces the same outcome variables of interest as the desktop version of MouseTracker (v. 2.84; Freeman and Ambady, 2010): AUC, MD, RT, and x-flips; however, there are some differences inherent in the online presentation of stimuli.

Participants were required to complete the task on a personal computer (not a phone or tablet). If a participant completed the task via touchscreen, there would be no recorded mouse trajectory, and they would be excluded from analysis. Similarly, bots can only make direct selections (clicks); they cannot move a mouse, and therefore, bot activity would be excluded in the same manner. In addition, the JavaScript code allows several warnings to be displayed as needed. At the beginning of the first practice trial, participants were shown a warning if their screen size was too small to see the entirety of the experimental setup. In these cases, they were asked to expand the screen before continuing. Unlike the desktop version by MouseTracker (Freeman and Ambady, 2010), the trial begins when the image loads. If participants took too long (> 700 ms; $M_{initiation}$ = 682.10) to start moving their cursor after the image appeared, they were shown an alert to begin earlier; conversely, if participants moved their cursor while the image was loading, they were told they started too early. If participants took too long (> 5000 ms) to select a response, they were shown an alert reminding them to respond faster. See Table 3 for the proportion of trials that triggered each alert. The allowable initiation time, as well as the cut-off time, were the defaults in the task programming (Mathur and Reichling, 2019), and give more leeway than desktop programming due to the variability of image load times in online data collection. In the online translation of this task, participants click a "Next" button, centered at the bottom of the experimental screen, which not only moves them onto the next trial but also provides a consistent cursor starting point. This is analogous to the "Start" button used for the same purpose on the desktop version of the mouse tracking task.

TABLE 3 Percentage trials with alerts shown, study 2.

Alert type	% trials
None	60.87%
Started too early	15.00%
Started too late	21.34%
Surpassed trial time limit	2.80%

Despite these idiosyncrasies, the experimental setup was similar to Study 1. Participants were again asked to categorize faces into binary choices. However, participants were asked to categorize the faces as "American" (presented on the top left corner of the screen) or "Foreign" (presented on the top right corner of the screen). The face stimuli, too, were slightly altered. Rather than combining different stimulus sources as in Study 1, we used the faces of 18 self-identified Latine men and women from the Chicago Face Database (Ma et al., 2015). Based on the data provided in the Database, six faces were medium-skinned (luminance $M = 144.50$, $SD = 10.12$) and viewed as prototypically Latine (Latine probability $M = 78.18\%$, $SD = 5.71\%$; "typical"), while another six were light-skinned (luminance $M = 167.00$, $SD = 7.73$), but viewed as prototypically White (Latine probability $M = 14.43\%$, $SD = 9.02\%$; White probability $M = 76.42\%$, $SD = 10.75\%$; "atypical"). Instead of self-identified multiracial faces as in Study 1, here we used six self-identified Latine targets who were light-skinned (luminance $M = 154.92$, $SD = 6.48$) but viewed as prototypically Latine (Latine probability $M = 79.22\%$, $SD = 11.68\%$; "ambiguous"). Moreover, the equal number of stimuli across categories allows for consistent base-rates, and therefore more consistent priors for the participants, compared to Study 1. The stimuli presentation order was randomized, and participants saw each image once.

After the mouse tracking task, participants were asked the same demographic questions as in Study 1. They were also presented with questions about their skin tone ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 1.13$) as well as how their skin tone compared to others of their same racial or ethnic group ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 0.761$). Finally, participants again completed ratings of the average White American's skin tone ($M = 1.77$, $SD = 0.799$) and average Latine American's skin tone ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.05$) using the ten-point NIS Skin Color Scale (Massey and Martin, 2003). Similar to Study 1, these exploratory variables are not considered further.

Analytic plan

Results from Study 2 were analyzed in RStudio (v. 2024.12.1.563; Posit team, 2025) in much the same way as in Study 1. Any trials with RTs greater than 3 SDs from the mean were removed before analysis ($n_{trials} = 24$ from 9 participants). The three image categories (ambiguous, typical, and atypical) were used as the independent variable in all analyses, with the ambiguous category used as the reference group. Logistic regressions were used to test the decision outcomes (e.g., "Foreign" vs. "American")

4 In our preregistration, we said we would conduct simple ANOVAs instead of the linear mixed effects model. We feel that being able to account for the dependency of within-participant data is necessary to more appropriately test our hypotheses and therefore justified this deviation. The general pattern of results holds, though, if conducted in an ANOVA framework, as is reported in the Supplemental Material on OSF.

using the "glm" function in base R (R Core Team, 2016). Mouse trajectory results were again analyzed in the "nlme" package (v. 3.1-168; Pinheiro et al., 2025) with participant allowed as a random intercept. Finally, AUC, MD, and RT were again standardized for easier interpretation in the models but left unstandardized for descriptive statistics and figures. Descriptive statistics and correlations of all mouse tracking outcomes are presented in Table 1.

Results

Decision outcomes by facial category

To begin, we examined the decision outcomes ("Foreign" vs. "American") by facial stimuli type. As expected, the typical Latine faces were more frequently categorized as "Foreign" (trial $n = 910$, 74.0%) than "American" (trial $n = 320$, 26.0%), and the atypical Latine faces were more often deemed to be "American" (trial $n = 982$, 80.0%) than "Foreign" (trial $n = 245$, 20.0%). Participants were more evenly split in their categorization of the ambiguous faces ("Foreign" trial $n = 684$, 55.7%; "American" trial $n = 544$, 44.7%). Testing these counts with a logistic regression showed that the inclusion of facial category did improve the model fit above and beyond the null model, $X^2(2) = 785.09$, $p < 0.001$. Compared to the ambiguous faces, the typical Latine faces were much more likely to be categorized as "Foreign" than "American," OR = 2.26, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI (1.909, 2.683), whereas the atypical Latine faces were much less likely to be categorized as "Foreign" (as opposed to "American") than the ambiguous faces, OR = 0.198, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI (.166, 0.237).

Mouse tracking trajectory analyses

In examining AUC, there were no significant differences between facial types (ambiguous: $M = 0.820$, $SD = 7.547$; typical: $M = 1.052$, $SD = 11.133$; atypical: $M = 1.158$, $SD = 18.726$; see Figure 2a and Table 2). MD similarly yielded no differences by stimuli type (ambiguous: $M = 0.890$, $SD = 1.371$; typical: $M = 1.008$, $SD = 3.853$; atypical: $M = 0.824$, $SD = 1.842$; see Figure 2b and Table 2). In this context of national categorization, we do not see any difference in mouse trajectory deviation when participants categorize the ambiguous faces vs. the typical or atypical Latine faces.

However, when examining RT, we did see significant effects: participants took longer to categorize the ambiguous ($M = 1356.200$, $SD = 885.311$) faces than either the typical ($M = 1297.377$, $SD = 858.939$) or atypical Latine faces ($M = 1279.546$, $SD = 833.271$; see Figure 2c and Table 2). This suggests that participants spent more time cognitively processing how to categorize the ambiguous (light skin, prototypically Latine) faces than the comparatively easier task of categorizing the typical or atypical Latine faces. Similarly, participants demonstrated significantly more x-flips when they categorized the ambiguous faces ($M = 1.973$, $SD = 2.142$) than either the typical ($M = 1.835$, $SD = 1.909$) or atypical faces ($M = 1.769$, $SD = 1.961$; see Figure 2d and Table 2). This suggests that, in line with our predictions, participants showed the most indecision by moving their mouse back and forth between the outcome options when they saw the ambiguous stimuli.

Discussion

As predicted, participants categorized the typical Latine faces (medium skin tone and prototypical) as more stereotypically "Foreign" and the atypical Latine (light skin and non-prototypical) faces as "American." However, their responses were more mixed when categorizing the ambiguous (light skin and prototypical) faces. Although these faces were still more frequently categorized as "Foreign" (684 trials) than "American" (544 trials), the gap was much smaller than for the typical Latine faces. Consistent with Study 1, these findings highlight the complexity of rapidly categorizing Latine faces that display physical characteristics associated with both White and Latine Americans.

The mouse-tracking results of Study 2, however, show a mixed picture. Specifically, as expected, participants took longer and generated more x-flips when categorizing the faces of ambiguous targets than a/typical targets. Contrary to our prediction, however, the more direct measures of mouse trajectory deviation—AUC and MD—failed to show significant differences between the facial stimuli. The discrepancy in outcomes between Studies 1 and 2 could be due to several factors, including more erratic mouse trajectories when completing the study online (Study 2) vs. in person (Study 1), or the overall difficulty of categorizing nationality (Study 2) rather than race (Study 1). Nevertheless, given that we do see differences in RT and x-flips in Study 2, we can reasonably surmise that participants did struggle more to decide how to categorize the ambiguous faces than the a/typical Latine faces, but that indecision was not captured in AUC and MD in this experimental paradigm.

General discussion

The present research examined the social cognitive processes underlying the racial categorization and stereotyping of Latine faces. Both typical (medium skin tone, prototypical) and ambiguous (light skin, prototypical) Latine individuals were more likely to be categorized as Latino American and labeled as "Foreign," compared to atypical (light skin, non-prototypical) Latine individuals. Our findings also revealed that both skin tone and Latine prototypicality uniquely influence the dynamic cognitive processes involved in these categorizations. Specifically, as predicted, mouse trajectories for typical and atypical Latine targets showed quick reaction times with minimal deviation from an idealized straight line. In contrast, mouse trajectories for ambiguous Latine targets exhibited greater complexity, leading to more significant deviations during racial categorization and greater indecision in national categorization. These results highlight that both skin tone and Latine prototypicality are key predictors of how Latine individuals are categorized. Furthermore, even when light-skinned and medium-skinned Latine individuals are matched for high prototypicality, skin tone continues to affect the cognitive processes involved in their categorization.

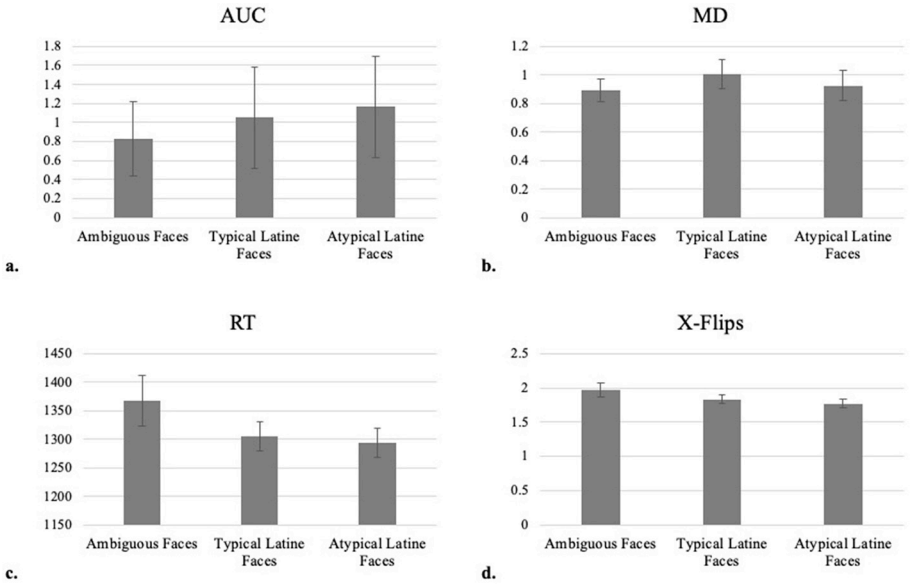

FIGURE 2
Study 2 mouse tracking results measuring **(a)** AUC, **(b)** MD, **(c)** RT, and **(d)** X-flips. Error bars represent standard error.

These findings align with the dynamic interactive theory of person construal and are consistent with traditional mouse-tracking research. Specifically, prior work has shown that ambiguous physical appearance—such as possessing features characteristic of multiple racial categories—creates cognitive competition that complicates final categorization decisions (e.g., Freeman et al., 2020). In our work, this was evident in the categorization of light-skinned, prototypically Latine-appearing individuals, as indicated by higher AUC, longer reaction times, and more x-flips. Importantly, we provide the first evidence of this effect in perceptions of Latine targets, a group that is both racially ambiguous (Chen et al., 2021) and growing in numerical representation in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Our findings demonstrate that, despite the racial ambiguity of Latine Americans as a whole, medium skin tone serves as the most direct and reliable phenotypic cue for categorizing someone as Latine. In addition, while past studies have shown that light-skinned Latine individuals are more likely to be categorized as White than Latine in implicit binary choice outcomes (Camacho and Reinka, 2026), our findings add nuance by revealing that even light-skinned, prototypically-appearing Latine individuals are still predominantly categorized as Latine, though this categorization requires more cognitive effort, highlighting the complexity of these judgments.

Our findings are also consistent with the theory of racial phenotypicality bias. As posited by the theory, we find that people who appear more prototypical of a racial group are more likely to be perceived through the lens of group-based stereotypes (Maddox, 2004). Specifically, we found that both medium-skin, prototypically appearing Latine individuals and light-skinned, prototypically appearing Latine individuals were significantly more likely to be categorized as "Foreign"—a stereotype commonly associated with Latine individuals—compared to light-skinned, non-prototypically appearing Latine individuals. Novel to our study, however, is the finding that the dynamic pathways by which these categorizations are made differ for ambiguous Latine targets compared to either typical or atypical targets. Participants took longer and reversed directions more along the x-axis when categorizing these faces, demonstrating indecision and delay in categorizing them as either stereotypical ("Foreign") or counter-stereotypical ("American"). Notably, AUC and MD were not statistically significant in Study 2, which may suggest that the complexity involved in stereotypically categorizing ambiguous Latine faces is more effectively captured by subtler measures of decisional conflict—such as x-flips—rather than by overall deviation from a direct response trajectory, which is what AUC reflects (Freeman et al., 2010). Regardless, our findings demonstrate that faces that prior research (and Study 1) showed to be the most prototypical (medium skin tone) are also dynamically categorized as the most stereotypical, while ambiguous Latine faces, though largely categorized in the same manner, require more cognitive effort.

Our research has several limitations that affect the generalizability of our findings (Simons et al., 2017). Although we observed significant differences in the dynamic racial categorization and stereotyping of Latine individuals based on skin tone and prototypicality, we were unable to identify the specific facial features that make light-skinned individuals appear prototypically Latine, limiting our ability to manipulate Latine faces beyond skin tone and average prototypicality. Additionally, while using real faces—rather than the morphed faces commonly used in mouse-tracking research (Chwe et al., 2024)—enhances ecological validity, it introduces uncontrolled variability in previously identified Latine prototypicality features such as lip shape.

We also did not employ a fully crossed design, as we were unable to include medium-skinned Latine individuals

who varied in prototypicality, preventing us from disentangling the effects of skin tone and prototypicality for medium-tone individuals and restricting such conclusions only to light-skinned targets. Moreover, prior work shows that impressions depend on both target and perceiver characteristics (Hehman et al., 2017), suggesting that racial and national categorizations may be shaped by participant factors such as prior exposure to Latine individuals—factors we did not measure. In addition, individuals may also appear prototypically Latine for reasons beyond physical appearance (e.g., name, Spanish proficiency; Garcia and Abascal, 2016; Sanchez et al., 2012), underscoring the need for future research to examine how non-phenotypic features contribute to prototypicality judgments and stereotypical categorizations.

Finally, in Study 2, participants could use either a trackpad or an external mouse depending on their personal computing setup. Because we could not assess which device was used, reaction time variability likely differed across participants. However, given our within-participants design, this variability should be greater between participants than within participants, and our inclusion of participant as a random effect should largely account for these differences in the statistical model.

Despite these limitations, our findings have important implications for understanding how Latine Americans are racially categorized and stereotyped in various contexts. For example, both medium- and light-skinned Latine individuals who appeared prototypically Latine were categorized as Latine American (Study 1) and stereotyped as foreigners (Study 2). This suggests that prototypical targets are likely to experience similar forms of explicit stereotyping and bias due to their prototypicality (cf. Maddox, 2004). However, in contexts where stereotyping and bias are automatically activated or occur within limited time frames, medium-skinned Latine individuals may be more susceptible to these biases. As shown in the current study, their racial categorization and stereotyping transpired more quickly and directly. Therefore, in situations like the shooting paradigm—where groups stereotyped as criminals are more likely to be erroneously shot in a computer-simulated game (Correll et al., 2014)—medium-skinned Latine individuals may be more likely to experience this bias than their equally prototypical, but lighter-skinned, Latine counterparts. Indeed, skin tone is an important predictor of stronger implicit bias in split-second "shoot/don't shoot" decisions, with dark-skinned Black targets more likely to be mistakenly identified as threats compared to light-skinned Black targets (Kahn and Davies, 2011). This is particularly relevant for Latine Americans given that they are also stereotyped as criminals (Zou and Cheryan, 2017), in addition to stereotypes of foreignness, as measured here.

Conclusion

Despite being the largest racial or ethnic minority group in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023), Latine Americans remain underrepresented in person-perception studies examining the role of skin tone and phenotypic features in their stereotypicality (Maddox et al., 2022). We aimed to address this limitation by exploring the continuous and dynamic cognitive processes through which Latine Americans are racially (White vs. Latine) and nationally (American vs. Foreign) categorized. Our findings align with previous studies on the explicit and implicit categorization and stereotyping of Latine individuals: medium skin tones are perceived as more prototypically Latine and stereotypically foreign compared to lighter skin tones (Camacho and Reinka, 2026; Chirco and Buchanan, 2021; Wilton et al., 2013). However, we demonstrate, for the first time, the unique influences of prototypicality and skin tone on the categorization and stereotyping of light-skinned Latine individuals. Specifically, we find that ambiguous-appearing Latine targets experience similar categorizations compared to those with medium skin tones, but the cognitive pathways to such categorizations are intermixed with the possibility of being considered White and American—possibilities not as readily ascribed to their medium-skinned counterparts. These findings underscore the need for further exploration of the cognitive processes through which Latine Americans are perceived and the consequences of such processes.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this study can be found in online repositories. The names of the repository/repositories and accession number(s) can be found below: https://osf.io/jkwue/?view_only=7388465ff6da4f049f313b0a8de0a96d.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Institutional Review Boards at the City University of New York and Ursinus College. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

GC: Data curation, Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization, Investigation. MR: Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. CB: Visualization, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Santa Clara University, United States

REVIEWED BY
Santiago Gómez Echeverry,
VU Amsterdam, Netherlands
Ana Maria Fernanda Arias Uriona,
Universidad Católica Boliviana San Pablo, Bolivia

*CORRESPONDENCE
Angela R. Dixon
angela.dixon@northwestern.edu

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The perception paradox: experiencing and witnessing skin color discrimination and self-rated health in Latin America

Angela R. Dixon[1,2,3]*

[1]School of Education and Social Policy, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, United States, [2]Northwestern University Pritzker School of Law, Chicago, IL, United States, [3]Department of Medical Social Sciences, Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, Chicago, IL, United States

Introduction: An extensive body of literature has established that perceived discrimination is linked to adverse health outcomes. In Latin America, a region deemed a pigmentocracy due to its pronounced skin color–based stratification, research on the relationship between color discrimination and health remains limited and mixed. This ambiguity may reflect a perception paradox in the context of national ideologies of *mestizaje* (race-mixture) and racial democracy that purport colorblindness. Latin Americans tend to report high levels of witnessing color discrimination against others (vicarious discrimination) but paradoxically low levels of experiencing discrimination against themselves (personal discrimination).
Methods: Using cross-sectional survey data for Brazil, Mexico, Peru, and Colombia from the Project on Ethnicity and Race in Latin America, I examine the relationship between self-rated health and both personal and vicarious color discrimination. Given that national ideologies have historically privileged class-based explanations of stratification while obscuring the role of skin color, I also examine class discrimination as a comparator.
Results: The results show that the observed associations between discrimination and health vary by both the target and the attribute of discrimination. While personal color discrimination does not show a statistically significant association with poor health, vicarious color discrimination is robustly associated with poor health. In contrast, personal class discrimination is consistently associated with poor health, while vicarious class discrimination is not.
Discussion: Taken together, these findings suggest that associations between perceived discrimination and health must be understood in light of the Latin American racial order in which *mestizaje* and racial democracy work to define which explanations of inequality and unfair treatment are deemed legitimate and reportable.

KEYWORDS
class discrimination, colorism, Latin America, perceived discrimination, self-rated health, vicarious discrimination

1 Introduction

Perceptions of discrimination are an important measure of how individuals interpret and experience inequality. In societies marked by colorism, which refers to the systematic privileging of white/light skin and devaluing of darker skin, skin color can function as a salient attribute of perceived discrimination (Dixon and Telles, 2017). An extensive body of literature demonstrates that perceived discrimination is associated with adverse mental and physical

health (Lam et al., 2025; Paradies et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2019). These studies, primarily based in the U.S. and other high-income countries, have largely focused on personal discrimination, defined as unfair treatment targeted against oneself (Lee et al., 2024; Lewis et al., 2015; Pascoe and Richman, 2009). Considerably less scholarly attention has focused on how different approaches to measuring color discrimination shape our understanding of its relationship to health.

Measurement considerations are particularly important in Latin America given the entrenched color-based stratification that coexists with historic national narratives of *mestizaje* (race-mixture) and racial democracy purporting colorblindness (Telles and Sue, 2009; Wade, 1997). Scholars have argued that these ideologies are not simply cultural narratives, but serve as a racial project through which the racial/color hierarchies, rooted in legacies of colonialism and racialization, have been both structured and rationalized (Moreno Figueroa and Wade, 2024; Wade, 2024). Within such a context, a perception paradox has emerged. Many individuals perceive ethnoracial discrimination and colorism as a cause of stratification in the region (Silva and Leão, 2012; Telles and Bailey, 2013); yet, this perception coexists with relatively low levels of personal reports of ethnoracial and color discrimination, notions that are deeply intertwined in Latin America given that ethnoracial identification has historically been heavily dependent on skin color and phenotype (Canache et al., 2014; Reyes-Ortiz et al., 2023; Telles and Sue, 2009).

Prior research on ethnoracial and color discrimination and health in Latin America is limited and mixed. While some studies show statistically significant associations with health outcomes (Fattore et al., 2018; Reyes-Ortiz et al., 2023; Santana et al., 2007), others find weak, attenuated, or null associations, particularly when also accounting for class discrimination (Camelo et al., 2018; Mendez et al., 2020; Perreira and Telles, 2014). Given the gap between generalized recognition of color discrimination and personal reports, standard approaches focused on personal experiences may obscure the role of color discrimination as a risk factor for health in this context. National ideologies that discourage recognition of color discrimination may not only shape what is perceived and reported, but also understandings of the relationship between color discrimination and health. Although still understudied compared to personal discrimination, growing evidence suggests that witnessing discrimination against other individuals, also known as vicarious discrimination, is associated with adverse health (Chae et al., 2021; Holloway and Varner, 2023; Moody et al., 2023). Despite the high levels of vicarious discrimination reported in Latin America, little scholarly attention has been paid to the relationship between vicarious color discrimination and health in this context. Considering both personal and vicarious color discrimination may help to uncover whether the narrow focus on personal color discrimination has unduly shaped existing understandings of how color discrimination relates to health.

In this study, I examine the relationship between perceptions of color discrimination and self-rated health in Latin America. I compare multiple attributes of discrimination by examining color and class discrimination, experienced personally and witnessed against others. Class discrimination serves as a salient counterpoint to color because national ideologies have historically privileged class-based explanations of stratification while dismissing the role of color (Degler, 1986; Telles, 2004). This dual comparison provides analytic leverage to investigate how the sociohistorical meaning of the attributes of inequality—in this case, skin color and class status—may shape the relationship between discrimination and health. To do this, I use data from the Project on Ethnicity and Race in Latin America (PERLA). I find that observed associations between discrimination and health vary based on both the target and attribute of discrimination.

2 Background

Throughout much of Latin America, darker skin is predictive of worse socioeconomic and health outcomes, at times even more so than racial identification, giving rise to the region being deemed a pigmentocracy (Lipschutz, 1944; Perreira and Telles, 2014; Telles and PERLA, 2014). This racial/color hierarchy was birthed through colonialism, enslavement, and pervasive marginalization of Indigenous and Afrodescendant individuals (ECLAC, 2016; Wade, 2024). These racialized hierarchies based on descent and phenotype created economic and social inequalities that persist to the present day (Telles and PERLA, 2014). However, after independence, national ideologies of *mestizaje,* and racial democracy in Brazil, were used to obscure these hierarchies and construct national identities based on the idea of a racially and culturally mixed society free of racism and racial discrimination (Andrews, 2004; Degler, 1986). While these ideologies assert that race mixture created blurry racial boundaries that constrained racism, scholars argue these ideologies work to legitimize the racial and color-based hierarchy that privileges whiteness and light skin while subordinating darker skin, Indigeneity, and Blackness (Moreno Figueroa and Wade, 2024). Furthermore, these ideologies posit that color-based and ethnoracial inequalities can be explained by color-blind, class-based factors (Harris, 1964; Telles and Sue, 2009).

Yet, the ideologies of *mestizaje* and racial democracy are both contested and incomplete. There is widespread belief that racial discrimination and racism are at least in part to blame for societal inequality (Bastos et al., 2017; Silva and Leão, 2012; Telles and Bailey, 2013). For example, Brazilians with the strongest beliefs in racial democracy counterintuitively most strongly believe that ethnoracial inequalities are produced by structural factors such as racism or discrimination, rather than individualistic explanations such as personal work ethic (Bailey, 2002).

Despite robust evidence that Latin Americans widely perceive racial/color discrimination, rates of reporting personal color discrimination are markedly low (Canache et al., 2014; Dixon, 2019). This discrepancy aligns with a sociohistorical context in which national ideologies can make the reporting of personal discrimination costly. Those who have claimed to be the target of ethnoracial discrimination can themselves be accused of being racist and sowing division (Golash-Boza, 2012; Sue, 2013; Sue and Golash-Boza, 2013; Twine, 1998). Prior work has also suggested that individuals might not perceive or report personal discrimination, as this can cultivate feelings of lack of agency and lower locus of control, given that they seemingly could not prevent themselves from being discriminated against (Lewis et al., 2015).

This gap observed in reports of perceived personal discrimination compared to vicarious discrimination aligns with the personal–group discrepancy, a phenomenon observed in social psychology (Levin et al., 2002; Taylor et al., 1994). Individuals tend to report higher rates of discrimination happening to their in-group members (e.g., Black people in general) than against themselves (e.g., what a Black individual would say they

personally experienced). Taylor et al. (1994, 233) argued that "If all minority group members perceive relatively little discrimination directed at them personally, where are the group members who are discriminated against at such a high level that it would warrant the high ratings of group discrimination that emerge so consistently?" This paradox is also highlighted by the fact that many do not report personally knowing others who engage in racist behavior, despite high levels of recognition of color discrimination. For example, in Peru, Sue and Golash-Boza (2013, 1588) concluded that "…although most Peruvians now recognize that racism exists, they do not view themselves or people they know as participating in racism, demonstrating a classic case of 'racism without racists.'"

Unlike color discrimination, class discrimination was never incongruent with national narratives or identities created through *mestizaje* and racial democracy. According to these narratives, the disadvantages faced by Indigenous and Afrodescendant individuals and those with darker skin were not a result of their skin color or ethnoracial identity. Instead, such disadvantage was explained as resulting from class status (Telles and PERLA, 2014; Telles and Sue, 2009). Consequently, the observed inequality was seen as a historical artifact, not an active contemporary reproduction. For example, according to these ideologies, slavery was seen as a historical reason Afrodescendant individuals were socioeconomically disadvantaged; however, living within a purportedly racially equitable society did not prevent historically marginalized ethnoracial groups from contemporary upward mobility (Andrews, 2004; Telles, 2004). Adages such as "money whitening" also suggested the notion that better treatment comes with increased wealth—even for non-White people or individuals with darker skin (Roth et al., 2022; Schwartzman, 2007). Within such ideologies, class-based explanations thus served to minimize and obscure historically rooted and contemporarily reproduced ethnoracial stratification.

Therefore, according to these national ideologies, class discrimination, unlike color discrimination, was a socially legitimate and expected explanation for inequality (Golash-Boza, 2012; Sue, 2013; Telles, 2004). In line with the predominance of class explanations, class status is often the most common factor to which unfair treatment is attributed in Latin America; rates of reporting personal class discrimination are routinely much higher than those of personal color discrimination (Perreira and Telles, 2014; Silva and Leão, 2012; Telles and PERLA, 2014). Extant research has shown perceptions of class discrimination to be an important risk factor for poor health, one that also attenuates associations between color discrimination and health (Mendez et al., 2020; Perreira and Telles, 2014). These diverging patterns, taken by themselves, would seem to call into question the importance of color-based discrimination in these contexts.

However, national ideologies that privilege class discrimination over color discrimination may complicate individuals' ability to identify the cause of discriminatory treatment (Canache et al., 2014; Dixon, 2019). Prior work has documented that individuals may experience unfair treatment due to skin color but attribute it to other factors rather than reporting it as color discrimination (Bastos et al., 2017; Dixon, 2019). Given the work of *mestizaje* and racial democracy ideologies to reinterpret racial/color hierarchy through a class-based lens, observed associations between discrimination and health may differ depending on how discrimination is measured. As such, it is vital to examine both the attribute to which individuals assign discriminatory treatment as well as the target of discrimination.

3 Data and analytic strategy

3.1 Data

To investigate the association between perceptions of discrimination and health in four Latin American countries, I use data from the Project on Ethnicity and Race in Latin America (PERLA). Conducted in 2010, PERLA is uniquely suited for this study as it remains one of the only comparative surveys to offer such extensive questions on color discrimination, particularly both personal and vicarious discrimination, as well as self-rated health in the region. PERLA is a cross-sectional survey conducted using face-to-face interviews with voting-age respondents in Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru. PERLA selected these countries given their large Indigenous and Afrodescendant populations (Telles and PERLA, 2014). PERLA conducted national surveys in each of the four countries and an Indigenous oversample in Mexico and an Afrodescendant oversample in Colombia. One respondent per household was interviewed and the unit of analysis is the individual. The surveys were administered in Portuguese in Brazil and in Spanish in the three other countries. The number of respondents sampled was approximately 1,000 in Brazil and 1,500 in the other three countries. The analytic sample is restricted to individuals aged 18–65 ($N = 5{,}094$). Due to sample size limitations, I excluded 174 individuals who did not self-identify as White, Mixed, Indigenous, Black, or Mulato. Finally, I used listwise deletion for the remaining variables to arrive at a final analytic sample of 4,736. All estimates are unweighted and therefore represent associations within this analytic sample, as opposed to population estimates for Latin America.

3.2 Variables

The main outcome of interest is self-rated health, which is measured based on the question, "Would you say that your health overall is very good, good, fair, bad, or very bad?" Self-rated health is a robust, widely used measure of well-being that is predictive of morbidity and mortality (Idler and Benyamini, 1997; Jylhä, 2009; Schnittker and Bacak, 2014). In line with a large body of previous work examining poor health as a parsimonious indicator of health status, I created a dichotomous variable for poor health by indicating whether the respondent reported good (good, very good) or poor (fair, bad, very bad) health (de Castro et al., 2020; Fagundes et al., 2022; Perreira and Telles, 2014). The grouping of the "fair" middle category with poor health is consistent with the connotation of the middle category *regular* being more aligned with poor health in Latin America, in contrast to English-language measures of self-rated health in which only the bottom two categories are commonly combined (Camelo et al., 2022; Fagundes et al., 2022; Mendez et al., 2020; Perreira and Telles, 2014).

The main predictors of interest are perceptions of personal and vicarious discrimination based on skin color and class status. These measures are designed to capture self-reported perceptions of discrimination and are also referred to as self-reported discrimination

(Williams et al., 2019). The perception of personal color discrimination was based on the following survey item: "In the last five years, have you ever felt discriminated against or been treated badly or unfairly due to: Your skin color." For personal class discrimination, the respondent was asked the same question with a different discrimination attribute: "Your economic situation." The perception of vicarious color discrimination was measured based on the following question: "Have you witnessed situations where another person has been discriminated against, treated badly, or unfairly due to: His/her skin color?" For vicarious class discrimination, the respondent was asked the same question with a different attribute: "His/her economic situation?" For each of the discrimination questions, respondents could indicate "many times," "sometimes," "a few times," or "never." The top three levels of frequency were collapsed to form dichotomous variables measuring whether a respondent reported any level of frequency of discrimination versus no discrimination at all.

Additional covariates included in the analyses are the respondents' skin color, ethnoracial self-identification, Indigenous parentage, wealth, educational attainment, possession of health insurance, urban/rural residence, gender, age, marital status, and country. Skin color is based on the PERLA Color Palette that ranges from 1 (lightest) to 11 (darkest) (Telles and PERLA, 2014). PERLA interviewers assigned a numerical value to the facial color of the respondent based on this palette. I recoded skin color into a 4-level variable of very light (1, 2), light (3, 4), medium (5, 6), and dark (7–11) in line with previous studies that suggest the relationship between skin color and health outcomes is not linear in the Latin American context (Perreira and Telles, 2014).

Ethnoracial identification with a marginalized group is associated with perceiving ethnoracial discrimination (Canache et al., 2014). Throughout Latin America, skin color and race are often correlated but are not synonymous, and the strength of the association varies by country (Telles and Paschel, 2014). Importantly, decisions on how individuals self-identify can be shaped by political and ideological positions, in addition to, or with little regard for, phenotype (Telles and PERLA, 2014). Therefore, I also control for ethnoracial self-identification based on the question, "You consider yourself… (Spanish) / Your color or race is…? (Portuguese)." I then recoded the responses for standardization across countries to White, Mixed (Mestizo in Spanish-speaking countries/Parda in Brazil), Indigenous, and a joint Black/Mulato category (Negra/Preta/Mulato). The combination of the Black/Mulato category follows Perreira and Telles (2014), who did not find meaningful differences between those who self-identified as Mulato or Black regarding socioeconomic status and health outcomes in PERLA. In Mexico and Peru, respondents were also asked, "Based on your ancestors and customs, you consider yourself to be of what origin?" I also coded those who responded "Nahuatl, Maya, Zapoteco, Mixteco, Quechua, Aymara, De la Amazonia, Otra pueblo indigena" as Indigenous. Indigenous parentage is a binary variable based on self-report that either or both parents were Indigenous.

Socioeconomic status is operationalized using wealth and educational attainment. The wealth measure is an index constructed using principal component analysis of 11 household items (television, refrigerator, telephone, washing machine, vehicle or car, drinking water in the house, bathroom in the house, computer, flat screen TV, internet service, and a gas or electric stove), following Córdova (2009) to account for differences across both urban and rural areas and the various country contexts. The wealth index was normed to have a mean of zero and has a standard deviation of 1.8 with a range of −6.4 to 6.0. Wealth measures are known to be valid alternatives to income-based measures in low-to-middle income nations (Filmer and Pritchett, 2001). Education is measured as the last year of education completed and is a continuous variable ranging from 0 to 18.

Marital status is a binary variable indicating whether the respondent is married/cohabitating or not. Possession of health insurance is also a binary variable indicating whether the respondent reported having any health insurance. Gender and urban setting are binary variables. Age is a continuous variable. In all regression models, I also control for country of residence.

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics.

Variable	Value
Poor health (%)	36.7
Perceived discrimination (%)	
Personal color discrimination	19.5
Vicarious color discrimination	59.5
Personal class discrimination	33.0
Vicarious class discrimination	64.5
Skin color (%)	
Very light	6.7
Light	40.0
Medium	36.3
Dark	17.0
Ethnoracial identity (%)	
White	16.1
Mixed	46.8
Indigenous	21.3
Black/*Mulato*	15.8
Parent indigenous	23.4
Socioeconomic status	
Wealth index, mean (SD = 1.8)	0.0
Education (years)	9.6
Healthcare access (%)	
Any health insurance	59.6
Urban	76.1
Demographics (%)	
Female	51.5
Age (years)	37.4
Married/cohabitating	62.1
Country (%)	
Brazil	16.4
Colombia	27.6
Peru	28.8
Mexico	27.2
Observations	4,736

TABLE 2 Odds ratios from logistic regression models predicting perceiving personal and vicarious color and class discrimination.

Variable	(1) Personal color	(2) Vicarious color	(3) Personal class	(4) Vicarious class
Skin color (ref. very light)				
Light	0.892	1.041	1.336^{+}	1.077
	(0.188)	(0.157)	(0.202)	(0.153)
Medium	1.435^{+}	1.126	1.386*	1.079
	(0.272)	(0.195)	(0.212)	(0.167)
Dark	2.619***	1.591*	1.760**	1.402^{+}
	(0.590)	(0.295)	(0.321)	(0.271)
Ethnoracial identity (ref. White)				
Mixed	1.486**	1.055	1.176^{+}	1.156
	(0.227)	(0.114)	(0.114)	(0.129)
Indigenous	1.695*	0.970	1.119	1.187
	(0.364)	(0.135)	(0.159)	(0.175)
Black/*Mulato*	3.255***	1.530**	1.089	1.434*
	(0.664)	(0.241)	(0.172)	(0.234)
Indigenous parent (ref. non-indigenous parent)				
Parent indigenous	1.542***	1.347**	1.370***	1.239*
	(0.182)	(0.131)	(0.128)	(0.119)
Socioeconomic status				
Wealth index	0.953^{+}	1.051^{+}	0.896***	1.035
	(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.020)	(0.027)
Years of education	1.025*	1.062***	1.013	1.067***
	(0.012)	(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.010)
Demographics				
Female	0.966	0.945	1.052	0.998
	(0.069)	(0.057)	(0.059)	(0.061)
Age	0.998	0.993*	1.002	0.998
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Urban	1.346*	1.523***	1.271*	1.555***
	(0.181)	(0.181)	(0.134)	(0.180)
Country (ref. Mexico)				
Brazil	0.660*	0.302***	0.639**	0.227***
	(0.117)	(0.036)	(0.093)	(0.031)
Colombia	0.709^{+}	1.114	0.998	0.939
	(0.125)	(0.139)	(0.139)	(0.127)
Peru	1.651**	1.353*	1.220	1.200
	(0.259)	(0.171)	(0.167)	(0.162)
Constant	0.061***	0.651	0.195***	0.710
	(0.020)	(0.171)	(0.049)	(0.183)
n	4,736	4,736	4,736	4,736

Exponentiated coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses.
$^{+}p < 0.10$; $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{***}p < 0.001$.

3.3 Analytic plan

I begin by presenting summary statistics for the variables of interest in Table 1. Next, I estimate logistic regression models to examine how key demographic factors predict the reporting of perceived discrimination and how these patterns vary by the target (personal versus vicarious) and attribute (color versus class) of discrimination (Table 2). In Table 3, I examine the main question of interest: the relationship between perceived personal color and vicarious color discrimination and poor health using logistic regression models. Model 1 presents the traditional model that is commonly employed to estimate the relationship between personal color discrimination

TABLE 3 Odds ratios from logistic regression models for associations between color discrimination and poor health.

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Perceived discrimination (ref. none)			
Any personal color discrimination	1.204 (0.138)		1.120 (0.128)
Any vicarious color discrimination		1.274** (0.095)	1.241** (0.092)
Skin color (ref. very light)			
Light	0.960 (0.156)	0.953 (0.158)	0.956 (0.158)
Medium	1.162 (0.206)	1.166 (0.207)	1.161 (0.207)
Dark	1.028 (0.226)	1.035 (0.229)	1.019 (0.226)
Ethnoracial identity (ref. white)			
Mixed	1.169 (0.149)	1.172 (0.149)	1.169 (0.148)
Indigenous	1.061 (0.177)	1.071 (0.178)	1.066 (0.177)
Black/*Mulato*	1.114 (0.203)	1.116 (0.203)	1.100 (0.202)
Indigenous parent (ref. non-indigenous parent)			
Parent indigenous	1.173 (0.114)	1.173 (0.115)	1.165 (0.113)
Socioeconomic status			
Wealth index	0.896*** (0.019)	0.892*** (0.019)	0.893*** (0.019)
Years of education	0.952*** (0.010)	0.950*** (0.010)	0.950*** (0.010)
Healthcare access			
Any health insurance	0.878+ (0.068)	0.881 (0.068)	0.882 (0.068)
Demographics			
Female	1.325*** (0.084)	1.327*** (0.085)	1.327*** (0.085)
Age	1.036*** (0.003)	1.036*** (0.003)	1.036*** (0.003)
Urban	0.649*** (0.053)	0.639*** (0.052)	0.637*** (0.052)
Married/Cohabitating	0.955 (0.066)	0.959 (0.067)	0.960 (0.067)
Country (ref. Mexico)			
Brazil	0.620** (0.106)	0.654* (0.111)	0.653* (0.111)
Colombia	0.535*** (0.067)	0.527*** (0.066)	0.530*** (0.067)
Peru	1.898*** (0.227)	1.900*** (0.232)	1.886*** (0.228)
Constant	0.260*** (0.066)	0.237*** (0.061)	0.238*** (0.061)
n	4,736	4,736	4,736

Exponentiated coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses.
+$p < 0.10$; *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

and poor health (Perreira and Telles, 2014). In Model 2, I replace personal color discrimination with the more rarely examined measure of vicarious color discrimination. Finally, to assess the relationship with health when accounting for the other type of discrimination, in Model 3, both personal and vicarious color discrimination are included in the same model.

I then repeat the analysis above, but for perceived class discrimination as a comparator to perceived color discrimination to assess whether the results based on the target (personal vs. vicarious) hold across attributes. In Table 4, I show the relationship between poor health and personal class discrimination, then vicarious class discrimination, and both simultaneously (Models 1–3). Finally, in Models 4–6 of Table 4, I estimate the association with poor health for personal color and personal class discrimination, vicarious color and vicarious class discrimination, and all four types of discrimination simultaneously.

4 Results

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for the sample. Regarding health, 36.7% of the sample reports poor health. Personal color discrimination is perceived by 19.5% of individuals. In comparison, more than three times as many individuals (59.5%) report they have witnessed someone else being discriminated against due to skin color (vicarious color discrimination). Personal class discrimination is considerably more common than personal color discrimination, with 33.0% of individuals perceiving they have been discriminated against personally due to class status. The percentage of those perceiving vicarious class discrimination (64.5%) is almost twice as high as personal class discrimination, but not much higher than the rate for vicarious color discrimination. Most respondents have either light (40.0%) or medium skin color (36.3%), while dark (17.0%) and very light (6.7%) skin color are less common. Ethnoracial self-identification as Mixed is the most common response (46.8%), followed by Indigenous (21.3%), then White (16.1%), and lastly Black/Mulato (15.8%), with 23.4% also reporting Indigenous parentage. The majority of respondents reside in urban areas, have health insurance, and are married or cohabitating. Respondents, on average, have 9.6 years of education and a normed wealth index score of approximately zero (SD = 1.8).

Table 2 displays estimates from logistic regression models assessing the relationship between key demographic factors and perceiving personal color discrimination (Model 1) and vicarious color discrimination (Model 2), personal class discrimination (Model 3), and vicarious class discrimination (Model 4), as compared to not perceiving the respective type of discrimination. The results show a different pattern in the factors associated with perceiving personal discrimination. Ethnoracial identification most consistently predicts perceiving personal color discrimination; however, skin color more consistently predicts perceiving personal class discrimination, when adjusting for other factors. The patterns for skin color and ethnoracial identification are fairly consistent between vicarious color discrimination and vicarious class discrimination. In terms of socioeconomic status, more years of education is positively associated with perceiving all but personal class discrimination. On the other hand, greater wealth is associated with significantly lower odds of reporting personal class discrimination,

TABLE 4 Odds ratios from logistic regression models for associations between discrimination and poor health.

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Perceived class discrimination (ref. none)						
Any personal class discrimination	1.338*** (0.103)		1.321*** (0.104)	1.327*** (0.105)		1.325*** (0.111)
Any vicarious class discrimination		1.153+ (0.090)	1.037 (0.082)		0.970 (0.090)	0.881 (0.084)
Perceived color discrimination (ref. none)						
Any personal color discrimination				1.020 (0.126)		0.971 (0.120)
Any vicarious color discrimination					1.299** (0.115)	1.288** (0.118)
Skin color (ref. very light)						
Light	0.944 (0.155)	0.954 (0.157)	0.944 (0.155)	0.945 (0.154)	0.954 (0.158)	0.944 (0.155)
Medium	1.154 (0.205)	1.169 (0.208)	1.154 (0.205)	1.153 (0.206)	1.166 (0.207)	1.153 (0.206)
Dark	1.027 (0.226)	1.049 (0.231)	1.026 (0.226)	1.024 (0.227)	1.035 (0.230)	1.017 (0.226)
Ethnoracial identity (ref. white)						
Mixed	1.164 (0.148)	1.170 (0.148)	1.163 (0.148)	1.163 (0.148)	1.173 (0.149)	1.166 (0.148)
Indigenous	1.065 (0.178)	1.064 (0.177)	1.064 (0.178)	1.064 (0.177)	1.072 (0.178)	1.073 (0.178)
Black/*Mulato*	1.138 (0.207)	1.130 (0.204)	1.135 (0.207)	1.135 (0.207)	1.116 (0.204)	1.125 (0.207)
Indigenous parent (ref. non-indigenous parent)						
Parent indigenous	1.165 (0.115)	1.183+ (0.116)	1.165 (0.115)	1.164 (0.114)	1.173 (0.115)	1.157 (0.113)
Socioeconomic status						
Wealth index	0.901*** (0.019)	0.894*** (0.019)	0.900*** (0.020)	0.900*** (0.019)	0.892*** (0.019)	0.898*** (0.019)
Years of education	0.952*** (0.010)	0.951*** (0.010)	0.952*** (0.010)	0.952*** (0.010)	0.950*** (0.010)	0.950*** (0.010)
Healthcare access						
Any health insurance	0.885 (0.068)	0.878+ (0.068)	0.886 (0.068)	0.885 (0.068)	0.881 (0.068)	0.888 (0.069)
Demographics						
Female	1.319*** (0.083)	1.323*** (0.084)	1.319*** (0.084)	1.319*** (0.084)	1.327*** (0.084)	1.323*** (0.084)
Age	1.036*** (0.003)	1.036*** (0.003)	1.036*** (0.003)	1.036*** (0.003)	1.036*** (0.003)	1.036*** (0.003)
Urban	0.644*** (0.053)	0.646*** (0.052)	0.643*** (0.053)	0.644*** (0.052)	0.639*** (0.052)	0.637*** (0.052)
Married/Cohabitating	0.956 (0.066)	0.953 (0.066)	0.956 (0.066)	0.956 (0.066)	0.959 (0.067)	0.962 (0.067)
Country (ref. Mexico)						
Brazil	0.634** (0.109)	0.644** (0.110)	0.641** (0.109)	0.634** (0.109)	0.651* (0.111)	0.648* (0.110)

(Continued)

TABLE 4 (Continued)

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Colombia	0.530*** (0.066)	0.532*** (0.067)	0.530*** (0.066)	0.530*** (0.067)	0.527*** (0.066)	0.525*** (0.066)
Peru	1.910*** (0.233)	1.916*** (0.232)	1.908*** (0.232)	1.907*** (0.230)	1.900*** (0.233)	1.897*** (0.231)
Constant	0.248*** (0.064)	0.246*** (0.064)	0.245*** (0.063)	0.248*** (0.063)	0.238*** (0.062)	0.237*** (0.061)
n	4,736	4,736	4,736	4,736	4,736	4,736

Exponentiated coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses.
$^{+}p < 0.10$; $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{***}p < 0.001$.

while for the other measures of discrimination it is marginally or not statistically significant.

Next, Table 3 displays odds ratios for the relationships between perceived personal and vicarious color discrimination and poor health. All models were adjusted for skin color, ethnoracial identification, Indigenous parentage, wealth, education, health insurance, gender, age, urban residence, marital status, and country of residence. In Model 1, the association between personal color discrimination and poor health is not statistically significant, holding all else equal. However, those who perceive vicarious color discrimination (Model 2) have 27% higher odds of reporting poor health compared to those who do not perceive vicarious color discrimination (OR: 1.27, $p < 0.01$). In Model 3, the association between vicarious color discrimination and poor health remains statistically significant when both personal and vicarious color discrimination are included. Those who perceive vicarious color discrimination have 24% higher odds of reporting poor health compared to those who do not perceive vicarious color discrimination (OR: 1.24, $p < 0.01$).

Next, in Table 4, I examine the relationship between personal and vicarious class discrimination and poor health. In Table 4, Model 1 shows that those who perceive personal class discrimination have 34% higher odds of reporting poor health than those who do not perceive personal class discrimination (OR: 1.34, $p < 0.001$). This finding contrasts with the findings for personal color discrimination, in which there is not a statistically significant association between personal color discrimination and poor health. For Model 2, vicarious class discrimination is marginally associated with poor health (OR: 1.15, $p < 0.10$). When including both personal class discrimination and vicarious class discrimination, Model 3 shows personal class discrimination has a statistically significant association with poor health (OR: 1.32, $p < 0.001$). However, the relationship between vicarious class discrimination and poor health is not statistically significant.

I introduce my final line of comparative investigation in Models 4–6. Model 4 displays odds ratios from a logistic regression in which personal color and personal class discrimination predict poor health. When adjusting for personal color discrimination, personal class discrimination remains associated with poor health, while the relationship between personal color discrimination and poor health is not statistically significant. Those who perceive personal class discrimination have 33% higher odds of reporting poor health than those who do not perceive personal class discrimination (OR: 1.33, $p < 0.001$). Model 5 shows that vicarious color discrimination is associated with poor health (OR: 1.30, $p < 0.01$), while vicarious class discrimination does not show a statistically significant association with poor health when controlling for vicarious color discrimination. Finally, in Model 6, I include all four measures of discrimination in the same model. When adjusting for the other types of discrimination, both vicarious color discrimination and personal class discrimination remain associated with poor health at a statistically significant level. Those who witness color discrimination have 29% higher odds of reporting poor health (OR: 1.29, $p < 0.01$), and those perceiving that they have experienced class discrimination have 33% higher odds of reporting poor health (OR: 1.33, $p < 0.001$) when holding all else constant. Personal color discrimination and vicarious class discrimination do not show statistically significant associations.

5 Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to the broader literature on perceptions of discrimination and health by demonstrating how measurement approaches shape observed associations with health. Leveraging PERLA's unique set of extensive measures of discrimination, I find that vicarious color discrimination and personal class discrimination demonstrate the most consistent associations with poor health, while there is no evidence of a statistically significant association with personal color discrimination. Taken together, these findings suggest that associations between perceived discrimination and health must be understood in light of the Latin American racial order in which *mestizaje* and racial democracy work to define which explanations of inequality and unfair treatment are deemed legitimate and reportable.

The results demonstrate that color discrimination's association with health varies based on the target of the discrimination. Personal color discrimination did not show a statistically significant association with poor health, which is consistent with prior studies that have found weak or attenuated associations (Mendez et al., 2020; Perreira and Telles, 2014). In contrast, vicarious color discrimination showed a statistically significant association with increased odds of reporting poor health even when accounting for the other measures of discrimination. This finding extends growing evidence from the U.S. that vicarious discrimination is a risk factor for health (Chae et al., 2021; Dominguez et al., 2008; Holloway and Varner, 2023; Moody et al., 2023; Wofford et al., 2019). Given that the majority of individuals report vicarious color discrimination, the health implications of living in a pigmentocracy may be more far-reaching than previously understood and not limited to the targets of color-based discrimination.

The differential finding for personal and vicarious color discrimination may in part reflect national ideologies shaping recognition and

reporting of discrimination. National ideologies encourage citizens not to interpret racial and color discrimination as the cause of unfair treatment but instead hold other forces, such as classism, responsible or attribute the treatment to personal failure (Harris and Kottak, 1963; Pierson, 1942). Correspondingly, personal color discrimination was the least common type of discrimination reported. This is consistent with other studies finding low levels of prevalence (Canache et al., 2014; Dixon, 2019; Reyes-Ortiz et al., 2023). Prior work has argued that individuals may attribute unfair treatment they experience to individual characteristics rather than to a social category, thus not perceiving unfair treatment as discrimination (Machado et al., 2021; Silva and Leão, 2012). For example, Bastos et al. (2017, 304) argued that their Brazilian respondents' conceptualization of mistreatment and discrimination is distinct, thereby structuring what is reported as discrimination. This conceptualization is shaped by "… the ideologies that individuals hold—particularly the extent to which they view inequalities as stemming from individual characteristics or broader social structures."

In such a sociohistorical context with pervasive color-based stratification, reporting vicarious color discrimination may be less psychologically and socially costly than reporting personal color discrimination (Lewis et al., 2015; Sue and Golash-Boza, 2013; Twine, 1998). Close to 60% of respondents report vicarious color discrimination, as compared to about 20% who report personal color discrimination; the high prevalence of vicarious discrimination may serve to make it more socially permissible. This pattern of reporting may also enable individuals to acknowledge clear ethnoracial disparities while minimizing some of the social risks of challenging *mestizaje* ideologies (Sue and Golash-Boza, 2013). The high prevalence of reports of vicarious color discrimination relative to personal color discrimination may also reflect an awareness of racial hierarchies and inequality rooted in colonialism, slavery, and racialization rather than solely the perception of individual-level interactions (ECLAC, 2016; OHCHR, 2023; PAHO, 2019; Wispelwey et al., 2023).

While this study examines measures of interpersonal discrimination, the findings must be considered in light of the specific sociohistorical legacies marked by structural racism and racial hierarchies in which racism and discrimination operate as structural determinants of health (OHCHR, 2023; Williams et al., 2019; Wispelwey et al., 2023). Those who witness discrimination may recognize that they themselves are susceptible to being discriminated against, which in turn can have negative mental and physical health effects (Truong et al., 2016). Given the relatively blurry and fluid racial boundaries in Latin America, and the fact that skin color is often contextualized as relative (e.g., relative color of siblings within families), this potential susceptibility may be particularly salient (Hordge-Freeman, 2015; Telles and Paschel, 2014). Living in such a context may lead to anticipatory stress, hypervigilance, and rumination, which may contribute to weathering and allostatic load due to the stress of being constantly on guard against potential discrimination (Himmelstein et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2019).

The diverging findings for class discrimination reveal that the association between the target of discrimination and health varies by the attribute of discrimination. Personal class discrimination was both more commonly reported than personal color discrimination and associated with poor health in line with prior research (Mendez et al., 2020; Perreira and Telles, 2014). This pattern aligns with the work of national ideologies to legitimate class-based explanations while obscuring racial/color-based ones (Moreno Figueroa and Wade, 2024; Wade, 2024). In a context in which color and class are historically intertwined and hard to disentangle, prior work has identified the difficulty individuals may have in assigning a cause of discrimination such as class or color discrimination (Dixon, 2019; Merritt et al., 2006). Notably, the results show skin color was more consistently associated with reporting personal class discrimination than personal color discrimination, a pattern consistent with some unfair treatment based on color being attributed to class factors (Dixon, 2019). If this study had solely examined perceptions of personal discrimination, the pattern of results would mirror previous work showing that class discrimination was associated with poor health, whereas color discrimination was not (Mendez et al., 2020; Perreira and Telles, 2014). The relationship found for vicarious color discrimination highlights how such approaches have led to an incomplete understanding of perceived discrimination and health in this sociohistorical context.

Conversely, the association between vicarious class discrimination and health is not statistically significant. This suggests vicarious discrimination is not a universally more consistent risk factor for poor health than personal discrimination in this context. Notably, vicarious color discrimination and vicarious class discrimination were reported at similar rates and the factors predicting both were largely consistent. This similarity for both types of vicarious discrimination suggests a generalized awareness of the broader inequality and the ways both class and color structure life outcomes. Taken together, the divergent findings for vicarious color and vicarious class discrimination suggest vicarious discrimination measures may reflect a broader recognition of societal inequality; on the other hand, personal reports may more strongly align with national ideologies. These diverging patterns highlight the need for scholars to pay closer attention to measurement approaches.

This study has several limitations. First, with cross-sectional data, it is not possible to establish a causal relationship between perceiving discrimination and health. However, prior reviews of longitudinal studies provide additional evidence of the association between discrimination and worse health (Lewis et al., 2015; Paradies et al., 2015). Future work assessing longitudinal associations between personal and vicarious color and class discrimination is needed. Second, future work should more closely examine the patterns found in this study within country-specific contexts. Although Latin American countries share broad similarities, each country possesses a unique sociohistorical context with differing manifestations of the national ideologies as well as patterns of stratification and inequality (Loveman, 2014; Telles and Paschel, 2014; Telles and PERLA, 2014). A third limitation is that although PERLA remains one of the only datasets in the region to examine personal and vicarious color discrimination and self-rated health, the data were collected in 2010. Given the evolving discourse on race, colorism, and discrimination throughout the region, future studies should investigate whether the reporting patterns and observed associations found in this study persist in the present context.

Lastly, the measure for personal discrimination is bounded by the time frame of "the last five years," while the time frame for vicarious discrimination is unspecified. Prior work suggests chronic discrimination, particularly the accumulation of discrimination over the life course, may have especially deleterious effects on health (Lewis et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2019). As a result, the statistically significant association between vicarious color discrimination and health,

compared to the null finding for personal color discrimination, may in part arise due to the longer exposure period implied by the vicarious discrimination measures. However, the existence of a statistically significant association for personal class discrimination but not for vicarious class discrimination calls this explanation into question. If the discrepancy were simply due to the time difference, one would expect to find the same pattern for class discrimination, with vicarious class discrimination also being associated with health. The actual pattern of results suggests that this difference is not solely due to the time reference of the question. It will be important for future work to examine both personal and vicarious discrimination through longitudinal research.

6 Conclusion

By examining both personal and vicarious color discrimination, this study expands the more limited role color discrimination has occupied in understanding perceived discrimination as a risk factor for health in Latin America. Reframing discrimination's observed relationship to health as shaped by the target reveals an unexamined complexity in understanding colorism and its implications. The divergent findings for color and class discrimination, with vicarious color discrimination and personal class discrimination showing the most consistent associations with poor health, demonstrate how overlooking the sociohistorical meaning of the attribute and the target of discrimination can lead to incomplete conclusions. As such, efforts to examine stratification and inequality must seriously consider how individuals interpret, understand, and report societal processes and how this meaning-making shapes scholarly conclusions.

Data availability statement

Publicly available datasets were analyzed in this study. Data used in this study can be requested from https://perla.soc.ucsb.edu/perla-data-sets.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent was not required to participate in this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

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EDITED BY
Nadia S. Craddock,
University of the West of England,
United Kingdom

REVIEWED BY
Bindi Shah,
University of Southampton,
United Kingdom
Ta'Les Love,
Grand Valley State University,
United States

*CORRESPONDENCE
Monica Ronniza Majumdar
✉ monicamajumdar92@gmail.com

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From filters to fairness: understanding colourism through TikTok aesthetics and trends

Monica Ronniza Majumdar*

Queen Mary University of London, London, United Kingdom

This study investigates how British South Asian women engage with and interpret skincare and beauty content on TikTok, with particular attention to how the platform reproduces, normalizes, and commodifies colourism through its algorithmic and influencer-driven structures. The study is qualitative in design centring participants' own accounts of how TikTok's beauty culture shapes their self-perception, identity, and consumption practices. Data were collected from 15 participants via an online survey of open-ended qualitative questions, supplemented by a small number of descriptive Likert-scale items used solely as contextual framing. Participants' open-ended narratives form the exclusive analytical basis of the study and were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings reveal that TikTok operates as both a site of creative self-expression and a mechanism that participants experienced as reinforcing colonial hierarchies of skin tone through subtle and overt colourist discourses. Participants reported that repeated exposure to brightening trends and influencer marketing heightened self-comparison and internalized beauty pressures. However, participants also demonstrated moments of resistance and critical reflection, challenging these ideals and reclaiming pride in their natural complexions. The tension between internalization and resistance emerges as the study's central analytical contribution: these positions coexist within individuals rather than representing opposing responses, revealing the structural ambiguity of agency within platform capitalism. Overall, the study concludes that TikTok's algorithmically personalized content simultaneously reinforces and exposes colourism, shaping how British South Asian women understand and negotiate identity amid digital empowerment and structural inequality.

KEYWORDS

algorithm, colourism, consumer behavior, digital studies, platform capitalism, social media, South Asian identities, South Asian women

1 Introduction

Over the past decade, social media platforms have become central infrastructures through which beauty norms, identity formation, and consumer practices are produced and circulated (Matthew, 2024). TikTok positions itself as a departure from the aspirational perfection of platforms like Instagram. Its emphasis on user-generated content and a highly personalized "For You" feed constructs a sense of intimacy and spontaneity between creators and audiences. This performative realism, where creators appear unfiltered, casual, and emotionally candid, renders the platform an influential arena for shaping

perceptions of beauty, identity, and self-care (Taylor, 2025). It is this combination of apparent authenticity and structural commercial logic that makes TikTok a particularly consequential space for understanding how colourist ideals are reproduced and negotiated among British South Asian women.

Within TikTok's rapidly evolving beauty culture, skincare discourses centered on brightening, whitening, and glow have gained significant traction (Kang et al., 2024). Although framed through the language of wellness, self-care, and personal improvement, these terms echo longer histories of colourism that privilege lighter skin tones as markers of desirability, success, and social value. For British South Asian women, shaped by postcolonial legacies, diasporic identities, and racialised beauty hierarchies, TikTok represents a contradictory space. It offers visibility and opportunities for self-representation while also reproducing subtle forms of exclusion. Participants in this study describe experiencing algorithmic amplification and aesthetic standardization as forces that shape which bodies and skin tones are made visible; perceptions that, regardless of whether they can be verified against platform mechanics, carry real consequences for self-image and belonging. Such dynamics are best understood in relation to the historical formation of colourism within South Asian communities (Punathambekar et al., 2022).

Colourism has long structured social relations and gendered beauty norms within South Asian contexts, privileging lighter skin tones (Dixon and Telles, 2017). Shaped by colonial legacies, caste hierarchies, and global white supremacy, fairness has been linked to femininity, respectability, and social mobility (Glenn, 2008; Hunter, 2007; Nagar, 2018). Under British colonial rule, lighter skin became associated with power and proximity to whiteness, while darker skin was devalued, entrenching hierarchies that persist today (Hall, 1990). The persistence of these hierarchies is not incidental; it reflects their deep embedding in social institutions, family norms, and cultural imaginaries that digital platforms have amplified rather than dissolved.

In contemporary contexts, colourism operates through everyday practices such as family expectations, beauty advertising, and the promotion of brightening products (Dixon and Telles, 2017; Hunter, 2007; Ellis and Destine, 2023). It is sustained not only through overt discrimination but also through routine pressures to manage appearance. As such, colourism remains an adaptive system shaping women's self-perception across both offline and digital spaces.

Against this backdrop, this paper examines how British South Asian women perceive and interpret skincare content on TikTok, focusing on how repeated exposure to brightening and glow-orientated skincare discourses shape user perceptions and practices within colourist beauty narratives. The study focuses on terminology such as brightening, glow, and radiance because existing research has shown that such terms operate as euphemistic substitutes for skin lightening (Glenn, 2008; Parameswaran and Cardoza, 2009). Importantly, participants' accounts reflect how they experience and interpret the platform's content; the distinction between perceived algorithmic behavior and demonstrable platform mechanics is maintained throughout.

This paper makes three key contributions. First, it extends research on colourism by situating skin-tone hierarchies within contemporary algorithmic media environments, showing how historically rooted ideals of lightness are sustained and experienced through platform infrastructures. Second, it contributes to digital media studies by demonstrating how TikTok shapes racialised perceptions of desirability, authenticity, and consumer identity as narrated by British South Asian women themselves. Finally, by centring these women's qualitative accounts, it advances feminist and diasporic media research, illuminating how users navigate, interpret, and at times resist colourist discourse within participatory yet commercialized digital spaces.

2 Literature review

2.1 The role of TikTok in shaping contemporary beauty and skincare culture

Social media platforms have become integral to everyday life and cultural production, reshaping how beauty, identity, and self-presentation are negotiated. Researchers increasingly recognize that these platforms are not merely communication tools but digital ecosystems that produce and circulate aesthetic values (Abidin, 2023; Duffy, 2017). Within this digital ecology, TikTok has become one of the most influential visual spaces (Kułaga, 2024), particularly among younger demographics. Kushwaha (2024) observes that social networking sites offer new possibilities for self-expression and the re-articulation of femininity, allowing women to experiment with self-presentation beyond the constraints of traditional media. There is genuine evidence for this: studies of TikTok's non-relational social model have found that it enables creators from marginalized communities to build audiences and visibility without the established follower networks that previously gatekept mainstream media exposure (Sujon and Ntalla, 2025; Blackburn and Hogg, 2024). This democratic affordance is real and should not be dismissed. However, as Banet-Weiser (2018) argues, social media's politics of authenticity, the logic that promises empowerment and individuality, remains entangled with consumer capitalism in ways that complicate straightforward optimism about representation.

In the UK, TikTok's impact on the beauty and skincare industry is striking. The platform now boasts 30 million active users, and TikTok shop has become the fourth-largest beauty retailer in the country, with over 498 billion beauty-related views (CEW UK, 2025; Beauty Matter, 2025). Its architecture, based on short-form, vertically scrolling videos and a hyper-personalized "For You" page, creates an immersive environment where trends emerge and decay at remarkable speed. Within this environment, visibility becomes contingent on continuous self-presentation, producing what Duffy (2017) terms "aspirational labor": creators, particularly in the beauty sector, engage in ongoing affective and aesthetic work to remain visible and maximize opportunities for monetisation.

The platform's algorithm personalizes the For You page to curate an ever-evolving stream of skincare routines, product recommendations, and transformation videos

(Ebrahim and Tanner, 2021). As Seekis and Lawrence (2023) explain, its recommendation system learns continuously from user behavior to surface content most likely to sustain engagement, meaning that videos aligning with dominant beauty norms are, as participants consistently described, more likely to be repeatedly surfaced in their feeds. Beauty ideals such as glass skin, a Korean-beauty ideal associated with an even, poreless, and luminous complexion, alongside glow, and brightening thereby circulate at an accelerated pace, collapsing the boundaries between authenticity, aspiration, and advertising. Despite TikTok's positioning as a platform of authenticity, its algorithmic and aesthetic infrastructures frequently produce the opposite effect: Felimban (2025) argues that visual-first platforms project an idealized world in which highly edited appearances are presented as both authentic and desirable. For British South Asian women, whose skin tones and features diverge from the platform's dominant aesthetic, this gap between performed authenticity and lived appearance is not merely cosmetic; it is the space in which colourist norms take hold. Colourist beauty ideals do not need to be explicitly promoted to be effectively transmitted; repetition alone does the ideological work.

Simultaneously, TikTok operates as an emblem of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017), where user participation, emotional labor, and self-representation are transformed into sources of profit. Creators in the beauty and skincare niches function as both cultural intermediaries and economic actors, commodifying relatability, and authenticity as forms of brand value (Duffy, 2017; Banet-Weiser, 2018). It is vital to acknowledge that platform capitalism as a framework has attracted criticism for its tendency toward structural determinism; for presenting users primarily as subjects of commercial extraction rather than as agents capable of exploiting platform affordances for their own ends (Postigo, 2016; van Dijck et al., 2018). Critics argue that the framework risks underestimating the extent to which users, including those from marginalized communities, actively shape platform cultures rather than passively receiving them. This critique has merit, and the present study is attentive to it: the qualitative data consistently shows participants who are not only subject to commercial logic, but who analyse, critique, and at times subvert it. The framework of platform capitalism is retained here not to deny this agency, but to insist that such agency is exercised within structural conditions that the framework helps make visible. The speed of these interactions also fosters cycles of comparison, aspiration, and consumption, consistent with social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954; Vogel et al., 2014).

Overall, the literature presents TikTok as a hybrid socio-technical marketplace that merges the affective appeal of authenticity with the commercial imperatives of digital capitalism. While this globalized visibility offers space for new forms of representation, it also reproduces subtle hierarchies of desirability, particularly around skin tone and complexion. The central tension this section has established is that TikTok's democratic promise and its colourist effects are not in contradiction; they are produced by the same mechanisms. Authenticity, relatability, and community are the platform's cultural offer; engagement optimisation and commercial scale are its structural logic.

2.2 Colourism in the digital space

Colourism, broadly defined as the privileging of lighter skin tones within and across racial and ethnic groups, has long functioned as a mechanism through which social hierarchies of beauty, class, and desirability are maintained (Phoenix and Craddock, 2025). Its origins are deeply entangled with the colonial and imperial histories that equated whiteness with modernity, purity, and progress, while marking darker skin as inferior. Hunter (2007) and Glenn (2008) argue that skin-tone hierarchies persist across societies and diasporas, shaping employment prospects, marriage markets, and cultural ideas of femininity. Within South Asian contexts, fairness remains a signifier of privilege, upheld through centuries of caste stratification and colonial mimicry.

Hall (1990) and Dyer (1997) argued that visual culture is central to the construction of race; advertising, camera and cinema have historically illuminated whiteness as the normative standard of beauty and humanity. Hall's (1990) emphasis on representation as an active meaning-making process highlights how visual media do not merely reflect racial hierarchies but participate in their reproduction; a framework that remains crucial for analysis of contemporary digital beauty cultures. In beauty advertising, for example, lighter skin has long symbolized success, cleanliness, and aspiration, while darker tones are coded as undesirable or in need of correction (Parameswaran and Cardoza, 2009). This visual grammar of correction, the idea that darker skin is a problem to be solved, is what positions media visibility as both inclusion and control, granting recognition to bodies that conform to the dominant aesthetic while marginalizing those that do not.

In the digital era, these hierarchies persist through perceived algorithmic amplification and influencer visibility (Taylor, 2025). Research by Love et al. (2025) found that users reported being less likely to click on videos featuring dark-skinned influencers. This finding relates to user behavior and audience preference rather than the algorithmic behavior of TikTok's recommendation system directly. It is important to acknowledge a more optimistic strand of scholarship here: researchers have found that TikTok's non-relational algorithm, by surfacing content based on engagement rather than existing social networks, has in certain contexts amplified the visibility of creators from underrepresented communities who would have struggled to build audiences on follower-dependent platforms (Bhandari and Bimo, 2022; Blackburn and Hogg, 2024). This optimistic strand of the literature is important and should not be dismissed; the question this study pursues is not whether visibility is possible on TikTok but under what conditions it is distributed and whose skin tones are centered when it is.

Beauty communities organized around South Asian, Black, and dark-skinned aesthetics have found genuine audiences on TikTok, and hashtags such as #BrownSkinGirl and #DesiGlow have attracted substantial engagement. This evidence of broadened representation is real and should not be discounted. However, as the insights from this study show, the existence of representational space does not guarantee its equitable distribution or freedom from colourist hierarchies: participants encountered both moments of genuine visibility and the persistent dominance of brightened,

lighter-skin toned aesthetics in their feeds. The two experiences coexist, and it is that coexistence, rather than either harm or empowerment taken alone, that the study is positioned to investigate.

Research on digital beauty filters further underscores how technology operationalises colourist ideals. Xu et al. (2023) document that TikTok hosts thousands of filters designed to modify facial features, including smoothing skin texture and lightening complexion. A growing body of empirical research links frequent engagement with such filters to increased body dissatisfaction and appearance-related anxiety (Schröder and Behm-Morawitz, 2025; Wang, 2024; Caravelli, 2025). Through this lens, TikTok's participatory culture is both empowering and disciplining: users can represent themselves, yet they often do so within templates of beauty that participants experience as algorithmically rewarded, and that valorise lighter skin tones.

For diasporic communities, particularly British South Asian women, the encounter with these digital aesthetics is complex. Living within a multicultural society that celebrates diversity yet continues to privilege Eurocentric standards, these women navigate intersecting discourses of race, gender, and class. Scholars of the South Asian diaspora note that colourism persists as a transnational ideology transmitted through family expectations, popular media, and beauty commerce (Parameswaran and Cardoza, 2009; Saha, 2021). Yet, the relationship between South Asian diasporic identity and colourist beauty norms is neither static nor uniform. Phoenix and Craddock (2025) find that younger British South Asian women are increasingly contesting intergenerational colourism rather than simply inheriting it, and Punathambekar et al. (2022) show that diasporic media cultures can generate new forms of self-representation that challenge rather than replicate dominant beauty ideals.

Colourism within South Asian communities is better understood as a contested ideological terrain than as a monolithic value system, which is precisely what makes its reproduction through digital platforms analytically interesting. On TikTok, hashtags like #GlowUp, #BrighteningRoutine, and #RadianceSkin circulate widely, often repackaging colourist language in wellness and self-care vernacular (Kang et al., 2024), reproducing hierarchies even among users who would explicitly reject them if named directly.

Digital spaces are not solely sites where colourist hierarchies are reproduced; they also function as arenas for counter-narratives, reflexive engagement, and forms of resistance (Tate, 2018; Jackson et al., 2020). Movements such as #BrownSkinGirl and #DarkIsBeautiful illustrate how users actively contest internalized colourism through community storytelling and digital activism. Drawing on Tate's (2018) work on the governmentality of beauty shame, such engagements can be understood as conscious interventions through which users negotiate, reframe, and at times refuse dominant beauty discourses. At the same time, as Banet-Weiser (2018) and Gill and Orgad (2021) put forward, acts of resistance are often absorbed and circulated as forms of marketable authenticity, a tension explored further in the discussion.

Overall, the literature on colourism in the digital space reveals a paradox: digital platforms promise visibility, voice, and empowerment, but they remain structured by historical hierarchies of lightness that are now encoded in algorithmic design and influencer economies. For British South Asian women, navigating TikTok's skincare culture means negotiating between representation and regulation, authenticity, and aspiration.

2.3 TikTok and colourism: intersecting discourses of beauty and technology

Empirical research highlights persistent racial imbalances within TikTok's beauty culture, consistent with Srnicek's (2017) and Noble's (2018) observation that platforms structured around engagement optimisation tend to amplify normative beauty content, though the specific relationship between engagement signals and algorithmic outputs is not directly observable to users and this study does not claim to verify it. Harriger et al. (2023), in their analysis of 342 videos tagged under body positivity, found that over 93% reflected Western beauty ideals, with nearly 69% featuring white women and only 2.3% featuring Asian representation. Harriger et al. (2023) note, however, that TikTok's body positivity content showed greater diversity in terms of body size than comparable content on Instagram, suggesting that the platform's algorithmic architecture can, in some dimensions, facilitate broader representation, even where racial diversity remains severely underrepresented. This distinction matters for this study: TikTok's democratic affordances are not uniformly absent, but they appear to operate unevenly across axes of identity, with racial and skin-tone diversity lagging behind representational progress. This pattern can be understood through the lens of intersectional invisibility, whereby individuals who occupy multiple marginalized identities are rendered less visible within spaces ostensibly designed to promote inclusion (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach, 2008), and it underscores the particular importance of foregrounding British South Asian women's experiences.

TikTok received significant criticism for promoting unrealistic beauty ideals through the release of its Bold Glamor filter (Allyn, 2023). The effect is hyper-realistic and nearly undetectable, making it increasingly difficult for users to distinguish between filtered and unfiltered appearances. The Bold Glamor controversy also exposes the contradictions of TikTok's brand identity: an app celebrated for authenticity that simultaneously promotes aesthetic perfection through computational enhancement. Studies have shown that face-altering filters encourage users to compare their offline appearance with digitally enhanced versions of themselves, intensifying self-surveillance (McLean et al., 2015; Veldhuis et al., 2020; Hermans et al., 2022; Schröder and Behm-Morawitz, 2025). Where filters encode lighter, smoother skin as the enhanced version of the self, the self-surveillance they intensify is not aesthetically neutral; it is colourist in its terms of reference.

Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954; Vogel et al., 2014) provides a useful framework for understanding how users evaluate themselves in relation to others within TikTok's visual economy. It is worth acknowledging that social comparison research has been critiqued for overemphasizing upward, negative comparisons while underweighting the role of lateral and downward comparison, social support, and community solidarity in shaping self-evaluation

(Vogel et al., 2014; Tylka et al., 2023). Research on body-positive communities specifically has found that exposure to diverse representation can produce positive self-evaluation effects under certain conditions (Cohen et al., 2019). The framework is retained here not as a complete account of how social comparison operates on TikTok but because it captures the specific dynamic, continuous upward comparison facilitated by an algorithmically curated feed of aspirational content, that the participants in this study consistently describe. Empirical support for this comes from Seekis and Kennedy (2023), who found that exposure to beauty content on TikTok was associated with increased appearance shame and upward comparison processes among young women, with self-compassion serving only a partial moderating role. These processes must also be situated within longer histories of racialised aspiration, through which the language of brightening, glow, and radiance rearticulates established colourist ideals as wellness and self-care. Even counter-narratives intended to challenge idealization may inadvertently sustain hierarchies by positioning whiteness as the baseline from which authenticity is measured (Harriger et al., 2023).

Overall, the literature establishes TikTok as a space where beauty ideals, colourism, and digital visibility intersect in ways that carry real consequences for racialised users, but it has been more effective at documenting structural patterns than at capturing how individual women experience, interpret, and contest these dynamics in practice. This study addresses that gap by drawing on qualitative narratives to explore the depth and texture of these experiences among British South Asian women. Descriptive survey items are included to provide contextual orientation but do not constitute a parallel strand of analysis.

Accordingly, the study is guided by three key research objectives:

- To investigate how engagement with TikTok content shapes self-perceptions and aspirational beauty ideals among British South Asian women.
- To explore how British South Asian women experience and interpret TikTok skincare content using terms such as brightening, whitening, and glow, and how this language shapes their perceptions of ideal skin tone.
- To analyse whether and how TikTok's algorithmic and creator structures, as perceived by users, commodify colourist skincare narratives and influence British South Asian women's consumption patterns and perceptions of brightening products.

3 Materials and methods

This study is qualitative in design, employing in-depth open-ended survey responses to explore how British South Asian women engage with and interpret skincare and beauty content on TikTok, with a focus on algorithmic visibility, influencer culture, and colourist discourse. Data were collected via an online survey that included a small number of descriptive Likert-scale components alongside the qualitative prompts. These descriptive items are not treated as a quantitative strand; they provide contextual framing for the qualitative analysis and are summarized as descriptive counts only. The analytical and theoretical contribution of the study rests entirely with the qualitative data.

The sample comprised 15 British South Asian women; participants ranged in age from 18 to 54, with the majority falling between 25 and 40. Identification with South Asian heritage was assessed through self-reported ethnic background selection in the demographic section of the survey. Participants represented a range of South Asian ethnic backgrounds, including Bangladeshi ($n = 4$), Indian ($n = 4$), Pakistani ($n = 4$), Sri Lankan ($n = 2$), and mixed South Asian heritage ($n = 1$). Professional backgrounds included working professionals ($n = 9$), students ($n = 3$), and homemakers ($n = 3$). Participants were primarily based in urban and suburban areas across the UK, including London ($n = 8$), Birmingham ($n = 4$), Oxford ($n = 2$), and Manchester ($n = 1$). All participants reported regular use of TikTok and engagement with skincare and beauty-related content.

Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling strategy initiated within British South Asian digital and community networks. This approach facilitates access to individuals with shared cultural and digital experiences while reflecting the informal, interconnected nature of online communities.

Data were collected through an online questionnaire comprising 15 questions. Quantitative questions measured participants' engagement with TikTok skincare content and related purchasing behaviors using a five-point Likert scale (1 = Never, 5 = Always), enabling a descriptive summary of engagement patterns within the group. Qualitative open-ended prompts were designed to capture participants' emotions, responses, perceived pressures, and lived experiences in relation to skincare content and representation on TikTok. Participants were encouraged to elaborate freely, and no word limits were imposed. The prompts were:

- In what ways, if any, do TikTok skincare trends or videos affect how you feel about your natural skin tone?
- Have you ever felt pressured to use certain skincare products or routines because of the way skin tones are portrayed on TikTok?
- How do conversations about skin tone on TikTok compare to those you experience in your everyday life (e.g., with friends, family, or community)?

3.1 Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for this research was obtained from the Queen Mary University of London Research Ethics Committee. All participants provided informed consent before participating and were reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. The survey was hosted on a secure, GDPR-compliant platform, with all responses encrypted and stored securely. To protect participant anonymity, pseudonyms have been used in place of participant identifiers throughout this paper. No financial incentives were offered. Following data collection, responses were reviewed for coherence, relevance, and indicators

of automated or non-genuine participation; no evidence of bot-generated or fraudulent responses was identified.

3.2 Data analysis

The Likert-scale items are summarized as raw counts within the findings section to provide contextual framing, for instance, establishing that the majority of participants in this group reported regular exposure to brightening terminology before the qualitative analysis explores how that exposure was experienced. These counts are not analyzed statistically, do not carry inferential weight, and are not treated as a separate strand of findings. They are presented solely to orient the reader to the scale and consistency of participants' engagement with the content under study.

Qualitative data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke (2021) approach. The analytical process moved through six phases: familiarization with the data through repeated reading; generation of initial codes applied across all responses; searching for themes by grouping codes into candidate patterns; reviewing and refining themes against the full dataset to ensure each was internally coherent and sufficiently distinct; defining and naming themes by articulating the central organizing concept of each; and producing the final analysis by selecting representative quotations and developing the theoretical argument. Codes were generated inductively, without imposing a predetermined framework, capturing recurring patterns relating to colourism, algorithmic visibility, influencer culture, self-perception, and resistance. Themes were not treated as fixed containers but as active interpretive constructs, consistent with Braun and Clarke (2021) insistence that reflexive thematic analysis foregrounds the researcher's role in meaning-making rather than treating themes as residing transparently in the data. Particular attention was paid to affective language, metaphor, and evaluative statements, allowing the analysis to capture both emotional responses and culturally situated interpretations of TikTok skincare content. Quotations are presented throughout the findings to support transparency and allow readers to evaluate the relationship between data and interpretation. An audit trail was maintained throughout, documenting coding decisions, theme revisions, and the rationale for interpretive choices, and all themes were reviewed against the full dataset before finalization to ensure internal coherence and minimize selective or anecdotal interpretation.

3.3 Researcher positionality

As a British South Asian woman, positionality informed both participant recruitment and data analysis in this study. Recruitment through community and digital networks was facilitated by shared cultural familiarity, which supported participant trust and openness when discussing sensitive topics such as colourism, beauty norms, and racialised self-perception. This shared positioning is a methodological strength in terms of access and depth of disclosure, but it also carries analytical risks: the researcher may unconsciously recognize and foreground experiences that mirror her own while underweighting those that diverge. To manage this, reflexive memo-writing was undertaken at each stage of the analytical process, explicitly documenting where the researcher's own experiences of colourism and digital beauty culture were activated by the data and where interpretive decisions were made. During coding, memos were used to distinguish between recognizing a pattern across participants' accounts and projecting a pattern onto them. The final themes reflected the range of participants' experiences rather than the most resonant subset. This process does not eliminate positionality as an influence on interpretation; reflexive thematic analysis does not claim to do so. It makes that influence visible and accountable, consistent with Braun and Clarke (2021) understanding of reflexivity as an active analytic practice rather than a declaration of neutrality.

4 Findings

The survey included five Likert-scale prompts alongside the open-ended qualitative questions. As background context: the large majority of participants reported frequent engagement with skincare-related TikTok content; almost all regularly encountered brightening, whitening, or glow terminology; most had purchased or considered purchasing brightening products following TikTok exposure; and all 15 reported at least occasional exposure to skin-altering filters. These observations establish that the experiences participants describe in their qualitative accounts were broadly shared within this group rather than exceptional. No analytical claims are drawn from them. The study's contribution rests entirely with the qualitative analysis that follows.

4.1 Performative self-presentation and the construction of digital beauty

Across participants' accounts, a recurring tension emerged around how beauty and authenticity are performed on TikTok. Rather than being a space of unfiltered self-expression, participants described a digital environment where self-presentation is shaped by algorithmic norms, influencer aesthetics, and subtle hierarchies of visibility. What participants describe is not simply exposure to beauty ideals but the felt pressure to perform those ideals, to align their online selves with dominant standards of glow, radiance, and brightness in order to belong. This transforms authenticity from a quality of self-expression into a form of aesthetic labor: looking natural, on TikTok, still requires work.

Anisa and Ruksana were asked how TikTok skincare content affects their relationship with their natural skin tone. Their responses reveal accounts that existing theories of colourism in advertising (Glenn, 2008; Parameswaran and Cardoza, 2009) cannot fully anticipate: that the colourist message is not delivered by a brand but absorbed through the accumulated aesthetic of ordinary users who appear to share the same skin aspirations.

> **Anisa:** "A lot of the content I see pushes this idea that good skin means having a bright, even, almost glowing complexion, which often translates to lighter-looking skin.

> Even when the videos don't say it directly, there's a subtle message that darker or textured skin needs to be fixed or brightened to look beautiful. Seeing so many creators using toners, serums, and brightening masks made me feel like I needed to do the same just to keep up."

> **Ruksana:** "TikTok skincare trends sometimes make me feel a little insecure about my natural skin tone. I see so many videos promoting products that promise to brighten or even out skin, and it often feels like lighter or flawless skin is being idealized. Even if that's not the creator's intention, it can make me question whether my natural tone is something that needs fixing. It's a mix of admiration and frustration. I love learning about skincare, but I don't love feeling like my natural skin isn't good enough."

Glenn (2008) and Parameswaran and Cardoza (2009) document how fairness is coded through advertising language, but Anisa describes a mechanism that precedes language entirely. The message that darker skin "needs to be fixed" is embedded in the visual messaging of who appears on screen, in what context, and with what products, a form of aesthetic conditioning that operates below the threshold of conscious persuasion. Hall (1990) enables an understanding of why this conditioning is so difficult to resist: because it arrives without a sender. There is no advertisement to dismiss, no brand to distrust. There is only the cumulative weight of thousands of creators whose skin looks the same way, all apparently arrived at that look through the same products. The ideological work is distributed across a community, which makes it feel like consensus rather than instruction; and consensus, unlike advertising, does not invite the skepticism that might allow it to be refused.

Ruksana's account adds a dimension that Anisa's does not explicitly name: the affective cost of maintaining critical awareness inside a system designed to erode it. Tate's (2018) framework on the governmentality of beauty shame describes how colourist norms are internalized as self-regulation but does not account for the exhaustion of knowing the system is operating on you and being unable to stop it from working. Ruksana knows that the ideal she is being offered is not her skin; she tells herself her skin is "unique and beautiful;" and she still feels the anxiety. What her account reveals is that critical consciousness and affective vulnerability are not opposites; they coexist, sometimes within the same sentence. Tate's (2018) concept of the governmentality of beauty shame holds that colourist norms operate through internalized self-regulation that persists even when the subject recognizes the system producing it: critical consciousness does not dissolve the norm; it coexists with it. As participants consistently describe it, the For You Page does not pause when the user becomes aware of what it is doing. Awareness is not a condition of exit. The feed, as participants described it, continues, and with it the comparison.

Taken together, the accounts of Anisa and Ruksana illuminate a dynamic that social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954; Vogel et al., 2014) begins to explain but does not fully contain. Festinger's (1954) original formulation holds that individuals evaluate their own opinions and abilities by comparing themselves to others, with upward comparison, measuring oneself against those perceived as superior, generating the greatest self-evaluative pressure. Vogel et al. (2014) extend this to social media environments, finding that passive exposure to idealized content produces more negative self-evaluation than active engagement, precisely because the viewer has no conversational resource with which to contextualize or contest what they are seeing. Both dynamics are illustrated here: Anisa describes a process of passive, repeated exposure to a visual standard she did not seek out and cannot easily avoid, while Ruksana articulates the self-evaluative consequence, the felt sense that her skin is something that "needs fixing." What the participants' accounts add that social comparison theory cannot supply, however, is the specific ideological content of the comparison target. Social comparison theory is a structural account of a psychological mechanism; it does not explain why the standard being compared against encodes a racialised hierarchy of skin tone rather than some other dimension of appearance. For that, the theory must be read alongside Glenn (2008) and Hall (1990): the comparison is upward not merely because the creators on Anisa and Ruksana's feeds have clearer or brighter skin, but because that brightness carries the accumulated cultural weight of colourism, rendering it not simply aspirational but ideologically loaded. TikTok's For You Page does not create the terms of comparison; as participants experience it, it delivers them at scale, personalized and without pause.

The performative logic does not stop at self-perception; it restructures behavior, transforming skincare from a private practice into a public performance evaluated by an invisible audience whose approval is mediated entirely by the platform's aesthetic economy.

> **Kavita:** "It's wild, the platform has turned skincare into a competitive sport. People aren't even washing their faces anymore; they're performing it for likes. And if your skin isn't glowing like a glazed donut under a ring light, you're clearly doing something wrong. The message is clear: your skin is only beautiful when it looks nothing like your actual skin."

> **Zulaykha:** "TikTok makes me feel like I'm committing a crime if I don't have a 10-step skincare routine imported straight from Seoul and blessed by the algorithm itself. Every influencer's face is glowing like a freshly waxed iPhone screen, and I'm over here wondering if I should start exfoliating my soul too."

> **Kiran:** "As a South Asian girl, that pressure isn't new; it's something that's always been around in subtle ways. But TikTok amplifies it. When creators talk about brightening or glow-up routines, it can sound a lot like the same old colourism, just with trendier language and packaging. I've even caught myself wanting to buy products I never cared about before, just because everyone online made it seem like having glassy or luminous skin was the goal."

Duffy (2017) theorizes aspirational labor as the work performed by creators, the ongoing effort of self-presentation required to remain visible and monetisable on platform economies. What Kavita shows is that this logic has migrated from producers to consumers: the audience is now also performing. Banet-Weiser (2018) provides an understanding of why this migration has occurred. Her argument that platform cultures collapse the distinction between lived experience and performance, transforming everyday practices into bids for social and commercial validation, applies precisely here: TikTok's architecture, the Like button, the view count, the comment, makes any act of self-care into a potential bid for social validation. The platform does not distinguish between content and life; it simply renders all life as potential content, and rewards those whose life performs most legibly within its aesthetic economy.

Zulaykha's account adds the experiential texture that Ionescu and Licu (2023) theorize: it names the specific affective experience of being governed by an aesthetic standard one did not choose and cannot locate. The algorithm she describes as "blessed" is ironic but precise; it is not a person, not a brand, not even a set of rules she can identify and reject. Ionescu and Licu (2023) argue that TikTok's algorithm, as experienced by users, does not merely reflect identity but actively shapes it, progressively narrowing the aesthetic window through which users understand themselves as acceptable. What Zulaykha adds to their framework is the phenomenology of that narrowing: the felt experience of a system that has learned her preferences and now uses them against her, one she can recognize and name, but cannot refuse, because the standard it imposes was built from her own prior engagement.

Kiran's account is the most theoretically significant of the three because it makes explicit what the others imply: that TikTok's colourist aesthetics are not new but are a new delivery mechanism for an old ideology. Glenn (2008) and Parameswaran and Cardoza (2009) document the long history of fairness commodification in South Asian beauty culture; Kiran confirms that this history is not merely continuous with the present but has been accelerated and personalized by it. What her account adds that Glenn (2008) and Parameswaran and Cardoza (2009) cannot supply is the subjective experience of that acceleration, of recognizing the same pressure she has always felt arriving through a different interface, with trendier language and a checkout link already attached. Srnicek (2017) explains why the new delivery mechanism is more effective than the old one: platform capitalism does not merely circulate existing cultural content, it optimizes it, amplifying the forms that generate the most engagement and embedding commercial infrastructure directly at the moment of aspiration. The pressure to brighten that Kiran's community has long transmitted has now arrived through a personalized feed, timed to the moment her prior viewing history has made her most receptive. The ideology is the same. The system delivering it has been engineered for conversion.

4.2 *Influencer* culture, commercialization, and the commodification of beauty

Srnicek (2017) argues that platform capitalism extracts value from user participation, transforming self-expression into a commodity. Duffy (2017) extends this through the concept of aspirational labor; the affective and aesthetic work creators perform to remain visible and monetisable. What neither framework fully accounts for is how this commercial logic operates at the moment of consumption: how colourist desire is not simply available to be purchased but is actively produced in users who did not previously hold it. The accounts below make this production process visible.

> **Meera:** "At least in real life, people pretend it's about personal preference. On TikTok, they skip the pretending and go straight to monetising the insecurity. It's not a conversation anymore, it's capitalism with good lighting. It's so easy to buy things directly from the app. The products are cheap, always on sale, and promoted in such convincing ways that it's hard not to be tempted. There are almost no restrictions, so anyone can sell creams or serums that promise lighter or clearer skin, even if they might not be safe or effective."

> **Naina:** "Not from people I know, but from the silent judgment of TikTok's For You Page. Before you know it, you're halfway through a cart full of serums promising to "brighten" your complexion, which we all know is code for lighten it just a little. I think TikTok profits off people's insecurities."

Meera's account reveals something Srnicek's (2017) platform capitalism framework describes structurally but cannot account for experientially: the specific feeling of watching as social space becomes a commercial one. Srnicek's (2017) framework establishes that TikTok extracts value from user participation yet does not explain how this extraction is felt as a betrayal, as the loss of something that once felt like conversation and now feels like a transaction. What Srnicek (2017) adds to her account is an explanation for why this shift is so effective. Platform capitalism, as he argues, does not merely provide a space in which commerce occurs; it engineers the conditions under which commerce becomes the path of least resistance. The commercial infrastructure of TikTok, shoppable links, in-app purchasing, seamless checkout, is designed to be frictionless, which means the transition from watching to buying happens before the user has formed a conscious intention to purchase. Meera knows this, which is why she can name it. But Naina's account shows what happens when that knowledge is not yet formed: she finds herself 'halfway through a cart' without understanding quite how she arrived there. What Srnicek's (2017) framework reveals that Naina cannot see from within her own account is that this is not a lapse in judgement but the designed outcome of a platform that has deliberately collapsed the distance between aspiration and acquisition, because that collapse is where the revenue is.

> **Sana:** "Conversations about skin tone on TikTok are like reality TV, loud, dramatic, and full of people pretending they're just educating while selling skin lightening solutions in the next breath. You've got creators live for 24 h straight,

> holding up jars of mystery cream like they've discovered the cure for melanin. Everyone's suddenly a dermatologist with a discount code."

> **Katrina:** "There's that Pakistani woman on TikTok who spends almost 12 h a day live-streaming from her basement, selling skin-lightening soaps and creams. Watching her promote those products nonstop made me realize how deeply embedded the idea is that lighter skin is more beautiful."

Banet-Weiser (2018) argues that empowerment discourse is absorbed into commercial logic, but Sana captures the precise moment of that absorption, the point at which "just educating" becomes a cover for "selling a skin-lightening solution in the next breath". Duffy (2017) provides a structural explanation for why the collapse is so complete. Her concept of aspirational labor describes how creators are structurally rewarded for performing authenticity while pursuing commercial ends; the incentive structure does not require deception; it simply makes authentic-feeling promotion more profitable than honest critique. TikTok's monetisation architecture, affiliate links, TikTok Shop integration, brand partnerships, gives creators a direct financial incentive to make commerce feel like community, and Duffy's (2017) logic explains why this is not a corruption of the platform's culture but an expression of its design. Katrina's account adds a dimension that Sana's does not make explicit: the intra-community dimension of this commerce. What her account reveals is the specific dissonance of watching a South Asian woman sell skin-lightening products to a South Asian audience, the way this transmits colourist ideology not as external imposition but as cultural self-reproduction. Drawing on Banet-Weiser's (2018) framework, peer credibility functions more effectively than institutional advertising precisely because it arrives as shared identity rather than sales. Content that appears to come from within the community carries a legitimacy that brand advertising cannot purchase, making it, structurally speaking, a more efficient vehicle for the same ideology.

4.3 Perceived algorithmic visibility and the reproduction of skin tone hierarchies on TikTok

Participants consistently described their experiences of TikTok as one in which lighter, filtered, or brightened faces dominate their For You Pages while darker or unfiltered appearances feel comparatively absent. While TikTok is often celebrated for its democratic potential, participants experienced it as producing an uneven terrain of visibility. These accounts speak to how the platform is perceived and felt, not to how its technical systems demonstrably function. TikTok's recommendation architecture is opaque to users, and this study makes no claims to verify algorithmic behavior from qualitative data. What the data reveal, and what constitutes this study's empirical claim, is that the perception of biased visibility is widespread, consistent, and consequential: it shapes self-image, engagement, and belonging.

> **Ruksana:** "TikTok skincare trends make me feel like my natural skin tone is an unfinished project. According to the app, I'm apparently just a few serums, three brightening masks, and one miracle Korean essence away from finally being acceptable to the algorithm. Every time I scroll, I half-expect someone to announce the launch of a new improved human skin shade, now in TikTok beige!"

Ruksana's account reveals something that Noble's (2018) framework on algorithmic oppression cannot supply: the subjective phenomenology of being governed by an aesthetic standard you cannot see or name. Noble (2018) argues that algorithmic systems can encode racial bias; what Ruksana illustrates how the perception of that encoding is experienced as personal inadequacy. She does not say "the algorithm discriminates against my skin tone;" she says she is "just a few serums away from finally being acceptable." The ideology has been successfully internalized as self-improvement. Ionescu and Licu (2023) then explain why internalization is so complete: TikTok's algorithm, as experienced by users, does not merely reflect preferences but actively shapes them, progressively narrowing the aesthetic window through which users understand themselves as acceptable.

> **Kavita:** "To me, the real issue isn't that TikTok portrays beauty wrong, it's that it mirrors a society that still values fairness over authenticity. Changing TikTok means changing what we reward with our attention. Until people stop liking those videos, the algorithm will keep serving us the same lie."

Kavita's account does something that platform critique alone cannot: it distributes responsibility. Noble (2018) and Benjamin (2019) locate the reproduction of racial hierarchy in algorithmic design; Kavita locates it in user behavior, "Until people stop liking those videos, the algorithm will keep serving us the same lie." What her account reveals that theory could obscure is the complicity of the audience, including herself, in sustaining the system she critiques. This is not a finding that exonerates platform design; it complicates where the intervention needs to occur. Benjamin's (2019) concept of the New Jim Code, technological designs that encode racial preference while appearing neutral and responsive, captures precisely why individual refusal is insufficient. Love et al. (2025) show that skin-tone bias shapes click decisions within beauty content; users report being less likely to engage with videos featuring dark-skinned creators, and in systems that weight engagement signals, such disparities could contribute to reduced surfacing of such content, though the specific mechanics remain opaque to users. This supports Kavita's contention that user interactions sustain the repeated circulation of colourist content not through any single deliberate act but through the aggregated weight of many small choices, each of which appears innocent in isolation. Noble's (2018) framework, extended to engagement-optimized platforms, suggests that systems which learn from the full range of user behavior, including what users scroll past, how long they pause, and aggregated patterns across similar profiles, make

individual acts of refusal insufficient to interrupt the system. The architecture learns from everything, which means the user can withdraw a single signal without withdrawing from the logic that produced it.

> **Ayesha:** "TikTok skincare trends have made me more critical, not insecure, about my natural skin tone. It is basically colourism repackaged as self-care. What frustrates me most is how easily people fall for it. Creators push products that promise lighter skin, audiences buy into it, and the cycle keeps feeding itself. It's not just about skincare anymore, it's about selling insecurity."

What Ayesha's account adds that Gill and Orgad (2021) cannot supply is the experiential texture of recognition from within: she has not merely observed the structure, she has felt it operate on her and chosen detachment as a response. This is a theoretically significant move. Gill and Orgad's (2021) critique of confidence culture describe how self-improvement is marketed as empowerment while quietly reinforcing dependence on consumer solutions; Ayesha's statement that "it's not just about skincare anymore, it's about selling insecurity" names this mechanism precisely. Her description of the self-perpetuating feedback loop, creators pushing products, audiences buying in, the cycle feeding itself, points to the commercial architecture Srnicek (2017) theorizes at the structural level. What Ayesha adds is the subjective corollary: wellness discourse places the imperative to improve inside the subject rather than outside it. It is not that society wants you to have lighter skin; it is that you want to glow, to radiate, to be your best self. The ideology is delivered through the notion of personal autonomy and arrives as self-determination. Ayesha's critical distance from this process does not place her outside it; it places her at its edge, able to name it while still inhabiting the platform it defines.

> **Sabina**: "TikTok didn't just amplify the conversation about skin tone, it warped it. It turned something deeply personal into content, where people profit off the same insecurities they claim to challenge. On TikTok, it feels like they come from algorithms that know exactly what will make you doubt yourself."

Sabina adds a dimension Ayesha does not name: the felt experience of being known by the system. Where Ayesha analyses the structure, Sabina describes the sensation, algorithms that "know exactly what will make you doubt yourself." Ionescu and Licu (2023) reveal that this feeling of being known is not incidental to the platform's design but central to it: personalisation is the mechanism through which commercial platforms convert generalized trends into targeted purchase intent. The algorithm does not know what will make any individual user doubt herself, but it has learned, from aggregated behavioral data across users, which categories of content generate the kinds of engagement that precede purchasing decisions. The precision Sabina experiences is real. It is also the product of a system designed to produce exactly that feeling.

> **Rekha**: "On TikTok, I've noticed that when South Asian or Sri Lankan creators with lighter skin post, the comments are full of compliments about their beauty. But when darker-skinned creators show up, the focus shifts, people start talking about their "features" or "attitude" instead, almost avoiding acknowledging their beauty directly. It's subtle, but it sends a clear message about which shades of brown are celebrated and which ones are tolerated."

Rekha's account reveals something that Hall's (1990) theory of representation establishes at the level of structure: that within the category "South Asian," a further hierarchy operates, distinguishing which "shades of brown are celebrated and which ones are tolerated." Hall (1990) stipulates that representation reproduces power relations, but Rekha shows the precise texture of this reproduction in comment sections, in the shift from compliments about beauty to remarks about "features" or "attitude" as skin tone darkens. Theory describes the system; she documents its experience. Noble's (2018) analysis of Google Search provides a useful analogy here: algorithmic systems can learn from and amplify racially biased patterns of user engagement, producing discriminatory outputs through mechanics rather than deliberate design. Applied to TikTok's comment-driven visibility logic, the same pattern is plausible: the comments are not only expressions of individual prejudice but also inputs into a system that learns from them. The content that receives the most positive interaction shapes what the platform surfaces next, and what the platform surfaces next shapes what audiences learn to value. A similar recursive dynamic may be at work on TikTok, as Noble's (2018) framework suggests, though the specific mechanics remain opaque and this study makes no claim to verify them.

4.4 "It's just a preference": colourism and the normalization of discrimination on TikTok

Hall (1990) describes the ideological work of representation as the process by which structural inequality is made to appear natural, individual, and unproblematic, a process in which "just a preference" becomes the discursive shield that protects colourist attitudes from critique. What Hall's (1990) framework cannot tell us is how this ideological work feels from the inside: whether it produces rage, exhaustion, resignation, or strategic detachment. The qualitative accounts in this theme reveal precisely this, showing that the normalization of colourist discourse on TikTok generates a range of affective responses that ideology critique alone cannot capture, and that these responses are shaped by the specific affordances of a platform where prejudice circulates at scale, anonymously, and without consequence.

> **Meera:** "The truth is, TikTok didn't create these beauty standards; it just profits from them. People act shocked by how extreme some live sellers are, but they're only doing what gets attention and sales. Personally, I've learned to take

> it as a reminder of how powerful marketing and cultural conditioning can be. Instead of feeling pressured, it's made me double down on embracing my natural skin, because the moment you stop trying to fit their idea of beauty, you take your power back."

Meera's account reveals that structural critique can function as an affective resource. Hall (1990) and Srnicek (2017) position TikTok as profiting from pre-existing beauty hierarchies, but they cannot tell us that naming this mechanism might, for some users, convert potential shame into defiance. Meera has arrived at something resembling what Freire (1970) terms critical consciousness, the capacity to perceive and name the structural forces shaping one's experience, allowing her to observe the system from within it and refuse its terms. Banet-Weiser (2018) would recognize this as the absorption of resistance into commodity form, not to negate Meera's agency, but to situate it within the structural conditions that simultaneously enable and contain it. What Meera's account adds that neither Freire nor Banet-Weiser can supply is the specific affective texture of this position: the feeling of clarity without exit. She can name the system, refuse its terms, and remain inside it simultaneously, not because her refusal is incomplete but because the platform offers no outside from which to refuse. That is not a failure of critical consciousness; it is its limit condition under platform capitalism.

> **Sana:** "So many videos promote brightening or lightening products, and even if it's subtle, it sends a message that lighter or more even-toned skin is somehow better. What makes it worse is the comment sections. I've noticed how people with darker or more textured skin often get targeted with racist or Islamophobic remarks, especially lately in the UK. It's exhausting trying to unlearn that pressure, but I've realized that no amount of product can change how society views skin. It's the mindset that needs to change, not the melanin."

Sana's account reveals the intersection of colourist beauty discourse with Islamophobia as a distinct and compounding form of racialised hostility. Tate (2018) and Glenn (2008) theorize colourism as a system organized around skin tone; Sana's experience indicates that on TikTok, this system is not separable from religious identity; darker skin and visible Muslim identity are targeted together in the comment sections she describes, producing a layered vulnerability that skin-tone frameworks alone cannot capture. Banet-Weiser's (2018) argument about popular misogyny, the coexistence of celebratory and harmful cultural narratives within the same digital space, explains why hostile and prejudiced responses in comment sections are not incidental failures of moderation but structural features of a platform whose engagement-reward mechanisms, as participant experienced it, create conditions in which hostile responses circulate without consequence.

The platform does not distinguish between the affect of admiration and the effect of contempt; both keep users scrolling, both generate the metric that matters. Her conclusion that "it's the mindset that needs to change, not the melanin" locates the conflict at the level of ideology, but Srnicek (2017) adds a structural account of why mindsets alone are insufficient: they are produced, sustained, and amplified by platform architectures whose commercial logic gives them no incentive to change.

> **Deepa:** "I feel like conversations on TikTok about skin tone mimic the conversations in real life but are used with sort of politically correct terms. Those on TikTok do it in a sly way, they won't outwardly tell me that being dark is ugly the way my family does, but they'll say, "brighten that skin for luscious skin" as if my skin was already an issue."

Deepa makes a distinction that is theoretically crucial and empirically precise: she identifies TikTok not as a space where colourism is more intense than in offline life, but as a space where it is more linguistically sophisticated, positioned through the messaging of wellness and self-care. This is exactly what Parameswaran and Cardoza (2009) describe in their analysis of fairness discourse in South Asian beauty advertising: the substitution of explicit racial hierarchy with the coded language of improvement, a substitution that is commercially rational as well as ideologically effective because wellness language is more searchable, more shareable, and less likely to generate content moderation flags than explicit colourism. Srnicek (2017) makes the structural logic of this explicit: platform capitalism shapes the form content takes as much as its volume, rewarding those whose language aligns with its optimisation logic regardless of whether creators are conscious of that alignment. Deepa contributes the experiential texture of this substitution, the specific feeling of having one's skin described as an "issue" through language that presents itself as helpful. The platform does not require creators to be conscious of this optimisation: it simply rewards those whose language aligns with it.

> **Zulaykha:** "Conversations about skin tone on TikTok feel very different from the ones I have in my everyday life. With my friends and family, there's an understanding. But on TikTok, those conversations can feel a lot harsher and more exposed. While the platform allows people to speak openly about racism and discrimination, it also gives space for racist and Islamophobic voices to spread hate without consequence. It makes me more cautious about what I share and sometimes even afraid to show my face online. In real life, there's compassion and understanding, but on TikTok, it often feels like you're constantly defending your right to exist in your own skin."

Zulaykha's account reveals a distinction between being seen and being exposed. Visibility on TikTok, as she experiences it, does not produce the recognition and belonging that Sujon and Ntalla (2025) identify as its potential reward. Instead, it produces hypervisibility, a condition in which one's presence invites not celebration but scrutiny, hostility, and the demand to justify one's right to participate. This extends what Sujon and Ntalla (2025) began to theorize: that for racialised women, digital visibility can function as a form of vulnerability rather than

empowerment, and that this vulnerability is relational, shaped by the contrast with the safety of offline community spaces where, as Zulaykha describes, "there's compassion and understanding". Sujon and Ntalla (2025) argument positions visibility on TikTok as simultaneously a symbolic reward and a source of precarity for marginalized creators, but Zulaykha's account specifies the relational mechanism that makes this precarity felt: it is the contrast with the accountability of offline community that makes the platform's exposure so acute. Srnicek's (2017) platform capitalism adds a structural explanation for why this contrast exists: offline community norms are maintained through social accountability between known individuals; TikTok's scale-amplified environment provides no equivalent mechanism, and its commercial logic gives it no incentive to create one. Hate comments can circulate "without consequence" not as a failure of individual conduct but as a structural property of a platform designed to maximize engagement without acknowledging what that engagement costs those it targets.

4.5 Colourist shame on TikTok: transmission and resistance

Tate's (2018) concept of the governmentality of beauty shame holds that colourism operates not through explicit command but through the internalization of norms that subjects apply to themselves, a self-surveillance in which shame is both the mechanism of control and its primary affective output. What the concept cannot supply is an account of how this self-surveillance is triggered, sustained, and occasionally broken in a specific digital environment: the precise mechanisms through which a TikTok scroll converts into felt bodily inadequacy. The narratives below make that process visible, showing that TikTok does not simply reflect colourist norms but provides the specific affordances, peer-to-peer transmission, algorithmic repetition, seamless commerce, through which those norms are renewed as personal feeling.

> **Meera:** "My friends will swear they're just trying to even out their skin tone while holding a product literally called Whitening Miracle. TikTok is the loud, global version of what our communities already whisper, just with filters, hashtags, and a checkout link."

Meera articulates what platform capitalism theory (Srnicek, 2017) describes structurally but cannot account for experientially: the continuity between offline community norms and their digital amplification. Srnicek (2017) can tell us that TikTok commodifies user participation and scales cultural content for profit; he cannot tell us that the specific content being scaled is the same colourist ideology that participants encounter in their kitchens and living rooms. What Meera's account adds to theory is the lived experience of scale, TikTok does not introduce colourism to her social world, it turns up its volume to a global frequency, attaching a checkout link to what was previously a whispered family pressure. Duffy's (2017) account of aspirational labor shows how affect, including shame, aspiration, and the desire to improve, is not merely a byproduct of platform participation but the primary resource platform capitalism extracts and monetises. The whispers become a checkout link not by accident but because shame is commercially productive: it generates the emotional state that precedes the purchase decision. The Whitening Miracle is not incidentally named; the promise encoded in that name is precisely what generates the click, the sale, and the platform's revenue. Platform capitalism, as Srnicek (2017) theorizes it, engineers the conditions under which commerce becomes the path of least resistance; the specific vehicle here, seamless purchasing, personalized targeting, frictionless checkout, is designed to convert the emotional state shame produces into revenue before it dissipates.

> **Leela:** "I have felt pressured to use skincare products because of the way skin tones are portrayed on TikTok. As a dark-skinned Sri Lankan, I naturally have melasma and hyperpigmentation, it had never bothered me so much until I started seeing other women point it out on TikTok to get rid of because it's patchy or uneven, and my natural ethnic complexion is supposed to be this unattainable white board. Due to how normalized these trends became I did invest in some skin care products for whitening, but with support I eventually understood the toxicity of it all."

Leela's account is the dataset's most precise illustration of how Tate's (2018) governmentality of beauty shame operates at the level of the individual body. Tate (2018) argues that colourism functions through internalized self-regulation; the subject applies the dominant aesthetic standard to herself, producing shame not as an external imposition but as a felt conviction about one's own inadequacy. What Leela's narrative contributes that the theoretical framework cannot predict is the specific trigger: it was not advertising, family pressure, or cultural tradition that made her melasma and hyperpigmentation feel like problems, but the cumulative encounter with other women on TikTok pointing out these features as defects. This peer-to-peer mechanism, shame transmitted through participatory content rather than top-down broadcast, is a distinctly digital form of the governmentality Tate (2018) describes, and one that her framework, developed prior to the TikTok shop marketplace, does not fully anticipate. Leela's own trajectory offers a structural account of why this process required external support to undo: the platform's design ensures continuous re-exposure to the norms that produced the shame, making individual critical reflection insufficient. Tate (2022) describes decolonial self-articulation as a social and relational process; Leela's account confirms this precisely, showing that the exit from internalized shame was not achieved alone.

> **Katrina:** "The platform claims to celebrate diversity, but the view of beauty that dominates my feed still feels pretty constrained. Light, clear, glowing skin is usually what gets pushed to the top. That said, I do see some dark-skinned girlies showing up on my For You Page, and I love that. They're not the majority, but the handful who do appear

> really challenge those narrow ideals and make me feel seen. At this point, I'm convinced TikTok doesn't sell skincare, it sells shame in tiny glass bottles."

Katrina's account holds two emotions simultaneously without resolving them, a complexity that shame theory and platform critique alone cannot account for. She experiences TikTok as a space of constrained beauty ideals and as a space where she occasionally feels genuinely seen, and she does not reconcile these two experiences into a single verdict. This ambivalence is analytically significant because it resists the totalising logic of both critical platform studies (van Dijck et al., 2018; Gillespie, 2018), which tend to emphasize harm, and empowerment frameworks (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill and Orgad, 2021), which tend to emphasize agency. What her data reveals is that the same platform, and sometimes the same feed, can function as both a site of shame and a site of recognition depending on what surfaces. Harriger's (2023) content analysis, showing that over 93% of body-positivity content reflected Western beauty ideals, combined with the audience engagement patterns identified by Love et al. (2025), suggests that the moments of visibility Katrina describes as exceptional are structurally produced as exceptional: they are ruptures in a pattern rather than evidence that the pattern is changing.

> **Rekha:** "When I saw that TikTok video of Chunkz saying, "Ehhh, Sri Lanks come like that," my first reaction was honestly, what the hell do you mean by that? It wasn't just a random comment. It reflected a deeper perception that Sri Lankans, and South Asians with darker skin in general, can't be considered pretty. Hearing it said so casually, in a way that got laughs online, really highlighted how normalized colourism still is, even among people who claim to celebrate diversity."

Rekha's reaction to a viral joke identifies a mechanism that neither Tate's (2018) shame framework nor Hall's (1990) representation theory fully accounts for: the role of humor as a vehicle for colourist normalization within intra-community spaces. Tate (2018) theorizes shame as something imposed by dominant beauty standards on racialised subjects; Hall (1990) theorizes representation as a site where ideological meanings are produced and contested. Neither fully anticipates the situation Rekha describes in which a South Asian influencer performs colourism as comedy to an audience that rewards it with laughter. What her account reveals is the affective precision of this mechanism: the joke works, and causes harm, precisely because it comes from within the community. It carries the implicit authority of shared cultural knowledge while simultaneously weaponising that knowledge against some members of the community. Banet-Weiser's (2018) concept of popular misogyny, the coexistence of celebratory and harmful cultural narratives within the same space, applies here as popular colourism. The platform's engagement logic does not distinguish between the laughter of solidarity and the laughter of contempt. Both generate the same metric.

Alongside these narratives of internalization and shame, Priya articulates explicit resistance:

> **Priya:** "Do these trends affect how I feel about my skin? Absolutely. They make me want to delete the app, pour my moisturizer down the drain, and start a countertrend called #UnevenAndUnbothered. Because if TikTok's version of "perfect" skin is the standard, then honestly, I'd rather fail the test."

Priya's response reveals what Tate's (2018) framework on beauty shame implies: that the refusal of the dominant aesthetic standard is itself an affective achievement, not simply an intellectual position. She does not merely disagree with TikTok's beauty norms; she describes a visceral, embodied response, "delete the app, pour my moisturizer down the drain," that signals how deeply the standard has registered even in the act of rejecting it. What her account adds to Tate's (2018) framework is the phenomenology of resistance: the feeling of what it is like to refuse, from the inside, a norm that has enough gravitational pull to produce that strength of reaction, a dimension Tate (2018) theorizes at the structural level but does not supply at the experiential one. Sujon and Ntalla (2025) add a structural qualification Priya does not make: visibility on TikTok functions as both reward and constraint, meaning that her proposed countertrend #UnevenAndUnbothered would, if it gained traction, generate the same engagement that sustains the platform whose logic she is critiquing. Banet-Weiser (2018) extends this further: resistance is frequently absorbed as a legible and marketable form of authenticity, circulated by the same commercial infrastructure it sets out to refuse. Priya's refusal is real and meaningful. It is also, structurally speaking, a content format.

5 Discussion and concluding remarks

This study investigated how British South Asian women perceive, interpret, and navigate brightening-related skincare content on TikTok, with particular attention to how colourist beauty norms are reproduced, rationalized, and, at moments, contested within a platform environment shaped by commercial and algorithmic logics. The discussion proceeds in three stages. It first provides a direct answer to each of the study's three research objectives, identifying not only what the data show but what they reveal that the existing literature had not yet established. It then theorizes the central analytical finding, the tension between internalization and resistance, as a structural property of platform capitalism rather than a feature of individual psychology. Finally, it sets out the study's contributions and their implications for colourism research, feminist digital media studies, and platform scholarship.

5.1 What the study found and what it adds

The first objective asked how engagement with TikTok skincare content shapes self-perceptions and aspirational beauty

ideals among British South Asian women. The study's answer is this: colourist norms are transmitted primarily through aesthetic repetition and linguistic repackaging rather than through explicit racial instruction. Participants were not told that lighter skin is more desirable; they encountered this message through the For You Page, in the vocabulary of brightening, glow and radiance, in the visual dominance of smoothed and lightened complexions, and in the implicit logic of what counts as skin that is "fixed" vs. skin that is really good enough.

This is not a finding the existing literature had established. Glenn (2008) and Parameswaran and Cardoza (2009) established that skin-lightening discourse is coded through euphemistic wellness language in South Asian beauty advertising. What this study adds is evidence of how that coding operates in a participatory, peer-mediated, algorithmically amplified environment where the source of the message is not a brand but an ordinary user, often a South Asian woman herself, whose apparent relatability makes the colourist logic she transmits harder to identify and easier to internalize. Kiran's observation that TikTok reproduces 'the same old colourism, just with trendier language' names this mechanism precisely; what the study contributes theoretically is an account of why the new packaging is more effective than the old one: because it arrives through a face that looks like yours, on a platform that feels like community.

The second objective asked how British South Asian women experience and interpret color-related terminology in TikTok skincare content, and how this shapes their perceptions of ideal skin tone. The study's answer is that the relationship between exposure and internalization is real but not uniform, and that critical awareness mediates but does not neutralize affective impact. This finding departs meaningfully from the existing literature in two directions. First, it challenges frameworks that treat exposure to colourist content as straightforwardly damaging, social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954; Vogel et al., 2014) and body dissatisfaction research (Schröder and Behm-Morawitz, 2025) tend to model exposure as producing a predictable negative outcome. The data here show a more complex picture: participants who demonstrated structural awareness of colourist discourse, who could name platform capitalism, trace colonial histories, and critique influencer rhetoric, still reported affective vulnerability. Ruksana's simultaneous "admiration and frustration," Ayesha's critical detachment coexisting with consumer temptation, and Kavita's structural analysis of the algorithm alongside her continued scrolling all indicate that critical literacy is a protective resource but not a shield. Second, the study finds that the modulating factor is not simply knowledge but the relational and cultural context in which users are embedded, what participants have been told about their skin by family, what community narratives they carry, and whether they have access to counter-discourses that affirm darker complexions. This relational dimension of internalization is undertheorised in the existing digital media literature, which tends to focus on platform exposure in isolation.

The third objective asked whether and how TikTok's structures, as perceived by users, commodify colourist skincare narratives and influence consumption. The study's answer is unambiguous: they do, and the mechanism is more sophisticated than prior accounts of influencer marketing suggest. Existing scholarship on platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017) and aspirational labor (Duffy, 2017) establishes that digital platforms extract value from user participation and that creators commodify authenticity for commercial gain. What this study adds is an account of how this commodification operates at the level of the audience, not only the creator. Naina's account of finding herself mid-way through a cart of brightening serums without having consciously decided to buy them illustrates a process Srnicek and Duffy do not fully theorize: the conversion of ambient algorithmic exposure into purchasing behavior through the accumulated affective weight of repeated aesthetic encounters, without the consumer explicitly endorsing the ideology that drives the purchase. The commercial architecture of TikTok, seamless in-app purchasing, shoppable livestreams, the absence of clear distinctions between organic and sponsored content, creates conditions in which colourist desire does not need to be consciously held to be commercially productive. It need only be felt, briefly, in the moment before the checkout link is tapped.

This study makes three contributions to the literature. First, it advances the theorisation of colourism in digital spaces by showing that the platform reproduction of colourist norms operates not only through content, the presence of brightening products, lighter-skinned creators, and Eurocentric beauty standards, but through the affective and commercial architecture of the platform itself. Existing scholarship has established that algorithmic systems can encode racial bias (Noble, 2018; Benjamin, 2019) and that influencer culture commodifies racialised femininity (Duffy, 2017; Taylor, 2025). What this study adds is an account of the user-side experience of these processes: how colourist norms come to feel like personal preference, community wisdom, and authentic self-care rather than structural imposition. This distinction matters because it explains why colourist ideology is so resistant to critique even among participants who can identify it, the ideology does not present itself as ideology.

5.2 The internalization-resistance tension: a structural account

The most significant finding across all five themes is not any single instance of colourist harm or individual act of resistance, but the consistent coexistence of both within the same participants, the same accounts, and sometimes the same sentences. This is the study's central analytical contribution, and it requires a structural rather than psychological explanation, one that accounts for why this tension is so stable and so widespread rather than treating it as a feature of particular individuals' ambivalence.

Tate's (2018) concept of the governmentality of beauty shame provides the theoretical foundation. For Tate, colourism does not operate primarily through external command, through being explicitly told that darker skin is inferior, but through the internalization of regulatory norms that subjects apply to themselves. Shame is the affective mechanism through which this self-regulation is maintained: it motivates self-surveillance, self-correction, and the consumption of products that promise to bring the body into conformity with the dominant aesthetic standard. What TikTok adds to this framework, and what this study

documents, is a set of platform-specific mechanisms through which the governmentality of beauty shame is continuously renewed. The For You Page, as participants consistently describe it, means that the aesthetic standard is not encountered once but repeatedly, in content that feels spontaneous and authentic rather than prescriptive. The peer-to-peer transmission of colourist norms, through ordinary users pointing out each other's melasma, through influencers framing skin-lightening as self-care, through comment sections rewarding lighter-skinned creators with compliments and darker-skinned creators with remarks about their "features," means that the source of shame is diffuse and relational rather than institutional and identifiable. This is precisely what makes it so difficult to refuse: there is no single authority to reject, no advertisement to dismiss, only the accumulated weight of what appears to be community consensus.

And yet participants do refuse, partially, provisionally, and often simultaneously with complying. This is the finding that Tate's (2018) framework illuminates but does not fully resolve. Tate (2022) theorizes decolonial self-articulation as the process through which racialised women come to name, refuse, and reframe dominant beauty ideals. Leela's trajectory, from never having found her hyperpigmentation troubling, to purchasing whitening products, to "understanding the toxicity of it all" with external support, follows this arc. Meera's strategic detachment, Priya's embodied refusal, Ayesha's critical distance: all represent forms of decolonial self-articulation in practice. But what Tate's framework does not account for is the structural condition that this study foregrounds: the platform does not distinguish between compliant and resistant content. Both generate engagement. Both feed the same commercial system. This is where Banet-Weiser (2018) becomes indispensable. Her concept of popular feminism, the absorption of feminist and empowerment discourse into commercial and media logics, applies here as popular decolonialism: the language of skin-tone pride, of #BrownSkinGirl and #DarkIsBeautiful, of refusing brightening culture, circulates on TikTok as content, generating the views and engagement that sustain the platform economy that sustains the colourist beauty industry. Resistance is not co-opted after the fact; it is structurally incorporated from the beginning, because the platform's engagement logic makes no distinction between the affect of shame and the affect of defiance. Both keep users scrolling.

This structural incorporation of resistance is what makes the internalization-resistance tension not a psychological paradox but a political one. The question it poses is not why individual women feel both pressured and defiant, that is entirely understandable, but why the system is designed such that both responses are commercially equivalent. The answer this study points toward is that platform capitalism, as Srnicek (2017) describes it, is indifferent to the content of affect; it requires only that affect be sustained and that it drives engagement. Colourist shame and anti-colourist pride are, from the platform's perspective, the same thing: content. This is the structural insight that neither Tate's framework nor Banet-Weiser's alone fully captures, and that this study's data make visible, not through individual testimony but through the pattern that emerges when individual testimonies are read together. The tension between internalization and resistance is not a personal failing or an incomplete politics; it is the expected outcome of a system designed to monetise both.

This has a specific implication for how we theorize agency in digital environments. Existing frameworks in feminist digital media studies, including algorithmic oppression (Noble, 2018), surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019), and popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018), read together, can be seen to oscillate between two positions: one that emphasizes structural constraint and renders users as relatively passive recipients of platform ideology (Noble, 2018; Zuboff, 2019; Elias and Gill, 2018), and one that emphasizes user agency and renders resistance as inherently meaningful and politically generative (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Jackson et al., 2020). Both positions, the data suggest, are partially correct and structurally insufficient. What is needed, and what this study begins to develop, is a framework that holds structural constraint and meaningful agency together without resolving the tension between them, because that tension is not a theoretical problem to be solved but an empirical condition to be theorized. British South Asian women on TikTok are not dupes of colourist ideology, nor are they free agents who can simply choose to refuse it. They are subjects navigating a system that has been designed, at every level, to make both compliance and resistance feel like personal choices and to profit from both.

5.3 Contributions and limitations

The preceding analysis points toward three contributions that extend beyond the specific findings and carry implications for how colourism, platform scholarship, and feminist digital media studies are theorized. First, the study advances understanding of how colourist norms are reproduced in digital spaces, not only through the visible presence of brightening products, lighter-skinned creators, and Eurocentric beauty standards, but through the affective and commercial architecture of the platform itself. Where prior scholarship has documented structural bias at the level of algorithmic design and influencer economy, this study accounts for what that bias feels like from the inside: how colourist norms come to feel like personal preference, community wisdom, and authentic self-care rather than structural imposition. This matters because it explains why colourist ideology is so resistant to critique even among participants who can identify it; the ideology does not present itself as ideology, and any intervention that addresses only its visible content will leave its affective infrastructure intact.

Second, the study contributes to feminist and diasporic media research by establishing that British South Asian women on TikTok are not simply recipients of colourist discourse but active theorists of it. Participants in this study consistently demonstrated a form of critical media literacy, the capacity to name platform capitalism, trace colonial genealogies of skin-tone hierarchy, and identify the commercial mechanisms through which colourist desire is produced, that has not been foregrounded in prior research on this community's digital media engagement. This critical literacy is not straightforwardly protective, as the data show; but its existence is analytically and politically significant. It indicates that the resources for resistance are already present within the community, and that the obstacle to more sustained refusal is not ignorance but structural: the platform is designed to absorb critique as content.

Third, by centring the internalization-resistance tension as its primary analytical object rather than treating it as a complication of a simpler finding, this study makes a methodological argument for qualitative research in this area. Only an approach capable of holding contradiction, of sitting with ambivalence rather than resolving it into a cleaner narrative, can capture what is actually happening when British South Asian women engage with TikTok's beauty culture. The study does not conclude that TikTok is harmful or that resistance is futile; it concludes that both harm and resistance are structurally produced by the same system, and that understanding that system requires methods that can follow participants into the complexity of their own experience.

For British South Asian women, navigating TikTok involves a negotiation that is never finally resolved, because the platform ensures that every act of participation, including refusal, feeds the same commercial infrastructure. This is not a counsel of despair. It is a precise diagnosis of where the structural problem lies not in individual users' responses to colourist content, but in the design of a system that makes colourist norms profitable and embeds them in the everyday rhythms of digital leisure. Addressing that problem requires intervention at the level of platform design, content moderation policy, and advertising regulation, not at the level of individual media literacy.

6 Limitations and future research

Although this study offers valuable qualitative insights into the intersections of TikTok, colourism, and self-perception among British South Asian women, several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample of 15 participants is appropriate for a qualitative study of this kind, where analytical depth and contextual richness are the goal rather than statistical representation. Generalisability is not claimed. In addition, the use of snowball sampling with existing British South Asian digital and community networks means participants may share overlapping social circles, cultural reference points, or attitudes toward colourism and beauty norms, which could limit the diversity of perspectives captured to a more dispersed sampling strategy. This is a recognized limitation of snowball sampling more broadly, and future research could mitigate this by combining snowball recruitment with other strategies, such as purposive sampling across more varied networks, to capture a wider range of viewpoints. The descriptive survey items included in the data collection were used solely as contextual framing and carry no inferential weight; future research seeking to examine the scale or distribution of these patterns across populations would require a larger, purposively sampled study with a properly powered quantitative design. Future qualitative research could also expand the participant pool and explore similar themes across other cultural and diasporic groups to understand how colourism and algorithmic visibility manifest differently across communities. Including participants with diverse identities spanning gender, sexuality, ability, and age would further enrich understanding of how intersecting experiences shape digital beauty perceptions.

A further limitation lies in the absence of a content analysis of TikTok videos. This study focused primarily on participants lived experiences and perceptions; however, analyzing captions, hashtags, audio, and visuals could provide a more comprehensive picture of how colourist language and aesthetics circulate on the platform, and would allow future researchers to examine the gap between user perception of algorithmic behavior and what content analysis can observe. Incorporating content analysis in future research would help capture how TikTok's short-form design and algorithmic logic contribute to the visibility and virality of colourist narratives.

Finally, future studies might explore the relationship between digital self-presentation and body image more explicitly. Burnell et al. (2022) found that frequent photo retaking and filter use correlated with body image concerns, suggesting that self-curation itself may heighten dissatisfaction. Building on these insights, future research should examine how TikTok's culture of filters, virality, and algorithmic validation influences users' emotional wellbeing and reinforces or disrupts colourist ideals, ideally drawing on longitudinal designs that can capture change over time.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Queen Mary University Research Ethics Committee. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

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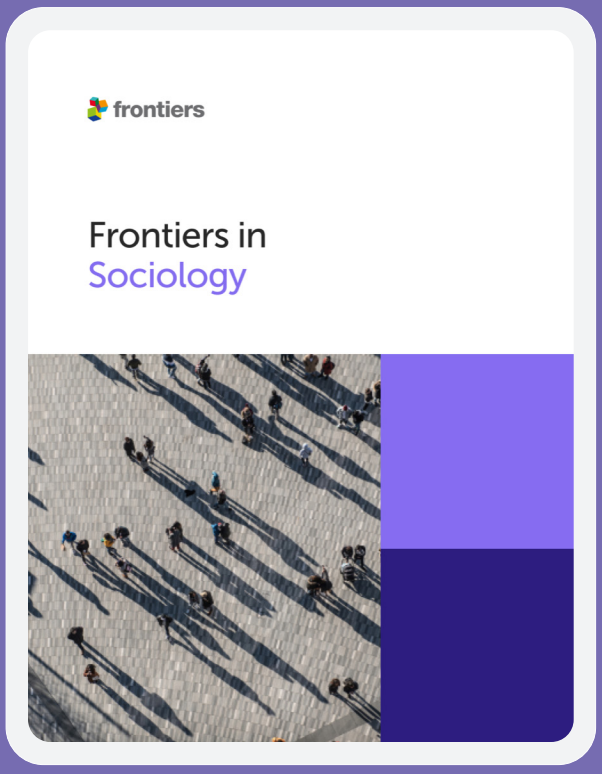

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